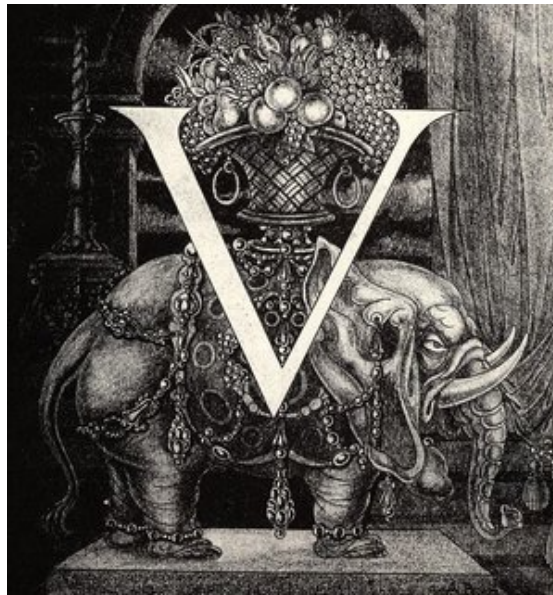


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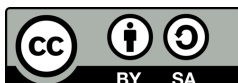


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Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult

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Issue 2, December 2018

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The Devil in the Detail: An Introduction to Decadent Occultism from the Editors

Alice Condé and Jessica Gosling

The double meaning of ‘occult’ refers to the secret and the supernatural, and, just as ‘Decadent’ was both a pejorative term and a badge of honour in the nineteenth century, accusations of affiliation with the dark arts are being re-appropriated and celebrated by marginalized groups. The historical association of the occult with non-normativity and transgression means it has particular significance as a form of protest or protection in today’s era of ‘small-d’ decadence. There has been a recent extreme political swerve to the right, climate change denial threatens to end the world as we know it, and social media platforms are subject to deep corruption and involvement in a neo-Cold War, but bubbling under this surface is a queer rebellion associated with witchcraft and occult magick. For example, we might think of the symbolic efforts to counteract patriarchal control by the #MagicResistance collective on Twitter, who use spells to channel their energy towards curtailing the power of Donald Trump, or the celebration of horror and transgression exemplified by the ‘Deep Trash in the Underworld’ club night and exhibition accompanying the *Performing the Occult: Magick, Rituals and the Monstrous in Live Art* symposium at Queen Mary, University of London.¹ The club night, held at the Bethnal Green Working Men’s Club in London on 21 October 2017 featured magickal and monstrous queer performance, music, and artwork.² Decadence has always been a countercultural, subversive movement, and it is no surprise, therefore, that connections are emerging between Decadence scholarship and the growing interest in occult and esoteric practices.

In recent years there has been a flourishing of scholarly interest in the occult, with publications bridging the gap between the esoteric library and the ivory tower of academia. Recent additions to Oxford University Press’s Very Short Introduction series, for example, include *Witchcraft* (2010) by Malcolm Gaskill, *Paganism* (2011) and *Magic* (2012) by Owen Davies, and *Ritual* (2015) by Barry Stephenson. In the past two years numerous monographs and edited

collections have been published, and these new works indicate a turn away from a consideration of the occult purely as a subject of theological study towards a more interdisciplinary literary, artistic, and cultural approach known as ‘occulture’, a term coined by Christopher Partridge in his two-volume *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (2004-2005) and characterized by a topical focus on the intersection between mystical and the cultural practices. Partridge explains his notion of ‘occulture’ in popular culture thus:

Expanding the narrow, technical definition of the term ‘occult’ to include a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology and a range of beliefs emanating out of a general interest in the paranormal, occulture is the new spiritual atmosphere in the West[.]³

Alongside Partridge’s 2016 *Occulture and Everyday Enchantment*, recent academic publications that tap into the zeitgeist (ghostly double meaning intended) of the ‘new spiritual atmosphere’ through reflection on nineteenth and early twentieth-century manifestations of the occult include the *Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic*, edited by Owen Davies (2017); Dionysios Psilopoulos’ *The Prophets and the Goddess: W. B. Yeats, Aleister Crowley, Ezra Pound, Robert Graves, and the Chthonic Esoteric Tradition* (2017); Per Faxneld’s *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (2017); Laurence Wuidar’s *Fuga satanae: musique et démonologie à l’aube des temps modernes* (2018); *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous*, edited by Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani (2018); and Victoria Clouston’s *André Breton in Exile: The Poetics of ‘Occultation’, 1941-1947* (2018). *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875-1947*, edited by Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford (2018) is part of the *Occulture in Britain, 1875-1947* project based at the Universities of Glasgow and Stirling which organized three workshops in 2016-2018, focusing in particular on the occult in journalism, literary fiction, entertainment, and political movements.⁴

Alongside these publications, there have been a wealth of conferences and exhibitions including, but by no means limited to, the *Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult* conference at Goldsmiths, University of London (July 2018); a two-day international conference on *The Occult*

Revival organized by the Theosophical Society (September 2018); the *Berlin Occulture Esoteric Conference*, including workshops, rituals, and divination (November 2018); the *Spellbound* exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford; and an exhibition of photographs from The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic at The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities in Hackney, London. The market for Magickal and Pagan books is also thriving, with the increasing availability of aesthetic self-publishing options turning book publishing back into a magical art. As a reflection of this highly fecund academic and creative landscape, this winter solstice edition of *Volupté* includes academic articles from established and emerging scholars, reviews of exhibitions and books, new translations, and visual art.

The lively and broadening interest in the occult, however, has not yet focused substantially on its relationship with Decadence, despite the obvious connections between the two. Nineteenth-century Decadence coincided with a resurgence of esotericism, alternative religions, and a belief in magic as a rejection of secularism and science. Until now, this intersection has been most richly considered in relation to Catholicism, notably by Ellis Hanson in *Decadence and Catholicism* (1998), but there are also occult roots in Decadence, a tradition that celebrates the perverse, the otherworldly, the antinormative, and the blasphemous. Occult symbolism is as appealing as the robes and rituals of Rome.

Scholarship on Decadence and the occult has traditionally been dominated by two nineteenth-century icons, W. B. Yeats and Aleister Crowley, who are synonymous with the paradoxical elements of the *fin-de-siècle* occult revival. Yeats's romantic mysticism and Crowley's perversity seem like strange bedfellows but they are united through their fascination with Decadence. For both figures, the amalgamation of the spiritual and the profane created either a portal into the unknown or an aesthetic world-renunciation. As we know from following Durtal's journey across J.-K. Huysmans's tetralogy, from damnation in *La-bàs* (1891) to religious salvation in *L'Oblat* (1903), this fascination is a cornerstone of Decadent art and literature.

Difficulties arise due to the fact that just as ‘Decadence’ refuses to fit comfortably within definitional limits, it also exceeds the boundaries of the occult. However, there is ‘devil in the detail’, and we can identify engagement with the occult within intricate Decadent narratives. We move away from Crowley and Yeats, and focus instead on some of the other significant figures of Decadent occultism: Jean Lorrain, Vernon Lee, Remy de Gourmont, Arthur Machen, and Robert Smythe Hichens. We hope that this issue of *Volupté* will go some way towards reconciling the worlds of Decadence studies, where the occult is often relegated to a curious embellishment, and occult studies, where Decadence has not yet been brought to the fore. The articles originate from the *Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult* conference held at Goldsmiths on 19-20 July 2018, which explored the rich and complex relationship between Decadence and the occult, supernatural, and magical, in literature, visual art, performance, and politics, from ancient Rome to the present day. The diverse range of creative and critical material in this issue reflects the conference as a meeting of minds between practising witches, magicians, Thelemites, aesthetes, Decadence scholars, and Modernists.

Occult practices – and witchcraft in particular – have long been codified as specifically female transgressions against patriarchal order, and this is reflected in Decadent texts, for instance in the poems of Baudelaire or the novels of Huysmans, where the female and the feminine are linked with the allure and repulsion of the mystical and magickal. However, as Mathew Rickard argues in “‘Vers le sabbat’: Occult Initiation and Non-Normative Masculinity in Jean Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas*”, the relationship between maleness and the occult also deserves consideration. With reference to the work of Lorrain, one of the leading figures of French Decadence, Rickard explores the often-overlooked occult connections with male homosexuality in *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901). He illustrates the ways in which traditional aspects of the Witches’ Sabbat – invocations of gods and goddesses, intoxication or poisoning, eroticism – are appropriated by Lorrain as symbols of his male characters’ non-normative sexualities. The subtle yet deliberately subversive association of non-normativity with the Sacred Feminine and

homoerotic deities in Lorrain's novel challenges patriarchal control, and occulture emerges as a site of resistance and rebirth akin to our modern notion of the 'coming out' narrative.

A similar observation about Decadent expression of non-normative desire – in this case lesbian desire – is made by Mackenzie Brewer Gregg in 'Vernon Lee's Occult Beauty'. Paying attention to the importance of the occult (hidden) and supernatural, as well as resonances of the past in her Gothic fiction and art criticism, Gregg interrogates Lee's fascination with marginalized figures in histories, archives, and folklore. Lee's conception of beauty hints at the decadence of unhealthy taste, imbuing her art criticism with traces of the so-called 'inversion' (a nineteenth-century term for same-sex desire) of queer sexuality. Lee's short stories emerge as triumphantly feminist when characters engage in revisions of anti-female narratives or submit to the otherworldly power of beauty. Gregg exposes Lee's 'guerrilla tactics' of disrupting 'official' historical narratives as a queer feminist rebellion with contemporary resonances.

It is interesting to compare Lee's delicate, vague handling of beauty and sexuality with the more explicit, perhaps because more heteronormative, sexuality and eroticism at the heart of Remy de Gourmont's fiction. In 'The Line of Lilith: Remy de Gourmont's Demons of Erotic Idealism', Robert Pruett explores the relationship between the occult and sexual desire in *Lilith* (1892) and 'Péhor' (1894), but also considers a pseudonymous treatise entitled *Les Incubes et les succubes* (1897), drawing on Gourmont's working partnership with J.-K. Huysmans arising from their shared interest in the occult. In typical Decadent fashion, Gourmont's depiction of heterosexual sexuality is related to sterility: sensual rather than sexual pleasure. In *Lilith*, Satan introduces to mankind not an awareness of intercourse, which Adam and Eve already possess, but reveals to them a world of sins and pleasures. Sexual awareness results from the Fall, but the demon is an emancipatory figure who is removed from the animalistic carnality of sex in the world and the baseness of natural desires.

In Alexandre Burin's article we encounter a more self-conscious engagement with the scandalous aspects of the occult in which fictional texts, rather than demonic or supernatural

forces, are held to blame for Decadent perversion. In ‘*The Poison of Literature: On the Social and Literary Construction of Baron Jacques d’Adelswärd-Fersen’s “Black Masses” Scandal*’, Burin investigates the link, manufactured by the French press, between accusations of immoral sexual practices and the occult in the 1903 case of Adelswärd-Fersen and Count Hamelin de Warren. Both men were accused of indecent and ritualistic behaviour with underage boys recruited to take part in orgiastic ‘ceremonies’ in Adelswärd-Fersen’s apartment. Burin points out the complex interconnections between the way Decadent literature was held responsible in the press for ‘poisoning’ and inciting its readers including Adelswärd-Fersen to perversion, the means by which the press disseminated rumour and fiction about him, and how he ultimately used this to his own advantage in the semi-autobiographical novel *Lord Lyllian, Messes noires* (1905).

Literature and the occult have a special relationship. Arcane knowledge is held within texts, and words take on new power when used as incantations that connect the speaker or reader with mystical and magical entities or realms. Sophie Mantrant pays attention to this in ‘Textual Secrecy: Arthur Machen and “The True Literature of Occultism”’. Turning to Machen’s late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century work, Mantrant explores the ways in which the Welsh writer uses occult strategies, such as obscure symbolism or esoteric references that deliberately alienate the uninitiated, in his fiction and criticism. Machen provokes the reader’s desire to know the unknown through playful veilings and unveilings of truth. In this way, Mantrant suggests, Machen re-enchants the ordinary world with a sense of wonder and mystery, but he also leads the reader through a series of textual mazes that result only in frustrating encirclings or dead-ends. In *Hieroglyphics: A Note upon Ecstasy in Literature* (1902), Machen describes the ‘ecstasy’ of ‘fine literature’ as a substitute for ‘wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown.’²⁵ The secrecy in his fiction offers readers the chance to achieve this ecstasy while also affording the writer a sense of superiority and prestige.

Patricia Pulham’s article returns to the trope of the occult relating to unarticulated homosexual urges. In ‘Occultism and the *homme fatal* in Robert Smythe Hichens’s *Flames: A*

London Phantasy’, she compares the work of neglected Decadent and occult author Hichens with the most famous figure of the British *fin de siècle*, Oscar Wilde. Pulham draws out the rich intertextual allusions in Hichens’s 1897 novel *Flames*, observing not only the notable similarities with Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91), but also the incorporation of references to Pre-Raphaelite works to suggest homoerotic desire. Against a Decadent backdrop, the homoerotic is coded through the homosocial interaction between the novel’s protagonists, bachelor friends Julian and Valentine, especially relating to their contact at séances and religious worship of one another in which the preoccupation with the body of Christ equates to a homoerotic longing for male beauty. As in all the other articles in this issue, the occult is suggestive of hidden yet alluringly transgressive aspects of Decadence.

Volupté is committed to publishing original creative and critical works, and we are delighted to feature two creative pieces in this issue: a survey essay on ‘Literary Decadence and the French Occult Revival’ and two new translations of Joséphin Péladan by Brian Stableford, a pioneering scholar of Decadence and the occult, and ‘The Magickal Body – Text and Image’, an artwork by Geraldine Hudson whose ‘Topography of the Witch’ project unites the Decadent concerns with space, place, sexuality, and the Sacred Feminine from a contemporary occult perspective. By focusing on her own body as a site of resistance in her personal magical practice, Hudson’s work reminds us of the Decadent fascination with the body and its functions, and of the importance of reclaiming both physical and spiritual spaces from under normative, bourgeois, or patriarchal control. Similar strategies are foregrounded in the textual analyses of Decadent works by all our contributors.

A strong sense of interconnection between Decadence and the occult emerges from this issue. Certainly there is a spiritual element at play; the fascination with magic and the supernatural is akin to the aesthetic curiosity towards Catholicism, but we might also say that the dark arts are part of the wider ‘occulture’ of Decadence. The occult is not merely another aspect of the ‘naughty’ Decadent rejection of mainstream ideologies, but, as the contributors to this

issue demonstrate, it emerges as a more significant tool through which to explore queerness and non-normativity, whether this relates to male homosexuality, lesbianism, ‘perverse’ or sinful sexual pleasures, or textual ecstasy.

As Pulham’s reading of *Flames* reminds us, the stifling Victorian socio-cultural climate accounts for the veiled allusions to queerness in British Decadence, and Burin highlights the way in which the French press framed the occult and homosexuality as scandalously Decadent. In the present day, of course, we can be more explicit in our modes of self-expression. As Stableford concludes in his survey essay, only from our current perspective is it truly possible to reflect on the correspondences between the decadent worldview and the appeal of the occult. Today’s moment of global unease is not unlike the ‘*fin du monde*’ atmosphere at the turn of the twentieth century, and mapping our own contemporary concerns on to historical Decadent works goes some way towards satisfying our desires to tease out occluded or implied meanings relating to ‘transgression’.

This issue of *Volupté* suggests there is great potential for future scholarship on Decadence, magic(k), and the occult, particularly in work by queer or marginalized figures. Both Decadence and the occult emerge as defiant strategies against normativity that celebrate darkness, transgression, and ‘otherness’, but also work towards new, more enlightened ways of being. Rather than pessimistically welcoming the ‘*fin du globe*’ as Wilde’s Dorian Gray does,⁶ Decadent works might be read as invitations to renewal and revision. The intersection between Decadence and the occult suggests a countercultural rebellion; new scholarship on this intersection sidesteps the ennui of Decadence and infuses the field with vitality and urgency that is especially resonant today.⁷

¹ *Performing the Occult: Magick, Rituals and the Monstrous in Live Art*, Queen Mary, University of London, 19 October 2017 <<http://www.blogs.sed.qmul.ac.uk/event/performing-the-occult/>>.

² ‘Deep Trash is back with a reincarnation of a to-die-for night of live art! Punk witches, cruising and cursing, afro-futurist Voodoo, leaky rituals, feminist sigil magick, queer zombies, camp vampires, anti-capitalist hell-raising, blood-spilling ... and many other supernatural experiences!’ Advertisement for ‘Deep Trash in the Underworld’,

Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, 21 October 2017 <<https://cuntemporary.org/deep-trash-in-the-underworld/>>.

³ Christopher Partridge, 'Alternative Spiritualities, Occulture and the Re-Enchantment of the West', *The Bible in Transmission*, Summer 2005, 2-5 (p. 3)

<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/bible_in_transmission/files/2005_summer/Bit_Summer_2005_Partridge.pdf>

⁴ For a complete list of the *Occulture in Britain* workshops, visit <<https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/faculties-and-services/arts-humanities/literature-and-languages/literature-and-languages-research/english-studies/popular-occulture-in-britain/workshops/>>

⁵ Arthur Machen, *Hieroglyphics: A Note upon Ecstasy in Literature*, in *Arthur Machen: Decadent and Occult Works*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff (Cambridge: MHRA, 2018), pp. 283-92 (p. 283).

⁶ 'I wish it were *fin du globe*' sighs Dorian at a party, 'Life is a great disappointment.' Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 198.

⁷ We wish to express our gratitude to Jane Desmarais and Robert Pruett, our co-organizers for *Decadence, Magic(ks), and the Occult*, the healing waters of the White Spring at Glastonbury, Luke Paisley of Sorry Design who provided illustrations for this issue, and all who joined us at the Goldsmiths conference for two days of illuminating discussion.

‘Vers le sabbat’ : Occult Initiation and Non-Normative Masculinity in
Jean Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901)

Mathew Rickard

Queen’s University Belfast

The new socialism is a movement that is not just
political, but also magical and sexual.¹

Jean Lorrain (1855-1906) is considered one of the most representative authors of French decadence, with A. E. Carter presenting him as the prime example of *fin-de-siècle* literary debauchery.² Like his own queer literature, Lorrain often rose to notoriety and was known for his effete style.³ An alleged homosexual and the manifestation of the dandy-aesthete, Lorrain declared that ‘je ne suis qu’un miroir et l’on me veut pervers’ [I am only a mirror that people wish to be perverse].⁴ This extravagance, as well as his role as a journalist – the ‘fanfaron de vices’ [braggart of vice]⁵ – positioned him perfectly as a ‘literary observer of the *bas-fonds* of society’.⁶

Although Lorrain has fallen into obscurity in recent years, much like Decadence itself, ‘inferior to the canon from which it has fallen away’,⁷ the connections between homosexuality and transgression have generated much discussion by critics of Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas*, with most agreeing that the author provides us with a homosexual discourse.⁸ This article aims not only to reclaim a non-canonical author and text, but to address also the dearth of attention paid to occult overtones that run parallel to the narrative of male homosexuality in the novel, which subvert the traditional (misogynistic) assumption of witchcraft in particular as an exclusively female ‘crime’. I will focus on what I identify as the apex of the narrative – the Witches’ Sabbat – arguing that the representation of witchcraft tropes in the novel links to the presentation of non-normative masculinity through comparable engagement with marginal practices.

Hugh B. Urban’s assertion that religious and sexual transgression can be mobilized against dominant social discourse will be demonstrated, providing a ‘profound transformation from a terrifying medieval nightmare of heresy and social subversion into a modern ideal of personal

empowerment and social liberation'.⁹ This will ultimately reveal Decadence to be a similarly iconoclastic and rebellious practice through which mainstream ideologies are rejected and agency is asserted.

Fin de Siècle, Fin de Sexe

It is axiomatic that the end of the nineteenth century saw a crisis of gender.¹⁰ However, critical engagement with occult undercurrents that ran parallel to these debates has been scarce even though in *Là-bas*, perhaps the most notorious Decadent text to deal with the occult, Joris-Karl Huysmans explicitly states that 'alors que le matérialisme sévit, la magie se lève' [while materialism rages, magic rises].¹¹ This quotation suggests that recourse to the occult was seen as an attempt to re-enchant an increasingly banal, commercialized world. Just as Charles Baudelaire once exclaimed that 'le vieux Paris n'est plus' [the old Paris is no more],¹² so too did his *fin-de-siècle* successor, Huysmans, declare that he sought to find 'une compensation aux dégoûts de la vie quotidienne' [compensation for the disgusting nature of daily life].¹³ Robert Ziegler illustrates this stagnant modernity with an illustration from Lorrain's 'Lanterne magique', in which two theatregoers lament the loss of Gothic fantasy in favour of modern rationality.¹⁴

Interestingly, this is the only reference to the work of Lorrain in a text devoted to the occult in *fin-de-siècle* culture, which also contains no mention of the construction of masculinity within Lorrain's narratives. This article aims to demonstrate that this has been a scholarly oversight: it builds on Amy Clukey's assertion in her study of English modernist and occult enthusiast Mary Butts that 'the body of literary criticism exploring modernist engagements with occultism remains small, considering the extent of the occult revival' at the *fin de siècle*, with much scope for development, especially with regards to gender.¹⁵ This oversight is unusual when we consider the role that gender played in late nineteenth-century occultism. Indeed, Urban describes the rise of a *magia sexualis* in tandem with a *psychopathia sexualis* in the West at the same time,¹⁶ a relationship that both Alex Owen and Joy Dixon problematize in relation to sexual

‘immorality’, masculinity, and their connections to occultism. Dixon suggests that *fin-de-siècle* occultism was ‘a man’s world’,¹⁷ while Owen notes the establishment of magic in the Golden Dawn as the exertion of one’s willpower upon the world, drawing on medical concepts of a ‘masculine temperament’.¹⁸ However, when we consider that sexologists such as Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter theorized ‘a connection between the function of priest and invert’,¹⁹ it becomes clear that marginality and transgression are potent features of *fin-de-siècle* Decadent occultism.

Occult Practices, Occult Sexualities: Theorizing the Marginal

Fin-de-siècle occultism tapped into historically marginal and transgressive practices which ran counter to Christian and patriarchal society. George McKay notes that while the word ‘occult’ refers to what is hidden, it can be extrapolated to refer to ‘hidden or marginal figures or narratives’. In this way, ‘occulture’ becomes a ‘culture of resistance’ through its engagement with the marginal.²⁰ Occulture can thus be considered as a crystallized form of social anxiety associated with patriarchal disruption, and can be appropriated in order to subvert dominant discourses.

Critics such as Urban have pointed out that the black arts and illicit sexuality have historically gone hand-in-hand,²¹ with Dixon noting the longstanding links between religious and sexual unorthodoxy.²² Charges of sexual indecency have historically been brought before several religiously marginalized and disenfranchised groups throughout history.²³ In particular, such charges have been levelled against those accused of witchcraft, whose alleged practices represented ‘a forceful and popular challenge to the existing structure of power’.²⁴ In a late nineteenth-century context, the links between the occult and sexual transgression can be seen in the work of Aleister Crowley, who utilized the ‘psychologised magic of the *fin de siècle*’ and an ‘anarchic sexuality’²⁵ to undercut Victorian morality with the aim of the ‘renegotiation of the self’.²⁶ For this reason, it is useful to bring these theories of marginality together through the lens of Gayle Rubin’s ‘charmed circle’, which compares acceptable sexual practices to those which are

detrimental for the patriarchy, creating an inner, acceptable circle of practices in contrast to an outer, marginal circle.²⁷ Apart from the obvious lexical connections between a ‘charmed’ circle of sexuality and the occult, it is clear that occult practices are equally located on the periphery of society, providing some *locum tenens* through which to explore and interrogate sexuality.

Decadence, Occultism, and the Appeal of Witchcraft

The end of the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of occult fraternities which emerged at the same time as new social identities, and as such were characterized by the anxieties surrounding gender at that time.²⁸ Matei Călinescu has described Decadence as ‘the rejection of the tyranny of tradition’, and so it is unsurprising that some Decadent writers saw fit to engage with occultism, given this atmosphere of iconoclasm and gendered rebellion.²⁹ Owen notes that *fin-de-siècle* occultism was founded on ‘the inadequacies of a life stripped of any meaningful spiritual component, the perceived threat to individual and aesthetic autonomy posed by a developing mass culture, the dependence of modes of modern rationality on a particular characterization and positioning of the irrational’,³⁰ but also that this aestheticization of nineteenth-century *ennui* drew from the ‘modernity’ of the Decadents.³¹ This modernity, with its love of artifice, was founded in turn on the Schopenhauerian tenet of ‘perception as intellectual’³² – Decadence, like occultism, offered the artist-initiate the opportunity to dismantle and shape their world.³³ Indeed, it would seem at times that *fin-de-siècle* occultism and Decadence were one and the same, with parallels between Owen’s criteria for occultism and Arthur Symons’s description of Decadence, characterized by an ‘intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an oversubtilizing refinement upon refinement [and] a spiritual and moral perversity’.³⁴ As such, while literary representations of black magic provided new perspectives, ‘the value of occultism lay in its ethical transgressions’, with Decadence providing a unique space in which to comment on sexual and gender taboos, ultimately highlighting the artificial and illusory nature of these social constructs.³⁵

While the connections between Decadence, occultism, and gender have been examined,³⁶ few scholars have looked at the peculiar image of witchcraft in novels, which is surprising when we note Corinne Fournier Kiss's assertion that the nineteenth century was obsessed with the witch hunts.³⁷ Images of witchcraft appear in George Sand's *La Petite Fadette* (1849), and it has been noted that Jules Michelet's pseudo-historical treatise *La Sorcière* (1862) was based on Sand's reconciliation between Christ and the Devil in *Consuelo* (1842-1843).³⁸ This particular use of occult imagery becomes interesting for my argument in relation to non-normativity because whereas membership of an actual occult fraternity often meant conforming to bourgeois expectations, witchcraft has always been viewed as inherently transgressive.

As Samuel puts it in the Bible, 'rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft',³⁹ and both Michelet and Charles Leland use the image of a witch leading a Sabbat to conjure forth images of peasant revolt against a patriarchal, Catholic aristocracy, with Michelet's coven fighting for class equality⁴⁰ while Leland's subversive, Italian messiah Aradia leads her coven with the charge to poison their feudal lords.⁴¹ Witchcraft has historically been considered as feminine, and as a specifically patriarchal marginalization of femininity. Indeed, the Witch Hunts are popularly thought of as a female holocaust, but nearly 25% of the accused were men.⁴² This is a key point in my argument that witchcraft presents us with a unique, and often elided, form of transgression for men, and specifically homosexual and non-normative men. As Arthur Evans notes in his study of historic witchcraft and homosexuality, 'heresy became a sexual rather than a doctrinal concept', which demonstrates the 'intimate connection between Gay men, heresy, and witchcraft'.⁴³ Although the freedom espoused by Aradia and Michelet's witch refers to liberation from the medieval feudal system, it will become clear in the following study of *Monsieur de Phocas* that Lorrain is able to build on these images of social revolt and emancipation and apply them to the manumission of non-normative masculinity. In this way, witchcraft becomes a unique trope to be appropriated by Decadence in order to reflect its remit of a schism with establishment culture.

Flight to the Sabbat: *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901)

Non-normative masculinity and corruption are at the core of Lorrain's novel. The protagonist, the duc de Fréneuse, is a typically Decadent anti-hero who is beset with fetishes and phobias which the core antagonist, Ethal, feeds with art, whilst purporting to cure Fréneuse from his afflictions, noting that 'la génie dénué [sic] de la raison enfante des monstres' [genius devoid of reason gives birth to monsters].⁴⁴ This narrative of corruption and subversion builds to a zenith in the chapters concerned with a dinner party culminating in a traditionally Sabbatic gathering that takes place in a recognizably Decadent environment. The dinner party consists of guests whom Ethal refers to as 'quelques cosmopolites' [some cosmopolitans], with 'cosmopolitan' referring to the implied decadence and debauchery of contemporary Parisian culture (139), which echoes Carter's description of *fin-de-siècle* Paris with its 'rouged cheeks, painted lips, drugs, dance-halls, theatres, vice-haunted quays and boulevards'.⁴⁵ Non-normativity seems to be a common attribute of all the guests, with the hint of male homosexuality most notable, as well as the implied incest between two English siblings. Ethal tells Fréneuse that he would perhaps prefer the brother of Maud White, and it could be argued that the incestuous relationship between the two siblings provides an almost acceptable, heteronormative paradigm through which Fréneuse can experience his attraction to Reginald. Indeed, we are told that 'tant cette ressemblance de l'un et de l'autre les désexuait' [their resemblance to each other desexed them] (141), both 'androgynizing' the siblings and fulfilling Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's queering of René Girard's 'erotic triangle', by which 'a calculus of power [is] structured by the relation of rivalry between the two active members of an erotic triangle [...] often in which two males are rivals for a female'.⁴⁶

In this way, by amalgamating societal undesirables and deviants, Lorrain presents us with the traditional image of the Witches' Sabbat, a choice reflected in the name of this chapter, and from which this article takes its name. In his study of male witchcraft, Schulte notes that 'by attending the Sabbat, [a man] had become a member of a subversive group of felons whose moral standards represented the reverse of contemporary norms'.⁴⁷ In a late nineteenth-century

context, this early modern imagery still evoked sentiments of counter-cultural revolt, with the well-known anti-Semite Drumont comparing the Dreyfus Affair to the Witches' Sabbat, saying that 'c'est bien le Sabbat, c'est-à-dire la parodie sacrilège et le blasphème contre la Vérité et la Patrie' [it is well and truly the Sabbat, that is to say, a sacrilegious parody and blasphemy against Truth and the Fatherland].⁴⁸ Thus, engagement with the occult and in particular that of traditional witchcraft marks a turning away from patriarchal, heteronormative society.

The Witches' Sabbat can be broadly understood as a regular gathering of witches in order to worship the Devil. However, medieval imagery of the Witches' Sabbat has its roots in the conflation of many folkloric strands, notably the Wild Hunt led by Diana.⁴⁹ In this way, the Witches' Sabbat can be held as a symbol of feminist revolt, as seen in the works of Michelet and Leland. As such, it is unsurprising that Lorrain's Sabbat should feature the feminine as a focal point. Maud White can be considered to open the Sabbat with an intertextual, almost liturgical, reiteration of Albert Samain's 'Le Bouc noir passe au fond des ténèbres malsaines' [The Black Goat Goes to the Bottom of Unhealthy Darkness], alluding both to unconventional love with its references to 'l'amour qui doit demain engendrer la haine' [the love that must tomorrow engender hatred], but also to witchcraft, with Samain noting that 'minuit sonne au coeur des sorcières obscènes' [midnight rings in the heart of obscene witches] (147). Fréneuse muses that this recitation 'semblait incarner un rite, un rite de religion oubliée' [seemed to embody a rite, a rite of a forgotten religion], whilst Ethal notes that this 'appel aux larves' [call to the larvae] has seemingly summoned guests to the salon, with Fréneuse suggesting that 'la voix lente de Maud les évoquait' [the slow voice of Maud evoked them] (146-47). This of course has further significance, not only suggesting that the guests of the party itself are ghoulish, not of this world, and ultimately non-normative, but that they have been summoned there by an unknown force.

Decadent imagery of apostasy and atavism flows through the allusions to non-normative religion, which are furthered by calls to prelapsarian Egyptian religion, and particularly the cult of Isis, with Ethal declaring: 'mettons Prêtresses de la Bonne Déesse, n'est-ce pas? puisque aucun

homme n'était admis aux mystères d'Isis' [let us appoint Priestesses of the Good Goddess; since no man was admitted to the mysteries of Isis] (150). This once again marks the refusal of patriarchal religion, and indeed the Patriarchy at large. Max Nordau's 1892 treatise *Entartung* [*Degeneration*] described a 'dying world',⁵⁰ and Brian Stableford notes that the cultural pessimism that emerged from this theory caused the Decadents to associate the implied decline of Europe with the decline of several historic civilizations, even Sodom and Gomorrah.⁵¹ Indeed, the decline of Rome is often attributed to the introduction of Greek decadence, including 'homosexuality, whoring, and elaborate and costly banquets',⁵² while John Addington Symonds asserted that 'the pursuit of beauty in Greece had ended in death' – both features that returned and characterized *fin-de-siècle* Decadence in conjunction with the emergence of new sexual and social identities.⁵³

The narrative has been associated with the Sacred Feminine from its outset via the reference to the goddess Astarté in the subtitle of the novel as well as her narrative implication: it draws upon the 'simultaneous [historical] cult of Astarte, Isis, and Aphrodite', an unsurprising syncretism given the shared attributes of these goddesses.⁵⁴ As the Sabbat continues, Lorrain builds on the Isian imagery (perhaps as a syncretic proxy for Astarté) but contradicts the suggestion that no man was admitted to her cult by placing all the men at the salon – even those non-heteronormative men – around Sophie, noting that no woman was presented (154). This syncretic and queer nature of deity was previously presented to us in the novel with the description of a dancer who was 'à la fois Aphrodite et Ganymède, Astarté et Hylas' [at once Aphrodite and Ganymede, Astarte and Hylas] (78). This androgynous syncretism is significant for non-normative masculinity when we consider Sarah Waters's assertion that both Ganymede and Hylas (alongside Antinoüs) have historically also been associated as 'homoerotic icons', providing the 'nineteenth-century Greek Lover [i.e. homosexual or invert] not just with a historical precedent but with a model for his own retrospective yearning'.⁵⁵ This marks an archetypally Decadent inversion of the traditional masculine-feminine binary and could be viewed as a non-

normative male identification with the transgressive female archetype epitomized in the patriarchal disruption that the Sacred Feminine represents.

Traditional notions of gender stability are further subverted in typically Decadent fashion by the introduction of the Javanese androgynes, a stability that is only further subverted by their distinct Otherness as Javanese. As Fréneuse notes, ‘le sexe est si ambigu dans cette race’ [sex is so ambiguous in this race] (155). It is thus only fitting that they should lead the ad-hoc coven into what is jokingly described as ‘le commencement de l’orgie’ [the beginning of the orgy] (156), which would have traditionally been considered as the zenith of Sabbatic action.⁵⁶ This orgy comes to a close with the Duchess of Althorneyshare being described as ‘la madone du Vice, stigmatisée sous le surnom de Notre Dame de Sept-Luxures’ [the Madonna of Vice, denounced by the nickname of Our Lady of Seven-Luxuries] (158). The anti-Marian imagery of this description of the duchess is clear, and also draws her into Phillip Winn’s suggestion that Astarté – the shadowy personification of Fréneuse’s fetishes – is an anti-Madonna, deifying the duchess as Astarté.⁵⁷ The Sacred Feminine can thus be considered to run throughout this passage as a deliberately subversive counterpoint to patriarchal, normative discourse.

Another traditional trope of the Witches’ Sabbat is presented as the Sabbat continues with the consumption of opium, which in this setting is a specifically self-inflicted phenomenon that establishes associations with the flight to and from the Sabbat. The opium acts as a catalyst for imagined flights over ‘un fantastique et silencieux Paris vu à vol d’oiseau’ [a fantastic and silent Paris seen as the crow flies] (162) as well as ‘l’Inde légendaire et védique après l’Égypte mystérieuse’ [legendary and Vedic India after mysterious Egypt] (166). This use of a narcotic to initiate a spirit-flight echoes both Alexander Kuklin and Edward B. Tylor’s descriptions of psychotropic ointments that allegedly transported the witch to the Sabbat.⁵⁸ Indeed, these ‘flying ointments’ consisted of several intoxicating plants of the *Solanaceae* family, which cause a similar psychotropic effect to opium.⁵⁹ It is clear that Lorrain was aware of such a concoction, noting in his more overtly occult short story ‘La Princesse au sabbat’ that ‘la princesse, debout toute nue

devant la cheminée, se sent oindre et frotter d'une étrange pommade' [the princess, standing naked in front of the fireplace, anointed and rubbed herself with a strange ointment], only to find herself at the Sabbat.⁶⁰

In addition to the narcotic nature of both the flying ointment and the opium, Michael J. Harner argues that this intoxication often took a distinctly erotic aspect, which builds on Erich Hesse's assertion that 'the hallucinations are frequently dominated by the erotic moment'.⁶¹ This leads Harner to assert that the image of the witch and her broomstick 'was undoubtedly more than a symbolic Freudian act, serving as an applicator for the atropine-containing plant to the sensitive vaginal membranes', highlighting both the vehicular and phallic nature of the broomstick.⁶² The distinctly sexual aspect of the flying ointment can be symbolized both through the Javanese dance in which the androgynes 'ne faisaient qu'un seul corps à deux têtes' [became one body with two heads], as well as the guests circulating and fraternizing together in a manner that could be reminiscent of sexual congress (162). We read that Maud White '[était] allongée auprès de son frère' [was lying next to her brother] (160), while Ethal 'venait alors s'étendre entre Welcôme et [Fréneuse], et les danses du poison commençaient' [came to lie between Welcôme and [Fréneuse], and the poison dances began] (161), which once again alludes to Sedgwick's erotic triangle, albeit with three men, rather than requiring a female lens through which homosexual desire can be safely expressed.

Another witchcraft trope – the witches' teat – appears towards the end of the Sabbat in the passage entitled 'Smara' which takes its name from a vampiric reverie by Charles Nodier, further implying the evocation of an occult power.⁶³ The witches' teat was held to be the spot on the witch's body from which she suckled her familiar, an act that Deborah Willis has suggested represents a perversion of maternal power – another powerful image of gender-bending.⁶⁴ Fréneuse notes that an 'effroyable ennemi conquérait [sa] chair. Toute une armée d'énormes chauves-souris [...] de l'espèce dite vampire, suçait [son] sang' [a dreadful enemy conquered his flesh. An entire army of enormous vampire bats were sucking his blood], an act that he

reciprocates, instinctively biting the bat and drinking its blood (167). The image of the bat of course evokes associations of vampirism in addition to the implication of a witches' teat, but Fréneuse's reciprocation of the act further underlines his non-normativity and marks his now willing compliance with the Sabbatic actions, while also representing the Decadent obsession with death and decay.⁶⁵

'Vivre sa vie': A Coming Out Narrative

The Sabbat and its aftermath are linked inextricably with a homosexual conflict against society as both Ethal and an Irishman named Welcôme vie for Fréneuse's attention with Welcôme suggesting that 'vivre sa vie, voilà le but final; mais [...] nous avons contre nous notre éducation et notre milieu, que dis-je?' [living one's life is the ultimate goal; but [...] our education and environment are against us, what can I say?] (181). This ultimately highlights Ethal's actions up to this point of the narrative as a toxic obstacle to liberation. Welcôme suggests that by meeting one's demons head-on and internalizing them, Fréneuse will overcome his anxiety. He is told,

laisser entrer l'univers en soi et prendre ainsi lentement et voluptueusement possession du monde [...]. Là seulement, Astarté vous apparaîtra dans quelque belle fleur humaine, robuste et suant la santé, trop rose et trop rousse avec yeux mystérieux de bête, telle la bouchère au profil d'Hérodiade

[let the universe enter you and you will easily and sensually take possession of the world. Only in this way will Astarté appear to you as some beautiful human flower, robust and emanating health, too pink and auburn with mysterious eyes of a beast, like the butcher with the profile of Herodias] (180).

The reference to Herodias here once again underlines the connections to witchcraft, with Leland equating his pagan messiah Aradia with Salomé's mother,⁶⁶ while Hutton suggests that Aradia is simply the Italianized form of Herodias.⁶⁷ As such, I would argue that, in this scene, Welcôme gives expression to an act we would today refer to as 'coming out', using a rehabilitated image of Astarté and witchcraft as a metaphor for homosexual desire and self-acceptance.

This ultimately provides a stark counterpoint to Ethal's misogynistic, *vagina dentata*-inspired version of Astarté, who 'entre ses cuisses fuselées, au bas renflé du ventre, à la place du sexe,

ricanante, menaçante, [avait] une petite tête de mort' [had a small sneering and menacing skull between her tapered thighs, below the low bulge of the belly where her genitals ought to have been] (207). This image not only perpetuates male fears of the feminine at the *fin de siècle*,⁶⁸ but also acts as a prophylaxis against normative sexuality. Indeed, queer desire is often presented in Decadent texts as the new norm to which people may aspire, perhaps best demonstrated by Raoule's longing for a brand new, strange love in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénu*s.⁶⁹ Welcôme's call to arms thus acts as a panacea for Fréneuse against all the false promises that Ethal has made throughout the narrative, with the protagonist noting that 'j'écoutais cet homme [Welcôme], comme on boit un philtre' [I listened to this man as one would drink a potion] (182). This once again draws on occult imagery, while associating it with a curative 'coming out' narrative.

Fréneuse later notes that because of Ethal he walks through the forest of Tiffauges described by Huysmans as 'un envoûté, un misérable et fol ensorcelé des magies noires d'autrefois' [an enchanted, miserable fool bewitched by black magicks of yesteryear] (211). By intertextually imposing Durtal's hallucinations of the historical Gilles de Rais from Huysmans's *Là-bas*, Lorrain once again underlines the occult influences upon his protagonist, as well as his non-normativity. Huysmans's text represents Decadent occultism *par excellence*, atavistically bringing the Medieval to the Modern, while Gilles de Rais' involvement in the occult, child murders, and rapes all serve to bring forth the Decadent fascination with death, decay, and perversion.⁷⁰ However, this reverie galvanizes Fréneuse into action, and making his choice between the two men, he kills Ethal by forcing him to ingest his own poison. This act, I suggest, completes Fréneuse's initiation into the witch-cult and fulfils the expectations of the Sabbatic sacrifice. Indeed, it would seem that the protagonist has taken on a new identity after the incident, one presented in the language of rebirth.

On exiting Ethal's workshop we are told that he 'ouvri[t] la porte de l'antichambre et descendi[t] l'escalier' [opened the door of the antechamber and went down the stairs] (276). This exit is evocative of a yonic image of a child's passage from the womb along the vaginal canal

during birth. He goes on to say that ‘je ne me reconnais plus’ [I do not recognize myself anymore] (280), and it is significant that the protagonist is never again referred to as the duc de Fréneuse but as the eponymous Monsieur de Phocas after the murder. This ‘rebaptism’ is confirmed in the publisher’s office at the beginning of the novel (which takes an epistolary form following this expository episode) where the protagonist tells us that ‘le duc de Fréneuse est mort, il n’y a plus que M. de Phocas’ [the duc de Fréneuse is dead, there is only M. de Phocas] (53). This echoes the Jesuit del Río’s assertion that witches were rebaptized by the Devil during the Sabbat.⁷¹

Conclusion

This article has shown that occult and marginalized sexual identities and behaviours can be considered non-normative and inherently interlinked due to their shared marginality, both in historical texts as well as in the works of Jean Lorrain. I have suggested that Lorrain’s engagement not only in non-heteronormative behaviours in *Monsieur de Phocas*, but also the underlying imagery of occultism – through the transgressive and iconoclastic lens of Decadence – helps to queer the dominant discourse as per Urban’s exploration of challenges to established social orders. As such, the occult can be considered to inhabit a position ‘outside’ of Rubin’s ‘Charmed Circle’ of sexual behaviours and identities, which in the case of the novel ensures that the protagonist is ‘doubly’ transgressive due to his engagement with non-normative sexuality and the occult. For this reason, he is allowed a further route to authority via multiple methods of subverting the status quo. The result is that the protagonist’s engagement with non-normative religious modes effectively triggers a rebirth within him and allows him ‘vivre sa vie’ [to live his life] as commanded by Welcôme.

The imagery of witchcraft offers a further method of subverting the status quo, turning the gendered expectations of the witch on their heads while engaging with Decadent tropes of apostasy and rebellion. Men were also historically accused of witchcraft, which had implications

for their masculinity as, by being associated with witchcraft, they were necessarily feminized.⁷² As Elizabeth Kent puts it, ‘male witches were masculine others, whose poor practice of patriarchy cut across paradigmatic idealization of masculine virtue’.⁷³ This article has revealed that witchcraft and Decadence intersect in the work of Lorrain through engagement with marginality and ‘otherness’ in order to highlight the struggle of non-normative masculinity at the *fin de siècle*. Following Georges Bataille’s conception of transgression as the construction and subsequent overstepping of laws⁷⁴ as well as historical links between illicit sexuality and religious apostasy, Lorrain empowers a peripheral, transgressive protagonist. He subverts the status quo, permitting him avenues to power, and ultimately readdressing the balance of power between heteronormative masculinity and non-normative, subordinate masculinity.

¹ Arthur Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* (Boston: Fag Rag Books, 1978), p. 155.

² A. E. Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), p. 16.

³ Robert Ziegler, *Asymptote: An Approach to Decadent Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 177.

⁴ Jean Lorrain, *La Nostalgie de la beauté: pensées choisies et précédée d'une introduction par Jean Bouscatel* (Paris: E. Sansot et Cie, 1930), p. 85. All translations in this article, unless stated otherwise, are my own.

⁵ Rachilde, ‘Jean Lorrain, le fanfaron de vices’, in *Portraits d'hommes* (Paris: Mornay, 1929), pp. 49-58.

⁶ Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 123.

⁷ Robert Ziegler, ‘Decadence as Poison: The Dynamics of Literary Circulation in Jean Lorrain’, *Neophilologus*, 79 (1995), 25-32 (p. 25).

⁸ Cf. Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Father: Decadence in France 1870-1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), p. 201; C.J. Gomolka, ‘Ghosts in the Closet?: The Dandy, Specter, and Spectacle in Jean Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Bougreton* and *Monsieur de Phocas*’, *Pacific Coast Philology*, 52.1 (2017), 88-111 (pp. 89-90); Philippe Martin-Lau, “‘Et Narkiss se mira...’: regard sur l’écriture hétérosexuelle de Jean Lorrain”, *Dalhousie French Studies*, 61 (2002), 49-61 (p. 54); and Phillip Winn, *Sexualités décadentes chez Jean Lorrain: le héros fin de sexe* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), p. 21.

⁹ Hugh B. Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esotericism* (London: University of California Press, 2006), p. 2.

¹⁰ George L. Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 78; Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin-de-Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), p. 10.

¹¹ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-bas* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 238.

¹² Charles Baudelaire, ‘Le Cygne’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, ed. by Graham Chesters (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1995), p. 86, line 9.

¹³ Michel de Lézinier, *Avec Huysmans: Promenades et souvenirs* (Paris: Delpeuch, 1928), p. 193.

¹⁴ Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic, and Mysticism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 1.

¹⁵ Amy Clukey, ‘Enchanting Modernism: Mary Butts, Decadence, and the Ethics of Occultism’, *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, 1 (2014), 78-107 (p. 80).

¹⁶ Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, p. 1.

¹⁷ Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 67.

¹⁸ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 88.

¹⁹ Joy Dixon, ‘Sexology and the Occult: Sexuality and Subjectivity in Theosophy’s New Age’ in *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 7.3 (January 1997), 409-33 (p. 412).

²⁰ George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 51-52.

- ²¹ Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, p. 1; ‘Sexuality’, in *The Cambridge Handbook of Western Mysticism and Esotericism*, ed. by Glenn Alexander Magee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 429-40 (p. 430).
- ²² Dixon, ‘Sexology and the Occult’, p. 416.
- ²³ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 283-86, 295-98.
- ²⁴ Urban, *Magia Sexualis*, pp. 23, 34.
- ²⁵ Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, pp. 187-213.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- ²⁷ Gayle S. Rubin, ‘Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality’, in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, Michèle Aine Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 3-44 (p. 13).
- ²⁸ Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, p. 85.
- ²⁹ Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Post-Modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 171.
- ³⁰ Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*, p. 238.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ³² F. C. White, ‘The Fourfold Root’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, ed. by Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 63-92 (p. 70).
- ³³ John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 57.
- ³⁴ Arthur Symons, ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (1893), 858-67 (p. 858).
- ³⁵ Clukey, ‘Enchanting Modernism’, p. 79.
- ³⁶ See, for example, Ziegler’s *Satanism, Magic, and Mysticism in Fin-de-Siècle France*.
- ³⁷ Corinne Fournier Kiss, ‘La Figure de la sorcière dans la littérature du XIXe siècle (Jules Michelet, George Sand, Eliza Orzeszkowa)’, *Wiek XIX: Rocznik Towarzystwa Literackiego imienia Adama Mickiewicza*, 5.47 (2012), 259-79 (p. 259).
- ³⁸ M. Ione Crummy, ‘George Sand and her “Sage-Femmes” as an Inspiration for Jules Michelet’s *La Sorcière*’, in *Le Siècle de George Sand* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), pp. 237-46.
- ³⁹ I Samuel 15: 23, *The Holy Bible: King James Version* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Bibles, 2011).
- ⁴⁰ Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière*, ed. by Lucien Refort (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1952), pp. 128-29.
- ⁴¹ Charles Leland, *Aradia, or The Gospel of the Witches* (London: David Nutt, 1899), p. 2.
- ⁴² Alison Rowlands, ‘Not the “Usual Suspects”? Male Witches, Witchcraft, and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe’, in *Witchcraft and Masculinities in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Alison Rowlands (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-30 (p. 2).
- ⁴³ Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture*, pp. 56, 12.
- ⁴⁴ Jean Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), ed. by Hélène Zinck, p. 115. All subsequent references will be from this edition unless stated otherwise.
- ⁴⁵ Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature*, p. 16.
- ⁴⁶ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 21 [in relation to René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961)].
- ⁴⁷ Rolf Schulte, *Man as Witch: Male Witches in Central Europe*, trans. by Linda Froome-Döring (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.
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Vernon Lee's Occult Beauty

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Throughout her career, the late-Victorian essayist, fiction writer, and aesthetic theorist Vernon Lee (1856-1935) sustained a critique of the Aesthetic movement to which she was nevertheless an important contributor. Finding that the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* sanctioned elitist self-absorption, irresponsible excess and intellectual vapidness, Lee sought to instead establish a connection between the worship of beauty and the development of ethics. One of the ways in which she achieved this divergent aestheticist project was, I wish to suggest, through occult theories of knowledge, learning, renunciation, and submission. My aim in this article is to approach the concept of beauty in Lee's work, considering how it energizes and challenges her interwoven concepts of desire, history, and ethics. Turning first to the occult underpinnings of her essays on aesthetics, I subsequently unearth the queer historiographical injunction embedded within her Gothic fiction, exploring, through a reading of 'Amour Dure', how the historian's encounter with occult beauty awakens affective and sexual investments in the feminist past.

First, I wish to offer a note on my use of the terminology of aestheticism, drawing on Lee's own definition. Lee suggests that the difference between aestheticism and decadence is less definitional than it is performative: she refers to 'persons styled by themselves aesthetes and by others decadents.'¹ 'Decadent' is, according to this schema, a word only used to describe someone else, whereas 'aesthete' is a word that some would choose to refer to themselves – although, notably, not Lee, who situates herself outside of both. Bearing in mind Lee's willingness to use the two terms to describe the same collection of people and texts, in this article, I draw upon them somewhat interchangeably, distinguishing between them on the occasions upon which Lee finds it important to do so.

Central to late-Victorian occultism is the figure of the initiate. In Theosophy, initiation refers to the process by which the disciple, guided by the Masters through escalating levels of direct spiritual experience, accesses new ways of seeing and sensing: ‘the man becomes conscious of a new world, as though some great new sense had been given to him.’²² The aesthete, a seeker of beauty, also strives to enter into a ‘new world’ of perceptual sensitivity, one that is opened up through the cultivation of a ‘new sense.’ Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) articulates the initiatory ideal as an imagined moment of awakening, in which ‘our eyelids might open some morning upon a world that had been refashioned anew in the darkness for our pleasure, a world in which things would have fresh shapes and colours, and be changed, or have other secrets.’²³

The spiritual awakening envisioned by Wilde was difficult to uncouple from the cult of beauty’s cruder association with the mania for collecting, a trope that George du Maurier famously satirized in the pages of *Punch* with his depiction of a Wildean couple who aspire to live up to their teapot.²⁴ That Wilde’s vision of sensory rebirth is embedded within Chapter Eleven of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which depicts Dorian’s decadent collecting-fugue, indicates the difficulty of separating the spiritual ideals of aestheticism from its extravagant material practices. Lee found an alternative to the apolitical, isolated mode of aestheticist collecting through Walter Pater’s idea of asceticism. Lee, who cites Pater’s *Marius The Epicurean* (1885) as her inspiration, insists that ‘our deepest aesthetic emotions are [...] connected with things which we do not, cannot possess.’²⁵ In order to come into contact with beauty, we must devote ourselves to the work of pursuing it, for ‘art cannot be enjoyed without initiation and training.’²⁶ Occult initiation begins with the practice of renunciation: an axiom in the inaugural issue of the Theosophical magazine, *Lucifer*, reads: ‘the first step (toward occultism) is sacrifice, the second, renunciation.’²⁷ Through the occult premise of initiation coupled with renunciation, Lee aligns herself with the spiritual possibilities of aesthetic awakening, while distancing herself from its materialistic dimensions.

Throughout Lee's art criticism, she resists the scholarly, accumulative model of knowledge – the idea of study *as* collecting, in which learned men in armchairs accrue facts toward the eventual cognitive mastery of a subject – in favour of an experiential mode, in which the curious, childlike initiate comes to grasp a concept intuitively through an act of enchantment. In her own recollections of her childhood education, Lee writes of her nanny imbuing her with an interest in folklore and fairy tales. Although, she admits, these are stories that one can find 'in the sixpenny books sold at the stations', for her, they were 'learned in some occult and direct manner', through a feminine oral practice.⁸ Similarly, in her parable of aesthetic education 'The Child in The Vatican' (1881), Lee imagines the ancient statues in the Vatican casting a spell upon a child visitor, such that the child learns directly 'the teachings of the statues themselves.'⁹ The statues, 'a very mixed company', which includes 'unspeakable ruffians and outcasts', hail from all levels of the social hierarchy.¹⁰ They speak in 'gibberish' and 'slang;' they 'have never read Winckelmann' and thus 'do not know all these wondrous classifications of schools of which [...] we are so justly proud.'¹¹ Yet they teach the child something more fundamental: 'a lesson of their own nature and kinship.'¹² In these examples of aesthetic education, Lee privileges a direct mode of learning that undermines existing discourse, such as the classificatory systems imposed by Winckelmann, in favour of the magic spell cast by feminine and working-class figures.

In *Laurus Nobilis* (1909) Lee again draws on occult language in order to present a notion of beauty as something that wields a significant and direct power over the initiate. She writes:

The Beautiful is in some manner one of the primordial and, so to speak, cosmic powers of the world. The theories of persons styled by themselves aesthetes and by others decadents have indeed attempted to reduce man's relations with the great world-power beauty to mere intellectual dilettantism or sensual superfiness. But the general intuition has not been shaken, the intuition which recognized in Beauty a superhuman, and, in that sense, a truly divine power.¹³

Lee critiques the collector's mode of aestheticism – 'intellectual dilettantism' – as a reductive approach to beauty. She rejects the highly refined or 'superfine' sensuality of the decadent, instead turning to a democratic ideal of common sense – the 'general intuition' – in order to

suggest that beauty is ‘primordial’, ‘cosmic’, a ‘superhuman and truly divine power.’ In keeping with its divine power, beauty works upon she who interacts with it. It is not subject to her; rather, she is subject to it. Drawing on the imagery of the occult, Lee writes, ‘We call in beauty as a servant, and see, like some strange daemon, it becomes the master; it may answer our call, but we have to do its bidding.’¹⁴ This domination by the ‘master’ beauty is an initiatory step on a spiritual path, a threshold the initiate must pass over in order to come into ethical relation to otherness. Beauty is pedagogical: it is a teacher. ‘Pleasure in the beautiful is essentially a spiritual phenomenon, one which (alters) the contents of our mind, while leaving the beautiful object itself intact and unaltered.’¹⁵ If we fully ‘give ourselves to it’, we increase our ‘spiritual activity’. We learn, finally, to ‘reject the lesser good for the greater’, in art and in life, meaning that, through the cultivation of aesthetic discernment, we also develop the capacity to judge between right and wrong in other areas of our lives.¹⁶ The cultivation of good judgement inevitably leads to renunciation: ‘The Beautiful teaches asceticism leading to a more complete and harmonious rhythm of individual existence.’¹⁷ Thus, counter to the tenets of *l’art pour l’art*, beauty is not autonomous *from* the political or ethical, but neither is it subject to political demands. Rather, it is a supernatural, all-possessing power that teaches its initiates the proper sensibility through which to engage ethically in the world around them.

Lee’s premise of beauty as a spiritual teacher is haunted by the problematic but important question of taste: particularly, the problem of individual taste that might be unhealthy. Lee holds this notion of dangerous beauty, which she introduces to curious effect in ‘Beauty and Sanity’ (1909), at arm’s length. How, she asks, can she even discuss it, without ‘introducing a sickly atmosphere of decadent art and literature into (her) valley of bay trees?’¹⁸ Grasping for an example, she conjures the Roman Emperor Tiberius, a ‘very subtle person’ who preferred to sleep on black sheets and take his meals on black tablecloths. In order to prefer black, she suggests, Tiberius had to forego the colour white, a shade universally accepted as good and pleasant, and by proxy, forego all purity, newness, and health. Mimicking the voice of the

imagined Decadent, Lee asks, ‘But what if we *do not care for white*? What if we are so constituted that its insipidity sickens *us* as much as the most poisonous and putrescent colours?’¹⁹ The notion of a taste for complexity and refinement leads, then, to a flipped aesthetic experience: that which to ordinary people is beautiful and good (‘the Antique and Outdoor Nature, and early Painters, and Mozart and Gluck, and all whitenesses physical and moral’) becomes ‘insipid’ and ‘sicken[ing]’, and that which is repulsive to most becomes pleasurable: ‘Other people’s poison is our meat.’²⁰ Decadent taste, described in phenomenological terms as an inversion – ‘the desire for the topsy-turvy’²¹ – undermines the supposed universality of ordinary beauty. Yet the ‘meat’ that it offers is still, at its heart, a poison. While for Lee Decadent art is not to be a target of public moral censure, it is dangerous on an individual scale: an ‘unwholesome aesthetic self-indulgence’ that leads to the ‘disintegration of the soul.’²² With this image of the endangered soul, Lee obliquely references an earlier piece of writing: the post-trial defence of Oscar Wilde that she embedded within a book review of Max Nordau’s anti-Decadent treatise *Degeneration* (1892; tr. 1895), where she reorients moral censure toward the social isolation that leads to ‘the deterioration of the soul’s faculties and habits.’²³ Thus, when, in 1909, she obliquely indexes the soul-disintegrating capacity of Decadence, she indexes queer sexuality. While Lee devotes a great deal of space in this volume to the contemplation of the spiritual possibilities inherent in aesthetic initiation, considering the relationship between beauty, vitality, sociality, and ethics, she is not quite able to engage the particularities of its spiritual dangers. Lee carefully stems the tide of a queer decadence that creeps in at the edges of the essay, threatening to overtake her explanation of safer, healthier beauties should she venture to describe it.

While Lee’s criticism published after the Wilde trials avoids fully addressing the question of decadence, the fictional tales included in her earlier 1890 volume, *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, do offer fuller explorations of queer, decadent beauty as an occasion for aesthetic and erotic initiation. Each of the four stories collected in *Hauntings* is rich with Gothic eroticism. In ‘Dionea’, the reincarnated Venus causes sexual pandemonium in a seaside Italian town. The

composer-protagonist of 'A Wicked Voice' is haunted, in spite of himself, by the uncannily alluring voice of a Venetian castrato. In 'Oke of Okehurst', Alice Okehurst carries on a love affair with Lovelock, an ancestral ghost. In 'Amour Dure', Polish historian Spiridion Trepka, tasked with writing a history of Urbania, Italy, stalls his official research in order to pursue a Renaissance spectre.

In spite of the fact that each story circulates around problems of desire, Vineta Colby rejects queer readings of Vernon Lee's stories, arguing that 'to read them as unconscious revelations of her inner self – of her sexual frustration and repressed lesbianism [...] is unrewarding.'²⁴ As Patricia Pulham and Catherine Maxwell suggest, Colby's claim is a legitimate defence against the 'crude Freudian analysis' of earlier critics like Burdett Gardner or, in other words, the reading of lesbian texts as symptomatic of the author's repressed desire for other women.²⁵ What conditions both the symptomatic queer reading and the foreclosure of queer readings in relation to Lee's work is the assumption that Lee and her oeuvre are not already queer: that Lee, in Colby's words, 'fail[ed] to come to terms with her own sexuality' and that, unable to recognize her sexuality in life, she was doomed to play it out unconsciously in her work.²⁶ Scholars like Kathy Psomiades, Joseph Bristow, Richard Dellamora, and Martha Vicinus have successfully explored the queer dynamics of Lee's writing with a nuanced understanding of lesbian aesthetics that is not contingent on the question of whether or not Lee successfully accomplished lesbian sex. As Psomiades observes, Lee was 'at the center of a remarkable community [...] in which women's romantic attachments to each other exist openly.'²⁷ Looking at Lee's mode of relationality, built around her cross-identificatory ties to a cosmopolitan community of sexual dissidents, as Dellamora has successfully done,²⁸ allows us to acknowledge that she realized a number of practices and commitments throughout her life that are legible as queer. With this in mind, we are able to turn to her stories as a model of queer late-Victorian historiographical and aesthetic practice.

The supernatural story poses a problem to literary form because, as Lee argues, the frightening object must never be fully revealed if it is to remain frightening: ‘the supernatural is necessarily vague, and art is necessarily essentially distinct: give shape to the vague and it ceases to exist.’²⁹ As if to address the problem of form in her fantastic tales, Lee injects her descriptive passages with heavy doses of the word ‘vague.’ In ‘Oke of Okehurst’, for example, the reader encounters a ‘vague scent of rose-leaves and spices’, a ‘vague depression and irritation’, a ‘vague eccentricity of expression’, ‘a look of vague contempt’, a ‘vague, haunting something’, a ‘vague presence [...] of [a] murdered cavalier poet’, a ‘vague absent glance’, a ‘vague, permeating, continuous feeling’, and so on.³⁰ Even a bed is found ‘loom[ing] out vagu[ely].’³¹

If vagueness creates the fantastic atmosphere of ontological uncertainty, it also pries open the possibility of representing sexualities that have been rendered culturally impossible. In *Hauntings*, non-normative desire turns many of Lee’s characters into otherworldly and ethereal entities, causing them to withdraw from others and to lose their physical shape. As Terry Castle argues in *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), ‘to love another woman’ in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, ‘is to lose one’s solidity in the world, to evanesce, and fade into the spectral.’³² While Castle reads the phantasm as a representation of lesbian invisibility, lesbian readers and writers like Lee also imagined this ghostly embodiment, the ability to vanish into thin air, as a means of increased freedom, mobility, and sexual agency. Indeed, if there is any one thing the uncanny women in *Hauntings* all seem to want, it is to be left alone. The central mystery of ‘Oke of Okehurst’ is Alice Okehurst’s indifference both to her husband, Mr. Oke, and to the amorous painter tasked with making her portrait. Mr. Oke, traumatized by the loss of a child, blandly pretends to enjoy his life, while Alice, erotically obsessed with the ghost of her ancestor Lovelock, goads her husband with relentless comments about the past. Alice becomes a shadow within her own house: thin, willowy, and clad in white, she grows ‘more diaphanous, strange, and faraway’, eventually appearing ‘incorporeal.’³³ Alice stages her withdrawal from family life, her indifference to patriarchal systems of reproduction and representation, as a gradual bodily

disappearance, a slippage into the fantasy of a lost past: loving a ghost, she becomes a ghost. Her withdrawal, accompanied by the proliferation of linguistically vague descriptions of the Okehurst estate and its residents, produces a Gothic household in which everything, down to the furniture, is queerly conditioned by uncertainty.

In 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' (1995), Jacques Derrida suggests that 'a spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive.'³⁴ The archive, a collection of traces of a past that never fully manifests, calls to us, like Hamlet's ghost, with an injunction, a sense of 'something to be done.'³⁵ Yet, as Carla Freccero comments, the ethical response to the demands of the past cannot be an appropriation of the past, its re-entombment, in other words, under the weight of the present. Freccero proposes a queer approach, 'queer both in its uncanniness and in its engagement with desire', that responds to the spectral *arrivant* 'not to determine what is what – to know – but to be demanded of and to respond.'³⁶

For Lee, as for Freccero, the concept of the spectral is a way of negotiating an affective relationship to the archive, one based both in our need for the Past, and in the Past's need for us. In the preface to *Hauntings*, Lee insists 'the Past, of which the prose is clean obliterated by distance – that is the place to get our ghosts from.'³⁷ The capital-P Past is not a particular era in history, but an imaginative and poetic space, conditioned by temporal 'distance', into which the modern subject, disenchanted with the prosaic and normative present, can travel. As Christa Zorn suggests, it is unclear whether Lee's scholarly protagonists 'desire a more glamorous past or an exquisite sexual experience, since both become interchangeable'.³⁸ This erotic desire for the past is embodied in what Lee calls the 'spurious ghost', the idea of the past that 'haunt(s) certain brains'.³⁹ The 'certain brain' suggests that the proclivity for being haunted is rarefied, attached to a particular kind of person. Lee attributes such capacity for being haunted to Arthur Lemon and Flora Priestley, the two friends to whom *Hauntings* is dedicated. In so doing, Lee suggests an affiliation between herself and others who longed for an alternative to what José Esteban Muñoz has called the 'stultifying heterosexual present.'⁴⁰ The ghosts that we create in our minds are a

necessary vehicle for this escape: they traverse the ‘borderland of the Past’ moving ‘perpetually to and fro’, and thus they ‘carr[y] us between it and the Present.’⁴¹

Lee’s ghosts are traces, fragments, the present/not present archive of partly obscured, forgotten, and marginalized histories. They are

[t]hings of the imagination [...] sprung from the strange confused heaps, half-rubbish, half-treasure, which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions, litter of multi-coloured tatters, and faded herbs and flowers, whence arises that odour [...] which hangs in the air when the ghost has swept through the unopened door, and the flickering flames of candle and fire start up once more after waning.⁴²

The spurious ghost arises within the mind when the historian contemplates this eclectic archive of material traces, of ‘tatters’ and impressions. The archive that Lee imagines is liminal, with each thing being only half-there: ‘half-rubbish, half-treasure’, ‘half-faded’, ‘fragmentary’. It is not the space of official history, but coincidental, conditioned by neglect and disarray: an archive of the vague traces that accrue around the edges of official history, haunting, compelling, and frustrating because it is both there and not there.

Spiridion Trepka, the protagonist and narrator of ‘Amour Dure’, in some ways represents the official mechanisms of historical knowledge production. A Polish historian, Trepka has received a grant from the German government to write a history of the fictionalized Italian city of Urbania. He begins his account, staged as a series of diary entries, with a cynical awareness of the colonizing premise under which he has travelled to Italy. Rome, he comments, is already overrun with traveling Germans: ‘Munich vandals at [his] heels, telling [him] where the best beer and sauerkraut can be had.’⁴³ In referencing the Vandals, the Germanic people responsible for the plunder of Rome in 455 CE, Trepka indicates that his own scholarly mission reproduces the dynamics of the initial destruction of the Italian capital. ‘Am I not myself a product of modern, northern civilization; is not my coming to Italy due to this very modern scientific vandalism which has given me a traveling scholarship?’⁴⁴ In travelling south, Trepka suggests, he is participating in the ‘scientific vandalism’ of knowledge production, the plundering of older

cultures by ‘modern, northern’ countries. This colonizing effort takes place on a North/South axis, but it is also temporal, based on a presumption of history as linear progress:

We smile at what we choose to call the superstition of the past, forgetting that all our vaunted science of to-day may seem just such another superstition to the men of the future; but why should the present be right and the past wrong?⁴⁵

Calling into question the colonial assumption that progress is linear, and that therefore the present is more ‘right’ than the past, Trepka aligns his temperament not with the forward-thinking modern historian, but with the backward-looking queer subjects of Lee’s introduction to *Hauntings*. Open to occult practices and folk knowledge, he believes in horoscopes and chiromancy, predicting his death on the grounds that a ‘gipsy in Poland’ once told him that a line in his palm ‘signified a violent death.’⁴⁶ His romantic temperament is bolstered by a hereditary tendency toward insanity, suggested by the fate of an Uncle Ladislas who suffered from a nervous condition. Trepka, a Polish subject during the period of Germany’s colonization of Poland, claims a complex national identity: both colonizer and colonized, his identification with Germanness is contingent and ill-fitting. He describes himself as neither fully a scholar, nor fully German, instead the ‘semblance of a German pedant.’⁴⁷ Lee also thought of her own national identity as hybrid: an Englishwoman born abroad in France, she was raised by a German nanny and devoted herself to the study of Italian history. As Hilary Fraser has shown, Lee’s preoccupation with foreignness allowed her to express her gendered and sexual difference: through valuing her own sense of being from elsewhere, she ‘speak[s] [...] from difference’, making her ‘estrangement’ a ‘virtue’ rather than a disadvantage.⁴⁸ Like Lee, who published her first study of Italian history at the age of twenty-four, Trepka (also twenty-four) has received acclaim for his history of Italy, which he calls an ‘atrocious book of erudition and art criticism.’⁴⁹ With his paradoxical combination of scholarly accomplishments and outsider status, his blend of intellectual rigour and superstitious fancy, Trepka appears to mirror Lee.

When Trepka first comes to discover Medea da Carpi, the Renaissance *femme fatale* who will become his undoing, her story is an interesting diversion. The romance of a Renaissance woman

for whose love five men died reaches a particularly juicy dénouement when she watches a man who loves her being tortured on her behalf, then coolly throws down her handkerchief, which he kisses before he dies, proclaiming her innocence. Over time, this story becomes an obsession, and she begins to haunt Trepka, appearing as a ghost outside his window and in a long-abandoned church. Inspired by a burgeoning love for Medea, Trepka begins to enjoy his work anew, and to perform historical studies in a way that challenges its disciplinary boundaries. ‘Am I turning novelist instead of historian?’ he asks himself.⁵⁰ Using the archives perversely, unbeknownst to the Director or to the Government, he seeks the kinds of traces of the untold history intimated by the ‘fragmentary vivid impressions’ of Lee’s introduction to the volume. ‘I can imagine there hangs about these mouldering pieces of paper a scent as of a woman’s hair’, he muses, seeking meaning in scents and the other evanescent objects of Lee’s ghostly archive: dead flowers, letters, fragments.⁵¹

Trepka’s connection to the Past instantiates what Carolyn Dinshaw has discussed as the ‘queer desire for history’.⁵² ‘Amour Dure’, the story’s title, is taken from a pun inscribed on a necklace, which means, according to Trepka’s translation, both ‘love that lasts’ and ‘cruel love.’ The cruel, cold love of the *femme fatale* extends across three centuries, much like the immortal spirit of Pater’s *La Gioconda*. ‘Dure’ also translates to ‘hard’, ‘stony’, and ‘difficult’. The double meaning of ‘amour dure’ indicates a queer take on love (love that crosses time, love that is difficult or challenging) and duration, presenting an experience of time as difficulty – time experienced as a wall between the present and the past. Trepka’s relationship to history, like Lee’s, is one of desire for contact, of revelation: he writes, ‘I had longed, these years and years, to be in Italy, to come face to face with the Past.’⁵³ As he travels the roads of Urbania, he imagines phantasmagoria of Renaissance horsemen, bedecked in armour; the villagers are like Madonnas in a painting, and the maiden sisters of his landlord are ‘the three Fates in person.’⁵⁴ Unlike ‘the Present’, which he lists as a series of prosaic duties (‘Four letters of introduction to deliver, and

an hour's polite conversation to endure with the Vice-Prefect, the Syndic, the Director of the Archives') the Past is infused with poetry and art.⁵⁵

Trepka's fanciful relationship to the Past manifests in his sexuality. As he reveals in his diary, 'I never could find a woman to go mad about. I am wedded to history, to the Past, to women like Lucrezia Borgia.'⁵⁶ Medea incarnates the capital-P Past with which Trepka is enamoured. Her beauty is described as outdated, 'The type is that most admired by the late Renaissance.'⁵⁷ Everything about her strange physiognomy is somewhat excessive or wrong, just a little 'too' much: 'the nose a trifle over-aquiline and the cheek-bones a trifle too low'; her eyelids 'just a little too tight at the corners; the mouth 'a little too tight, the lips strained a trifle over the teeth.'⁵⁸ She possesses 'a curious, at first rather conventional artificial-looking sort of beauty, voluptuous yet cold.'⁵⁹ Her hard and 'cold' beauty, weighted down by so many jewels of seemingly contradictory descriptors, is fairly conventional in its strangeness. It echoes Walter Pater's famous ekphrasis of *La Gioconda*, as well as J.-K. Huysmans's ekphrasis of Gustave Moreau's *Salomé*. Attentive to the provenance of the *femme fatale* trope she conjures, Lee includes 'a picture of the daughter of Herodias dancing' in the church (named for 'John the Beheaded', or John the Baptist) where Trepka first sees Medea, referencing the narrative of Salomé that was much-loved by Decadent writers including Huysmans, Gustave Flaubert, and Wilde.

Medea's strange beauty does not inspire restful contemplation or pleasure, but rather, a maddening sensation that feels like fear. 'The more [her beauty] is contemplated, the more it troubles and haunts the mind', Trepka writes.⁶⁰ Medea's effect on Trepka develops into a decadent affect that might be either sexual fervour or nervous illness: a racing of the heart, a morbid feeling. The thought of her 'sets my blood in a whirl, not with horror, but with... I know not what to call it. The feeling terrifies me, but it is delicious.'⁶¹ Waiting to meet Medea, he feels a 'creeping terror, which only a violent action [can] dispel.'⁶² The 'whirl' of blood he describes is erotic desire, but he, naively, lacks the vocabulary to explain it. He can only call it something that is 'not' – but akin to – horror; his feeling of terror that must be 'dispel[led]' with a 'violent action'

suggests orgasm, but also foreshadows the act of destruction that will constitute the story's climax.

Because of Trepka's sexual desire for Medea, scholars have tended to read Trepka's historiography as an act of masculinist possession. For Zorn, Trepka's relationship to Medea is that of a deluded, obsessive narrator who enacts the fetishistic male gaze upon his historical object of inquiry. 'By sexualizing her narrator's perspective', Zorn argues, Lee 'shows the limitations of the "modern" mind whose time-transcending consciousness simply reproduces cultural relationships between subject and object.'⁶³ According to Zorn, the ethical problem of Trepka's project, indeed, of historical projects writ large, is that, because of the historian's 'possessive yearnings', he fails to recognize Medea's historical otherness.⁶⁴ Zorn's reading focuses on the way in which Trepka displaces his anxieties around his national identity onto the figure of Medea: 'Medea signifies Trepka's longing for all that is lacking in his frustrating reality as a Polish subject of the German empire: the at-home feeling of his Polish boyhood, [and] his national (and masculine) identity.'⁶⁵ In other words, in this reading, his displacement is a lack which he seeks to displace through his attraction to Medea.

However, when we attend to the multiple points of identification between Lee and her protagonist, it is hard to read him fully as an embodiment of heterosexual desire. Nowhere in the text does Trepka reveal himself to be invested in reinstating a masculinist national identity. Instead, I would suggest, his colonized subjectivity leads to a mode of queer affiliation with the subject of his historical inquiry whose story he attempts to recover. His aforementioned 'semblance' of being German links him to Lee's own 'semblance' of being male: both are liminal, if celebrated, figures on the edges of official historical discourse. Both engage with the Past as an aestheticized space of poetry and of potential revelation. If Trepka and Lee share a queer kinship, Trepka's relation to the archive can be read as a provocation toward lesbian historical practices. Trepka engages in a relationship to the past that is both political and sexual, an enactment of solidarity alongside and through desire. At the story's end, he enacts historical

rescue through a larger criticism of power that eventually ends in an anti-patriarchal act of property destruction.

Stalling his official project, Trepka devotes his energies instead to revealing a more sympathetic portrait of Medea, embedding within Lee's tale a feminist revision of the Decadent *femme fatale* story. Looking back at the eve of sixteen-year old Medea's marriage to the fifty-year old Orsini, Trepka identifies with her experience. 'It seems to me that I understand her so well; so much better than my facts warrant', he writes, allowing himself to enter into the speculative mode in order to reflect upon marriage as a form of violence.⁶⁶ 'Reflect what [her marriage] means: it means that this imperious woman is soon to be treated like a chattel, made roughly to understand that her business is to give the Duke an heir, not advice.'⁶⁷ Trepka criticizes Renaissance and Victorian conventions of marriage, through which women become the property of men. Their voices, or 'advice', carry little value, while their worth is calculated through their reproductive capacity.

It is through her otherworldly beauty – excessive, odd, anachronistic – that Medea, an incarnation of the Past in all its otherness, resists being collected. She possesses in order to resist becoming a possession, a form of resistance which is not much a strategy or act of will, but is instead an objective effect of decadent beauty. Medea marries three times, each of her husbands meeting an early demise; with each remarriage, she increases her political power, eventually installing her son on the throne for a short time before her illegitimate reign is ended by papal decree. Medea builds her political power, Trepka speculates, on the basis of her beauty: 'It is perfectly marvellous how, without money or allies, she could so long keep her enemies at bay'. Such a feat can only be ascribed to her 'fatal fascinations.'⁶⁸ Drawing again on the language of enslavement, but flipping Medea's status from marital 'chattel' to an owner of slaves,

[h]er fate is, sooner or later, to triumph over her enemies, at all events to make their victory almost a defeat; her magic faculty is to enslave all the men who come across her path; all those who see her, love her, become her slaves; and it is the destiny of her slaves to perish.⁶⁹

The fate of her doomed lovers seems to Trepka to be perfectly reasonable and fair: 'No man must survive long who conceives himself to have a right to her; it is a kind of sacrilege.'⁷⁰ In Lee's Gothic story, as in her aesthetic theory, decadent beauty resists becoming property because of its innate occult power to possess its viewer.

While engaged in feminist reinterpretation of Medea's story, Trepka comes across the letters of her nemesis, Duke Robert II. Trepka comments that Robert, whom he had initially thought to be a hero, appears in a new light in his letters, as a 'cunning, cold, but craven priest.'⁷¹ Robert had Medea strangled to death, but even after her death, took precautions against her power. He devised a means to protect his soul until the Day of Judgement by creating a silver effigy of it and burying it inside an equestrian monument to be built in his honour. Robert, who saw Medea as 'almost supernatural', would have 'enjoyed having her burnt as a witch.'⁷² He created the conditions for himself to go down in history as a hero, while Medea would be 'tarred and feathered.'⁷³ Indeed, Robert's project has been successful, as Medea has been taken up by the local lore as a witch. She is legend to the local children, who say that she 'used to ride through the air on a goat', and they attempt to burn an effigy of her, chanting, 'She is a witch! She must be burnt!'⁷⁴ Trepka is determined to rewrite this history and expose Duke Robert's true nature, thus 'defraud[ing]' the Government which has sent him to Urbana of the history they expected to receive.⁷⁵ The destruction of the male hero becomes an act of historical justice, a means of exonerating the woman who had been relegated to the position of a hunted witch. It is a disruption of official history, an act of intellectual vandalism.

Vandalism, in Lee's art historical writing, is not so much a way of talking about crimes against property, as it is a way of talking about misreading. In an early essay collected in *Juvenilia*, she observes that the architects of the previous centuries misinterpreted the edifices they were attempting to restore, resulting in the 'horrid disfigurement of historic buildings.' Lee called these botched renovations the 'Vandal work of the past.'⁷⁶ Vandalism is an aesthetic transgression, a 'horrid disfigurement', and to vandalize is to fail to do justice to the truth of a text or object, a

failure that, for Lee, becomes an ethical problem as well. Bad reading – which she calls ‘selling [one’s] soul to the most cunning of all fiends, the Demon of Theory’ – is the seductive tendency to only see in the object that which proves our preconceived notions, rather than allowing ourselves to truly engage with its reality. This associative or theoretical interpretive practice affords the possibility of the ‘maltreatment of others, vandalism, and wastefulness.’⁷⁷ Her use of ‘scientific vandalism’ to describe Trepka’s official historical project then accords with this critique. If vandalism is an ethical problem, it can also be a mode of ethical recovery: one can, after all, vandalize the vandals. Lee thus uses the word ‘vandal’ to signal her own irreverent departures from orthodoxy. When she offers an unpopular opinion about noses in Botticelli, for example, she acknowledges that ‘I shall be set down as an utter Vandal’⁷⁸ for asking a question. In capitalizing ‘Vandal’, Lee not only paints a portrait of herself as a bit of a rogue, but names her association with a particular national origin, the barbarian roots that associate the Vandal with the image of the foreign Other. Stepping into this outsider position, she adopts it as a gesture of defiance. ‘Feeling myself already a Vandal’, she goes on, ‘I am hardened to the accusation, and I put forward my suggestion.’⁷⁹ Being a vandal here means recognizing that one’s interpretations have been and will be seen as misreadings, and embracing that repeated experience of rejection as toughness, a being ‘hardened’ by repeated ‘accusation[s]’ in order to create a position from which to speak. Sara Ahmed has written of the vandal as a feminist subject position, arguing that ‘to be a vandal is to damage what you are supposed to revere, to bring to an end what you are supposed to reproduce.’⁸⁰ To identify as a vandal is to interrupt received narratives of history and of value, to *end* rather than to *reproduce*.

Trepka’s ultimate act is not simply a rewriting of history, but, perversely enough, the destruction of a historical object. Following Medea’s request, sent to him in a letter, he steals a hatchet and destroys Robert’s soul entombed within the rusted monument. He narrates the action abruptly, in short, staccato sentences that appear jarringly after a series of lyrical, reflective passages: ‘I did it. I cut open the bronze; I sawed it into a wider gash. I tore out the silver image,

and hacked it into innumerable pieces.⁸¹ The official history, recorded after Trepka's death by a 'stab to the heart, given by an unknown hand', is that the bronze statue was 'grievously mutilated.'⁸² Trepka, who begins his narrative with a discussion of German history as 'scientific vandalism', ends it with an act of anti-State vandalism.

Responding to recent anti-harassment movements in the academy, Ahmed comments on physical vandalism as a tactic of complaint:

We might need to use guerrilla tactics; you can write names of harassers on books; turn bodies into art; write graffiti on toilet doors or on walls. [...] Feminism becomes a message we send out, writing on the wall; we were here, we did not get used it.⁸³

These guerrilla tactics against gendered violence have found their corollary in the strategic destruction and defacement of monuments to white supremacy within the United States post-Charlottesville.⁸⁴ Lee's depiction of the destruction of the monument at the end of 'Amour Dure' takes on, in our moment, a special urgency. It suggests to us that sometimes, if we are to take seriously the demands of our revenants, historiography will become an act of vandalism, a destruction of monuments to our so-called national heroes. These monuments, like the histories they represent, are not invulnerable; they are full of holes, already 'hollow and worn away by rust'.⁸⁵ We must, in Trepka's words, 'defraud'⁸⁶ the institution of the future books we have promised to write; we must instead become vandals, tempted toward the blade of the stolen hatchet with which we cut open and remake history.

¹ Vernon Lee, *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, 1909), p. 12.

² Annie Besant, *Initiation: The Perfecting of Man* (Chicago: The Theosophical Press, 1923), p. 91.

³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 112.

⁴ George Du Maurier, 'The Six Mark Tea-Pot', *Punch* (30 October, 1880), p. 194.

⁵ Lee, *Laurus Nobilis*, p. 65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

⁷ H.P. Blavatsky and Mabel Collins, *Lucifer* 1 (1887), p. 7.

⁸ Vernon Lee, *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1887), p. 40.

⁹ Vernon Lee, *Belcaro: Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: T Fisher Unwin, 1887), p. 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29,

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³ Lee, *Laurus Nobilis*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Lee, *Belcaro*, p. 68.

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- ¹⁵ Lee, *Laurus Nobilis*, p. 58.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 59.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 36.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 132.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p. 135.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ Ibid., p. 131.
- ²² Ibid., p. 136.
- ²³ Richard Dellamora, “‘The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought:’ Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde”, *New Literary History*, 35.4 (2004), 529-46 (p. 533).
- ²⁴ Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), p. 226.
- ²⁵ Vernon Lee, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, ed. by Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Mississauga: Broadview, 2006), p. 25.
- ²⁶ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, p. 2.
- ²⁷ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, ‘Still Burning from this Strangling Embrace: Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics’ in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. by Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 21-42 (p. 30).
- ²⁸ See Dellamora, “‘The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought:’ Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde”, pp. 529-46.
- ²⁹ Lee, *Hauntings*, p. 295.
- ³⁰ Vernon Lee, ‘Oke of Okehurst’, in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, p. p. 112; p. 117; p. 118; p. 123; p. 130; p. 136; and p. 145.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 113.
- ³² Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 32.
- ³³ Lee, ‘Oke of Okehurst’, pp. 105-53 (p. 141; p. 151).
- ³⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression’, *diacritics* 25 (1995), 9-63 (p. 27).
- ³⁵ Carla Freccero, ‘Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past’, in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. by George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 195-213 (p. 200).
- ³⁶ Freccero, ‘Queer Spectrality’, p. 201; p. 207.
- ³⁷ Vernon Lee, ‘Preface’, in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, pp. 37-40 (p. 39).
- ³⁸ Christa Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), p. 140.
- ³⁹ Lee, ‘Preface’, p. 40.
- ⁴⁰ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), p. 49.
- ⁴¹ Lee, ‘Preface’, p. 39.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Vernon Lee, ‘Amour Dure’, in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, pp. 41-76 (p. 41).
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 71.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 73.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 42.
- ⁴⁸ Hilary Fraser, *Women Writing Art History in the Nineteenth Century: Looking Like a Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 135.
- ⁴⁹ Lee, ‘Amour Dure’, p. 41.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 55.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., p. 58.
- ⁵² Carolyn Dinshaw, ‘Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion’, *GLQ*, 13 (2007), 177-95 (p. 178).
- ⁵³ Lee, ‘Amour Dure’, p. 41.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 44.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 43.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 54.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 51.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 52.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., p. 69.
- ⁶² Ibid., p. 67.
- ⁶³ Zorn, *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*, p. 158.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 140.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 164.

⁶⁶ Lee, 'Amour Dure', p. 56.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 58.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 63.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 73.

⁷⁶ Lee, *Juvenilia*, p. 116.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 121.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 122.

⁸⁰ Sara Ahmed, 'Refusal, Resignation, and Complaint' <<https://feministkilljoys.com/2018/06/28/refusal-resignation-and-complaint>> [Accessed 30 September 2018].

⁸¹ Lee, 'Amour Dure', p. 75.

⁸² Ibid., p. 76.

⁸³ Ahmed, 'Refusal, Resignation, and Complaint.'

⁸⁴ On 11 and 12 August 2017, Charlottesville, Virginia was the site of a white supremacist rally (known as 'Unite the Right'). Armed white nationalists responded violently to counter protestors, causing Virginia governor Terry McAuliffe to declare a state of emergency. Neo-Nazi James Alex Fields Junior drove his car through a crowd of counter-protestors, killing Heather Heyer and injuring 40 others. The organizers of the rally stated that one of their goals was to oppose the government-sanctioned removal of confederate monuments, specifically a statue of Robert E. Lee that stood in Charlottesville's Emancipation Park. Within the week following the riots, anti-racist protestors defaced or toppled five other confederate statues in Arizona, Virginia, and North Carolina as an act of resistance against Donald Trump's presidency and against the increasing visibility of fascism within the United States.

⁸⁵ Lee, 'Amour Dure', p. 73.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

The Line of Lilith: Remy de Gourmont's Demons of Erotic Idealism

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According to medieval tradition, the (male) incubus and (female) succubus were demons who preyed upon their victims by engaging in sexual activity with them. Representations of these spirits can be found in various works by the *fin-de-siècle* writer, critic, and poet Remy de Gourmont (1851-1915). In this article, I offer a close textual comparison of the play *Lilith* (1892) and the short story 'Péhor', as well as considering a pseudonymous treatise entitled *Les Incubes et les succubes* (1897) of which Gourmont is likely the author. In the *fin de siècle*, as in the middle ages, the incubus or succubus could be found at the centre of western culture's discourse over abnormal, dangerous, or obscure sexual phenomena. Aware of the prominent place this symbol held in the collective imagination, Gourmont sought to imbue the trope of the demon lover with his own set of phenomenological questions pertaining to the erotic life. Gourmont's work is perennially concerned with the condition of Eros in a world which, according to idealist principles, is ultimately unknowable except as a projection of the individual mind and the fallible senses. In the texts I shall address, Gourmont extrapolates Arthur Schopenhauer's neo-Kantian notion of 'the world as representation' to the realm of demonology, adopting the incubus and succubus as potent subjective phenomena which contribute to an idealist view of erotic dynamics and interactions.

The demon archetype figures prominently in a crisis of Eros and idealism that permeates Gourmont's fiction. It is one that goes back to the suspiciously confident words of Entragues, the protagonist of *Sixtine*: 'Le monde, c'est moi, il me doit l'existence, je l'ai créé avec mes sens, il est mon esclave et nul sur lui n'a de pouvoir' [The world is myself, it owes me its existence, I created it with my senses, it is my slave and nobody has power over it].¹ Here, one detects the influence of J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* in Gourmont's tone of Decadent withdrawal, only the

ivory tower is more explicitly philosophical. Entragues, like most Gourmontian heroes, is an adherent of a dramatized form of Schopenhauerian idealism. He exists in a world which he knows to be mentally constructed, a projection of the mind and the ideas it has developed or received. In Gourmont's essay entitled 'L'Idéalisme', Entragues' words are echoed: 'tout ce que je pense est réel: la seule réalité, c'est la pensée [...] Un individu est un monde' [all that I think is real: thought is the only reality [...] an individual is a world].² This statement was not only the basis of a novel like *Sixtine*, but for a whole theory of Symbolist artistic production. To Gourmont, idealism justifies the pure and unhindered expression of the individual mind. Symbolism is described as 'individualisme en littérature, liberté de l'art, abandon des formules enseignées [...] cela peut vouloir dire aussi: idéalisme' [individualism in literature, artistic liberty, abandonment of received formulas [...] this could also mean idealism].³ The basic principle of idealism, according to Gourmont, is one that can elevate the artist to a state of complete creative freedom. Art is able to free itself from external contingencies. Eros, however, is more problematic. The connection between the body and these 'ideas and images' is ultimately uncertain. As Jennifer Birkett explains, for Gourmont

contemporary sensuality resides in forms and language. In other words, he is aware that the modern body knows itself only *in culture*. Modern sensibility is constructed, its physical responses geared to certain ideas and images. Gourmont seeks to understand the bases of the construction in order to release the (male) imagination from that which within it is repressive, while leaving it free to enjoy those aspects that can still produce the frisson of pleasure.⁴

Though *Sixtine* contains no demons per se, it does contain scenes of disembodied intercourse which strongly prefigure the succubus archetype. In one passage, Entragues invokes Sixtine as one would a spirit: 'Chère créature de mon désir, je me confie à ta magie' [Dear creature of my desire, I entrust myself to your magic], he intones, 'habacle de ma volonté, réceptacle de mes illusions d'amour, évoque-toi et protège-moi!' [vessel of my will, receptacle of my illusions of love, manifest yourself and protect me].⁵ Entragues succeeds in conjuring Sixtine, but is sexually overtaken by her. He wakes confused and humiliated by an involuntary ejaculation: 'Ah!

Pollution! c'était Sixtine. Ah! misères des nerfs imbéciles!' [Ah! Pollution! It was Sixtine. Ah! scourge of imbecile nerves!].⁶

As its title suggests, *Le Fantôme* continues *Sixtine's* theme of the hallucinatory phenomena that constitute erotic desire. Hyacinthe, the eponymous phantom, though corporeal, is also a self-aware projection of her lover's mind. 'Je ne suis ni chair ni esprit' [I am neither flesh nor spirit], she says, 'je suis femme et fantôme' [I am woman and phantom].⁷ The mystical prose of *Le Fantôme* serves to highlight an elusive dichotomy of the material and the cerebral which the lovers try in vain to transcend. They yearn, 'sois spiritualisée, beauté charnelle, et sois réalisé, intellectuel fantôme' [be spiritualized, carnal beauty, and be realized, intellectual phantom].⁸ Gourmont's amorous characters are eternally marooned between the baseness of carnality and the intangibility of the imagination. Their lovers appear as phantoms or apparitions, idealist 'tricks of the light' symbolizing the unknowable relation between the mind and the objects of perception.

Gourmont, Courrière, Huysmans

In order to trace the metamorphosis of this theme of perceptual uncertainty into the specific domain of incubi and succubi, it is important to consider the network of occult influences which informed it. The perception of Gourmont's role in the occult strain of *fin-de-siècle* Decadence is coloured by two relationships: his romantic partnership with Berthe de Courrière and his literary friendship with Huysmans. By the time Gourmont met Courrière around 1887, she had already earned her reputation as the eccentric *grande dame* among Parisian occult circles. It was not long after Gourmont had first approached Huysmans in his office at the Ministry of the Interior in 1889 that the author of *À rebours* became a regular guest at the homes (soon to be shared home) of Gourmont and Courrière, where he 'sat through many a long evening, listening to his hostess as she discoursed on the occult arts or recalled the "dangerous personal experiences" which she had undergone.'⁹ Huysmans's friendship with the pair, however, provided more than the

occasional evening's diversion: Gourmont and Courrière became two of his chief informants in the project that would become *Là-bas* (1891). Moreover, it is by no accident that *Là-bas*'s main female character, Hyacinthe Chantelouve, shares a first name with *Le Fantôme*'s own co-protagonist. In Courrière, Huysmans seems to have found a more platonic continuation of the sensually-charged occult education begun by one Henriette Maillat, an affair which had ended over a romantic dispute. As Robert Baldick describes, '[Maillat] met his pleas with the astonishing claim that, being versed in the mysteries of incubus and succubus, she could have commerce with him or with any other man, living or dead, whenever she pleased.'¹⁰ There is no doubt that Huysmans's occult fascination was stoked by Courrière, who provided the author with both intrigue and insider information pertaining to contemporary Satanism.

Often neglected, however, is Gourmont's direct contribution to Huysmans's literary enterprise. In his letters to Arij Prins, Huysmans praises Gourmont, whom he had conscripted as a textual researcher: 'la bibliothèque nationale est fouillée pour moi, avec rage' [the Bibliothèque nationale is being excavated for me, with zeal].¹¹ Gourmont 'm'a fait toutes mes recherches à la bibliothèque sur le diabolisme du 15^e siècle au nôtre' [carried out all my library research on diabolism from the 15th century to our own].¹²

The question of *Les Incubes et les succubes*

Though it may have served a more banal function in *Là-bas* than Courrière's exploits, Gourmont's research at the Bibliothèque nationale does shed light on an unanswered question about his own work, that of a text entitled *Les Incubes et les succubes*, signed by one Jules Delassus. It was not until 1910 that Henri-Alban Fournier (better known by his pen name Alain-Fournier) cited Delassus as one of 'les pseudonymes les moins connus de l'auteur du Livre des Masques' [the lesser-known pseudonyms of the author of *The Book of Masks*].¹³ Assuming for the moment that Gourmont did write *Les Incubes et les succubes*, published in the *Mercure de France* in 1897, the detective work he did for *Là-bas* would no doubt be on display here. The question of

authorship, however, is complicated by Gourmont's fickle relationship with the occult. Patrizia d'Andrea, though ultimately convinced by Alain-Fournier's claim, admits to a number of red flags. In her intertextual study, she cites the contradiction between Delassus's apparent belief in supernatural phenomena and a passage from the *Promenades philosophiques* which negates them entirely: 'J'ajouterais qu'il ne doit venir à l'idée de personne que ces phénomènes obscurs puissent avoir la moindre connexion avec ce que les esprits simples appellent l'au-delà. Il ne s'agit point de surnaturel.' [I add that no one can claim the slightest connection between these phenomena and what simple minds call the *au-delà*. It is not a question of the supernatural.]¹⁴ Delassus, on the other hand, believes that 'Pour expliquer ces phénomènes, il faut bien admettre l'existence du plan astral' [To explain these phenomena, one must recognize the existence of the astral plane].¹⁵

The Gourmontian provenance of *Les Incubes et les succubes*, however, may lie precisely in its fickle treatment of both sides of the materialist/spiritualist debate. Where the supernatural fails in one area, science provides useful insight, and where science has proved reductive or silent, the writings of inquisitors come forward:

La science, qui dédaigne l'occulte, ne voit dans les faits observés par médecins que des maladies sexuelles dont elle ne recherche pas la cause. Presque seuls, les prêtres connaissent des exemples précis. Mais ils se retranchent derrière le secret de la confession, et refusent de parler, craignant le scandale que pourraient produire des révélations de cet ordre.

[Science, which disdains the occult, only sees sexual maladies in the facts observed by doctors without researching their cause. Precise examples are perhaps known solely to priests, but they hide behind the secret of confession, refusing to speak, fearful of the scandal that revelations of this kind might produce.]¹⁶

While discussing the summoning of incubi and succubi, however, he admits that '[i]l serait cependant très intéressant d'examiner scientifiquement la possibilité de produire des phénomènes de ce genre' [it would nevertheless be very interesting to scientifically examine the possibility of producing such phenomena].¹⁷ One moment he glorifies the magical texts, the next he sees them as 'recettes ridicules' [ridiculous recipes].¹⁸ In a manner suggestive of Gourmont's idealist world-view, these demons can only be seen through the subjective mirror of each

source. The approaches of science, religion, and the occult are equally considered because they are equally ‘wrong’ in their claims of objectivity. If *Les Incubes et les succubes* has an argument, it is the subjectivity of the demon. Instead of a theory, Delassus offers a phantasmagoria of writings and folklore with the intent of providing a history of an idea.

***Lilith* and the Construction of Sensuality**

The first lines of *Les Incubes et les succubes* state that ‘[l]es curieux phénomènes de l’Incubat et du Succubat remontent aux temps très anciens, à l’origine du monde’ [the curious phenomena of incubacy and succubacy go back to very ancient times, to the origin of the world].¹⁹ This is precisely where Gourmont set his *Lilith*. Its eponymous ‘heroine’, according to ancient Hebrew interpretations of scripture, was both the original bride of Adam and the mother of all incubi and succubi. Due in large part to a number of reference texts which had become available in the mid-nineteenth century, Lilith had already caught the attention of various artists and writers before Gourmont. She appears, for instance, in Victor Hugo’s unfinished *La Fin de Satan* (written between 1854-1862), and Gérard de Nerval’s collaboration with Bernard Lopez, *L’Imagier de Harlem* (1852). In England, she was captured by Dante Gabriel Rossetti both in verse, with ‘Eden Bower’ (1869), and on canvas a year earlier.

The spirit of Romanticism looms over the opening scene of Gourmont’s *Lilith*, particularly in its characterization of Satan as a sympathetic outcast. Before his banishment from heaven, he attempts to dispute Jehovah’s planned creation of man, but is drowned out by a chorus of sycophantic angels who praise Jehovah’s every dictate with constant cries of ‘Hosannah! Seigneur, ton œuvre est bonne!’ [Hosanna! Lord, your work is good!].²⁰ Satan’s doubt festers as Jehovah struggles to acquire the clay from which Adam will be moulded. Anticipating the rape of its fertility, the earth initially refuses to yield its clay, protesting ‘Je ne veux pas que ma substance serve à former des créatures qui un jour m’abreuveront de sang’ [I do not wish for my substance to serve in the formation of creatures who shall one day sup my blood].²¹ ‘Il n’aura pas

son argile!’ [He will not have her clay!],²² repeats an increasingly irate Satan, as indeed neither Gabriel nor Michael manage to strike a bargain with the unyielding earth on Jehovah’s behalf, until Azrael narrowly succeeds at last, by force.

Once the clay has been secured, Gourmont introduces several new *dramatis personae*: Le Soleil [The Sun] and La Nuit [Night], the latter presiding over Les Ténèbres [Darkness] and Le Silence [Silence]. These personified qualities follow a dichotomy which mirrors that of Jehovah and Satan: the diurnal and the nocturnal. As Jehovah works to mould the clay, there is a vivid scene which begins ‘L’approche des ténèbres excite son activité, et quand la nuit descend, la statue est complète’ [The gathering darkness hastens his activity, and once night descends, the statue is complete].²³ Jehovah’s role as both a dictator and a creator of forms belongs symbolically to the day. As he rushes to finish the statue before nightfall, he relies on the sun as a collaborator. This concludes with a vivid stage direction in which the sun emits one last brilliant flash of life-giving light before disappearing, along with Jehovah. This is followed by a starkly contrasting nocturnal scene. At night Adam’s form is soft and vulnerable. La Nuit asks Le Silence to protect Adam, not from whatever may lurk in the darkness, but rather from the intrusive phenomena of daytime. The scene hints at an uncertain transformation occurring beneath the veils of Les Ténèbres, inaccessible to both the audience and, in theory, Jehovah. Gourmont establishes its opposition to Jehovah’s realm through stylistic devices as well. In contrast to the repeated, exclamatory hosannas and decrees of earlier, the voice of La Nuit is without exclamation. It insists on silence, careful not to damage Adam’s fragile ears.

It is important to mention here that the name ‘Lilith’ has its root in the Hebrew word for night, and although she has not yet been introduced, we can already see Gourmont beginning to define the significance of her nocturnal affiliation. We recall Jehovah’s forceful violation of the earth’s fertility, suggested by the theft of its clay. As the diurnal realm becomes Jehovah’s accomplice in this crime, night (‘Lilith’) emerges as an opposing force.

As the sun returns, so does the imperious, exclamatory language of the day. Entering with

a flamboyant ‘Me voilà!’ [Here I am!],²⁴ its bright heat changes the wet clay into ‘un infrangible diamant’ [a resilient diamond].²⁵ Here, with the final crystallization of the statue, is where Jehovah and Satan take their sides. Satan is not convinced that man has been perfected. ‘Cette créature n’est pas déplaisante, mais elle sent un peu la boue’ [This creature is not unpleasant, but it smells slightly of mud].²⁶ Satan can quite literally sniff out that which is still damp and undesignated beneath the fixed, Apollonian surface that the sun has created on Jehovah’s behalf. In other words, he focuses his attention on the aspect of man which still belongs to the nocturnal side. ‘Vous êtes le jour’ [You are the day], he says in farewell to Jehovah, ‘je serai la Nuit’ [I will be the Night].²⁷

It is worth noting that Gourmont would use the same imagery in his famous portrayal of Stéphane Mallarmé in an essay from *La Culture des idées* (1900). Mallarmé’s poetry is ‘personnelle, repliée comme ces fleurs qui craignent le soleil; elle n’a de parfum que le soir’ [personal, retreating like flowers that fear the sun; it only fragrant at night].²⁸ It is ‘plein de doutes, de nuances changeantes et de parfums ambigus’ [full of doubts, shifting shades, and ambiguous perfumes]²⁹ in contrast to the ‘affirmations lourdes’ [heavy assertions]³⁰ of establishment literature. The nocturnal/diurnal divide in *Lilith* is consistent with this later critical concept of the delicate subjectivity which evades the clear, totalizing daylight of progress and convention. From this perspective, the duelling forces into which Adam is born correspond to a politics of sensibility. Moreover, if we recall Birkett’s argument that ‘the modern body knows itself only *in culture*’ and that ‘its physical responses [are] geared to certain ideas and images’,³¹ then this would also imply a politics surrounding the construction of sensuality. However, as *Lilith* is set at the origins of the world, there is nothing ‘modern’ about it.

Adam, in his first moments on earth, experiences a blissful state of undifferentiated energy. ‘Comme je suis beau, comme je suis vaste!’ [How beautiful I am, and how vast!], he observes. ‘L’immensité de mon être évolue à l’infini: tout cela, c’est moi. Je contiens le ciel et le soleil, et les animaux qui se meuvent et les oiseaux qui volent’ [The immensity of my being

expands infinitely. I encompass the sky and the sun, the animals that move and the birds that fly].³² He is stimulated by the supposed lack of boundaries between himself and all other phenomena, ignorant of the forbidden or harmful. There is a sensuality in his language which suggests a sexual stimulation associated with the sense of infinity. In fact, it is remarkably close to a scene from *Le Fantôme* describing an orgasm, an experience of ‘toutes les richesses de l’infini [...] sa propre essence avait absorbé et détenait à jamais l’essence de tout’ [all the riches of infinity [...] her own essence had absorbed and forever held the essence of everything].³³ As in all of Gourmont’s descriptions of sexual rapture, however, the brief moment ends in humiliation as the self re-establishes, or, in Adam’s case, establishes itself for the first time. He tries to touch the sun, to catch a flock of birds, and is puzzled by the distance which now appears between himself and other objects. The distinctions between his senses begin to appear. Adam approaches a blossoming cherry tree and is surprised at the coarseness of its bark against his skin when it looked so soft from far away. This is when Jehovah’s servant, the angel Raziel, descends to begin Adam’s education. ‘Raziel vient à son secours, cueille une branche fleurie, la lui fait respirer, cueille un bouquet de cerises et une à une les lui met dans la bouche’ [Raziel comes to his rescue, plucks a flowering branch, makes him smell it, plucks a bunch of cherries and one by one puts them in his mouth].³⁴ Sensuality is being constructed here. Sensory pleasure is becoming organized and therefore limited, initially perhaps through independent discovery but ultimately through the indoctrination to an established order. Adam needs this training and individuation to successfully navigate his environment, but it is at the expense of the earlier moment of ecstasy.

The angel, acting for Jehovah, tells Adam what his different body parts are for. This is compromised when, in a comic moment, we discover that the genitalia were created with no clear aim in mind: ‘ceci pour entendre, ceci pour voir, ceci pour manger, ceci pour... Je ne sais pas...’ [this for hearing, this for seeing, this for eating, this for... I do not know...].³⁵ It is from this oversight that Lilith is brought into being. Jehovah decides that ‘il n’est pas bon que l’homme

soit seul' [it is not good for man to be alone],³⁶ and creates a female from the leftover clay. She is designed in response to Adam's sexuality, but sexuality itself has not been given a purpose. Hence, she is sterile. In her first moments, Jehovah realizes that he has not provided an accountable meaning to the sexual impulse, but has rather reproduced and dilated its chaotic presence in the world. This is of course insupportable in Jehovah's vision of order, and thus he sends her to hell to become the companion of Satan.

LILITH

la première, et d'une voix luxurieusement lasse qui, après chaque invocation meurt en une caresse:

Iod, ô mâle, Dieu et Phallus, axe du monde et axe de l'Esprit, je te révère, ʾ, ô mâle!

[firstly, and in a lustfully weary voice which, after each invocation, ends in a caress:

Yod, O male, God and Phallus, axis of the world and axis of Spirit, I honour you, ʾ, O male!]

SATAN

répond:

Hé ô femelle, Matrice et Beauté, indolence spirituelle, lascivité, je te révère, ה, ô femelle!

[replies:

Heh, O female, Matrix and Beauty, spiritual indolence, lasciviousness, I honour you, ה, O female!]

LILITH

Va, ô copulation, femelle et mâle, trompe et calice, obscurité du demain, je te révère, ʾ, ô copulation!

[Vav, O copulation, female and male, horn and chalice, darkness of tomorrow, I honour you, ʾ, O copulation!]

SATAN

ה, ô femelle!

[ה, O female!]

LILITH

Ne m'appelle pas Hé, appelle-moi Stérilité. Ne suis-je pas l'Inféconde?

[Do not call me Heh, call me Sterility. Am I not the Infertile One?]³⁷

In these post-coital vows, Satan and Lilith pronounce the divine name of God (indicated by the Hebrew letters). The emphasis is on blasphemous, ecstatic ritual, sublimating the carnal act through forbidden language. Their genitalia are not reproductive organs but the aesthetic, ceremonial objects ‘trompe et calice’ [horn and chalice]. This scene is again close to the action of *Le Fantôme*, in which the lovers experiment by imbuing their intercourse with perversions of Catholic ceremony and liturgical incantations. Where transcendent sexuality in *Le Fantôme* is impossible, Lilith and Satan achieve a fulfilment of Damase and Hyacinthe’s fantasy, as mentioned earlier. Their encounter represents an experience of sexual gratification which, like Lilith herself, has been denied to humanity; an experience untroubled by phenomenological paralysis and dissociated from oppressive contingencies such as reproduction, shame, and mortality.

Gourmont has already deviated liberally from the traditional Lilith sources, and in so doing raises a number of philosophical points. The narratives of the *Zohar* and the *Alphabet of Ben Sira*³⁸ describe a quarrel between Adam and Lilith. The latter refuses to be subservient and, specifically, to assume the submissive role in sexual intercourse. The reason for Gourmont’s variation might be that the original suggests a built-in, objective sexual code on the part of Adam, complete with an innate system of taboos. According to the Jewish texts, the cause of his revulsion is merely assumed. Gourmont, however, would rather portray Adam as an allegorical model for the gradual construction of individual experience; a blank slate whose sensibility is being deliberately encoded according to the biases of a patriarchal order.

‘Savoir, c’est nier’: The Demonic Moment of Sexual Awareness

When Lilith and Satan decide to visit the garden as Incubus and Succubus, it is immediately after Jehovah has attempted to regain order by creating Eve from Adam’s rib, finally providing a functional aim to the accidental phenomenon of sexuality. Carefully designed to be submissive,

Eve is instructed by Adam (as he himself was instructed by Raziel) to conform to the received system. Interestingly, the regulated nature of the garden affords them a limitless experience of sensual pleasure, a ‘constante plénitude d’un amour inépuisé. Pas de réveil brutal et déconcertant’ [constant plenitude of unflagging pleasure. No brutal and unsettling awakening].³⁹ For Gourmont, disillusionment and liberty are often woven into the same fabric. *Sixtine’s* Entragues experiences the adverse effects of intellectual freedom upon sexual and romantic gratification; Salèze from *Le Désarrois*,⁴⁰ discussing his relationship to women, admits that ‘savoir, c’est nier’ [to know is to deny].⁴¹ It is reasonable that this trope would have its counter-image in an intellectual prison which is also a sensual paradise. By this logic, even Satan and Lilith, because they are free to exhaust the depths of sexual knowledge, have become disillusioned.

Lilith’s carnal explorations with Satan have left her sensually calloused, and she now pines for a new sensation of which she is currently incapable: fecundity. The language she uses is indicative of a fertility envy, a vampiric longing for virgin life forces, a hunger for innocence so that she may renew her own debauchery. ‘La jouissance fuit comme l’eau par un trou’ [Pleasure leaks like water through a hole], she laments, ‘mes sens sont morts ainsi que des feuilles mortes’ [my senses are as dead as dead leaves].⁴² This expression gives her a metaphorical womb which has expired, and her vain plea to Satan, ‘Déchire-moi, que le sang coule sur mes cuisses’ [Tear me apart, so that blood runs down my thighs]⁴³ endows her with a metaphorical broken hymen, a nostalgia for an irretrievable ‘première heure’ [first hour].⁴⁴

Satan and Lilith appear on earth to tempt Adam and Eve to taste the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. When Adam eats, he declares ‘Maintenant, je suis fort, je suis grand, je touche aisément le ciel...’ [Now I am strong, I am tall, I effortlessly touch the sky...],⁴⁵ no doubt a reference to the ‘orgasmic’ description of his first moment on earth: ‘comme je suis beau, comme je suis vaste! ... Je contiens le ciel et le soleil’ [how beautiful I am, and how vast! I encompass the sky and the sun].⁴⁶ Though no direct mention of sexual intercourse is made, in Gourmont’s view, this moment of the Fall is the first act of incubacy and succubacy. Satan and

Lilith have fulfilled their roles as ethereal tempers, at once desired and feared, exerting an invisible power upon their victims. Having grown tired of their own depleted pleasure, Satan and Lilith annex themselves to the ecstatic sexual awakening of the terrestrial couple. Successful in his temptation, Satan introduces the seven sins as if counting down to a moment of release: ‘Gourmandise, paresse ou lâcheté, luxure... Quand nous serons à sept, je m’en irai tranquille.’ [Gluttony, sloth or cowardice, lust... When we arrive at seven, I will go quietly.]⁴⁷ The conventional sins develop as Adam and Eve begin to quarrel in their new environment about the changes to their bodies and thus their regard for one another. However, Satan adds another crucial aspect to man’s suffering.

Enfin, – et ceci sera très amusant, – je veillerai comme un ange sur leur enfance polluée, et quand la lignée de Lilith aura dévirilisé la puberté des mâles, je leur donnerai des vierges qui n’auront ouvert qu’en rêve et symboliquement leurs jambes pures...

[Lastly – and this will be very amusing – I shall preside like an angel over their tainted childhood, and when the line of Lilith has devitalized the puberty of the males, I shall give them virgins who only spread their pure legs symbolically and in dreams...]⁴⁸

Indeed, Adam and Eve too have been ‘symbolically’ defiled. Satan’s vow (as well as his actions) seems to indicate that sexual awareness, rather than intercourse itself, is the Fall which humans will now be doomed to rehearse. Adam and Eve were far from chaste before his arrival. In an early scene, ‘la volupté gonfle et roule dans leurs seins prédestinés les vagues infatigables de l’éternel amour.’ [pleasure swells and surges in their predestined breasts like ceaseless waves of eternal love].⁴⁹ This carnal love, then, is not what Adam and Eve have discovered. Rather, in tasting the fruit, they consume for the first time the ‘ideas and images’ suggested by Birkett, a framework through which the untroubled unity of their pre-pubescent sensuality splinters into a chaotic multitude of sins and pleasures.

‘Péhor’: A Morbid Vision of Idealist Puberty

Gourmont would later elaborate on the tragedy of sexual awareness in his short story ‘Péhor’, the first of the *Histoires magiques* (1894), in which he imagines the visitation of an incubus upon a

young girl, Douceline, at the moment of her own pubescent transformation. Before the arrival of the titular demon, Gourmont establishes a similar pre-lapsarian sensual state to what we have just seen in *Lilith*. True to her typifying name ('douce' meaning 'soft'), Douceline exhibits a diffuse, infantile sexuality characterized by a delight in the sensation of softness. 'Précocement caresseuse et embrasseuse' [Precociously prone to caressing and hugging],⁵⁰ she is sensually similar to Adam, who was initially drawn to the perceived softness of a cherry tree.

Douceline undergoes a major change at her First Communion. Her religious debut is not portrayed as an extension of parental control, but rather a sphere of sensual delight, a vast array of new sensations and images. Her interest is specifically piqued by a framed image of Jesus, which she is allowed to take home as a gift.

Le Jésus d'où fusait ce jet de carmin avait une face affectueuse et encourageante, une robe bleue, historiée de fleurettes d'or, de translucides mains très fines où s'écrasaient en étoile deux petites groseilles: Douceline l'adora tout de suite, lui fit un vœu, écrivit au dos de l'image: 'Je me donne au S.-C. de Jésus, car il s'est donné à moi.'

[The Jesus from whom this jet of carmine sprayed had an affectionate and reassuring face, a blue robe adorned with golden florets, and translucent, fine hands in which two little redcurrants were crushed in the shape of stars: Douceline immediately adored it, pledged to it, and wrote on the back of the image: 'I give myself to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, for it has been given to me'.⁵¹

As always with Gourmont, one is seldom sure where the scathing critique of the Church begins and the sincere exploration of its eroticism ends. The incubus Péhor will only arrive after a series of sanguinary episodes which cast a dark complexion on Douceline's affection for the blood of Christ. In the first, she begins to bleed from extended periods of kneeling before the portrait, thanking Jesus for an illness she has developed. With the exaggerated violence and carnality of Catholic piety, Gourmont foreshadows the brutality of Douceline's sexual awakening.

Guérie, elle remercia Jésus des marques blanches qui lui trouaient le front, se livra à de longues éjaculations, à genoux, derrière un mur, sur des pierres aiguës. Ses genoux saignaient: elle baisait les blessures, suçait le sang, se disait: 'C'est le sang de Jésus, puisqu'il m'a donné son coeur.'

Affaiblie par l'anémie de la fièvre, elle avait pendant des semaines, oublié son vice: les mouvements habituels se recomposèrent dans le sommeil.

[Healed, she thanked Jesus for the white marks that cratered her brow, offering up long ejaculations, kneeling behind a wall upon sharp stones. Her knees bled: she kissed the wounds, sucking the blood, telling herself: ‘This is the blood of Jesus, for he has given me his heart’.

For several weeks, weakened by the anaemia of her fever, she had forgotten her vice: her habitual actions reconstituted themselves in sleep.]⁵²

Through the use of innuendo and double entendres,⁵³ Douceline’s budding sexuality is made indistinguishable from the aesthetics and practices of religious devotion. Gourmont’s tactic is to lay bare the implicit eroticism of Catholic worship as a way of exposing that of childhood, these being two spheres in which it is generally ignored or obscured. However, as Douceline’s sensuality begins to structure itself around ‘ideas and images’, such as the visual appearance of Jesus, the theological concept of blood, and the language of devotional prayer, it also begins a process of fragmentation. Her tendency to masturbate, namely, is relegated to sleep and dreams. Douceline’s now-repressed habit becomes decisive when, one night, she withdraws a hand stained with menstrual blood. To her, this is an unspeakable degradation which causes her to hide the portrait of Jesus out of embarrassment.

‘Les démons sont des chiens obéissants’ [Demons are obedient dogs],⁵⁴ Gourmont tells us upon Péhor’s arrival, indicating that they are summoned by clear conditions. The intervention of Péhor, like that of Satan and Lilith, coincides with the victim’s first sexual awakening. Once again, this awakening has nothing to do with the onset of sexual behaviour, but rather with how it is understood and framed. Gourmont highlights this concept by repeating the symbolic motif of Douceline’s blood. Between the blood she lovingly sheds for Jesus and the blood she is ashamed to discover on her hand, he suggests, there is only a subjective difference. Following this thread, the incubus replaces Jesus as Douceline’s incorporeal lover.

Elle le sentait venir, et tout aussitôt des frissons commençaient à voyager le long de sa peau, faiblement, puis nettement localisés [...] enfin, une explosion comme de feu d’artifice, un craquement exquis où fuselaient sa cervelle, son épine, ses moelles, ses muqueuses, les pointes de ses seins et toutes ses chairs dépidermées.

[She felt him coming, and just as quickly the frissons began to travel across her skin, faintly, then acutely localized [...] finally, an explosion like fireworks, an exquisite shock at the confluence of her brain, her spine, the marrow of her bones, her mucous membranes,

the nipples of her breasts, and her mortified flesh.]⁵⁵

Through a stylistic shift from the vague, polymorphous, and suggestive description of Douceline's earlier sensuality to the explicit mode seen here, Gourmont once again suggests that puberty (and the demon it invites) has more to do with a change of terms than of actions. Where the characters of *Lilith* would have to be performed by actors, Gourmont takes the opportunity in 'Péhor' to clarify the incorporeal, imagined nature of the demon as he sees it. Péhor is 'invisible et intangible' [invisible and intangible].⁵⁶ It is clear that Douceline's experience of the demon occurs as a cerebral phenomenon which now accompanies the sensual behaviour she has always exhibited.

One could no doubt interpret the visitation of Péhor as a result of sexual repression, Catholic guilt, or the fever Douceline has contracted. Robert Zeigler sees the encounter to be 'described as pathology',⁵⁷ whereas Brian Stableford suggests that it is caused by 'enforced ignorance and social pressure'.⁵⁸ Legitimate as these conclusions are, there remains an overriding Symbolist and idealist discourse of what Gourmont in *La Culture des idées* calls 'l'intelligence s'adorant soi-même' [the intelligence adoring itself].⁵⁹ Regardless of its roots in repression or illness, Péhor's visitation constitutes a subjective reality so profound that it has a physical effect on the body. For Gourmont, the incubus is a totem of the mind's transcendent ability to deflower itself and the body which houses it. This point is made clear when Douceline undergoes her first (human) sexual encounter, an act of rape to which she is mentally, and miraculously, immune: 'Ne souffrant pas, amplement déflorée par Péhor dont les imaginations étaient audacieuses, elle laissa faire.' [without suffering, having been amply deflowered by Péhor in her audacious imagination, she allowed it to happen.]⁶⁰ Armoured by her demonic experience, she laughs in the face of the man (who, fittingly, is a travelling Bible salesman), shrugs her shoulders, and casually walks away.

An episode such as this should perhaps be held in relation to the virgin martyrs of Gourmont's *Latin mystique* (1892) who mocked their torturers as well, deriving strength from

their divine love of Christ. Just as Douceline freely offers herself to the priest, Gourmont translates a fragment on Saint Agatha which reads: ‘Mais celle-ci, plus forte que ses tourmenteurs, des hommes, livra ses membres aux flagellations; combien son cœur est valeureux, clairement le montre à tous sa mamelle suppliciée.’ [Stronger than her male tormentors, she offered her limbs to their flagellation; so brave was her heart, she exposed her tortured breast for all to see.]⁶¹ Gourmont has simply reversed the religious designation: the Roman torturer has become a Christian, and Douceline gives her virginity to Péhor instead of God. While Gourmont does take aim at the hypocrisy of the Church, the weapon he uses is taken from its own mystical tradition. The incubus is (momentarily) redeemed from its evil connotations by providing a form of spiritual strength akin to that of the female martyrs whom Gourmont frequently celebrated.

As a figment of cerebral eroticism, the demon, like the mystical spouse, represents an emancipatory dissociation from the base carnality of the material world. As Gourmont makes clear in works such as *Sixtine* and *Le Fantôme*, however, this dissociation cannot be fully controlled or sustained. Like a Faustian contract, the power and pleasure given to Douceline must be repaid tenfold.

Elle respira, évanouie presque, les yeux clos, les mains ramant parmi les vagues molles du naufrage, qui emportait la damnée aux abîmes... Un baiser d'excrémentielle purulence s'appliqua sur ses lèvres exactement, et l'âme de Douceline quitta ce monde, bue par les entrailles du démon Péhor.

[She breathed, nearly fainting, her eyes closed, her hands paddling among the gentle waves as she sank, accursed, into the abyss... Her lips received a kiss of excremental decay, and the soul of Douceline left this world, ingested by the entrails of the demon Péhor.]⁶²

In deciding that Douceline should perish at a young age, Gourmont exaggerates the annihilating quality of sexual awareness. Following her molestation, Douceline joins the ranks of Gourmont's disenchanted heroes: her increasingly morbid illness is mirrored by a weakening of her cerebral pleasure. Upon seeing a group of pregnant women at church, the once-blissful Péhor changes into a monster. In his essay ‘On the Nightmare’ (1910), Ernest Jones describes the conviction of

Peter Sinistrari (also cited in *Les Incubes et les succubes*) that incubi are essentially positive beings, yet who take on a demonic identity if the beholder believes there to be one.⁶³ This principle can be applied to Douceline's image of Péhor, who has mutated with the knowledge of sexuality's physical dangers.

While Douceline may serve a similar function as Adam in the scheme of Gourmont's demon narratives, her tragedy is also highly gendered. Though Péhor indoctrinates her into the same phenomenological quandary of Gourmont's male characters, he exploits the supposed passivity of the young girl to exaggerate its effects. The ruinous acquisition of sexual knowledge for Adam, like Damase and Entragues, prepares the mind for creative production. Setting to work on the *Sefer Yetzirah* (like Entragues does with 'Adorant', *Sixtine's* novel-within-a-novel), Adam and his male descendants double as explorers of the link between worldly estrangement and genius. Douceline, on the other hand, seems to anticipate the misogynistic views which Gourmont would develop in the early part of the twentieth century. Indeed, 'Péhor' may be read as a literal manifestation of one such statement from *Le Chemin de velours* (1902): 'hors de l'amour, il n'y a point de vie pour la femme.' [Outside of love, woman has no life.]⁶⁴

Though questions such as that of gender representation remain thoroughly on the table, I hope to have illustrated here that incubi and succubi, together with their young victims, serve a unique function in Gourmont's erotic discourse. With *Sixtine*, Gourmont began a career-long artistic investigation into the forces that shape erotic desire and sexual gratification. Adopting an idealist position, he dramatized the Schopenhauerian notion of the world as representation in the character of Entragues, a tragic hero of 'la vie cérébrale' [cerebral life]⁶⁵ who is forced to confront the limits of immaterial Eros. Sixtine, like *Le Fantôme's* Hyacinthe, takes on spectral characteristics which symbolize the unknowable relationship between the material and the mental, often appearing in sexual dreams which further confound the limits of the body and the mind. Immersed in demonology by virtue of his affiliation with Courrière and Huysmans, Gourmont begins to engage seriously with images of incubi and succubi. Like the supernatural

in general, the mythology and phenomena of demonic sexual visitation offered a symbolic framework for exploring the transcendent nature of the erotic imagination. This exploration, however, reveals certain harrowing discoveries. As much as the incubi and succubi themselves, Gourmont focused his attention on the pubescent transitions of their young victims. In doing this, he creatively effectively dramatizes the incurable origins underlying the crisis of erotic experience from an idealist standpoint.

¹ Remy de Gourmont, *Sixtine* (Paris: Savine, 1890), p. 13.

² Remy de Gourmont, *L'Idéalisme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1893), pp. 13-14.

³ Remy de Gourmont, *Le Livre des masques* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1921), p. 8.

⁴ Jennifer Birkett, 'Images of an Egoist: The Politics of Style and Sensibility in the Work of Remy de Gourmont', in *The Decadent Reader*, ed. by Asti Hustvedt (New York: Zone Books, 1998), pp. 926-38 (p. 931). Italics in original.

⁵ Gourmont, *Sixtine*, p. 251.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 252.

⁷ Remy de Gourmont, *Le Fantôme* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1893), p. 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁹ Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Sawtry, Cambs.: Dedalus, 2006), p. 198.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹¹ J.-K. Huysmans, *Lettres inédites à Arij Prins (1885-1907)*, ed. by Louis Gillet, (Paris: Droz, 1977), p. 192.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹³ Alain-Fournier, *Chroniques et critiques*, ed. by André Guyon (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 1991), p. 39.

¹⁴ Patrizia d'Andrea, 'L'ésotérisme chez Remy de Gourmont ou la face cachée d'un ésotérisme idéaliste', in *Actualité de Remy de Gourmont*, ed. by Vincent Gogibu and Nicolas Malais (Paris: Clown Lyrique, 2008), pp. 175-85 (p. 179).

¹⁵ Jules Delassus, *Les Incubes et les succubes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1897), p. 43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

²⁰ Remy de Gourmont, *Lilith, suivi de Théodat* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1906), p. 15.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

Adam is made from the earth's clay, hence Gourmont's pun on the term 'sentir la boue' [to smell of mud], an idiom meaning 'to stink'.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

²⁸ Remy de Gourmont *La Culture des idées* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1900), p. 130.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Jennifer Birkett, 'Images of an Egoist', p. 931.

³² Gourmont, *Lilith*, p. 39.

³³ Gourmont, *Le Fantôme*, p. 30.

³⁴ Gourmont, *Lilith*, p. 41.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁸ The two main Kabbalah source texts of Gourmont's time.

³⁹ Gourmont, *Lilith*, p. 70.

⁴⁰ Having already lost his job at the Bibliothèque nationale due to his dissident article *Le Joujou patriotisme* (1891),

Gourmont abstained from publishing *Le Désarroi* due to its themes of anarchy and terrorism. It was written between 1893-1899, and only recently discovered in 2006.

⁴¹ Remy de Gourmont, *Le Désarroi* (Paris: Clown Lyrique, 2009), p. 9.

⁴² Gourmont, *Lilith*, p. 84.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 109.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 106.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 96.

⁵⁰ Remy de Gourmont, *Histoires magiques* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1924), p. 7.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁵² Ibid., p. 11.

⁵³ In Christianity, ejaculatory prayer is short by definition ('Hallelujah!', 'Amen!', etc.). Thus, 'longues éjaculations' [long ejaculations] is a suggestive oxymoron.

⁵⁴ Gourmont, *Histoires magiques*, p. 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

⁵⁷ Robert Ziegler, *Asymptote* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), p. 216.

⁵⁸ Brian Stableford, *Glorious Perversity: The Decline and Fall of Literary Decadence* (Rockville, MD: Borgo, 1998), p. 92.

⁵⁹ Gourmont, *La Culture des idées*, p. 17.

⁶⁰ Gourmont, *Histoires magiques*, p. 15.

⁶¹ Remy de Gourmont, *Le Latin mystique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1892), p. 43.

⁶² Gourmont, *Histoires magiques*, p. 19.

⁶³ See Ernest Jones, 'On the Nightmare', *American Journal of Insanity*, 66 (1910), 383-417. Later expanded as *On the Nightmare* (London: Hogarth Press and Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1931).

⁶⁴ Remy de Gourmont, *Le Chemin de velours* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1902), p. 248.

⁶⁵ *Sixtine* is subtitled 'Roman de la vie cérébrale'.

*The Poison of Literature*¹
On the Social and Literary Construction of Baron Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen's
'Black Masses' Scandal

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Par quelle littérature malsaine, l'âme du jeune baron Jacques
d'Adelswärd, a-t-elle été pervertie?

[what poisonous literature corrupted young Baron Jacques
d'Adelswärd's soul?]²

In *Le Canard sauvage*, 1903, Alfred Jarry states that 'après tout, c'est la littérature qui prédestine les noms, même s'ils sont déjà historiques, et qui dicte ses conditions à la vie' [after all, it is literature that predestines names, even if they are already historic, and which imposes its conditions upon life].³ This statement was made in the wake of the 'Black Masses' scandal that broke in the press during the summer of 1903. Two young men – Baron Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen and Count Hamelin de Warren – were arrested on the charge of being involved in a moral scandal that was rumoured to include underage boys at orgiastic 'ceremonies' inspired by Nero and Elagabalus, held twice a week in Adelswärd-Fersen's flat, in Paris' *beaux quartiers*.

Over the course of a month – and later during the trial in November-December 1903 – this case was relentlessly covered in the press through sensational articles that combined Satanist symbolism with the blurring of referential and fictional discourses. Along with sexual perversion, the role of modern literature was severely questioned in public debates: the literary production of decadent writers like Charles Baudelaire, J.-K. Huysmans and Jean Lorrain was accused of corrupting the youth, while in the same movement it also generated the transgressive representation of the scandal as 'Black Masses' in the press. In Belle Époque France, the 'littérisation du journal' [the literarization of the newspaper] often emerged from a process of fictionalization of everyday life.⁴ As a consequence, the frontiers between fiction and information

appeared more and more porous. For this reason, Adelswärd-Fersen's 'Black Masses' scandal stands as a case study of the issue of literature intoxicating the 'matrice médiatique' [media matrix] as much as the media space intoxicating the 'matrice littéraire' [literary matrix].⁵

In this article, I analyse the transgressive representation of the 1903 'Black Masses' scandal as both a social and literary construction that emerged in the intermediary space of the newspaper. I argue that the homosexual interpretation of black masses and the ever-generative influence of literature on the media fashioned this case at the time of profound anxieties in French society (in particular, secularism, anti-Semitism, and degeneration). Through the 'Black Masses' scandal and its self-reference in both the press and literature, I also intend to show emergent authorial strategies – literary postures,⁶ social discourse, transfictionality and transmediality – in literary as well as media sociability in *fin-de-siècle* France.⁷ As a result, the public image of Adelswärd-Fersen emerges from both literature and a social imaginary (the press and the public): it is structured from what Alain Viala calls a strategy of positioning in the literary – or cultural – field.⁸ Thus Adelswärd-Fersen's posture is multiple and interactive. His position 'relève d'un processus *interactif*: elle est co-construite, à la fois dans le texte et hors de lui, par l'écrivain, les divers médiateurs qui la donnent à lire (journalistes, critiques, biographes, etc.) et les publics' [emerges from an *interactive* process: it is co-constructed, both in and out of the text, by the writer and the mediators who write about it (journalists, critics, biographers, etc.) but also the public].⁹ Following the issue of transgressive representation relentlessly addressed in the 'Black Masses' scandal, the interest then also lies in the fact that the media and literary representations of Adelswärd-Fersen come out as real and textual, but also imaginary.

The 'Black Masses' Scandal

On 10 July 1903, a moral scandal broke in the French press. *Le Journal* and *Le Matin*, two of the most important press organs of Belle Époque France, published columns respectively entitled 'Un Scandale' [A Scandal] and 'Messes noires' [Black Masses] about the arrest of 'Baron d'A...'

on suspicion of re-enacting modern Saturnalias with young boys. They also revealed that the police were actively looking for ‘Count de W...’, the Baron’s accomplice. In the following days, the case was covered daily in dozens of newspapers and magazines,¹⁰ through sensational titles that borrow from Decadent literature and Symbolist Satanism, such as ‘Les Noces de Satan’ [Satan’s Black Wedding], ‘Les Messes noires de Paris’ [Paris Black Masses] (*La Presse*, 11 July), ‘En pleine bacchanale’ [Into Bacchanalia] (*Le Matin*, 11 July), ‘Le Roman d’un névrosé’ [The Novel of a Neurotic Man] (*Le Matin*, 14 July), and ‘Pourriture’ [Putrefaction] (*L’Aurore*, 14 July). Even from the very early stages, the literary imaginary played an explanatory and referential role in the case. The names of the two young men were revealed in the press on 12 July. Articles published long descriptions of Adelswärd-Fersen, a twenty-three-year-old aristocrat and poet, admirer of eighteenth-century libertine writers and Satanists of the following century, and his friend Count Hamelin de Warren, twenty-two years of age, ‘still missing’.¹¹ Adelswärd-Fersen was a very rich aristocrat of Swedish descent; on his paternal side, he was related to Count Axel von Fersen, who was known as the alleged lover of Marie Antoinette.¹² He was also a writer and a poet. In 1903, he had already published six volumes of rather mediocre and formulaic poetry – including *Ébauches et Débauches*,¹³ *L’Hymnaire d’Adonis*, *À la façon de M. le Marquis de Sade*¹⁴ – that often address gender ambiguity and homoeroticism. They had a low print run, and are now almost totally forgotten.

In *Le Journal* (12 July), journalist Arthur Dupin wrote a four-column article that gave its name to the whole case: the ‘Black Masses’ scandal. Over a period of several months, it was reported that both Adelswärd-Fersen and Warren would pick up young boys from the Lycée Carnot and other prestigious schools and take them to their Avenue de Friedland *garçonnière*, where they indulged in exhibitionist ‘tableaux vivants’ and *poses plastiques*, the recreation of pagan ceremonies, poetry reading, and most notably sex. It was also said that clergymen, members of the aristocracy, courtesans and *demi-mondaines* (Liane de Pougy supposedly posed as the Callipygian Venus in one of these sessions), musicians and writers attended such ceremonies.

From the day it was revealed, the ‘Black Masses’ scandal generated panic and anxiety in the media, but also the public space. While most of the journalists made sensationalist claims through the association of sexual perversion with Satanism, some seemed to be more rational. As early as 11 July – only one day after the arrest – the investigating magistrate in charge of the case, M. de Valles, was interviewed in *La Presse*. He reportedly said:

Écoutez, cette affaire n’est pas aussi compliquée que vous pouvez le croire; il s’agit, simplement, pour nous, de protéger l’enfance... Voilà le fait, très simple et très net: des enfants ont été emmenés dans l’avenue de Friedland; c’est là un crime prévu et puni par la loi [...].

[Listen, this case is not as complicated as you think; it is simply, for us, about protecting the youth... It is a very simple and very clear fact; children were taken to the house on Avenue de Friedland; it is a crime that is punished by law].¹⁵

The issue of transgressive sexual behaviour was where the real scandal lay. The *fin de siècle* was a period of transition that created a large variety of fears. Many were associated with social mobility and sexual transgressions. Homosexuality in France was decriminalized by the Penal Code of 1791 after the Revolution. However, it was still widely seen as immoral. In 1860, the age of consent was fixed at 13 years (art. 331 of the Penal Code): the police could only arrest two people of the same sex on the charge of public indecency – a prospect that seemed very difficult – or if one of them was under 13 years of age. In 1903, the public still had in mind the trials of Oscar Wilde and Georges Eekhoud.¹⁶ As a matter of fact, in an article published by *La Presse*, journalist Fernand Hauser called Adelswärd-Fersen a ‘new Oscar Wilde’. A number of articles drew comparisons between the ‘Black Masses’ case and the 1889 Cleveland Street scandal that involved Lord Arthur Somerset and young male prostitutes, but also the trial of Oscar Wilde in 1895. In the light of revelations that arose from police investigations and young witnesses, as well as a widespread heteronormative discourse, the two young men would then risk a serious sentence.¹⁷

In *fin-de-siècle* French literature and culture, the association of sexual transgression with occult practices was highly suggestive. Satanism stood as ‘a *floating signifier*, a loose semantic

cannon that can be filled with a variety of meaning and used accordingly in discursive battles.¹⁸ While Valles and the judicial body emphasized the immoral dimension of the case, the media constructed a decadent imaginary around it, whose sensational titles barely hid a commercial purpose. In fact, most newspapers never really ceased to use symbolist Satanism to cover Adelswärd-Fersen's case and trial. In 1903, a few weeks before the Avenue de Friedland scandal, occultism expert and 'collaborator and friend' Gabriel Legué had been tirelessly promoting his new book on black masses in the press.¹⁹ Following his expertise and after the police found skulls and candelabra in the *garçonnière*, the journalists quickly created a link between Adelswärd-Fersen and Satanism. At the time, the Satanist rhetoric was largely used in the pathological denunciation of homosexuality, for both Satanism and homosexuality stood as 'abnormal' practices in the collective imagination. From 11 July onwards, the press largely denounced Adelswärd-Fersen's aristocratic and decadent lineage, and journalist J. Philip engaged in a diatribe against the degeneration of French nobility. But if articles focused on the issue of caste and class they also quickly suggested that the weekly reunions that took place in the Baron's flat were the theatre of homoerotic and pederastic activities.

In this respect, the relationship between aestheticism and sexuality was often blurred in journalistic articles. Lengthy descriptions of Adelswärd-Fersen's and Warren's flats appeared in the press following the day of the arrest. Along with the nature of the activities recorded in the *garçonnière*, the Satanic décor of the flats reads like a justification of the Count's sexual deviance. The journalists also evoked the vices of high society: decadent aristocracy and the modern dandy, heredity, neurosis, and hysteria are all themes that run throughout *fin-de-siècle* literature (such as the works of Baudelaire, Huysmans, Rachilde, Catulle Mendès, Lorrain, Remy de Gourmont). They published substantial descriptions of Adelswärd-Fersen's private income, accounts of his wardrobe, as well as the decoration of his flat. In *Le Matin* (11 July) the journalist drew a list of decadent objects found there: 'têtes de mort, cierges, étoles, peignoirs sombres, tuniques, corsets, photographies sadiques et lettres édifiantes échangées entre lui et son

complice, le marquis de Warren' [skulls, altar candles, clergy stoles, dark robes, tunics, corsets, sadistic photographs and edifying letters exchanged between him and his accomplice, Marquis de Warren].²⁰ He compared the *garçonnière* to the solitary retreat of the Duc des Esseintes, Huysmans's hero in *À rebours* (1884). As we can see, while the November trial of Adelswärd-Fersen and Count Hamelin de Warren directly dealt with sexual perversion, the press coverage of the 'Black Masses' scandal in July largely focused on the issue of transgressive representation borrowed from Decadent aesthetics. In this way, the imagination of the media constructed a literary trial that incriminated modern literature in the press.

Intoxications – The 'Poison of Literature'

At the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the Belle Époque, newspapers like *L'Écho de Paris* or *Le Journal*, which both sold more than 300,000 copies on a daily basis, still followed, to a certain extent, a narrative model inherited from literary fiction. Their front pages all presented short narratives, sketches, or minute narratives written by famous writers like Catulle Mendès, Théodore de Banville, Jean Richepin, or Jean Lorrain.²¹ It is proof that there still was a form of continuity in the collusion between fiction and information. The combination of the 'matrice médiatique' [media matrix] and the 'matrice littéraire du journal' [literary matrix of the newspaper]²² then produced new journalistic genres that were all applied to the 'Black Masses' scandal: sections like 'faits divers', interviews, reportage, or mundane chronicles were particularly welcoming to the literary techniques of narration and fictionalization. As Guillaume Pinson demonstrates, the sociocritical hypothesis of a 'romanesque généralisé' [generalized fiction] in the social discourse of the nineteenth century proves that writer-journalists did not necessarily recognize a separation between information and invention in the space of the newspaper.²³ Unsurprisingly, it would seem that many descriptions of the Baron actually stemmed from literature: his own or others'. In *Gil Blas*, 12 July, Pierre Mortier used long quotations from Adelswärd-Fersen's latest novel *Notre-Dame des mers mortes* (1902) to give an account of the

Baron's personality before concluding that 'with the man we can judge the writer'.²⁴ Within this context, one could read Mortier's comment as 'with the character we can judge the writer, and the man'. The press also published rejection letters from authors that Adelswärd-Fersen approached in order to write a preface to his volumes of poetry (namely, François Coppée, Edmond Rostand, and Fernand Gregh), along with long excerpts of Adelswärd-Fersen's poetry. The letter sent by Coppée mentions that *Ébauches et débauches* is 'paré de la beauté du diable' [adorned with the Devil's beauty], to which journalist Fernand Hauser added: 'M. Coppée n'eut-il pas, en écrivant cette phrase, le pressentiment du satanisme de M. d'Adelswärd?' [didn't M. Coppée sense, when writing this sentence, M. d'Adelswärd's Satanism?]. Hauser finally referred to the same volume of poetry as displaying 'une pointe d'hellénisme inquiétante' [a touch of disturbing Hellenism]. This directly points towards homosexuality.²⁵ These clues were meant to give a literary portrait of the Baron and contextualize the case. In doing so, the journalists also interviewed anyone likely to give out sensational information about Adelswärd-Fersen, pederasty or the practice of black masses.²⁶

In *fin-de-siècle* France, Satanism gave rise to authentic anxieties.²⁷ Alternative spirituality, together with processes of modernization, especially the issue of secularization (the law on the Separation of the State and the Church was voted in 1905), mobilized public opinion, which saw in the Satanic imagination a cultural signifier linked with countercultural conspiracy, and moral and religious transgression including radical socialism, anarchism, anticlericalism, and same-sex relations. In his study *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France*, Robert Ziegler states that 'evil was manifested by the very multiplicity of one's adversaries: bankers, Protestants, Freemasons, Republicans, all conspiring with the Jews in their scheme to world conquest'.²⁸ However, it is interesting to note that the majority of the newspapers that covered Adelswärd-Fersen's scandal through a Satanist rhetoric were both republican and anticlerical (*Le Journal*, *Le Matin*, *Le Petit Parisien*, *La Presse*).²⁹ The interpretation of black masses as sexually transgressive was therefore the essential motivation of the press, alongside the perceived power of their

decadent aesthetics, be they textual or visual in (often satirical) magazines [see Fig. 1], for it quickly became clear that the 'Black Masses' scandal did not involve any actual black masses or further Satanic practices.



Figure 1. René Georges Hermann-Paul, 'Chez l'esthète', in *Le Canard Sauvage*, 19 (26 July-1 August 1903). The caption reads: 'Monsieur est occupé...' [Monsieur is busy...]
Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Investigating magistrate Valles stated *de facto* that '[i]l ne faudrait pas trop faire de littérature autour de ce fait divers; la Messe Noire, pour nos prévenus, n'était qu'un prétexte' [it would be better not to produce too much literature around this 'fait divers'; the Black Mass was nothing but a pretext used by the two accused men].³⁰ Consequently, I propose that the issue at stake in this case is an issue of representation. It appears that the referential discourse used to address the context and the descriptions of the two young men involved in the 'Black Masses' scandal was often merged with an imaginary that stemmed from modern Decadent literature. For instance, Huysmans's novel *Là-bas* (1891) shows the alliance of Satanism to sodomy, but also to the textual rather than the real.³¹ The notion of a 'poison of literature' then stood as both the cause and the consequence of Adelswärd-Fersen's case. It was a crucial factor in the literary and mythical construction of the 'Black Masses' scandal in the press.

The Satanist symbolism used in the construction of the 'Black Masses' scandal was largely borrowed from social discourse on transgressive sexualities and modern Decadent literature. In that respect, parallels were drawn between Adelswärd-Fersen's 'ceremonies' and the literary production of writers such as Jules Michelet, Huysmans, and Jules Bois.³² The latter authors' expertise about Satanism and the practice of black masses was addressed at an early stage in the press. The interview of Huysmans was the first published in *La Presse* (12 July).³³ The author of *Là-bas* appeared categorical:

Des messes noires? Nous dit M. Huysmans. Mais, cher monsieur, il n'y a pas là trace de messes noires. Il fallait à ces sadiques un dieu. Cela faisait mieux d'avoir dans leur appartement des guirlandes de roses et des têtes de morts. Mais il ne faut aucun de ces objets pour célébrer la messe noire. Pour cette cérémonie infernale, il faut un prêtre pour officier, une femme nue et un enfant pour égorger. Je crois qu'aucun des personnages n'est passé par le rez-de-chaussée de l'avenue Friedland.

[Black Masses? Huysmans tells us. Dear Sir, there's no trace of black masses there. These sadists needed a god. Their flats looked better with rose garlands and skulls. But you don't need such objects to celebrate a black mass. For this diabolical ceremony you need a priest to preside over it and a naked woman; you also need to cut a child's throat. I don't think any of these characters passed through the ground floor of the avenue de Friedland flat].³⁴

The journalist reported that Huysmans then produced a small book that gave an exact account of a black mass, presided by Abbé Guibourg.³⁵ The cover of the book was red. This detail seemed to redirect the passage into fictional discourse, for the journalist wondered: ‘est-ce le rouge de l’enfer?’ [is it the colour of hell?]. Here the genre of the chronicle definitely shows that the space of the newspaper was pervaded by literature: besides the information drawn from Huysmans, the journalist carefully chose to craft an ironical sense of suspense. The next day, Jules Bois was interviewed in *La Presse*. The author of *Le Satanisme et la magie* (1895) confirmed Huysmans’s comments on occult practices. They both converged in the necessary denial that black masses took place, as well as the demystification of their own direct influence. However, Bois drew the journalist’s attention to the notion of imitation at the core of these ‘simulacres de messes noires’ [simulacra of black masses]:

Des messes noires... Des messes noires... me dit M. Jules Bois, on a bientôt fait parler de messes noires; je crois bien que M. d’Adelswärd se livrait à des parodies de messes noires; car pour que la messe noire soit vraiment noire, il faut des hosties... Et on n’a pas parlé d’hosties, dans le cas du jeune d’Adelswärd...

[Black masses... Black masses... Jules Bois tells me, the public opinion rushed a little bit; rather, I think that M. d’Adelswärd engaged in parodies of black masses; for, to make a black mass really black, one needs Hosts... And no one talked about Hosts when it came to the young Adelswärd’s case.]³⁶

The subversive and ironical dimension introduced by Decadent writers interviewed in the press is crucial to this whole case. The notion of parody that Bois used to describe Adelswärd-Fersen’s ‘ceremonies’ was reflected in the sensationalist style used by the journalists in charge of covering this moral ‘fait divers’. This sensationalism led to a case of aesthetic *mise en abyme* of the matter in the press. Indeed, black masses could be described as parodies of the religious services of the Roman Catholic Church. Adelswärd-Fersen’s ‘ceremonies’ would then be parodies of parodies, later *parodically* covered in the press and visual culture [see Fig. 2]. Bois’ and Huysmans’s answers to the journalists’ questions annulled the Satanist hypothesis and the invention of a ‘Black Masses’ scandal. Yet, their participation in the debate paradoxically legitimized and supported the fabrication of an aesthetic dimension around the case. As I will show later, Adelswärd-Fersen

would use the same technique in his 1905 novel *Lord Lyllian, Messes noires*. Bois concluded his interview by saying that ‘le rite de sang et de luxure [...] est devenu une amulette de poètes dépravés’ [the ritual of blood and lust [...] has become the distraction of degenerate poets]. Max Nordau’s concept of degeneration, employed by the press and social discourses at the time, applied to Decadent literature and the notion of ‘distraction’ served as a concrete argument for this pathological case.³⁷ According to Bois, the scandal was nothing more than a whole simulacrum of ancient black masses, perpetrated by imaginative young men intoxicated with the ‘poison of literature’.



Figure 2. Manuel Orazi, *L'Assiette au beurre* (front cover), 141 (12 December 1903).
(Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France).

***Fin-de-siècle* Echoes: Adelswärd-Fersen and Jean Lorrain**

At the turn of the century, the society press created a space where a certain representation of society life as both spectacle and social comedy was blooming. Indeed, the nineteenth century was the era of ‘media sociability’ in which society practices became standardized and mass-advertised. In that respect, every movement and attitude became a strategy of self-promotion.

Pinson states that

La presse incarne le règne de l'apparence mondaine, publicisée à outrance, éclatée, étalée. Contre cette réalité de surface, morcelée, la ‘réalité’ du roman, ce n’est peut-être pas tant l’au-delà que l’en-dessous de la représentation médiatique.

[The press embodies the influence of social appearance, which is excessively publicized, exploded and spread out. Against that crumbled, apparent reality, the ‘reality’ of the novel lies below, rather than beyond, the media representation.]³⁸

Jean Lorrain was very much aware of this sense of illusion provided by the constant representation of social life as a form of spectacle. He wrote extensively to denounce the hypocrisy of the higher classes in ‘Pall Mall Semaines’, his series of chronicles for *L’Écho de Paris*. Although at first indirect, Lorrain’s role in the ‘Black Masses’ case in the press is vital for a better comprehension of the strategies of positioning in the literary and cultural field.

Proclaimed ‘fanfaron des vices’ [braggart of vices] by fellow writer Rachilde, Jean Lorrain was certainly one of the most scandalous writers of *fin-de-siècle* France.³⁹ His novels *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901) and *Les Noronsoff* (1902) both portray the symptoms of hereditary degeneracy through the stories of the perverted and blasé dandy Jean de Fréneuse – ‘Monsieur de Phocas’ – and debauched sadist Prince Wladimir Noronsoff, last representative of a dying race cursed by a Bohemian some centuries ago.⁴⁰ Adelswärd-Fersen was all too familiar with Lorrain’s work, and the two writers even met in Venice in 1901. Journalists quickly made connections between the Baron’s ‘pagan orgies’ and Lorrain’s literature. Indeed, several newspapers revealed that Adelswärd-Fersen’s excessive over-identification led him to sign some of his poems ‘Monsieur de Phocas’ and *Sonyeuse* – the title of Lorrain’s 1891 famous decadent tale. It was even reported

by *Le Journal* collaborator Arthur Dupin that during his military service Adelswärd-Fersen attempted to re-enact a scene of Satanic nude debauchery from Lorrain's *Les Noronsoff*. Entitled 'Le souper de Trimalcion', as a reference to Petronius' *Satyricon*, at a dinner party the hero unveils the naked bodies of three men placed on the dining table [see Fig. 3].



Figure 3. Manuel Orazi, 'Messes noires', in *L'Assiette au beurre*, 141 (12 December 1903).
Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Dupin strongly alluded to the connection with Lorrain: 'une fête dont les *préparatifs* étaient empruntés visiblement à l'œuvre d'un de nos meilleurs écrivains modernes' [a party whose *preparations* were evidently borrowed from the works of one of our best modern writers].⁴¹

Mortier, in *Gil Blas*, was more direct:

Il lit M. de Phocas: toute la perversité des héros de Jean Lorrain l'exalte, il l'imitera, le copiera même, il s'exercera à penser comme lui, à penser et à sentir comme lui. Monsieur

de Phocas avait un compagnon de débauche: d'Esthal [*sic*], Jacques d'Adelswärd s'acoquine avec M. de Warren [...].

[He reads M. de Phocas: all the perversity of Jean Lorrain's heroes thrills him; he will imitate him, he will even copy him, he will practise to think like him – to think and feel like him. Monsieur de Phocas had a partner in his debauchery: d'Esthal [*sic*], Jacques d'Adelswärd runs with M. de Warren].⁴²

Lorrain was not just one of the leading models of Decadent literature; he was also a journalist and ruthless chronicler of Belle Époque France. When the 'Black Masses' scandal broke in the press in 1903, Lorrain was travelling in Southern France and Corsica but he still remained a regular collaborator on *Le Journal* and he had access to the continental press. He was therefore aware of the case.⁴³ Coincidentally, *Le Journal* published Lorrain's short story 'L'Horreur du Simple' [The Terror of the Simple] on the very day of the scandal. The story deals with hysteria, occultism, and most importantly it denounces the imitation of fiction: the final lines mention 'la manie du romanesque et le poison de la littérature' [the obsession of fiction and the poison of literature]. This indirectly prefigured the spectacular treatment of Adelswärd-Fersen's case in the press and a public debate about the disappearing dichotomy between fiction and reality in both literature and the press.

1903 was a tumultuous year for Lorrain. He was accused of libel by the Decadent artist Jeanne Jacquemin after she recognized herself in a report that he published in *Le Journal* (11 January).⁴⁴ On 6 May, he was fined 2000 francs and sentenced to two months in prison. He was also ordered to pay 25,000 francs for damages to Jacquemin – a considerable sum of money for the time. Thibaut d'Anthonay states that in fact it is more likely that Judge Puget sentenced Lorrain 'afin de lui faire payer le prix de la provocation et du scandale qu'il a, jusque là, pratiqués en (presque) totale impunité' [in order to make him pay the price of the provocation and the scandal that he has, until now, been practising (almost) freely].⁴⁵ In the summer of 1903, Lorrain was preparing himself for the result of the appeal when the news broke that police had arrested Adelswärd-Fersen and Warren.⁴⁶ Clearly, Lorrain did not want the 'Black Masses' scandal and the veiled allegations against him in the press to contribute towards further moral and financial

concerns as this would compromise his status and impede his literary projects.⁴⁷ However, as I will show, Lorrain also anticipated the profit of instant publicity.

On 2 and 3 August, he published a two-part article entitled ‘Le baron d’Adelswärd à Venise’ [Baron d’Adelswärd in Venice]. The piece focused on a meeting with the Baron in Venice in 1901. Like most journalists, Lorrain described Adelswärd-Fersen as a literary pathological case: ‘deux toxiques infectaient également ce jeune homme: le poison de la littérature et le poison de Paris’ [two poisons equally corrupted that young man: the poison of literature and the poison of Paris].⁴⁸ In the article, Lorrain emphasized Adelswärd-Fersen’s reckless ability to mix reality and fiction while in Venice, in comparison to his questionable literary skills. The last sentence reads: ‘Sans le vouloir, inconsciemment peut-être, il avait fait de la littérature, de la mauvaise littérature’ [Without wanting it, perhaps, unconsciously, he had made literature, bad literature].⁴⁹ This charge could also apply to the Avenue de Friedland ceremonies: Adelswärd-Fersen stood, according to Lorrain, as ‘a victim of the poison of literature’ eager for publicity and recognition, who often adopted a variety of postures in private and public spaces. Incidentally, in *L’Aurore* (13 July), the journalist published an extract of a letter sent by a friend of Adelswärd-Fersen, who wrote: ‘c’est l’école des jeunes poètes qui veulent faire de leur personne une réclame pour leurs œuvres’ [it is the school of young poets who want to create publicity for their works out of their personae].⁵⁰ Lorrain’s argument did not differ from Huysmans’s and Bois’. He emphasized the issue of debauchery: ‘si M. d’Adelswärd parodia jamais quelque chose, il parodia surtout la folie de Néron, – d’un tout petit Néron du faubourg Saint-Honoré’ [if M. d’Adelswärd ever parodied something, he parodied Nero’s madness – a very minor Nero from the Faubourg Saint-Honoré].⁵¹ From a journalist’s perspective, he insisted on how literature seemed to affect and corrupt the new generation. Drawing a parallel with both Adelswärd-Fersen and the ‘Black Masses’ scandal, he concentrated on how the transgressive features of Huysmans’s Mme de Chantelouve influenced many women in *fin-de-siècle* France. He stated that many recognized themselves in her. Parodying Gustave Flaubert’s purported

quotation about Emma Bovary, Lorrain wrote that many women would exclaim: ‘Son héroïne [Huysmans’s Chantelouve], c’est moi!’⁵² Consequently, Huysmans, prior to the intervention of the press, should be guilty: ‘La presse y a mis beaucoup du sien [...] croyez que la littérature de M. Joris-Karl Huysmans l’avait fortement préparée’ [The press contributed to it greatly [...] be sure that M. Joris-Karl Huysmans’s literature had prepared it intensely].⁵³ Yet Lorrain seemed to forget that by accusing modern literature of corruption, he was also accusing the transgressive representation of his own literary production (his heroes are indeed often pathological cases themselves). Yet his sensationalist claim could also constitute a strategy of mystification and self-promotion. After all, if young men like Adelswärd-Fersen were ‘intoxicated with the poison of literature’, there is no doubt that modern readers were also well intoxicated with the poison of the press and the polysemiotic invasion of publicity in both literature and the media. Lorrain knew that well.

It is safe to argue that Lorrain was anxious about the outcome of Adelswärd-Fersen’s case. Yet he, as a writer-journalist, was by definition a ‘communicant’ [a communicator] – or, to use a term more appropriate for the time, a *mystificateur*.⁵⁴ He was an expert in the modern techniques of communication and promotion. Consequently, and paradoxically, he also perceived what great opportunity this scandal could turn out to be for him. In a letter to Gustave Coquiot, Lorrain wrote:

Quelles colères et quelles injures ne vont pas déchaîner mes deux papiers sur Adelswärd... et quelle réclame! [...] les piquantes révélations qu’annonce l’accouplement de ces deux noms: J. d’Adelswärd et Jean Lorrain!!! Et quelle déception! rien que de la littérature.

[What rage and offense my two papers on Adelswärd are going to unleash... and what publicity! [...] the juicy revelations announced in the coupling of these two names: J. d’Adelswärd and Jean Lorrain!!! And what disappointment! Nothing but literature.]⁵⁵

Lorrain proved to be very insistent on this matter. In another letter he sent to journalist and writer Pierre Valdagne, Lorrain unapologetically elaborated a strategy whose sole aim was the fast sale of his works in the wake of the ‘Black Masses’ scandal. It was shameless opportunism. He wrote:

ce serait peut-être le moment de relancer, sinon par la presse, mais chez les librairies [...], le Vice errant et Mr de Phocas. À l'heure où toute la presse m'accuse d'avoir corrompu Mr d'Adelswärts [sic] et d'avoir inspiré les orgies de l'avenue Friedland, ces volumes deviennent de vente. Ne l'oubliez pas.

[it would perhaps be time to throw le Vice errant and Mr de Phocas again, if not in the press, in bookshops [...]. At the time when all the press accuses me of corrupting Mr d'Adelswärts [sic] and inspiring the avenue de Friedland orgies, these volumes should be for sale. Don't forget this.]⁵⁶

The relation between Lorrain's literature and Adelswärd-Fersen's life therefore proves to be of significant importance, as it reveals the intricate interplay between fiction and reality: Lorrain writes a book; Adelswärd-Fersen performs it; Lorrain retextualizes Adelswärd-Fersen's performance. And they both condemn it outwardly and reap the benefits.⁵⁷ In a way, then, to parody Wilde, it seems that 'Life imitates Art that imitates Life', and so on. In Belle Époque France, the value of 'l'écho mondain' [the society column] was essential to the selling of newspapers. Yet it also constituted a real 'literary matrix' to numerous Parisian novels. Unsurprisingly, Adelswärd-Fersen also parodied the transgressive representation of the 'Black Masses' scandal in his 1905 novel, *Lord Lyllian, Messes noires*.

Adelswärd-Fersen's *Lord Lyllian, Messes noires* (1905)

The trial of Adelswärd-Fersen and Hamelin de Warren finally took place in Paris, in November-December 1903. Due to the resumption of the Dreyfus affair⁵⁸ and the case of the female swindler Thérèse Humbert during the same period, it did not make the front pages for long. Ironically, the trial, and the hypocrisy of criminal justice more generally, were also dubbed 'Black Masses' in the press. In *Le Matin*, Gaston Leroux wrote: 'il fallait être en peignoir rose pour assister aux messes de M. d'Adelswärd; il est nécessaire d'être en robe noire pour les messes noires du Palais' [people had to wear pink robes to attend M. d'Adelswärd's masses; they are required to wear black robes for the Court's black masses].⁵⁹ In essence, Leroux considered the trial to be persecution. Maître Grandgousier covered it in *Le Matin*.⁶⁰ He also dismissed the allegations of Satanic ritual abuse, insisting that the 'ignominious acts' performed by the two

young men had ‘nothing to do with literature’, and refocused the debate over transgressive sexuality. However, it is interesting to note that Grandgousier’s comment on the defendant’s moral principles emphasizes shifts in societal norms. He refers to them as ‘poor young men’ or persons in need, echoing the notions of pathology and degeneration, while modern society would most likely call them paedophiles: ‘ils n’ont rien de diabolique et de surhumain, les deux malheureux auxquels la société demande compte du double délit d’outrages publics à la pudeur et d’excitation de mineurs à la débauche’ [there’s nothing diabolical or inhuman about these two poor men, whom society accuses of offences to decency and incitation of minors to debauchery].⁶¹ Indeed, on 3 December, the two protagonists were found guilty of offences to decency and incitation of minors to debauchery and corruption. For this, they were sentenced to six months in jail. Warren served the whole time while Adelswärd-Fersen, having been incarcerated since late July, was released in early 1904. He went immediately into exile on the island of Capri. There he continued to write relentlessly. In 1905, he published a novel entitled *Lord Lyllian, Messes noires*, which stands as both a justification and a response to the media and public opinion.⁶² As we shall see, Adelswärd-Fersen’s novel is a *roman à clef*. It is also a satire of and directly drawn from both the ‘Black Masses’ scandal and the trial as they were represented in the press.

In *La Littérature au quotidien* (2007), Marie-Ève Thérénty defines the relationship between literary and journalistic forms as circular. Studying the press in the nineteenth century, she observes a consistent phenomenon of ‘contamination’ between literature and print media, ‘le journal empruntant à la littérature ses modes poétiques, la Littérature récupérant [...] tous les procédés de mise en voix et de validation de l’information’ [the newspaper borrows poetic modes from literature, and literature recovers all the methods of approving and voicing information].⁶³ In a way then, the coverage of real-life events in the press was infused with narrative techniques that first originated from the experimentations of realist writers like Balzac.⁶⁴ In return, literature was transformed by the structure of the newspaper and the

emergence of ‘l’écho mondain’. Internally, this new media system created the formation of an editorial board more responsive to intertextual and intermedial references, which together helped move beyond fiction and fact through the incorporation of a self-reflexive awareness amongst journalists and their readers. Writers then often used the journalistic space – and reality – as a ‘literary matrix’ to their own works of fiction. As I have demonstrated, Lorrain was very familiar with this technique due to his experience as a scandalous journalist. He often adopted different postures in both his fiction and the press, and he guided his readers into the whole of his œuvre through the literary representation of society. It seems that Adelswärd-Fersen used the same method in his transfictional novel *Lord Lyllian, Messes noires*.

Lord Lyllian is largely autobiographical. In her review published in *Le Mercure de France*, 15 April 1905, Rachilde wrote: ‘Lord Lyllian est une sorte de biographie. Qui ne reconnaîtra l’éphèbe poète que nous avons tous con-nu, dans les lettres ou dans le monde?’ [Lord Lyllian is a sort of biography. Who wouldn’t recognize the young poet that we have all en-cunt-ered, through literature or out in the world?].⁶⁵ Here the use of the hyphen marks a separation between ‘con’ [cunt, or idiot] and ‘nu’ [naked]; it allows Rachilde to engage ironically with the Baron’s transgressive nature. The main protagonist of *Lord Lyllian* is indeed a fictional version of Adelswärd-Fersen, although he also shares many similarities with Lord Alfred Douglas, while the informed reader would easily recognize contemporary celebrities who were all mentioned in the ‘Black Masses’ scandal: Harold Skilde (Oscar Wilde), Supp (Friedrich Alfred Krupp), Sar Baladin (Joséphin Péladan), Montautrou (Count Robert de Montesquiou), police agent Pioux (Inspector Roux), Jean d’Alsace (Jean Lorrain), etc. The novel does not display any serious interest in Satanism but towards the end the character Chignon, a famous painter, epitomizes the connection between Devil worship and the transgressive sexual orientation of most characters:

Satan, c’est l’homme en face de Dieu. Satan c’est notre nature, Satan, c’est notre volupté, Satan, c’est notre instinct. C’est pour ça que Satan n’est pas si méchant, à tout prendre! La preuve en est, mon cher Lord, qu’il suffit de faire – à la lettre – ce qu’il nous plaît, pour devenir le plus grand criminel du monde, au dire de l’Évangile.

[Satan is man facing God. Satan is our nature, Satan is our sensual pleasure, Satan is our instinct. That is why, after all, Satan is not so wicked! The proof is, my dear Lord, that all it takes to become the greatest criminal in the world is do precisely whatever we like, according to the Gospel].⁶⁶

In this respect, in *Satanic Feminism* (2017), Per Faxneld calls *Lord Lyllian* ‘noteworthy for fitting well with contemporary ideas about Satan as a saviour from Christian oppression of all things carnal’.⁶⁷ Yet the whole story can also be read as the parodical superposition of both the Wilde-Bosie homosexual relationship and the ‘Black Masses’ scandal. It constitutes a *disjecta membra* narrative that applies to the overlapping of myths, references, fiction and reality. Jean de Palacio calls it a ‘curieux mélange de veine antiquisante et de modernités’ [bizarre mix of antique and modern touches] that is rightly confusing.⁶⁸ The character of Harold Skilde is a transparent representation of the Irish dandy Wilde. In a letter he writes in prison, he expresses that:

Les juges ne me font pas peur. Ils m’accusent d’avoir corrompu la jeunesse, d’avoir souillé l’enfant, par mes exemples et mes écrits. Je sais toute la bêtise, toute la cruauté et toute la vindicte qui animent leur accusation...

[I am not afraid of judges. They accuse me of corrupting the youth, of perverting the child, through my examples and my writings. I know all the stupidity, all the cruelty and all the rancour that animate their accusation...].⁶⁹

While this passage echoes Wilde’s *De Profundis* (1905), it also seems to give Adelswärd-Fersen the opportunity to attain a certain form of redemption while openly and directly criticizing the judges who sentenced him to prison in the wake of the ‘Black Masses’ scandal. In a way then, Adelswärd-Fersen was aware of a case that bore resonance with Wilde’s and Eekhoud’s, and that led to both a literary trial and sexual conflicts. This is probably why in *Lord Lyllian* he seems to also parody the semantics used in the press when the ‘Black Masses’ scandal broke in 1903:

D’ailleurs vous êtes fixés par eux, n’est-ce pas? Vous venez me voir, m’examiner ainsi qu’un acteur à scandale, ou comme un cas pathologique. C’est presque un cinquième acte. Je connais ma réputation actuelle, mon cher [...].

[By the way, you are sent by them, aren’t you? You come to see me, to examine me like a scandalous actor, or like a pathological case. It’s almost like a fifth act. I know my present reputation, my dear].⁷⁰

Scandale, scandale? mais tous vous êtes passionnés de ce scandale!...

[Scandal, scandal? you are all obsessed with this scandal!...].⁷¹

The reference to classical tragedy and the dénouement through death ('cinquième acte') reinforces the idea that the 'Black Masses' case was a social and literary construction, which almost read like a modern play. Furthermore, Adelswärd-Fersen draws parallels with Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which was discussed in detail during the 1895 trial, while using the same argumentation that Alfred Jarry, Gaston Leroux, and others actively developed during the 'Black Masses' trial to emphasize the metadimensional value of the accusations. Through literature, then, Adelswärd-Fersen denounces the hypocrisy of the judges who sentenced him:

Je suis un vieillard dans un corps d'enfant [...]. L'on m'accuse enfin d'avoir des vices: je n'ai que les vices de mes accusateurs!

[I am an old man trapped in the body of a child [...]. I am accused of having vices: I only have the vices of the ones who accuse me!].⁷²

References to black masses can be found at the very end of the novel. In an unveiled biographical manner, Adelswärd-Fersen's writing clearly reads as a response to his detractors. In the final chapter, Lord Lyllian discusses the idea that black masses are nothing but a symbol – be it aesthetic, decadent, homosexual – before giving an account of the scandal. There, Adelswärd-Fersen parodies the ways in which the real case was treated in the press by constructing a series of sensationalist rumours all stemming from random people. He establishes a list of positions pulled in a decrescendo of value ('concierges', 'valets', 'larbins', 'cochers', 'femmes de chambre', 'untel') which echoes the way journalists gathered information about the avenue de Friedland 'ceremonies' from a wide range of 'witnesses', whether they were credible or not. The novel ends with the death of Lord Lyllian, shot by one of the young boys out of jealousy. When the doctors tell the inspector that there is no way he could question the dying man, the inspector replies: 'Pas possible?... Songez donc... Un scandale urgent! Il nous le faut, coûte que coûte.' [Not possible?... Think a bit... An urgent scandal! We need it, at all costs.]⁷³ The spectacular dimension of the scandal appears to be more important than what it is actually about. These are

the last words of the text. They clearly summarize the commercial cause of the media treatment of the ‘Black Masses’ scandal in Belle Époque France. After all, according to Hamon, ‘la réclame’ [publicity] integrated in the media and literary field is also a form of intoxication.⁷⁴

Kali Israel has argued that ‘throughout the late nineteenth-century a series of highly mediated but spectacularly detailed scandals, *causes célèbres*, and exposés permitted diverse constituencies to engage in struggles over the construction of meaningful stories about sexual danger and sexual truths.’⁷⁵ In this respect, the ‘Black Masses’ scandal is symptomatic of *fin-de-siècle* interpretations of gender roles, sexual transgression and deviance. It elucidates the role of the media and modern literature, and the implication of the criminal justice system regarding gender, ‘thus providing a snapshot of critical moments of social contestation during the era that witnessed the emergence of the New Woman, the New Man, and the Third Sex as social constructs.’⁷⁶ Yet it also shows that, in an age of ephebophilia⁷⁷ Adelswärd-Fersen’s case constitutes a modern mythography whose destiny was socially and literary constructed in the intermediary space of the newspaper.

As I have shown with reference to the media and literary construction of the ‘Black Masses’ scandal in the social *semiosis* of Belle Époque France, Adelswärd-Fersen stood at the juncture of real, textual, and imaginary representations of himself as author-subject.⁷⁸ Parodying the extraordinary claims made about the ‘Black Masses’ scandal in the metalepsis narrative *Lord Lyllian, Messes noires*, he challenges the epistemic oppositions between reality and fiction to form a modern mystification.⁷⁹ Yet his novel also constitutes a space of observation and explanation. Indeed, Adelswärd-Fersen also used Satanism and the black masses as parodical semantics to address both homosexuality and hypocrisy in the *fin de siècle*.⁸⁰ In one sense then, two years after the ‘Black Masses’ scandal, Adelswärd-Fersen not only adopted the transgressive representation of the case as ‘media matrix’ for his transfictional novel, but he also used it to reconstruct himself as an innocent young man, and a modern writer.

¹ The title of my article is taken from Jean Lorrain's 'Le baron d'Adelswärd à Venise. Le Poison de la Littérature', *Le Journal*, 3 August 1903. All translations are mine.

² Fernand Hauser, 'Un nouvel Oscar Wilde', *La Presse*, 12 July 1903. Hauser clearly draws a parallel between Adelswärd-Fersen and Dorian Gray – himself corrupted by Huysmans's poisonous novel *A rebours* in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Occasionally, Adelswärd-Fersen is referred to as Adelswärd. In the letters and articles in which this occurs I have retained the original spelling.

³ Alfred Jarry, 'L'Âme ouverte à l'Art antique', in 'Messes noires', *Le Canard sauvage*, 19, 26 July - 1 August 1903, p. 6.

⁴ Marie-Ève Thérénty, *La Littérature au quotidien. Poétiques journalistiques au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), p. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶ See for instance the works of José-Luis Diaz, *L'Écrivain imaginaire. Scénographies auctoriales à l'époque romantique* (Paris: Champion, 2007) and Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur* (Geneva: Slatkine Érudition, 2007).

⁷ See Guillaume Pinson, 'Imaginaires des sociabilités et culture médiatique au XIXe siècle', *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 110 (2010), 610-32 (p. 626). See also Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 1999).

⁸ Alain Viala, 'Sociopoétique', in *Approches de la réception*, ed. by A. Viala and G. Molinié (Paris: PUF, 1993).

⁹ Jérôme Meizoz, 'Ce que l'on fait dire au silence: posture, ethos, image d'auteur', *Argumentation et analyse du discours*, 3 (2009) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4000/aad.667>>.

¹⁰ Coincidentally, the press also covered the disease of Pope Leo XIII at the same time. He died on 20 July 1903.

¹¹ Count Albert Hamelin de Warren left for America two weeks before the scandal broke in the press. Because of this absence, the journalists did not pay much attention to him, and when they did Warren was used as a way to balance and contrast Adelswärd-Fersen's actions and attitude, especially at the trial. There is no record of de Warren's life after his release in 1904.

¹² For a detailed study of Fersen's background and the 'Black Masses' trial, see Nancy Erber, 'Queer Follies: Effeminacy and Aestheticism in *Fin-de-siècle* France, the Case of Baron d'Adelswärd-Fersen and Count de Warren', in *Disorder in the Court, Trials and Sexual Conflicts at the Turn of the Century*, ed. by N. Erber and G. Robb (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999), p. 195.

¹³ Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, *Ébauches et débauches* (Paris: Léon Vanier, 1901).

¹⁴ Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, *L'Hymnaire d'Adonis, À la manière du marquis de Sade* (Paris: Léon Vanier, 1902).

¹⁵ 'Les Noces de Satan', *La Presse*, 11 July 1903, p. 3.

¹⁶ See Erber and Robb's 'Introduction', in *Disorder in the Court*, p. 4.

¹⁷ In fact, all the young boys who attended the ceremonies were over 13 years old. See Régis Revenin, *Homosexualité et prostitution masculines à Paris, 1870-1918* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2005), p. 72.

¹⁸ Jesper Aagaard Petersen, 'Introduction: Embracing Satan', in *Contemporary Religious Satanism: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 11. Italics in original.

¹⁹ Published in 1903 by E. Fasquelle, *La Messe noire* is a rather sensationalist and anti-Semitic work.

²⁰ 'Messes noires', *Le Matin*, 11 July 1903, p. 2.

²¹ Thérénty, *La Littérature au quotidien*, p. 149.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 353-70.

²³ Guillaume Pinson, *Fiction du monde. De la presse mondaine à Marcel Proust* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2008), pp. 8-9. On the relation between literature and the press, see also *La Civilisation du journal, Histoire culturelle et littéraire de la presse française au XIXe siècle*, ed. by D. Kalifa, P. Régnier, M.-E. Thérénty, and A. Vaillant (Paris: Nouveau Monde éditions, 2012).

²⁴ Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, *Notre-Dame des mers mortes (Venise)* (Paris: P. Sevin et E. Rey, 1902).

²⁵ Fernand Hauser, 'Un nouvel Oscar Wilde', *La Presse*, 12 July 1903, p. 1.

²⁶ 'Les Messes noires. Graves révélations', *Le Journal*, 12 July 1903, p. 1-2.

²⁷ For instance, see the Taxil hoax and the Palladian Order in the 1890s.

²⁸ Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 202.

²⁹ Only *Le Figaro* (conservative, aristocratic and clerical) seemed to be more discreet with the case. The journalists were first not inclined to name the two protagonists of the scandal and consequently 'overburden two honourable families' [11 July, p. 3], but they finally aligned with the other newspapers and revealed the name of 'miserable young man' Baron Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen.

³⁰ In 'Les Noces de Satan', *La Presse*, p. 3.

³¹ See the chapter 'Huysmans Mystérique', in Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 108-68.

³² See Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière* (1862); Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-bas* (1891); Jules Bois, *Le Satanisme et la magie* (1895).

³³ The same day, however, Jules Bois wrote a long article about black masses in *Gil Blas*, following the article 'Le Scandale de l'avenue de Friedland' by Pierre Mortier.

³⁴ 'À propos de Messes Noires', *La Presse*, 12 July 1903, p. 3.

- ³⁵ This book was in fact the *Archives de la Bastille*, ed. by Frantz Funck-Brentano (Paris: Plon, 1892), t. IX of the *Catalogue des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal*. It contains the 'exact account of a black mass' celebrated by Abbé Guibourg. Huysmans evokes Abbé Guibourg in chapter five of his novel *Là-bas* (Paris: Tresse & Stock, 1895).
- ³⁶ 'Les Messes Noires', *La Presse*, 18 July 1903, p. 1.
- ³⁷ See Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1892; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).
- ³⁸ Pinson, *Fiction du monde*, p. 197.
- ³⁹ This is the title of Rachilde's chapter on Lorrain in *Portraits d'hommes* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1930), pp. 77-92.
- ⁴⁰ Jean Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas* (Paris: Ollendorff, 1901) and *Le Vice errant. Coïns de Byzance* (Paris: Ollendorff, 1902).
- ⁴¹ Arthur Dupin, 'Un Scandale. Les Messes noires', *Le Journal*, 11 July 1903, p. 2.
- ⁴² Pierre Mortier, 'Le Scandale de l'avenue de Friedland', *Gil Blas*, 12 July 1903. Occultist illustrator Manuel Orazi later pictured this in literary and satirical magazine *L'Assiette au beurre* ('Messes noires', in *L'Assiette au beurre*, 141, 12 December 1903. See Fig. 3.)
- ⁴³ In a letter to Gustave Coquirot [21 July 1903], he wrote: 'Et cette affaire Adelswärd, qu'en dit-on? J'ai connu et vu ce jeune snob [...]. De la triple essence de vanité littéraire et mondaine, de pose et d'hypotypose, mais inintelligent' [And what is said of that Adelswärd case? I met and saw this young snob [...]. His essence is a combination of literary and social vanity, pose and hypotyposis, but he is unintelligent]. In Jean Lorrain, *Lettres à Gustave Coquirot*, ed. by Éric Walbecq (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007), p. 104.
- ⁴⁴ Jean Lorrain, 'Femmes – Victime', in *Le Journal*, 11 January 1903. Initially, Lorrain had a good relationship with the couple Jacquemin-Lauzet, but their relationship slowly degraded over time. In this article, Lorrain portrays a mythomaniac and nymphomaniac female artist who shares many similitudes with Jacquemin. He calls his character 'Narcissa' – a name he also gave to Jacquemin in a groundbreaking article that brought her success in Paris (*Le Journal*, 30 May 1892). In a letter addressed to Lorrain [11 May 1903], Rachilde recognized in Jacquemin's attitude a certain 'love for publicity'. Quoted in Éric Walbecq's article entitled 'Le procès de Jeanne Jacquemin contre Jean Lorrain en mai 1903', in *Jean Lorrain. Produit d'extrême civilisation*, ed. by J. de Palacio and É. Walbecq, Rouen: PURH, 2005, p. 198.
- ⁴⁵ Thibaut d'Anthonay, *Jean Lorrain, Miroir de la Belle Époque* (Paris: Fayard, 2005), p. 829.
- ⁴⁶ Against all odds, Jacquemin withdrew her complaint on 24 October, the day of the appeal. Lorrain was not sent to jail; he was nevertheless obliged to pay a large sum of money to Jacquemin.
- ⁴⁷ In fact, Lorrain was investigated once more in 1904, as part of the 'Greuling case'. In October 1903, Swiss explorer Frédéric Greuling murdered his lover Éliisa Popesco, an actress at the National Theatre of Bucharest, in the Hôtel Régina, Paris. Just like Adelswärd-Fersen, the young man met Lorrain in Nice in 1902 and he sometimes impersonated him by wearing multiple rings on both hands. In *Le Journal*, 29 March 1904, Marréaux Delavigne wrote: 'il aurait particulièrement goûté les œuvres de Jean Lorrain et de Maurice Barrès dont il jette sans cesse les noms dans le débat pour essayer de se faire du talent de ces écrivains une sorte de réclame littéraire et une justification de ses déchéances morales' [he supposedly enjoyed the œuvres of Jean Lorrain and Maurice Barrès, whom he mentions relentlessly in the debates to try and get a sort of literary publicity and moral justification from their talent] (p. 3). Literature was being incriminated again. Lorrain had to appeal to his most well-known literary friends for help by means of letters that would clear his role in the Greuling case.
- ⁴⁸ Jean Lorrain, 'Le baron d'Adelswärd à Venise. Un intoxiqué', *Le Journal*, 2 August 1903, p. 3.
- ⁴⁹ Lorrain, 'Le baron d'Adelswärd à Venise. Le Poison de la Littérature', *Le Journal*, 3 August 1903, p. 3.
- ⁵⁰ Jean Lorrain, 'Grave affaire de mœurs', *L'Aurore*, 13 July 1903, p. 3.
- ⁵¹ Jean Lorrain, *Pelléastres* (Paris: Albert Méricant, 1910), p. 134.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 125.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-25.
- ⁵⁴ Alain Vaillant, 'Communication littéraire, culture médiatique et publicité au XIXe siècle', in *Littérature et publicité, de Balzac à Beigbeder*, ed. by L. Guellec and F. Hache-Bissette (Marseille: Éditions Gaussien, 2012), p. 79.
- ⁵⁵ Lorrain, *Lettres à Gustave Coquirot*, p. 108.
- ⁵⁶ Letter to Pierre Valdagne [16 July 1903], in *Jean Lorrain, Correspondances*, ed. by Jean de Palacio (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006), pp. 185-86.
- ⁵⁷ On this note, it would be interesting to study such media and literary strategies in the light of the 'ethical turn' in literature and literary criticism.
- ⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that Maître Demange – Dreyfus' lawyer during the 1894 and 1899 trials – was hired by Adelswärd-Fersen's family to defend their son in court. This hints at the power of the family and importance of the case.
- ⁵⁹ Gaston Leroux, 'À propos de Messes noires', *Le Matin*, 17 July 1903, p. 1.
- ⁶⁰ Grandgousier is a pseudonym drawn from François Rabelais's second novel *Gargantua* (1534). Grandgousier ('Big Throat') is the father of Gargantua. He is a very Rabelaisian character in the sense that he appreciates all of life's pleasures. This echoes the journalist's sympathetic comments.
- ⁶¹ Maître Grandgousier, 'Un procès à huis clos. Les Messes noires', *Le Matin*, 29 November 1903, p. 1.

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- ⁶² Jacques d'Adelswärd-Fersen, *Lord Lyllian, Messes noires* (1905; Montpellier: Éditions QuestionDeGenre/GKC, 2011).
- ⁶³ Thérénty, *La Littérature au quotidien*, p. 19.
- ⁶⁴ Guillaume Pinson, *L'Imaginaire médiatique* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013), p. 130.
- ⁶⁵ Rachilde, 'Lord Lyllian', in *Le Mercure de France*, 15 April 1905, pp. 575-76. This parallels what she later said about Lorrain: '[Il] était à la fois le peintre et le modèle de ses héros. Qui était vrai? Qui était faux? Le savait-il lui-même?' [he was both the painter and the model of his heroes. Who was real? Who was fake? Did he know himself?]. Rachilde, *Portraits d'hommes*, p. 91.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- ⁶⁷ Per Faxneld, *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- ⁶⁸ Jean de Palacio, 'Preface', in Adelswärd-Fersen's *Lord Lyllian*, p. 7.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ⁷² *Ibid.*
- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- ⁷⁴ See Philippe Hamon, 'Introduction. Littérature et réclame: le cru et le cri', *Romantisme*, 155 (2012), 5-10 (p. 8).
- ⁷⁵ Kali Israel, 'French Vices and British Liberties: Gender, Class and Narrative Competition in a Late Victorian Sex Scandal', *Social History*, 22.1 (1997), 1-26 (p. 1).
- ⁷⁶ Erber and Robb, 'Introduction', in *Disorder in the Court*, p. 1.
- ⁷⁷ See Revenin, *Homosexualité et prostitution masculines*, p. 72. See also Gide's formation of a homosexual pedagogy in his autobiography *Si le grain ne meurt* [1920/1926] (Paris: Gallimard, 1972).
- ⁷⁸ On the notion of 'social semiosis', see Pierre Popovic, 'De la semiosis sociale au texte: la sociocritique', *Signata*, 5 (2014) <<http://dx.doi.org/10.4000:signata.483>>.
- ⁷⁹ Gérard Genette, *Métalepse. De la figure à la fiction* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).
- ⁸⁰ More than fifty years later, Roger Peyrefitte addressed the same issues in his transfictional novel about the Baron, *L'Éxilé de Capri* (Paris: Flammarion, 1959).

Textual Secrecy: Arthur Machen and ‘The True Literature of Occultism’

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Arthur Machen (1863-1947) read *The Book of Nicholas Flamel* as a child and later in his life spent several years cataloguing books on occult matters for the antiquarian bookseller George Redway. The result of his work was an annotated catalogue, *The Literature of Occultism and Archaeology* (1885), that referenced works on alchemy, astrology, witchcraft, and animal magnetism (among others). The Welsh writer was more than well versed in the occult and esoteric philosophies that are often referred to and sometimes discussed in his works of fiction. In an article entitled ‘The Cult of the Secret’ (1926), Machen underlines that humanity has always been drawn to secret societies and mysterious rites, a powerful attraction he personally experienced.¹

Machen became a member of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1899 and while he was very much thrilled by the initiation rites, the emptiness underlying the ritual soon left him disappointed. In *Things Near and Far* (1923), he reflects that

[t]he society as a society was pure foolishness concerned with impotent and imbecile abracadabras. It knew nothing whatever about anything and concealed the fact under an impressive ritual and sonorous phraseology.²

He also rejected ‘the follies of modern theosophy and modern spiritualism’ or ‘back-parlour magic’.³ In other words, all the new, fashionable forms of occultism. Instead, he always looked longingly back to the mystery cults of Antiquity, thus participating in the *fin-de-siècle* pagan revival.

In an 1899 article entitled ‘The Literature of Occultism’, Machen ventures that the true literature of the occult may not be that which consciously sets out to write of hidden things, but imaginative literature that thrills the heart ‘with inexplicable, ineffable charm’.⁴ Such literature is made of ‘runes which call up unknown spirits from the mind’.⁵ ‘Runes’, ‘hieroglyphics’, or ‘symbols’ are abundantly used by Machen in the definition of ‘high literature’ he outlines in *Hieroglyphics: A Note Upon Ecstasy in Literature* (written 1899; published 1902).⁶ Indeed, the few

elements the author mentions in his description of the true literature of occultism are also to be found in his long treatise about what should be considered as fine literature. Machen's persona in *Hieroglyphics*, the Hermit, claims that the world is made up of hieroglyphics and that the literary text is created in its image. Both are veils that, like the veil of Maya, simultaneously reveal and conceal the truth about existence. High literature can only be written by one who has had a glimpse of the higher realities hidden behind the veil of appearances, an ecstatic experience that affords them the privilege of the initiated. The writer then translates this ecstasy into a symbolic language that may trigger the same extramundane experience in the neophyte reader. For example, Machen offers a list of possible synonyms for ecstasy: 'rapture, beauty, adoration, wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown.'⁷ Clothed in the language of symbolism, fine literature may be defined as occult as its meaning is not directly accessible.

As I will discuss in this article, Machen's focus is on the use of symbolic or hieroglyphic language rather than on what it supposedly reveals. In other words, he emphasizes the form of secrecy rather than its content. The same fascination with form appears in his praise of the elaborate ritual of the Catholic Church, which stages visible signs of the invisible and is thus 'a perfect image of the world'.⁸ His own writing, he repeatedly stated, sought to convey the same sense of awe and mystery. Machen has been recently called a 'decadent apostle of wonder',⁹ and it can be argued that his ultimate aim is not so much to take the reader into occult territories as to re-enchant the everyday world and mundane existence. His use of the decadent *topos* of unutterability has been discussed by several critics, such as Andrew McCann in his examination of occult-oriented popular literature in late-Victorian Britain. McCann places the *topos* within the larger framework of Machen's 'mystically inclined symbolism'. Indeed, unutterability is also a typical motif of mystical writing, in which 'the sign evokes the alterity that motivates it, but that is always beyond its scope'.¹⁰ Often overlooked, however, is the use of this *topos* within a larger strategy of secrecy. Machen's writing may be called 'secretive' in that it insists that there is a secret but it withholds a revelation. Rather than unveiling, Machen weaves a complex textual

fabric, or multiplies the veils that supposedly hide higher truths.¹¹ As the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard underlined, seduction is at play not in the tearing of the veil, but in the play of veils.¹² Machen's texts tease the reader with the possibility of unveiling and this play of veils thus causes desire; more precisely a 'desire for the unknown' that Machen uses as a synonym for ecstasy.

Enigmatic Signs

Machen's texts abound in enigmatic signs, codes, cryptograms or ciphers that foreground the theme of secrecy. In 'Riddles and Symbols', an essay included in the collection *Bridles and Spurs*, he wonders about man's irresistible attraction to riddles and symbols.¹³ The tentative answer is that we love enigmas because we live in an enigma. Here, as in many other places, Machen expresses his view of the world as a tremendous mystery. It is made of symbols or hieroglyphics that hint at higher realities like a sacramental veil. The mysterious graphic signs or codes that pepper his fictional world are thus an analogue of the *liber mundi*; they are enigmatic signs embedded in an enigmatic world-text.

'The Red Hand' (1895) provides several examples of such mystery languages and the whole story revolves around the activity of deciphering. The amateur detectives, Dyson and Phillipps, soon (mistakenly) identify the red hand of the title as the *mano in fica*, also called the fig sign, a gesture used to avert the evil eye. They have much more difficulty decoding the message found in the dead man's pocket, however. Not only does it remain meaningless without the secret key, but the handwriting itself seems odd: 'the letters were curiously contorted, with an affectation of dashes and backward curves which really reminded me of an oriental manuscript.'¹⁴ The handwriting gives an impression of strangeness and remoteness. In other words, a sense of the unknown. Once decoded, the message leads the amateur sleuths to a black tablet engraved with mysterious whorls and spirals, which are even more precisely described than the handwriting of the message. When faced with such marks, the first step in the semiological

investigation consists in identifying the signs. After briefly wondering if the ‘labyrinths of line’ are natural markings, Dyson becomes convinced that they are the work of man and need deciphering.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, the mystery of all those secret languages is not solved by the man of science, the ethnologist Phillipps, but by the man of imagination and would-be writer, Dyson. Because he refuses to limit the field of possibilities, Dyson eventually uncovers the supernatural explanation of the enigma. The short story as a whole, however, gives much more importance to the puzzling signs and ciphers than to what they reveal: the supernatural explanation is sketched in less than a page at the end of the tale. Indeed, the solution opens the door to a larger, ontological mystery to which there is no real closure.

The mysterious signs are also a form of *mise en abyme* – the symbolic language used by the writer is essentially the ‘runes’ of the true literature of occultism. In Machen’s view, high literature is created in the world’s image. The world is made up of hieroglyphics and, as it is written in symbolic language, so is the literary text:

For literature, as I see it, is the art of describing the indescribable; the art of exhibiting symbols which may hint at the ineffable mysteries behind them; the art of the veil, which reveals what it conceals.¹⁶

In *Hieroglyphics*, the Hermit uses the image of the cryptogram to further explain what he means by ‘high literature’. Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), he states, is like a cryptogram that enthralls, amazes, and perplexes the reader, but once the secret is divulged the spell is broken and one is unlikely to read the novel again.¹⁷ While admitting that a luminous intuition lurks behind the plot, that is, the mystery of human nature, the Hermit places *Jekyll and Hyde* on the lower shelves of high literature, mainly because the plot eventually discloses the secret of the physical transformation being produced by a drug. Thus, it sweeps aside the truly mysterious by resorting to the ingenious incident of the powder. Machen’s persona indirectly states that high literature is not a literature of revelation.

Myths, too, are veils, since they also use the language of symbolism. They are an indirect means of expression that simultaneously reveals and conceals. Thus, Machen’s persona in

Hieroglyphics claims that ‘all the profound verities which have been revealed to man have come to him under the guise of myths and symbols – such as the myth of Dionysus’.¹⁸ This conception of myth is also propounded in one of Machen’s most famous texts, *The Great God Pan* (1894). The encounter with Pan is described within the novella as ‘an exquisite symbol beneath which men long ago veiled their knowledge of the most awful, most secret forces which lie at the heart of things’.¹⁹ The novella itself is a diegetic transposition of the Pan hypotext,²⁰ moving the story to a different time and a different place. One of the characters explicitly identifies this transposition: ‘Yes; it is horrible enough; but, after all, it is an old story, an old mystery played in our day, and in dim London streets instead of amidst the vineyards and the olive gardens.’²¹ The meta-textual comments obliquely designate the novella as a symbolic text that needs deciphering. Indeed, the text contains its own instructions for use as it underlines that, being written in symbolic language, it should not be read literally. The process of deciphering undertaken by Machen’s amateur detectives thus mirrors the reading of the hieroglyphic world, as well as the reading of the hieroglyphic text.

As Nicholas Freeman argues in *Conceiving the City* (2007), symbolist texts such as Machen’s often use the form of the detective story to hint at spiritual quests and at mysteries in the older sense of the term.²² The genre of detective fiction can be considered as a veil or a hieroglyphic language hiding a symbolist text. Machen actually anticipates this analysis in *Hieroglyphics* when his persona ventures the hypothesis that Edgar Allan Poe’s Monsieur Dupin is a symbol of the mystagogue, the initiated who leads others into secret rituals and teachings. Seen in this light, the mystery genre is directly related to the Greek word *mustéria*, referring to initiation cults. Machen’s detectives are faced with the figurative labyrinth of the enigma, but also with a literal one as they walk through maze-like London in quest of a solution.

The labyrinth is a common motif in detective fiction, but it takes on another dimension in the work of the mystically-inclined author because of its initiatory function. Many of Machen’s *flâneur*-detectives know the city well.²³ In ‘The Inmost Light’ (1894), for example, Dyson’s main

field of study is ‘the physiology of London’.²⁴ His research work includes the darkest parts of the city; its slums, dangerous alleys, and disreputable neighbourhoods. Because of their knowledge of the city, Machen’s detectives can see networks and patterns that escape the common gaze. Their investigations take the reader into an initiatory labyrinth that may lead to a secret centre.

Textual Mazes

Machen discusses the motif of the labyrinth in several places in his non-fiction writing, for example in the autobiographical *London Adventure*:

The maze was not only the instrument, but the symbol of ecstasy: it was pictured ‘inebriation’, the sign of an age-old ‘process’ that gave the secret bliss to men, that was also symbolised by dancing [...].²⁵

Describing the maze as ‘pictured “inebriation”’ is not only a way of referring to the disorientation it causes. Inebriation, which is placed between inverted commas, should be understood as the mystical experience that gives access to another reality.²⁶ Similarly, the inverted commas around ‘process’ emphasize the mystery shrouding the signified. As a symbolic sign, the labyrinth is a signifier without a signified. It is, in Gilbert Durand’s words, ‘the epiphany of a mystery’,²⁷ but the mystery remains.

Machen replicates the complex architecture of the labyrinth in his writing. His longer texts are maze-like narratives in which the reader wanders in search of meaning. In his 2013 article on *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), Kostas Boyiopoulos highlights the centrality of the image of the labyrinth/maze in Machen’s fiction and studies how the disorientated protagonist of the novel, Lucian Taylor, negotiates ‘the boundary between the London maze and the maze of his own consciousness’.²⁸ The reader, too, experiences disorientation in Machen’s textual mazes, which may be seen as instruments of readerly ecstasy. Their complexity turns the reader into a detective, who endeavours to piece the puzzle together but never obtains a clear, full picture. For example, *The Three Impostors; or The Transmutations* (1895) is an episodic novel whose narrative structure was deeply influenced by Stevenson’s *The Dynamiter* (1885). The two novels are made

up of embedded stories connected together by a frame narrative. Like the three young men created by Stevenson, Machen's amateur detectives listen to stories, which in turn often move to a third, hypo-hypodiegetic level. The tales, it turns out, have been fabricated by the three impostors of the title with the aim of locating and capturing a man named Joseph Walters. The mastermind behind the plan is the mysterious Lipsius, the head of a secret society about which very little information is provided. The self-contained embedded stories are loosely connected together so as to the frame story by tenuous links and subtle echoes. The reader's attention is thus constantly solicited as they tread Machen's maze, which, in the end, takes them back to the beginning. The circular text returns to the deserted house Dyson and Phillipps discover in the prologue, the epilogue taking place only a short while later. The reader thus emerges from the disorientating maze, but a full revelation is denied and their questions are left unanswered. Some pieces can be fitted together, some threads can be woven so that unclear shapes appear, but the pattern in the carpet, to borrow an image from Henry James, remains shadowy and indistinct.²⁹

Other texts are similar to concentric labyrinths as they take the reader through a series of layered embeddings that suggest penetration into a hidden centre or secret room. They sweep the reader into a sort of gyrating dance. In Chapter 2 of *The Great God Pan*, Clarke takes up a manuscript in which he wrote down the story he was told by a man named Phillips, who was not a participant but was reporting a story he had heard. His narrative contains yet another embedded story, that of a girl named Rachel who tells her mother about what happened to her in the woods. But the reader does not get to hear Rachel's story since Clarke suddenly closes the book. The last words that can be read are 'she said—',³⁰ and the door leading to the hidden centre bangs shut. The device of denying revelation by interrupting the act of reading is also used in Chapter 7, though in a slightly different manner. Austen picks up the manuscript written by one of the victims of the *femme fatale*, the daughter of Pan, which describes the dark rituals she performs. He reads a short passage, that is not revealed to the reader, and, struck with horror, snaps the book shut. The reader does not learn anything about the short fragment and is thus

relegated to a position of inferior knowledge. Robert Mighall very appropriately describes *The Great God Pan* as a whole as ‘a “Chinese puzzle” without a centre’.³¹ The comparison to Chinese boxes is used within the text by one of the amateur sleuths: ‘A case like this is like a nest of Chinese boxes’, Herbert states.³² Yet, the secret nested in the centre is never reached, as is evidenced by ellipsis that “closes” the novella. Machen’s texts draw attention to the way they withhold information, constantly reminding the reader that there is much he does not know.

Chapter 13 of Machen’s later novel *The Terror* (1916), which includes a manuscript written by a man who is locked up in a house surrounded by murderous animals, may also be likened to a concentric labyrinth without a centre.³³ As he is dying of thirst and falling prey to hallucinations, he hears a voice delivering a long speech reminiscent of a sermon. He writes the speech down, which adds an embedded layer. Yet the promise of a centre is not fulfilled, as the manuscript ends with scrawled lines across the page and, finally, ‘scrapes and scratches of ink’.³⁴ Thus, the end of the text consists of undecipherable signs and the centre of the concentric labyrinth remains out of reach. One might say that a veil lifts to reveal another veil, which in turn reveals another veil, but the supreme revelation is denied. A parallel may be drawn between Chapter 13 of *The Terror* and the ending of *The Hill of Dreams*. In this *Künstlerroman*, Lucian Taylor, the decadent artist, is set on writing the ‘golden book’, one that would cause delicious sensations in the reader by using the art of suggestion. When he dies from a drug overdose, his landlady and her husband find his manuscript on his desk. The page they pick up is an unreadable text, the sheet being covered with ‘illegible hopeless scribbings; only here and there it was possible to recognize a word’, and the end of the novel foregrounds the theme of indecipherability.³⁵ After going through a phase of existential solipsism, the fictional writer has reached the most extreme stylistic solecism. As Linda Dowling writes, he has created a language ‘so perfected in its private symbolism that it will no longer yield its meaning even to the select few, but only to the unique reader, Lucian himself’.³⁶ More generally, the recurrent theme of indecipherability in Machen’s

work can be interpreted in relation to a wider metafictional discourse on the allusiveness of symbolism.

The White People (written 1897; published 1904) is probably the most stunning and fascinating textual maze devised by Machen. Just as the protagonist is initiated into dancing in the labyrinth by her nurse, the reader journeys through a disorientating manuscript, a hermetic text where they lose their way more than once. *The Green Book* is an embedded text in which an adolescent girl relates her wandering in the woods and her initiation into black magic by her nurse.³⁷ In the epilogue, the reader learns that the girl eventually committed suicide, for some unknown reason. S. T. Joshi's description of the text as 'a masterpiece of indirection, a Lovecraft plot told by James Joyce'³⁸ gives a rather clear idea of the novella, and the ceremonies of black magic performed by the otherworldly creatures the girl meets in the dark woods indeed give the story a Lovecraftian flavour. She also relates these strange encounters in a sinuous narrative that heralds the modernist stream of consciousness and the text mimics the labyrinthine wanderings of the character walking in the woods. In *The Green Book*, chronology is repeatedly disrupted, embedded stories lead away from the main narrative path, and words in an unknown language are obstacles in the reader's way. Many such words are used in the very first paragraph of the girl's manuscript, so that the reader loses their bearings from the beginning, and attention is drawn to the deliberate withholding of information and meaning: 'And I must not say who the Nymphs are, or the Dôls, or Jeelo, or what voolas means.'³⁹ The mysterious words call for deciphering, but, though the reader can dimly guess what the referents may be, they remain semantically unclear signs. One of the ways of encouraging deciphering attempts is the use of English derivational morphology: 'It all looked black, and everything had a vooor over it. It was all still and silent, and the sky was heavy and sad and grey, like a wicked vooorish dome in Deep Dendo.'⁴⁰ The adjective 'vooorish' is obviously derived from the noun 'vooor', which apparently refers to a kind of fog. Both should probably be linked to the 'Kingdom of Vooor' that is later alluded to, but the path ends there, and the reader reaches a dead-end in the maze.

More generally, the text forces the reader to actively participate in the uncovering of meaning. The frame story thematises the act of reading and interpreting by introducing a reader figure in the text. His name, Cotgrave, points to his status as a neophyte: his life, it suggests, is circumscribed within the limits of birth and death (Cot/grave). In contrast, the name of the wise man, Ambrose, indirectly refers to immortality. After going through the manuscript, Cotgrave admits that, though he has understood the gist of it, many elements remain beyond his grasp. Ambrose states that knowledge of alchemical symbolism may help decipher, or interpret, the manuscript and identify the hidden references to what he calls ‘processes’,⁴¹ which he does not name, of course. As in *The London Adventure*, ‘processes’ is placed between inverted commas, thus underlying the obscurity of what the word refers to. The references to unidentified ‘processes’ are described as hidden in the obscure text; they have to be found before they can be elucidated. Ambrose the initiate does not explain, he does not give a key to unlock the text, and it is left for the reader to try and interpret the narrative. The text as labyrinth remains an open symbol.

While Ambrose states that the reader must patiently forge the key for himself, the Hermit in *Hieroglyphics* points out that he has given the key to his listener, but not opened the door: ‘The key is in your hands, and with it you may open what chambers you can.’⁴² Thus, the Hermit underlines that there are many doors – in other words, many potential interpretative routes – and it is left for the reader to wander in quest of the ‘right’ one, if there is such a thing. The statement appears in a long, meandering discourse about ‘high literature’, yet another maze-like text, full of twists and turns. The maze promises to lead to the secret of making fine literature, which, in the end, is very explicitly not revealed because, as the Hermit explains, art is one of the ineffable mysteries. The key he gives is that all fine literature is written in symbolic language. In other words, the only key given is that such texts require deciphering.

Secret Knowledge

The wise men in *The White People* and *Hieroglyphics* share several traits in common with their creator, among which is a thorough knowledge of alchemy. Machen's fiction abounds in references to the occult science, some of which call for elucidation. For example, in *The Great God Pan*, the scientist Dr Raymond briefly quotes Crollius, whom he presents as one of his main influences. Oswald Crollius, a disciple of the school of Paracelsus, wrote *De Signaturis internis rerum* (1609), a book in which he maintains that those who have been initiated into occult writings are able to decipher the signatures God imprinted on his creations. Such information is not given within Machen's novella, however, so the reference remains rather obscure. The theme of secret knowledge also appears in his many references to Kabbalah, Rosicrucianism, or Freemasonry. They are often mere allusions and therefore point to the existence of esoteric knowledge without giving information about its content. Machen borrows from the esoteric mode of writing in an allusive way when writing about esoteric knowledge and, in some cases, even identifying the secret society requires deciphering. In the short story 'Ritual' (1937), for example, the name Hiram Abiff is used in passing, without any reference to Freemasonry. The members of the society are then designated by 'the Widow's offspring', a circumlocution that is a form of encoding.⁴³ Allusions, be they textual or non-textual, function as hints and thus open up a signifying space. They engage the reader by promising access to further meaning. If not grasped, however, they remain unfilled gaps. Indeed, Machen's reader is often made to feel that they do not possess the superior knowledge required to fully understand the texts. Obscure references to esoteric knowledge or mythological traditions are part of the writer's strategies of secrecy and they create an impression of elitism. They do not prevent global comprehension, but still create shadowy areas that signal superior knowledge.

Machen's texts often suggest the existence of an esoteric tradition within the literary world. The authors that are most often referred to or quoted are those who, in the writer's view, manage to intimate the existence of a world unseen: François Rabelais, William Blake, Samuel

Taylor Coleridge, Thomas De Quincey, John Keats and, of course, Edgar Allan Poe. Their texts are presented as containing secret knowledge of the world, and the reader is incited to turn to other texts in order to try and unlock the one they are reading. Thus, the narrator of ‘The Children of the Pool’ (1936), after referring to the psychologist Kurt Koffka, turns to Poe in order to try and account for the terror triggered by a gloomy landscape.⁴⁴ More precisely, he refers to Poe’s ‘Landscape Garden’ (1850), which he does not name, leaving it to the reader to identify the text he is discussing. In *The Secret Glory* (1922), Keats, Rabelais, and Walter Map are all mentioned within a few lines. Map, however, is merely designated as the ‘old poet’ who wrote ‘*Mibi est propositum in Taberna Mori*’.⁴⁵ The average reader is unlikely to identify the source of the obscure quotation. Moreover, the untranslated Latin may be an obstacle in the reader’s path since it requires deciphering. Machen’s fiction thus constructs a knowledgeable implied reader sharing the writer’s secret knowledge and literary erudition. In other words, a reader who belongs to a small circle of initiates.

Allusion comes from the Latin *alludere*, which means to jest or to play with, an etymology that points to the element of playfulness contained in the device. Allusion partakes of both revelation and concealment, and Machen makes it an essential ingredient in the veiling that characterizes his fiction. The Welsh writer goes further since he plays at mingling real and invented knowledge (or imaginary erudition). For example, his novella *N* (1936) includes extracts from a book written by a man named Hampole entitled *A London Walk: Meditations on the Streets of the Metropolis*.⁴⁶ A knowing reader will be reminded of the title of Machen’s autobiographic text, *The London Adventure; or the Art of Wandering*. The fictive text is also discussed in *The Green Round*, where the reader learns more about the book and its author. Hampole is said to have corresponded with a real author, the little-known Mary Anne Atwood, which reinforces the illusion of the fictive author’s existence.⁴⁷ Similarly, in *The Terror* (1916), several characters discuss the views expressed by a philosopher called Huvelius in his *De Facinore Humano*.⁴⁸ Both the name and the title ring true, but they are both fake. Unsurprisingly, critics have tried to identify the real

philosopher Machen may be alluding to, and have come to the conclusion that Huvelius is a mask for Schopenhauer. This is evidence of the way Machen's texts constantly encourage the reader to turn into an active detective and to pick up clues that may help solve the enigma. The writer also suggests the potential for unmasking when he gives a character the same initials as his own, for example Ambrose Meyrick in *The Secret Glory*, a young man who is described as both an artist and a mystic. Should the character be seen as a mask for the author? And would it be going too far to point out that the first letters of the words 'artist and mystic' are also the initials of both the character and his creator, A. M.? The mere idea of doing so suggests an awareness that one is playing a sort of deciphering game. This more playful dimension of Machen's fiction has often been overlooked, and it is one of the components of the author's 'secretive' writing. Machen's comments on *romans à clef* help shed further light on this strategy of secrecy. His persona in *Hieroglyphics* does not think highly of 'novels with a key', because once unlocked they lose all mystery. He places detective stories (with the exception of Poe's) in the same category, describing them as more or less ingenious 'tricks'. He admits, however, that the curiosity such texts arouse may be a first step towards ecstasy:

Indeed I imagine that this trick of stimulating the curiosity may be made subservient to purely aesthetic ends, it may become a handmaid to lead one towards the desire of the unknown which I think was one of the synonyms I gave you for the master word – Ecstasy.⁴⁹

Curiosity may be a step towards the most highly prized goal, which is not access to higher realities, but a sense of awe and mystery.

Syntax and Shadows

Although Machen was well versed in occult and esoteric matters, his own Platonic worldview may be summed up in one simple sentence: we see only shadows. The visible world is a veil hiding higher realities. 'We live in an enigma', Machen wrote, and his work calls to mind the

words of the Belgian symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck: ‘The Great Secret, the only secret, is that everything is secret.’⁵⁰

Machen’s esoteric erudition provided him with strategies of secrecy that he deploys in his texts to insist that there is a most secret secret. In her discussion of *The Great God Pan*, Susan Navarette makes a revealing parenthetical comment: ‘By knowing (or pretending to know) more than it reveals, the text forces us [...] to reveal more about our inner selves than we wish to know’.⁵¹ ‘Or pretending to know’ reveals the working of Machen’s text: it acts as if it knows and lures the reader with the prospect of a higher knowledge that may not exist. The labyrinth may well be without a centre; the veil may hide another veil. Secrecy is valued over whatever may be concealed so as to cause wonder and a sense of the unknown. However, secrecy also serves as a ‘mark of distinction and prestige’, as Hugh B. Urban convincingly argues in an article about secrecy and symbolic power in Freemasonry.⁵² Urban underlines that secrecy is an adornment that signals superiority. It turns knowledge into something rare and precious, and the ‘happy few’ who possess it gain prestige. Thus, secrecy may also be seen as a strategy used by Machen to confer distinction and prestige on his texts, with the hope, perhaps, of having them placed on the shelf of ‘high literature’.

¹ Arthur Machen, ‘The Cult of the Secret’ (1926), in *The Secret of the Sangraal & Other Writings*, ed. by R. B. Russell (Leyburn: Tartarus Press, 2007), pp. 260-62.

² Arthur Machen, *Things Near and Far* (New York: Knopf, 1923), p. 215.

³ Arthur Machen, ‘The Literature of Occultism’ (1899), in *The Terror and Other Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (Oakland: Chaosium, 2005), pp. 306-12 (p. 307).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Arthur Machen, *Hieroglyphics: A Note upon Ecstasy in Literature* (New York: Knopf, 1923).

⁷ Ibid., p.18.

⁸ This quotation is from *A Fragment of Life* (1904), in which the protagonist goes through an ecstatic experience and becomes aware that the visible world is but a veil: ‘He saw that, in a sense, the whole world is but a great ceremony or sacrament, which teaches under visible forms a hidden and transcendent doctrine. It was thus that he found in the ritual of the church a perfect image of the world.’ *A Fragment of Life*, in *The White People and Other Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (Oakland: Chaosium, 2003), pp. 98-173 (p. 166).

⁹ Eva Valentová, ‘Dreaming in Fire and Working in Clay: The Problem of Translating Ideas into Words in Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan*’, *Brno Studies in English*, 43.1 (2017), 213-32 (p. 213).

¹⁰ Andrew McCann, *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 150.

¹¹ The key points developed in this article are further elaborated upon in Sophie Mantrant, *Arthur Machen et l’art du hiéroglyphe* (Cadillon: Le Visage Vert, 2016).

- ¹² Jean Baudrillard, *De la séduction* (Paris: Galilée, 1979), p. 50.
- ¹³ Arthur Machen, 'Riddles and Symbols', in *The Secret of the Sangraal & Other Writings*, pp. 321-23.
- ¹⁴ Arthur Machen, 'The Red Hand' (1895), in *The White People and Other Stories*, pp. 1-28 (p. 9).
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- ¹⁶ Arthur Machen, 'Beneath the Barley' (1931), in *Eleusinia and 'Beneath the Barley'* (West Warwick: Necronomicon Press, 1988), pp. 10-11 (p. 10).
- ¹⁷ Machen, *Hieroglyphics*, p. 71.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 141.
- ¹⁹ Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan* (1894), in *The Three Impostors and Other Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi, (Oakland: Chaosium, 2007), pp. 1-50.
- ²⁰ In Gérard Genette's terminology. See *Palimpsestes: la littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).
- ²¹ Machen, *The Great God Pan*, p. 43.
- ²² Nicholas Freeman, *Conceiving the City: London, Literature, and Art, 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ²³ Sage Leslie-McCarthy discusses their specialist knowledge in 'The Detective as "Expert" in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*', *Australian Victorian Studies Journal*, 13.1 (2008), 35-45.
- ²⁴ Arthur Machen, 'The Inmost Light' (1894), in *The Three Impostors and Other Stories*, p. 52.
- ²⁵ Arthur Machen, *The London Adventure; Or, The Art of Wandering* (1924) (London: Village Press, 1974), p. 89.
- ²⁶ Like W. B. Yeats, among others, Machen presents both drunkenness and dancing as triggers of mystical ecstasy, and he frequently sings the praises of the Bacchic cult. For example, in *Far Off Things*, he writes that 'the Ancient Greeks truly taught us that man was raised from the brutish to the spiritual state by Bacchus, the giver of the vine. By wine is man made divine.' Arthur Machen, *Far Off Things* (New York: Knopf, 1922), p. 138.
- ²⁷ My translation of the French 'épiphanie d'un mystère'. Gilbert Durand, *L'Imagination symbolique* (Paris: PUF, 1964), p. 8.
- ²⁸ Kostas Boyiopoulos, "'The Serried Maze': Terrain, Consciousness and Textuality in Machen's *The Hill of Dreams*", *Victoriographies*, 3.1 (2013), 46-63 (p. 58).
- ²⁹ The image, borrowed from Henry James's 'The Figure in the Carpet' (1896), is repeatedly used by Machen, both in his fiction and in his essays. See, for example, Machen's letter to Montgomery Evans (9 May 1934), in *Arthur Machen & Montgomery Evans: Letters of a Literary Friendship, 1923-1947*, ed. by Sue Strong Hassler and Donald M. Hassler (London and Kent, OH: Kent University Press, 1994), pp. 75-76.
- ³⁰ Machen, *The Great God Pan*, p. 13.
- ³¹ Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 216.
- ³² Machen, *The Great God Pan*, p. 17.
- ³³ Arthur Machen, *The Terror* (1916), in *The Terror and Other Stories*, ed. by S. T. Joshi (Oakland: Chaosium, 2005), pp. 1-106.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- ³⁵ Arthur Machen, *The Hill of Dreams* (1907), in *The Great God Pan and The Hill of Dreams* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2008), p. 235.
- ³⁶ Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 160.
- ³⁷ Kostas Boyiopoulos discusses the girl's labyrinthine dance in "'The Serried Maze': Terrain, Consciousness and Textuality in Machen's *The Hill of Dreams*", p. 49.
- ³⁸ S. T. Joshi, *The Weird Tale* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 22.
- ³⁹ Arthur Machen, *The White People* (1899/1904), in *The White People and Other Stories*, pp. 62-98 (p. 70).
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.
- ⁴² Machen, *Hieroglyphics*, p. 96.
- ⁴³ Arthur Machen, 'Ritual' (1937) in *The Terror and Other Stories*, pp. 300-03 (p. 301).
The legend of Hiram Abiff, also known as the widow's son, is the foundation of Freemasonry's ritual of the third degree.
- ⁴⁴ Arthur Machen, 'The Children of the Pool' (1936), in *The Terror and Other Stories*, pp. 164-86 (p. 185).
- ⁴⁵ Arthur Machen, *The Secret Glory* (1922) (Los Angeles: Aegypan Press, 2006), p. 110.
- ⁴⁶ Arthur Machen, *N* (Leyburn: Tartarus Press, 2010), pp. 12-15.
- ⁴⁷ Arthur Machen, *The Green Round* (1933) (London: Ernest Benn, 1968), p. 122.
- ⁴⁸ Machen, *The Terror*, pp. 47-49.
- ⁴⁹ Machen, *Hieroglyphics*, p. 24.
- ⁵⁰ My translation of the French: 'Le Grand Secret, le seul secret, c'est que tout est secret.' Maurice Maeterlinck, *Le Grand secret* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1921), p. 19.

⁵¹ Susan Navarette, *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), p. 199.

⁵² Hugh B. Urban, 'The Adornment of Silence: Secrecy and Symbolic Power in American Freemasonry', *Journal of Religion and Society*, 3 (2001), 6.

Occultism and the *homme fatal* in Robert Smythe Hichens's *Flames: A London Phantasy*

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Decadent literature is often characterized by lives lived at the fringes of convention. While the intersections between Victorian literature and the supernatural in its various forms have been the topic of considerable discussion, the presence and function of occultism in Decadent literature remain relatively underexplored. In contrast, occultism's contribution to modernist literature and culture has received continued attention, most recently in John Bramble's *Modernism and the Occult* (2015) and in Tessel M. Baudin and Henrik Johnsson's collection, *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema* (2018).¹ The existing lacuna in Decadence Studies is particularly surprising given that Decadent literature, with its noted focus on the strange and the curious, lends itself to such critical scrutiny. This essay is the first to examine how the *homme fatal* – a key Decadent trope notoriously explored in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91) – sits at the intersections between Decadence, occultism, and homoerotic desire in Robert Smythe Hichens's *Flames: A London Phantasy* (1897). Here I argue that, though Hichens is best known for *The Green Carnation* (1894), the homosocial and homoerotic triangulations of desire in Hichens's *Flames* imply that Wilde's novel had a far more serious impact on Hichens's writing than his scandalous parody might suggest.²

Decadent Terrors

In his afterword to *Decadence and the Senses* (2017), David Weir comments on the problematic nature of Decadence, noting how the concept is 'hard to make sense of because it is attached to so many different ideas, attitudes, orientations, movements, histories, arts, [and] artists'.³ However, on the issue of Decadent taste, Weir offers a valuable definition. While observing that, traditionally, beauty is associated with delight, while ugliness disgusts, Weir asks: 'what happens

when disgust delights?’ and confirms that the ‘taste for decadence involves precisely such delight in disgust’ as well as an ‘uncommon sense that finds delight in things that people who have normal taste react to with revulsion’.⁴ He adds that ‘If disgust seems too strong a word’ we should remember that ‘the Latin *gustus* at the root of it simply means “taste”, so the uncommon sense of decadence involves a taste for the distasteful’ (original emphasis).⁵ He proceeds to suggest that this ‘taste for the distasteful’ might serve as a significant link between the ‘sublime taste for terror’ that manifests itself in eighteenth-century fiction and in the Decadent literature of the *fin de siècle*. Remarking that ‘the taste for terror’ contributed significantly to the rise of eighteenth-century Gothic fiction, Weir writes that ‘Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* might be advanced as a concrete case of decadent sublimity since that novel is nothing if not neo-Gothic’ and notes how in Huysmans’s *À rebours* Des Esseintes is similarly ‘overwhelmed’, ‘petrified and hypnotized’ by the ‘terror’ of Gustave Moreau’s Salomé.⁶ Yet, as he points out, the significant difference between the Gothic fiction of the eighteenth century and its late nineteenth-century counterpart is that the basis for that terror in Decadent literature is often not nature, but art: ‘the mysterious portrait in the case of Dorian Gray, the painting of Salomé in the case of Des Esseintes’.⁷ This aesthetic form of Decadent sublime is equally present in *Flames: A London Phantasy* (1897).

Hichens’s interest in the occult emerges not only in *Flames* – a novel that has much in common with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* – but also in his supernatural short stories, his non-fiction writings on Egypt, and in his 1911 novel *The Dweller on the Threshold*. Although at the *fin de siècle* he moved in literary circles that included George Moore, E. F. Benson, Arthur Symons, Henry James, and Marie Corelli, his work has received comparatively little attention.⁸ Aside from Nick Freeman’s recent analysis of ‘What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guildea’, the most commonly anthologized of Hichens’s tales, there is scant scholarly criticism available.⁹ The reasons for this neglect are unclear, especially when one considers that not only was he a journalist whose writing career spanned almost sixty years, but also a lyricist and a well-known

novelist whose works were adapted for stage and screen.¹⁰ *Flames*, too, was made into a film produced by Maurice Elvey and released in 1917, sadly now lost. Contemporaneous reviews written at the close of WWI, within the first six months of 1918, suggest that the film tapped into the needs of a population heavy with loss and mourning; one reviewer comments on how the war had ‘given an impetus to the cult and study of telepathy and spiritualism’, while another reflects on the fact that, at that time, spiritualism was a topic that attracted ‘a great deal of interest’.¹¹ The *Aberdeen Evening Express* of 7 June 1918 describes Hichens as ‘An ardent disciple of psychic research’ and in his autobiography, *Yesterday* (1947), he confesses that at the time of writing *Flames*, he ‘was interested in “spiritualism,” [...] attended several séances, and knew various people who claimed to have occult powers’.¹² The novel, which engages with the ‘unending struggle between good and evil’, is therefore written with some first-hand experience of occult practices.¹³

Set in London and dealing with the descent of its monied characters into the city’s urban underworlds, *Flames: A London Phantasy* offers a tale of vice and virtue. The novel revolves around an angelic and ascetic young man, Valentine Cresswell, known as ‘The Saint of Victoria Street’, and his friend and close companion, Julian Addison, who is often tempted to explore and enjoy London’s illicit pleasures but who, inspired by Cresswell’s example, initially remains ‘pure’. A third, older, man, Dr Hermann Levellier, who dabbles in psychology, is a frequent visitor to Cresswell’s home and a close friend and advisor to both young men. One night, at a dinner hosted by an aristocratic acquaintance, Julian meets a dangerous occultist aptly named ‘Marr’ who encourages him to experiment and to develop his ‘latent powers’.¹⁴ While discussing Julian’s meeting with Marr, Valentine confesses that he is somewhat tired of his own saintliness and desires to experience life’s temptations; Julian, in turn, reveals that he is only kept from such temptations by Valentine’s goodness. Prompted by Marr’s advice, they resolve to attempt a séance at which they hope that they will be able to exchange souls so that the nature of each might counter the excesses of the other, thus enabling them both to reach moral equilibrium.

While the first three sittings are unsuccessful, the fourth results in Valentine's collapse into a death-like trance. As Valentine falls into this trance, Julian hears 'a strange and piercing' cry, and sees a 'tiny', 'faint' flame – a flame that he later understands to be Valentine's soul – emerge from his friend's body and vanish.¹⁵ On that same night, as Julian later discovers, Marr is found dead in a hotel in Euston Road after spending the night with a prostitute known both as 'Cuckoo Bright' and 'The Lady of the Feathers' due to her penchant for sporting an elaborately feathered hat. While strolling through the London streets, Julian meets her by chance and is drawn to her despite her lowly status. By some strange and undisclosed mechanism, Valentine's virtuous but dispossessed soul, now displaced by the evil soul that had resided in Marr, seeks refuge and finds a home in Cuckoo's worn and sullied body.

Modern Occultism

The friends' experiment proves a disaster. Now living in Valentine's body, Marr's soul leads Julian astray and encourages him to indulge in vice and sin. As the evil Valentine and Julian both descend into debauchery, it is Cuckoo who, though a fallen woman, seemingly functions as the moral centre of the novel. This aspect of the story did not sit well with the anonymous reviewer whose assessment of the novel appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* on 18 March 1897, but the article's importance lies in its recognition of *Flames* as a new form of fiction that sits apart from the conventions of the Victorian ghost story. The reviewer comments:

It was not so long ago that no tale which respected itself and put forward pretensions to the miraculous but took the realm of ghosts in hand ... But in these latter days we are fallen upon other expedients. Ghosts are *démodés*; they are but kept in the cupboard to affright children. [...] For a man to see a ghost is to confess himself a subject for the comic papers. But the unseen powers and forces have usurped the place of precedence. Mr. Stevenson's 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' was, in its way, a very perfect example of the newer method, more recondite, more elusive, and more ineluctable. Mr. MacLaren Cobban, too, wrote an excellent tale upon the modern lines, called 'The Master of His Fate.' These are the progeny of modern occultism. And in a way Mr. Hichens's elaborate story stands upon the same base. He carries on the modern tradition, and exemplifies it extremely well.¹⁶

Flames, then, can be read in the context of what this review calls ‘modern occultism’. As Alex Owen observes in *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (2004), in the last decade of the nineteenth century, ‘the terms mysticism and mystical revival were in general use to refer to [...] the widespread emergence of a new esoteric spirituality and a proliferation of spiritual groups and identities’.¹⁷ By the 1890s, the Theosophical movement was in ‘full swing’, surviving the death of Madame Blavatsky to continue as an international association; the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which had established its first temple in London in 1888, had spread to Bradford, Edinburgh, and Paris; and such endeavours were accompanied by a revival of interest in the esoteric religions of ancient Greece and Egypt.¹⁸ Characteristic of this ‘spiritual movement’ was a growth of interest in Christian mysticism, and ‘most notably, a nondenominational – sometimes non-Christian – interest in “esoteric philosophy,” or occultism’.¹⁹

In contrast to the Victorians’ ubiquitous engagement with spiritualism that crossed class boundaries, *fin-de-siècle* occultism attracted a higher class of aficionado; though often aligned with women’s suffrage and socialism, it functioned as ‘a somewhat elitist counterpoint’ to the spiritualist movement that had preceded it.²⁰ Yet *fin-de-siècle* ‘occultism’, like spiritualism before it, also encompassed a wide range of beliefs and practices including ‘divination (astrology, palmistry, tarot reading, crystal gazing, and so on), sorcery, and black magic (the manipulation of natural forces, often for self-interested purposes), and various kinds of necromancy or spiritualist-related practices’, and the new occultism owed much to its popular predecessor, especially to the development of latent powers in those individuals who sought them.²¹ This aspect of occultism is one that Owen explores in her study, locating it in relation to secular advances ‘in the understanding of mind and consciousness’, developments that were beginning to examine the ‘dynamic relationship between the rational and the irrational’.²² Acknowledging a consciousness of the interactions between Decadence and occultism, Owen opens *The Place of Enchantment* with a quote from Holbrook Jackson’s 1913 study of the eighteen nineties and the spirit of the age:

It was an era of hope and action [...]. Life-tasting was the fashion, and the rising generation felt as though it were stepping out of the cages of convention and custom into a freedom full of tremendous possibilities. [...] The experimental life went on in a swirl of song and dialectics. Ideas were in the air. Things were not what they seemed, and there were visions about. The Eighteen Nineties was the decade of a thousand ‘movements.’ People said it was a ‘period of transition,’ and they were convinced that they were passing not only from one social system to another, but from one morality to another, from one culture to another, and from one religion to a dozen or more. [...] There was so much to think about, so much to discuss, so much to see. ‘A New Spirit of Pleasure is abroad amongst us,’ observed Richard Le Gallienne, ‘and one that blows from no mere coterie of hedonistic philosophers, but comes on the four winds.’²³

This spirit of the age is very much in evidence in *Flames* in which ‘Life-tasting’ is indeed the fashion, in which the nature of morality is discussed, and in which the impact of *fin-de-siècle* ideas and the influence of occultist theories are explored.

In Hichens’s novel, it is the figure of ‘Marr’ both in his original incarnation and in his later possession of Valentine’s physical body around whom occultist questions and practices arise, and it is Marr, described as ‘Satanic’, who discusses soul transference with Julian and encourages him to experiment with Valentine.²⁴ Prior to the successful fourth sitting during which the transfer of Marr’s soul to Valentine’s body is completed, Julian tellingly sees Marr at the theatre where ‘a modern allegory of the struggle between good and evil’, reminiscent of the Faust legend, is being performed.²⁵ When Julian hears of Marr’s death, he expresses regret and tells Valentine how the former had ‘gained a sort of influence’ over him, and how Marr ‘had a power, a strength about him, even a kind of fascination’.²⁶ However, his significance becomes clear when Valentine, now possessed by Marr’s malevolent soul, visits Cuckoo with the intention of cautioning against her friendship with Julian, fearing that Valentine’s lost soul resides in her and that she may challenge his control. Though the uneducated Cuckoo can only guess at the meaning of Marr’s ensuing diatribe on the notion of the will, we, as readers, recognize his adherence to Nietzschean philosophy. ‘My religion is will, my gospel is the gospel of influence, and my god is power’, he tells Cuckoo.²⁷ He proceeds to explain the nature of that power and the process by which he has possessed Valentine’s body:

Will binds the world into a net, whose strands are like iron. Will dies if it is weak, but if it is strong enough it becomes practically immortal. But, though it lives itself, it has the power

to kill others. It can murder a soul in a man or a woman, and throw it into the grave to decay and go to dust, and in the man it can create a second soul diametrically opposite to the corpse, and the world will say the man is the same; but he is not the same. He is another man. Or if the will is not strong enough actually to kill a soul [...] it can yet expel it from the body in which it resides, and drive it, like a new Ishmael, into the desert, where it must hover, useless, hopeless, degraded and naked, because it has no body to work in.²⁸

He considers his possession of Valentine's body and the expulsion of the latter's soul a special triumph; although 'saintly' and 'pure' and expressing 'a definite repugnance to sin', Valentine's 'original dissatisfaction with his own goodness' is 'the weapon' that brings about his own destruction. It is the loss of the *will* to be good that makes Valentine vulnerable for, Marr suggests, 'will is personality, soul, the ego, the man himself'.²⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, translations of important works by Nietzsche had introduced his ideas to erudite readers, and concepts relating to the 'superman', to 'the sovereignty of the self as creator and arbiter of all "truth," and emphasis on the all-powerful will spoke with great immediacy to occult endeavours'.³⁰ Although there is no direct reference to Nietzsche in Hichens's novel, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that the first English translation of *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was published by Macmillan in 1896, the very year during which Hichens was in the process of writing *Flames*.³¹ However, Schopenhauer is mentioned; in conversation with Dr Levillier, Marr, disguised as Valentine, claims that 'To deny the will is death, despite Schopenhauer' while to 'assert the will is life and victory'.³² Contesting Schopenhauer's philosophy, this reference functions, I suggest, as a tacit acknowledgement of Marr's Nietzschean ideology.³³

Spiritual Affinities

While soul transference is at the centre of Hichens's novel, other aspects of the occult play a significant part in *Flames*. At the fourth séance, Valentine and Julian engage in table-turning; the table shifts along the carpet and twists under their hands, raps, trembles, and pulsates, stirred by 'Animal Magentism'.³⁴ Mesmeric trances feature in some of the sittings, most notably during the fourth, where Marr's soul expels Valentine's from the latter's body, but also in the final sessions

where Marr asserts his will over Cuckoo. In addition, Hichens's choice of 'Valentine' as the name for his 'Saint of Victoria Street' alludes not only to the Saint Valentine we recognize – the third-century Roman saint who became associated with courtly love in the middle ages – but also, and more knowingly, to Valentinus (c.100–c.160 AD), the early Christian gnostic theologian, for whom people were classified as spiritual, psychical, and material, and according to whom only the spiritual were given the knowledge required to receive divine powers.³⁵ Most interestingly, perhaps, early conversations between Julian and Valentine prior to the possession signal allusions to a belief in Swedenborgian correspondences; a theory of twin souls, soul-mates, and spiritual affinities.³⁶

That Valentine and Julian are soul-mates is evident from the beginning of the novel. While Julian is 'Valentine's singularly complete and perfect opposite, in nature if not in deeds', they 'respond closely' to each other and are '*en rapport*'.³⁷ Initially, Dr Levillier, too, is part of that precious circle. Before the fatal evening on which Marr asserts his will over Valentine, Levillier sits with Julian while the latter plays the piano in a 'pretty' drawing-room where all was 'complete human sympathy', a 'sympathy' that springs 'from their vitality'.³⁸ Once Valentine's soul comes to lodge in Cuckoo, it is in her that Julian finds a sympathetic soul, a spiritual affinity who, despite her fallen status is willing to risk her life for him.

While Hichens takes pains to assert the purity of the male friendships and, indeed, of Julian's relationship with Cuckoo which, barring a single lapse, remains a platonic one at her request, the novel suggests a coded homoeroticism that emerges through allusions to celibate same-sex communities; through the novel's engagement with artworks; through veiled references to unspoken 'sins'; and through the contact between Julian and Valentine that is facilitated through occult means. Moreover, the novel's sets of triangular relationships and the unwitting Faustian pact that triggers Marr's possession of Valentine, recalls Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a similarity of which Hichens, a sometime friend of Wilde's and Alfred Douglas, and author of *The Green Carnation* could not have been unaware. As in Wilde's novel, homosocial

connections lie at the heart of *Flames*. All three male protagonists are bachelors; the 55 year old Dr Levillier has 'never married' and has a 'double mind' of 'a great doctor and [...] a great priest'.³⁹ Following the possession, Valentine bewails the fact that he lives 'in a sort of London cloister' with Julian for his companion and, later, Julian observes how 'For a long time he had gloried in living in a cloister with Valentine'.⁴⁰ After his first night of debauchery, Julian claims that he feels 'like a monk who had suddenly thrown off his habit, broken his vows and come forth into the world'.⁴¹ While these references appear to reinforce the celibacy and purity of these relationships, a dedication to and love of God, they suggest a world of men who worship Christ, who is God made man. In fact, Julian's adoration of Valentine borders on religious worship: 'Valentine was to Julian, a god' and he, like Christ, 'had ever been, and still remained, to him a perpetual wonder, a sort of beautiful mystery'.⁴² Even more telling, perhaps, is Valentine's own love for an image of Christ, *The Merciful Knight*, a watercolour by Edward Burne-Jones, that takes pride of place in his drawing-room. Prior to Marr's possession of Valentine, we are told, he adores its depiction of the saviour:

This was the only picture entertaining a figure of the Christ which Valentine possessed. He had no holy children, no Madonnas. But he loved this Christ, this exquisitely imagined dead, drooping figure [...]. He loved those weary, tender lips, those faded limbs, the sacred tenuity of the ascetic figure, the wonderful posture of benign familiarity that was more majestic than any reserve.⁴³

Valentine's focus on the body of Christ is echoed in the text by Julian's own focus on Valentine's body as the latter contemplates this image while playing the piano. Julian remarks on how Valentine's eyes 'perpetually sought this picture, and rested on it while his soul, through the touch of the fingers, called to the soul of music that slept in the piano'.⁴⁴ Julian, in turn, rests his gaze on Valentine, comparing 'the imagined beauty of the soul of Christ with the known beauty of the soul of his friend. And the two lovelinesses seemed to meet, and to mingle as easily as two streams with one another'.⁴⁵

As Dominic Janes has discussed, *The Merciful Knight* (1863-64) is one of Burne-Jones's 'most important early works'.⁴⁶ The painting depicts a Florentine knight, St John Gualberto, who,

according to legend, was ‘miraculously embraced by a wooden figure of Christ while praying at a wayside shrine’ in acknowledgement of Gualberto’s forgiveness of a kinsman’s murderer.⁴⁷

Despite its worthy subject matter, the painting was not well received by critics who complained about the relational composition of the bodies. As Janes explains:

The depiction of an intimate bodily encounter of a man with Jesus was clearly one that made many viewers uneasy. It is important to emphasize, however, that the artist had, if anything, radically toned down the level of intimacy on display. A series of sketches for the work now at the Tate Gallery, London, show him struggling with the question of how to render physical contact between Jesus and the suppliant. One of these shows the knight and Christ in a mouth-to-mouth kiss that acts to link their bodies into a single sinuous band.⁴⁸

Given this context, Julian’s conflation of Valentine’s soul with Christ’s and the mingling of their ‘two lovelinesses’ implies the substitution of physical desire with spiritual love.⁴⁹

Occult Sins and Substitutions

Substitutions, overt and covert, are a feature of Hichens’s novel, the most significant of which is implicit in the relocation of Valentine’s soul in Cuckoo’s body. Although it does not fully displace hers, it possesses it and bends it to its will. During the night of Bacchanalian revelry that follows their attendance at a performance of the ballet, *Faust*, at the Empire, Leicester Square, Valentine, now possessed by Marr, falls from his pedestal and becomes Julian’s ‘comrade instead of a god’.⁵⁰ However, the night also ends in the only sexual encounter that occurs between Julian and Cuckoo, the fallen woman whose soul is now fused with Valentine’s. In the chapter that follows this event, Cuckoo is aghast and, though she loves Julian, begs that theirs should be a platonic relationship, a request to which Julian willingly accedes, claiming, ‘I do not think of you in that way. I never shall’, and adding, ‘You and I are to like each other thoroughly, never anything more, never anything less. Like two men’.⁵¹ Julian’s heterosexual relationship with Cuckoo is thus replaced by a homosocial one that is nevertheless replete with homoerotic tensions for, in having bedded Cuckoo, Julian has also bedded Valentine regardless of Hichens’s efforts to restore the chastity of this friendship. In addition, in the latter chapters of the novel,

Cuckoo is repeatedly referred to ironically as ‘the blessed damozel’.⁵² Rossetti’s poem ‘The Blessed Damozel’ (1850) and, by implication, his painting of the same name, recall an idealized love between a lover and a dead beloved and function here as counterparts of the spiritual love depicted in *The Merciful Knight*. In conversation with the evil Valentine, Julian alludes to the poem while meditating on the image of the flame as soul, exclaiming, ‘By God, Vall! [...] do you know what I read in a book I took up from your shelves the other day – something about souls being like flames? It was in Rossetti: Flames!’⁵³ Turning to Cuckoo, he stares into her eyes where Valentine’s soul manifests itself precisely in such flames. Arguably, Cuckoo’s newly-recognized blessedness is due to her secular martyrdom: having renounced her profession and unable to support herself in any other way, she has driven her body to the point of starvation. Furthermore, she is co-opted by Dr Levillier to effect Julian’s salvation: ‘The fallen creature’ becomes the ‘protector’, and ‘the unredeemed’ the ‘redeemer’, thus aligning Cuckoo, ‘that Magdalen of the streets’ simultaneously with Mary Magdalene, the recipient of Christ’s forgiveness, with Christ himself, and with the Christ-like Valentine, the object of Julian’s love.⁵⁴

However, the novel’s concerns with decadent sins and their redemption are complicated by the inexplicit nature of some of the sins that are to be forgiven. Freeman suggests that such ‘sins’ might include: ‘prostitution, alcoholism, chain-smoking, drug use, and homosexuality’.⁵⁵ Certainly we see that Julian is indulging in sex with prostitutes and that he drinks absinthe every night.⁵⁶ Additionally the doctor remarks during the last, vital, sitting that on this occasion, ‘No drowsy poppy-bed was Julian’s’, ‘No opiates gave him peace’ implying that, by this point, he has also become an opium addict.⁵⁷ Yet other sinful pleasures remain unarticulated. We learn that prior to his fall, Julian has battled with unspoken ‘temptations’,⁵⁸ and when Dr Levillier meets Julian following a period of indulgence in such ‘temptations’, the narrator comments on the physical changes that have been wrought on him. His cheeks are ‘no longer firm, but heavy and flaccid’, his mouth ‘deformed by the down-drawn looseness of the sensualist, and the complexion beacons with the unnatural scarlet that was a story to be read by every street boy’.⁵⁹

Moreover, under the influence of the evil Valentine, Julian has been taught to love ‘sin, vice, degradation of every kind’.⁶⁰ While the exact nature of Julian’s vices is unclear, they are written on his body, and Hichens’s references to ‘street boys’ and ‘degradation of every kind’ point to secret vices whose names dare not be spoken.⁶¹ Julian’s hunting ground is Piccadilly Circus, an area of London that had ‘a subcultural and more general notoriety for renters and homosexual cruising’, and it was here that ‘a cross-dressing “Piccadilly vulture”’, who featured in the *Illustrated Police News* in 1889, had ‘handed out cards referring men to the Cleveland Street brothel’, the site of a major homosexual scandal that year.⁶²

Interestingly, Julian’s physical degeneration is prefigured in a discussion between Basil Hallward and Dorian in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which shares with *Flames* a focus on homosocial/homoerotic relationships; both novels are concerned with the consequences of sin and hidden vices, both mediate homosexual attraction through heterosexual substitutions,⁶³ and both explore the influence of a corrupt older man on younger, more beautiful boys. In Wilde’s text, Hallward confronts Dorian with the fact that ‘dreadful things are being said’ about him, that people speak of him as ‘something vile and degraded’, but claims that, despite this, he finds it difficult to accept the rumours when he sees Dorian, who has maintained his youthful beauty. He explains that:

Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man’s face. It cannot be concealed. People talk sometimes of secret vices. There are no such things. If a wretched man has a vice, it shows itself in the lines of his mouth, the droop of his eyelids, the moulding of his hands even [...]. But you, Dorian, with your pure, bright, innocent face, and your marvellous untroubled youth – I can’t believe anything against you.⁶⁴

In *Flames*, it is not Julian but the evil Valentine who maintains a beautiful exterior, and Julian functions as the double on whom the ravages of his sins are etched. Valentine is a saintly, Christian version of the pagan Dorian. While Dorian is likened to the beautiful boys of Classical history and myth – Adonis, Narcissus, Antinous – and looks as if he were ‘made out of ivory and rose-leaves’, Valentine is a ‘saint’, and ‘like some ivory statue’.⁶⁵ ‘Tall, fair, [and] curiously innocent looking’, Valentine’s visage resembles Dorian’s ‘pure, bright, innocent face’, though his

is not the face of a Greek god but of 'a blonde ascetic'. His blue eyes are passionless, his mouth 'made for prayer, not for kisses', yet he inspires desire and admiration and women long to kiss him.⁶⁶ Though possessed by Marr, Valentine ostensibly retains his beauty. Subtle changes are visible only to Dr Levillier who notices that Valentine's 'frigid and glacial purity had floated away' from his face 'like some lovely cloud', and that now there was 'something hard and staring about it'. While his features 'were still beautiful', their 'ivory lustre was gone'.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, Valentine's newly demonic nature reveals itself in other ways: his dog disowns him and growls in fear whenever he approaches; he can no longer sing and play beautiful music, producing instead dissonant and disturbing sounds; and he destroys his formerly beloved painting, *The Merciful Knight*. In an act that resembles Dorian's destruction of his portrait in the closing scene of Wilde's novel, the evil Valentine slashes it in such a frenzy that the canvas hangs from 'the gold frame in shreds, as if rats had been gnawing it'.⁶⁸ Other changes manifest themselves in ways that are distinctly Decadent. When Valentine and Julian return from a trip to Paris, Dr Levillier visits Valentine's home and discovers that the drawing-room's décor has been significantly altered. A curious black cabinet covered with 'grotesque gold figures' has replaced the piano, 'a gigantic rose-coloured jar filled with orchids', those 'Messalinas of the hothouse' sits above it, and, in contrast to the pale, ascetic elegance that formerly characterized it, the room is now littered with strange, curious ornaments, and predominated by an unsettling shade of red.⁶⁹

This colour has a debilitating synaesthetic effect on Dr Levillier's rational mind:

Glancing from this cabinet, and those that stood upon it, the doctor was aware of a deep and dusty note of red in the room, sounding from the carpet and walls, tingling drowsily in the window curtains and in the cushions that lay upon the couches. [...]. It was a dim and deep colour, such as a dust-filled ruby might emit if illuminated by a soft light. [...] Despite his own complete health of mind, and the frantic disquisitions of the morbid Nordau, the little doctor felt as if he heard the colour, as if it spoke from beneath his feet, as if it sang under his fingers when he laid them on the heavy brocade of the couch, as if the room palpitated with a heavy music which murmured drowsily in his ears a monotonous song of dull and weary change. No silence had ever before spoken to him so powerfully.⁷⁰

The colour scheme is accompanied by notable changes in Valentine's taste in art: where *The Merciful Knight* had once hung, 'a Cocotte by Leibl smoked a pipe into the room', and where,

formerly, classical figures and atmospheric landscapes had set the tone, ‘Jockeys and street-women painted by Jan Van Beers and Degas, Chaplin and Gustave Courbet’ now ‘leered down’ on him.⁷¹

Decadent Dialogues

Valentine’s new interior bears more than a passing resemblance to Baudelaire’s Parisian rooms, a décor that, for Gary Lachman, resonates with his ‘satanic’ or ‘decadent philosophy of life’:

[H]e furnished his rooms lavishly and frequently changed the décor [...]. He papered his rooms in red and black and hung curtains of heavy damask. [...] Delacroix adorned the walls, thick carpets muffled the urban cacophony, and voluptuous perfumes filled the air. This atmosphere of sensuous and aesthetic refinement would be codified years later in Huysmans’ influential novel *A Rebours*.⁷²

Whether Hichens was drawing on Huysmans or Baudelaire we cannot be certain, but Dr Levillier’s synaesthetic responses certainly suggest Baudelaire’s poem ‘Correspondences’, in which ‘Perfumes, sounds, and colours correspond’,⁷³ and it is in this room, this domestic, Decadent version of Hell, that Levillier believes, despite his rationality, that he sees the flames of lost souls that burn brightly for a moment and then die ‘into the red of the room’.⁷⁴ However, one might argue that Hichens’s greatest influence is Wilde. Though *Flames* is a powerful novel that stands on its own merits, it nevertheless echoes aspects of Wilde’s novel: its unleashing of hedonistic impulses through occult means recalls *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as does its appropriation of Walter Pater’s conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). Pater’s exhortation, ‘To burn always’ with a ‘hard, gem-like flame’, that we ‘may grasp at any exquisite passion’ or ‘knowledge that will set our spirits free or stir our senses’, is, in Hichens’s novel, as in Wilde’s, repurposed and framed by occultism.⁷⁵ Moreover, Hichens plays with the implicit homoeroticism in that ‘stirring of the senses’, that sensory pleasure Pater suggests one might find in ‘the face of one’s friend’.⁷⁶ The delight that Julian initially takes in Valentine’s face is ‘pure’ but is corrupted once Marr is in possession of Valentine’s body, something Julian recognizes towards the end of the novel when the evil Valentine asks, ‘You say I am a stranger?’ to which Julian

replies, ‘Yes, with the face of my friend’.⁷⁷ Pater’s suggestion that what we must forever be ‘curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions’, that we must fit ‘as many pulsations as possible’ into our given time, is reflected in Julian as he contemplates the possibility of accessing London’s pleasures in the evil Valentine’s company.⁷⁸ As they survey London’s street life from a window in the Victoria Street apartment, Valentine hooks his arm through Julian’s. As he does so, he renders Julian’s arm ‘a line of living fire, compelling that which touched it to a speechless fever of excitement’, and the latter’s ‘pulses’ throb and hammer as two inebriated men pass below ‘embracing each other by the shoulders’ in ‘protestations of eternal friendship’.⁷⁹ The unmistakable thrill Julian experiences at Valentine’s touch, and his agitation at the sight of love expressed between men cannot help but invite a homoerotic reading.

As Elizabeth Lorang has observed, Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is itself informed by ‘modern occultism’. In her discussion of the serialized version of the novel in *Lippincott’s Monthly Magazine* (1890-91), she notes that it appeared alongside Edward Heron-Allen’s article ‘The Cheiromancy of To-Day’ and asserts that the two pieces ‘form a dialogue on the occult and the desire to know one’s soul via outer appearances’, that it is a conversation that ‘draws on and engages the nineteenth century’s fascination with occultism and the pseudosciences’.⁸⁰ She argues that ‘the very metaphor of Dorian Gray, that the portrait reflects Dorian’s real character and the state of his soul, is an extended form of cheiromancy (palmistry), or other of the arts of divination by outward appearance’.⁸¹ This suggests that Wilde, like Hichens, responds in his novel to contemporary interests in the occult; we know that Wilde asked Heron Allen to cast his son Cyril’s horoscope a few days after the child’s birth, and that, in March 1895, Wilde and Bosie consulted Mrs Robinson, the ‘Sibyl of Mortimer Street’, indicating his belief in such practices.⁸² But the occult in both texts also provides a covert platform for the representation of dark urges and unarticulated desires. In *Flames*, it permits physical touch: during one of the séances, Julian believes that his hand is being held by Valentine’s, his ‘little finger [...] tightly linked’ in his, only to discover that it is a phantom hand that belongs to an unspecified owner.⁸³ The novel allows

such contact between men, while simultaneously disavowing it. It is a strategy that Hichens also employs in ‘What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guildea?’ where the eponymous professor is pursued by a phantom lover, and who, like the men in *Flames*, is an academic of the period who lives primarily among men and counts a priest as his closest friend.

As Freeman acknowledges, Hichens’s sexuality remains mysterious, although recent critics have suggested that he shared Wilde’s ‘homosexual proclivities’.⁸⁴ We do know that he never married. In addition, we know from his autobiography that he knew Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde well enough to lunch with them at London’s Café Royal though he later attempts to distance himself from the Wilde scandal by adding: ‘I never came across Oscar Wilde after the tragedy which overtook him. We were never in the same place or neighbourhood to my knowledge. I only saw him in his days of success and social popularity’.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, as John Clute argues, Hichens seems forever ‘haunted by a horror of exposure’.⁸⁶ While Hichens may insist on no more than a passing acquaintance with Wilde, the affinities between *Flames* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are difficult to ignore. Describing his first meeting with Dorian, Basil Hallward recalls the terror he experienced under Dorian’s gaze. Explaining the unsettling nature of Dorian’s power, he says: ‘I knew that I had come face to face with some one whose mere personality was so fascinating that, if I allowed it do to so, it would absorb my whole nature, my whole soul, my very art itself’.⁸⁷ That in *Flames*, the dangerous *homme fatal* is an equally beautiful, demonic male figure who fascinates, who exudes ‘an electric warmth’, and who makes the blood in Julian’s veins course with excitement and desire might lead us to draw our own conclusions about the nature of the revelation which, following the Wilde trials of 1895, had the potential to elicit in Hichens its own very real terror of social exclusion.

¹ John Bramble, *Modernism and the Occult* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Tessel M. Bauduin and Henrik Johnsson (eds), *The Occult in Modernist Art, Literature, and Cinema* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Studies in New Religions and Alternative Spiritualities, 2018).

² *The Green Carnation* was published anonymously in 1894. A parodic take on Wilde’s circle, it featured recognizable characters based on Wilde (Esmé Amaranth) and Lord Alfred Douglas (Lord Reginald Hastings).

- ³ David Weir, 'Afterword: Decadent Taste', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 219-28 (p. 219).
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.* Gustave Moreau produced numerous drawings, paintings, and watercolour versions of Salome, the most famous of which are *The Apparition* (1874-76) and *Salome dancing before Herod* (1876).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- ⁸ See Robert Smythe Hichens, *Yesterday: The Autobiography of Robert Hichens* (London: Cassell & Company, 1947).
- ⁹ Nick Freeman, 'What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guildea? Robert Hichens, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Ghosts of Hyde Park', *The Modern Language Review*, 111.2 (2016), 333-51.
- ¹⁰ Hichens produced several collections of short stories and thirty-eight novels, including a major bestseller, *The Garden of Allab* (1904), that became a popular stage play, and was filmed three times: in 1916, 1927, and 1936. The 1936 film featured such famous actors as Marlene Dietrich and Charles Boyer and was produced by David Selznick who went on to work on such film classics as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Rebecca* (1940). A much later novel, *The Paradine Case* (1933), was filmed in 1947 and directed by Alfred Hitchcock.
- ¹¹ Anon. 'Pictures and Players in the City', *Aberdeen Evening Express*, 7 June 1918, p. 2; Anon. *Cambridge Daily News*, 19 March 1918, p. 4. Special thanks to Matthew Sweet for drawing my attention to these reviews and for his help in certifying the loss of the film version of *Flames*.
- ¹² Hichens, *Yesterday*, p. 77.
- ¹³ Anon. 'Pictures and Players in the city', p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Robert Smythe Hichens, *Flames: A London Phantasy* (London: William Heinemann, 1897), p. 9. The film version may have represented Marr as one of the undead: the reviewer writing in the *Cambridge Daily News* on 19 March 1918 describes him as 'a vampire' with 'considerable occult power'.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ¹⁶ Anon. 'Reviews', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 March 1897, p. 4. Other examples of this shift from the ghosts of spiritualism to occult mysticism in popular culture would include Corelli's novels *The Soul of Lilith* (1892) and *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), both of which overtly deal with occult topics. Notably, *The Sorrows of Satan* shares a Faustian narrative with Hichens's *Flames*.
- ¹⁷ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 4.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5. Movements such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, for example, encouraged their initiates to engage in a complex programme of study that would lead to secret erudition. See, for example, Israel Regardie and John Michael Greer, *The Golden Dawn: The Original Account of the Teachings, Rites, and Ceremonies of the Hermetic Order* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2016).
- ²¹ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, pp. 19-20.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- ²³ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1922), pp. 30-31.
- ²⁴ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 97.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-36.
- ³⁰ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 133.
- ³¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. Alexander Tille (New York and London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1896). Tille was authorized to produce English editions of Nietzsche's work: see *Morning Post*, 17 July 1896.
- ³² Hichens, *Flames*, p. 273.
- ³³ Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818/19) 'overpowered' Friedrich Nietzsche during his student days at Leipzig, though he later contested Schopenhauer's thinking; see Christopher Janaway, 'Introduction', *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator*, ed. by Christopher Janaway (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 1-12 (p. 1). Schopenhauer's discussion of saintliness and ascetism also resonates with the figure of Valentine as 'The Saint of Victoria Street' who is presented initially as removed from worldly desire and emotion. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2 vols, trans. E. F. J. Payne, I (New York: Dover, 1969), p. 384.
- ³⁴ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 57.
- ³⁵ For a brief introduction, see 'Valentinus and the Valentinian Tradition', The Gnostic Society Library, <<http://www.gnosis.org/library/valentinus/index.html>> [accessed 27 October 2018]. For a more comprehensive

discussion of Valentinus in the gnostic context, see Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

³⁶ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, p. 99.

³⁷ Hichens, *Flames*, pp. 4-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 118; 173.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Dominic Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom from John Henry Newman to Derek Jarman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 52.

⁴⁷ Janes, *Visions of Queer Martyrdom*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

Explicit and implicit references to the Faust legend recur as a form of leitmotif in *Flames*. Early in the novel, Dr Levillier takes Valentine and Julian to see a play at the Duke's Theatre that functions as 'an allegory of good and evil which has been illustrated in so many different ways since the birth of the Faust legend' (p. 40) and, here, at the end of Book 2, Valentine takes Julian and Cuckoo to a Faust ballet at the Empire (pp. 158-61). In *Yesterday*, Hichens acknowledges the impact the Empire's ballets made on him as a young man, and how he incorporated these experiences into *Flames* (pp. 39-40).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 174-75.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 356.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵⁵ Freeman, 'What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guildea?', p. 342.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 409.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

⁶¹ For discussions of physiognomic signs of degeneracy in Gothic fiction, see Bridget M. Marshall, 'The Face of Evil: Phrenology, Physiognomy, and the Gothic Villain', *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, 6.2 (Fall, 2000), 161-72 and Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The changes in Julian's looks may also refer to opium addiction and/or onanism; see Diane Mason, *The Secret Vice: Masturbation in Victorian Fiction and Medical Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 124.

⁶² Matt Cook, *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.

25. Reference to such an incident (though not cross-dressing) appears in the *Illustrated Police News*, 7 December 1889.

⁶³ In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Dorian falls in love with the cross-dressed Sybil Vane, thus enabling 'boy love' through ostensibly heterosexual means, while in Hichens's *Flames*, 'boy love' is facilitated through Valentine's inhabitation of Cuckoo's body.

⁶⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Ward Lock & Co. Ltd., 1891), p. 225.

⁶⁵ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 4; Hichens, *Flames*, p. 2.

⁶⁶ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁷² Gary Lachman, *The Dedalus Book of the Occult: A Dark Muse* (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2003), pp. 129-30. These Parisian rooms were those in the Hôtel Pimodan (now the Hôtel de Lauzun) on the Île Saint-Louis, where Baudelaire lived from 1843-45.

⁷³ Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondences', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Culler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 19.

Baudelaire's poem is influenced by the teachings of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), which proposed affinities existed between the spiritual and physical realms (see Culler's explanatory notes to 'Correspondences', p. 352).

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- ⁷⁴ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 259.
- ⁷⁵ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 120.
- ⁷⁶ Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 120.
- ⁷⁷ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 401.
- ⁷⁸ Pater, *Renaissance*, p. 120.
- ⁷⁹ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 120.
- ⁸⁰ Elizabeth Lorang, 'The Picture of Dorian Gray in Context: Intertextuality and *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 43.1 (Spring 2010), 19-41 (p. 22).
- ⁸¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 23; Neil McKenna, *The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: Arrow Books), p. 477.
- McKenna notes how Wilde's consultation with Mrs Robinson resulted in a misplaced belief of success in the Wilde v. Queensbury trial. Wilde's wife, Constance, was also interested in the occult and became a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1888, the year in which it was founded. See Franny Moyle, *Constance: The Tragic and Scandalous Life of Mrs Oscar Wilde* (London: John Murray, 2011).
- ⁸³ Hichens, *Flames*, p. 28.
- ⁸⁴ Freeman, 'What Kind of Love Came to Professor Guilden?', p. 339. See also Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Denisoff maintains that 'Hichens was sexually attracted to men' (p. 115).
- ⁸⁵ Hichens, *Yesterday*, p. 69.
- ⁸⁶ John Clute, 'Hichens, Robert (Smythe) 1864-1950', in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*, ed. by John Clute and John Grant (London: Orbit, 1997), p. 466.
- ⁸⁷ Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, p. 9.

Literary Decadence and the French Occult Revival
A Survey Essay with Two New Translations of Joséphin Péladan

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The history of how the term ‘decadence’ came to be used as a description for certain kinds of literary productivity, eventually spawning a ‘Decadent Movement’ in the 1880s, which expanded to embrace the visual arts as well as poetry and prose fiction, is complicated and curious.

The notion of cultural decadence had been popularized by the eighteenth-century *philosophe* Charles-Louis le Secondat, Baron de La Brède et de Montesquieu, in *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur decadence* [*Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and their Decline*] (1734). Montesquieu argued that the disintegration of the Roman Empire had not been a series of unfortunate accidents, but the inevitable unfolding of a pattern governed by a quasi-scientific law, applicable to all empires, and all civilizations, according to which they follow a life-cycle that guides them inevitably from infancy to virility, and from virility to decrepitude. Implicit within that argument was the notion that France was repeating that inevitable life-cycle, its decadence symbolized by the courts of Louis XIV and Louis XV, and its climactic catastrophe looming.

The anticipated catastrophe was obligingly provided by the 1789 Revolution, but by the time it actually came about, an alternative overview of history had been provided in the philosophy of progress, popularized by Jacques Turgot and the Marquis de Condorcet, which maintained that social progress toward liberty, equality and fraternity went hand-in-glove with technological progress, and that while new technologies continued to improve the scope of human agency, society would continue to improve too, in a utopian direction. Furthermore, the Revolution proved not to be the end of the Bourbon monarchy at all. Badly bruised but alive and kicking, it was restored in 1814. During the first phase of that Restoration, which lasted until 1830, the French Romantic Movement, initially focused on poetry, began to venture extensively into prose. The so-called July Revolution of 1830, which fizzled out when the supposedly absolute monarchy

of Charles X was only replaced by the constitutional monarchy of Louis-Philippe, did not produce a radical historical break either, although the consequent relaxation of political censorship did allow the radicalism of the Romantic Movement to blossom far more freely than before.

The debate contrasting the rival theories of progress and decadence was placed at the heart of the movement's concerns by articles in the *Revue de Paris* by Charles Nodier, an arch-supporter of the theory of cultural decadence, and graphically dramatized by works of fiction such as X. B. Saintine's *Histoire d'une civilisation antédiluvienne* [*The Story of an Antediluvian Civilization*] (1830) and Nodier's 'Hurlublu' and 'Léviathan le Long' (1833). Among the works opposing them was Félix Bodin's defiant, but anxiously progressive, *Le Roman de l'avenir* [*The Novel of the Future*] (1834). The argument took a new turn in 1835, when the critic Désiré Nisard, commenting on the work of Victor Hugo in a highly controversial essay, accused Romanticism itself, and Hugo in particular, of being 'Decadent literature', a retrograde step from the progress supposedly represented by the formal rigor of Classicism.

Hugo was unimpressed, and simply dismissed Nisard's charge as nonsense, but some of the younger writers associated with the Romantic Movement, most notably Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire, elected to adopt another strategy, construing the condemnation as if it were a compliment. They began revelling in the idea that their work was the artistic reflection of contemporary cultural decadence, reproducing many of the features of the ornate literature of the Roman decadence. The eventual culmination of that strategy was Gautier's introduction to the posthumous second edition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, published in 1868, in which he described Baudelaire's work in these terms:

The poet of *Les Fleurs du mal* loved what is improperly called the style of decadence, which is nothing other than art arrived at the point of extreme maturity, determined by the oblique sunlight of civilizations grown old: an ingenious, complicated, savant style, full of nuances and refinement, always pushing back the boundaries of language, borrowing from all technical vocabularies, taking colours from all palettes, notes from all keyboards, striving to render one's thought in what is the most ineffable, and form in its contours the vaguest and most fleeting, listening in order to translate them to the subtle confidences of neurosis, confessions of ageing passions in their depravity and the bizarre hallucinations of obsession turning to madness.¹

In spite of Gautier's wary insistence on the impropriety of calling the style in question 'decadent', his characterization became and remained definitive of decadent writing, and it was the key inspiration of Stéphane Mallarmé, the doyen and chief theoretician of the Symbolist Movement of the *fin de siècle*. Symbolism overlapped with the parallel Decadent Movement to such an extent that few observers could tell them apart, although some Symbolists wanted to reject the 'Decadent' label and a few writers, prepared to be reckoned Decadent, considered themselves to be Naturalists rather than Symbolists.

The argument took another new turn in 1884 when the art critic Joséphin Péladan published his novel *Le Vice suprême*, which suggested that salvation from the contemporary decadence of Western civilization was only possible by means of a renaissance of occult philosophy and magic. This, he argued, would provide the means of its renewal. The novel appeared almost simultaneously with Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884), which rapidly came to be regarded as a kind of handbook of the Decadent lifestyle, and with Paul Verlaine's essay collection *Les Poètes maudits* [*Accursed Poets*], which constructed a celebratory history of perverse poetry as a homage to the heroic voices of outsiders who not only saw contemporary cultural decadence with exceptional clarity but embodied appropriately anguished and appropriately stylized reactions to it. To many observers, 1884 came to be seen as a crucial moment in literary history. Two years later in 1886, Anatole Baju launched the periodical *Le Décadent littéraire et artistique* (in April) and Jean Moréas published the manifesto 'Le Symbolisme' (in September), cementing the two labels under which the new literary movement was to go forward.

All three writers cited as key exemplars in the previous paragraph continued their literary endeavours, but they also exemplified their variant philosophies as much in their lifestyles as in their literary work. Verlaine became a virtual caricature of the alienated literary 'Bohemian', alternating phases of alcoholism and drug addiction with periods of rehabilitation and repentance; Huysmans began to think and act like martyr, dressing as a monk and living as eremitic an

existence as he could contrive in the outskirts of Paris while maintaining at least some of his literary acquaintances; and Péladan claimed entitlement to the royal title of ‘Sâr’ by inheritance from the ancient Kings of Babylon, and decided to recreate the legendary Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, spiced with the eighteenth-century mysticism of Martinism.

The original Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross was an imaginary secret society allegedly preserving an ancient wisdom invaluable for human spiritual transcendence. The idea was promoted by three Latin documents published in 1614-17, the first two being brief manifestos of a sort and the third an allegory describing (incompletely) the ‘alchemical marriage of Christian Rosenkreutz’. Numerous scholars of the period strove to discover and join the fictitious brotherhood – which was probably the invention of the Utopian philosopher Johann Victor Andreae, author of *Christianopolis* (1619) – and they speculated extensively about the nature and contents of the secret wisdom that it had allegedly preserved, usually adding the elusive principles of alchemy, the mysteries of neo-Pythagorean philosophy, and the occult lore of the Kabbalah, to the long-lost wisdom of ancient India and Egypt. People continued to yearn to discover and join the imaginary society for the next two hundred years, and more than one lifestyle fantasist claimed to have done so. *Littérateurs* who used the notion in fiction, most famously Edward Bulwer-Lytton in *Zanoni* (1842) – which was as popular in French translation as it was in the original – were routinely supposed to be members, no matter how hard they tried to deny it.

That confusion of literary and lifestyle fantasy had a long history, and understandably so. Writing, if undertaken seriously, becomes a lifestyle, and writers who consider or discover that they are unappreciated and stigmatized outsiders, misunderstood and ‘accursed’, are more likely to cultivate eccentricity in their lifestyle and inevitably become subject to the temptations of fantasization. It is not a coincidence that Baudelaire, the most accursed of Verlaine’s perverse poets, at least in his own estimation, applied his artistry as assiduously to his lifestyle as to his poetry, becoming a determined ‘dandy’ in the truest, most Byronic, sense of the term when he decided that henceforth ‘his only colour would be black’. Nor is it a coincidence that Baudelaire’s

most assiduous disciples followed his example in their literary and lifestyle fantasies alike. Those disciples included Jules-Amédée Barbey d'Aurevilly, author of the classic short-story collection *Les Diaboliques* [*The She-Devils*] (1874); Jean Lorrain, author of the Decadent short stories translated in *Nightmares of an Ether-Drinker* (2002) and *The Soul-Drinker and Other Decadent Fantasies* (2016); and Oscar Wilde.

London was in deep denial about its own cultural decadence and therefore unremittingly hostile to its accursed poets, although not as hostile as America, where Baudelaire's idol and spiritual brother Edgar Poe was hounded to death and then had his work stolen and his name reconfigured by the appalling Rufus Griswold. It is no wonder that Paris, the least-worst place for a poet to be accursed, became the world capital of Decadence, vitriolically castigated as such by the censorious German Max Nordau, who wrote his classic demolition of decadent art, *Entartung* [*Degeneration*] (1892), while living in the city. By the same token, Paris became the capital city of the nineteenth-century Occult Revival. Commonly approached via the primrose path of literature, occultism became the most attractive, extreme, fantasy lifestyle.

The sturdiest roots of the French Occult Revival were buried deep in the Romantic Movement. In the late 1830s, following the dissolution of the so-called *Petit Cénacle* spun off from Hugo's salon, Gautier and Gérard de Nerval continued to form the hub of a circle of ambitious writers, among whom was the young Alphonse-Louis Constant who had dropped out of an intended career in the priesthood. He became a disciple of the radical Churchman Hugues-Félicité de Lammenais, who promoted an idiosyncratic variant of Catholic libertarianism before becoming involved with the Utopian socialism of Fourierism. His early writings on those causes resulted in two terms of imprisonment and deep disillusionment when yet another Revolution, in 1848, only led to yet another backlash in the form of Louis-Napoléon's *coup d'état* of 1851 and the establishment of the Second Empire.

The Second Empire devastated the Romantic Movement, whose core members were radical Republicans. Hugo was banished and refused to take advantage of a subsequent offer of amnesty,

while Alexandre Dumas, similarly exiled, did accept the amnesty, but had to work for the rest of his career under severe censorship (as Gautier, X. B. Saintine and others who had stayed in Paris also had to do). It was even worse for those whose politics had been so radical as to win them prison sentences even under Louis-Philippe. Constant turned to the less politically-contentious mystical branch of Fourierism and after a period of enforced silence he recreated himself, transfiguring his forenames as Éliphas Lévi and publishing one of the great scholarly fantasies of the nineteenth century, *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie* [*Transcendental Magic, its Doctrine and Ritual*] (1854-56), which he followed up with *L'Histoire de la magie* [*The History of Magic*] (1860) and *La Clef des grands mystères* [*The Key of the Mysteries*] (1861).

Lévi also published a revised version of two fantasy novellas he had written before the 1848 revolution as *Le Sorcier de Meudon* [*The Wizard of Meudon*] (1861), but the scholarly fantasies massively outsold the literary fantasy and determined the path of his future. Although he continued to promote his political ideas – in his imaginary history, magic is essentially a species of subversion – he was typecast from then on as a lifestyle fantasist, a Magus supposedly practising the rituals he had recorded in his second scholarly fantasy, which became a handbook for many of the lifestyle fantasists of the *fin de siècle*, especially the English Order of the Golden Dawn which was formed in imitation of Péladan's Rosicrucian Brotherhood.

Histoire de la magie, inevitably, is mostly compounded out of previous scholarly fantasies, but it is also a product of the curious sub-genre of 'Romantic history', as practised by a number of authors associated with the Romantic Movement who attempted to rejig Montesquieu's theory of history, adapting it to the intellectual climate of post-Revolutionary France. The way was led by Augustin Thierry, a one-time follower of the Utopian philosophy of Henri de Saint-Simon, a great admirer of Walter Scott, and the author of *Histoire de la conquête de l'Angleterre par les Normands* [*History of the Conquest of England by the Normans*] (1825), in which Robin Hood is cast as the leader of the English resistance. Thierry combined a stern insistence on the consultation of original documents with a colourful style of narration and an imaginative freedom that made history in

general, and French history in particular, into a kind of epic romance. His chief disciples were the close friends Edgar Quinet and Jules Michelet.

Quinet, like Hugo, refused to accept Napoléon III's amnesty after his banishment in 1851. He wrote his masterpiece, *Merlin l'enchanteur* [*The Enchanter Merlin*] (1860) while in exile: a bizarre work of fiction that fuses a transfiguration of his own life story with the history of France, seen through the hypothetical viewpoint of the immortal wizard of Arthurian romance. Michelet spent the greater part of his active life writing a heavily-Romanticized multi-volume history of France (composed between 1847 and 1867), whose various spinoff items included a deliberate scholarly fantasy, *La Sorcière* [*Satanism and Witchcraft*] (1862), published immediately after *Histoire de magie* and probably inspired by it. The narrative reinterprets the witch persecutions of the late Middle Ages as the brutal suppression by the evil Church of a subversive and calculatedly pagan-feminist socialism, which had adopted the false guise of Satanism as a gesture of defiance not dissimilar in spirit to Baudelaire's adoption of the Decadent label, although far more dangerous. Initially, *La Sorcière* was far less influential on the development of the French Occult Revival than *Histoire de la magie*, but its impact grew over time and it became the ultimate source text of twentieth-century witchcraft, reinterpreted as a subversive form of paganism revelling in its survival of long persecution. Aided by his appointment to the Chair of History at the Collège de France, Michelet's history of France, which is nowadays credited with popularizing the idea of the Renaissance as a radical and decisive break in history, retained a certain respectability in spite of his venture into blatant scholarly fantasy to which some of his more inventive contemporaries never came close.

Étienne Lamothe-Langon's *Histoire de l'Inquisition en France* [*History of the Inquisition in France*] (1829) was long taken seriously, although it subsequently turned out that many of the documents he claimed to be citing did not exist.² His trumped-up history of the inquisition became a primary source for his fellow Toulousan, Napoléon Peyrat, who followed up an earnest history of French revolutionary movements from 1685-1789 (published in 1842) with a spectacular three-volume scholarly fantasy, *Histoire des Albigeois* (1870-72), which rewrote the history of the thirteenth-century

‘Cathar crusade’ as an account of the evil suppression of the south of France by the north and represented the Cathars, whose last stand was in the citadel of Montségur, as the custodians of the Holy Grail, supposedly brought to Provence by Joseph of Arimathea – a notion that proved to have remarkable staying power, extensively popularized in the twentieth century in both fiction and scholarly fantasy.

While the contributions made by other rebel Romantic historians remained temporarily muted, Lévi’s *Histoire de la magie* and *Dogme et rituel* took more rapid effect, and they formed one of the key elements of the specific revival wrought by Péladan in the 1880s, in association with two enthusiastic collaborators: the poet Stanislas de Guaita, author of *La Muse noire* [*The Black Muse*] (1883), *Rosa mystica* [*Mystic Rose*] (1885) and *Essais de sciences maudites* [*Essays in the Forbidden Sciences*] (1890); and the occultist ‘Papus’ (Gérard Encausse), author of *L’Occultisme contemporain* [*Contemporary Occultism*] (1887) and *La Science des mages* [*The Science of the Magi*] (1892). Guaita came from an aristocratic Italian family and his independent wealth not only permitted him to indulge the lifestyle fantasies of being a writer and a practising magician but also permitted him to build up a unique library of books on occultism and demonology, which became an important resource for other writers. His friend Édouard Dujardin, who was in regular attendance at Stéphane Mallarmé’s famous *mardis*, used his research in Guaita’s library in several of the short stories collected in *Les Hantises* [*Hauntings*] (1886).

One of Guaita’s principal suppliers of occult books was Henri Chacornac, who started dealing in such material as a *bouquiniste* on the Left Bank in Paris, but was enabled to move into a shop on the Quai Saint-Michel in 1884 when he married Marie-Pauline Lermina, the daughter of the anarchist and *feuilletoniste*, Jules Lermina. Lermina financed the founding of the shop and the specialist publishing business associated with it, and it became an important centre of occult society and activity. It was probably there that Guaita and Péladan met Papus, who also had ambitions to be a writer of fiction but had to persuade Lermina to help him in order to make his

work in that vein publishable. Lermina also contributed to Papus' occult periodical *L'Initiation*, launched in 1888, and the early issues serialized his novella *À brûler* [*Burn This*].³

Although he was an authentic anarchist, and hence a thoroughgoing sceptic, Lermina was also persuaded to preside over a massive 'Spiritist Congress', held in Paris on 9-15 September 1889 and organized by Papus, Guaita, and Péladan, which attracted eighty delegates from thirty-four different occult groups and demonstrated very clearly that the Occult Revival was by then in full swing. The community that the Congress brought together was far from harmonious, however; it was afflicted by all the expectable schisms, rivalries, and hostilities, which went so far as to provoke duels on occasion.⁴

Apart from Éliphas Lévi's scholarly fantasies, the other principal source of the neo-Rosicrucianism adopted by Péladan, Guaita, and Papus was Martinism, a doctrine named for a late-eighteenth-century mystic who called himself Martinez de Pailly but more widely popularized by his disciple Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin, who had ventured into fiction himself, in the surreal *Le Crocodile, ou la guerre du bien et du mal* [*The Crocodile, or the War Between Good and Evil*] (written 1792; published 1798), a work very much in the Decadent style and inspired by the Terror. Saint-Martin's mystical writings were heavily influenced by the German mystic Jakob Böhme and the neo-Martinist input into the Occult Revival helped to make Böhme an important reference point for Symbolist writers, most significantly Remy de Gourmont, author of the mystically inclined and melancholy story collections *Histoires magiques* [*Magical Stories*] (1894) and *D'un pays lointain* [*From a Faraway Land*] (1896), and Henri de Régnier, whose early work was reprinted in *La Canne de jaspe* [*The Jasper Cane*] (1897). Gourmont was a close friend of Huysmans while the latter was writing *Là-Bas* (1891), a study of the alleged survival of Satanism in modern Paris and which includes characters seemingly modelled on several well-known figures associated with the revival, including Stanislas de Guaita and Gourmont's then-mistress, Berthe de Courrière.

As well as being an art critic, Péladan was also a music lover, and he was part of a significant group of French Wagnerians. He contributed to the *Revue wagnérienne* (1885-87) edited by Édouard

Dujardin and T  odor de Wyzewa, whose articles for the periodical attempted to construct a generalized ‘Wagnerian’ aesthetic theory closely related to the ‘Decadent aesthetics’ that P  ladan had attempted to build in his criticism. Mallarm   was another contributor, and his aesthetic theories inevitably had an influence on the collaborative exercise as well. The importance of the French Wagnerians had previously been considerable, not only in establishing the composer’s reputation in France but in securing it in Bavaria, and a French contingent had been invited by the composer to attend the first performance of *Die Walk  re*, at the K  nigliches Hof- und Nationaltheater in Munich on 26 June 1870. The party included several writers who were to play key roles in the Decadent Movement, not only as participants but as models: Catulle Mend  s, author of *Zo’har* (1886), an intense tale of incest that borrows its symbolism from the Kabbalah; Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, author of the classic collection of *Contes cruels* [*Cruel Tales*] (1883); Mend  s’ already-estranged wife Judith (Gautier’s daughter, who subsequently reverted to her maiden name), author of *La Reine de Bangalore* [*The Queen of Bangalore*] (1887); and   douard Schur  , a young writer who was yet to make his name but went on to become one of the most influential figures in the Occult Revival. His most important scholarly fantasy, *Les Grand initi  s* [*The Great Initiates*] (1889), contributed greatly to the popularization of the idea of the Hermetic Tradition of Occult lore, as hinted at but not spelled out in the Rosicrucian manifestos. Schur   enumerated and described a sequence of unorthodox philosophers extending over more than two thousand years to the present day, disparate but nevertheless allegedly engaged in a great common enterprise.

One of Schur  s principal sources in drawing up his list and narrativizing its history was Antoine Fabre d’Olivet, perhaps the most esoteric of all the Romantic historians and one of   liphas L  vi’s most significant sources. His esotericism had been guaranteed by his philosophical eccentricities, although his knowledge of languages, including Hebrew, enabled him to consult original documents inaccessible to anyone else at the time, and to become interested in Biblical hermeneutics. Fabre d’Olivet was also interested in neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonist philosophy, and their connection with ideas condemned by the early church as heretical, and Schur  s

appropriation of that element of his thinking helped to allocate neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonic ideas an essential place in the imaginary history of the Hermetic tradition as it was understood by the writers of the *fin de siècle*. Fabre d'Olivet had initially attempted to establish a career as a poet before concentrating on philosophical work, and his involvement with Romanticism extended as far as translating Byron's *Cain* into French in 1823, although he appended a 'refutation' of its supposed philosophical implications, by which Byron is said to have been unimpressed.

Before compiling *Les Grand initiés*, Schuré also met Helena Blavatsky and became briefly involved with Theosophy, although his views were considered heretical by the Society she had founded in 1875. Blavatsky had previously been involved with American spiritualism – whose French equivalent was called *spiritisme*, because *spiritualisme* already had a different meaning in the French language – but she had dissented from the notion that the entities contacted by mediums were the spirits of the dead. She was in America when she published her first scholarly fantasy, *Isis Unveiled* (1877), but that book's employment of the ideas of Hermeticism and Neoplatonism suggests that, like Schuré, she had read Fabre d'Olivet (she was not conscientious about acknowledging her sources). When she returned to Europe in 1885, she initially settled in London, where she wrote and published *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), a much fuller account of her ideas which adopted a great deal of fake Oriental mysticism into an elaborate imaginary prehistory and history of the world. Rapidly translated into French, it became one of the most influential sources for the literature associated with the Movement.

That influence is understandable because Blavatsky was not at all shy about copying from literary sources and had borrowed abundantly from Edward Bulwer-Lytton's occult novels in constructing her fantastic metaphysics. In addition to Schuré, who appropriated Blavatskian materials into such novels as *L'Ange et la sphinge* [*The Angel and the Sphinx*] (1897) and *Le Double* (1899), her notions were very influential on a series of seven occult fantasies by Augustin Thierry's nephew, who was baptized Gilbert-Augustin Thierry but switched the hyphen in order to emphasize his relationship and began signing himself Gilbert Augustin-Thierry.⁵

Jane de la Vaudère, perhaps the most conspicuously Decadent of all the occult fantasists, extensively borrowed these theosophical notions in such historical novels as *Le Mystère de Kama* [*The Mystery of Kama*] (1901) and *La Sorcière d'Ecbatane* [*The Witch of Ecbatana*] (1906). Similarly, when Maurice Magre, who was introduced to the Occult community by Gabriel de Lautrec, developed an alternative occult history of his own for his many occult novels, he used Blavatsky's and Schuré's for templates, adapting his own version of the story of Christian Rosenkreutz and his own variation of Napoléon Peyrat's account of the Albigensian heresy and the Holy Grail.

The *spiritiste* movement that Blavatsky had abandoned remained a powerful, if rather peculiar, literary influence. It was primarily associated in Paris with 'Allan Kardec' (Hippolyte Rivali) who was an influential educationist, popularizing the pedagogical methods of Johann Pestalozzi in French schools, before his involvement with spiritism took over his life and his reputation following his first 'magnetization' and contact with the spirit world at a séance in 1855. His publication of *Le Livre des esprits* [*The Book of Spirits*] (1857) and *Le Livre des médiums* [*The Book of Mediums*] (1861) followed rapidly, shortly in advance of Éliphas Lévi's groundbreaking publications. At first the influence of the two writers was separate and there did not appear to most observers to be any overlap between them for some considerable time, at least until the Spiritist Congress of 1888, when the tacit placement of the spiritists in the same category as the neo-Rosicrucians, Martinists, and other would-be contributors to the Hermetic Tradition caused some resentment and hostility.

Kardec's spiritism, like its parent, American spiritualism, was a formal religion, akin in that regard to Swedenborgianism, another esoteric philosophy that had had some literary influence in France, especially on Romantic writers.⁶ Spiritism, however, had the distinction of also becoming a focal point of scientific investigation, principally in England, where the Society for Psychic Research was founded in 1882, but also in France, where the astronomer and popularizer of science Camille Flammarion became intensely interested in the phenomena produced by mediums and hosted many séances in an experimental frame of mind, inviting writers and artists as well as

fellow scientists to participate in his research. Flammarion managed to interest the sceptical Hugo in his work while he was still in exile, and the playwright Victor Sardou produced drawings for Flammarion while hypnotized, notionally depicting spirits reincarnated on other planets.

Other members of the Romantic Movement who became involved with spiritism included Delphine de Girardin, who began hosting séances in her salon before Kardec popularized the movement. She was probably the principal influence on Gautier's spiritist novella *Spirite* (1865), although he did not publish it until some years after her death. It was, however, Flammarion who became the principal popularizer of spiritism in France after Kardec, especially in promoting the notion that spirits might be reincarnated in other worlds, first proposed in the eighteenth century in several speculative *contes philosophiques* but given additional impetus and pseudoscientific support by Flammarion in *Lumen* (1866-69; 1872; revised 1887) and the best-selling *Uranie* [*Urania*] (1889).

The intense scientific scrutiny to which spiritist mediums were subjected had an inevitable effect on the way that the topic was treated by *littérateurs*. Even when, like La Vaudère, they routinely attended séances, they were often wary in their treatment of spiritism, although popular thrillers frequently borrowed the apparatus for purely melodramatic effect. In consequence, spiritism made less impact on Decadent literature than might logically have been expected and 'medicalized' tales of hypnotism, picking up themes from the research of pioneering neurologists like Jean-Martin Charcot and Charles Richet, usually shunned Decadent style in favour of a markedly different narrative strategy. One notable but somewhat belated exception was Gaston de Pawlowski, editor of the humorous periodical *Comoedia* – to which the ubiquitous Péladan was an occasional contributor – and he eventually assembled many of the surreal philosophical fantasies he published there in *Voyage au pays de la quatrième dimension* [*Journey to the Land of the Fourth Dimension*] (1912; revised 1923), which attempted to explain mediumistic and other seemingly-supernatural phenomena with the aid of additional geometrical dimensions.

Another writer who was a significant influence on the scholarly fantasies of Schuré was Louis Jacolliot, whose first venture into scholarly fantasy was *La Bible dans l'Inde* [*The Bible in India*]

(1869), which attempts to prove that the story told in the gospels is based on Indian accounts of the life of Krishna – an idea that had a direct and extensive influence on Jane de La Vaudère's Indian fantasies. He followed it up with the more general *Le Spiritisme dans le monde: l'initiation et les sciences occultes dans l'Inde et chez tous les peuples de l'antiquité* [*Spiritualism in the World: Initiation and the Occult Sciences in India and Among the Peoples of the Ancient World*] (1875), which made an important contribution to the importation of Oriental ideas into the French Occult Revival and their ensuing literary redistribution. He subsequently contributed to popularizing the idea of a lost continent in the Pacific, which, when filtered through Blavatsky, who incorporated it into her fanciful prehistory, became a prolific source of twentieth-century fantastic fiction.

Schuré was one of several writers heavily involved with the Occult Revival who published work in the prestigious literary and political periodical *Le Nouvelle revue*, originally owned and edited by the feminist writer Juliette Adam, a close friend of the Russian occultist and Theosophist Yuliana Glinka. Péladan was a regular contributor, publishing two serial novels in the periodical, and the younger writer Jules Bois also published two novels there.⁷

Sceptical *littérateurs* were, for the most part, eclectic in their selections from the available spectrum, and often reckless in hybridizing them, their interest in the ideas being primarily aesthetic, valuing them for their symbolic utility and narrative convenience. In that regard they contrasted to some extent with 'true believers', who approached the ideas they were deploying much more earnestly and didactically, often to the detriment of the purely literary qualities of their work. Only a handful of writers contrived to maintain a high reputation in both the literary and the occult camps, and the prolific literary works of Péladan, Schuré, and Bois tended to be considered with a rather jaundiced eye by literary critics. One close associate of Guaita, Péladan, and Papus who escaped that prejudice, however, was Victor-Émile Michelet (no relation to Jules), who established a considerable reputation as a poet, and published one collection of idiosyncratic prose tales, *Contes surhumains* [*Superhuman Tales*] (1900).

Later in his career, Schuré moved on to become a disciple of Rudolf Steiner, a one-time pillar of the Theosophical Society who split from it in order to found his own discipline of Anthroposophy. Schuré wrote dramas under Steiner's influence and vice versa, and Schuré played a leading role in introducing Steiner's ideas to France. Their effect, however, like many other effects of the Occult Revival, was somewhat delayed, not beginning until the nineteenth century was over and reserving their maximum influence until the twentieth century was well advanced. As those delayed effects became more pronounced, the manifestations of the Revival and its literary spinoff that had peaked in the *fin de siècle* faded away somewhat, illustrating the susceptibility of lifestyle fantasies and literary fantasies to fashion. Where fashion rules, however, memories are conserved, often nostalgically. Occult fantasies never die, but merely wait to make comebacks when the time is ripe.

A few of the books cited in this essay have never gone out of print and several others, after periods of oblivion, resurfaced even before the Bibliothèque Nationale's gargantuan *Gallica* website set forth to bring all of the library's out-of-copyright material into the public domain. The translations cited in the essay, and the essay itself, would not have been possible without that Herculean labour. Curiously, therefore – perhaps one might almost say magically – it is only in the present day, when simultaneous access to all the elements of the history mapped out here is not merely practicable but easy, that the spectrum of influences it observes can be perceived and mapped. If civilization were not on the brink of collapse, one might almost be able to believe in progress. Unfortunately, no one with an ounce of sanity can any longer believe, even for an instant, that a Péladanian renaissance might save us.

¹ Théophile Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', in *Les Fleurs du mal, Oeuvres complètes de Baudelaire*, I (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1868), p. 17. My translation.

² Lamothe-Langon's parallel career as a novelist was also partly fraudulent, some of his publications, including *L'Ermite de la tombe mystérieuse* [*The Mysterious Hermit of the Tomb*] (1816) being passed off falsely as translations of work by the English Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe, and he eventually became a full-time faker of fictitious and often salacious 'memoirs' of various famous people.

³ Other writers of fiction who appeared in the periodical's pages included Gabriel de Lautrec, whose early work was collected in *Poèmes en prose* (1898), partially translated in *The Vengeance of the Oval Portrait and Other Stories*, trans. by Brian Stableford (Tarzana, CA: Black Coat Press, 2011).

⁴ Not long before his death Guaita had to fight another of the leading writers of the revival, the novelist Jules Bois, author of the scholarly fantasy *Le Satanisme et la magie* (1895) and the story collection *Le Douleur d'aimer* (1896) and many other works. Both pistol shots missed their targets, probably by design.

⁵ The first three of these stories are translated in the collection *Reincarnation and Redemption* (2019).

⁶ Honoré de Balzac's novella *Séraphita* (1834) was perhaps the high point of Swedenborgian fiction, although it acquired a new influence when Péladan adopted its central motif of the androgyne very enthusiastically, as a kind of holy grail of human transcendental evolution.

⁷ Among several other contributions of a similar stripe was *Amour astral* [*Astral Amour*] (1900-01) by 'Willy,' the only novel written under that pseudonym not to be published by the family firm of Henry Gauthier-Villars, who usually recruited other writers to pen the work that appeared under it but seems to have written the first half of *Amour astral* himself, presenting a satirical view of the contemporary occult fascinations of French society and illustrating the process by which ideas from various sources had by then been thrown into a huge melting pot and vigorously stirred.

Two New Translations of Joséphin Péladan

Joséphin Péladan (1858-1918) came to Paris in 1882 and began a prolific and successful career writing criticism of art, music and drama for the periodicals that were proliferating rapidly at the time. Following the success of his novel *Le Vice suprême* in 1884, which suggested that salvation from the contemporary decadence of Western civilization was only possible by means of a renaissance of occult philosophy and magic, he became the best-known occult lifestyle fantasist in Paris, associating himself with the poet Stanislas de Guaita (1861-1897) and the occultist ‘Papus’ (Gérard Encausse, 1865-1916) to recreate the legendary Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, fusing it with the more recent mysticism of Martinism. He claimed entitlement to the royal title of ‘Sâr’ by inheritance from the Ancient Kings of Babylon. *Le Vice suprême* became the first of a twelve-volume epic, *La Décadence latine*, of which the eighth volume, *L’Androgyne* (1891), used the prose poem reproduced below as a preface. He published three volumes of art criticism under the general title of *La Décadence Esthétique* in 1888-91, the last of which advertised the founding of an annual Salon de la Rose & Croix, which was held from 1892-97 and became an important showcase for Symbolist artists.

To an Unknown Sister¹

Joséphin Péladan

Why are you hesitating? The heart is a good guide, we follow it in tears, but in tears we live and we climb, wounded but heroic, towards the summit where the angel awaits us, lifting us up on her ocellated wings, trembling and swift.

Stranger, come to the country I detest, what ill wind has ruffled your raiment, and what cross do you bear to the earthly cavalry?

Your spirit has cried out to the mirrors I have sculpted of the desired hereafter, magical reflectors; your spirit has cried out and seen its dream beneath the features of singularity and subtlety, which I have borrowed from da Vinci to adorn my threads with languorous light.

Glory be to God, who gave you an elevated soul; I am merely the bow of the enchanted violin, and if I have awakened the mystical sleepers and idealities lying within you, I am only a clarion of the celestial Diana, glory be to God.

Alas! Son of Satan, demon, if I can sow love and fire along my path and grant divine insomnia to my sisters; errant heart, troubadour, voice whining with the storm's wind, God does not allow me to burn with these flames, and the powerless, outstretched arms of my sisters, vainly rowing shadows in the night, do not embrace me.

Towards a mount I know not where, I carry the Holy Grail of the ideas of my distant ancestors.

Dare I take a sister with me on the fatal ride?

The chimera I mount, without bit or bridle, is perfidious, the hell it has left watching me, harrying me.

All I have left is pride, the golden sword buried in the mud of a Delta. All I have left is pride, the tiara crushed beneath the hooves of giant bulls. All I have left is pride, but I have kept it as is, with the same power that conquered you, predestined woman; I raise my hand before God, with no ring showing servitude, and, son of the first priests, I bless your gentle heart, which has beaten toward me and I draw the graces from Heaven upon his head.

Yet, if you were the virgin chosen to revive my eyes with your pure breath, and if my forehead could sleep, heavy on your breasts; if you were the fairy whose golden wand opens a quiet and sure path through forests filled with the fear of beasts from Reality; if you were the sister, consoling and soft; if you were the woman, sent by angels in answer to my prayer. Oh, be not her; I will bear my misfortune, I will buckle under yours, and destiny's order wants me alone and plaintive. Damned one who presents his heart to the shocks of existence, so that the spark, kindled in the flank of Prometheus, may fly from it before those obscured by instinct.

Yet I would dearly like to see you, if only in image...

When autumn comes, melancholic and russet, I will go to the country where you are, to gather myself together, and will spend a day, distracted or bored, under the tranquil balcony where your dreams soar. Later, much later, when life has put barriers between us, will we not be ashamed, faint-hearted and cold-bodied to have solicited happiness in thought alone.

As we hesitate, the cup proffered by our angel or devil evaporates or pours away. Before emptying it, we examine it for a long time, wanting only that it be inexhaustible.

You do not dare to take my time; I will dare to take your life! Forget, forget the hero in my glimpsed work, the hero who resembles the Beloved; the passion that does not fill me would kill you.

Let our lips not meet; they are red, they are hot, fountains of vertigo, doors of lust; but let us hold hands like the children of the same father that we are.

Yours is trembling, I can feel the artery beating the thin and clear skin, and it is not instinct which pulses in my veined temples, it is not pleasure that incites and impels us; we who seem to

desire one another, my sister, recognize each other; listen to this voice, this voice of the blood that sings the glorious moment of the brother discovered, of the sister encountered.

Yes, you are my sister, since you whisper the hymn of the unreal that I sing at the top of my voice. Yes, you are my sister, because you have never granted the wishes of the mortal stutterers of love or vulgar shakers of women. Yes, you are my sister, and, following the royal tradition of the Race, you have kept your hand withheld from hands extended from below. To encounter a heart you had to descend, and you sensed mine without stooping. Yes, you are my sister and duty demands that I pause for a moment on my chimeric path to kiss your heart, and then close it like a holy tabernacle when mass is over.

Sorority, incest, virtue or sin, ascension or fall, whatever the outcome of our nascent love, whether it rises above us like a mystic dawn, or carries the red and violet shadow of pathetic sunsets, we will emerge, blossoming, from the dream or purer from the sin.

Yes, purer! The noble souls in the athanaton of passion free themselves from the matrix and transcend themselves; and passing through a heart turned towards God, the muddiest current is purified!

The flesh becomes a springboard, launching us bewildered beyond the formal, and this same spasm, which brutifies Bottom, projects the Oelohite² towards the stellar zone.

Love's vibration has waves of sound that rise into the azure, turning blue as they die; sometimes, from the erotic shock of two bodies in turmoil, soar two souls in ecstasy. *Felix culpa!*

Fortunate sin, but sin; emerging from pleasure, vigilant pain always exacts its toll; the Dream can turn no soul to matter; the Dream is a desire, which like the symbolic serpent, joylessly bites itself.

Be my sister; and let us go through life hand in hand. If love one day came to join our lips, we would have made the effort of a great duty and would have struggled, before the decline, against the earth and its instinctive force, we Oelohites, sons of Atlas and Esther.

—*La Grande revue: Paris et Saint Petersburg* (November 1888)

¹ Thanks to Peter Coles for his helpful suggestions on an earlier draft.

² An Oelohite, sometime synonymous in Péladan's work with a Daimon, is a kind of demigod, or what Nietzsche called an *übermensch*: an attainable condition of transcendent being at which humans can and ought to aim.

Hymn to the Androgyne

Joséphin Péladan

I

Ephebe of the small bones, of the scant flesh, mixture of the strength that will come and the grace that is fleeing. O indecisive moment of the body, and the soul, delicate nuance, imperceptible moment of plastic music, sex supreme, third mode! Praise to you!

Virgin with slender arms, small breasts, illusion of strength that plays, hidden in grace, vague hour of the body not confused with the soul; hesitant colour, enharmonic accord, hero and nymph, apogee of form, the only one conceivable to the spirit world.

Praise! to you!

II

Youth with long hair and almost desirable, whom desire has not yet touched, beardless, unconscious of imminent opportunities, perhaps of pride, perhaps of corruption, schoolboy listening to the voices of insomnia, bad lot or cleric and future Knight of Malta or of Meschines. Praise to you!

Young woman with short and almost boyish hair, whose heart is not orientated, bud still closed to carnal blooming, perhaps of sin, perhaps of virtue, maiden spelling life in the song of the wind, vagrant or damsel, soon consecrated to Mary or Venus. Praise to you!

III

Virgin young man, incomparable charm, sole plenary grace, delectable unknown, reticent poem; on the velum of the heart not one name inscribed; on the velum of the body, not one pink trace; flesh that has not weakened, spirit still floating, alabaster from which nothing evaporates. Praise to you!

Virgin young woman, imperial diamond among all the gems of femininity, ornament that defies in comparison celestial crowns, your precious limbs are ignorant of any embrace and your fibres, sentimental strings, have not been subject to any dissonant finger, viol in which harmony sleeps entire, harpsichord of silence. Praise to you!

IV

Man who charms and tomorrow will labour, Siegfried unknown to himself, Cherub awakening and page of today, squire of tomorrow, bachelor astonished and musing on the brink of adolescence; first down on the lips and first trouble in the heart; pretty stammerer who reveals a naked neck as white as a woman's arm. Praise to you!

Woman who thinks and will love tomorrow; she is Desdemona unknown to herself and Juliette before the ball; an effort of reflection ending in the dream; a curious Pandora who interrogates the moon, illuminator of desire, nestling in the shadow of her heart, an ingenuous Bradamante asleep amid her long tresses, and seems an Endymion with a proud and silver body. Praise to you!

V

Sex very pure, which dies of caresses;
Sex very holy, which alone rises to the heavens;
Sex very handsome, which does not deny adornment;
Sex very noble, which challenges the flesh;
Sex unreal, which some traverse as Adamah once did in Eden;
Sex impossible to terrestrial ecstasy! Praise to you who do not exist!
Sex very mild the mere sight of which consoles;
Sex very calm, which sends the nerves to sleep;
Sex very tender, from which pure pleasure emanates;
Sex very caressing, which kisses our soul;
Sex very intoxicating, which leads us on high;
Sex very charitable, which gives us our dreams;
Sex of Jeanne d'Arc and sex of miracle! Praise to you!

VI

You were once called Adonis or Tammuz. Before Mozart you were Alcibiades; ideal chrysalis, from which angels spring, and reduce men to the inferior virility, to the masculinity of larvae. O form so perfect that God has consecrated it as the vestment of the eternal fête! Praise to you!

You were called for Plato Diotima: Sappho, Hypatia, Abbess of Gandersheim, Hrotsvithale¹ designated Polyonime,² whose glory is formed of the complete prism of mortal nuances, illuminated by perpetuity.

O grace so serene that Dante was able, in three bounds, to rise to the clouds. O lady of beauty, wisdom and glory chatelaine of Christian Valhalla! O Beatrice! Praise to you, Valkyrie!

VII

Intangible Eros, Uranian Eros, for the vulgar men of moral epochs you are merely an infamous sin; they called you Sodom, celestial contemptor of all voluptuousness. It is the need of hypocritical centuries to accuse Beauty, that vivid light, of the darkness that vile hearts contain. Keep your monstrous mask, which defends you from the profane! Praise to you!

Anteros, O healer of banal tenderness, powerful alchemist of imperfect desire, Athanor of the Great Work in the world of souls; it is your destiny that wants the temporary errors, the fecund errors, from which, unshackled, you rise to become sublime amid the curious astonishment of the agnostic! Praise to you!

VIII

Signorelli's angels,³ Leonardo's Saint Jean,⁴ punisher of Eden and the culpable Ereck,⁵ messenger of mystery and means of miracle, celestial ambassador, you are the supreme point at which our material eye can conceive spirit; you are the last step at which the celestial Norm can manifest prayer. Praise to you.

True angels of the true Heaven, burning Seraphim and Cherubim, abstractors, tenants of the thrones of the Norm – Lordship and Formless Essence! – Prince of the Septenary, who commands and obeys by turns. O initial sex, definitive sex, absolute of amour, absolute of form, sex that denies sex, sex of eternity! Praise, to you, Androgyne.

—*La Plume* (1 March 1891)

¹ Hrotsvitha of Ganderheim was a tenth-century Latin poet and dramatist who lived as a lay sister in the Abbey of Gandersheim, probably under the patronage of Abbess Gerberga, the niece of the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I.

² Péladan routinely uses the term 'Polyonime' [an entity with many names] in his writings, sometimes personalized and divinized.

³ 'Angels' by Luca Signorelli (c. 1450-1523) is one of a series of frescoes commissioned by Pope Sixtus VI for the shrine of Loreto.

⁴ Leonardo da Vinci's mysteriously androgynous painting of Saint John the Baptist, in the Louvre, impressed several writers of the *fin de siècle*, none more so than the lesbian poet Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn), who represented herself as 'San Giovanni' in the first version of her autobiographical novel *Une Femme m'apparut* (1904; tr. as *A Woman Appeared to Me*) and reproduced the image as a frontispiece.

⁵ The reference is to the protagonist of Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian romance *Erec et Enide* (the name is rendered Ereck in the German version by Hartmann von Aue), who is suspected of becoming effeminate and reacts badly.

The Magickal Body – Text and Image

Geraldine Hudson

Artist's Statement – Topography of Myth

As a border walker I am continually exploring questions around the inherent meaning of fiction and myth, authority, power and cultural concepts of origin, using various methods in my practice as means to engage, wandering between installation, object, photography, printmaking and artists' books, the inherent materiality being essential. Significantly, the relationship between the permanence of the porcelain, with the vulnerability of paper, hair and other organic material.

Using a methodology of walking, whether drifting or purposefully revisiting certain places, I attempt to explore notions of genius loci, examining the topography of myth in order to map a forensics of transgressive happenings as essential to the human condition.

In combining concepts of the stratological unconscious with the lay of the land, my practice continues to focus on notions of heterotopia, interweaving the psychogeographic experience with elements of esoteric initiation while questioning the shifting relations between the sacred and the profane in both urban and rural environments.

My more recent work has furthermore engaged with feminist notions of the personal as political, taking the standpoint of an 'other' regarding the visceral experience of the witch in relation to nature and site, as interpreted through ritual performance.

June 2018

I work under the cover of night. The ground is cold, the air thin. I have to be fast and furtive; moving like a fugitive, these places on the edgelands of the city are not mine alone. The damp, musty earth and the October chill form a light covering on my skin. My breath and my heartbeat tattoo the rhythm to follow.

Fully naked inside a circle of candles, I unfurl from the floor, the watchers smothered by the sound of my heartbeat. Slowly and deliberately, I paint my bare flesh with the ash from before, clothe myself in my robe, and begin the working.

The circle is cast, consecrated to the dead time. The ancestors I feel are present. I dedicate to Hekate. Stop, breathe and pace and then incant. My once-chilled skin now flushed. I sweat, shake, and continue to circle, becoming more intent. I present my offerings ... my monthly bleed mixed with the fruit of the underworld. I continue to encircle, unaware of those who watch.

Through orgasmic energy I enter the liminal space, become another and reincarnate.

Once the circle is closed, withershins, I remove myself from the room. The watchers, no longer passive observers but participants in the working, stay seated, blanketed in my sound. They have become one with my body during this working.

The earth under my fingernails is a reminder of my contact. The dirt; the soiled body of the apparent fallen.

I relate to my ritual performance pieces as workings – being both an element of art practice and magickal praxis, they negate each other and form another reality. In these workings I attempt to communicate the inaudible and the unseen, to translate the visceral into a language, albeit an occulted, codified one. I explore the phenomenological experience of the body as a vehicle, intuitive and consciously unconscious.

The body when used in Ritual is not just a tool or empty vessel through which an energy can flow. I see this as a prescriptive way of viewing the female body, as a passive vessel. During Ritual, I am in control of my own subversion. It is my will and my body is fully conscious. The skin tissue, sinews, receptors, and muscles are wholly aware. Upon working like this, my intent is to subvert that which may be seen as profane and to become one with my other self within the ephemeral space which I inhabit.

This practice is psychogeographic, concerned as much with the lay of the land which I inhabit, as Witch, as with the topography of my own flesh. My performance, ‘Topography of the Witch’ is a ritualistic working and performance, part of an ongoing body of work, that investigates psychological topographies, otherness, and the visceral experience of the witch.

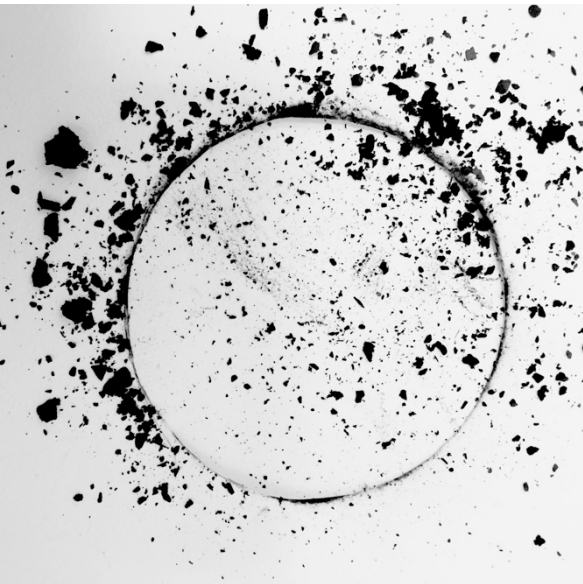
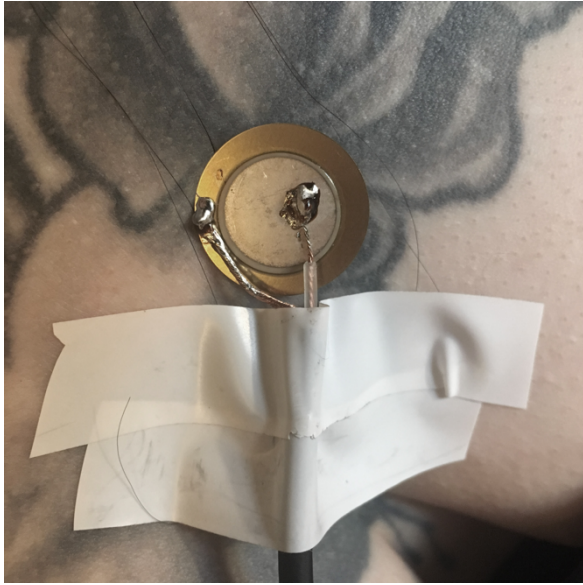
Beginning with basic rituals and moving towards a working at the end of October 2018, the culmination of my current research was a Samhain Ritual and self-initiation, as artist and witch. The site is mine at a given time, and I am familiar with the genius loci of the places I visit. When inhabiting a certain space, I become hypersensitive, relying on that which is innate and hereditary. This connecting thread, back to the ritualistic body of the Celtic Pagans, witches, and shamans is one, like the collective unconscious, that I relate to when regarding liminal spaces. Foucault’s heterotopia being a starting point in relation to the strata of the unconscious; when considering a liminal, dream or trance state this takes us full circle to the connection between my physical body and the lay of the land, the intersection being my state of mind/body and the liminal/physical space created: the sacred ground. As above, so below.

The final performance, which took place at the *Occulture* conference in Berlin on 16-18 November 2018, was built upon a series of layers. These included bodily observations during October, ritual praxis, recording of part of a Samhain Ritual, and further audio recordings at sites sacred to myself, together with first-hand observations of the female body, the affects psychologically and physically when in devotion, and the ritual and heterotopic space. Recorded sound was then mixed into a five-channel piece which incorporated my own heartbeat, breath, and orgasm during the ritual. This piece was present as part of my performance. Alongside the sounds recorded I made pictorial offerings to Hekate, lunar/vulva blots from my own menstrual blood collected a month earlier at the Hunter’s Moon, then combined with pomegranate juice (the fruit of the underworld) and ash collected from earlier workings.

I view my practice and research, not as academic study. Instead, my work attempts to subvert the, often male, gaze pertaining to the sacred feminine, particularly in its perception of the esoteric female as a passive vessel or medium. With a reminder that we still walk on treacherous precarious ground, and that the personal is always political, I choose to focus on the experience of myself as an integrated whole, a phenomenology of the female body in relation to land, ownership, and territory.



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Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose + Croix in Paris, 1892–1897

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
30 June – 4 October 2017

Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice
28 October – 7 January 2018

Hieronymous La Plume

‘oh! oil, oil, quel snobisme!’¹

This exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City is the first by a major museum (or any museum) to present those works displayed in the several salons staged by Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), the decadent symbolist eccentric who styled himself Sâr Merodack, leader of L’Ordre de Rose✠Croix du Temple et du Graal, the secret fraternal society Péladan established after a falling out with the occult poet Stanislas de Guaita, head of a Rosicrucian sect.² It is probably best not to ask how the esoteric system of the R✠C differs from ‘orthodox’ Rosicrucianism. Historically, the Rosicrucian Brotherhood dates from 1614, when *Fama Fraternitatis, dess Löblichen Ordens des Rosenkreutzers* [The Declaration of the Worthy Order of the Rosy Cross] was published at Kassel, Germany. This book claimed that one Christian Rosenkreuz, whose life spanned the *fin-de-siècle* period between the 14th and 15th centuries, founded the secret order after a journey to the East. Two more books about the secret adventures of Herr Rosenkreuz appeared, the last and weirdest being *Die Chymische Hochzeit Christiani Rosenkreutz* [The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz] (1616). As everyone knows, whenever one combines chemicals and nuptials high times are bound to follow, and the alchemical ceremony in this case does not disappoint, with some wedding guests dying and being brought back to life through magical operations.³ How much of this tradition wound up in the R✠C is hard to say, but some of it doubtless did, along with the usual syncretic mélange of hermeticism, occultism, and orientalism so typical of *fin-de-siècle* cults generally, such as

Theosophy, Visionism, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, and many others. A special interest of the Sâr Merodack (the name combines the Assyrian word for ‘leader’ with the name of an ancient Babylonian king) was androgyny, a well-known attribute of angels, whose gender is nothing if not fluid. This interest likely proceeds from the yonic associations of the Rose and the phallic implications of the Cross, making the cryptic abbreviation R✠C a neat little emblem of androgyny. Less cryptically, the Rose is a symbol of the Virgin Mary, the Cross a symbol of the crucified Christ – basic religious meanings that need to be kept in mind in assessments of Péladan’s cultural placement, which is somewhere at the nexus of symbolism, decadence, and late romanticism. Unlike the more republican, atheist British variant, French Romanticism remained largely Catholic and, usually, politically conservative, however rebellious it might have been in both social and artistic terms. The socially non-conforming, avant-garde monarchist Péladan is therefore typical of his romantic forebears, with the difference that he comes to the game rather late in the day. This belatedness is one thing that perhaps makes him decadent, as well as his general abhorrence of bourgeois modernity.

The Guggenheim exhibition makes available for the first time almost all of the art that was exhibited in Paris at the six R✠C salons, each at a different venue, over the years 1892–1897. The exhibition is not organized chronologically, however, but mostly by artist, with certain thematic strains included as well. For example, even though Péladan preferred not to exhibit portraits, he had no objection to representations of himself, usually in full hieratic regalia. Hence the modern viewer is treated at once to the three life-sized portraits of the Sâr that were originally spread over three salons: the master appears in a plain mauve robe, looking aloof and aloft, in the portrait by Alexandre Séon, from the first salon of 1892; a dandified version from the second salon of 1893 by Marcellin Desboutin shows Péladan as more of a squire than a Sâr, dressed in a black velvet suit with puffed sleeves and a lacy white ruffle spilling from the collar, one gloved hand on hip and the other, ungloved, holding a cane at a rakish angle; in the last, from the fourth salon of 1895, Jean Delville gives us a Péladan who is at once medieval and magisterial, a high

priest of the religion of art dressed in a pure white choir robe, his right hand raised in benediction and the left clutching a golden scroll. In a way, these three portraits capture, respectively, three essential attributes of Péladan's character: the mystical *symboliste*, the dandified decadent, and the magus of rarified, occult aesthetics.

Strictly speaking, the prohibition against portraiture (the Sâr himself excepted) evidently did not apply at the first salon of 1892, since Péladan accepted three small black-and-white woodblock prints by Félix Vallotton of Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Richard Wagner. Baudelaire and Verlaine face the viewer, the former looking disconcertingly cheerful and the latter appropriately mordant. Wagner is shown in three-quarter profile looking to his right and wearing his trademark beret. In context, the three images might be read as representations of the three secret masters of *symbolisme*, though, truth to tell, there is little of *l'idéal* in any of them. Still, few composers capture as well as Wagner did the fugitive association of music and emotion so critical to the indirect discourse of symbolist poetry, so it is almost surprising that no additional images of the bard of Bayreuth appeared in subsequent salons. What we have instead are several works by different artists that evoke music by visual means, as in Armand Point's painting from the fifth salon of Saint Cecilia, patron of music, undertaken in his best Pre-Raphaelite style (Péladan was an admirer of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and was inspired by the PRB abbreviation to adopt R~~X~~C as shorthand for his own fraternal order.) Other works evocative of music include Edmond Aman-Jean's lithograph *Beatrix*, used as a poster to advertise the second salon, which pictures Dante's muse Beatrice floating in space and holding a lyre in one hand, the other held by an angel, possibly leading her from heaven to aid her chaste lover on his pilgrimage. But, obviously, the symbolist image of choice for the mysterious power of music is Orpheus with his lyre.

Over the several salons Péladan selected three paintings by three different artists depicting Orpheus at various stages in his mythic career. Curiously, the order of exhibition shows that career in reverse chronology, beginning with Jean Delville's *Orphée mort* [*The Death of Orpheus*]

from the third salon of 1894, followed by Séon's *Lamentation d'Orphée* [*The Lament of Orpheus*], from the fifth of 1896, and, finally, Pierre Amédée Marcel-Béronneau's *Orphée*, showing Orpheus strumming his lyre in Hades, from the sixth of 1897. In addition, Séon exhibited another painting at the fifth salon titled *Le poète* [*The Poet*], showing a figure atop a small mount reaching up with his right hand into the night sky, appearing to grasp a handful of stars while his golden lyre lies at the base of the mount. The image is not explicitly one of Orpheus, but it might as well be, and, for that matter, so might Séon's dreamy portrait of Péladan, since the mauve robe the Sâr wears there is just a shade shy of the purple tunic draped over Orpheus lamenting on the strand.

Of these different representations of the mythic figure who became a symbolist amalgam of music, dream, *l'idéal*, and, indeed, the artist at odds with an uncomprehending, bourgeois audience, none is more arresting or evocative than Delville's *Orphée mort*. The artist shows the severed head of Orpheus fused with his lyre, drifting on the sea, with shallow waves and submerged seashells suggesting, perhaps, that the head has arrived at the shore of Lesbos. The azure water is dotted with stars reflected from the sky, their pattern presaging the constellation Lyra, at once completing the myth and, possibly, alluding to Stéphane Mallarmé's seminal symbolist poem of 1864, 'L'Azur' [*The Sky*]. But the primary symbolist allusion is to Gustave Moreau's *Orphée* (1865), in which a woman in Thracian dress gazes mournfully down at the head of Orpheus fused with his lyre as she cradles it in her arms. Delville borrows the image of head and lyre, reverses it, and simplifies the composition. He is also said to have used the face of his wife as the visage of Orpheus, thereby satisfying the inclination toward androgyny on the part of Péladan and the R&C generally. As for Moreau, he received an invitation to exhibit at the salon but declined, as did other artists Péladan admired, such as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Edward Burne-Jones.

The refusal of these older artists to participate likely amounts to nothing more significant than a reluctance to subordinate their established reputations to Péladan's cultish megalomania.

But their refusal did ensure that the R&C salons would put new artists on view; indeed, while declining to participate themselves, the established artists encouraged their students and protégées to exhibit (Séon, for example, had been Puvis's student, and Béronneau was a disciple of Moreau). The forced choice to exhibit new art by what we would today call 'emerging talent' may lie behind the Guggenheim's insertion of the R&C into the tired narrative of triumphalist modernism, namely, that these *fin-de-siècle* symbolists anticipated such modernist masters as Vasily Kandinsky, Frantisek Kupka, and Piet Mondrian, whose 'purely abstract art', in turn, 'pointed the way to the future for most of the twentieth century'.⁴ The wall text, catalogue, and website of the exhibition all stress the R&C artists' departure from realism and naturalistic technique, together with their investment in occult, syncretic mysticism, as pathbreaking maneuvers on the road to the kind of modernist abstraction on display in, for example, Kandinsky, who was also inspired by the esoteric syncretism of Theosophy, the bogus blend of Buddhism, Hinduism, Neoplatonism, Gnosticism, and other belief systems founded by that P. T. Barnum of theology, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky. The Guggenheim Museum in New York, together with its sister museum in Venice, boasts one of the premier collections of modernist art in the world, so there is a certain institutional imperative toward making the R&C part of the modernist narrative. No doubt this art would be given a rather different cultural inflection had the exhibition appeared at, say, the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

To this viewer, the curatorial interpretation of the work as pre-modernist is more evident in the apparatus accompanying the exhibition (catalogue, etc.) than in the exhibition itself. Take, for example, Delville's impressively disturbing *L'Idole de la perversité* [*The Idol of Perversity*], exhibited at the first salon. The image is well-known in reproduction and in descriptions like those of Bram Dijkstra, who sees a 'livid-eyed, snake-encircled, medusa-headed flower of evil, whose aggressively pointed breasts were as threatening as the fangs of a devouring animal'.⁵ For my part, looking at the imperious woman in the drawing (about a foot and half wide and almost three feet tall), the near life-sized figure with her firm, thrusting breasts, rounded belly, and wide

hips seems less threatening than alluring. She is, after all, an idol of perversity, which can easily be taken to mean that she invites the worship of perverts. Count me in. But regardless of whether the viewer finds the image threatening or alluring, neither impression would be possible without Delville's scrupulous naturalistic technique. And while it may be true that most attractive young women veiled in see-through gowns do not have snakes writhing between their breasts and in their hair, this is what they would look like if they did. The point here is simply that Delville does not so much eschew naturalistic technique in Guggenheim-approved proto-modernist fashion as re-purpose that technique to spectacular aesthetic effect, making perversity attractive. The Delville drawing helps to show that the modernist optic is not the only lens through which to view the art of the R⌘C; in truth, the dark vision of decadence might be more enlightening.

¹ Marcel Proust, *Le côté de Guermantes, À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1919), p. 63.

Some duchess or other comments on a play titled Maeterlinck's *Les Sept Princesses*, but no one seems to know that, only that it is incomprehensible and fashionable, so fashionable, in fact, that the historian character thinks it is by 'Sar Péladan'.

² Unless otherwise noted, information about Péladan and the R⌘C is taken from the catalogue accompanying the exhibition by Vivien Greene, *Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose X Croix in Paris, 1892–1897* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2017).

³ Christopher McIntosh, *The Rosicrucians: The History, Mythology, and Rituals of an Esoteric Order* (Boston: Weiser, 1997), pp. xviii–xix.

⁴ Greene, *Mystical Symbolism*, p. 30.

⁵ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 325.

Transnational Poetics, Aestheticism, and Decadence at the *Fin de Siècle*

New York University, 14 May 2018

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New York City receives thousands of visitors daily, but perhaps none were more delightful than the scholars who arrived on 14 May 2018 to attend Transnational Poetics, Aestheticism, and Decadence at the *Fin de Siècle* at New York University. Organized by Professor Marion Thain (New York University), Dr Kate Hext (Exeter), and Professor Jane Desmarais (Goldsmiths), and sponsored by their respective institutions, the one-day symposium comprised a keynote by Professor Regenia Gagnier (Exeter) titled ‘Transcultural *Poiesis* and the Making of Community’, thirteen ten-minute position papers, and a discussion about fostering a transnational Aestheticism and Decadence network in the future.

Gagnier’s keynote began by outlining the ancient Greek term *poiesis*, which refers to creating or bringing something into being, often through transformation. These processes, she explained, were fundamental to the rise of global Decadence – especially in the long nineteenth century. After all, the well-documented conflicts between tradition and the forces of modernization in multiple countries during this period drove non-European writers to produce Decadent literatures of their own, as well as to transform the European Decadent texts that they encountered. Take Oscar Wilde’s *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891), for example. While scholars have recently used approaches from textual history to question *The Soul’s* seriousness, Gagnier argued that regardless of the text’s perceived tone for nineteenth century British readers, its global circulation meant that it was interpreted in multiple ways by other major figures. One of these was André Gide, who developed Wilde’s stance on individualism’s compatibility with socialism to promote international universality through national particularity at the International Congress for the Defence of Culture in 1935. Gide’s work then circulated in Vietnam, a country

that was, at the time, experiencing a power struggle between French colonial rule and the nation's communist parties. Activists like Hoài Thanh eventually transformed Gide's views to argue that encouraging individualism could bolster national culture and help produce a more beneficial version of communism. The astounding circulation of Decadent texts, however, does not stop there: Gagnier's remaining case studies carefully swept the audience to other areas of the globe, from examining how Wilde's work was also used in China and Latin America, to investigating the reception of D. H. Lawrence in Australia and Mexico. Together, these studies suggested that there are many more sites of global Decadence waiting to be unearthed.

Indeed, the audience soon discovered that one of those sites is the land Down Under. The symposium focused on Australia, race, and postcolonialism in the first position papers session, opening with Nicholas Birns's (New York University) 'The Australian 1890s: More Decadent Than We Knew?', which outlined how Aestheticism and Decadence was used in Australia's artistic and political spheres. Birns highlighted figures like painter Charles Conder, who promoted impressionistic articulations of Australian landscapes and later befriended Wilde when working for *The Yellow Book*, and Australia's first female political candidate, Catherine Helen Spence, whose firm stance on minority representation countered white nationalist attitudes and evoked an admirable Kantian modernity.

Fortunately, Spence was not the only Australian political figure who opposed white nationalism. Jason Rudy's (University of Maryland) 'Xenophobia and the Dawn of Australian Aestheticism' demonstrated how, despite the development of the White Australian Policy in the early 1990s, Chinese-born merchant Quong Tart fostered interracial and international connections by advocating for Chinese-Australians, and, surprisingly, by maintaining a network of lavishly decorated tearooms. Not only did Tart's tearooms visually represent the intersection of Aestheticist and oriental glamour, but they were also the meeting place for The Dawn Club, a group of Sydney suffragettes who fought for women's rights and celebrated Aestheticism through their interest in women's fashion.

Australian national poetry flirted with Aestheticism and Decadence, too. Timothy Chandler's (University of Pennsylvania) "'Wild Erratic Fancy': Decadence and Nationalism in the Settler Colony', stressed that, despite first impressions, Australian writer A. B. 'Banjo' Paterson's notable poem 'Clancy of the Overflow' (1889) partially incorporates Decadent elements in its content and form, such as indulging in escapist fantasies, lamenting city life, and struggling with frustrated homoerotic desires. Moreover, the poem's kitschy tone and unusual trochaic meter (which puts it in relation to Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Raven'), Chandler argued, all suggest that Paterson's 'Clancy' exhibits a peculiar Decadent strain.

Yet, there exist writers who, despite possessing stronger associations with Decadence than Paterson, spurn the movement altogether. Robert Stilling's (University of South Florida) 'Looking Beyond *Fin de Siècle*: The Transnational Poetics of Postcolonial Decadence' focused on Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who maintains a provocative stance on Wilde and his followers: 'Art for art's sake', Achebe once announced, 'is dog shit.' Ironically, Achebe's work is closely linked with Decadence; one only has to turn to the title of his award-winning novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1959), to encounter his allusion to W. B. Yeats. While such behaviour appears paradoxical, however, Stilling argued that Achebe and other anti-colonial African writers often use Aestheticism as a subversive strategy to critique the earnestness of Empire.

Meanwhile, Harlem Renaissance writers were using Aestheticism and Decadence for another purpose. As Kristen Mahoney's (Michigan State University) 'Richard Bruce Nugent: Decadent Poetics and the Harlem Renaissance' demonstrated, African-American writers like Nugent repeatedly turned to Wildean models to articulate the experience of being queer people of colour in America. After leading the audience through Nugent's 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade' (1926) – a striking short story where the queer protagonist is literally named Beauty – and displaying gorgeous photos of Nugent's meticulously-decorated manuscripts from Yale's Beinecke Library, Mahoney argued that he used Aestheticism to transform racial and sexual trauma into beauty.

Can aesthetic beautification, however, sometimes step too close to fetishization? Katherina Herold's (University of Oxford) 'Orientalism and Decadence' claimed that although European Decadents like Wilde developed cosmopolitan views, they also engaged with reverse orientalism by promoting the fetishization of Eastern cultures and corresponding with each other through the concept of a 'Decadent East'. Future studies, Herold concluded, should further interrogate the relationship between Decadence and colonial histories.

After a lovely lunch, the symposium turned to the second position papers session focused on Asia, Translation, and Anglo-American Influences. Justin Sider's (United States Military Academy, West Point) 'Toru Dutt among the Parnassians: Genre, Abstraction, and Transnational Poetics' analysed the English and French verses of Indian Anglophone poet Toru Dutt, who used a French literary style that later influenced Aestheticism's rise: Parnassianism. Interestingly, her Parnassian poetry depended on transnational exchanges. Dutt's Cambridge University education, for example, trained her in English and French in addition to Bengali and Sanskrit, and connected her to British poet Edmund Gosse, who became her literary mentor. Yet, as Sider explained, Dutt's cosmopolitan background and her interactions with British influencers like Gosse may have also diluted the cultural authenticity of her poetry.

Nevertheless, Gosse fostered cultural authenticity in the work of Sarojini Naidu, another Indian poet who produced English poetry. Rochelle Almeida's (New York University) 'How the Nightingale of India Spread Her Wings: The Influence of Edmund Gosse and Arthur Symons on the Poetry of Sarojini Naidu' drew from a range of archival materials to show how Naidu, as a result of her British education, initially wrote lyrics that seemed to focus exclusively on European subject matter. However, Almeida demonstrated the way in which, after Gosse examined Naidu's early verses, he encouraged her to draw on themes from her national origin.

The question of authenticity continued in Alexander Bubb's (University of Roehampton) 'Translation as a Conceptual Framework in *fin de siècle* Studies', which investigated Rudyard Kipling's translations of non-Anglophone literature. Although Kipling preached that translations

should maintain cultural authenticity, Bubb argued that not only was the cultural authenticity of Kipling's own translations highly questionable, but that his adoption of a mysterious persona also deliberately sensationalized his translations for the public. Paying attention to how translations like Kipling's operated in the nineteenth century more broadly is critical since translations were often the primary way for European writers and readers to learn about other cultures.

Bénédicte Coste's (University of Burgundy) following paper, 'Translating the Poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti into *fin-de-siècle* France and After' was a case in point. By leading the audience through her extensive archival investigations of six French periodicals and seven French writers who were early translators of Rossetti's work (Emile Blémont, Gabriel Sarrazin, Ianthe Cleveland, Clémence Couve, Alfred Debussy, Robert Baignières, and Francis Vielé-Griffin), she revealed how Rossetti's verses were often translated as fragments for the French literary community.

In addition to translation, there is another site where dynamic transnational exchanges occur: the city. Veronica Alfano's (Delft University of Technology) 'In Much Abundance Lost: The City as Transnational Space' highlighted the centrality of urban experience in Decadent literature by way of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840). Poe's descriptions, she argued, suggest that cities are more closely linked to cosmopolitanism than nationalism. His work also demonstrates how some of the competing desires that torment urbanites are connected to the Decadent Movement, such as the thirst to fulfil individual ambitions versus the yearning to become part of the urban crowd.

The contradictory longings for both detachment and intimacy, however, were not the only desires that preoccupied Decadent writers. As Richard Kaye's (Hunter College, CUNY) 'Utopias of Law and Artifice: Shaw, Wilde, and Sexual Modernism' demonstrated, the Decadent Movement's celebration of same-sex desire influenced the re-imagining of legal and social structures. For example, although George Bernard Shaw was linked to fascist politics, Kaye

argued that Shaw also passionately supported homosexual rights, private individual rights, and freedom of expression. As for Wilde, Kaye stressed that *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* promoted a society that is best for the artist because it is precisely the artist who is the most important for developing well-functioning communities. Both writers, Kaye continued, articulated their political concerns in their plays, such as Shaw's *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1893) and Wilde's *Salomé* (1891).

Since the audience had, by this time, soared across multiple countries and historical events in a single day, Ellis Hanson (Cornell University)'s 'Teaching Decadence Now' closed the session by asking whether '*fin de siècle*' was the best category to associate with the field. After all, he asked, doesn't its 'French sigh' conceal how other cultures and time periods also engaged with Decadence? He stressed Americanness and Modernism in particular, citing Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* (1904) and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) to argue that American Decadents were engaging with Decadence before (and, perhaps, better than) the Europeans. Moreover, Hanson explained that Wilde's celebrated *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which contains melodrama and stuffy moralizing in addition to Decadent themes, might not be the most important book for us. That honour, he suggested, should be bestowed upon a major Decadent novel of our century, D. B. C. Pierre's *Lights Out in Wonderland* (2010), which depicts the consequences of capitalism and foregrounds the Anthropocene's political cynicism.

The symposium concluded with an engaging roundtable comprised of Tanya Agathocleous (Hunter College, CUNY), Laurel Brake (Birkbeck), Alex Murray (Queens University Belfast), Peter Nicholls (New York University), and Alex Wermer-Colan (Temple University), and a lively brainstorming session about the future of the field. While there is still much to discuss, the symposium participants did come to a consensus about removing '*fin de siècle*' from our name to reflect the field's transnational nature, proposing instead to use 'Aestheticism and Decadence' in the future. Closing the day with the promise of many more

symposia to come, the Aestheticism and Decadence network is poised to establish a permanent space in academia, and we very much hope that you will join us in this endeavour.

Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft

Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 31 August 2018 – 6 January 2019¹

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‘Could you stab the image of a loved one?’ This is one of six questions posed by Sophie Page and Marina Wallace, the two lead curators of *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual and Witchcraft*, intended to prompt visitors to ‘explore the place of magical thinking in our lives, and to connect this to magical thinking in the past’.² In drawing an emotive correspondence between a person and a surrogate, it is a question that strikes at the heart of one of the exhibition’s key aims, an aim shared with the Leverhulme-funded project that enabled it: to historicize identity and subjectivity in light of emotional experience and supernatural belief.

Spellbound offers no shortage of opportunities to contemplate the relevance and importance of emotional experience in a period traversing 800 years of magic, the occult and the supernatural in Europe, and the Ashmolean is an appropriate home given that it was founded by an alchemist and astrologer, Elias Ashmole, and is currently under the directorship of Xa Sturgis, who has experience as a practising magician known as The Great Xa. 180 exhibits are ordered into three broad periods – the medieval cosmos, early-modern communities, and the modern household – and from the outset visitors are encouraged to reflect on present-day rituals and beliefs that resonate with these histories, from deciding whether or not to enter the exhibition by walking under a ladder, to reading the initials and markings on padlocks secured by lovers to Leeds Centenary Bridge.

The first section explores the medieval cosmos and includes some beautifully illustrated manuscripts depicting celestial spheres and their relationship to ‘microcosmic man’ or ‘Zodiac man’, and astrological tools and instruments designed to depict or measure the movements of the cosmos and its impact on health and destiny. Read together, they reveal a worldview that

conjoins cosmological forces with the viscera of a human body prone as much to the malign designs of demons as it is to the positive influence of angels and the pangs of love (this link between the cosmos and the body also underpins the commissioning of a slightly kitschy new-age artwork in this room by Ackroyd & Harvey, called *From Aether to Air*). Talismans, crystal reliquaries and beeswax votives provide an accessible portal to medieval belief in the supernatural given the prevalence of comparable practices today in cultures where Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity still holds sway, while reflective objects used in necromantic rituals – including a captivating obsidian mirror owned by the sixteenth-century magician John Dee – evoke a long-lasting fascination with the uncanniness of reflected images in the art and literature of diverse cultures.

The exhibition is not ordered linearly; rather, the second stage focuses on the modern household. This section is considerably more speculative in evidencing belief in magic, witchcraft and the supernatural, but it does much to situate such belief in more quotidian and familiar terrain. What comes across most clearly is an understanding of natural and manufactured things as animate and agentic, whether they be a bewitched cow's heart pierced with nails found lodged in a chimney, with the smoke and fire warding off further evil (clearly the inspiration behind Katherine Dowson's commissioned art installation), clothes imbued with the characteristics of a loved one, or a Bellarmine jar or 'witch bottle' filled with urine, pins and hair buried beneath the threshold of one's home to protect it from evil. Understanding these things as vibrant matter chimes with the current shift toward new materialism in the arts and humanities, whereby non-human 'things' are regarded as having agency, and does much to fulfil the curators' aim to connect different modes of magical thinking past and present.

The final section of the exhibition is likely to be the most familiar to visitors as it focuses, albeit not exclusively, on the persecution of witches from the mid-fifteenth century until the European Enlightenment, culminating in a dramatized recording of witch trial transcripts. It includes further material 'things' that reverberate strongly as vibrant matter, such as a witch's

scale and a ‘Gown of humiliation’, which are placed in proximity to more recent artefacts and documentation of animate objects, for instance evidence of ‘ectoplasm’ called forth by the spiritualist Helen Duncan, one of the last women to be convicted under the 1735 Witchcraft Act before it was replaced with the Fraudulent Mediums Act in 1951. However, early-modern depictions of witches in paintings and engravings dominate, most notably a famous illustration of Matthew Hopkins questioning witches at Manningtree in 1645, and a copy of Albrecht Dürer’s *Witch Riding Backwards on a Goat* (1510). The latter in particular brings to light the dominant and fundamentally misogynist correlation of witchcraft with female elders who live alone, just as the sight of a witch forcefully grabbing a goat’s horn while clutching an erect broomstick reveals a patriarchal fear of emasculation among the artists who produce these images, along with those who commissioned the work. This is a fear that echoes the perverse advice given by Heinrich Institoris in his infamous study of witchcraft, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), which includes chapters on whether or not witches trick men into thinking that their penises have fallen off, and the methods used for removing them.

The care taken in gathering such a range of both very rare and quotidian objects, texts and images is highly impressive, with some of these – in my case the obsidian mirror and illustrated manuscripts – making a deep and lasting impression. However, while the exhibition catalogue makes brief reference to a ‘precarious domestic economy’ as ‘a plausible target for witches, male or female’,³ it is hard not to be reminded of Sylvia Federici’s important book *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (2004), which offers a trenchant critique of the ostracization of women from paid labour in the height of witch persecution in Europe, and the devaluation of women’s domestic work beyond the capacity to reproduce. More could have been done in the guidance accompanying representations of witches in the early modern period to critique the close imbrication of work, patriarchy and the persecution of female witches, using the misogynistic representation of ‘unproductive’ post-menopausal women in the otherwise well-selected and harrowing engravings, illustrations and paintings as cases in

point. This is also where the core concerns of this special issue of *Volupté* come into view most strongly. The ‘decadence’ of *Spellbound*’s rich array of weird, esoteric and potentially subversive objects rubs up against a more conventional view of witchcraft as a degenerate practice. In closing the exhibition with an array of paintings and artefacts predicated on ostracizing witches as a decadent subject feared more than they inspire, whose moral degeneracy is seen to corrupt the sacrosanct bonds of homogeneous Christian communities and heteronormative marital relationships, *Spellbound* risks muting a more captivating, more rewarding understanding of decadent practices as that which might *challenge* processes of victimization, rather than staging its worst excesses. Leaving the exhibition with the ‘outing’ of Helen Duncan as a fraud is particularly telling, laying bare the empirical evidence of her deception in ways that undermine the inspiring animistic worldview that had characterized the exhibition’s earlier stages. Also, the emphasis that these stages place on animistic beliefs, quite appropriately, calls to mind ritual practices in South American and African countries that were once under European colonial rule. While the exhibition is clearly focused on Europe, there was a missed opportunity here to explore the unfortunate legacies of witch persecution in these countries, which resulted in profound suffering for non-white slaves and plantation workers who were unable to correlate occult animistic worldviews with the imposition of Christianity.

I am critical of these aspects of *Spellbound*. However, it remains a monumental achievement in celebrating another part of the story of witchcraft – particularly in the exhibition’s earlier stages – that dominant narratives focusing solely on evil and suffering risk overlooking, a story that casts cultural histories of magic and the supernatural in more positive terms by exploring their links to love, healing, and in some important cases to empowerment as well. It draws together a wide range of evocative, captivating and inspirational artefacts, alongside harrowing reminders of the malevolence not just of spirits or demons in a cosmology that accommodated them, but also of those who demonized vulnerable subjects within their own communities in ways that failed or deliberately refused to acknowledge the value of diverse

strengths, insights and practices – an issue derived from emotional experience that still speaks volumes in such a precarious contemporary moment.

¹ Curation led by Dr Sophie Page (UCL), with Professor Marina Wallace (Artakt). Associate curators: Professor Owen Davies (University of Hertfordshire), Professor Malcolm Gaskill (UEA) and Dr Ceri Houlbrook (University of Hertfordshire).

² Sophie Page and Marina Wallace, 'Introduction', in Sophie Page, Marina Wallace, Owen Davies, Malcolm Gaskill and Ceri Houlbrook, *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2018), pp. 9-11.

³ Malcolm Gaskill, 'The Fear and Loathing of Witches', in *Spellbound: Magic, Ritual & Witchcraft*, p. 108.

Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture*
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. vii + 361.
ISBN 9780198701750.

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As the author of two other monographs involving the Victorian sensory imagination, *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (Manchester University Press, 2001) and *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2008), Catherine Maxwell brings her vast historical knowledge of literary figures of the Victorian period to her latest study, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture*.

Scents and Sensibility is a work of literary history peppered with analysis of scent-related texts. Maxwell reads many of these texts as demonstrating a given author's idiosyncratic tastes but also as revealing deeper connections to cultural mores and metaphors. These connections, in turn, blossom into fuller readings of the texts themselves as we better understand them in their cultural contexts. The main organizing principle of this study, therefore, is a focus on the authors, whom Maxwell identifies as *olfactifs*, those particularly sensitive to odours as an indicator of their Decadent aesthetic credentials.

The helpful introduction outlines the goals of this study, confining it to the realms of the literary and the aesthetic, steering clear of 'bad smells' and everyday odours. In her first chapter, 'Top Notes: Victorian Perfume Contexts', Maxwell discusses the complex social mores surrounding the perception of scent in the Victorian era. She begins by exploring olfaction's paradoxical status as both potentially crudely corporeal in its connection with bodily odours and transcendent in its implementation as incense in religious rites. Perfume, which scents the body (or clothing) with pleasant smells, occupies a space of tension. Maxwell also discusses how Victorian beliefs about hygiene, the consumption of material goods, and the proliferation of synthetics had a role in perfume's wide proliferation in Victorian Britain, a proliferation which

has been the victim of generalizations and oversights in favor of comparisons to French culture. Using almanacs and advertisements, Maxwell demonstrates that the way Victorians wrote about perfume was not necessarily the way they actually used and enjoyed it. The animalic scent of musk, for instance, was not typically represented as appropriate for a well-bred Victorian woman to wear; however, Maxwell reveals that many popular scents were created with musk and that these products were sold in abundance. Additionally, men were not generally regarded as wearing scent, and yet perfumes in the guise of soap, buttonholes, and scented tobacco were common. Furthermore, the *fin-de-siècle* dandy often used cologne to signal urbanity, while it was also used as literary shorthand for corruption.

Maxwell's focus on the *olfactif* begins towards the end of the first chapter with an exploration of the connection between olfactory sensitivity and poetic nature. She notes that Romantic poets and their poetry were often compared to fragrance. Thus, the ability to detect the subtle scent of dying strawberry leaves, for instance, became a sign of aesthetic refinement. Chapter 2, 'Perfumed Melodies, Violet Memories: Scent and Remembrance in the Nineteenth Century' gives a sampling of the poetry that links scent with memory, including the work of Percy Shelley, Alfred Tennyson, and Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper writing under the name 'Michael Field.' In this chapter, Maxwell also notes that scent is often described in a synesthetic manner, using the language of music to describe its ephemeral character. This chapter introduces major themes of renewal, memory, and influence that return in the subsequent chapters.

Chapters 3 to 7 will be of particular interest to scholars of Decadence, as these closely investigate the personal character of aesthetic writers in relation to their use of scent in literature. Though Decadent poetry is generally associated with the narcotic scents of lily and tuberose, in Chapter 3 'Les Fleurs du Mâle: Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater' Maxwell argues that some Decadent poets, particularly Swinburne, preferred more natural scents in their writing as well as personal lives, but that they were no less *olfactifs*. With Pater, Maxwell introduces the label of

flaireur, which goes beyond *olfactif* in the reliance of one's identity on the sense of smell. Pater's alchemy of scent and influence, in turn, influenced Oscar Wilde, who is more fully explored in Chapter 7, 'Dandies and Decadents: Oscar Wilde and Arthur Symonds'. Chapter 4 returns to scent's conflicted role in conjunction with the body and sexuality and discusses John Addington Symonds's comparisons between flowers and the male body in his *Studies of the Greek Poets*, and Lafcadio Hearn's descriptions of the scent of women of different races and cultures. Chapter 5 begins to show the fruit of Maxwell's labours in an extended reading of Mark André Raffalovich's *Tuberose and Meadowsweet*. In her reading, Maxwell capitalizes on previously discussed metaphors involving scent's capacity to indicate the ephemeral moment, male sexuality, and deadly pleasure. Chapter 6 extends the conversation to address feminine desire in the poetry of Michael Field. And Chapter 7 makes the intriguing choice of not only discussing Wilde's use of scent in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as an indicator of a fall into Decadent influence, but also addressing *Teleny* as a point of comparison to show further connections between scent, music, and desire.

The closing chapters explore how the use of scent in literature can metaphorically represent both the transient moment cherished by Pater, as well as the tenacity of a lingering memory within the work of Symonds. The sillage of scent is a particularly appropriate topic to introduce the final chapter, 'Victorian Drydown and Sillage: Virginia Woolf and Compton Mackenzie', which ends with a recognition that the thematic power of scent lingers into Modernism with authors such as James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, as well as neo-Victorian fiction. However, it is notable that Maxwell no longer uses the moniker *olfactif* or *flaireur* to describe these authors, but *aromancer*, a label, briefly introduced in reference to Pater, that suggests a wizardry employing the full range of scent as a transformative instrument. The reader is left with the impression that Maxwell need not have stopped with Woolf and Mackenzie, but might have wafted into the next century with ease.

Maxwell's work is of the highest level of scholarship, invaluable to anyone interested in Victorian conceptions of scent and the sensory experience. It is also of particular use to those interested in the *fin de siècle* Aesthetic movement, upon which it focuses much of its analysis, contrary to the title's punning suggestion that it may discuss Jane Austen's novels (which it does not). Many scholars will be interested in Maxwell's readings of individual poems, which, when read in the light of her cultural exploration of scent often have more to them than our current generalizations of Victorian relationships to scent would suggest. Maxwell's reading of Symons's 'Mundi Victima' is a particular highlight its blending of historical analysis and close reading. Any criticism levelled against Maxwell's study is that which might be levelled against Wilde or Baudelaire: that its richness risks overwhelming the senses. However, Maxwell guards against this with refreshing clarity and precision, making this a significant addition to Victorian and Decadence studies.

Arthur Machen, *Decadent and Occult Works*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff
(Cambridge: MHRA, 2018), 338 pp.
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Arthur Machen ('rhymes with blacken,' as he used to say) is one of the most intriguing writers and personalities of the *fin de siècle*. A major reason for this is that he seems to at once embody and yet stand apart from so many of its defining characteristics. A cigarette may have been Oscar Wilde's 'perfect pleasure' but Machen preferred the less exquisite, more richly satisfying briar, hymning the joys of languorous nicotine consumption in *The Anatomy of Tobacco* (1886). While Decadents from Charles Baudelaire onwards have been devout ailurophiles, Machen stalked the backstreets of Bloomsbury in the company of Juggernaut, a bulldog fierce enough to frighten even George Egerton. He loved France but preferred the vineyards of Touraine to the fleshpots and cabarets of gay Paris. He was a Celt, but his Welshness gave him a perspective on the world quite different from that of Irish nationalists such as W. B. Yeats. He relished the homosocial spaces of the pub and the club, but he was unambiguously heterosexual in outlook, and while others swooned over the 'bells and smells' of High Church ritual and went over to Rome, Machen refused to accept that the Reformation had made any significant difference to the landscape of faith. He loved the theatre and was, for a time, a professional actor, but his enjoyment of the stage was a world away from Arthur Symons's fetishization of the ballet (and ballet girls). His literary tastes ran from medieval Grail romances to Robert Louis Stevenson, but while Decadents pored over transgressive fiction from France or the transgressive realism of *Jude the Obscure*, his most powerful allegiances were to William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens. Thomas Hardy's novel was, he said in *Hieroglyphics* (1902), 'a long pamphlet on secondary education for farm labourers, with agnostic notes', and he hailed *The Pickwick Papers* as England's version of the *Odyssey*.

Nevertheless, for all the bluffness of his public image, Machen was as capable of recondite intellectualism as any of his peers: one suspects he could have written the type of arcane reference works Wilde pillaged when writing *Dorian Gray*. He was well read in classical and European literature, translating Casanova and the *Heptameron* of Marguerite de Navarre. His occult knowledge was wide-ranging; he catalogued books and manuscripts for the publisher George Redway, he belonged briefly to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and was a life-long friend of the mystic and historian A. E. Waite. He wrote some of the most original and influential Gothic fiction of the late-Victorian period. *The Great God Pan* (1894), *The Three Impostors* (1895), and the short stories of *The House of Souls* (1906) were filled with startling ideas and set pieces (notably the astonishingly sadistic finale of *The Three Impostors*), while elsewhere he offered radical reformulations of metropolitan space in *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) and his visionary late tale, 'N' (1935). His unique body of challenging and bizarre works continues to influence horror fiction and film over seventy years since his death.

Machen's reputation has fluctuated wildly since he first came to public notoriety with *The Great God Pan*. At first, he seemed poised for a *succès de scandale*, but the changes in public taste initiated by Wilde's downfall in the spring of 1895 led to harsh reviews of *The Three Impostors* and a period of cultural exile: it took him a decade to find a publisher for *The Hill of Dreams*. In September 1914 he returned to the public eye with his story, 'The Bowmen', which caused a sensation by appearing to be a news report of the British Expeditionary Force being aided by ghostly archers from the Battle of Agincourt, but his fame (or notoriety) was again short-lived. In the 1920s, however, a new generation of American enthusiasts became interested in his work, and this set the pattern for the subsequent century – periods of obscurity alternating with fashionable acclaim. We seem at present to be in the latter cycle of Machen's reputation, with high-profile advocacy from figures such as Stephen King and the film director Guillermo del Toro, reprints of his fiction from Dover, Penguin, and Oxford World's Classics, the ongoing elegance of the Tartarus Press editions of his fiction and autobiographical writings, and the publication of impressively original academic

works such as Alex Murray's *Landscapes of Decadence* (revelatory in its treatment of Machen's Wales in 2016) and James Machin's *Weird Fiction in Britain* (which demonstrated Machen's importance to a new Gothic aesthetic in 2018). To this roster we must now add Dennis Denisoff's contribution to the MHRA's excellent 'Jewelled Tortoise' imprint, a much-needed edition of Machen's *Decadent and Occult Works*.

Denisoff is not the first to annotate *The Great God Pan* – Roger Luckhurst provided useful notes when it appeared in his eclectic World's Classics anthology, *Late Victorian Gothic Tales* (2009) – and David Trotter did an edition of *The Three Impostors* for Dent in 1995. Denisoff has, however, gone further than his predecessors in providing a detailed scholarly introduction, copious annotations, contextual material and a selection of Machen's essays. The result is an essential collection of Machenalia, though by no means an entirely unproblematic one.

Machen's career began in the 1880s and he was still publishing important fiction as late as 1937, the year he appeared on the BBC's Welsh Programme discussing his beloved Dickens. The Friends of Arthur Machen, the literary society whose work Denisoff generously acknowledges, has done much to bring to light his many essays for newspapers and books such as St John Adcock's *Wonderful London* (1926), but its members' investigations only go to show how much Machen wrote, particularly once, having exhausted a small legacy, he was forced to make a living by his pen. Denisoff's selection runs from 'The Lost Club' (1890) to 'Ritual' (1937) via the full text of *The Hill of Dreams*, the compilation being rounded off with an extract from *The Three Impostors* ('The Recluse of Bayswater' which incorporates the better-known 'The Novel of the White Powder', a staple of horror anthologies), 'The Bowmen', and four prose-poems from *Ornaments in Jade*, published in 1924 but composed in the mid-late 1890s. In addition, Denisoff reprints Machen's essay, 'The Literature of Occultism' (1899), extracts from his critical manifesto *Hieroglyphics*, explaining his concept of 'ecstatic' art, and a handful of reviews, parodies, and other contextual pieces. It is a revealing selection, but it is surprising not to see the one of the Grail visions from 'The Great Return' (1916) or *The Secret Glory* (1922), the remarkable suburban epiphany, 'A Fragment of Life'

(1904), anything from Machen's three autobiographies, 'N', and so on. The dust-jacket claims the contents are 'the gems of Machen's oeuvre', but this is a tricky claim to substantiate. Machen's importance as a writer of mystical Christian fiction ought to be acknowledged more fully, not least because such mysticism was so important an aspect of Decadent (or at least, Symbolist) culture on both sides of the Channel. Perhaps *The Hill of Dreams and Other Writings* would have been a truer reflection of the edition's content, though 'decadent' and 'occult' are undeniably eye-catching.

Denisoff's textual selections are interesting (if a little contentious) and his edition contains very valuable notes which evidence Machen's wide knowledge of literature, mysticism, and the occult. Having edited a 'Tortoise' myself, I know something of the demands which Decadent writers place on their annotators, and I continue to marvel at Lene-Østermark Johansen's edition of Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (2014) which initiated the series. Denisoff and his research assistants track down allusions, quotations, translate Machen's frequent Latin tags, and indicate suggestive connections with other works. Whereas Pater and Symons, the subjects of earlier MHRA editions, range across visual art and music in their allusions, Machen is more solidly literary and often Biblical. Denisoff's notes therefore demonstrate something of the pattern of his wider reading and intellectual engagement as well as enlightening the reader as to the meaning of specific references.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the edition however is its title, and the central claim that Machen should be considered part of the Decadent movement of the 1890s. Denisoff rightly claims Machen for Symbolism, and one wonders when Symons identified Yeats as its 'chief representative' in Britain and Ireland in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1900) how familiar he was with Machen's work. As late as *The London Adventure* (1924), Machen was using Plato's cave analogy to depict the narrowness of human 'reality', suggesting that another order of being existed alongside and beyond it: this is a further reason why 'N' would have been such a valuable addition to the book. Earlier critics have allied Machen with Symbolism, but the links Denisoff makes between his work and wider Symbolist thought are persuasive ones.

Claiming Machen for Decadence is perhaps a more difficult task, not least because Machen himself insisted that he stood apart from it. He was published by the Bodley Head, but this is in itself no guarantee of decadent outlook: William Watson, who led the campaign to sack Aubrey Beardsley from *The Yellow Book*, was one of John Lane's most successful writers of the 1890s. Machen had enjoyed Wilde's conversation in the early 1890s but a few years later found himself repelled by his physical grossness, memorably comparing him to an obese washerwoman. When considering Machen then, a distinction needs to be drawn between those whose personal decadence underpinned the production of their Decadent works, and those whose more modest, even 'respectable' lives did not prevent Decadent artistry and attitudes. These Machen's stories certainly possess. His lush style, especially in *The Hill of Dreams* and parts of *The Secret Glory*, often suggests Pater, though he claimed to have little knowledge of his work. His fondness for transgressive and provocative subject matter, particularly in his first two novels, draws partly on Robert Louis Stevenson (might his *New Arabian Nights* (1882), which supplied the epigraph for the notorious *Chameleon* magazine in 1894, be another addition to the Decadent canon?) but seems equally close to the lurid fantasies of French writers such as Jean Lorrain, Rachilde, and Octave Mirbeau, the morbid mixture of sex and eroticism in *The Great God Pan* anticipating the more extreme manifestations of such in the latter's *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899).

Denisoff considers the affinities between Machen and 'nineties decadence in some detail in the course of his introduction, concluding that because 'Aestheticist', 'Decadent' and 'occult culture' were so 'interwoven' during this period, 'the tendrils of Decadence did not have to rely on Machen's conscious veneration and adaptation in order for them to insinuate themselves into his literary career' (pp. 15-16). Such influence is reinforced by his 'practical publishing arrangements and opportunities' (albeit drastically curtailed after 1895), 'overlapping cultural interpretations', 'avant-garde literary interests, and extended networks of personal relations' (p. 16). Whether or not Machen is 'D/decadent' is therefore a secondary concern. He swam in decadent seas and was stained by their purple waters.

This conclusion seems to slightly downplay the claims of the jacket blurb and the book's cover, which reproduces Beardsley's slyly leering faun from *The Great God Pan's* first edition. It does however serve a valuable purpose in that it removes Machen from a narrowly Gothic sphere of influence and situates his early work in its wider milieu. In Denisoff's edition, Machen emerges as an imaginative and ambitious writer who synthesized a variety of influences and concerns, from the high-spirited but dark comedy of Stevenson to the sonorous prose of the King James Bible.

Any selection from Machen's output will be problematic: an editor can never please every reader, and Machen is someone who inspires fervent devotion, as Denisoff's introduction acknowledges. What's here will certainly enliven the reading lists of many undergraduate courses on the Victorian Gothic, but, hopefully, it will also allow Machen to be seen not simply as a writer of 'shockers' but as a significant and distinctive contributor to the wider literature of his day. The edition is bolstered by a helpful bibliography of secondary works and a chronology of Machen's life and times. It is well produced and very competitively priced, meaning that it should find a home on university reading lists as well as on the hungry shelves of acquisitive Machenites such as myself.

Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 384 pp.
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Is Decadence the end or the beginning of a series of existential concerns about personal identity, nationhood, and literary tradition? Robert Stilling's *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry* addresses this important and long-overdue question. He establishes Western Decadence as a crucial model and foundation to postcolonial poetics.¹ Decadence, Stilling argues, served eminent poets and artists such as Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott, Agha Shahid Ali, Derek Mahon, Yinka Shonibare, Wole Soyinka, and Bernardine Evaristo as a springboard to shape their countries' own poetics either by adapting or rejecting the Decadent writings of prominent nineteenth-century figures such as J.-K. Huysmans, Walter Pater, Henry James, and Oscar Wilde. Stilling's study considers a wide range of postcolonial (European (Irish), South Asian, African, and Caribbean) narratives. He champions the idea of Decadence as an innovative force, one of cultural renovation. Put more figuratively, he considers Decadence as metaphor describing the 'death in birth' (p. 36) of the emergence of postcolonial aesthetics. For many writers 'the postcolonial nation begins in a state of artistic decadence, a decadence not simply imported from the West but composed of those backward-looking elements of indigenous traditions exaggerated by the colonizers' (p. 63).

In five chapters centred on individual postcolonial literary re-workings of Western and indigenous heritage, Stilling's study successfully brings together nineteenth and twentieth-century texts and authors. Decadence is once again discussed as 'both an organic turn in the cycles of world history and as an immanent problem of modernity' (p. 10) complementing recent publications such as Kristin Mahoney's *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015), Vincent B. Sherry's *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015), and *Late Victorian into Modern*

(2016), edited by Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr. However, Stilling's contribution moves the field a step further by eschewing the tendency to study Decadence as nation-specific despite its inherent cosmopolitanism. Transnationalism reaching beyond the boundaries of Euro-American canons is viewed as the core of literary Decadence. The cosmopolitanism of Decadence can no longer be regarded as a mere side effect of post-imperial exchange but the starting point for a remodelling of colonial cultures and their own modern aesthetics.

In *Beginning at the End* Stilling describes the ways in which anticolonial writing embraced Decadent traits such as satire, the rejection of realism, imitation, and a liberal approach to historicity in order to oppose the poetic self-indulgence of Modernism. The introduction usefully draws out the conflict of aesthetic and politically revisionary potential united in the cultural concept of Decadence as described by twentieth-century writers. Under the auspices of postcolonial revisionists of the second half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Modernism no longer automatically stood for the epitome of progress and innovation. All too often an emphasis on social conscience and political activism was sacrificed in favour of pure formalist aesthetics, which remained a key concern in postcolonial writing that attempted to consolidate relationships between histories of empires, new nationalism, and the role of the arts. Instead, Decadence provided a space for negotiations between aesthetics and politics. This, as Stilling notes, is visible in Achebe's literary response to political decadence in Nigeria. Whilst admitting that many of the poems treated in his book do not reflect the *fin-de-siècle* Decadent style elaborated by Wilde and others, Stilling claims that 'decadence is integral to [Achebe's poetic] stance towards the lost revolutionary possibility' of a stable post-independence Nigeria (p. 34). Stilling's book therefore offers no less than a 'new geography of literary decadence' (p. 24) as well as a reassessment of the temporal span of Decadence reaching far into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Although Stilling does not strictly maintain the focus on poetry announced

in the introduction (chapter three discusses drama and fine arts; chapter four a verse novel) this testing of generic boundaries is enriching rather than distracting.

The first chapter explores Agha Shahid Ali's weaving and unweaving of national (and poetic) identity modelled on Wilde's taste for the texts and textiles of 'the East'. Stilling uncovers a series of interesting and unexpected interconnections, for example that same-sex attraction ceased to be represented in Ghazal poetry after Wilde's trials in 1895 (p. 61). This chapter makes a convincing case for the interlacing and mutual effects of Western and Eastern Decadence. Chapter two explores the role of imitation in Derek Walcott's rewriting of colonial heritage caught between attempts to mimic Western art and black folk culture, a 'homegrown variety of decadence, one that manifests itself in an artificial African tribalism' (p. 99). Stilling identifies Walcott's 'transnational cosmopolitanism' informed by various strands of visual arts (Katsushika Hokusai, Antoine Watteau, French Impressionism) in conflict with 'his desire to build an independent West Indian aesthetic' (p. 124) in his search for an idiosyncratic language of West Indian Modernism.

Chapter three, which is the most innovative in the study, is devoted to British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare's revision of British history through his artistic engagement with forms of Anti-realism. Commenting on the burgeoning postcolonial art scene, Stilling observes that Shonibare uses the decadent dichotomy of art versus life to expose the artificiality of falsely-constructed European colonial histories. Stilling's engagement with a variety of texts, not only crossing geographical and temporary borders but also understanding texts as different media, makes this chapter an outstanding reading experience. Richly furnished with illustrations of Shonibare's work, this chapter shows how the subversion of Victorian imperial values is visualized in his artistic installations and films through an artificial inversion of political expectations. In a Brechtian manner content and form are 'estranged', or made foreign, in order to challenge the reader/onlooker to rethink their historical preconceptions. For example, Shonibare's cinematic reimagining of *Dorian Gray* (2001) exceeds the parameters of colonialism

and orientalism: ‘the black dandy substitutes for the white, and an oppressive Englishness substitutes for an oppressive Orientalism’ (p. 155). Whether or not this one-for-one inversion helps to overcome a Saidian binary based on uniform stereotypes of West and East remains debatable and is not further addressed by Stilling. However, this chapter offers very intriguing new dimensions for further research on Decadence and colonial materialism and the visual arts. Stilling’s carefully researched connections draw out the power of the ambivalence of attraction and repulsion towards forms of ‘othering’.

Stilling’s rich study includes postcolonial renovations of the Latin Decadence as well. Chapter Four weaves a delicate web of intertextual relations between Petronius’s *Satyricon*, Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra*, Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson* and Bernardine Evaristo’s 2001 novel *The Emperor’s Babe*. At times this fabric, reiterating Stilling’s playful take on texts, textiles and textures, appears referential. Texts are not always explored in full. Yet the juxtaposition between the African intersections with British history present under the Roman Empire and *fin-de-siècle* neoclassicism is insightful: the comparison of Evaristo’s text exposes the shared cultural roots of two continents and even the multi-faceted inner-European colonial heritage of Celtic traditions, which increasingly became subsumed under the label of British culture. The ‘ghost of lost Celtic languages’ haunts the ‘linguistic decadence of the [Roman] masters’ as portrayed in Evaristo’s verse novel (p. 221).

In his final chapter, Stilling sheds new light on Derek Mahon’s personal reworking of the 1890s Decadent archive in his poetry collection *The Yellow Book* (1997). Taking inspiration from African and Asian sampling of Roman and nineteenth-century Decadent sources (mainly Henry James, the Rhymers’ Club, and Wilde), Mahon ‘locates Ireland’s place within the changing landscape of the global literary market’ (p. 229). As a result, Stilling explains, Decadence might also be understood as an archival methodology of revision. Stilling bases this chapter on some new archival research conducted at Emory University that nurtured Mahon’s ‘cosmopolitan ventriloquism’ (p. 259) in which he aligned Irish, and moreover regional, modernism within the

imagined colonial community. Stilling has discovered some exciting materials, for example Mahon's notes on the biography of Irish independent fighter Roger Casement who, having witnessed atrocities in Belgian-occupied Congo, stirred resistance in Ireland and was executed after the Easter Risings in 1916. Again Stilling convincingly uncovers links between materials that at first sight seem only vaguely related: Mahon's notes and his poems integrate Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* with poems on Roger Casement by W. B. Yeats, Joseph Conrad's encounters with Casement in the 1890s, and Casement's own 'black diaries'. The homosexual allusions contained in these diaries were used against Casement by British forces in his trial, similar to Wilde's case and conviction (p. 270). Decadence is, in many ways, an archive of global histories and Stilling poses some important questions on the future of Decadent archives.

A coda on the importance of Wilde's persona for the global perception of Decadence concludes the volume. Decadence as 'an epithet in anticolonial thought initially signalled a desire to break away from the artistic establishments of Europe and the United States', and 'it just as easily came to express a desire to break into existing artistic establishments and reshape them from within.' (p. 288). With its focus on aesthetic hybridity, Decadence thus provides, in Stilling's view, a unique way for postcolonial writers to reclaim national identity through writing whilst avoiding the trap of realist orthodoxies. Stilling's conclusions here extend the constantly contested definition of Decadence which a number of forthcoming studies aim to redress; such as *Decadence: Cambridge Critical Concepts Series* (forthcoming 2019), edited by Jane Desmarais and David Weir, and *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (forthcoming 2019), edited by Alex Murray and Kate Hext. Stilling adds another perspective by maintaining that 'Decadence comes to suggest the dawn of diverse new national cultures, a pluralization of history, and the retrieval of traditions eclipsed by colonialism just as much as it defines the decline of empires and nations from within' (p. 288).

Considering that the figure of Wilde and his departure from Victorian realism provides one essential red thread running through the study, the only criticism that could be levelled

against it is Stilling's side-lining of the Decadents' own engagement in colonial practice (which is mentioned in passing on p. 303). Wilde, to this day the figurehead of British Aestheticism and victim of political abuse, is a central model for various aspects of Decadence that challenged existing societal and poetic conventions. However, Stilling neglects to mention Wilde's own colonial past. In 1895 he undertook a trip to Algeria with Lord Alfred Douglas and André Gide remarks, in a letter of 25 January to Robert Ross, on the 'lovely brown things' who followed them on a tour through the 'mountains of Kabylia'.² However, this very minor point does not in any way diminish the outstanding merit of this project.

Stilling's book will be indispensable for any scholar of Decadence as it offers insight into a long-overlooked wealth of non-European, non-American vernacular Decadences, which still remain unaccounted for in the broader discussion on global Decadence. Its original contribution lies in the truly global and comparative reading of texts and media beyond a Eurocentric canonical range of literatures. Beautifully written and rigorously researched, this book will be immensely significant for Victorianists, Modernists, and postcolonial theorists alike.

¹ For this review I use the term 'postcolonial' with the awareness that the term carries problematic connotations and that not all authors mentioned would identify with the concept of 'postcolonialism' as constructed by academic discourse.

² Oscar Wilde to Robert Ross, 25 January 1895, in *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 629.

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Geraldine Hudson is a British artist/curator and magickal activist, following her own path of witchcraft alongside being an initiated Thelemite. Having graduated from her MA in 2006 she has exhibited around Europe with work in permanent collections in the Czech Republic, Latvia, and England. She currently resides in Stockholm where, as well as regularly exhibiting her own work, she plays an active role in various artist collectives, notably being on the board and curating sound/experimental music events at Fylkingen, a venue for new music, performance and intermedia art. She organized the first 'Art as a Magick Process' seminar and workshop on the vernal equinox in Stockholm (2017). This then developed into the two-day symposium, 'Conjuring Creativity – Art & the Esoteric', co-curated with Dr Per Faxneld, bringing together academics, artists, performers and musicians (April 2018). This is to become a biennial event in-between other esoteric based art happenings.

Cherrie Kwok is a PhD student in English literature at the University of Virginia, where she focuses on Decadent poetry, Victorian literature, and the Digital Humanities. She earned her MA in English from New York University, where her work ‘A Study of Global Decadence: Sarojini Naidu and Arthur Symons’ received the English Department’s Millicent Bell Prize for Most Outstanding Thesis.

Hieronymous La Plume. To say that Hieronymous La Plume lives somewhere in upstate New York overstates the case, both biologically and geographically. In truth, wherever he hangs his head is home. Knowing that only shallow people take interest in anything, he is reluctant to make claims about his own dubious achievements, although he does admit to a certain amount of pride in knowing that, almost despite himself, he has managed to keep despondency alive all these years.

Sandra M. Leonard is an Assistant Professor of English at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, where she teaches composition, literature, and linguistics. She has an MA in Literary Linguistics from University of Nottingham and a PhD in Literature and Criticism from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. She researches intertextual literary devices and nineteenth-century transgressive authorship. Currently, she is working on a project involving Oscar Wilde and the aesthetic potential of plagiarism.

Sophie Mantrant is Senior Lecturer in British and American literature at the University of Strasbourg, France. Her research focuses on Gothic fiction, with a particular interest in the late nineteenth century. She has published a number of articles on *fin-de-siècle* supernatural fiction and is the author of a book on Arthur Machen entitled *Arthur Machen et l’art du hiéroglyphe* (Le Visage Vert, 2016).

Patricia Pulham is Professor of Victorian Literature, Secretary of the British Association for Victorian Studies, and editor of the EUP journal, *Victoriographies*. She is author of *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee’s Supernatural Tales* (Ashgate, 2008) and has published several edited collections on Victorian and neo-Victorian topics, as well as a range of articles on nineteenth-century writers including Wilkie Collins, Thomas Hardy, Oscar Wilde, and A. C. Swinburne. She edited the four-volume collection: *Spiritualism, 1840-1930*, published by Routledge in 2014, and is currently completing a monograph on the sculptural body in Victorian Literature, which is contracted to Edinburgh University Press.

Mathew Rickard is a final-year PhD candidate in the French department at Queen’s University Belfast in Northern Ireland. His thesis is entitled ‘Against the Grain: The Poetics of Non-Normative Masculinity in Decadent French Literature’ and is concerned with the intersection of French decadent poetics and the emergence of non-normative masculine identities and behaviours at the end of the nineteenth century, interrogating to what extent masculinity is ‘performed’ in decadent texts. His aim is to focus on the ways in which masculinity is negotiated through narrative representation, and the ways in which it is renegotiated and reinscribed as an effect of intertextuality. He regularly presents his work on decadence, while his broader research interests include book culture, intertextuality, transgression, and gender studies, with a particular focus on masculinities and queer theory.

Brian Stableford has been writing for fifty years. His recent scholarly work includes *New Atlantis: A Narrative History of Scientific Romance* (Wildside Press, 2016), *The Plurality of Imaginary Worlds: The Evolution of French roman scientifique* (Black Coat Press, 2017) and *Tales of Enchantment and Disenchantment: A History of Faerie* (Black Coat Press, 2019). In support of the latter projects he has translated more than a hundred volumes of *romans scientifiques* and more than twenty volumes

of *contes de fées* into English. He has also edited *Decadence and Symbolism: A Showcase Anthology* (Snuggly Books, 2018). His recent fiction, in the genre of metaphysical fantasy, includes a trilogy of novels set in an artists' colony in late nineteenth-century Gaul, in an alternate world in which the Roman Empire never fell, consisting of *Eurydice's Lament* (2015), *The Mirror of Dionysus* (2017) and *The Pool of Mnemosyne* (2018), published by Black Coat Press; and a trilogy set in the present day in West Wales, consisting of *Spirits of the Vasty Deep* (2018), *The Insubstantial Pageant* (2018) and *The Truths of Darkness* (2019), published by Snuggly Books.

EDITORIAL

Jane Desmarais (Editor-in-Chief) is Professor of English in the Department of English and Comparative Literature 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 currently working with David Weir on a volume on Decadence for the *Cambridge Critical Concepts* series (forthcoming in 2019). Her monograph, *Monsters Under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers, 1850 to the Present*, was published by Reaktion in 2018.

Alice Condé (Deputy Editor) is an Associate Tutor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is co-editor of *Decadence and the Senses* (with Jane Desmarais, Legenda, 2017) and is currently co-editing *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson* (with Jessica Gossling, Peter Lang, forthcoming 2019). Her essay on 'Decadence and Popular Culture' is forthcoming in Jane Desmarais and David Weir's volume on Decadence for the *Cambridge Critical Concepts* series.

Jessica Gossling (Deputy Editor) is a Postdoctoral Associate Tutor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Editorial Assistant for *The Literary Encyclopedia*. Her current research focuses on the Decadent threshold poetics of Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Arthur Symons, and Ernest Dowson. She is co-editor of *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson (1867-1900)* and her essay on 'À rebours and the House at Fontenay' is published in *Decadence and the Senses*. Alice and Jessica are the webmistresses of *Volupté.gold.ac.uk*.

Robert Pruett (Reviews Editor) is a DPhil student in French at St Cross College, Oxford, where he is preparing a thesis on eros and idealism in the work of Remy de Gourmont. Alongside the Cercle des Amateurs de Remy de Gourmont (CARGO), he co-organized the *Fin de Siècle Symposium* (Balliol College, Oxford, 2016). In 2018, he co-organized *Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult* at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His chapter on 'Dowson, France, and the Catholic Image' will appear in the forthcoming *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson* (ed. by Alice Condé and Jessica Gossling).

Decadence and Cinema

Volupté, Volume 2, Issue 2 (Winter 2019)

Call for Papers

Volupté invites contributions to a special issue devoted to decadence and cinema guest-edited by David Weir to appear in winter 2019.

Areas of (overlapping) interest include filmic adaptations of specific works in the decadent canon (e.g., Ernst Lubitsch's adaptation of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*); the relationship of certain film genres (e.g., film noir) to the decadent tradition; the work of particular directors whose films can be construed as decadent because of some combination of mise-en-scène and scenario (e.g., Kenneth Anger, Luchino Visconti, Federico Fellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Nagisa Ôshima, Derek Jarman, Peter Greenaway, David Lynch, John Waters); the relationship between decadence and camp, whether deliberate (Ken Russell's *Salome's Last Dance*) or inadvertent (Charles Bryant's and Alla Nazimova's 1923 *Salomé*); the interest in decadent narratives and themes during the silent era (e.g., the vamp persona, the Babylon segment of D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, Erich von Stroheim's explorations of aristocratic corruption and decline, etc.); representations of societal decay in different national cinemas (especially the Weimar Era in Germany); and the relationship between the aesthetic constructs of classicism and decadence in the cinematic context (e.g., the decline of poetic realism in French cinema of the 1930s into the 'tradition of quality' in the 1950s prior to the rejuvenation of cinema in the form of the *nouvelle vague* of the late 1950s and early 1960s).

Prospective contributors should send essay drafts to volupte@gold.ac.uk by 30 September 2019.