Decadence, Degeneration, and the End

Studies in the European Fin de Siècle

Edited by

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The social, scientific, and industrial revolutions of the later nineteenth century brought with them a ferment of new artistic visions. An emphasis on scientific determinism and the depiction of reality led to the aesthetic movement known as Naturalism, which allowed the human condition to be presented in detached, objective terms, often with a minimum of moral judgment. This in turn was counterbalanced by more metaphorical modes of expression such as Symbolism, Decadence, and Aestheticism, which flourished in both literature and the visual arts, and tended to exalt subjective individual experience at the expense of straightforward depictions of nature and reality. Dismay at the fast pace of social and technological innovation led many adherents of these less realistic movements to reject faith in the new beginnings proclaimed by the voices of progress, and instead focus in an almost perverse way on the imagery of degeneration, artificiality, and ruin. By the 1890s, the provocative, anti-traditionalist attitudes of those writers and artists who had come to be called Decadents, combined with their often bizarre personal habits, had inspired the name for an age that was fascinated by the contemplation of both sumptuousness and demise: the fin de siècle.

These artistic and social visions of degeneration and death derived from a variety of inspirations. The pessimistic philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), who had envisioned human existence as a miserable round of unsatisfied needs and desires that might only be alleviated by the contemplation of works of art or the annihilation of the self, contributed much to fin-de-siècle consciousness. Another significant influence may be found in the numerous writers and artists whose works served to link the themes and imagery of...
Romanticism with those of Symbolism and the fin-de-siècle evocations of Decadence, such as William Blake, Edgar Allen Poe, Eugène Delacroix, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Charles Baudelaire, and Gustave Flaubert. The greatest single influence on French Symbolist poetry derives from Baudelaire (1821–67), whose works revealed a disjointed world that could not be interpreted in rational terms, and which was often pervaded with images of physical beauty prone to dissolution and decay. In his preface to the 1869 edition of Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil), the poet and cultural critic Théophile Gautier provided an early summation of the precepts of Decadence in the arts, which he treated in terms of artistic style:

The poet of *Les Fleurs du mal* was fond of the style that is improperly called “decadence”; this is nothing more than art which has reached the same point of maturity that marks aging civilizations as their suns begin to set. It is an ingenious style, complex, wise, full of nuances and refinements, forever extending the limits of language, borrowing from all technical lexicons, taking colors from every palette and notes from every musical instrument. This style endeavors to express the ineffable nature of thought, the vaguest and most fleeting contours of form, with an ear for translating the subtle whisperings of neurosis, the avowals of a depraved and decrepit passion, and the bizarre hallucinations of an obsession that borders on insanity. This style of decadence is the final utterance of the Word that has already been called upon to express everything, that has already been pushed to the absolute limit. This style brings to mind a language that has become marbled with a greenish tinge of decomposition, like the spoiled hanging meat of the late Roman empire, or the labyrinthine refinements of the Byzantine school, which was the final form of Greek art once it had lapsed into deliquescence. Such a language is quite necessary, and yet fatal, for those people and civilizations in whom artificial life has replaced natural life, thereby creating unimagined yearnings within men.²

Some years before the flowering of decadent expression in the final decades of the century, Gautier had already taken note of some of its salient themes, as expressed in the poetry of Baudelaire: the imagery of an exhausted civilization in decline, for which artificiality had come to triumph over any life that might be in tune with nature; the link between decadent society and sickness, especially neurosis and mental instability; the need for language to find arcane, unfamiliar modes and terms of expression; and the correlation between fading civilization and the imagery of death and dissolution.³ Quite soon after Gautier wrote his preface, the fantasy of empires in a state of
collapse became a painful reality, with the humiliating defeat of the French Second Empire at the hands of Prussia in the war of 1870–71. The memory of this event, and the social turmoil that it caused, eventually became subsumed in fin-de-siècle consciousness.

The early Symbolist poets were drawn to beauty, but it was often a cold, miserable beauty that was destined for death and decay. This can be seen in Baudelaire’s many poems dealing with decomposition, sometimes that of a woman whom the poet was inclined to mock for her vanity. Death, as the culmination of the process of degeneration, in time emerged as a central motif of fin-de-siècle Decadence, revealing a peculiar fascination not only for the death of beauty, but also death in beauty, the sublimely aesthetic experience of mourir en beauté (dying in beauty). In 1864, the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–98) began the long formation of his iconic figure Hérodiade (Herodias), the self-absorbed biblical princess who rejoices in the sterility of her hard frigid beauty, a beauty that she associates with death. In time, the story of Herodias and her daughter Salome, who was said to have performed an erotic dance for the head of John the Baptist, came to fascinate the followers of Symbolism, as can be seen in the influential paintings of the subject that Gustave Moreau (1826–98) presented in Paris in 1876, as well as in the novella Hérodiade (1877) by Gustave Flaubert (1821–80). Moreau’s sensual paintings of Salome are also prominently featured in the novel that provided the clarion call of the decadent movement, as well as the quintessential portrait of the aesthetic decadent hero: À rebours (Against Nature) (1884), by Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848–1907).

When Huysmans’s protagonist, the self-indulgent aristocrat Jean Des Esseintes, amuses himself by encrusting a tortoise with so many jewels that it dies, the evocation of beauty that leads to destruction can be said to have reached its most grotesque extreme. For the Symbolist painter Odilon Redon (1840–1916), Death personified was a beautiful goddess, “divin refuge, heureuse fin du mal de vie” (a divine refuge, a happy end to the misery of life). In the fin-de-siècle experience, death and beauty go hand in hand, as in the case of the dwarf in Oscar Wilde’s tale “The Birthday of the Infanta,” who dies of grief when he realizes that he lacks beauty, and thus perforce must be deprived of love.

By the 1880s, the French Symbolists had made an open fetish of their pessimism and fondness for the imagery of degeneration, thereby declaring themselves in rebellion against the mores of the bourgeoisie. In 1883, the poet Paul Verlaine (1844–96) published one of the iconic poems of the movement, “Langueur,” which provided a startling and provocative image in its famous opening line “Je suis l’Empire à la fin
Here the degeneration of society as a whole becomes conjoined with that of the artistic individual, the poet who is supremely content in his languid role as the tottering Empire, absorbed in creative distractions as the triumphant barbarians approach. In 1884, with an expanded version appearing in 1888, Verlaine published *Les poètes maudits*, a collection of poems by himself and others, including Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91) and Mallarmé, which emphasized the antisocial and even self-destructive image of the decadent poet. In 1886, the journalist Anatole Baju (1861–1903) founded a journal, *Le Décadent*, which openly rejoiced in the provocative label of Decadence, surviving as the official organ of the movement until 1889. In their defiant revolt against artistic convention, the Decadents and Symbolists provided an exuberant polemic against positivism, rationalism, materialism, faith in progress, and the virtues of bourgeois conformity, rejecting descriptions of nature in favor of a kind of aesthetic artificiality, of an indulgence in the realms of the senses, imagination, and individual experience. If cults of beauty and the self were one result of this, another was the expression of profound pessimism, a tendency to focus on the imagery of doom, decay, and a society in decline.

The fin-de-siècle experience in Britain had, in its turn, derived much from the art movement known as Aestheticism, a reaction against utilitarianism and blind faith in industrial progress. The Aesthetes, whose ideals descended from the art and poetry of the Pre-Raphaelites, exalted art for its own sake, apart from considerations of morality or social purpose. Their attitudes were generally seen as congruent with those of the Symbolists, and by the last decade of the century, the unique aesthetic culture of the fin de siècle, embodied in Britain most plainly in the works of Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), reveals the influences of both the Symbolists and Aesthetes, all viewed as Decadents in the eyes of the general public. Decadence or *décadisme* was only sporadically regarded an organized, coherent movement, even by critics of the French literature of the 1880s that reflected the inspiration of Baudelaire, Verlaine, or Huysmans. Within the realm of the visual arts, the notion of Decadence has had an even more tenuous presence, being largely viewed as little more than an inclination of certain artists who are included in the overriding Symbolist movement, instead of being viewed as a category in its own right. As John R. Reed notes, fin-de-siècle Decadence may be regarded as both a social phenomenon and an aesthetic definition, and thus it is not always easy to separate one aspect from the other, nor indeed to define precisely what was meant.
by the term “decadence” in this period. Although Symbolist art in general seeks to create images that might give rise to obscure or transient responses on the part of the viewer, under the influence of decadent consciousness, it tends toward a kind of compositional fragmentation that can yield meaning only if subjected to “an intellectual effort at comprehension.” Not coincidentally, a decadent style has frequently been identified in those artists who are described in Huysmans’s iconic novel, such as Odilon Redon, Rodolphe Bresdin, and most especially Gustave Moreau, whose *Salome Dancing before Herod* becomes a kind of jewel-encrusted reliquary in Reed’s eyes, with each gemstone endowed with a meaning that cries out for interpretation.

In this period, notions of Decadence and degeneration were not limited to the aesthetic experience, nor were they primarily viewed in religious, philosophical, or ethical terms, as had long been the case in the history of Western thought. As the century drew to a close, Decadence and degeneration began to be regarded as sociological phenomena, and indeed they attained a pseudoscientific status in the medical studies of psychiatrists and doctors such as Bénédict Augustin Morel (1809–73) and Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), who sought to define the pathologies of the degenerate individual in society. These studies culminated in the work of the Austrian physician Max Nordau (1849–1923), whose *Degeneration* (1892) analyzed the art and literature of the Decadents as pathological threats to a well-ordered society. In Nordau’s view, a decadent, self-indulgent intelligentsia had forced its ideas of degeneration on the innocent mass of society, instilling within it the absurd notion that civilization was declining inevitably toward its end. For Nordau, Decadence equals depravity: the unhealthy Decadent unreasonably projects his own misery onto that of the flourishing world around him, and thus yearns to drag it down to his level, to make the rest of the society behave as antisocially as he does. The decadent tendency toward what Nordau calls “mysticism,” the inability to view or react to reality in the traditional, time-honored ways (in this regard he equates the dreams of the Symbolists with the visions of the Impressionists, Pointillists, and other avant-garde painters), becomes more than a matter of aesthetic taste: for Nordau, these are all signs of “hysteria,” of a pathological degeneration of the brain that he sets out to describe in precise medical terms throughout his book. For instance, in Nordau’s view, normal painters depict what they actually see, whereas degenerates suffer from nystagmus, a kind of trembling of the eyeball, so that they see everything indistinctly. Thus, the entire phenomenon of Decadence, in all of its
manifestations, could always be explained as some sort of physiological condition; however, it was a condition that, as Nordau imagined, could threaten the very existence of civilization.

The confusion over how to define and characterize the experience of late-nineteenth-century Decadence, which has been called more of a “sensibility” than a true style, becomes quite apparent in the case of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), one of the principal philosophical influences on the fin de siècle. While Nordau could only regard Nietzsche as a capital Decadent, an amoral, pathological, egomaniacal babbler of nonsense, Nietzsche himself identified true social Decadence in the values and attitudes of Christianity, which he characterized as devoted to illness, corruption, decline, and nihilism. In Nietzsche’s view, Christianity had made a virtue of whatever was weak, debased, or flawed, and therefore needed to be replaced with something that reflected the true greatness of man. Christianity was nihilistic because it reduced the natural aspirations of man to sin. In effect, for Nietzsche, the end was already here, in the form of the death of old verities and religions; thus, the only hope of social renewal lay in the rise of a strong, confident human type that would be capable of living according to nature and instinct. At the same time, Nietzsche’s doctrine of the eternal recurrence, a central notion of his influential work *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885), explicitly denied the possibility that humanity could ever reach an end, since an essentially purposeless cosmos cannot have a goal or be directed toward a final state; thus, all things are locked into a condition of endless and senseless repetition. This is the condition to which mankind must learn to adapt, and in which it must find a way to flourish.

By the final decade of the century, the themes and motifs of Decadence had become more pervasive and tended to manifest themselves in diverse ways throughout culture. Attitudes toward Decadence became ambiguous, often falling somewhere between the wholehearted embrace of Gautier and the Symbolist poets on the one hand, and the strident condemnation of Nordau on the other. As a result, Decadence and degeneration might well appear as central themes in a work that would otherwise seem to be disposed to reject their validity. It has been noted that the pathologically neurotic (or as it was known then, “neurasthenic”) Des Esseintes of Huysmans’s *À rebours* ends his antisocial experiment, his attempt to achieve the total aestheticization of existence, as a miserable failure. Moreover, it would be difficult to argue that Oscar Wilde expected his readers to yearn to imitate the insensitive depravity of the protagonist in Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), nor indeed to desire to
share his fate. The Time Traveler in H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895) is only too glad to leave the supremely decadent society that he discovers hundreds of thousands of years in the future, wherein the childlike, ineffectual Eloi live on nothing but fruit and passively allow themselves to be consumed by a superior but more sinister human subspecies, while they dwell in apparent bliss amid the ruins of a failed civilization.\(^{24}\) This ambiguity of the fin-de-siècle vision of Decadence is perhaps most evident in the historical novel *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero* (1895), by the Polish author Henryk Sienkiewicz. At first glance, Sienkiewicz’s work appears to provide an unabashed exaltation of the virtues of first-century Christianity in the face of unrelenting pagan persecution; and indeed, the author made no secret of his fervent Catholicism. Nonetheless, the novel does not fail to titillate or fascinate its readers to a certain extent by offering them pruriently decadent material, not only with its lavish descriptions of the feasts and orgies of Nero’s court, but also with lengthy descriptions of horrific martyrdom. At the end of the novel, there is relatively little description of the happy life of the ostensible protagonists, the Christian lovers who have barely managed to escape the horrors of Nero’s persecutions. Instead, the primary emphasis is on an act of *mourir en beauté*, the extended suicide of the work’s decadent—aesthete hero, Petronius Arbiter Elegantiarum (“the arbiter of elegance”), who cheerfully opens his veins along with his beloved slave-mistress on orders from Nero, surrounded by every artistic refinement in a sumptuous party setting.\(^{25}\) Once the two find their happy death by exsanguination, they become, in effect, works of art themselves: “The guests, looking at these two white forms, which resembled two wonderful statues, understood well that with them perished all that was left to their world at that time—poetry and beauty.”\(^{26}\) The novel purports to provide an apotheosis of nascent Christianity; yet this orientation becomes at least partly subsumed by a last long, fascinated look at the degeneration of pagan Rome, on the brink of collapse in an orgy of beauty, refinement, and death.

The essays in this volume reveal the remarkable variety of forms and modes of expression that characterized the various visions of Decadence, degeneration, and the end of things during the fin de siècle. The term Decadence can reflect a mode of expression, a thematic inclination, a stylistic attitude, or an aesthetic tendency, but it can also function as a manifestation of actual cultural deterioration.\(^{27}\) In the latter context, it may be conjoined to depictions of cultural or physical degeneration. These in turn lead quite naturally to the idea of the “end,” defined both in temporal terms, as the death of individuals
or the fall of civilizations, and as the expression of general societal pessimism that characterized the fin de siècle, with its delusions concerning positivistic ideals of progress, as well as its notion that God and traditional displays of piety had been effectively supplanted by recent scientific discoveries.

The volume is divided into four parts. The first, “The Twilight World: Decadent Visions of the World, Society and Culture,” presents four essays concerning various responses, including those influenced by prevailing scientific theories, to perceptions of decline or decay of societies in the past, present, or future. The first of these provides a vision of the death of the entire universe, in Mason Tattersall’s “Thermal Degeneration: Thermodynamics and the Heat-Death of the Universe in Victorian Science, Philosophy, and Culture.” Tattersall describes the impact of the prevailing fin-de-siècle theory that the universe was fated to die a slow, cold death according to the new theories of thermodynamics, concentrating especially on the manifestations of this notion on the arts, religion, and society of Britain. This essay is followed by the contribution of Natalia Santamaría Laorden, “A Regenerative Decadence or a Decadent Regeneration: Challenges to Darwinian Determinism from French, Spanish and Latin American Writers in the Fin-de-Siècle.” Here Santamaría Laorden explores the influence of Darwinian evolutionary theory on contemporary explanations for, and responses to, the perceived political decline of the entire Latin race, inspired in part by gloomy assessments of the military defeats of France in 1870 and Spain in 1898.

Even though fin-de-siècle artists and writers were often perceived to be estranged from society, both by themselves and by others, many of them felt moved to provide social critiques. Such efforts might include a reassessment of history as a means to criticize contemporary society, especially the history of classical antiquity, which, as has been noted, held a special fascination for fin-de-siècle writers and artists. The interpretation of antiquity is the central topic of Anastasia Antonopoulou’s essay, “Late Antiquity as an Expression of Decadence in the Poetry of Constantine P. Cavafy and Stefan George,” which is the next chapter of the first section of the volume. Although neither was familiar with the work of the other, the Greek poet Cavafy and the German poet George shared a common interest in Byzantium and the Late Roman and Hellenistic-Alexandrian eras, regarding them as transitional periods, characterized by exhaustion and the decline of grandiose empires. In her article, Antonopoulou shows how the two prominent fin-de-siècle poets employed antiquity as a means of expressing their decadent vision of contemporary life.
The last chapter in the first section is provided by Magali Fleurot, who describes the critique of British society provided by the fairy tales of one of the key figures of the fin de siècle, Oscar Wilde. In her essay titled “Decadence and Regeneration: Oscar Wilde’s Fairy Tales as a Tool for Social Change,” Fleurot demonstrates that Wilde’s fairy tales were ultimately intended to call for regenerative improvements in a Victorian society subverted by the upheavals of modernity, regardless of the accusations of degeneration that were leveled at the author by critics.

The second section of the volume is “The Seduction of Sickness.” The interest in morbidity and pathology during the fin de siècle was undoubtedly due in part to commercial reasons, thanks to social changes and increased literacy among the wider European public. Other important factors included the influence of positivism, advances in medicine, and the different theories of physical and mental degeneration that came to the fore during the second half of the nineteenth century. Fin-de-siècle culture, especially the decadent movement, was more obsessed with the portrayal of illness than any other aesthetic or intellectual movement that had preceded it. Sickness was also employed as a metaphor by social critics and decadent artists who saw themselves at odds with the values and visions of the ostensibly “healthy” bourgeois society. Pirjo Lyytikäinen’s chapter “Decadent Tropologies of Sickness” analyzes disease as a literary trope in Nordic decadent literature, with emphasis on the ways in which the pervasive “embrace of decay” in the novels of Ola Hansson, Volter Kilpi, and Joel Lehtonen might serve to subvert bourgeois values, especially under the influence of the imagery of illness in Huysmans’s À rebours. This chapter is followed by the work of Abigail Susik, which concentrates on two social problems of the period: consumerism and drug addiction. In “Consuming and Consumed: Woman as Habituée in Eugène Grasset’s Morphinomaniac,” she analyzes Grasset’s lithograph La morphinomane as a form of aestheticized critique of social degeneration. Kyle Mox offers the final essay of this section, “Decadence, Melancholia, and the Making of Modernism in the Salome Fairy Tales of Strindberg, Wilde, and Ibsen,” a study of the imagery of melancholia in some important fin-de-siècle literary depictions of the character Salome, the most pervasive artistic creation of the decadent movement.

Misogyny was another of the salient characteristics of the fin de siècle. It has been interpreted as a consequence of the exaltation of the artificial on the part of some Decadents, as well as their hostility to nature; but it may also reveal their tendency toward a kind of hatred
of life that regarded woman, the one who gives birth, as a central symbol. The prevailing misogyny also appears to result from male responses to nineteenth-century movements for the emancipation of women, which represented a threat to traditional notions of the inherent superiority of men. Fin-de-siècle views of women are reflected in the third section of the volume, “Decadence and the Feminine,” beginning with Kristen M. Harkness’s chapter “Mariia Iakunchikova and the Roots of Decadence in Late-Nineteenth Century Russian Modernism,” the study of a consumptive Russian painter who attempted to disassociate herself from the critical expectations of her homeland while seeking a place in the highly competitive Paris art scene. Iakunchikova’s efforts to create her own self-image and come to grips with her physical decline, all the while resisting the tendency of critics to define her art as decadent, reveal many of the tensions inherent in the fin-de-siècle aesthetic experience. They also reflect the perceived threat to masculine identity that was embodied in the emancipated woman, a threat that reached its fullest expression in the myriad depictions of Salome, the ultimate “castrating” femme fatale of decadence. Her popularity as a trope in the visual arts and literature was so great that critics have coined the term “salomania” to describe the phenomenon. In his essay “The Spectral Salome: Salomania and Fin-de-Siècle Sexology and Racial Theory,” Johannes Burgers analyzes the figure of the biblical princess, with emphasis on Oscar Wilde’s incarnation of her, in conjunction with the sexual and anti-Semitic theories that so often characterized views of degeneration by the end of the nineteenth century. The third section of the volume concludes with Gülru Çakmak’s chapter “‘For the Strong-Minded Alone’: Evolution, Female Atavism and Degeneration in Aubrey Beardsley’s Salome.” Here the emphasis is on the illustrations that Beardsley drew for Wilde’s English edition of his play Salomé in 1894. In harmony with Burgers’s thesis, Çakmak demonstrates that Beardsley was inspired by the scientific notions of nineteenth-century naturalists and criminal anthropologists in his depiction of the biblical princess as a symbol of pathological atavism and degeneration.

The pessimistic atmosphere of the fin de siècle might culminate in visions of the end of the world, or it might manifest itself in a fascination for the death of the body. This theme, ultimately descended from the motifs of Romanticism, took on a new characterization in light of the scientific discoveries of the later nineteenth century, which made death essentially meaningless in the eyes of many, by abolishing traditional concepts of divine providence and the afterlife. The volume concludes with the section titled “Two
Studies of Death,” including Maura Coughlin’s chapter “Death at Sea: Symbolism and Charles Cottet’s Subjective Realism,” a study of the ways in which the French painter Cottet (1863–1925) depicted the isolated world of the fishing communities of Brittany as a land consumed with the imagery of death and mourning. Rejecting the traditional view that Cottet indulged in artistic primitivism, a kind of mythic romance of the rustic in nature, Coughlin describes instead the artist’s mastery of a subjective realism that revealed hard truths of contemporary life. This is followed by the last chapter of the volume, “The Seduction of Thanatos: Gabriele D’Annunzio and the Decadent Death” by Marja Härmänmaa, which explores the various notions and depictions of death that appear throughout the works of the Italian author D’Annunzio (1863–1938). D’Annunzio’s quest for personal immortality through grand gestures and works of art, as well as the myriad references to death that pervade his cult of self, can be viewed as an almost paradoxical incarnation of Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return: the life that is lived so well, and makes so fine an end, must be worthy of imitation, and therefore, endless repetition.

Notes


3. On the persistent imagery of late antiquity in visions of Decadence, see Jullian, Dreamers of Decadence, pp. 149–61; and Calinescu, Five Faces of Modernity, pp. 158–60.


15. Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 135. For the descriptions of these artists in Huysmans’s novel, see Huysmans, *Against Nature*, pp. 44–53. On


18. For Nordau’s characterization of avant-garde painters as hysterical degenerates, see M. Nordau (1968) Degeneration (New York: Fertig), p. 27.

19. For the notion of Decadence as a sensibility, “in particular, a critical sensibility and an unusually worshipful mode of spectatorship,” see Hanson, Decadence and Catholicism, p. 30.


22. For the notion that writers drawn to decadent imagery were not necessarily disposed to call for the triumph of decadence, see Hanson, Decadence and Catholicism, p. 29. On the inherent “instability of meaning” of the term Decadence, which might by turns express either a lament for dehumanizing aspects of nineteenth-century social and technological progress, or else an inevitable decline into a state of barbarism, see Weir, Decadence, pp. 11–13.


25. For a very different but contemporaneous view of the historical figure Petronius as author of the Satyricon, which exalts his nobility of
spirit as “the most wanton of scoffers” and emphasizes his opposition to “decadent” Christianity, see Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, p. 50.


27. See Weir, *Decadence*, p. xvi.

PART I

The Twilight World
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CHAPTER 1

Thermal Degeneration: Thermodynamics and the Heat-Death of the Universe in Victorian Science, Philosophy, and Culture

Mason Tattersall

During the nineteenth century, scientific notions of heat progressed from the concept that heat was a physical substance to a new energy-based thermodynamics. This development had a broad impact on European culture in the latter part of the century, particularly in the understanding of time. The temporal universe had traditionally been seen in human terms: it had a birth and it would have a death. In the medieval natural theological worldview, the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of man reflected each other reciprocally. The rise of an increasingly autonomous natural science that indicated no reason to expect a life span for the universe severed this tie. At the close of a century of increasing intellectual, economic, social, cultural, and religious change, this seemed to cast tiny, finite man adrift in a vast and infinite universe. Some found this liberating, some terrifying. The rise of thermodynamics, with its physical reasons for presupposing an impending end reintroduced, for good or ill, finitude into the natural scientific picture of the cosmos.

By mid-century many significant developments had taken place in the understanding of heat. The steam engine had driven massive social change. The physical theory of heat had been replaced with a mechanical theory and a new science of energy, now viewed as an indestructible quantity defined as the ability to do work. Developments
in the scientific understanding of heat had also led to the concept of entropy,—a measure of the disorder of physical systems, of the unavailability of energy for transformations, or the inability to do useful work. Two observations underlay these developments: first, that various forms of energy were convertible (including heat into mechanical work), and second, that heat always flows from hotter to cooler bodies. Further exploration of these phenomena led to a new science of thermodynamics, embodied in two laws:

1) The energy of the universe is constant.
2) The entropy of the universe tends toward a maximum.

From these two basic laws of fundamental import, simplicity, and the most general applicability, there arose a set of intellectual trajectories that played out in fields as diverse as physics and poetry, theology and popular fiction. Entropy reintroduced a finite timescale and mortality to the natural history of the universe that the temporally open-ended views of materialistic mechanism had abandoned. For some, this rehumanized the universe, returning a mortality to it that mirrored our own. For others, this introduced a new kind of apocalypse; not a divinely sanctioned culmination, but a cold end brought on by meaningless mechanistic necessity, the philosophical implications of which were deeply ambiguous.

According to the new science, in any physical, chemical, or biological process, energy was always conserved. The sum total of energy in the universe always remained. Instead of disappearing, it was converted into other forms in the processes that we experience. Thus, the steam engine converted chemical energy stored in coal into heat, and then converted heat into work. No energy was lost in this process. But energy was, in fact, lost to us. In the conversion of heat into work, only a very small amount of the heat created by the burning coal was actually transformed into work. The rest was transferred to the cooler bodies around the engine. Although some energy was converted into work, the rest was dissipated. The rest of the heat was spread out, heating up other objects and the atmosphere. The energy was not lost, but, being dissipated as heat, it was lost to man,—“wasted” as William Thomson put it, “although not annihilated.”

Eventually, all usable energy would be converted into heat, which would disperse and diffuse, bringing the temperature of the colder parts of the universe up and the warmer parts down until everything in existence was at a uniform temperature. Once this happened, all
energy (though not destroyed) would be useless to life. The sun would burn up all its remaining fuel, dissipating its energy into heat, which would be dispersed into space. The cessation of the sun’s furnace would bring all life on earth to an end; this would mean an end to the hydrologic cycle, the winds, and all usable energy on earth.\(^2\) The motions of the planets would eventually be halted by the long, slow force of friction, dissipating celestial kinetic energy into heat, resulting in a cold, dead, motionless universe, as devoid of life as it was of useful energy (Smith and Wise 1989, 498).

Thermodynamics painted a startlingly new and remarkably encompassing picture of the universe. Energy was constant but changed form. Time was unidirectional (as opposed to the reversibility of processes in Newtonian mechanics). Energy was constantly becoming less usable for man; it was constantly being transformed into heat, which was constantly being diffused. This was leading, inevitably, to a final state, where all energy will have been transformed into heat and spread out evenly. Entropy will have reached its maximum. All the energy of the universe will still be there, but it will be useless. All large-scale motion will have ceased,—transformed into vibrations of the particles of matter,—and all life will have died. The cosmos will be left a cold, dead expanse of matter.

Reactions to this picture varied. Some tried to find a way out.\(^3\) Some saw it as proof of God’s design; others saw it as detrimental to religious ideas. Thomson’s group saw the two laws as highlighting the unidirectional nature of God’s creation.\(^4\) This was proof that the universe was created (it had a definite beginning) and that it was moving toward an inevitable end. In drafts of his “On the dynamical theory of heat,” Thomson couched the issue in religious terms, expressing irreversibility, directionality, and dissipation in terms of “a cosmological, and indeed theological principle.” Smith and Wise point to the “depth of his belief that irremediable losses must occur,” pointing to Thomson’s quoting Psalm 102.\(^5\)

The material world could not come back to any previous state without a violation of the laws which have been manifested to man…without a creative act or an act possessing similar power…“The earth shall wax old &c.” The permanence of the present forms and circumstances is limited. Mechanical effect escapes not only from agencies immediately controlled by man, but from all parts of the material world, in the shape of heat, & escapes irrecoverably, though without loss of vis viva. (Smith and Wise 1989, 317, 330)
Thomson saw this irreversibility as proof of the teleological, unidirectional time scheme of the Bible. He was no biblical literalist, but this vision of a finite universe served as a rebuttal to the infinite or cyclical conceptions of the materialists. It returned a life span to the cosmos. The macrocosm of the universe again mirrored the microcosm in man: it had been born; it would die.

This was a time of great change in British religious life. In England, in the wake of Tractarian crises, dissent, evangelical movements, and continuing division within the Church itself, the situation was precarious. The Scottish Presbyterian Church likewise was undergoing massive convulsions. Thomson and his allies saw themselves as providing a middle course between extremes: a rational Christianity, in harmony with science, with a natural theology grounded in the laws of thermodynamics and the science of energy:

As Scottish Presbyterian culture manifested every sign of disintegration, the promoters of the science of energy began to represent the new natural philosophy as a counter to the seductions of enthusiast Biblical revivals on the one hand and evolutionary materialism on the other. (Smith 1998, 6)

The heat-death was part of God’s plan for the history of the universe. The new science was used to promote this Christian rationalist view; science and belief went hand in hand in this new cosmology, but there were competing views. Mechanism was a real threat, and a general shift in scientific thought away from natural theology was on the rise.

Thomson, with his rationalist natural theology, was caught up in the religious turmoil of nineteenth-century Britain. He tried to use his science to chart a middle course, between the unscientific and the irreligious, believing religion and science to be mutually compatible and in harmony with each other. He was promoting a course between the Scylla of scientific naturalism/materialism and the Charybdis of biblical literalism. He responded to the second danger by making no speculations about the actual details of creation (though his time-span was long enough to displease literalists immediately). He attacked the first danger head-on. Since Thomson and the North British group took reversibility to be the core doctrine of materialism, they imagined that the irreversibility inherent in thermodynamics was in itself sufficient to disprove it.

John Tyndall was part of a new generation of scientific naturalists. Though not a thorough (or exclusive) materialist, he was against any
sort of natural theology and pushed for the separation of religious and scientific questions. Tyndall was more of a problem than others who thought along the same lines because he was a physics insider. He was well connected in London, “at the very heart of elite metropolitan science,” and he “wielded an unsurpassed knowledge of German physics, particularly that which related most directly to energy and thermodynamics” (Smith 1998, 179, 180). But the worst thing about Tyndall was that he did not attack or dispute thermodynamics, he co-opted it. Tyndall championed the conservation of “force,” but from a naturalistic rather than a natural theological standpoint. His cosmological views included the new science of energy, but they excluded the theological. And here was a crucial issue: although Thomson and his group saw it as such, there was no logical reason to suppose that the directionality of thermodynamics and the finality of the heat-death presupposed a Christian cosmos.

Tyndall’s 1874 address at the British Association for the Advancement of Science left his position clear, proclaiming: “The impregnable position of science may be described in a few words. We claim, and we shall wrest, from theology the entire domain of cosmological theory.”7 Tyndall became a target of Thomson’s group for obvious reasons. Peter Guthrie Tait and Thomson engaged in a press battle with Tyndall that took place in a variety of forums. Though both scored points, the key loss for Thomson’s side was that the science of energy and the laws of thermodynamics were no longer exclusively their own. These laws of physical nature guaranteed no specific metaphysical interpretation, and their interpretation was thus an open issue.

The Manichean nature of the two laws of thermodynamics proved difficult. The first law pointed to continuity and infinity, while the second law pointed to finitude in terms of both a beginning and, significantly, an end. The philosophical difficulty of reconciling these two laws comes through in Thomson and William Rankine’s different reactions to the second law, in Tyndall’s focus on the first law and reluctance to talk about the second,8 and in Herbert Spencer’s First Principles.

Spencer was,—like Tyndall, to whom he was close,—a scientific naturalist. He favored the divorce of science and religion, and opposed any sort of anthropomorphic theology, but he was, like Tyndall, not a strict materialist. He was an agnostic, of the nineteenth-century variety, arguing that there was nothing science could say about religion. In First Principles he attempts to salvage a portion of religion by abstracting what he believes to be the kernel of truth
behind all religions: that there is something beyond our understanding. But, as this is beyond our understanding, there is very little we can say about it.  

Spencer put great emphasis on the conservation of “force.” The persistence of force became his fundamental principle, expressed in a series of works for which *First Principles* sets the stage. “The sole truth,” he writes,

> which transcends experience by underlying it is... the persistence of force. This being the basis of experience must be the basis of any scientific organization of experiences. To this an ultimate analysis brings us down, and on this a rational synthesis must build up. (Spencer 1880, 167)

Spencer saw progressive evolution, from simple and similar to complex and differentiated forms, as a rule in the physical and social worlds no less than in the biological world (Spencer 1880, 423). The persistence of force underlay all progressive evolutionary processes; thus, the first law was his initial focal point. However, an early misunderstanding of the principle of dissipation and equilibration (as he initially saw the second law) meant that he believed that the directionality of time in Thomson’s picture confirmed his progressive view. When Tyndall corrected him, Spencer was initially horrified. The apocalyptic heat-death threatened a bleak end to his optimistic view of the universe. He “was forced to realize, much to his regret, that progressive evolution seemed incompatible with the second law” (Kragh 2008, 106). He then proposed a solution (like Rankine’s) of natural processes that might restart the process once a heat-death was reached.  

The heat-death posed a new problem for scientific naturalists and materialists. In the past, their views (particularly post-Newton) had generally been of either a cyclical or a temporally open universe. Now science itself was imposing finitude upon them, burdening them with an end of all things, no less weighty without its religious form. What is clear when we examine Tyndall and Spencer is that the heat-death was as immense and difficult an apocalypse for these non-Christian thinkers as the Apocalypse of Revelations was for Christian thinkers.

Another vastly different response to the heat-death could be found in Tait and Balfour Stewart’s *Unseen Universe*. This text was a part of the battle between Tait and Tyndall over the correct interpretation of the science of energy. Tyndall had expanded the scope of the science of energy in materialistic ways, into the realm of biological life,
and, worst of all, had happily combined these ideas with Darwinian evolution. Tait and Stewart’s strange text was an attempt to take the science of energy back from the materialists. They wanted to show that incompatibility between science and religion was an illusion, and to provide a scientific basis for the Christian idea of immortality, both for the body as well as for the spirit, which the second law and its ensuing heat-death seemed to threaten. Their solution was unusual to say the least, and it pleased neither side.

They posited a universe somewhat in line with Thomson’s. It was a universe where energy was conserved and entropy tended toward a maximum. It was created by God, and the laws of nature were expressions of God’s will. The physical universe was heading toward its cold end in an inevitable heat-death. But they proposed a way out by positing a second universe, the unseen universe, connected to ours by energy bonds. This unseen universe was inhabited by intelligent powers and could effect changes in the seen universe through energy transferences. Thus, when the seen universe ran down, the unseen universe could wind it up again. The conservation of energy applied not just to our physical, seen universe, but to the total system. Though the physical universe seemed to be moving toward its end, the unseen universe would persist and cause the seen universe to persist as well.

The unseen universe explained apparent conflicts between Christian religious beliefs and science in a way that seems to do little justice to either. The unseen universe was where immortality existed for individual souls. It allowed for miracles, angels, and “all manner of ‘superior intelligences’ and for the immortality of man” (Smith 1998, 254). Specifically, with regard to the fearful heat-death, Stewart and Tait noted that energy appeared to be dissipating, but that, if we take the whole system into account (including the unseen universe), dissipation might not apply to the whole. They argued that the “laws of energy are generalizations from experience” (Stewart and Tait 1894, 210), which left room for the idea that dissipation might not be inevitable:

Claims like these help us to understand why . . . Thomson and [James] Maxwell did not like *The Unseen Universe*. Not only did it appear to speculate far beyond the boundaries of the visible world, but the weakening of the scientific doctrines of conservation and dissipation of energy in favour of a principle of continuity undercut the strong commitment of both Maxwell and Thomson to belief in God’s absolute creation of matter and energy *ex nihilo* and thus above all too a belief in divine omnipotence. (Smith 1998, 255)
Though they argued for an intelligent agent that they equated with the Christian God, their strange hybrid of physical and metaphysical explanation, entirely speculative and without scientific ground, and also hardly doctrinally correct as far as mainstream Christian beliefs went, created an unusual mélange of ideas that, though popular at the time, had little lasting effect. Their strange attempt to deal with the heat-death and the co-opting of the science of energy by non-Christian scientific naturalists shows the difficulty that these problems posed for philosophical interpretation and the extents to which some would go to neutralize them.

The influence of ideas about useful and useless energy, and its eventual unavailability in a cold, dead future, also made its presence felt in poetry. We may mention Rudyard Kipling’s “McAndrew’s Hymn,” with its world of steam power and movement, of energy transformation, economy, and waste, where the movements of the ship are always measured in terms of the depletion of coal, and the commitment of the narrator’s life to his work has likewise depleted the energies of his soul, always with inevitable dissolution and waste.23 Here the intimate bond between the macrocosm and the microcosm is distinctly palpable and deeply felt.

Algernon Swinburne’s “Garden of Proserpine” concludes with an image of a spent world, when “star nor sun shall waken,” “the sleep eternal” pervading “In an eternal night,” driving home the fact that “no life lives forever” and the entropic certainty of the second law, “that even the weariest river” “winds somewhere safe to sea.”24 Swinburne’s ironic use of mythical/religious elements and secular ideas creates a tension in his work that reflects an unsure world of secularization, rationalism, and the desire for the transcendent.25 The secular/scientific image of the end provided by the heat-death suited Swinburne’s nontheistic outlook.26 And he remarked on Tyndall’s address with approval:

Science, so enlarged and harmonized gives me a sense as much of rest as of light. No mythology can make its believers afraid or loth to be reabsorbed into the immeasurable harmony with but the change of a single individual note in a single bar of the tune, than does the faintest perception of the lowest chord touched in the whole system of things. Even my technical ignorance does not impair, I think, my power to see accurately and seize firmly the first thread of the great clue, because my habit of mind is not (I hope) unscientific, tho’ my work lies in the field of art.27

Ideas, born in the sciences, became part of the common stock of metaphors for artists.
In “Hertha,” Swinburne combines an attack on theism with a mythic/allegorical description of a single essence and power that persists through all variety of transformations of time and space and a linear, progressive view of time. The Earth-Mother Hertha, as man’s own freedom and genius, tells the reader: “God changes, and man, and the form of them bodily; I am the soul.” The winding down of the cycles of the physical world in “To Walt Whitman in America,” of the slow meter of the sun, and the weary river eventually emptying into the entropic sea, all of these images point to the ultimate repose of the universe (Swinburne 1904, 2:129). But Swinburne finds no terror here, but rather, a sense of rest and calm.

The “deep mid mystery of light and of heat that seem to clasp and pierce dark earth, and enkindle dust” appears in “A Nympholept” (Swinburne 1904, 6:135). T. Earle Welby calls this “the finest lyric [Swinburne] produced in the last twenty years of his life, and in a strange way one of the profoundest nature poems in the language.” Solar imagery abounds here (as in much of Swinburne’s work): “the star / We call the sun, that lit us when life began / To brood on the world that is thine by his grace for a span” (Swinburne 1904, 6:138). “Life and light” appear unified, while “ruin” appears with “all things dim.” “Death seals up life, and darkness the sunbright air” (Swinburne 1904, 6:141). These are familiar images for us. Margot Louis notes that Swinburne uses the passage of time with its alternations of light and dark to point to time’s ultimate meaninglessness that makes us yearn for some sort of transcendence or resolution (Louis 1990, 167–68). Yet the tension between this yearning and the inevitability that the entropic passage of time presents leaves resolution unattainable. “But,” Swinburne asks, “thou, dost thou hear? Stars too but abide for a span, / Gods too but endure for a season” (Swinburne 1904, 6:141).

The transience of all things in the face of the inevitable march of time presents an impenetrable barrier.

Energy, entropy, and the heat-death make their strongest literary impression in late-nineteenth-century science fiction. Here “conversation among articulate Victorians about solar physics and the prospects for life on earth in a cooling solar system worked, as half formulated anxieties will, to generate much imaginative thought and production” (Beer 1996, 225). Furthermore,

To most intelligent Victorian readers physics could become intelligible only in a popular conceptual form. Moreover, the absence of a formal scientific education meant that scientific ideas tended to be received by non-scientific Victorians in the mode of dreads and dreams as well
Two key examples will suffice to familiarize us with the situation. Clarke points to Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Coming Race*, in which an underground species is able to avoid the entropic effects of energy dissipation by controlling “a superior form of energy” that “flows into their ‘world without a sun.’ ” Clarke characterizes the novel as “an allegory of energy and evolution that resonates closely with the conservative cultural agenda of the North British thermodynamicists.”

By controlling the transformations of their superior form of energy, this subterranean species is able to avoid the dissipative effects of energy transfers as we know them; they are freed from the iron grip of the second law. They become “the gods of their own substitute sun” (Clarke 2001, 51). In the world of science fiction fantasy, the secular apocalypse is avoided.

In H. G. Wells’s *The Time Machine*, however, the cold end is inevitable. The 1895 story centers on a journey to the year 802701. In this distant future mankind is physically altered, devolved into two post-human species, the surface-dwelling, weak, peaceful simpletons, the Eloi, and the subterranean, vicious, animalistic Morlocks, who maintain the engines that produce the basic wants for the Eloi and feed on them at night. The Time Traveler’s escape from this bleak future world is made via another leap forward, speeding toward the heat-death itself. Wells combines the themes of biological and thermal degeneration producing a secular account of the end times for a secularizing world.

His picture of the heat-death of the universe, some 30 million years in the future, offers a stark contrast to the fiery and noisome traditional Apocalypse. Traveling toward the end, “The palpitating greyness grew darker.” Though he was traveling at a tremendous speed through aeons of time, the “alternations of night and day grew slower and slower, and so did the passage of the sun across the sky, until they seemed to stretch through centuries.” Thus, the Time Traveler witnessed the weary winding down of the great clock. “At last a steady twilight brooded over the earth.” Then “the sun, red and very large, halted motionless upon the horizon, a vast dome glowing with a dull heat, and now and then suffering a momentary extinction.” All large-scale motion in the solar system had come to a near halt. The rise and fall of the tides was ended forever. “The earth had come to rest
with one face to the sun, even as in our own time the moon faces the earth.”

When the Time Traveler finally stops, he finds himself on a “desolate beach.” Here, even at the twilight of existence, he finds some life, green lichen, a “huge white butterfly,” and weary, slow-moving “monstrous crab-like creature[s]” that attempt, “moving slowly and uncertainly,” to make a sort of last meal of him (Wells 1957, 82–83). Escaping again into the future, he moves now nearer to the uttermost end, where no life at all is possible, where heat-death reigns supreme over the still kingdom.

He travels forward, “drawn on by the mystery of the earth’s fate, watching with a strange fascination the sun grow larger and duller in the westward sky, and the life of the old earth ebb away;” and he brings his machine to a halt:

A bitter cold assailed me. Rare white flakes ever and again came eddying down. To the north-eastward, the glare of snow lay under the starlight of the sable sky, and I could see an undulating crest of hill-locks pinkish white. There were fringes of ice along the sea margin, with drifting masses further out; but the main expanse of that salt ocean, all bloody under the eternal sunset, was still unfrozen. (Wells 1957, 84)

As an inner planet eclipses the sun, the old earth grows colder still:

The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, and the showering white flakes in the air increased in number. From the edge of the sea came a ripple and a whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of the birds, the hum of the insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over. (Wells 1957, 85)

Thus, the earth and life pass, with a whisper rather than a scream, into stillness and ice, predicted by the iron inevitability of cold science.

Wells’s story speaks to the inevitability of endings. It substitutes a secular apocalypse for the religious one he was unable to believe in any longer. “At the climax of The Time Machine, the Traveler’s dead end at Terminal Beach implies that his individual ability to move within time has given him no ultimate reprieve from the larger cosmic catastrophe” (Clarke 2001, 127). But Wells’s move is contrary to the inclinations of Rankine, Stewart, and Tait, who wanted to escape
from inevitability. Wells instead wanted to escape to inevitability. The open-endedness of infinite time terrified him:

The Time Machine (1895) bears witness to the way in which Darwinian origins and thermodynamic endings reshaped interpretations of the apocalypse. Rejection of the biblical vision of the end left Wells, by his own admission, terrified at the prospect of time without limits. His creation of a scientist who travels through time to the end of the world, then returns to his own time and recounts his experiences to his late nineteenth-century audience, represents an attempt to re-impose narrative shape upon human history in the light of its revised origins. (Mills 2007, 143–44)

Wells discovered what many others felt, that time unending was terrifying in its vastness. As a student of Thomas Huxley he was firmly with the materialists, yet he felt the immensity of the universe acutely:

Wells’s Darwinian—or more accurately Huxleyan—education led him away from the eschatological certainties of his evangelical upbringing. Armageddon, the Last Judgement and the triumphant return of Christ, the consummation of the world as described in Revelation, vanished in the open-ended, unimaginable time-scale of geological formations and of the infinitely slow processes of natural selection, to be replaced by a “blackness and a vagueness about the endless vista of years ahead, that was tremendous—that terrified.” Wells’s terror is understandable. As Frank Kermode has said: “tracts of time unpunctuated by meaning derived from the end are not to be borne.” (Mills 2007, 155–56)

A vision of the end represents narrative closure, which we find difficult to live without; such closure has, after all, been with us for so very long.35

What can we say of this nineteenth-century journey through time? We have seen the tangled interplay of multiple intellectual trajectories where “physics, mythography, and the ordinary fear of death converged in late nineteenth-century imaginations” (Beer 1996, 219). The development of thermodynamics had far-reaching implications for cosmology. These had implications for theology and philosophy. And this provided inspiration and subject matter for artists. The return of a finite time scale for the universe, now sanctioned by science, came at a time when, moving through the waning years of the century toward its own inevitable conclusion, endings were very much in the air. The mortality of man was once again reflected in the mortality of the universe.
This was a period in which the further development of science, technology, and industry progressed alongside, contributed to, and interacted with changes in religious thought. It was a time of secularization, as well as religious rethinking and revival. Technological and economic developments caused massive changes in society. And heat, as it always has been, was at the heart of it all. Victorian society was changing and uncertain as it approached the millennium. The idea of the heat-death gave those who had lost their faith in a religious apocalypse a new kind of narrative closure, whether fearful or reassuring. A secular millennium occurred alongside the Christian millennium. Old ideas and narrative constructions die hard. The heat-death allowed a primal archetype and trope to shift from the religious to the secular realm, fulfilling a very basic human need for closure. Fin-de-siècle thermal degeneration brought together the age-old idea of the end of the world with a whole host of other ideas both old and new: linearity, waste and use, *energia*, materialism, religious concerns, and so on, all melted together into a mélange of anxieties that were eventually displaced again with the twentieth-century discovery of nuclear processes, which expanded the thermal time span but introduced their own world-ending fears.

In the end, dissipation, the degeneration of energy, questions of our place in the vast expanse of space and time, all point to the great certainty of our existence and one of the central features of our humanity: our mortality. This inevitability is what Swinburne points to in “The Garden of Proserpine”; it underlies our freedom and promise, but it also looms before us, inescapable and terminal—the future:

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Then star nor sun shall waken,
   Nor any change of light:
Nor sound of waters shaken,
   Nor any sound or sight:
Nor wintry leaves nor vernal,
Nor days nor things diurnal;
Only the sleep eternal
In an eternal night.36
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**Notes**

1. W. Thomson (1882) *Mathematical and Physical Papers*, 6 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), vol. 1, p. 189. Though he was one of a group of British and German thinkers responsible for
the development of thermodynamics, indebted to the work of James Prescott Joule, Hermann von Helmholtz, Rudolf Clausius, and others, Thomson was the crucial figure in the formulation of theories of thermodynamics and energy.


3. Rankine postulated a finite boundary of the universe where radiant heat might eventually be reflected causing new condensations of energy and restarting the process.


5. “24 I said, O my God, take me not away in the midst of my days: thy years are throughout all generations. 25 Of old hast thou laid the foundation of the earth: and the heavens are the work of thy hands. 26 They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: yea, all of them shall wax old like a garment; as a vesture shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed: 27 But thou art the same, and thy years shall have no end. 28 The children of thy servants shall continue, and their seed shall be established before thee” (King James Version).

6. “The new emphasis brought theological and cosmological arguments to the very core of the draft, arguments which illuminated the problems of loss of useful work in machines by relating them to a necessary diffusion of energy which only God Himself could restore…Dissipation had finally become an issue independent of conservation. God alone could create or annihilate energy, and God alone could restore the original distribution or arrangement of energy in the created universe. By accepting such a creed, grounded on theological conceptions of an omnipotent God whose action alone made man’s use of power possible…Thomson synthesized a worldview which incorporated within itself a problem not amenable to purely dynamical understanding.” Smith and Wise, *Energy and Empire*, p. 332.


11. “Spencer was perhaps the earliest of the evolutionary thinkers who found the physicists’ heat death…disturbing and incompatible with progressive evolution, but he was far from…the only one.” Darwin too was very disturbed by the prospect (Kragh, Entropic Creation, pp. 108–10). Spencer’s solution was to look beyond our solar system. He granted that the sun’s energy was being dissipated and that this must lead to the end of life in our solar system. However, citing observed sidereal motion, he proposed that gravity was slowly drawing solar systems in the universe together, which, he proposed, could lead to collisions; these in turn would expel gaseous matter (exploded suns and planets) in the form of receding nebular clouds, which would then condense into new solar systems. Another of his solutions follows Rankine, directly proposing a possible limit (within absolute space) to the extent of the ether in which the known universe is suspended; if thermal radiation reached that limit, it might bounce back and start the mechanism up again. Spencer, First Principles, pp. 458–65.


14. “We therefore devote considerable portions of this volume to a proof that the conception of God which the majority of Christians derive from the New Testament is in no way inconsistent with…scientific principles.” Stewart and Tait, Unseen Universe, p. 19.

15. On the scientific basis of Christian immortality, see Stewart and Tait, Unseen Universe, p. 8. These writers were concerned that the loss of a future, no matter how distant, would be devastating. “Take away all hope of a future state…and we feel certain that the effect upon humanity would be simply disastrous.” Stewart and Tait, Unseen Universe, p. 3. Beer points to the emotional impact: “the death of the sun, according to Thomsonian physics, was not put farther off; on the contrary, it was rendered historically foreseeable. Instead of the timeless apocalypse of Revelations, physicists were busy computing the number of years left for life on earth— they ranged from twenty-one years more to several million…The death of the sun was far off, true enough, but, in the time of the imagination, a million or two of units cannot stave off immediacy. The event is more imaginable than its distance.” G. Beer (1996) Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter (Oxford: Clarendon Press), p. 229.

16. The preface to the sixth edition is already extremely defensive in light of criticism received from both scientific and religious quarters; see Stewart and Tait, Unseen Universe, pp. v–xiii.

17. They claim that their argument stands without Christian beliefs, but presuppose these nonetheless. See Stewart and Tait, Unseen Universe, especially pp. 13–15, 72.
18. Stewart and Tait justify this invention with what they call “the principle of continuity,” which they do not adequately define or justify, yet, which trumps all other arguments and scientific laws (including the second law of thermodynamics). Their definitions of this principle (which later in the text is referred to as a “law”) are as follows: “It thus appears that, assuming the existence of a Supreme Governor of the universe, the principle of Continuity may be said to be the definite expression in words of our trust that He will not put us to permanent intellectual confusion” And “The great scientific principle which we have made use of has been the Law of Continuity. This simply means that the whole universe is of a piece . . . something which an intelligent being is capable of understanding, not completely nor all at once, but better and better the more he studies it.” Stewart and Tait, *Unseen Universe*, pp. 88, 270–71. Unfortunately, the principle of continuity is also part of their justification for asserting that there is a supreme governor, and thus circular reasoning undercuts their assertions.

19. “There exists now an invisible order of things intimately connected with the present, and capable of acting energetically upon it . . . the energy of the present system is to be looked upon as originally derived from the invisible universe, while the forces which give rise to transmutations of energy probably take their origin in the same region. And it appears to us to be natural to imagine that a universe of this nature, which we have reason to think exists . . . connected by bonds of energy with the visible universe, is also capable of receiving energy from it, and of transforming the energy so received.” Stewart and Tait, *Unseen Universe*, p. 199.

20. “We can hardly escape from the conclusion that the visible universe must in matter, as well as in transformable energy, come to an end. But the principle of continuity upon which all such arguments are based still demanding a continuance of the universe, we are forced to believe that there is something beyond that which is visible.” Stewart and Tait, *Unseen Universe*, p. 94. How and why the principle demands the continuance of the universe in this way is not entirely apparent, and the shaky ground upon which their prime principle rests renders the whole thing problematic.


22. Combining multiple nineteenth-century fears into one statement, they refer to heat as “the communist of our universe.” Stewart and Tait, *Unseen Universe*, p. 126.


25. “An imaginative idea—the death of the sun or ‘Balder Dead’ to quote the title of one of Matthew Arnold’s poems on the Norse myth—increased in intensity and range of meaning once it was accorded scientific status and was generating scientific controversy.” Beer, Open Fields, p. 227.


29. Swinburne, Poems, vol. 2, p. 73 This passage is also reminiscent of Psalm 102, but in this case God himself is transient, rather than the reverse.


33. The blending of these devolutionary themes (biological and thermal) is not at all uncommon in the period. Spencer’s philosophy presupposes the connection between biological and physical evolution and devolution along with social and moral (d)evolution as well. The American Henry Adams, in his Degradation of the Democratic Dogma links biological and moral devolution with the dissipation of heat in a universal tendency of all nature to degenerate. This line of thought views organisms as complex systems, and analogically imports theoretical ideas about complex systems from the world of physics (where their success is evident in manifest physical accomplishments). In the biological world of The Time Machine, entropy reigns supreme as the fundamental principle of all complex systems; eventually all will degenerate and decay. We see the decayed remnants of a powerful
social system that has sunk into an entropic social-heat-death where no new work can be done; thus biological devolution reflects the degraded state of society.


35. “The Apocalypse cannot be circumvented in Victorian renegotiations of time and narrative; its imposition of an end...constantly recalls to itself all modes of narrative closure...the articulation of the end joins narrative to apocalypse at every turn because it is time’s acquisition of an end in the apocalyptic tradition that marks the epoch of Western narrative.” Mills, *Approaching Apocalypse*, p. 146.

Traditional literary historiography has divided literature produced in Spain during the fin-de-siècle period into two separate movements: the so-called generation of ‘98 and modernismo.¹ The first group represented those Spanish authors who wrote in response to the loss of key colonies of the Spanish Empire such as Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines at the conclusion of the Spanish–American War, whereas “modernism” defined the efforts of certain other Spanish writers, as well as many Latin Americans, who followed a mainly aesthetic enterprise under the influence of the Symbolist poets in France. Some of the premises behind the dichotomies (narrative/poetry, political/aesthetic, even “masculine”/“feminine”) that were presented by literary historiographers from the 1930s and 1940s (mainly Pedro Laín Entralgo and Pedro Salinas) were exposed as artificial and counterproductive to the study of fin-de-siècle literature as early as 1969 by Ricardo Gullón. However, the two labels still pervade not only school textbooks, but also the titles of recent panels at professional conferences.
The representation of certain writers from this period (mainly Miguel de Unamuno) as errant knights in search of a national soul that was in need of healing, after the ravages done to the Spanish Empire, is generally rooted in two historical misinterpretations. The first of these, from an international perspective, is the assumption made by historians about the Darwinian rhetoric used in this period. “The survival of the fittest” premise was used not only in a biological context to explain the disappearance of certain species, but also as an epistemological strategy adopted to characterize events ranging from the Spanish defeat of 1898 to the rise of American hegemony to France’s loss to Prussia in 1870. The second misinterpretation, from a very nationalistic standpoint, can be identified in the historical view concerning the economic consequences of the loss of colonies in 1898 as they were negatively represented during the dictatorships of Primo de Rivera (1923–30) and Francisco Franco (1939–75). As the economist Juan Pan-Montojo has shown, there was not actually a downturn, but rather an improvement in the Spanish economy at the end of the nineteenth century. The coining of phrases such as “the disaster of 1898” responds to a catastrophic version of events that should be resisted in contemporary historiography.

More recently, the “generation of ‘98” label has been replaced by a more general “fin-de-siècle crisis of the West” (Bernecker 2007, 129). The advantage of coining this phrase is that the nationalistic lenses are no longer present, replaced by a wish to study the relationship to literatures produced beyond the borders of Spain. However, this perspective is also a result of contemporary European historiography that regards Spain as part of the European Union. Spanish writers from the turn of the century used to aspire to some of the political institutions or economic reforms that had become commonplace in other European countries, such as England. In this sense, it is somewhat ironic to include Spain in this retrospective version of events. Even more troublesome is the fact that the desire to see Spain as part of Europe, conjoined to an ambivalent attitude on the part of modern critics toward the former Spanish colonies on American soil, can lead to a denial of the crucial role that some Latin American authors played in Spain at the end of the nineteenth century. The press of the time, in fact, presented a constant collaboration between writers from both shores of the Atlantic. The Argentinian newspaper La Nación, the French magazine El Mundial, and the Spanish journal La lectura provide fine examples of these collaborations. Throughout these writings there is a common wish, shared by Spaniards and Latin
Americans alike, to solve questions raised by the historical, philosophical, and literary circumstances of the period.

Following this approach to Spanish literature and its connection to both European and Latin American writers, in this essay I will focus on how Darwinian premises were echoed in the concepts of degeneration and decadence coined at the time to depict not only historical events, but also the political institutions of France, Spain, and Latin America. More significantly, I will analyze how the rhetoric of degeneration became the stimulus to think creatively about the possibilities of renewing not only the political status of the country, but also its language and literature. In Michael Aronna’s words, some authors “did not wish to confirm the racial condemnation inherent in the discourse of degeneration, but rather sought to extract its promise of evolutionary regeneration” (Aronna 1991, 21). In the recipe for “regeneration,” the ideas of thinkers as diverse as Friedrich Nietzsche and Hippolyte Taine are thrown into a mixture that will sustain the country as it crosses the threshold of the century.

**Regeneration and Agency: Reconfiguring “the Fittest” as the National Leader**

Darwin’s theory of the “survival of the fittest” was read by many as a natural law that could explain the political success of countries, or the lack thereof. Spaniards, much like everyone else, were dismayed by what Spanish sociologists like Joaquín Costa (1846–1911) considered a new law, more animal than human, based on natural selection. In *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin had argued that all species derived from a common origin and that their characteristics were a result of evolution. At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, Costa claims that natural laws led “our race” to death, whereas they enlivened those of England and the United States. This epistemological understanding of history as the result of biological laws resulted in the establishment of taxonomies and hierarchies in the context of nations and races. Specifically, the proposed distinction between the Anglo-Saxon and Latin races provoked controversial debates in Spain, France, and Italy. *La deca-
denza delle nazioni latine* (the decadence of the Latin nations) by Giuseppe Sergi (1900), *Le problème de l’avenir latin* (the problem of the future of Latin countries) (1903), and *À quoi tient l’infériorité française?* (to what is French inferiority due?) by Léon Bazalgette (1900), and *Latini e anglosassoni, razze inferiori e razze superiori* by
Napoleone Colajanni (1906) (Latin and Anglo Saxon, superior and inferior races) all provide examples of these works, which were reprinted several times at the beginning of the twentieth century.\(^5\)

One of the best known of these fin-de-siècle sociological works, À quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons? (Anglo-Saxon superiority: to what is it due?, 1899) by the French pedagogue Edmond Demolins (1852–1907), adapts the system of taxonomies established by Darwin to a map in which the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin races are presented as clearly divided and distinct from one another. Demolins’s purpose is to find the key to the success of Anglo Saxon countries (mainly England and the United States). Despite the positivistic criteria used to divide the world map, Demolins reached beyond purely scientific reasoning and paid attention to the role of education in the populations he examined. While English children were taught to be self-reliant from an early age, countries like France or Italy based their educational systems on the children’s memorization of school material. At the end of the nineteenth century, this emphasis on education had significant outcomes, such as the belief in the necessity of an elite as a means to achieve progress and modernization for one’s country.

For French philosopher Alfred Fouillée, in L’enseignement au point de vue national (education from a national standpoint, 1892), it is the education of an elite that would bring the country forward. In fact, as Venita Datta has argued, this belief in an intellectual elite was shared by both Dreyfusard and anti-Dreyfusard thinkers in fin-de-siècle France (Datta 1999, 72). The power of the press, the reform of the educational systems, as well as the existence of a literate public, made some writers fear the status of the intellectual. As Henry Bérenger made clear in L’Aristocratie Intellectuelle (Intellectual Aristocracy, 1895), universal suffrage was not an option. The only legitimate power must come from a well-educated elite, an “intellectual aristocracy”\(^6\) (Datta 1999, 75).

In Spain, Joaquín Costa’s attitude toward elections provides a remarkable perspective on these debates. According to Costa, the masses are immature and the nation lacks will. Therefore, there is no possibility of an election: “People are still immature: the Nation, unaccustomed to exercising will, has none: there is not an electorate as such” (Costa 1988, 192). The solution, according to Costa’s Oligarquía y Caciquismo como forma de gobierno de España: Urgencia y modo de cambiarla (oligarchy and despotism as the characteristic form of government in Spain: a pressing need and the means to change it, 1901), is to hold simulated elections. The objective of this sham is, in
other words, “pedagogic” (Costa 1988, 192). As Gonzalo Sobejano has observed in his study on Nietzsche’s influence in Spain, Costa was fully aware that both the education and the economy of the country would take a long time to be restored. And it was this awareness of the slowness of change that made him hope for a messianic solution, a leader with exceptional qualities, the “cirujano de hierro” (iron surgeon) who would save the Spanish population and modernize the country (Sobejano 1967, 174). As in the case of Nietzsche’s “superman,” the unscrupulous means of obtaining power, along with the fake elections, would cause the leader “no shame, no bad conscience” (Nietzsche 1964, We Philologists 156). In fact, following Nietzsche, the lack of conscience is also associated with an artistic condition that both the “superman” and the “iron surgeon” must share. Nietzsche says the superman must be “more sincere, open-hearted and passionate as artists are” (Nietzsche 1964, 156), and Costa describes his “iron surgeon” with a similar metaphor as an “artist for the people” (Costa 1988, 115). It is not, however, an exact copy of Nietzsche’s superman that authors like Costa adopt. The German philosopher wrote, “I dream of a combination of men who…shall be willing to be called destroyers…: We will not build prematurely: we do not know, indeed, whether we shall be able to build, or if it would be better not to build at all” (Nietzsche 1964, 190). For the writers in the regeneration movement, semantics revolve exclusively around the concepts of creation and construction. Given that this feature of destruction cannot be applied to their discourse, this aspect of Nietzsche’s thought was modified to fit their objectives.

The references to Nietzsche are made even more explicit in Ariel (1900), by the Uruguayan writer José Enrique Rodó (1871–1917). Rodó wrote this extended essay, which takes its name from one of the characters in Shakespeare’s The Tempest, as a guide to moral and behavioral principles for Latin American youth. Displaying a full command of European thinkers of the time from Charles Baudelaire to Jean-Marie Guyau, Rodó manages to acknowledge the importance of democracy, criticize it, and remodel it. Although he starts his work with very positive references to his audience and an appeal for an integral and harmonious program of education, Rodó then introduces a negative remark: “Democracy has been censured for leading human-kind toward a Sacred Empire of utilitarianism and, in the process, of establishing a norm of mediocrity” (Rodó 2013, 57). Although Rodó does not quote Arthur de Gobineau directly, he refers to emigration as a source of degeneration: his terms for it include “barbarism,”
“inescapable hordes of vulgarity” (Rodó 2013, 61), and “egalitarian barbarity.” The masses are even transformed into animals by Rodó, who makes a vague reference to Baudelaire’s notion of “zoocracy,” and a very specific reference to Charles Morice’s “prudhommes” (upright, proper men): “a fierce legion of Prudhommes who have but a single word for their motto—Mediocrity—and who are inspired by hatred of the extraordinary.”

**Deter minism Redefined: How the “Ideal” and the “Fittest” Became One**

The rhetoric in all these fin-de-siècle works, used to defend and legitimize the existence of an elite or an “intellectual aristocracy,” echoes the models of the ideal character in Hippolyte Taine’s *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise* (history of English literature, first published in 1873) and *L’Idéal dans l’Art* (the ideal in art, first published in 1867). In these works, Taine (1828–93) shows his familiarity with Darwin’s methods and adapts them to the study of literature. In the prologue to *Histoire*, he talks about the primitive “substratum” of each species and how, in the case of man, this “substratum” would evolve according to his race (la race), his geographic and political surroundings (le milieu), and his epoch (le moment). According to the French author, these circumstances not only affect the life of man, but also his literary productions. When Taine focuses on the study of the “ideal” character, he follows a similar approach: “As to ourselves, we shall, as usual, study it as naturalists, that is, methodically, analytically, and shall endeavor to realize not an ode, but a law” (Taine 1965, 11). Despite Taine’s intention to stay faithful to the naturalist “law” and avoid literary “odes,” he believes that the artist’s main role is to transform the “real” character into an ideal one. The artist accomplishes this transformation by modifying the character’s features to make him “more powerful”:

The aim of a work of art is to make known some leading and important character more effectually and clearly than objects do. For that purpose, the artist forms for himself an idea of that character, and according to his idea he transforms the actual subject. The object thus transformed is found to conform to the idea or in other words, to the ideal. Things thus pass from the real to the ideal when the artist reproduces them by modifying them according to his idea and he modifies them according to his idea when, conceiving and eliminating from them some notable character, he systematically changes the natural
relationship of their parts in order to render this character more apparent and more powerful. (Taine 1965, 12)

For Taine, the qualities of an ideal character become more obvious when set vis-à-vis another character that lacks all such qualities. Seen thus, the character of Sancho Panza in Cervantes’s masterwork *El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* functions as the perfect counterpart to the complex Don Quijote: “And directly opposite, to strengthen the impression, the intelligent, straightforward, vulgar fat lout” (Taine 1965, 13). This is the same strategy that Rodó will use as he relates the perfect Ariel to his antagonist: “Ariel is the ideal toward which human selection ascends, the force that wields life’s eternal chisel, effacing from aspiring mankind the clinging vestiges of Caliban, the play’s symbol of brutal sensuality.”

Costa’s representation of the “iron surgeon” and the “masses” follows the same pattern of antagonistic characters with regard to both will and biological constitution. Together with these rhetorical tactics, Taine struggles to stay faithful to the more scientific, “real” character from which the “ideal” derives. In this regard, he insists on the existence of the primitive substratum that the character must possess, but nonetheless avoids stereotypes by opening up the character to features that are universal:

Great literary works manifest a profound and durable character and their rank is higher accordingly as this character is more durable and more profound. They are generalizations that present to the mind under a sensible form at one time: principal traits of a period, at another, primordial instincts and faculties of a race, at another, some fragment of a universal man and those elementary psychological forces which are the ultimate explanation of human events. (Taine 1965, 67)

Once more, Don Quijote’s character is quoted as the best representation of these universal qualities. To sum up, Taine conceives the ideal fin-de-siècle character according to both a determinism that dictates the character’s behavior based on his or her biological constitution and historical circumstances, as well as a rhetorical construct. This construct allows the characters to transcend some of their temporal and geographical boundaries, thus guaranteeing the creation of an “ideal.” The reader will be unaware to what extent the character is created from specific physical conditions or literary tropes. Both elements, the specific references and the writer’s artifice, endow the character with its particularity.
Therefore, the “ideal” character is the result of both a positivistic and a creative view of human beings. The combination of both qualities helps readers understand the appeal that the discourses from the fin-de-siècle period had among their audiences. Specifically, both Taine and Ferdinand Brunetière, in *L’Art et la morale* (1898), added a “moral” value to the work of art, and the ideal character from which the intellectuals of the period would benefit greatly: “The definition of art is thus relative to the definition of other social functions, to which it holds, or ought to hold, determinate relations. Art is a force, the use of which cannot be regulated by itself, and by itself alone. These forces must be balanced among themselves in a well-ordered society.”

In order to legitimize their existence as a “morally superior” intellectual aristocracy, several authors state that society is demanding from them a moral regeneration that only they can give. Venita Datta has observed this behavior in several French authors of the time who thought of themselves as the perfect antidote for the state of decadence that France was experiencing. Datta has traced this attitude in Hugues Rebell (“A new ideal that guides our behaviour, dominates our thought and leads an entire people,” Datta 1999, 248); Maurice Barrés (“The people want us to propose a model of social perfection,” Datta 1999, 248); as well as Adolphe Retté (“the poet’s principle was to present the Beautiful, the True, the Just,” Datta 1999, 247). Interesting enough, these statements share a belief in the relation between ethics and aesthetics.

Reinterpreting Darwinian theories, specifically in the case of Rodó, critics like Maarten Van Delden talk about the “survival of the prettiest” in order to define the construct of intellectuals in this period. The ethics involved in these constructions has also been debated. In the case of Costa, Carlos Serrano and Jacques Maurice have questioned who determines the common good, and Jorge Gonzalez Rodríguez wonders about the capacity leaders had to represent interests different from their own. More significantly, Enrique Tierno Galván has stated that Costa’s theories would serve dictatorships in Spain, and Carlos Real de Azúa reflects on how Rodó never alluded to the dictatorships in Latin America that were contemporary to him. The legitimacy of this “intellectual aristocracy,” as a group, was based on the way they talked about morals and virtue. In this respect, Nietzsche is still helpful in illuminating the manipulations to which the “moral” was doomed: “And yet perhaps they (the categories of reason) represent nothing more than the expediency of a certain
race and species—their utility alone is their ‘truth’ ” (Nietzsche 1967; *The Will to Power*, 278).

To sum up, the authors Costa and Rodó share the belief in a ruling class and a man who is articulated in their works according to the characteristics of the prevailing notion of the “ideal” character. Vis-à-vis the ruling of beasts, or a mass without will, both sketch an aristocracy with exceptional qualities based on the French thinkers of the time. This aristocracy is thought to be intellectual, aesthetically inclined, and even epic. As part of their literary construct, they go beyond the specific temporal and spatial circumstances of their characters: Costa has the English political system in mind, whereas Rodó goes back to classical Greece. By venturing outside of specific Spanish and Latin American contexts, Costa and Rodó reflect on the differences among societies and justify the need for political change.

Costa’s and Rodó’s trespassing of geographical boundaries is the latest twist to the construction of a character based on specific positivistic criteria. Darwin’s theory of evolution had led to the doctrine of “survival of the fittest” in biological terms, and now this premise was being read politically, to explain the economic advantage of some nations versus others. When analyzing the causes of that political/economic imbalance, some fin-de-siècle authors appealed to education and set aside biological determinism. This approach offered the possibility of success to nations that were otherwise doomed. In this metaphorical process from degeneration to regeneration, however, not only are some of the positivistic criteria applied (as in the case of Taine’s “primitive substratum”) but also Darwin’s “fittest” is rewritten: the “fittest” is recreated by fin-de-siècle thinkers as the construct that combines moral, educational, and aesthetic values. If evolution was to be read as a race for hegemony among nations, then an ideal forerunner was in the making.

**Notes**

1. Alejandro Mejías-López has traced the journey of this term through different decades in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry*. The entry on “modernism” in 1965 described “a Hispanic literary movement, spanning the decades of the nineteenth and early decades of the twentieth centuries.” It also added that “a cosmopolitan perspective, a new concinnity of language and a new poetic diction were the main contributions of modernism to Western Literature.” In 1974, the term remained in the English form in the page header, but the entry on the subject was in Spanish, “modernismo.” In the 1993 edition, however,
“modernism” has returned as an entry but there are no references to the Hispanic literary movement. The Hispanic movement now goes under the name “modernism,” but there are no acknowledgments to its “contributions to Western Literature.” See A. Mejías-López (2009) *The Inverted Conquest: The Myth of Modernity and the Transatlantic Onset of Modernism* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press), p. 1.

2. Varela Ortega has affirmed, “The extravagant neo-Darwinist generalization about ‘dying nations’…‘agonized races’…people unable to adapt, beaten and sunk by decrepitude, whose inescapable destiny was to fall ‘under the hegemony of mature peoples’…was key to understanding the epistemology of the regeneration movement.” J. Varela Ortega (1998) “Del desastre y sus consecuencias,” *Imágenes y Ensayos del 98* (Valencia: Cañada Blanch), p. 287. All translations from Spanish are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

3. On this topic, see Pan-Montojo *Más se perdió en Cuba: España, 1898 y la crisis de fin de siglo* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial). The film *Raza* (1941), based on a script by Francisco Franco, can provide a typical example of such negative interpretations of events, since it starts with the portrayal of a family that is torn apart when the father, an army general, is shot while fighting in Cuba in 1898. This tendency to view the events of 1898 as the end of the empire (even if some key colonies still remained in Africa) was reinforced in the historiography written during Franco’s regime.

4. *El Mundial*, edited by Rubén Darío, was published in France in Spanish.


8. In his *Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines* (1853–1855), Arthur de Gobineau argued that what defines an elite is its “racial purity,” viewed from a genetic perspective. When an elite conquers another race, it is doomed to be destroyed.

9. Rodó, *Ariel*, p. 63. Rodó also provides this description of the forces of degeneration: “Large numbers of immigrants have been added to a nucleus still too weak to assimilate and channel properly this flood of humanity in ways that can be provided by a solid secular social structure, a secure political system, and deeply rooted personal values. The
situation conjures up the future dangers of a democratic deterioration that will bury any notion of quality beneath the blind force of numbers, that will erase all sense of order in societal consciousness, and that in yielding hierarchical order to the vagaries of chance will necessarily lead to the triumph of unjustifiable and ignoble supremacies.” Rodó, Ariel, p. 60.

10. As Rodó says, Shakespeare’s Titania, in the act of kissing the ass’s head in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, would serve excellently as the emblem of Liberty who bestows her love upon the mediocre (Rodó, Ariel, p. 62).


13. Taine and other thinkers of the period assume that that there is a direct equivalence between certain psychological traits and certain “races” or “nations.” In Le Bon, we find a similar belief: the possibility of assigning specific moral and intellectual traits to an English, Italian, or Spanish person. In pseudoscientific fashion, Le Bon compares this capacity to “the process led by scientists to describe a dog or a cat.” G. Le Bon (1916) Lois Psychologiques de l’Évolution des Peuples (Paris: Félix Alcan), p. 24.

14. Rodó, Ariel, p. 31. There is an interesting relation between Rodó’s Ariel and Thomas Carlyle’s work On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History. For Carlyle, the success of a “Saxondom covering all spaces of the globe” is that it “gets an articulate voice”; see T. Carlyle (1846) On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History: Six Lectures (New York: Wiley and Putnam), pp. 114, 144. He finds this voice in the greatness of Shakespearean characters. For Rodó, whose Ariel also includes the above-mentioned reference to Midsummer Night’s Dream, the complexity of the characters from The Tempest has been reduced to stereotypes.


16. According to Taine: “A people, in the course of its long life, goes through many such reiterations; and yet it remains intact, not only by the continuity of generations composing it, but also by the persistence of character underlying it. Herein consists the primitive substratum.”


18. Venita Datta herself uses the rhetoric of the degeneration/regeneration metaphors to explain the role of the intellectuals in France: “In the wake of the loss of the Franco-Prussian War and the decline of France’s role on the European stage, intellectuals deplored the country’s ‘decadence’ and called for a regeneration of the country. Moreover, they felt they were ideally suited to lead France to such regeneration.” Datta, *Birth of a National Icon*, p. 208.

19. See M. Van Delden (1997) “‘The Survival of the Prettiest’: Transmutations of Darwin in José Enrique Rodó’s *Ariel*,” in *Constellation Caliban: Figurations of a Character* (Amsterdam: Rodopi), pp. 150–57. As pointed out by students in my “Readings in Humanities” class during the discussion of *Ariel* in the Spring of 2014, Rodó is able to redefine Darwin’s theory of the survival of the fittest according to this aesthetic enterprise: “Thus it is that in the process of evolution some of the excessive enticements of nature that may seem to result solely from caprice—the song and the bright plumage of the birds, and, to attract the pollinating insect, the color and perfume of the flowers—have actually played a practical role: their greater allure has assured that the most beautiful within a species survive over those less fortunately endowed” (*Ariel*, p. 55).


21. All of these discourses on regeneration exclude female agency. Not only was the ideal defined by men of the period, but it could only be thought of as masculine. In this regard, some of the period gender references are very meaningful: Demolins requests his readers not to cry like women but act like men, and his main mission is the formation of “men.” E. Demolins (1898) *Anglo-Saxon Superiority: To What Is It Due?* trans. L.B. Lavigne (London: Leadenhall), p. 3.

22. On this issue of the epic genre, the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío and the Spanish poet Manuel Machado actually rewrote the medieval *chanson de geste, Cantar de Mio Cid*, at the beginning of the century, and made the epic tones of the poem disappear. As Julio Ortega has affirmed, the Spanish language had never before experienced the transformation of its past literary tradition as a new horizon for the present; see J. Ortega (2003) *Rubén Darío* (Madrid: Omega), p. 22.

23. Yet, it is crucial to acknowledge that while these writers are “rhetorically conjuring modernity,” as Sylvia Molloy has brilliantly expressed,
through a discourse of regeneration, they are attracted to the rhetoric of the degenerate French Symbolists and those poets influenced by them. This is how Molloy reads Rodó’s attraction for Darío’s sensual language, despite finding something “perverse” in it that would not fit *Ariel* as the “holistic program for a healthy continent”; see S. Molloy (1983) “Ser y decir en Darío: el poema liminar en Cantos de Vida y Esperanza,” in L. F. Cifuentes and S. Molloy (eds.), *Essays on Hispanic Literature in Honor of Edmund L. King* (London: Támesis), p. 198. In other articles, *Modernismo y regeneracionismo* and *Debates finiseculares*, I have discussed the relevance that the aesthetics of decadence in works such as Henryk Sienkiewicz’s *Quo Vadis?* and Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé* had in Spanish and Latin American writers at the time. For these writers, decay becomes not only the impetus for rebirth, but also a sight worth contemplating, endowed with intrinsic beauty.
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Late Antiquity as an Expression of Decadence in the Poetry of Constantine P. Cavafy and Stefan George

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Introduction: Cavafy’s and George’s Theses Regarding History

Literary modernism reacts to the historicism of the nineteenth century in two ways, either by producing “poetry without history” or poetry of a “productive historicism.” The latter term, suggested by Dirk Niefanger,\(^1\) denotes an aesthetical procedure in literature, which responds to modern experiences of alienation by depicting them in an historical context, so that they become more familiar. In this way, new relationships arise between history and poetry. This tendency is especially observable within the literature of European decadence, which, by orienting itself toward such historical periods as the Late Roman or the Hellenistic–Alexandrian eras, tries to define the present. This chapter investigates this phenomenon on the basis of the work of Constantine P. Cavafy and Stefan George.\(^2\)

Cavafy (1863–1933), who is now considered as one of the preeminent Greek poets, was a Greek of the Diaspora, born in Alexandria. More than any other Greek poet of his time, he “worked within the context of European poetics”\(^3\) of the late nineteenth century, such as the movements of Symbolism, Aestheticism, and Decadence. Stefan George (1868–1933), the leading exponent of the German Aesthetic movement, with strong ties with the French Symbolists, introduced the dogma of l’art pour l’art (art for art’s sake) in Germany, not only
through his poetry, but also by means of his programmatic texts in the literary magazine *Blätter für die Kunst*, which he founded in 1892. For both poets, the past plays a dominant role; nonetheless, they both revolutionize the tradition of historical poetry, as it was established in the nineteenth century. In his early lyrical collection *Algabal* (1892), for instance, George creates an absolute novelty within German literature by putting an extremely negative historical personality in the center of the work, while at the same time making a strong departure from the sources. Cavafy’s historical poems on the other hand constitute an innovative and unique treatment of history, which provides a complete departure from post-Romantic patriotism.

In his foreword to the collection *The Books of the Eclogues and Eulogies, of Legends and Lays and of the Hanging Gardens* (1894), Stefan George stresses that no image of a specific historical period is set forth in these poems, in spite of the fact that they refer to the past. The poet goes on to say that the content of these lyrical texts is nothing more than “reflections of a soul which has fled temporarily to other times and other places.”4 The imagery of the poems is indeed evocative of an exotic past, yet at the same time it is familiar, since the writer concludes that “each epoch and each spirit, by being individually formulated, moves into the realm of the present and the personal” (George 1958, 1:63). This statement provides an essential characterization of what we have called “productive historicism” at the beginning of the chapter. Cavafy’s relationship to history is more complicated, given that a considerable number of his poems revolve around historical themes. Since the publication of G. Seferis’s article on Cavafy, it is commonplace in scholarship to say that the poet employs the “historical method,” which means that the present is expressed through the past by means of the technique of “objective correlation,” in analogy to the “mythical method” of the modernists.5 The Cavafian historical method, however, is not one of absolute identification of the past with the present. It does not function as a one-to-one correlation; instead, it is to be understood kaleidoscopically as a game of reflections that allows the reader to see his or her own present condition through history.6

It is obvious now that the Cavafian attitude toward the past is very similar to that of Stefan George. Their common interest in Byzantium and in the Late Roman and Hellenistic–Alexandrian eras connects them both to the wider phenomenon of European Decadence, since the French Symbolists were the first who made these historical periods the subjects of their poetry. They are transitional periods characterized
by exhaustion, failure, and decline, yet at the same time by spiritualization, splendor, and debauchery. In eras like these, poets find a familiar frame to express their feelings. Concerning the Hellenistic period, Cavafy said, “In this epoch I feel free. I have made it my own”; then, about the Byzantine period: “For me the Byzantine period is like a cupboard with many drawers. If I need something, I know in which one I have to search in order to find it.” In German literature, Stefan George represents the anticlassical tendencies of the turn of the century, according to which antiquity remains a literary theme brought forward through an entirely different approach from the one undertaken by eighteenth-century classicism. In the place of the humanistic ideal of antiquity, there now appears an epoch of decline: Stefan George brushes the brilliant Age of Pericles aside and turns to the Late Roman and Hellenistic eras instead.

Decadence and Late Antiquity: Thematic Correlations in the Works of George and Cavafy

Within the scope of this study we adopt the general definition of the term Decadence as formulated by W. Rasch, who describes it as “a literary phenomenon in European literature at the end of the nineteenth century, with a thematic focus on the depiction of decay and downfall, in all its differentiations.” According to Rasch, Decadence encompasses such aesthetic categories as fin de siècle, aestheticism, or l’art pour l’art. Under the main theme “decay,” many motifs that describe its symptoms and manifestations are subordinated, such as biological degeneration, enmity toward nature, worship of beauty, scorn for contemporary values, exhaustion, sexual perversity, sensuality, and self-indulgence.

Here we concentrate on the question of how both poets employ the past in order to express their decadent feelings and their poetics. A possible first answer is that both poets’ protagonists are often historical or pseudo-historical figures, who appear incapable of changing the circumstances of their lives for the better and avoiding failure. Such characters include the last Byzantine Emperor Theophilos Palaiologos in the homonymous poem of Cavafy, who has lost his courage and prefers to die, or Dimitrios in the poem “King Dimitrios” (Cavafy), who faces the end of his kingship not like a king but “like an actor.” Once the play is over, Dimitrios “changes his costume and goes away.” Similarly in George, in particular in the collection The Books
of the Eclogues and Eulogies, one of the main recurring figures is that of the resigned person, as in the poems “The End of the Victor” or “The Knight who Gives Up.” Just as in Cavafy, the protagonists here accept their failure, not as a tragic breach but as a human condition. The much-cited verses from Cavafy’s poem “The God Abandons Antony” reflect the attitude of both poets: “Don’t mourn your luck that’s failing now . . . / As one long prepared . . . / Say goodbye to her, the Alexandria that is leaving.”

Along with the historical figures, both poets present whole cultures that are too tired to act, cultures that stagnate in lethargic suspension. However, behind this inactivity the initial process of degeneration lies hidden. As an example of thematic analogies between their works, let us consider comparatively Cavafy’s “Waiting for the Barbarians” and George’s “The Burning of the Temple.” They are both pseudo-historic poems, and despite their differences they both share the same thematic focal point, namely the juxtaposition between civilization and barbarism. D. Dimiroulis, interpreting Cavafy’s poem, summarizes its content in the formulation “Barbarism against civilisation or civilisation inviting barbarism”; this could apply to George’s poem as well. Both poems are written in a dialogic form and have a dramatic-theatrical character. Exact historic dates are not mentioned, but clear references to such terms as “Forum,” “Senate,” “consuls,” “praetors,” and “Emperor” in Cavafy’s poem, as well as the naming of the barbarians as Huns in George’s poem, all lead the reader directly to the late Roman era. In George the representatives of the old civilization are the priests of the temple, whereas in Cavafy they are all of the powerful officials of the agora mentioned above. In both poems, these civilized figures show the same attitude toward the barbarians: they do not choose the way of resistance, but instead are prepared to yield their land and goods to the barbarians.

Ili, the leader of the barbarians in George’s poem, does not appear; we are informed about him and his actions only indirectly through the conversation between the priests. He is the barbarian invader planning to occupy the land and destroy everything. In Cavafy’s poem no leader of the barbarians is mentioned. The presence of the barbarians as a whole is very powerful in the poem, stressed through the tenfold repetition of the epithet “the barbarians.” In each poem the plot ends differently. In George’s case, the temple burns in the end. The priests surrender, sacrificing themselves, the temple, and what it represents, for a new beginning. In Cavafy, on the other hand, the barbarians do not appear despite the expectations. Or it could be that “there are
no barbarians any longer,” as the border guards report. The narrator of the poem concludes: “And now, what’s going to happen to us without barbarians? / They were, those people, a kind of solution.” The empire is now really disappointed because the barbarians do not come. Both poems can be read in the context of European Decadence, since in both of them surrender and defeat are perceived as the only salvation, and the barbarians as the only solution, for timeworn and decayed cultures. Both poems show a clear affinity for the dominant “degeneration–regeneration” theme, which in fin-de-siècle literature is often expressed symbolically through the fall of the empire and the imminent arrival of the barbarians. Although at first sight it seems as if the poems formulate different positions through their closing verses, I would argue that they represent the same skepticism toward the solution of the barbarians. Cavafy, with exquisite irony, denies the very existence of the barbarians, and by doing this, he “negates messianic consolation” (Tziovas 1986, 175). He makes “a parody out of the mythology of salvation” through the return to a primitive barbaric condition (Tziovas 1986, 175). Similarly, George remains skeptical, although at the end of his poem he lets the barbarians come and destroy the temple. In his poem, no dialectic synthesis between barbarism and civilization emerges. Following the destruction of the temple, the old culture is not substituted by a new one, despite the fact that barbarism includes embryonic elements for a new creation.

To erect a new temple—that is the conclusion of the poem—more than “a thousand years” would be needed.

Thus, the burning of the temple has to be read much more as a yearning and less as a suggestion. Both poets are deeply concerned with the way the Western world has been taken over by positivistic rationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. Both poems use the fall of the Roman Empire as a backdrop for the anxiety and uncertainty that permeates the European thought of their time.

**Decadent Aesthetics with Regard to Late Antiquity**

Beyond the thematic analogies, the past plays an important role for both poets in formulating the principal aspects of Decadence, such as artificiality, the aestheticization of life, and the emphasis on the depiction of ritual in poetry, which are examined below.

The first section of George’s collection *Algabal*, entitled “The Realm Below,” describes a subterranean world of luxurious artificiality.
fashioned by the emperor Algabal himself. Here he is neither priest nor emperor, but an aesthete. This is his realm, his own sanctuary to which he flees from reality. Diamonds and rubies, alabaster, ivory, crystals, and topaz are the materials of this self-conjured world, which is never illuminated by natural light, but rather by the flickering artificial light of candles.

The garden he has constructed, as the last poem of the first section states, needs “neither air nor warmth,” since the trees are made of coal and pieces of lava. It is a lifeless, sterile garden with no ability to reproduce. Algabal’s garden is the most characteristic example for the modified perception of nature in the context of European modernism. It presents an absolute “denaturization of nature in favor of the aesthetic need of the decadent.” This rebellion against nature itself possesses above all a significant poetic meaning, which finds a clear articulation in the last stanza of the poem. Here the speaking I expresses its wish to turn this lifeless garden into a fruitful one: “But how can I engender you in my sanctuary... great dark black flower?” The black flower, “a poetic provocation,” substitutes the blue flower, the main symbol of longing in the German romantic tradition. By negating the blue flower, the poet diverges from Romanticism and introduces a new aesthetics, which proclaims an absolute autonomy of art. The work of art has to be understood as an autonomous entity, entirely a product of the artist, independent from society, politics, and ethics. The poet is like Algabal, who “wishes to share no credit for his creation with nature, or ultimately with God.”

With regard to space in Cavafy’s poetry, it is undeniable that it is urban and artificial, deprived of references to nature. I. M. Panayotopoulos has therefore characterized Cavafy as “the poet of the enclosed space.” In many of his poems the small room dominates, which at times, as in the case of “Walls” or “The Windows,” appears to be hermetically isolated from the outside world. The small room, almost always referred to as dark or only artificially lighted, constitutes the poet’s sanctuary; it is a place of solitude, memory, vision, and poetical creation. The choice of isolation is a conscious one, and is associated with an elitist distancing of oneself from the multitude. The public space in Cavafy’s poetry is principally the cityscape of his contemporary Alexandria, but stylized through reminiscences of ancient Alexandria in the form of a timeless, mythical city. In this way Cavafy’s Alexandria becomes synonymous with cultural and racial fusion, homoeroticism, and indulgence. Apart from Alexandria, other ancient cities that constitute the scenery of Cavafy’s poems are Antioch,
Sidon, and Seleucia, all of them cities which in the Hellenistic period experienced a peculiar flowering, characterized simultaneously by cultural development and moral degeneration. In Cavafy’s poetry they are never simply geographical places, but rather codes of eclecticism for those who understand life as something full of indulgence and intellectual activity. The poetical map of these cities includes very few recognizable places, such as disreputable hotels, coffee shops, taverns, casinos, or theaters. At the same time, as Charalambidou-Solomi stresses, the urban scenery in Cavafy’s poetry is depicted as a sterile cityscape without nature, children, animals, and women. In fact, all manifestations of the natural element (flowers, plants, mountains) are excluded from his poetry. Thus, Cavafy’s Alexandria is represented as a poetically recreated city designed “to serve as a suitable setting for his aesthetics.”

The rebellion against nature in both poets can be understood not only as a resistance to Romanticism, but to bourgeois society as well. In the sterile environment of their poetry, the only birth is the birth of a poem. This is an important common characteristic between them. In his artificial garden, Stefan George attempts to engender the black flower, actually the new poetry; whereas Cavafy, in his incomplete “Genesis of a Poem,” acknowledges as conditions for engendering a poem the isolation of the artist in an enclosed space where memory and vision predominate. It is significant that both of them flee to the past and revel in an ancient ambiance (for George, it is Algabal’s late-Roman decadent environment, whereas for Cavafy, it can be found in the decadent mythical urban cityscape of Alexandrian cities).

The only reaction to this feeling of decadent stagnation suggested by Aestheticism is the intensity of senses, which leads to the indulgence in each moment. Walter Pater’s Renaissance, a hugely influential book for European modernism, proclaims a new Hedonism that flourishes in the desire to celebrate the transitory nature of life by freezing the moment and preserving it. To maintain the ecstasy of the moment “is success in life,” concludes Pater; only the accumulation of such moments constitutes a meaningful life. The quest for perfect moments is one of the main dimensions in Cavafy’s work, often expressed through direct or indirect references to the past. Tastes, colors, and perfumes become allegories not only for an intensive sensual life, but also for daringly aesthetic writing. In the poem “Ithaka” the poet presents life as a long journey, justified only as a journey in the world of senses. Not only does the title point to the past, but also the whole organization of the poem, with repeated references to a
time-transcending exotic Orientalism. Therefore, one must indulge in “sensual perfume of every kind,” or search in Egyptian and Phoenician cities for distinguished fine things like “mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony.” The luxuriant quality of materials and clothes as an aspect of the aesthetics of life appears in the poem “Alexandrian Kings,” where Cleopatra’s son, Kaisarion, the young king, is depicted only through his luxurious clothes and valuable jewels. We hear nothing about the other traits of his personality; he is completely identified with his extravagance. In George’s Algabal we notice similar aesthetics of life and an underlying intense sensual experience. The emperor’s clothes are all of a rare exquisite silk material, imported exclusively for him from Syria. At the same time rare oriental scents like essence of spikenard, lavender, myrrh, or incense create a sensual atmosphere, recalling similar details in Baudelaire’s Correspondances or Parfum exotique. Algabal is presented as a hedonistic, narcissistic figure; in his realm a luxurious exoticism predominates, which, as in the case of Cavafy’s poetry, echoes the discourses of exoticism and Orientalism that permeate European Decadence. This Orientalism, which abounds in the works of both poets, includes the Western vision of the East as a mysterious land of fabulous luxury, erotic license, and indolent indulgence; thus, it conforms perfectly to the aesthetics of décadisme (Decadence). The Orient is the absolute Other, and its evocation points to an extraordinary experience for the senses, far away from the banality of daily existence.

Between Cavafy’s and George’s aestheticization of life there is, despite the common dimensions discussed above, a great difference: George radicalizes this aspect to the point of aesthetical amoralism. We can take as an example the first poem of the second section, which describes a scene where the emperor is feeding his pigeons. The whole poetical narration assumes an air of a still painting. When one of the slaves disturbs this static scene he is forced to commit suicide, submitting to the emperor’s will. At the same time the elimination of the slave restores the aesthetical order, creating, however, a new picture: The slave’s red blood on the green basalt tile becomes a new aesthetic experience, which again leads to the creation of a new work of art, since Algabal orders a craftsman to engrave the scene on a trophy. Another poem describes a scene in which Algabal orders his guests to be asphyxiated at a banquet under a mass of roses dropped from the ceiling. In this way, the emperor offers his guests an extreme variation of mourir en beauté, while at the same time he provides himself with a rare spectacle. This amoralism points to an “aesthetical
fundamentalism,” which aims to create an independent realm of art in which bourgeois values are excluded or converted into their opposites. The scorn of bourgeois values and the elitist attitude toward society, deriving from the conviction of the superiority of art, is a theme in Cavafy as well, but it never reaches the extreme of amorality that is evident in the case of George.

Closely connected with the aesthetics of life is the ritualization of experience in decadent literature. Both Cavafy and George share a strong interest in ritual and the cultic as a common characteristic, which situates both of them within a particular tendency in modern literature, along with poets such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, or Valéry. Modernists use rituals as an ancient or primitive form of communication, expressing in this way an antithesis to the conventional consideration of reality. W. Braungart examines the function of the ritual in George’s work in its expression as religious worship or social ceremonial, and speaks of an “aestheticization of the ritual.” This statement could perfectly characterize Cavafy’s poetry as well, since rituals occupy an outstanding place in his work. Many ritualistic poems address popular orthodox liturgical rites that recall the Byzantine tradition. His poem *In Church*, for instance, focuses on the ornamental decoration of the church and on the magnificence, splendor, glory, and austerity of the liturgy. The attitude of the I-speaker is not the attitude of a believer, but of an aesthete. It is worth noticing that the religious ceremony is presented in a theatrical manner that leads to a heightening of the senses: sight (the precious holy vessels, the majestic presence of the priests), hearing (the liturgical chanting and harmony), and smell (the aroma of incense). A similar ritualistic and ornamental character runs also through the prose poem “Old Christian Vision,” by George. The consecration of a young man named Elidius is here depicted in an old Byzantine basilica. A great multitude is gathered, while priests preparing the consecration mutter litanies. The appearance of the Archpriest recalls the Cavafian “splendor of our Byzantine heritage.” He is followed by children holding lit candles, in his complete palatial vestment with a miter decorated with glowing gemstones. Both poets turn to ritual, considering it a form of externalization of the esoteric dimensions of the soul; both of them employ ceremony and ornament to enhance aesthetic poetics, while at the same time offering a clear opposition to the bourgeois optimism of progress at the beginning of the twentieth century.
Decadent Eroticism and Antique Art

A sexuality deviating from Christian morality is one of the main tendencies in fin-de-siècle literature. Within this tendency, homosexuality constitutes undeniably the most frequently recurring theme. Many Aesthetes and Decadents excluded women as an object of desire from their works, replacing them with “the ideal of the young man.” The glorification of the beautiful ephebe in fin-de-siècle literature epitomizes the spirit of decadence, according to Philip Stephan, since it is combined with some of its principal characteristics, such as worship of beauty, an elitist attitude, and the defiance of more traditional ethics.

For Cavafy, the motif of the ephebe pervades his oeuvre as a whole, whereas it predominates in George’s Maximin cycle. In both poets, as will be clarified later, homoerotic love is connected with Platonic ideas and with the aesthetics of J. J. Winckelmann, who praised ancient Greek sculpture in his works, especially as they were presented by Walter Pater.

George has often been characterized as a continuator of the ideas of Winckelmann in modernism, since he placed the quasi-religious worship of an ephebe in the center of his poetry. The Maximin poems have a biographical origin, inspired by the extremely gifted young boy Maximiliam Kronenberg, whom George met in 1902, and who died suddenly after having spent three years in close contact with the George circle. In the boy’s youth the poet has found the embodiment of his ideal, which can be summarized in his later verse “deification of the body and the embodiment of the deity.”

In 1906, after the boy’s death, George published a memorial book entitled Maximin, ein Gedenkbuch, glorifying him as a god. On the title page of the memorial book there is a photograph of Maximin “that signals the homoerotic charge of the ensuing paragraphs.” The archetypal character of Maximin is underlined through iconographic references to antiquity. Following the typology of Antinous, the young boy appears in the photo as a bust, turned away from the viewer at a three-quarters angle, with nude upper body, a garland on his hair, and a rod in his hands. The photo stylizes him as “a live statue” (Sünderhauf 2004, 223). Already the opening sentences of the memorial book, wherein the poet describes his first meeting with Maximin, reveal the religious attitude toward the ephebic youth, who is depicted as “all powerful.” However, the Greek apotheosis of an athletic ideal that is immediately evident in Maximin’s appearance is also combined with the evocation “of a centuries-old Christian culture” (George 1958, 2:522).
boy is thus mitigated through the burden of culture that he seems to carry. Maximin is a latecomer, who despite his heroic shape possesses the characteristics of that melancholy which is formed through centuries of Western culture, exactly like Tadzio in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. Both of them remind us of Cavafy’s young latecomer Kaisarion in the homonymous poem, who looks “ideal in his grief.”

Maximin and Tadzio are two examples in the German literature of the early twentieth century that embody the idea of an ephelic beauty combined with an antique sculptural understanding, Platonic perceptions, homoeroticism, and Decadence. As a matter of fact the preface to *Maximin* abounds with metaphors inspired by ancient sculpture that are projected onto the young boy. These serve to illustrate the significance of antique art for George’s perception of male beauty: “brightness and charisma”; “heroic shape”; “gesture”; “the far-off gaze and at the same time so penetrating and brilliant that the others had to look down”; “the embodiment of our notion and of our ideal”; “the slight browning of his skin”; “the ideal of the youth”; “blooming beauty”; and “superiority not through talking or acting, but alone through his presence in the space.” The erotic undertones in the text are not provocative, since they present Maximin as a sublimated, essentially genderless figure. The last lines of the preface constitute the climax of the deification. After his early death Maximin has to be worshipped like a god: “We now can eagerly, after impassioned signs of veneration, erect his statue in our sanctuary, kneel before him and worship him.”

It has been pointed out that ancient sculpture serves Cavafy both as a source of inspiration and as a vehicle for his definition of the ideal of the young ephebe.\(^43\) The main feature of the Cavafian ephebe is his beauty; sometimes this beauty is truly divine, as in the case of the poems “One of Their Gods” and “Ionic.” In the first poem the young man is a “tall, extremely handsome, / with the joy of being immortal in his eyes” who, descending from the Olympian mountaintops, moves through the Syrian marketplace of Seleucia arousing general admiration. In “Ionic” the godlike ephebe is a “young ethereal figure” who “indistinct, in rapid flight, / wings across the hills.” In both poems the deity seems to be among us in a lovely human form. On the other hand, clear Platonic references emerge in the poem “In a Town of Osroeni.” The poem describes a wounded young man named Remon, lying by an open window, while the moonlight shines on “his beauteous body.” Remon could be Syrian, Greek, or Armenian, but the moonlight makes his “sensual face” remind us of “Plato’s Charmidis”: thus, he becomes “a timeless icon of homosexuality.”\(^44\)
A particular section within Cavafy’s love poetry includes the epitaph poems that refer to dead or dying young men. The dead young men have “a subtle beauty” ("For Ammonis, Who Died at 29, in 610") or are “famous for their good looks” ("Tomb of Iasis"). The settings, as well as the protagonists in these poems, are fictitious. The names (Iasis, Ammonis) point to the past, while some details and specific references place the poems clearly in the late Alexandrian period, a period employed by the poet to denote sensuality. Cavafy uses the historical as a tool for exploring the personal, and at the same time as a tool for expressing homosexual desire, as a strategy to conceal intended meanings. “Epitaphs, codes and the classics” are, as Sarah Ekdawi acknowledges in her article on the Cavafian ephbes, three Victorian strategies for writing about sex, which Cavafy used in the same fashion as Oscar Wilde before him. A particular use of sculptural terms is to be found in the poem “Kaisarion.” Here the sculptural vocabulary functions as a metaphor for the poet’s imagination. The fact that history books dedicate only a few lines to Kaisarion gives Cavafy the freedom to mold him into an object of beauty according to his imagination. He forms a sympathetic view of Kaisarion, a delicate and sentimental beauty: “I made you good-looking and sensitive / .../ pale and weary, ideal in your grief.” The ideal of beauty is here undermined by decay, evoked by the pallor and sorrow of the young man. In both poets, the glorification of male beauty adopts religious characteristics evoked through sculptural terms. This has to be understood as a strategy of sublimation that has its roots in J. J. Winckelmann, who in his famous descriptions of ancient sculptures in the eighteenth century uses sublimation strategies to conceal his homoerotic feelings. Walter Pater plays an intermediary role between Winckelmann and modernism; in his study “Winckelmann” (1867), he examines Hellenism and homoeroticism from the standpoint of aestheticism. In both poets the classical ideal of beauty, the plastic perfectness, is tempered with the characteristics of morbid decay.

In conclusion, I would like to stress one final similarity. L. Giannakopoulou points out that the description of male beauty in Cavafy’s “I’ve Looked So Much” (“The body’s lines. Red lips. Sensual limbs. / Hair like that stolen from Greek statues, / Always lovely, even uncombed, / And falling slightly, over pale foreheads”) corresponds to Hellenistic sculpture, and specifically to the work of Lysippus (Giannakopoulou 2007, 135ff). It is known that during the Hellenistic period intense erotic feeling was expressed in art and projected onto statues, which were “invested with a deep homoerotic feeling and were the object of constant observation and fantasies.”
(Giannikopoulou 2007, 149). In this context, it is worth mentioning that Lysippus is the only ancient sculptor mentioned in the work of Stefan George. In his short epistolary work *The Emperor Alexis’s Letters to the Poet Arkadios*, the poet refers explicitly to Lysippus characterizing his works as “magnificent” and underlining as a distinctive trait “the strong limbs unified with fine curves in a divine manner.”

**Conclusion**

The European literary avant–garde rediscovered late antiquity at the end of the nineteenth century, and transformed it into a model epoch for the fin de siècle. This study examines the phenomenon on the basis of the poetry of C. P. Cavafy and Stefan George, two poets who have never been considered comparatively before.

Both of them take inspiration from late antiquity to create their themes and their poetics. In the second subchapter, the essay has examined how both of them employ historical or pseudo-historical figures and situations from the late Roman and Alexandrian periods in order to express the modern decadent feelings of weariness, exhaustion, and decline. As a main example for this, the study has juxtaposed the poems “Waiting for the Barbarians” (Cavafy) and “The Burning Temple” (George).

Beyond the thematic correlation, we may conclude that the period of late antiquity plays an important role for both poets in formulating their views of some of the main aspects of decadent aesthetics, such as artificiality, aestheticization of life, or evocation of ritual in poetry (subchapter 3). The last subchapter (4) investigates how Cavafy and George employ ancient sculpture in their works in order to glorify ephebic male beauty and encode their homosexuality. The use of history in their writings could be characterized as productive historicism (subchapter 1), since neither of them is interested in a purely antiquarian reception and depiction of history; instead, they both employ history in a free and productive manner in order to depict life in the modern age and express their dissatisfaction with the moral and social order.

**Notes**

2. A juxtaposition between the two poets has never been attempted before, save for a passing reference made in 1962 by one of the first translators of Cavafy’s poetry into German, Helmut von den Steinen. He had emphatically characterized Stefan George as the German equivalent to Cavafy; see K. P. Kavafis (1985) *Gedichte. Das gesammelte Werk*, trans. Helmut von den Steinen (Amsterdam: Castrum Peregrini), p. 22. His view is also evident in his correspondence with the poet Karl Wolfskehl. The two men often refer to Cavafy and George, ascribing to their poetry common characteristics of the Gnostic theories. Nevertheless, a comparison between Cavafy and George from this perspective would be “hardly useful” for the history of literature, as Chryssoula Campas has remarked; see C. Campas (2010) “Athen und Ägypten. Helmut von den Steinen, Übersetzer von Kavafis,” in C. Campas and M. Mitsou (eds.) *Hellas Verstehen. Deutsch Griechischer Kulturtransfer im 20. Jahrhundert* (Cologne, Weimar and Vienna: Böhla), pp. 289–328, here 311. In the scope of the present study we will put aside the misleading idea of the Gnostics’ influence; instead, we will compare the two poets from the standpoint of fin-de-siècle modernism.


4. S. George (1958) *Werke*, 2 vols. (Munich: H. Küpper), vol. 1, p. 63. The translation is mine, as are all translations from German or Greek, unless otherwise indicated.


15. The antique sources present Heliogabalus as an extremely negative personality, linking his name to the emperors Caligula and Nero, and ascribing to his character such features as eccentricity, sexual indulgence, exquisite luxury, autocratic power, and cruelty. On the relationship between the collection and its sources, see V. A. Oswald (1948) “The historical Content of Stefan George’s Algabal,” *The Germanic Review*, 23, pp. 193–205.


27. See Charalambidou-Solomi, A Study in Decadence, p. 206.


31. This episode has become one of the icons of the fin de siècle, in the form of Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s sumptuous painting The Roses of Heliogabalus (1888, private collection).


35. See G. Rigopoulos (1991) Ut pictura, poesis. Το εκφραστικό σύστημα της ποίησης και ποιητικής του K. Π. Καβάφη (Athens:


37. See H. Linke (1960) Das Kultische in der Dichtung Stefan Georges und seiner Schule (Munich and Düsseldorf: Küpper).

38. See Jusdanis, The Poetics of Cavafy, pp. 35ff.


46. For the essay on Winckelmann, see Pater, The Renaissance. Works of Walter Pater were in Cavafy’s personal library; see Giannakopoulou, The Power of Pygmalion, p. 139. In the George circle the importance of Winckelmann was widely discussed, since one of George’s followers, Bertold Vallentin, wrote one of the first monographs on Winckelmann.

47. S. George Werke, vol. 2 p. 493. However, the common preference of Cavafy and George for postclassical literature is remarkable as well. In his Eulogy of Mallarmé (1893), George speaks of the strong impression that the writings of the Byzantines, the later Romans, the Alexandrians, and the ecclesiastical fathers all made on him. A common source of inspiration for both poets seems to be the Hellenistic poet Callimachus. Cavafy’s affinity to Callimachus was noticed early, while George’s awareness of the Alexandrian poet is documented through his poem “To Callimachus”. Nowadays, the poetry of Callimachus is recognized as the prototype of the l’art pour l’art literature.
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Aunt Augusta, Lady Windermere, or Dorian Gray are all names that have become part of British culture and immediately trigger recognition; they are literary landmarks, classic characters that have become familiar thanks to countless stage representations or adaptations for the silver screen. However, relatively few remember the stories of the little dwarf, the lovesick fisherman, or the Star-Child. Oscar Wilde’s fairy tales, although not as famous as his plays, are beautiful texts, divided into two considerably different collections.¹ The Happy Prince and Other Tales appeared in 1888 and was clearly inspired by Hans Christian Andersen.² It is a collection that can be read to children, even though they are not intended to be the sole recipients. However, in 1891, Wilde published A House of Pomegranates, a beautifully wrought collection of radically aesthetic tales, full of color, sin, and stories of ill-fated love.³ Unmasking his society’s quirks was doubtless Wilde’s favorite endeavor each time he sat down to write and, as an artist who was determined to subvert Victorian society’s dominant message of submission to codes and appearances, he sought to use the genre of the fairy tale to infuse the world of the marvelous with certain elements characteristic of the Victorian era. 1891 was a fecund year for Oscar Wilde, who also published The Picture of Dorian Gray, Intentions, and The Soul of Man under Socialism. This lush period of productivity was to last for several years, including the celebrated
plays that he wrote from 1892 to 1895. In 1895, the publication of the English translation of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (first published 1892), with its indictment of Wilde’s life and works, symbolically signaled the beginning of the end for Wilde’s career. Indeed, the decadent movement, which had attained its highest expression in the 1880s in France with the works of the Symbolist poets and the publication of *À rebours* by Joris-Karl Huysmans, had been followed in Great Britain by such artists and writers as Arthur Symons, Aubrey Beardsley, and Oscar Wilde. However, in time, the upper middle class refused to suffer further perturbation of its moral sensibilities; so Wilde was ultimately prosecuted as much for his “degenerate” art as for sodomy. The man who had a “hysterical craving to be noticed, to occupy the attention of the world with himself, to get talked about” was tried and eventually condemned to hard labor. With his “artistic death” came the demise of the decadent movement in Britain. While Max Nordau saw in the decadent movement an inexorable march toward depravity, moral rot, and a fetish for death, we understand it as a call for change, which, although it may involve the destruction of certain values, is not nihilistic in essence.

This essay proposes to consider how the form of Wilde’s fairy tales reveals a call for change as far as Victorian society is concerned. First we will examine how the anamorphic nature of Wilde’s tales causes them to take the form of aesthetic-socialist parables: a look beneath the veneer of pure Aestheticism will reveal how the use of fairy tale codes speaks for a process of subversion, not only of the genre itself but also of society. In *A House of Pomegranates*, morbidity and artificiality coalesce most conspicuously; nonetheless, by adopting the viewpoint that degeneration can involve regeneration, we will be able to examine the tales in that collection as a combination of extreme Aestheticism with the anarcho-socialist plea made in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*. Seen in this way, the tales can become the fictional pendant of Wilde’s only avowedly political essay. Oscar Wilde’s tales are examined here in the light of his political views and his perspectives on the human condition, which is a somewhat challenging task in view of the general lack of research on his political philosophy, with the exception of Jack Zipes’s books on his fairy tales.

**Wildean Fairy Tales and the Subversion of the Dominant Discourse**

Fairy tales in Great Britain took longer than in other countries to gain legitimacy. Associated with the peasantry at first, and then with foreign
fantasies, it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that they acquired an unchallenged popularity. Two centuries earlier the “nannies’ tales,” whose name derived from the oral character of their transmission, were first gathered by the Italian Giambattista Basile and published in 1634 (Il Pentamerone was a collection of oral stories) and then by Charles Perrault in France. The latter published Histoires ou Contes du Temps Passé, known in English as Tales of Mother Goose, which was the result of his collection of old tales from the French oral tradition. They were then destined for the entertainment of the French court, but not before some alterations had been made. Indeed, Perrault had collected his tales from the peasantry, and what they recounted was not acceptable for the conversations of the salons. Jack Zipes reminds us that the peasant origin of the tales accounts for the fact that they “presented the stark realities of power politics without disguising the violence and brutality of everyday life. Starvation, abandonment of children, rape, corporal punishment, ruthless exploitation—these are some of the conditions that are at the root of the folktale.” That was why Perrault had to alter his tales, and why he “removed all the licentiousness that . . . might corrupt the virtue of princesses.” Such tales were thus originally destined for adults, and it was only in the eighteenth century that they were subsequently recounted to a younger audience. Paradoxically enough, when the Grimm brothers did their own job of collecting German folk tales and legends, they retained elements that seldom appear in the versions we are familiar with today. For example, in Sweet Rampion, the princess’s suitor meets with a cruel fate as “he fell among thorns which pierced his eyes and blinded him,” and in Rumpelstilzskin, the cruel dwarf “stamped the floor so hard that his leg went right through it. It went in so far that he could not get it out so he took hold of it and pulled so hard it came clean off.” At the time, such displays of violence had an educational purpose: children were warned against disobedience, sin, and cruelty. They were taught that the bad were never rewarded for their evil actions and that nobody could escape due punishment. Young tale readers thus acquired a sense of the social representations of their time based on bourgeois values: the hero’s goals were “money, power and a woman,” whereas the heroine learned virtues in keeping with the mores of patriarchal society—passivity, obedience and patience—with a triple goal: “wealth, jewels, and a man to protect her property rights” (Zipes 2012, 69).

As education was becoming more and more important in the eyes of the Victorians, and once school attendance was made compulsory in 1876, pupils needed a literature of their own and books for children
were in increasing demand. The material, which was at first produced by the Evangelical Tract Society, progressively lost its moralistic tone and started to be written for entertainment, albeit with a continuing function of social conditioning. Indeed, while the eighteenth century had seen a new emphasis on stories that made children believe that they could rise in society (The History of Giles Gingerbread for instance), the beginning of the nineteenth century saw the creation of an opposite movement, which guilefully conveyed to the poor the notion that their condition was sanctified by God and had to be accepted as their destiny: “Clearly by the 1790s, dissatisfaction with the lowly or even destitute condition one was born to seemed dangerous to an oligarchy cradled in the reassuring assumption that a God-given superiority was the just and necessary foundation for its material and social preeminence” (Jackson 1989, 171). In the first half of the nineteenth century, fairy tales came to be considered immoral and too remote from practical reality, at a time when children were expected to understand that fairies did not exist and that works of imagination were too frivolous. Things began to change after the 1840s, and fairy tales began to acquire considerable popularity in what Roger Lancelyn Green described as “the Golden Age of children’s books.” In a way, this was largely due to the work of Sir Henry Cole, who edited the Home Treasury series, which “marked the emergence of emphatically non-didactic books for children.” In these series, tales from both the English tradition and the Grimm collection appeared and began to gain an air of respectability. Subsequently, numerous tales of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries were translated from a number of languages and cultures and brought to the British public, with the result that British children ended up being quite versed in fairy tales of Norwegian, Russian, or even Indian origins. Naturally enough, a lot of British writers undertook writing fairy tales themselves. Indeed, John Ruskin, William Thackeray, or Charles Dickens were among the first English writers to venture into the world of fantasy; The King of the Golden River by Ruskin was published in 1851, while Dickens’s The Magic Fishbone appeared in 1867. The parodic treatment of the fairy tales that these authors used was far from being the norm in the mid-nineteenth century, but by the end of the century, it had become more common to play with conventions, if only to cause the works to be read by a wider audience, which might include adults. When Oscar Wilde, whose parents had also gathered Irish tales to put them in writing, wrote his own tales in 1888 in The Happy Prince and Other Tales, and subsequently in A House of Pomegranates in 1891, he did not mean them expressly
for the use of children. In a letter to a friend, he described his tales as “studies in prose, put for Romance’s sake into a fanciful form: meant partly for children, and partly for those who have kept the childlike faculties of wonder and joy.”16

The fact that Oscar Wilde wrote fairy tales is rather consistent with his personality, for he was a fabulous storyteller and the roots of the tales are grounded in orality. Some conventional characteristics of the traditional tales—as defined by Russian formalist Vladimir Propp for instance—were thus respected by Wilde who, in order to subvert traditional fairy stories, abided by at least some of the rules that make them identifiable as such. The underlying discourse is fundamentally different, whereas the form and structure tend to be respected. Indeed, Propp’s tripartite structure, which so often rules the action in folk narratives, can be found in the Irish author’s tales.17 The Happy Prince sends the swallow on three errands, the Nightingale sings and presses her heart to the rose’s thorn three times to make it turn red, the Young King has three dreams, and the Star Child’s generosity is tested three times by the magician.

Nevertheless, as far as Wilde’s tales are concerned, the moral is not to be found in the punishment of the bad and the reward of the good. In *The Happy Prince and Other Tales*, children are taught a very different story. As a matter of fact, all the heroes, except for the Selfish Giant, meet with a sad end. The Happy Prince offers his life and that of the little swallow in order to do good to his people, but is not understood by the pragmatic and callous men who run the city: the sacrifice is thus to no avail and the cynics have the last word.18 Wilde shows that the capacity to dream and to see beauty where it truly lies has disappeared. He targets the materialism of his contemporaries while denouncing the absence of action taken to alleviate the sufferings of indigent people within cities. The lack of hope is also evident in “The Nightingale and the Rose,” in which the bird sacrifices herself on the altar of love, but dies for nothing, since the student who badly wanted a red rose throws the flower in the gutter, and then declares that love is useless. Hans, in “The Devoted Friend,” sacrifices himself at the Miller’s request and dies in the forest, a victim of the Miller’s ruthless exploitation of his generosity. Conversely, traditional tales tend to have happy endings, since the reader or hearer is meant to identify with the protagonist.

As a matter of course, fairy tales were also written as entertainment and often spoke for the humble reader’s wish to acquire a better life. Hence, the stories about kings, queens, and princes; and when members of the lower classes appear in the traditional tales they usually
improve their condition and climb the social ladder. However, Oscar Wilde’s tales do not attempt to perpetuate bourgeois social representations; on the contrary, he denounces the dominant discourse, which was detrimental to the lower classes and questioned the wisdom of those who think that, “if you say the same thing over and over a great many times, it becomes true in the end” (RR 47). In Wilde’s tales, the opposition is clear between who is rich and who is not, but also between who has the means to express himself and who does not. Little Hans’s “friend,” the Miller, manages to turn Hans’s death into a ludicrous sacrifice because he is the one who can speak well, and his hypocritical verbosity finds an audience when, at Hans’s funeral, he declares: “I had as good as given him my wheelbarrow, and now I really don’t know what to do with it. It is very much in my way at home, and it is in such bad repair that I could not get anything for it if I sold it. I will certainly take care not to give away anything again. One always suffers for being generous” (DF 43).

Although Oscar Wilde is usually considered a hedonistic socialite, unaware of the destitution in which many of his countrymen lived, his political essay is proof to the contrary. *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891) does not display a conventionally pious and paternalistic empathy toward the poor, nor does it propose to alleviate their sufferings through charity, contrary to what was commonly advocated among benevolent Victorians. It is mostly a call to manifest dissatisfaction with an impossible way of life: without beauty and pleasure around them, the poor should not accept to remain slaves to the rich; instead, they should claim their freedom. *The Soul of Man under Socialism* does not uphold social solidarity; it professes liberty through self-assertiveness and artistic self-fulfillment. In Wilde’s tales, society precludes the characters’ attempts to assert themselves and make their own conscious choices: the Young King is shunned by his people when he appears at his coronation in the clothes of a beggar, the Fisherman is cursed by the priest who cannot recognize true love because he does consider affection for a mermaid as legitimate, and the Star-Child dies an enlightened king, only to be succeeded by a cruel ruler.

In both collections, some aspects of humor and realism are combined with masterfully poetical language. Despite these elements of humor, the writer’s critique of certain Victorian values becomes quite plain. It is very often the materialism of a capitalistic age that is ridiculed and portrayed as out of place in the world of the marvelous. The satirical aspect of Wilde’s discourse can be found in the “trespassers will be prosecuted” sign in the Giant’s garden (SG 28). Indeed, the intrusion of such a notice into the fairy-tale world ridicules the
prohibition and preannounces Wilde’s stance in *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, in which he calls for the abolition of private property. Ready-made truths were turned upside down by Wilde, who juggled with paradoxes in order to debunk what Victorian society had to say about morality, honesty, and other cardinal virtues. Cynicism is absent from traditional fairy tales, which usually end happily. In Wilde’s tales, happy endings are scarce. The Star-Child, after he became King in his land, fed the poor and brought “peace and plenty in the land” (SC 140). However, Wilde added the statement that deprives the reader of a happy ending and brings a bitter conclusion to the tale: “Yet ruled he not long, so great had been his suffering, and so bitter the fire of his testing, for after the space of three years he died. And he who came after him ruled evilly” (SC 140). Traditionally, fairy tales conclude with the resolution of a crisis, such as the initial presence of a witch, of an evil ruler, of a child-eating ogre. However, in his stories, Wilde maintains the atmosphere of crisis without ever fully resolving it, as he does not believe that a magic wand is enough to solve the miseries of the world.

**Aestheticism and Politics: When Decadent Tales Vindicate the Need for Change in Society**

Wilde’s tales, albeit apparently pessimistic, are recounted with a remarkable care for what makes a story beautiful. Wilde created his own fairy-tale style by employing a decadent aesthetic imagery in the tales. The word “aesthetics” (from the Greek *aesthesis*, “sense perception”) started to be employed as early as 1735 by the German philosopher Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and “became, gradually, the accepted term for all discussions concerning the nature of beauty in both its theoretical and concrete aspects.” It was only at the end of the nineteenth century that Aestheticism started to mean the search for beauty above all other concerns, and was deemed decadent because of its apparent disregard for traditional morality (Calloway 2011, 16). Thus, if Aestheticism was not necessarily decadent, Decadence was perforce an aesthetic movement and became the defining characteristic of the fin de siècle, the so-called Yellow Nineties.

Decadence was a paradoxical movement, which is maybe why some critics consider Wilde as its master: “the soul of Decadence is Oscar Wilde. He is its uncontested master and most lucid theoretician.” Indeed, while the decadent movement in literature seldom shows a glimmer of hope for the future—nor is the future its object—Decadence as a philosophical and historical phase that has been
undergone by various civilizations and eras contains renewal in its DNA. This explains why, in Wilde’s tales, degeneration lives alongside regeneration. Vladimir Jankélévitch explains how progress and decadence are irreparably linked and how the latter provides an opportunity to start anew after having exhausted many possibilities. Decadence in Wilde’s tales, just like nineteenth-century socialism, embodied progress and change; and by rejecting the world as it was, it showed a will to change things. On the one hand, Wilde’s prose is eminently aestheticized, but on the other hand, he was aware of the dangers of total Aestheticism when outer beauty is not matched by beauty of the soul. This was the argument not only of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but also that of “The Star-Child,” of “The Birthday of the Infanta,” of “The Fisherman and His Soul,” and of “The Happy Prince,” whose beauty is sterile until what adorns the statue is used for social purposes. This is why Julia Prewitt Brown thinks that there is such a thing as “Wilde’s ‘ethical aesthetic.’ ” By saying that he believes in the importance of form over content, Wilde simply states that beauty is the path that leads us to the core of things, as directly as any realistic and stark discourse can do. In his *Illustrated History of Children’s Literature*, Peter Hunt insists on the tales’ dual aspect: “Wilde’s elegantly wrought stories . . . play out the conflict between the Paterian desire for beauty and fine feeling and the impulse to pity and intervention on behalf of human suffering.” We are of a different opinion though, as far as the impulse to pity and intervention is concerned, because the limits of those feelings are precisely what is exposed in many tales. Wilde explained in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* that charity did not help the poor in the long run, and that it even hampered the deep changes that had to take place within society.

Contrary to the first collection, for which Wilde chose one of the tales as title for the whole book, he named the 1891 collection after a fruit that is redolent with symbolic meaning. Indeed, pomegranates have a twofold signification: one is linked with death and the underworld, since it was the instrument of Hades’s deception of Persephone who, after she was taken to live with the god of the Underworld, could have gone back to her mother Demeter had she not consumed pomegranate seeds. The Greeks also associated it with Dionysus because a pomegranate tree grew right on the spot where the “God of Libations” was cut into pieces by Hera. Similarly, Christianity also considers it a symbol of resurrection: often pictured in Renaissance paintings, it embodies the idea that Christ died and was born again, an important signifier if we consider that Decadence reconciles two sides
of the same coin: degeneration and regeneration. That double symbolism is in itself very Wildean, as the Irish author was fascinated not only by the Ancient Greeks but also by Catholicism. Walter Pater, whom Wilde befriended at Oxford, greatly influenced his hedonistic vision of life and of art. Pater’s insistence on reaching the meaning of things through transient sensations characterizes Decadence, also described by Stephen Calloway as “a dandyism of the senses,” “an extraordinary, precious ideal which we observe in its final splendor” (Calloway 2011, 22). If we see Decadence as a call for change, it must inevitably be linked to politics. The same can be said of Wilde’s dandified appearance: conformity being what society expects from the individuals who compose it, journalists often attacked Wilde for that aspect of his personality, if one can judge from the numerous caricatures that appeared in magazines such as Punch, for example. However, if the “personal is political,” as the feminists had it in the 1970s, then the dandy is a figure of resistance to established codes: “[the dandy] challenges the world just by being himself.” As a dandy, Wilde also made people uncomfortable because of the extreme care that he took in dressing, and the outlandish appearance that his eighteenth-century clothes gave him. Such flamboyance was sometimes perceived as artificial and contrived. Punch made a point of drawing attention to Wilde’s appearance, and thus lampooned the aesthetic movement through Wilde. In 1881, George du Maurier, one of Punch’s most famous cartoonists, created Maudle and Jellaby Postlethwaite, two aesthetic characters who were regularly featured in the magazine; moreover, when Wilde’s name appeared, it was often twisted in ways that allowed everybody to recognize who the target was, Oscuro Wildegoose or Ossian Wilderness being obvious enough references to Oscar Wilde. The fact that his appearance was different from that of the usual Victorian male made his contemporaries uneasy enough to provoke a steady series of comments in Punch or in The World (Ellmann 1988, 220).

According to Madeleine Cazamian, the characteristics of Decadent Aestheticism were “a preference for artificiality, luxury, eccentricity or abnormality; diabolism or bliss in evil.” In “The Birthday of the Infanta,” the makeup and masks at the Spanish court reveal what Catherine Rancy calls “an aesthetic and decadent fear of time and ageing.” That anxiety is manifest in the tales where death can somehow be circumvented, as in “The Fisherman and his Soul” or in “The Birthday of the Infanta.” The Wildean world in which these characters evolve is far from suggesting innocence, and one of the best instances of the cruelty oozing from the stories lies in the description
of the Court’s barbarity in the ill-named Joyeuse, the Young King’s palace. When he was only a newborn, he was stolen from his mother who herself was killed by her own father, the King, by “a swift Italian poison administered in a cup of spiced wine” (YK 60). The Princess’s fault was to have given birth to an illegitimate son, the fruit of her illicit union with a man of lower parentage. A victim of convention, her body was consequently “lowered into an open grave…where, it was said, that another body was also lying, that of a young man of marvelous and foreign beauty, whose hands were tied behind him with a knotted cord, and whose breast was stabbed with many red wounds” (YK 60). The image may well have been inspired by Guido Reni’s painting of Saint Sebastian, one of Wilde’s favorites. The use of Aestheticism mitigates the actual meaning of the depiction, which is that a man was savagely killed for having loved a woman above his rank; and yet, as in the baroque painting, in which the somewhat indolent pose of Reni’s Saint Sebastian tones down the atrocity of the saint’s death, the murder of the young man in the story becomes high art.

As Holbrook Jackson has claimed, Decadence can be considered as playing on two sides; if one part was concerned with egoistic and morbid pleasures, the other demanded a better life and a “freedom which should give the common man opportunities for the redemption of himself and his kind. Along with the poseur worked the reformer urged by the revolutionist.” This accounts for the fact that in Wilde’s tales, socialism appears in harmony with the atmosphere of Decadence. Gems, makeup, and artifice show a reevaluation of things. They serve as a reminder that true beauty does not reside where one might think, as at the end of “The Happy Prince.” Even though the statue was stripped bare of all its precious coating and the swallow had been dumped on a heap of dust, the leaden heart and the dead bird are the two things that the angels take back to God as the most beautiful objects in the city. Although “The Fisherman and his Soul” bears the imprint of Aestheticism, the latter is used to show the world’s misery. The Emperor’s palace is described as having “pillars…of green marble, and a pavement of a kind of peach-blossom marble” (FS 111). That luxury shows a discrepancy between those who have and those who do not: “There may be some who lack raiment and others who lack bread. There may be widows who sit in purple and widows who sit in rags” (FS 120). The tale was published in 1891, the same year as The Soul of Man under Socialism, which heralded in almost the same words the end of such oppression: “There will be no people living in fetid dens and fetid rags, and bringing up unhealthy,
hunger-pinched children in the midst of impossible and absolutely repulsive surroundings.”

“Give [man] a mask and he will tell you the truth.” When Wilde wrote that aphorism in *The Critic as Artist*, he gave us a clue about how he worked. Indeed, he endeavored to tell the truth about his society by means of the mask he was wearing of a dandified aesthete. His contemporaries chose not to take what he had to say seriously, although his beliefs were close to those of William Morris, for example. Wilde admired Morris because he thought that all his creations were inspired by the search for beauty. In 1889, he wrote an article in *The Pall Mall Gazette* entitled “Poetical Socialists,” which was a review of the book of songs edited by Edward Carpenter, *Chants of Labour: A Song-Book of the People*. In that article, he expressed his good opinion of socialism: “[Socialism] has the attraction of a wonderful personality, and touches the heart of one and the brain of another, and draws this man by his hatred of injustice, and his neighbour by his faith in the future, and a third, it may be, by his love of art, or by his wild worship of a lost and buried past.” Like William Morris—who was one of the contributors to *Chants of Labour*—Wilde’s concern for the miseries of his age was not a mere pose. In 1886, he signed a petition in favor of the Haymarket anarchists in Chicago and was the only man of letters in London who did so. It was not surprising that he sympathized with the anarchists and with his oppressed fellow men, as it must be remembered that Oscar Wilde was the son of Jane Francesca Elgee and William Wilde. His mother had fought for the independence of Ireland when she was young, and had written deeply committed poetry under the name of Speranza, as well as pamphlets and articles in the Irish newspaper *The Nation*. Far from being a rich lady’s pastime, poetry for her became a means to advocate for more rights for the poor, as in the case of this poem entitled “The Voice of the Poor”: “Before us die our brothers of starvation: / Around are cries of famine and despair: / Where is hope for us or comfort or salvation?” In her son’s stories, the heroes are the weak, the invisible: a fisherman, a dwarf, a shepherd, a gardener are given a voice to reveal the extent of their exploitation. The tales expressed his ideas about society and what he considered the faults of capitalism and private property. He gave a definition of what he called socialism, which may appear utopian but which was inspired by an awareness of the evils of his time: “Socialism, Communism or whatever one chooses to call it… will restore society to its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism, and ensure the material well-being of each member of the community.” In the tales, the Selfish Giant evolves from a nasty capitalist owner to a happy
communist, blithely sharing his fruit with the children. In Wilde’s eyes, socialism, communism, and anarchism were arbitrary labels that he used interchangeably, which tended not to allow his political ideas to be taken seriously.

The tales’ radicalism may also be found in their criticism of power. The vertical authority embodied by the sovereign in “The Young King” is disparaged as callous and indifferent to people’s sufferings; it is even accused of making those hardships heavier through the careless and ludicrous need that the Crown has for jewels and luxurious fabric. People die to provide beautiful robes, a pearl destined to adorn the scepter of the future king, or rubies to be set on his crown. The descriptions of the looms where his workmen are gathered are reminiscent of Victorian workshops: “The meager daylight peered in through the grated windows, and showed him the gaunt figures of the weavers bending over their cases. Pale, sickly-looking children were crouched on the huge crossbeams… The air was foul and heavy, and the walls dripped and streamed with damp” (YK 63). The young man who is preparing to be king chooses to wear the clothes of a poor man on the day of his coronation, an attempt at equality that is blessed by God, who makes his staff blossom.

Conclusion

The renewal that the tales seem to call for is identical to Oscar Wilde’s longing for a freer society. Wilde’s socialism was tainted with Aestheticism because he thought socialism was beautiful, in the sense that it was to be brought about by artists as much as it was meant to make artists of men. Marxist critic Terry Eagleton comments on Wilde’s rejection of utilitarian values: “If [Wilde] sometimes displays the irresponsibility of the aesthete, he also restores to us something of the true political depth of that term.” Wilde used the medium of the tale to fight against the dull materialism of his age, and to offer the marvelous as a counterbalance to Victorian hypocrisy. “Morality does not help me. I am a born antinomian” was one of Wilde’s last declarations in De Profundis. Delight in beauty and melancholy are what the reader feels once he has read the tales, but he certainly does not feel the weight of a Victorian moral, as Wilde was as reluctant to preach anything to anybody as he was to be preached to. We have the impression that a fight for a better world is at stake in his stories, and to tell the lower classes that they had a right to a better life was subversive in itself. The fin de siècle made such a plea possible, although most of its eulogists were so disenchanted that they did not transform their discontent into positive protest. Wilde implicitly
did, although he was never involved in political organizations and thus his socialism remained idiosyncratic; it was a blend of art and politics, it was a message of insubordination sent to challenge the bleakness of Victorian times.

Notes

6. The first stories that inspired Basile were not actual fairy tales but rather fables (favole) told by Italian Renaissance writer Giovanni Francesco Straparola who, in Le Piacerevoli Notti (1550, 1553), relates stories that were later recounted as Beauty and the Beast for example, or Puss-in-Boots.
15. The world of marvelous tales was not strange to him, as both of his parents had published books of legends. In 1888, Lady Wilde published Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland, and William Wilde in 1852 had collected various legends for his Irish Popular Superstitions.

18. “So they pulled down the statue of the Happy Prince; ‘As he is no longer beautiful, he is no longer useful’, said the Art Professor at the University.” HP, p. 19.

19. “Cinderella,” “Beauty and the Beast,” and “Puss-in-Boots” provide examples of this tendency.

20. “The possession of private property is very often extremely demoralizing, and that is, of course, one of the reasons why Socialism wants to get rid of the institution.” O. Wilde (2002) *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, in *The Ballad of Reading Gaol and Other Writings* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited), p. 249.


26. Pomegranates are featured three times in the “Fisherman and his Soul” and once in “The Birthday of the Infanta.”


28. Wilde had been fascinated by Catholicism ever since childhood. Just before he died, he was converted to Catholicism, according to Robert Ross: “I then went in search of a priest, and after great difficulty found Father Cuthbert Dunne of the Passionists, who came with me at once and administered Baptism and Extreme Unction.” Robert Ross to More Adey, December 14, 1900, in O. Wilde (2002) *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. R. Hart-Davis (Ware: Wordsworth), p. 854.

29. Walter Pater (1839–1894) was an English critic and historian who influenced the aesthetic movement. His ideas were considered dangerous by the establishment after the publication of *The Renaissance* and its famous conclusion that appeared like a call for hedonism: “To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.” W. Pater (1873) *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: MacMillan and Co), p. 210.

30. See [www.punch.photoshelter.com](http://www.punch.photoshelter.com) for the magazine’s cartoons taunting Oscar Wilde, including the famous one of Wilde as a sunflower in a vase with the caption: “‘O, I feel just as happy as a bright Sunflower!’ Lays of Christy Minstrelsy.” Printed in London’s *Punch* on June 25, 1881.
35. At the end of the tale, sweet-scented white flowers start to grow where the Fisherman and his mermaid were buried, a clear sign of a presence beyond the grave.
36. The little Infanta’s mother was embalmed after her death: “and her body was still lying on its tapestried bier in the black marble chapel of the Palace just as the monks had borne her in on that windy March day, nearly twelve years before” (BI 74–75).
37. “And the vision of Guido’s St Sebastian came before my eyes as I saw him at Genoa, a lovely brown boy, with crisp, clustering hair and red lips, bound by his evil enemies to a tree and, though pierced by arrows, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned gaze towards the eternal beauty of the opening Heavens.” S. Mason (1914) *Bibliography of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. Werner Laurie), p. 86.
41. “We come before you as a body advocating the principles of Revolutionary International Socialism; that is, we seek a change in the basis of Society—a change which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities.” William Morris (February 1885) “The Manifesto of the Socialist League,” *Commonweal*. Consulted on www.marxists.org.
42. “I have always felt that your work comes from the sheer delight of making beautiful things: that no alien motive ever interests you: that in its singleness of aim, as well in its perfection of result, it is pure art, everything that you do.” *Letter to William Morris* (March–April 1891), in Wilde, *Letters of Oscar Wilde*, p. 291.
44. “I tried to get some literary men in London, all heroic rebels and skeptics on paper, to sign a memorial asking for the reprieve of these

45. The family was nonconformist and Wilde’s father—who recognized three illegitimate children—did have his share of scandal when a patient of his first accused him of sexual abuse and then of libel. The trial that followed declared Sir William Wilde guilty and tarnished his reputation in Dublin.


47. Wilde, *The Soul of Man*, p. 278.


PART II

The Seduction of Sickness
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Decadent Tropologies of Sickness

Pirjo Lyytikäinen

**Introduction**

An exceptional relationship with sickness is a well-known characteristic of decadent literature. In the decadent perspective on life, malady attains value at the expense of health; moreover, the embrace of decay characteristic of the movement constitutes in itself a manifesto for sickness. A line from a decadent credo by “the chorus of the insane” in the Finnish novel *Mataleena* (1905), by Joel Lehtonen, says as much: “And we want to be decadent, if everyone else flaunts their good health.”¹ This fragment of Lehtonen’s text, which is in many ways a peculiar text of Decadence, repeats the gesture of embracing decay, and brings forth one of the most important aspects of this cherishing of malady and malaise: the provocative function it has in relation to the values of bourgeois society. The inversion or revaluation of well-established values is an integral part of the literary stance that defines Decadence,² and the exaltation of sickness is one of its central aspects. But there is more to this: sickness is valued as a dimension that can give new insights into the lives of characters, and even reveal fundamental truths that are hidden from “the healthy.” Art needs sickness to be true art.

Thus, malady becomes a trope that functions metaphorically to refer to the core ideas within fin-de-siècle Decadence. The malady often remains unspecified, referring to sickness in the broadest sense, as a sign of distinction separating the world of the Decadents from that of appalling normality, that is, the bourgeois idea of health. The more specific tropology of malady in fin-de-siècle Decadence had two main sources. First, it inherited a variety of more or less “literary”
illnesses like the spleen of the earlier Romantic Decadents. Second, Naturalism, with its enthusiasm for neuropathology, introduced medically defined illnesses that appeared in new ways in Decadent texts. Hysteria and neurosis/neurasthenia, as defined by the psychopathologies of the nineteenth century, provided the standard basis for new imagery of illness in decadent literature, but now it was mixed with the traditional imagery of melancholy. Decadence replaced the “scientific” approach preached (if not always practiced) by such Naturalist authors as Émile Zola with a phantasmagoria of diseases, where the new scientific terminology blends with a whole package of old mythical and theological clichés.

In this chapter, I will explore the tropology of sickness by juxtaposing Joris-Karl Huysmans’s À rebours, the most important prototype of a decadent novel with regard to the tropology of sickness, as well as all other decadent tropes, with three less known but, in this context, highly relevant decadent texts: Ola Hansson’s Sensitiva amorosa (first published 1887), Volter Kilpi’s Antinous (1903), and Joel Lehtonen’s Mataleena (1905). These novels also give us a glimpse into Nordic Decadence, a relatively unknown and not very well-researched reverberation of the French movement. Furthermore, these texts express the metaphysical dimensions of sickness but do not present any “scene of convalescence,” such as those analyzed by Barbara Spackman. I focus on the various descriptions of the illnesses of their male protagonists, including the “pathology” of their visions and dreams (one could call them, as Huysmans does, “somnambulistic, angelic apparitions”). These visions manifest the epistemological value of sickness: they function as allegorical emblems revealing the worldview of Decadence.

Huysmans’s novel, on the one hand a compilation of motifs and themes already circulating in the French cultural and literary field but, on the other, essentially the most important nodal point combining and transforming these elements to form a specifically decadent blend, serves to give the other texts an orienting perspective. The Swedish text by Hansson, which almost defines Decadence for Swedish literary history, tells stories about different weak and overly sensitive protagonists, all of whom have problems in their erotic lives. The book manifests an overall reflexive mode, beginning with an introductory chapter commenting on the title, which is said to refer to “an herb growing in the overcultivated soil of modern society, called sensitiva amorosa.” This herb, with its morbid veins, “sickly sweet scent,” and color resembling “the light in a sick-room” (Hansson 1957, 11) is a trope for modern sensitivity, which renders normal sexual life impossible for
the protagonists: the combined evidence of the weak characters’ cases amounts to an exposition of a decadent worldview. The two Finnish texts, each in its own way, show how decadent themes and style(s) are transfigured in the movement’s later phase—in a country where the existence of Decadence used to be denied or downplayed. Antinous develops the common motif of the ephebe connected to narcissism, which in a variety of modes is a universal symptom of decadent male protagonists. It presents a series of tableaux depicting the life of a decadent Schopenhauerian aesthete (loosely modeled on the historical figure of Antinous, the beloved companion of the Roman Emperor Hadrian), culminating in the suicide of the perennially solitary protagonist by drowning in the Nile. Mataleena presents a narrator-protagonist who is suffering from demonic mania (or male hysteria), and combines decadent and Naturalist motifs with Nietzscheism. There is less variation in the tropology of sickness than in the overall style and structure of the four texts, but Lehtonen’s stands out on account of its protagonist, who embraces raging insanity instead of showing any of the standard symptoms of a weak neurotic personality. In each text, one important variable is the degree to which the sickness is articulated in Naturalistic or medical terms: the tendency in the later decadent texts is toward allegorical and philosophical representations that express a totally metaphorical “sickness unto death” instead of backing it with a medically grounded representation of neurosis, as in the case of À rebours.

Neurosis and the Sensitivity of Male Protagonists

The multiple symptoms of hereditary degeneracy adopted from medical literature by Naturalist literature, in order to characterize its protagonists, already included various nervous disorders. Huysmans’s À rebours relies on the idea of hereditary decline introduced into literature by Zola, although the aristocratic lineage of its protagonist gives a new tone to the description. The neurotic last scion of the Des Esseintes family is plagued with hereditary weakness stemming from the “exhaustion” of the noble line.

The Naturalist imagery of fatal heredity and the medical discourses of degeneration remain an essential part of the tropology of literary Decadence, but they are supplemented or even overwhelmed by a rich expansion of motifs. The store of symptomatic choices of food, art, partners, and interior decorations in À rebours exploits and combines a most varied arsenal of cultural ideas, which are connected to the
neurosis of the protagonist purely in order to produce the desired stylistic and artistic effects. Choosing what is “decadent” in terms of cultural *topoi* that are partly inherited from ancient ideas of the Fall and of moral depravity, partly defined or redefined by modern conceptions of hypersensitivity, narcissism, and the art of nuances, is what defines neurosis in the (phantasmagorical) diagnostics practiced by the Decadents.

Huysmans sets up a model for subsequent writers by (whimsically) equating aesthetic preferences and neurotic symptoms. All the choices that Des Esseintes makes when decorating his house supposedly form part of his case history and reflect his neuroses, so that we could say that his house is an allegorical image of his sickness. The colors alone could be used to diagnose the hero, if we are to believe the narrator, who identifies the taste for the color orange with weak neuroticas (Huysmans 2009, 14).

This refinement and artificiality are products of a neurotic mind. Thus, it is the blend of hypersensitivity and intellection that is presented as symptomatic of neurosis. However, this aesthetic type, as incarnated in the protagonists of decadent texts, is presented as a failure, in comparison to truly productive artists: to produce a work of art is something that is beyond the capacity of most decadent characters. The vigorous creativity of the authors themselves does not match with this description of neurosis, however much the Decadents denounced themselves (or each other) as neuroticas.

Ola Hansson’s Sensitiva amorosa caused a scandal in Swedish literary life which determined the author to leave the country. The combination of Naturalist analysis and Aesthetic intellection in this work compares with Huysmans’s characterizations of his hero’s malady. Hansson’s short stories describe *livsängest* or the sickness of modern man as a paralyzing anxiety, which constantly “poisons the soul” and “exhausts its energy.” The narrator seems to admit that “the anxiety of living” is a purely physiological disposition of blood and nerves; nevertheless, he wonders about its precise nature as a state of mind. Is the “monstrous parasite” just the idea of mortality or death, which somehow have become more intimate to modern man, or is it the fate that “raises its head of Medusa in front of the modern fatalist?” (Hansson 1957, 49). He even speculates that the essence of the whole universe is sick, and it is only because modern man is more sensitive than older generations that he senses the sickness inside himself. Thus, the refinement brought by civilization causes this anxiety, by awakening the awareness of a primordial cosmic condition. But the physiological and psychological explanations are competing in an uncanny
way. If it is just “the spoiled seed and egg of the parents” that determine the fate of the protagonist in the story the narrator is about to tell, then there seems to be no need for invoking the images of grim Death, or “the concrete vision of the struggle for survival” that haunt the hero’s conscience (Hansson 1957, 49). The whole package of cultural heritage connected to mortality and “evil fate,” meant to explain the condition of modern man, functions at a different level from the hereditary line that plagues the particular individual.

The reference to the struggle for survival betrays the Darwinist influences on Hansson’s idea of the nature of man. Huysmans, contrary to Hansson, does not pay any attention to Darwinist developments and the “cell-substances” that seem to determine the emotional life of Hansson’s characters. Instead, Huysmans proposes an uneasy combination of hereditary determinism conjoined with psychic and cultural factors as influences on the condition of modern man. The case history of Des Esseintes is supplemented by a survey and presentation of the whole culture of Decadence in all its manifestations, which becomes largely independent of the Naturalistic account of Des Esseintes’s neurosis. Hansson’s topic is, at the literal level, restricted to erotic relations between man and woman, but the neurotic sensitivity of the male protagonists is aesthetic—very much the same as that of Des Esseintes. The smallest trifle is enough to dissipate an erotic attachment, which seems to be doomed anyway, since the physical side of sexual relations is presented as abhorrent. Ultimately, the only erotic pleasure that remains is visual: a contact from eye to eye, or just between the male eye and the beauty of a female passerby. Hansson’s book ends with the story of such an “oculo-erotic” rendezvous, where a man and a woman who are complete strangers to each other “enjoy sex” by looking at each other’s eyes in a public place without ever approaching each other. The aesthetic–erotic satisfaction that is achieved only through sight becomes the main theme of the text, as in the case of Paul Bourget’s “Flirting club,” but it also relates to the more general aesthetism of Decadence exemplified by Des Esseintes’s seclusion in what is supposed to be a perfect aesthetic space.

Even more extreme, both in form and content, is the aesthetic orientation in Kilpi’s Antinous (1903), a sort of lyrical prose work comprised of a series of tableaux that presents the eponymous character as an observer reacting to all things around him solely by looking—only as an aesthete. In a sense, this work generalizes the aesthetic “solution,” which in Hansson’s text remains connected to sexual life. We find Antinous mostly in front of landscapes, buildings, or artworks,
but even when he is looking at living people he “freezes” them in aesthetic positions, thereby treating them as if they were artworks. The young author, who in the 1930s was to become the most important Finnish Modernist, experimented with this Decadent text after two lyrical novels in the Symbolist register, which were admired by a chosen few, but which also provoked some strongly negative reactions.\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Antinous} was mostly greeted with incomprehension or indifference by readers, which had the effect of silencing the author for two decades. Decadence was not understood in Finland, since it cherished the image of itself as a young, vital, aspiring nation, albeit in the grips of oppressive Russian rule.

Kilpi’s text does not have any realistic settings and does not bear traces of Naturalism in its descriptions. The figure of the ideally beautiful youth (with the connotations of androgyny and “perversity” or homosexuality that Kilpi’s text never explicates but only implies), and the external framework of geographical places (Bithynia, Athens, Rome, and Egypt), where the historical Antinous lived, is all that remains of the character’s model. In decadent literature, Antinous makes fleeting appearances as a paradigmatic aesthetic and homoerotic ideal,\textsuperscript{15} while Kilpi mainly uses the figure as an inspiration to create a beautiful soul infected by the “poison” of aestheticism. Kilpi’s book records Antinous’s aesthetic experiences and his desire to merge into a vision of the world as a passive observing eye, a sort of \textit{Weltauge} (“world eye”) inspired by the aesthetics of Arthur Schopenhauer.\textsuperscript{16} Kilpi was probably the first author to introduce such notions to Finland, where Schopenhauer’s pessimism and misogyny, unlike in France, were never prominent.

The central idea in Schopenhauer’s aesthetic theory is related to the function that aesthetic experience plays in freeing its subject from the burden of the world of desires or the grip of the universal Will. The aesthetic experience lifts the subject to a contemplative state where he sees the objects of his aesthetic intention as ideals, rather like Platonic Ideas. Therefore, both the subject and the object are presented as hovering above a material and physical world that is controlled by the Will, which manifests itself in natural laws and bodily desires—especially sexual desire, the instrument of the eternal Will in perpetuating itself—which enslave the individual. The aesthetic experience brings a temporary relief from this rule; the final delivery from the suffering and turmoil caused by the will to live can be attained only in death.\textsuperscript{17} Kilpi’s \textit{Antinous} uses this Schopenhauerian background in shaping his protagonist, but acknowledges the morbid and antisocial
implications of this kind of aesthetic attitude by connecting the figure to the narcissistic tendencies of the decadent neurotic. Beauty does not provide freedom from suffering: “But isn’t even being beautiful just suffering and sickness? Isn’t a man vibrating with beauty just a great sorrow which is melting him?” asks the protagonist.18

The prominent Narcissus theme in the work serves to qualify the sickness: the aesthetic attitude of mirroring one’s soul in an external world that has been transformed into a mirror image leads to the abandonment of human interaction. The self-sufficient pleasure of an individual focusing on a life of refined sensations erodes both communal life and individual morality, and is, at the same time, the source of incurable melancholy. The narrative ends with the suicide of the aesthete unable to solve the enigma of life—symbolically represented in the text as a female stone sphinx, a sort of metaphysical femme fatale figure with feminine sex appeal but also a petrifying gaze.19 Antinous’s sickness is not described naturalistically; it is a mental state, which reflects the detachment of the fin-de-siècle aesthete from everyday life. In a sense, Antinous transforms Hansson’s erotic ideal of detachment and fear of bodily contact, as well as Des Esseintes’s in-between existence, into a full-scale aestheticism, by presenting the protagonist as a denizen of an ideal world beyond Naturalism. Antinous is the embodiment of the aesthetic impulse that denies worldly morality in order to embrace an ideal vision purged of physical and social contacts: but even while bodily realities are absent from the picture, this purity and aesthetic bliss cannot be maintained. Kilpi’s Antinous is betrayed by his own thoughts: the melancholiac sees the horror through the veil of beauty.20 The meaninglessness and incomprehensibility of life plague the aesthete even in the sphere where he has cut off all contacts with other people and the material world (except insofar as they can be appreciated aesthetically, as works of art). Hansson’s (or Schopenhauer’s) attempts to negate suffering are shown to be inadequate; the sickness is incurable, yet inherent in the aesthetic way of life.

If in Kilpi’s text we can see a lyrical (and Symbolist) version of the weak neurotic/sensitive without Naturalist elements, the image of hereditary madness that Joel Lehtonen (1881–1934) developed in Mataleena seems to renew the Naturalist/decadent trope, in order to create a new version of Decadence appropriating Nietzschean notions related to the Dionysian art instinct (as depicted in The Birth of Tragedy). The imagery of primitive agrarian life and the wilderness, as opposed to old culture and urban settings, marks this strange
blend produced by the encounter between European currents and Finnish literary culture. But the wilderness that Lehtonen describes becomes an allegory of the terrifying and fascinating natural forces and the primordial life evoked by other similar images in Huysmans’s texts, as well as elsewhere in decadent literature. In *Mataleena* the protagonist-narrator tells of his trip to his home village in search of his biological mother who abandoned him when he was a baby. The novel, although strewn with autobiographical details and realistic descriptions, is, at a deeper level, an allegory of becoming a (decadent) poet. It presents a life and a world wherein the weak Decadent would immediately succumb, even if he nostalgically dreams of such a world: a life in the form of the chaos of barbaric forces. The Dionysian affirmation of life (as chaos and becoming rather than order and stability) seems to guide the narrator-protagonist, but it turns out that what he finds and what he affirms as his roots bear the fatal mark of hereditary illness. The weak neurotic symptoms are replaced by mania, or by the properties associated with raging hysteria: constant excitement and exaltation, exaggerated emotions, restlessness, a tendency to lie (by inventing a past to his mother), and hyperbolic style mark the poet-protagonist. He presents himself as the last member of a family that exhibits a primordial tendency to raving madness and a death drive. However, this hereditary line is not seen to be weakening, unless we count as a degenerate the last of a family line who becomes a poet (genius).

Lehtonen’s hero does not cultivate artificial worlds. Instead, he returns to nature, although to a nature contaminated by decadent forces, threatening and lethal, yet also fascinating, since it manifests the wild forces of life and creation that only exist when they are commingled with death, degeneration, and insanity. Des Esseintes is betrayed by his own weak and infirm body that bears the destiny of an old lineage that is bound to degeneration when its forces are spent; his body thus functions as an allegory for the whole culture, in the view of the Decadents. Lehtonen’s hero, on the other hand, embodies the flowering of a whole race of “barbarians”; nonetheless, he and his family are not representatives of “natural” health in any sense. The recurring self-image of the narrator is that of “a golden flower rising from the bogs.” Nature itself is the breeding ground for destruction and decadence; this image of nature, already surfacing in Zola and conspicuous in Huysmans’s *En rade* (first published in 1887), is given its full force as a paradoxically horrifying and alluring setting in Lehtonen’s novel.
Visionary Neurotics

The weak and neurotic protagonists of decadent texts do not lack the power of imagination. Their phantasmagoric dreams and visions are vivid and usually terrifying to the visionaries themselves. The allegorical images rely heavily on cultural tradition and often derive from Naturalism, although their narrative status is different. In Decadence, depicting what the characters or character-narrators imagine brings forth the visionary character of their neurosis. These imaginings correspond to and presuppose the workings of a neurotic mind, if we believe what the narrator of *À rebours* affirms when he describes Des Esseintes regarding the Salome pictures by Gustave Moreau.

The description of the oil painting that shows Salome dancing before Herod is followed by a description of how Des Esseintes interprets it, and what fascinates him about it. Citing the text of the Gospel of St. Matthew, Huysmans draws the reader’s attention to the fact that none of the central elements in Moreau’s painting is found there (we could also note that the paintings themselves are only the pretext for the imaginative interpretation of them in *À rebours*). The Gospel accounts do not reveal the erotic and decadent aspects of the dancer. Instead, Salome’s “frenzied charms,” her “purposeful depravity” become “accessible only to sensibilities that had been unsettled and sharpened, rendered almost visionary by neurosis.” In short, now they are visible only to the eyes of a neurotic.

To neurotic eyes, Salome is revealed to be an idol of hysteria. The expressions used (catatony, insensitivity) allude to the medical context of Jean-Martin Charcot’s descriptions of his cases of hysteria and his theatrical lecture-performances, which Huysmans, among other writers, frequented. Huysmans’s description, however, recreates the image of hysteria as a product of the imagination of a neurotic culture and a neurotic, degenerate protagonist. This image has its sources in “those regions of the soul in which the nightmare growths of human thought flourish,” to cite Des Esseintes’s view of Baudelaire (Huysmans 2009, 117).

In this vision of hysteria and its interpretation, not much of any medical or Naturalistic discourse is left. Religious associations complement the attractive picture of “primordial” horror, the irresistible, yet petrifying abjection, which characterizes these sexual phantasmagorias. Hysteria as a medical notion becomes further diluted when Salome is made into the emblem of the deadly sin Lust (*Luxure*), by blasphemous reminiscences of the prayer of the Virgin, and by a
reference to the Beast of the Apocalypse (Huysmans 2009, 46). The already protean character of hysteria, recognized and disseminated by the medical discourses of the time, assumes here a kind of perverse, misogynistic, even diabolical epiphany of the human condition.

The description of the other picture by Moreau, the aquarelle *L’Apparition*, wherein Salome herself is petrified by the vision of the erotic as the primordial terrorizing force, also exploits the vocabulary connected to hysteria (the immobile, hypnotized histrionic is associated with Charcot’s “theater of hysteria”), and only now the powerful idol is reduced to a victim of terror (Huysmans 2009, 47–48). The description focuses on the effect that the female emblem produces in the male spectator. Salome is no longer a goddess; instead she is only a courtesan and an allegory of human condition. This erotic fantasy of the weak and almost impotent protagonist of Huysmans’s novel, with its masochistic and sacrilegious tones, once again produces the ambivalence ubiquitous in these visions: the senses of the almost impotent Decadent are aroused by the meeting of opposites (savage and refined, abject and beautiful, sex and death, seduction and violence) in the female Other. Part of the great sickness is the impossibility of breaking out of this lethal entanglement. The forceful imagination, which repeats, combines, multiplies, and strengthens all (contradictory) clichés about women and femininity, belongs to weak, feminized, or impotent characters and is, in principle, a symptom of their sickness, but is also given as the profoundest insight into the foundation of the universe: the force of desire is always seen as an accomplice of death and suffering—it is the vehicle of the deception of the Will, in Schopenhauerian terms. Thus, neurosis triggers epiphany.

The very rich descriptions of the two Salome paintings reverberate in various ways in later decadent texts and their tropologies of malady: the “eternal Salome” is inescapable for the later Decadents. One of Hansson’s stories tells of the last passion, which suddenly overtakes a male protagonist despite his idea that he has grown beyond sexual attraction. The protagonist is described as a typical effeminate Decadent: a thin figure with a *mignon* (delicate) face like a porcelain statuette. The woman he becomes infatuated with is described as his contrary in both physical and psychic respects. She is strong, and her hard form and gray eyes indicate strong sexuality with their “dim glow”; her whole being exudes the spirit of lust. He finds himself engaged to the woman, but his increasing anxiety cannibalizes his passion until he finally escapes the abject relationship before the marriage takes place. The seemingly limited focus on sexual relations in *Sensitiva amorosa* is brought to metaphysical levels in another case study describing a man fatally terrified by his erotic visions. His
visions present women and femininity in a particularly lurid light. The threatening stormy landscape on a hot summer day makes him see a demon in his female companion (the text never reveals anything else about their relationship except that they are watching the approaching thunderstorm together). He suddenly sees how “her forms are loosened” and her face is turning livid: in other words, he hallucinates her decay as an organism. The familiar decadent trope of seeing the double image of a beautiful young body and a repulsive dead body is here used in a particularly effective way. The girl’s “small greedy eyes” and her voracious smile are mysteries that he tries to penetrate—“as a surgeon operates on a sick substance with his instrument,” says the text (Hansson 1957, 78–79). But he is unable to use his “instrument”; the deathly erotic mystery remains. The enigmatic smile of the sphinx hypnotizes the protagonist and reduces him to an utterly passive creature who sees the whole world grotesquely changed by what he surmises beneath the smile: desire and abjection become one. A second stormy evening repeats the first scene. This time the light of a lantern makes the woman’s eyes phosphorescent, and suddenly he thinks he sees a tableau behind the smile: an orgy with a horrible dance macabre of male skeletons and naked female bodies (a reference to a painting by Jacob Jordaens is given).

This vision leads the protagonist toward psychosis: he begins to see the painting with the dance macabre in every female face; all female faces now bear both the sphinx-smile and the orgy that combines sex and death in a grotesque vision of the death dance. The final stroke comes in the middle of the street when he hallucinates and believes that he sees the whole universe as a night filled with phosphorescent spots, all the spots figuring the same smiling face of the woman he loved, until the myriads of faces finally become one, a giant face filling the whole universe with its cruel and covetous smile (Hansson 1957, 81–83). Although this unhappy visionary is taken to the insane asylum, his last vision seems to express the sick essence of the universe referred to at the beginning of Hansson’s book. Women are the unknowing vehicles of knowledge, whereas the neurotic men, once again, become the interpreters who are driven to despair or madness by what the female emblems reveal. Sexuality and desire spell out the foundation of human life in suffering: die Welt als Wille (the world as Will), with sex as the nexus driving man under its spell.

In Antinous as well, we find the quasi-obligatory scene describing the encounter of the protagonist with a mysterious sphinxlike woman (Kilpi 1903, 78–79). Clelia is seen lying naked on a tiger skin, and she is associated with the tiger also through various metaphors. This scene is just one of the many aesthetic tableaux in the text, but it is
the only one where the object of Antinous’s gaze looks back at him. The androgyne protagonist is troubled before the mystery (he even wonders if a woman is a human being), but he escapes, in order to avoid any further contact with this mystery. Nevertheless, this scene prepares the way for the fatal turning point, where Antinous meets the stone Sphinx in Egypt. This figure, with its alluring femininity (face and breasts), combined with the hard stony mass, imposes on Antinous a riddle that he cannot solve, now presenting itself as the fundamental question of being. The deathly statue represents the whole human history with its lost empires and forgotten civilizations, as well as the godless universe of becoming, which in the Decadent’s eyes presents itself as corruption and chaos rather than regeneration. The unsolvable riddle drives Antinous to commit suicide. It comes not as a surprise that this utterly passive hero brings about his death in the most passive way imaginable: he just steps from his boat into the Nile, the “eternal river,” and “glides” under water (Kilpi 1903, 122). The Schopenhauerian Endlösung (final solution) to suffering is reached, but here the aesthetic life seems to conduct the protagonist to it, rather than offer relief from it.

Lehtonen’s Mataleena, with its manic/hysteric poet-narrator, presents us with a different scenario, although the obligatory female emblems appear. In this text, two “mother-figures” dominate the scene, and the protagonist, embracing a Nietzschean ethos, a kind of affirmation of (“pagan”) life, also reacts to them in an affirmative way. If for Nietzsche the affirmation of life, as a disciplined countermovement to Schopenhauerian negation of life equated with suffering, was also an affirmation of suffering, then the Dionysian Decadent seems to affirm the life of pleasure despite the suffering. In Mataleena, the search of roots confirms the self-identity of the poet as a Dionysian artist surrendering to the forces of chaos and destruction, as well as to opposing societal morals and norms. The text celebrates the free creation of one’s own life and life-story as a work of art rather than truth. Nevertheless, the fatal heredity, or the phantasmagoria of an heredity constructed by the narrator for himself, emphasizes sickness and decay as both the sources and the reward for creativity.

The narrator’s successful quest for his long-lost biological mother Mataleena (Magdalene) ends with finding a one-eyed human wreck in rags, insane and suffering from a strange nervous disorder, who is sitting on straw scattered on the floor in the destitute tenant house of the narrator’s uneducated half-brother. A reputed beauty in her youth, the mother is now an ugly skeleton suffering incessant pains, delirious, terrified by her visions of hellfire, tortured by bedbugs
and cockroaches. Overall, the description of the mother starts as a Naturalistic picture (evoking the last images of Gervaise in Zola’s *L’Assommoir*); nonetheless, in the end, it is seen to resemble other fantastic visions of Decadence: it compares, in tone and style, with Huysmans’s description of the bulldog woman who is an image of Syphilis (Huysmans 2009, 78–81). Lehtonen thus vacillates between a more or less Naturalistic description and a grotesque fantasy in much the same way as Huysmans does. We also easily recognize this as a variant of the double image that combines female beauty with decay.

The mother appears as an emblem combining many of the numerous paradoxes of the text: since she is the sinful Mary Magdalene in whom the son insists on seeing the holy Madonna, she thus combines sin with holiness, rather like Huysmans’s emblematic Salome. The exalted description surrounding the grotesque figure with positive attributes presents her as the ambivalent ideal of Decadent art. The once rejected son defiantly recognizes in her his own fate, thus turning his back on the bourgeois education and the values of his foster home. His biological mother is presented as his precursor, and passes on the fatal heredity wherein the blessing of a life of absolute freedom is mixed with the curse of early decay and insanity. The naturalist idea of heredity is twisted here to serve the purpose of asserting a symbolic heredity, wherein the will to transgress is equated with creative energy, necessarily accompanied by self-destroying prodigality and gained only at the cost of sanity.

The fantasy about the real mother is complemented by a vision of a fantasy figure that functions as the mirror of Narcissus. Like Des Esseintes, Lehtonen’s protagonist is prone to fantasy and dreaming. Right after the description of the meeting with his mother he recounts this recurrent vision that he has. When he looks at the birch forest in the lingering light of the northern summer nights, he sees “The Wonder of the Forest,” also identified with the spirit of the wilderness, who combines elements of vegetal nature with a female figure. The ambivalence of this creature comes clearly forth. It is a figure driven by fierce and contrary passions; wild erotic desires; as well as violent hatred and jealousy. It is ice-cold and burningly hot at the same time. It blesses and blasphemes, cures and poisons, and is “eternally avenging.” The creature takes on female characteristics:

> [I]t was a woman, the Wonder of the Forest, whose eyes flash with wild green like phosphor and whose nipples glow in her breasts swollen with lust, scarlet like two wild carnations. (Lehtonen 1905, 24)
We recognize the green phosphorous glow and the erotic allure as standard decadent motifs, although vegetal elements here and elsewhere in Lehtonen tend to replace jewelry and other artificial decorative elements. The figure is at once both alluring and threatening (she is compared to a she-wolf; Lehtonen 1905, 12); she becomes the personification of the poet’s wild soul—as he himself affirms (Lehtonen 1905, 24). As an allegorical mother-figure, she is the generatrix of his writing. But there is a remarkable tension between the image of the Wonder of the Forest and the real mother to whom the title of the novel refers. Mataleena, as an emblem of decadence, shows all the horrors of decay, whereas the Wonder of the Forest represents untamed primitive force, and functions as a kind of Mother Nature connected to the cruel, wild, and untamed primordial nature of constant change and struggle, evoking, at the same time, the Nietzschean idea of the Dionysian.

The appropriation of the two mother-figures by the poet is the secret of his writing: together the figures allegorically represent his ambivalent poetry, combining Dionysian excess with a clear concept of grotesque decadence as the ultimate ground of human life. Unlike many weak protagonists of decadent literature, our poet-hero seems to have the force and energy to appropriate the creative forces symbolized by the female presences in his life. Sterility or impotence does not threaten him—yet. To Des Esseintes, as the feeble overripe fruit of a bygone civilization, the primitive female figures appear terrifying and paralyzing, although tempting at the same time; whereas Lehtonen’s protagonist mirrors himself freely in them and identifies with them. He is empowered by a creative force linked to this heritage, which marks him as the “Flower of the Wilderness,” the genial end product of his family line. But the creative force is contaminated. The transgressive energy of the wilderness combines the emblems of powerful primitivism with all the negative force of degeneration. Nature’s primordial life force is also the breeding ground of insanity in this fictional universe.

Although the two character types seem to oppose each other, we may well ask how different the maniac (or male hysteric) is from the passive weakling. For the weak Decadent, the demonic man was a fantasy figure or a figure from the past, who represented lost, archaic strength and a combination of spontaneous action, strong will, and passion. Huysmans’s hero, like many others who precede or follow him, combines extreme weakness and fragility of the nervous system with a ferocious imagination. He has wild sadistic dreams and is capable of producing vigorous mental images, imagining sublimely
horrible figures and forceful emblems of disease. In his dream visions, the formerly urbane Des Esseintes keeps falling into barbarism and savagery; that is, he becomes the Other that stands in opposition to civilization, which is constantly present in the decadent fictional worlds. The categories of the (over)civilized and the barbarian mix in uncanny ways.

In fact, the imagined “authentic” alternative to degenerate modern man undermines the difference, especially from the point of view of health/sickness—the Dionysian Decadent is too “modern,” too conscious of his “lateness” to be able to appropriate an attitude of spontaneous creation or action. Lehtonen describes in all his early works male protagonists who are active and destructive in a desperate way; their activity is often more given to debauchery, idleness, and violent fantasies rather than anything constructive. In Mataleena, the story of the mother’s youth is a nostalgic lie about real action and passion, and the poet’s own power lies in this imagining, even if it can still lead to poetic productivity.

**Conclusion**

Lehtonen’s protagonist, like the neurotics and aesthetes of the other texts, expresses the sensibility of the Decadents, with their “deeper” insights into the nature of things. Nonetheless, none of them is cured, and all of them show that the ultimate sickness, which is the main theme or the background schema of most decadent writing, with or without the support of the new medical designations, is the melancholia provoked by the grotesque meaninglessness of life. The decadent movement produces its tropology of sickness and the dramatization of despair and death drive in hallucinatory visions (the stone sphinxes haunting everywhere), against the background of the still-aching wound of lost faith or lost security. As literature, Decadence tended to look back rather than envision the future: only death and destruction were seen waiting on the horizon. Furthermore, the often grotesque and paradoxical blending of categories perhaps prepared the way for forms of thinking that eventually were to become relevant once more in our own time, toward the fin du millénaire (the end of the millenium).

**Notes**


3. This was the early phase of decadent sensibility (ca. 1830s), according to A. E. Carter (1958) *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature 1830–1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 27.


14. Recorded in V. Suomi (1952) *Nuori Volter Kilpi* (Helsinki: Otava), pp. 114–16 and 135. The earlier works by Kilpi with the revelatory titles *Bathseba* (1900) and *Parsifal* (1902) already testify influences from Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, and probably Hansson as well.


18. V. Kilpi (1903) *Antinous* (Helsinki: Otava), p. 91.


22. This image of bog (*suo*) was strongly connected to an important but negatively seen element of Finnish nature (i.e., Suomi, the Finnish word for Finland), and becomes imbued with negative connotations through its suggested association with “Decadent” marshlands and sludge. See J. de Palacio (2011) *La Décadence: le mot et la chose* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres), p. 19.


29. Kilpi, Antinous, pp. 116–17. The figure itself is rather like a Greek sphinx, and the only feature it has in common with the famous Great Sphinx of Giza is the size.

30. For Schopenhauer the world is such that everyone wishes to escape from the suffering, yet he does not advocate suicide; see for example Schopenhauer, The World as Will, vol. 2, pp. 709–15.

31. Lehtonen’s earlier novels, especially Paholaisen viulu (“The Devil’s Fiddle” 1904) and Villi (“The Wild One” or “The Savage,” 1905), describe artist-dilettantes who are unable to produce anything but their own life of pleasure as a “work of art.” See Lyytikäinen, Narkissos ja sfinksi, pp. 203–08 and 218–20. The Nietzschean elements in Lehtonen’s work betray the influence of Thus Spoke Zarathustra and The Birth of Tragedy, but Lehtonen’s Dionysian imagery also contains romantic elements that have little to do with Nietzsche’s philosophy.

32. Here I refer to the first description of the figure (Lehtonen, Mataleena, p. 12), but the image recurs and an almost identical description is given (p. 24).
CHAPTER 6

Consuming and Consumed: Woman as Habituée in Eugène Grasset’s *Morphinomaniac*

*Abigail Susik*

**Introduction**

When considering the visual culture of fin-de-siècle Paris, there might be more obvious places to look for themes of decay and maladie (sickness) than in the popularly inclined and decorative oeuvre of Eugène Grasset (1845–1917). Rather than exemplifying the conclusion of an era or the decline of a cohesive culture, Grasset’s production serves more as a significant late-nineteenth-century point of reference for the developing image-rhetoric of a pervasive consumer culture comprehensible to contemporary viewers today. Such a culture is, and arguably was already in Grasset’s time, dependent on fusing high artistic style with everyday needs and concerns, a formula that produces new “luxury” commodities at the same time that it encourages a cycle of stylistic obsolescence. As one of the most successful designers of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, active in both European and American markets, the Swiss-born Grasset combined many of the dominant stylistic languages of his era—medievalism, Japonism, and above all, an overarching program of ornamentalism—to impressively diverse and often quotidian, instrumentalized means and ends.¹ The enormously productive Grasset tried his hand at nearly every kind of plastic media over the course of his lengthy career.² In particular, he engaged in the early stages of what would become a graphic design industry for product advertisement, a burgeoning field in which he
became a leader alongside other late nineteenth-century artists such as Jules Chéret, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Alphonse Mucha. Grasset’s striking poster designs fused emergent avant-garde stylization with crowd-pleasing iconography, sumptuous product propaganda, and seductive “cover girls” who beckon to the viewer through lattices of schematic, organic motifs.

Certainly, the charm of Belle Époque consumption pastimes, the implied beauty of bourgeois taste, and modernity itself are themes at the forefront of Grasset’s commercial aesthetic, narratives that superficially leave scant room for the angst of social decline and historical finitude. At the center of Grasset’s print media vernacular, the image of the healthy, happy, and beautiful bourgeois woman of Europe defined his visual culture of consumption—and ultimately influenced the development of the most powerful advertising trope of the modern era: the desirable female as consuming, consumable, and consumed all at once—woman as cipher for nurturing, stimulating, and satisfying libidinal appetites of all kinds. For the most part, “Grasset’s women are demure, innocent and quiescent,” as Victor Arwas articulates, “the very concept of the Grasset maiden was the search for the ideal woman” (Arwas 1978, 24, 78). Sometimes, however, another representation of woman as dangerously “consumed” in the very act of consumption came to the surface in his œuvre, and it is this fissure that I explore here.

Through an analysis of Grasset’s 1897 lithograph *La Morphinomane* (*Morphinomaniac*), I hypothesize that the artist’s conflicted orientation to the image of woman as a modern consumer, his awareness of the growing trend of popular addiction narratives and iconographies, and his participation in a Post-Impressionist exploration of avant-garde pictorial trends such as *japonisme* and the resurgence of the lithograph—were all closely tied to his interest in and engagement with critical discourses of social degeneration during the fin-de-siècle period. Specifically, this interest in social degeneration as a physiological condition is mapped directly onto Grasset’s engagement with the legacy of decadent culture in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century, in particular that of Symbolism, in such a way that his avant-garde aesthetics merged with social critique to create the amalgam of form and content displayed in *Morphinomaniac*. This aestheticized social critique places the figure of woman in the crossfire of a debate about avant-garde aesthetics, modern forms of consumption, the degeneracy of turn-of-the-century life, and the European identification with the colonized “other.” Although it is doubtful
that Grasset sympathized with radical conservatives of his time such as Max Nordau, who equated degeneration with avant-garde aesthetics, Grasset nevertheless similarly elides social and cultural trends. Morphinomaniac thus suggests a multifaceted, and in some ways ambiguous, critique that also casts light on Grasset’s conflicted relationship with the culture of his time.³

**Grasset and Degeneration**

Through the figure of Grasset and other members of his milieu, “fine” art begins to embrace the industrial commercial realm and the “minor arts.” At the same time, iconic signifiers of progress—well-being, naturalness, youth, abundance, vitality, and productivity—become important factors in the early stages of promotional graphic design. Yet, coterminous with his pioneering commercial design during the 1890s, Grasset was enthusiastically embraced by factions of the avant-garde, such as the nascent Jugendstil movement, which celebrated him as a forerunner after 1894; Salon de la Rose + Croix, the most esoteric representatives of a Symbolist inclination during that period and with whom Grasset exhibited work in 1892; and the Vienna Secession, which displayed his work in 1898.⁴ Historically and biographically, therefore, Grasset’s oeuvre can be analyzed in relation to decadent aesthetics. Specifically, it can be considered in dialogue with the ideology of “degeneration” of Hungarian physician Max Nordau that emerged in the year 1892 with that author’s eponymous publication.

I nevertheless explicate a thematic assertion: Grasset’s optimistic and benign images of women in advertisements and commercial posters are counterparts to the handful of disturbing scenes of women that Grasset produces. Accordingly, I will analyze Grasset’s advertisements in tandem with the list of decadent female types that Annemarie Springer articulated in 1973–74: the virginal “ingénue,” the married “bourgeoise,” and the now-familiar persona of the “femme fatale.”⁵ Building on these categories, my argument appends another feminine type to that list—the “habituée,” which I define as the practiced, confident, and sometimes compulsive female consumer.

How did late-nineteenth-century Europeans distinguish between positive and negative, appropriate and inappropriate forms of consumption—between nurturing sustenance and ravaging dependence? In what ways were theories of degeneration a reaction to a rising consumer culture as well as to the diverse pressures of urban life that are more commonly highlighted in scholarship on this period?
Furthermore, what aspects of the European discourse on degeneration can be gleaned from Grasset’s oeuvre, which so adeptly combines avant-garde tendencies with commercial and professional ambition through the application of high art principles to the commodity? The topic of ornamentation and decoration in Grasset’s work could itself serve as a fruitful point of departure in such queries, given that Grasset’s skill in transforming floral or foliate patterned motifs into a vibrant pictorial language was itself a key commonality between the Pre-Raphaelite and Symbolist movements that Nordau excoriates in *Degeneration*.\(^6\)

Instead, it is Grasset’s understudied lithograph *Morphinomaniac* (Figure 6.1) from 1897 that I maintain serves as an indicator of certain extremities, polarities, and outlying tendencies in this historical context. As an aberration from the rest of Grasset’s oeuvre and a twist on the iconography of the decadent, therefore, *Morphinomaniac* may

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**Figure 6.1** Eugène Grasset. *La Morphinomane*. 1897. From *L’Album d’estampes originales de la Galerie Vollard* (edition of 100). Printed by Auguste Clot. Color lithograph in seven colors. Image: 41.3 × 31.3 cm. Sheet: 57 × 42.5 cm. Photo credit: V & A Images, London/Art Resource, NY.
illuminate some heretofore neglected zones of consideration in this field of inquiry. In itself, *Morphinomaniac* is singular enough in style and subject to warrant sustained art historical analysis of its role as an iconographic and stylistic watershed, and a catalyst for subsequent “addiction iconography” after 1900. In Europe, the administration of morphine was limited to injection by physicians using early forms of syringes during the 1830s; not until the 1840s was it in wide use as a commodified drug in either pill or liquid form. It did not become common to inject morphine for medical purposes with what eventually became known as a “hypodermic” until the 1870s (Davenport-Hines 2002, 99–106). Grasset, therefore, depicts a fully modern subject.

Consumption trends did factor into Max Nordau’s elaboration of societal degeneration, in his designation of “oniomania” or the “buying craze” as one common manifestation of modern hysteria. In *Entartung* (*Degeneration*, 1892), Nordau writes, “The present rage for collecting, the piling up, in dwellings, of aimless bric-à-brac, which does not become any more useful or beautiful by being fondly called bibelots, appear to us in a completely new light when we know that Magnan has established the existence of an irresistible desire among the degenerate to accumulate useless trifles” (Nordau 1968, 27). Referring to the French psychiatrist Valentin Magnan (1835–1916), pioneer of an early wave of addiction studies on alcoholism and absinthe habits with texts such as *Étude expérimentale et clinique sur l’alcoolisme, alcool et absinthe; Épilepsie absinthique* (1871) (*Experimental and Clinical Study on Alcoholism, Alcohol and Absinthe; Absinthe-induced Epilepsy*), Nordau presciently maps nonphysiological patterns of Victorian-era excess, such as shopping and collecting, onto the rising number of medical studies on psychosomatic pathology and obsessive compulsion of various kinds. Notably, in 1897, the year *Morphinomaniac* was published, Grasset himself also attacked the modern inclination of the bourgeoisie to mindlessly accumulate bric-à-brac, or “vieux-neuf” or “old-new” commodities, as a major obstacle to the development of innovative modern design. In his statement to the Conference on Art Nouveau, he writes, “The role of money, which changes its nature today so easily, is in our modern society a force largely feeding the fire of invention. It is necessary to hope that in the burgeoning future we will find rich men who are less limited than these eternal collectors of bric-à-brac!” Prestige economies and everyday materialistic customs can thus be understood as important in cultural discourses on and visual histories of consumption and Decadence on an interdisciplinary level. Fin-de-siècle studies benefit
from extended examination of consumption patterns both “normative” and “pathological” as reflected in Grasset’s Morphinomaniac.

A Print for Vollard

Morphinomaniac was one of 32 prints included in the ambitious publication L’Album d’estampes originales de la Galerie Vollard (Album of Original Prints from the Vollard Gallery), printed in spring of 1897 and exhibited that December in Ambroise Vollard’s gallery, which opened in 1895 in the rue Lafitte, Paris. Following the popularity of publisher André Marty’s periodical L’estampe originale (The Original Print) beginning in 1893 (to which, notably, Grasset contributed the color lithograph La Tasse de grès [The Vitriol Thrower], also known as La Vitrioleuse for the sixth album in 1894), as well as other publication ventures in Paris that featured various print processes, Vollard began to encourage artists in his coterie to undertake print production. The focus was the color lithograph in particular. Largely painters by trade, the contributors to Vollard’s albums hailed from movements such as Impressionism, Symbolism, and the Nabis.

Grasset did not contribute to Vollard’s initial publication, Les peintures-graveurs (The Painter-Engravers) of 1893, but it is telling that his entry for the subsequent L’Album d’estampes originales is arguably the closest work in his oeuvre to the earlier La Tasse de grès both stylistically and iconographically. Between 1893, when Grasset published La Tasse de grès in Marty’s L’estampe originale, and 1897, when Morphinomaniac appeared in Vollard’s second portfolio, Grasset at last began to receive widespread recognition for his art and for his role as a pedagogue in Paris, primarily through the vehicle of an acclaimed major retrospective of his work at the Salon des Cent in 1894. Given that wave of success, perhaps Vollard desired a reprise of the type of work by Grasset that had appeared previously in Marty’s innovative and celebrated L’estampe originale five years earlier, a publication that was defunct when Vollard’s gallery opened. Certainly the two lithographs share much in common stylistically and iconographically, and most Grasset scholars class them together given their uncharacteristic emotional intensity as compared with the rest of his œuvre.

Juxtaposing the two prints, Victor Arwas argues that La Tasse de grès is “the most accomplished example of japonisme in Grasset’s œuvre,” and he cites the direct influence of Japanese woodblock ukiyo-e or “floating world” prints by Toyoluni and Sharaku on Grasset’s choice of the diagonal positioning of the depicted woman.
Three years later, *Morphinomaniac* retains much of this influence with a noted reduction, however, in the stylized contours that characterize the earlier print. As an interior “genre” scene of specifically modern subject matter, *Morphinomaniac* is, on the surface at least, significantly more allied to Realist traditions than is the quasi-allegorical *La Tasse de grès*, although this designation only holds in a limited dialogue between these two images. By any count, *Morphinomaniac* is a print that exaggerates graphic, illustrative style rather than naturalism. Yet, as an embodiment on the one hand of demonic anger, *The Vitriol Thrower* is to some degree also an emblem of Symbolism: the glaring subject, the supernatural blue skin and red hair, and a background of miasmatic whiplash arabesques. In contrast, the *japonisme* of *Morphinomaniac* is far more terrestrial in tenor although it is no less terrifying in its “absolute horror” as Arwas has termed it (Arwas 1978, 64). However, these stylistic similarities gain more substance when the social critique embodied in both works is considered. In *Printmaking in Paris: The Rage for Prints at the Fin de Siècle* (2013) authors Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho and Marije Vellekoop tie *La Tasse de grès* to the anarchist acid throwers of 1890s’ Paris. The authors comment that “Grasset’s militant vitrioleuse demonstrates his support of these ideas.”

*The Vitriol Thrower* and *Morphinomaniac* are therefore closely related by production circumstances, medium, style, and iconography. Both works merge *japoniste* rendering with Symbolist expressive color and quasi-Realist subject matter to create prints that communicate contemporary social commentary. Yet *Morphinomaniac* contains a level of naturalistic detail, narrative depth, and intimate pathos that *Vitriol Thrower* does not. Situated, therefore, somewhere between the social Symbolism of works like Grasset’s *La Tasse de grès*, his fantastical *Trois Femmes et Trois Loups* (*Three Women and Three Wolves*, c. 1892), and the Jugendstil stylization of the female form in his print series in 1897 for G. de Malherbe’s *Dix Estampes Décoratives* (*Ten Decorative Prints*)—*Morphinomaniac* is difficult to classify iconographically.

Compared with the color lithograph *Inquiétude* (*Nervousness*) from the *Estampes Décoratives* series of 10 prints, which is arguably the closest match to *Morphinomaniac* among the various personifications of troubling emotions as lovely young maidens in the series—*Froideur* (*Frigidity*), *Tentation* (*Temptation*), *Jalousie* (*Envy*), *Anxiété* (*Anxiety*), *Danger* (*Danger*)—*Morphinomaniac* eschews ornamental plant motifs for a domestic interior and concrete action. Unlike *Inquiétude* with its abstract exploration of a psychological state, *Morphinomaniac* is
neither a “decorative panel” nor a symbolic emblem, although from a present-day standpoint, all of these images can be said to enact a misogynistic equation of female with moral weakness, sin, and vice.

For Anne Murray-Robertson, *Morphinomaniac* “participates in Grasset’s Symbolist vein.” In contrast, Yves Plantin argues that *Morphinomaniac* is a singularly Realist image above all, an isolated tangent within Grasset’s repertoire: “But this Realist episode, which one could situate in a universe à la Zola, would remain without sequel.” However, even the prints for *Estampes Décoratives* such as *Inquiétude* are Realist for Plantin in the sense that they reveal a range of psychological states experienced by women. According to his reading, these prints represent “a search for reality in this precise domain,” and they “reveal a more intimate aspect of Grasset’s personality through the consecration of a feminine type that he idealized, a patiently constructed image which remains tied to his name.” Plantin continues: “he refuses to use the image of the woman as a mere ornamental motif for his posters or his designs. His model is the contemporary French or Parisian woman.” Between Symbolism and Naturalism, sensation-alism and Realism, Grasset’s *Morphinomaniac* may be a nodal point for what Murray-Robertson has termed a palpable “duality” in his work. According to her reading, the “anguish” represented there signifies a larger cultural and aesthetic transition in the fin-de-siècle period, which reconciled “the utilitarian, the social and the spiritual” (Murray-Robertson 1998, 99, 101).

Unlike most of the other artists who contributed to *L’Album d’estampes originales de la Galerie Vollard*, many of whom were not as experienced as Grasset in the technique of lithography and color lithography, Grasset began utilizing chromolithography as early as the mid-1880s for his commercial work. It may have been the case with *Morphinomaniac* that he felt at liberty, or perhaps was compelled, rather, to experiment with more challenging imagery as a method of distinguishing his “fine art” work within the avant-garde cénacle of Vollard’s gallery from his patently commercial work. Indeed, *Morphinomaniac* stands out radically from the other prints in the album in its jarringly frank subject matter and also its bold application of saturated swaths of color, which suggests a conscious diversion on Grasset’s part from the more innocuous and formally bland scenes and landscapes of his colleagues. For instance, Pierre Bonnard, a member of Les Nabis, created a warm-toned cover lithograph for the album that depicts a kitten playing on a table strewn with art prints (Untitled, 1897).
In searing contrast, *Morphinomaniac* discloses a disturbing glimpse of narcotic addiction through aggressive stylization and an acid palette that pushes the lithographic print to its chromatic limits. The lithograph strikes the viewer with such immediate force partly due to its claustrophobic point of view as a close-up of three-quarters of a frail woman’s body compressed into a rectangular frame that barely contains her, with only her legs beneath the knees escaping exposure. The beholder’s point of view peers down at her as she hunches uncomfortably over a chartreuse fauteuil. As if preparing for a blow from without or a convulsion from within, her abdominal muscles are tightly retracted and her shoulders are raised to the point of shrouding the neck entirely. The flat, densely hued yellow background pushes her form against the picture plane and lends her silhouette even more severity.

The scene is accordingly breathless and airless, and yet it is also a moment of action, a private moment of relief during the *toilette* (toilet) of this *morphineuse* (morphinomaniac), who is glimpsed in a partial state of dishabille. Black stockings and a blue garter on one leg, just glimpsed at the bottom of the frame but nevertheless highly eye-catching in the striped arrangement of contrasting colors, suggest that this woman has recently been dressed for public presentation, or perhaps is about to be. She also wears a sizable ring—a wedding band perhaps—just slightly touched with the same bilious lemon pigment of the background. Her copious and disheveled hair signifies a woman not yet aged, while the thinness of her body portrays decrepitude. The furrowed brow and slightly contorted mouth hint at simultaneous sensations of pain and pleasure coursing through her body.

The tenor of the image is ambiguous, echoing the dichotomous experience of temporary relief for the depicted addict, and yet the iconographic style possesses profundity as a metaphor, both transhistorically and cross-culturally. Likewise, it is not clear if the viewer is invited into this hidden scene, or if rather an unwelcome scopophilic drive underscores the privileged view. The bright green and yellow of the scene take on a poisonous intensity, just as the hair of the *morphineuse* expressionistically animates itself, two unruly locks flipping back in a manner suggestive of serpent fangs as she slips forward while inserting the *piqûre* (injection). The “serpentine” curve or arabesque favored by artists in France during this period thus takes on added iconographic weight in this context. Embodying a modern Eve in synchronicity with the Symbolist femme fatale, therefore, this woman’s dependence fuses her hunger for forbidden sustenance.
with the fatal venom of the satanic snake: she is at once a victim and a potential killer, poisoned and poisonous. Despite the vulnerability of her weak frame, she is an *adepte* (practiced user). The index finger, which pushes the syringe plunger with steady pressure, is the only part of her body that is composed and controlled. The other hand clutches fiercely at the flesh of the thigh in order to fill the veins with blood.

Therefore, in comparison with the femme fatale as a vampire that feeds on other beings cannibalistically, such as Edvard Munch’s lithograph-woodcut, *Vampire II* (1895–1902), this *habituée* engages in a solipsistic form of auto-consumption. She is “wasting” away slowly, “feeding” on herself gradually—overconsuming her body through dependency on a powerful narcotic—a narcissistic hyperphagia. Here “wasting” or “excess” is configured as an unnatural and unnecessary degradation and attrition, rather than the profligate expurgation of potentially useful material. The finality in question concerns both the body of the *habituée* and the small bottle of uncorked morphine glinting on the table: it is a matter of which of these substances will be exhausted first in the deadly exchange of consumption. Here Grasset seems to purposefully pursue the dark alternative to his successful advertising images of women consuming commodities with either healthy satisfaction or jubilant freedom.

**La Morphinomane as Habituée**

The dependence of this *morphineuse* could initially have been Pandoran in nature, resulting from a curiosity that caused her to open a morphine vial at some earlier point in time, but her fin-de-siècle world can be understood as the antithesis of the prelapsarian Garden of Eden that is represented in another print in the Vollard album of 1897, Charles Maurin’s etching and aquatint, *Eve* (1897). Eschewing the oppressive burden of tranhistorical symbolic registers of various kinds, then—historical, intertextual, allegorical—Grasset’s *Morphinomaniac* resists *exclusive* identification with past iconic coding (as Eve, Pandora, and so on) because its subject is entirely absorbed in the present act of the consumption of a specifically late-nineteenth-century imperialistic commodity—although, as I have argued above, these intertextual registers remain on a parallel plane to the immediate comprehension of the image as “contemporary.” She is the “ingénue,” the “bourgeoise,” and the “femme fatale” all at once—but at the same time she is also something else—a practiced *habituée*—an experienced and dependent female consumer.
Closer genealogically to the commercial posters being produced in the 1890s in Europe by Grasset’s contemporaries such as Jules Chéret, Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen, Alphonse Mucha, Georges Meunier, Jane Atche, and others—which again and again reveal woman as expert delectician and gourmand—La Morphinomane cannot be comprehended fully if she is solely read in terms of established Symbolist categories such as the femme fatale. While she retains these stratified associations in her hypocritical graphic coding as innocent, guilty, and middle class all at once, she is above all an embodiment of the much more novel category of the autonomous and determined female consumer, who is most often represented as happy, beautiful, and free. Whereas by and large in the 1890s the “type” of the habituée is relegated to the promotional realm of the advertising poster, where she revels among printed multiples of herself in the compulsive consumption of various addictive products from former and present European colonies and trading posts—sugar, chocolate, coffee, tea, tobacco, various narcotic products and their accessories, among other kinds of commodities—Grasset notably pioneers this type of female representation in the “artistic,” non-promotional realm.

In the less instrumentalized, though still “commodified,” realm of the artist’s print album, Grasset is able to demystify consumption of morphine, whereas his contemporaries such as Chéret configure the habituée of commodities in general as either ecstatic and filled with joie de vivre, or meditative and engrossed in a comforting sensual experience. From advertisements for Vin Mariani, the immensely popular fin-de-siècle beverage made with cocaine, to posters selling common patent medicines made with narcotics such as “Purguatif Géraudel,” probably made with opium, Chéret’s promotional filles (girls) often express their obsession with these everyday products through suspended leaps into the air, where they are surrounded by proliferating multiples of beloved commodities. Along with this trope of miraculously “floating” women grasping at phantasmal products, other popular attitudes for the advertisement habituée are the pseudo-religious worship of the commodity; the domestication, naturalization, familiarization, and anthropomorphization of the commodity as a pet (as frequently compared to cats); the meditative and sensual inhalation of the commodity as an opiate vapor (for nicotine and caffeine products in particular); and the (now familiar) use of the commodity as a catalyst for seduction—among several other modes. Employing the same medium in Morphinomaniac that was used for most of his own advertising commissions, Grasset reroutes
the formal attributes of the color lithograph in the service of an unapologetic visual revulsion. By rendering a streaky yellow background that mimics the texture of the *morphinomane*’s hair, smudgy contour lines that suggest a bruised and ashen complexion, and an erratic handling of form that conveys the involuntary frisson of the desperate *habituée*, Grasset transforms the publicity poster into a social critique somewhat comparable to earlier satirical *dessins* (drawings) by Honoré Daumier.

But how attached to the rhetoric of the “real” is Grasset’s stylized print, which grafts the means of popular art onto avant-garde impulses of the period? Two preparatory drawings for *Morphinomaniac* indicate that Grasset probably based his composition on drawings of a live model. The first drawing is a detailed academic study of a *habituée* whose intense pain is rendered in high definition through added lines around the now downcast eyes, and the depiction of a lankier

![Image](image-url)

mane (Figure 6.2). The table and morphine flask are missing from this sketch, as is the curl of hair that crowns the top of the lithograph—but more of the model’s body can be seen in the nearly full-length leg. A second and final preparatory drawing is further abstracted and closely resembles the final print in composition and styling (Figure 6.3). The creases around the eyes and forehead have been removed, the point of view has been shifted proximal, and movement is now suggested through the flip of hair.

The process of distillation from and abstraction of the model in Morphonomania is the same process that Grasset adopted for much of his commercial work, as exemplified in the preparatory drawing for the chromolithograph poster Dépôt de chocolate Masson, Chocolat mexicain (1897) (Masson Chocolate Store, Mexican Chocolate), completed in the same year as Morphonomania. However, in the decorative advertisement for chocolate from Mexico, the preparatory drawing is softened in the final poster. The model’s glib expression of workaday ennui is transformed into a nurturing smile as she feeds her healthy child.

**Figure 6.3** Eugène Grasset. *La Morphinomane*. 1897. Pencil on paper: 41.2 x 31.2 cm. Photo credit: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.
In *Morphomaniac*, Grasset arguably accentuates the pathetic shudder of the model, deploying the tools of graphic design in order to send a message of consumption as morbidly predatory. Anne Murray-Robertson accordingly comments that *Morphinomaniac* “is shocking enough in its composition” to suggest that “Grasset’s audacity was preoccupied with a form of Social Art.”

As was common for the period, the morphinomaniac’s addiction likely evolved out of “professionally” supervised medication. Such dependence on morphine was not necessarily considered immoral or unusual; the social narratives regarding drugs were in flux in the 1890s in Europe. Given cultural assumptions and prejudices about the nature of addiction today, the representation of morphine use in Grasset’s lithograph is highly susceptible to misreading. As Susan Zieger has demonstrated, the notion of addiction as a “disease of the will” does not concretize until the first years of World War I, when narcotics are decreed illegal in the United States and casual drug use becomes criminalized, when the temperance movement mobilizes, and when substance abuse is considered a significantly psychological behavior. Rather, before 1915, “inebriety” was the umbrella term in English for the “compulsion” to consume alcohol, narcotics, and other dependency-forming substances—a word that focused more on the effect than the cause of substance “abuse” itself (Zieger 2008, 4–5).

Due to the fact that the very concept of “addiction” itself was forming for the first time in late-nineteenth-century Europe and the United States in conjunction with a host of narcotic substances derived from various European colonies and former colonies, as well as homegrown concoctions that elicited dependence such as absinthe (native to Europe), the subject matter of Grasset’s *Morphinomaniac* can be more clearly comprehended if some consideration is given to this consumption history and the details of its material culture. Such an inquiry is further revealing in relation to the broader question of Decadence, for I argue that social theories of Decadence are closely bound up with changing consumption patterns at the end of the nineteenth century, developing theories of addiction, and the notion of consumption itself as a kind of addiction.

**Grasset’s *La Morphinomane* as Social Critique**

By the time Grasset created *Morphinomaniac* in 1897, morphine addiction by injection was commonly recognized in Europe and the United States, and an anti-opiate stance had become fully entrenched
in both the medical industry and in medical journals—although at the same time there was still much debate about these presumed negative effects of the drug and its prestige status.\textsuperscript{24} By the turn of the twentieth century, morphine \textit{habituées} had been associated with \textit{dégénérescence} (degeneration) for almost a decade. The publication of Nordau’s \textit{Entartung (Degeneration)} in 1892 contributed to this perspective (Davenport-Hines 2002, 170–81).

For Nordau, a physician, hysteria and degeneration were prominent causes \textit{and} symptoms of addiction, resulting from a modern urban malaise. In \textit{Entartung} he views widespread addictive symptoms as stemming from the consumption of nefarious substances, which then become a voluntary form of societal “poisoning.” Along the lines of the literal meaning of the French word for addiction as “mania for poison” (\textit{toxicomanie}), Nordau vilifies this collective “craze” for ingestible pollutants:

A race which is regularly addicted, even without excess, to narcotics and stimulants in any form such as fermented alcoholic drinks, tobacco, opium, hashish, arsenic which partakes of tainted foods (bread made with bad corn), which absorbs organic poisons (marsh fever, syphilis, tuberculosis, goitre), begets degenerate descendants who, if they remain exposed to the same influences, rapidly descend to the lowest degrees of degeneracy, to idiocy, to dwarfishness, etc. That the poisoning of civilized peoples continues and increases at a very rapid rate is widely attested by statistics. (Nordau 1968, 34)

Nordau adds that urban living is the primary culprit of this insidious contamination of a large portion of the populace through the substances of stimulants, narcotics, and poisons, bad bread included. It is the entire physiological consumption within European cities, from the daily intake of nonnutritious food to the regular abuse of the most addictive of pharmaceutical narcotics that will cause the decline of the human race over generations. This again emphasizes the semantic interpretation of “wasting” as nonproductivity, overconsumption, and flagrant excess.

Nordau’s concern with “degenerate reproduction” as a form of anti-production raises the important question of the relationship of late-nineteenth-century sexuality and gender issues in relation to morphine use, which in turn sheds more light on the semantics of Grasset’s lithograph of 1897. As Richard Davenport-Hines explains, like other addictive substances in nineteenth-century Europe that took on gender identifications, morphine injection was associated specifically with women. He writes, “Morphine injections were not only
used by prosperous women to relieve their nerves or subdue incipient hysteria, but were administered to them with similar sedative purposes by their male physicians. Addiction became identified with gender; the hypodermic habit was feminized” (Davenport-Hines 2002, 114). He goes on to say that privileged women “who chafed at the boredom and frustration, used morphine or other opiates to drug themselves into a functional passivity that made life bearable” (Davenport-Hines 2002, 113). Although the comparably addictive laudanum, the liquid form of edible opium, was enormously popular with European and American women from the late eighteenth century, opium smoking was more commonly associated with male consumption habits, much like alcohol. Almost all female habituées of morphine injections in this period were initially introduced to the drug by physicians. However, once these patients became dependents, the path into “degeneracy” or addiction quickly sloped downward, and the “unwary” patient dialectically folded over into the “genuine debauchée,” according to the typology set forth by physician Francis Anstie (1833–74) in his book *Stimulants and Narcotics* (1864).

Grasset may have been influenced in his choice of subject matter of morphinism and women by a trend in popular fiction, illustration, and some examples of fine art in France starting in roughly the mid-1880s—a series of texts and images that predate and also possibly influenced Nordau’s *Entartung* in 1892. Most of these popular references to morphinomania are critical in tone; some are more ambiguous. Novels such as *La Comtesse Morphine* (The Countess Morphine) by Marcel Mallat de Bassilian (1885), *Noris* by Jules Claretie (1892), and *La Morphine* (Morphine) by Jean-Louis Dubut de Laforest (1891) were all “fervently anti-morphine” as Barbara Hodgson states (Hodgson 2001, 99). In addition, many other fiction works of this period included prominent scenes of morphine consumption, such as Rachilde’s 1891 play, *Madame La Mort* (Madame Death), which features a male addict. Another example is Nordau’s *Die Krankheit des Jahrhunderts* (The Malady of the Century) (1887), a tragic Bildungsroman about the gradual downfall of its male protagonist. This novel briefly details suicide by morphine injection by a willful and sexually liberal Spanish countess named Pilar who is rejected by her lover and resorts to the obsessive “pricking” of her skin with a narcotics needle.

Visual depictions of morphine use also began to proliferate at this time, often highlighting the provocative spectacle of female addicts administering their own pleasurable doses in onanistic fashion. An
early example of an image representing female morphinism in France is an etching made a decade before Grasset’s lithograph by a painter and printer associated with the Impressionists, Paul-Albert Besnard (1849–1934). His *Les Morphinées* (*The Morphine Addicts*) (1887) shows two young Parisiennes caught in the ponderous reverie of the drug-induced spell, holding aloft a peacock’s feather in a sensual manner that evokes a caressing touch that may serve to alleviate the prick of the absent needle. Stylish, stoic, and seemingly in control of their sexuality and homosocial environment, Besnard’s *habituées* set the tone for a series of images of female morphine addiction to follow in the next two decades, with suggestions of affluence, bohemianism, lesbianism, and sybaritic Decadence.

Artists and writers themselves were experimenting with casual morphine use in Paris during the 1890s. The very month that Grasset’s *Morphinomaniac* was exhibited at Vollard’s gallery in December of 1897, the prominent poet Stanislas de Guiata died, probably from a morphine overdose, after years of habitual use. Also relevant in this context is the Spanish Symbolist Santiago Rusiñol (1861–1931), who moved to France in the late 1880s to study painting. By the late 1890s, Rusiñol was addicted to morphine, and he eventually had to seek medical help for his dependency. His two paintings of a *morphineuse* in “before” and “after” states of desperation and sensual relief from 1895 bear the strongest iconographic resemblance to Grasset’s lithograph produced two years later. From the stringy, coiling black hair of the depicted *habituée* to her rumpled night dress and the pallor of her skin, Rusiñol’s morphinomaniac is comparably absorbed in her experience and is seemingly alone in a private setting. The primary differences between these depictions of female morphine addiction by Rusiñol and Grasset appear to be the chosen mediums of paint and print, the expressionistic urgency of Grasset’s morphinomaniac, and also the conspicuously Orientalist styling of her rendering.

It is in fact these primary differences between the Rusiñol paintings and the Grasset lithograph of 1897 that I want to highlight in conclusion, as a way of returning to the continued question of the way in which Grasset’s print for Vollard’s album expresses its orientation toward narratives of Decadence and degeneration at this point in time—and how specifically his depiction of female morphine dependence articulated this rapport in a unique way. Clearly, hypodermic morphinism was sometimes associated with Decadence in France in the two decades before Grasset’s print was published, and in addition a visual and textual culture of sensational morphinism was already fairly
well established in both popular media and to a lesser extent fine art markets by 1890. However, the 1897 Grasset print breaks away stridently from previous morphinomaniac iconography by unabashedly conjoining narcotic dependence with avant-garde formalist strategies such as the favoring of print methods, *japonisme*, and a schematic and convulsive expressionism, to such an extent that Grasset almost seems to address Nordau’s claims in *Degeneration* that degeneracy is equivalent to an avant-garde aesthetic. Nearly deformed in her excruciating desire for the needle, Grasset’s morphinomaniac embodies a modern kind of disease that transforms her “natural” drive as woman into a distortion of projected heteronormativity. This *habituée* is self-medicating and thus self-pleasuring; she does not “nurture” but rather gratifies herself, resulting in the kind of anti-production that Nordau describes.\(^{29}\)

Two points made by Susan Zieger in *Inventing the Addict* are relevant here. Along with emphasizing the way in which discourses of sin, gluttony, and inebriety evolve into that of compulsive habits of willful addiction at the end of the nineteenth century, as I have mentioned previously, Zieger posits addiction as part of a larger historical colonial fixation on “marvelous substances from exotic locales: spices, sugar, tobacco, chocolate, coffee, tea, rum” (Zieger 2008, 4). Moreover, she relates the shift away from a discourse of inebriety to one of habitual addiction in this period to a change in views about power structures: as opposed to inebriety, addiction is specifically “the extreme ambivalence of self-enslavement” as a form of “domination...within the individual’s own psychology” (Zieger 2008, 6–7). This dialectic of exoticism away from the self and simultaneous incarceration within the self encompasses many of the fears about degeneration and death that haunted xenophobic writers like Nordau.

Taking too much pleasure in the products of the colonies was to become colonized in turn. Zieger writes: “Intoxication can thus transform into addiction, which—once discovered and named—encompasses the horror of realizing that one’s identity as a modern person, on the cusp of the future, results from a habituated dependence upon the primitive colony, which metamorphoses from a place of seduction to the locus of death” (Zieger 2008, 9). In this context, Grasset’s pronounced choice of a *japoniste* style for his lithograph takes on new significance. Did he intend to express solidarity with the other Post-Impressionist artists in Vollard’s second album of prints in 1897, some of whom similarly modeled their submissions after the Japanese prints that had become so popular by the 1860s in Paris—and therefore Grasset takes a stance against Nordau’s anti-avant-gardism? This
would seem to be the likely hypothesis, given that the avant-garde was Grasset’s milieu for the most part, and that he had been an enthusiastic *japoniste* since the 1870s.

**Conclusion**

*Morphinomaniac* must be understood as an embattled icon, one that bears the simultaneous encoding of conflicting social and aesthetic critiques and, thus, assumes an important position as a work that echoes the polemical atmosphere that surrounded the emergence of the avant-garde. *Morphinomaniac* is an important example of the iconography of Decadence in Europe because it blatantly maps a popular polemic—the critique of modernity and mass culture—onto an artistic medium, style, and subject matter in a provocative and innovative manner. In particular, the print answers the emphatic claims of Max Nordau with a high degree of specificity, combining avant-garde techniques and approaches with inflammatory subject matter in order to create an unusually condensed articulation of the cultural climate of this period. Grasset articulates the antinomy of his advertising designs by suggesting the following possible critical narratives, among potential others, which equate modern consumption patterns and mass culture itself with: (1) dependency on imperialist markets; (2) identification and/or fascination with the colonial other; (3) the obsessive desire for and of the female body; and (4) moribund overproduction and consumption. The lithograph’s satirical positioning as a critique within a critique, as a *japoniste*-avant-garde depiction of a modern pandemic, lends it remarkable cultural flexibility. The multivalence of this position is further echoed in the hybrid nature of the *habituée* type, who pollutes the castrating powers of the femme fatale with her simultaneous identity as castrated and phallic, addicted and addictive, consuming and consumed.

**Notes**

1. Grasset moved to Paris in 1871. This essay is for Christina Marie Hurst. I am grateful for Lynn Dirk’s editorial suggestions.
3. Correspondence with Anne Murray-Robertson, June 28, 2013.
4. On this topic, see Lepdor, Eugène Grasset: 1845–1917.
11. For this work, see Lepdor, Eugène Grasset: 1845–1917, p. 211; Arwas, Berthon & Grasset, p. 64.
14. Arwas, Berthon & Grasset, p. 64. See also Murray-Robertson, Grasset: pionnier de l’Art nouveau, p. 127.
19. My translation: “un telle recherche de réalité dans ce domaine précis”; “révèlent un aspect plus intime de la personnalité de Grasset en consacrant le type féminine qu’il a idéalisé, une image patiemment construite et qui restera lié à son nom.” Plantin, Eugène Grasset, p. 11.
20. My translation: “A l’instar des organisations féministes que nous connaissons aujourd’hui, il se refuse à utiliser l’image de la femme comme un simple motif ornamental pour ses affiches ou ses couvertures. Son
modèle est la Française ou la Parisienne contemporaine.” Plantin, Eugène Grasset, p. 11.


23. See also Kandall, Substance and Shadow, p. 76.


29. On this topic, see S. Zieger, Inventing the Addict, pp. 131, 143.
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CHAPTER 7

Decadence, Melancholia, and the Making of Modernism in the Salome Fairy Tales of Strindberg, Wilde, and Ibsen

Kyle Mox

Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century, a profound interest in the story of the death of John the Baptist inspired a remarkable number of novels, paintings, operas, and poems presenting variations in the Gospels’ accounts of the martyr’s demise. In particular, artists and writers were enraptured by the “dancing daughter” of Herodias, Salome.1 On the dramatic stage, the best-known production (or perhaps most enduring) treatment was Oscar Wilde’s play Salomé, written in French in 1891. While Wilde’s place in the “Salomania” of the late nineteenth century has been thoroughly explored, this work has rarely been read alongside the “dancing daughter” plays of Wilde’s main contemporary dramatists, August Strindberg, in Miss Julie (1888), and Henrik Ibsen, in Hedda Gabler (1890). These treatments of the Salome plot present an entry point for an examination of the Janus-faced art and literature of late-nineteenth-century Europe, which was both challenging and progressive with regard to subject and form while being nostalgic in its themes and motifs, a time period that Strindberg himself described as an “age of transition more urgently hysterical at any rate than the one that preceded it.”2 As Strindberg’s use of the term “hysterical” suggests, a significant portion of the criticism on the Salome
rope in fin-de-siècle art and literature is focused upon the cultural anxiety over gender performance and the “New Woman.” I argue, however, that gender performance is not the major concern of these works; instead these subversive works function as commentary on the destabilized aesthetic of the last years of the nineteenth century. As authors attendant at the evolution from the retrospective idealism of Romanticism to realist Naturalism and, finally, through to anti-idealistic Decadence, Aestheticism, and forward-looking modernism, all three seek to “work through” the melancholic attachment to the aesthetic ideal—defined as a perfect unity of form and meaning—by integrating biblical plots and deploying fairy tale motifs while simultaneously probing new territories in literary technique.

Although the compositions of their “Salome” dramas were nearly simultaneous, separated by only three years, they took radically different approaches to the raw material. Both Miss Julie and Hedda Gabler are generally considered Naturalist works, striving for realism in their staging and dialogue and focusing on the social problems of women’s emancipation and class struggle as central themes. In comparison, Ibsen’s critics often attacked the jerky and disjointed dialogue of Hedda Gabler, which was Ibsen’s similar attempt to more closely emulate natural dialogue. The lack of monologues and asides made it difficult for the contemporary audience to comprehend Hedda’s complex character. In contrast, though his preceding dramatic works were actually far more conventional than either Strindberg’s or Ibsen’s, Wilde’s Salomé is an ornate, dreamlike work often held up as a primary example of decadent or aesthetic literature. It was originally composed in French and with a hypnotic, almost incantatory cadence, exactly the sort of stilted dialogue that Strindberg rejected.

Despite these differences, however, each play can be easily seen as reacting critically to the intellectually light and unchallenging popular drama of the day. These three plays are a particularly interesting case study in that they not only represent a culmination/summary of nineteenth-century literature and art, but they also presage the modernist literature yet to come. These three authors—and these three works in particular—represent a literary “missing link” between the Romanticism and Symbolism of the nineteenth century and the modernism of the early twentieth century. Taken together, we may read these artistic products as an attempt to respond to a prevalent sense of loss and to articulate an emerging metaphysical and aesthetic crisis categorized as the fin de siècle, a crisis to which “modernism” became the response.
Decadence, Loss, and Modernity

A concept of “modernity” is possible only with a linear conception of time. Moving from the romantic conception of time as cyclical and ever-repeating, modern culture thus achieves progress, looking forward to the promise of the future; however, this acute sense of temporality engenders a profound sense of loss, an acknowledgment of separation from an idyllic state of being wherein time does not exist. This idyll and our attempts to gain access to it have been given many names—thanatos, the death drive, the Real, Eden, the Archive, Once Upon a Time.

The generalized anxiety of the closing days of the nineteenth century is unsurprising, considering the disorienting effects of, on the one hand, the realization of widespread political and intellectual emancipation and, on the other, crushing imperialism, genocide, dehumanizing urbanization, and industrialization. In the introduction to Faces of Modernity, Matei Calinescu describes “modernism” as an “increasingly sharp sense of historical relativism” through which the artist, cut off from “the normative past with its fixed criteria” was obligated to invent a “private and essentially modifiable past.” In terms of artistic production, Calinescu summarizes this cultural moment as a marked shift from an “aesthetics of permanence” based on a belief in an unchanging, transcendent ideal of beauty, to a transitory aesthetics that valued novelty. This transition was, quite naturally, anxiety provoking, necessitating a sort of bidirectional view of history; a key characteristic of both decadent and modernist literature was an inherent urge for repetition and return, for the resurrection of older stories reshaped into new forms. In this way, the melancholia of Decadence is, paradoxically, productive.

These chiasmatic forces thus create a central tension between the urge to look forward in hopeful anticipation toward an ideal future, while at the same time being compelled to preserve lost glories, to connect with the “golden age” of aesthetic idealism where beauty and meaning were one. Obvious and reliable touchstones are classical and biblical texts, legends, myths, and fairy tales. The incessant repetition of and return to the Salome story is symptomatic of this pattern, this melancholic tendency to seek a sort of cultural “archive,” a space that houses the records of the past and preserves stable meanings, from which to draw artistic inspiration and find aesthetic authenticity. This vexing position is the primary characteristic of avant-garde literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (be it Aestheticism, Decadence, Symbolism, or “low” modernism). As Jean
Pierrot writes, the decadent literary generation, in its rejection of contemporary reality and desperate for escape and dreams, “was naturally bound to make intensive use of the world of legends and myths” in its struggle to transmit “the metaphysical, moral, or esthetic ideas dear to their hearts.” Thus, the unifying characteristic of works from this period is their aesthetic relationship to loss.

By reframing the discussion of these movements to consider the psychological aspects of loss that so permeate the works, one can conceive of decadent literature as a form of proto-modernism, rather than late Romanticism, on account of its preference for the artificial over the natural, a preference that is emblematized by its style. Decadence, then, is not so much an intentional literary movement as a descriptor that may be applied to fin-de-siècle works of literature that exhibit three primary characteristics. First, decadent literature exhibits an obsession with decay. Nonetheless, this fixation on decay produces vibrant innovations in form and style. Second, Decadence represents the conflict between Romanticism and Realism that, in aesthetic terms, abuts the central philosophical struggles of the time: between religion and science, between the ideal, imperfectable relationship with the sublime through a personal connection with truth, as found in nature and the beautiful, and the discovery of truth and meaning within the self. Third, Decadence upholds the superiority of art over nature. As Wilde suggests in “The Decay of Lying,” “the only effects that [nature] can show us are effects that we have already seen through poetry, or in paintings. This is the secret of nature’s charm, as well as the explanation of Nature’s weakness.” In this way, meaning is not found in a direct encounter with nature itself, but rather through the more permanent truth offered by art, the font of creation that is located in the hands of humans. While this relocation of the source of meaning and creation is empowering, it is of course also a source of anxiety. The resultant melancholic longing for the perceived stability of aesthetic idealism thus produces the exploratory stylistic experiments of Decadence and, later, modernism.

**The Salome Plot and the Public Imagination**

Considering this melancholic attachment to the perceived stability of aesthetic idealism, it seems natural that Salome is a popular subject in late-nineteenth-century art and literature, with its predominant interest in beauty and decay. This intense interest in Salome, however, is not unique to Symbolism, Decadence, or other fin-de-siècle
movements. Although an entirely minor figure in the biblical texts, Salome has captured artists’ imagination for centuries, and each new phase has added contours to the basic plot that, when examined, complicate the fin-de-siècle treatments of Salome.

The generally accepted ur-texts for the Salome plot are the Gospels of Mark (6: 14–28) and Matthew (14: 6–11), both of which relate the death of John the Baptist by beheading. Although relatively minor anecdotes, these two episodes are worthy of examination, for they play a subversive role in the New Testament, both thematically and narratively. Both accounts’ use of analepsis, or flashback, a rare and unusual device in the Bible, suggests some authorial interjection into the “historical” plot, as the Bible is generally linear (a device that in popular media is referred to as “retcon,” short for “retroactive continuity”). The interruption of the story of Jesus suggests that ideological forces are at play, and the inconsistencies between the Gospels are indicative of contemporary anxieties of the Gospel authors. For instance, Ross S. Kraemer suggests that the competing ancient Salome narratives are indicative of early Christian anxieties about the relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist. The interjected anecdotes are intended to refute not only the notion that John had been resurrected, but also the idea that Jesus is actually John raised from the dead. Thus, the beheading of John is essential, for it means that his body has been desecrated in such a way as to make resurrection impossible, thereby subverting any claims that Jesus and John are one and the same. We can detect a similar didactic objective in the Salome plays of Strindberg, Ibsen, and Wilde.

The Salome story has waned and waxed in popularity from the first century onward. In the medieval period, Salome acquired immoral, erotic characteristics, thus serving as a villainess to the heroic John the Baptist. During the Renaissance, however, Salome became an ideal subject for depicting the beauty of the human form and a convenient means of displaying artistic virtuosity, given the challenges of painting the Baptist’s severed head and the opulent Oriental costumes. Salome gradually faded from the artistic imagination until the early nineteenth century, when she resurfaced in Heinrich Heine’s long narrative poem, Atta Troll (1841). Heine’s contribution to the Salome story was to introduce the taboo eroticism emphasized by Flaubert, Moreau, and Wilde, among others. After its 1847 publication in French, Heine’s capricious revision of the basic Salome plot not only rescued it from relative obscurity, but also established Salome as the muse of the new type of “aristocratic” artist, those artists who
would later be categorized as leaders of the Symbolist, decadent, and aesthetic movements. So, in total, Salome had become not only a symbol of idealized beauty, but a figure that is both politically and sexually subversive.

Salome as Fairy Tale

As previously suggested, another aspect of the Salome trope that makes it such a popular subject of the avant-garde artists of the fin de siècle is that it comes to us from the collective “archive” of biblical, historical, and fairy tale narrative traditions. Heine drew many of his more radical inspirations for his depiction of Herodias–Salome from German folk narratives, which had carried the Salome trope from the Middle Ages on. In Teutonic Mythology, Jacob Grimm observes that the story of Herod’s dancing daughter “must have produced a peculiarly deep impression in the early part of the Middle Ages, and in more than one way got mixed up with fables.” Grimm then goes on to explain the conflation of Herodias with Diana and the Teutonic deity Holda (or Frau Holle), who is the matron of childbirth, domestic animals, witches, and the “Wild Hunt” mytheme. Therefore, we can say with a degree of confidence that the Salome story reentered the modern artistic imagination, in part, by way of the fairy tale.

Strindberg, Ibsen, and Wilde were familiar with the literary tradition of fairy tales as a whole, as each author had done significant scholarly or creative work in the field. Given that these authors were familiar with the didactic potential of the fairy tale form, we can understand why they would so quickly adapt it to their needs: the appropriation of fairy tale motifs serves both as an efficient means of situating the new work within the cultural canon and as a means of layering complex, perhaps even subversive, themes upon the story at hand. Attempts to subvert, however, are not without risk of generating, in both English and Norwegian contexts, what Henry James describes as the “cries of outraged purity which have so often and so pathetically resounded through the Anglo-Saxon world.” Therefore, the difficulty of a subversive project is to encode it so that it may be both recognizable and effective, to be old and yet new. The technique of appropriating fairy tale forms is a means of putting new wine in old wineskins. In this way, Strindberg, Ibsen, and Wilde can deliver those “metaphysical, moral, or esthetic ideas dear to their hearts,” as described by Pierrot, in a form that is accessible to their audiences. In other words, the familiar narratives offered by fairy tales provide a comfortable, familiar point of access—a means of allowing the audience to conserve
its mental energy. Therefore, composing a revised fairy tale creates an entirely new product that allows for the incorporation of the author’s cultural critique, and also corresponds to the expectations of the audience with regard to taste.

There are several obvious fairy tale motifs in these three plays, and I shall touch on the most important characteristics with regard to setting, plot, and character. One essential quality of the fairy tale is the presence of a supernatural or magical atmosphere. In Miss Julie, this magical quality is established by the setting, as the play is set on Midsummer’s Eve, a Swedish festival traditionally celebrated on June 23 and 24, the Feast of St. John the Baptist. Considered one of the times of the year when the potential for magic is the strongest, numerous oracular traditions arose around the holiday, related mainly to fertility. This theme of fertility is promoted in Wilde’s Salomé through the repeated emphasis on the moon, which is a complicated metaphor in the play, simultaneously representing both life, in the form of Salome’s fertility and virginity, and death, gazing down in judgment on Salome at the end of the play. Of the three plays, Hedda Gabler is the most realistic in its mood and setting. However, the fertility/death theme is continued in Ibsen’s work as well, since Hedda begins the play pregnant, affirming her feminine fertility, in spite of her androgynous aggressiveness.

Another important fairy tale motif is the plot of transformation and integration. A fairy tale typically begins with some sort of extraordinary disturbance in the “home,” or point of equilibrium. The narrative then examines how the protagonist overcomes this extraordinary challenge in an attempt to achieve his or her strongest desire, which usually takes the form of a return to the originary point of equilibrium. Quite typically, however, the protagonist, through the course of his or her adventures, returns to the point of origin with the circumstances much improved (e.g., having gained riches, marriages, status). In Miss Julie, the point of disturbance is the recent dissolution of Julie’s engagement, coupled with the revelry of Midsummer. In Salomé, the disturbance is fairly obvious—the presence of Jokanaan and Salome’s sudden attraction to him. In Hedda Gabler, the obstacle is Hedda’s pregnancy, her marriage, and the prospect of a mundane, bourgeois lifestyle. In each of these three cases, the protagonist does not achieve equilibrium—there is no “happy ending.” I shall comment further on this deviation below.

Moreover, the protagonist’s point of origin is often undesirable, as fairy tale protagonists typically begin the story outside of mainstream society, often because of an abnormal upbringing. This constitutes
a third important element of the fairy tale trope. True to form, all three protagonists—Hedda, Julie, and Salome—are either mistreated by stepparents or raised unconventionally by their own parents (or both). Julie is raised by her mother to be masculine, in Julie’s words, “a child of nature and, what’s more, I was to learn everything a boy has to learn” (Strindberg 1998, 93). Hedda is an aggressive gynander. Her new aunt-in-law Miss Tesman remarks that Hedda is “General Gabler’s daughter” and comments to Berta the maid, “the way she lived in the general’s day! Do you remember how she would go out riding with her father?” (Ibsen 2004, 291). Wilde’s Salome is raised by the opportunistic, vengeful Herodias and gazed upon by the lecherous Herod Antipas (who together are in a perverse marriage). Perverted by her stepfather’s lust for her and goaded by her mother’s vengefulness, Salome begins the play seemingly a demure, chaste virgin, but by the end is revealed to be as vengeful and lascivious as both of her parents. At the climax of the play, as she speaks to Jokanaan’s severed head, she says, “I was a princess and thou didst scorn me. I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me. I was chaste, and thou didst fill my veins with fire.”

The characterization of Salome/Julie/Hedda as an eroticized predator is the problematic point, however, in terms of the dramatic reinterpretation of the original plot.

**Sexual Salome and the New Woman**

The depiction of Salome as an aggressive, sexual predator not only conforms to the “outsider” trope of the fairy tale mode, it is also the hallmark of the decadent vision of her. Upon her reappearance in the nineteenth century, Salome is depicted in remarkably divergent ways: at one end of the spectrum, she is childlike, pure (to the point of sterility), and un-possessible; at the other, she is a highly (though coldly) sexual emasculating gynander, a vile seductress, a femme fatale. It is the latter trope that was favored by Symbolist and decadent writers alike, and it was this version of Salome that influenced the characterization of Hedda, Julie, and Wilde’s Salome.

This theme of the femme fatale is particularly emphasized by the essential element of the Salome motif: her dance of seduction. Although many details of the Salome story have changed over the centuries, the centrality of her dance has remained consistent. In the stage directions for Wilde’s *Salomé*, the dance is not described in great detail: “*Salomé dances the dance of the seven veils*” (Wilde 1907, 54). In *Miss Julie*, the dance motif occupies a greater part of the dramatic
space, given the importance of ritual dance to the Midsummer festival. As a fertility celebration, it was also a time strongly linked to sex and marriage. The first reference to Julie is to her dancing:

*Jean.* Miss Julie’s quite crazy again tonight; absolutely crazy!
*Kristin.* Oh, so you’re back then, are you?
*Jean.* I went with the Count to the station and on my way back past the barn I just stopped by for a dance. And who do I see but her ladyship with the gamekeeper, leading the dance? But as soon as she claps eyes on me, she comes rushing straight on over and invites me to join her in the ladies’ waltz. And how she waltzed!—I’ve never known the like. She’s crazy! (Strindberg 1998, 71)

Furthermore, in place of an act division, Strindberg provides a “ballet” that is reminiscent of the Herodian fête and alludes to offstage events:

The peasants enter, dressed in their best clothes, with flowers in their hats; a fiddler at their head; a cask of small beer and a small keg of acquavit, garlanded with leaves, are placed on the table; glasses are produced. They drink. Then a circle is formed and they sing and dance the dancing game, “There came two women from out the wood.” When this is finished, they exit again, still singing. (Strindberg 1998, 86)

In *Hedda Gabler*, the dance of seduction was performed before the commencement of the play’s narrative. When asked by Brack why she had married the “most acceptable” George Tesman, she replies, “I’d danced myself out, dear Judge. My time was up” (Ibsen 2004, 314). In the action of the play itself, the dance is revised: Hedda instead performs dance music on the piano. At the climax of the play, the point at which Hedda realizes that her attempts to orchestrate a heroic death for Lovborg have failed and that her manipulations of Brack have been reversed, the stage directions read as follows:

Hedda goes into the rear room and draws the curtains after her. Short pause. Suddenly she is heard to play a wild dance melody on the piano.\(^{25}\)

Shortly thereafter, a blast is heard, and Hedda is found to have shot herself with her father’s pistol—through the temple, in a heroic fashion.

Taking as it does such a prominent role, one must consider what the metaphoric meaning of “the dance” is in these works. Transgressing
culture and time, as well as artistic boundaries, the image of dance is a complex and fecund symbol. A particularly useful means of interpreting this symbol is presented by Frank Kermode in *Romantic Image*. Kermode proposes a notion of “the Image” as a point of access to higher truths and a means of reconciling opposites, such as action and contemplation. In Kermode’s way of thinking, the work of art itself is a symbol, a “means to a truth . . . more exalted than that of positivist science or any observation depending upon the discursive reason.” Specifically, Kermode is consumed with the idea of the woman’s body in motion as the “emblem of the work of art or Image,” and he refers to this recurring image as “the Dancer” (Kermode 1957, 44, 57). In outlining the role of the Dancer in Romanticism, he spends significant time considering the importance of the Salome motif, asserting that, “throughout this tradition, the beauty of a work of art, in which there is no division of form and meaning . . . is more or less explicitly compared with the mysterious inexpressive beauty of such women, and perhaps particularly with that of Salome” (Kermode 1957, 60). In other words, the Dancer is the representation of a unification of form and meaning, the elusive and ultimate goal of the artist’s effort. Thus, she eludes reduction to dichotomies and represents the ideal of aesthetic perfection.

Given the primacy of Salome as the symbolic Dancer, however, one must question why, in each work, she is killed. Her termination is an obvious commentary—but upon what does her death comment? What critique are these authors attempting to make? The deaths of Julie, Hedda, and Wilde’s Salome are not only narrative innovations to the Salome plot, but they are also obvious points of divergence from the typical fairy tale trope. Indeed, a common characteristic of a fairy tale is the happy ending in which the protagonist reaps the rewards of his or her transformation and lives “happily ever after.” In the end, it is Julie who has been seduced, and she does not escape the story alive—she slits her own throat with a straight razor. Similarly, Salome and Hedda’s triumphs are short lived and end with their deaths—in the case of Salome, execution by Herod Antipas’s soldiers; in the case of Hedda, suicide by pistol shot.

These dark endings may be read both in the general and the particular. In general, plays adapting the well-known fairy tales of Charles Perrault and the Grimms became increasingly popular from the late eighteenth century onward, particularly as a form of political and social commentary. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, dramatic adaptations of fairy tales began to take a darker turn. Given
the generalized anxieties and feelings of doom at the fin de siècle, the fantastic utopias of fairy tales may have seemed an inadequate means of discourse; therefore, avant-garde authors sought to “re-produce” them to better suit the contemporary mood. Playwrights like Maurice Maeterlinck, Strindberg, Ibsen, Wilde, and William Butler Yeats turned to fairy tales and other anti-realistic forms to bring poetry and spiritual meaning back into the theater.

In terms of the particular meanings of these dark endings, we must return to the argument that the appropriation of fairy tale motifs is, in part, an attempt at subversion or social commentary.

**Death of the (Romantic) Dancer**

While this discussion of the interplay between decadent (and decadent-influenced) fin-de-siècle writers and the New Woman “problem” is both compelling and fecund, I argue that most of the perceived commentary on gender politics exists for sensationalist, rather than ideological, reasons. While anxiety over gender roles is obviously present in these plays, I argue that the larger concern of these authors is to exploit the swirling discourse around gender to further their subversive projects, which are to express the intense, melancholic anxieties prevalent in fin-de-siècle culture and to present larger arguments dealing with the ongoing conflict between aesthetic idealism and realism. In simpler terms, our authors’ characterizations are not as concerned with subverting popular conceptions of gender roles as much as they attempt to subvert popular conceptions of the function of art. If we approach these competing Salome dramas from this perspective, we may then read the ambivalence toward the accurate categorization of these plays (e.g., as naturalistic, avant-garde, aesthetic) as indicative of the critical value in juxtaposing them, as they represent a site of problematic transition from the preceding movements of Romanticism, aesthetic idealism, and Naturalism to the modernism to come.

Despite their progressive and experimental forms, Strindberg, Ibsen, and Wilde were not yet completely disentangled from the clutching vines of Romanticism, nor from any apparently “decadent” misogyny (i.e., anxiety over biology, or an antipathy to the natural) as evidence of a strong connection to an idealist paradigm, the Romantic Image of essential female beauty described by Kermode. As Toril Moi writes, the idealist view holds that, in avoidance of “the coarse and the vulgar,” that which are not beautiful, there is an urge to transcend the physical body in favor of “wildly idealized” representations
of women, including the trope of a pure woman proving her purity by sacrificing her life for love, the highest ideal of (melancholic) beauty. Moi goes on to describe an “an increasingly impoverished, moralizing, didactic form of idealism” that continued to function as a master discourse about literature and art in the wake of Romanticism proper (Moi 2006, 82), and I would argue that Strindberg, Ibsen, and Wilde are participating in this discourse, thereby sacrificing their women not as punishment for their deviance or degeneration (as would be the case in the New Woman discourse), but to either preserve them as an aesthetic ideal or employ them as a metaphor. Salome and Julie must die because their death is the only way to salvage their honor and elevate them above the base animalism of their unreasonable sexual needs. Hedda dies for a similar reason—because she is confronted by a system that gives her no other choice and because she aspires to a masculine ideal of heroism.

Granted, these sacrifices are departures from the traditional trope of sacrifice for an idealized love, but in each case, the death of the Salome-esque protagonist signals an unwillingness to resolve the conflicts or disappointments of the present age and instead reach toward an idealized past. This melancholic turn is not a sort of unresolved attachment to the loss of the true “woman” in the sociocultural sense, but rather in the aesthetic sense. In other words, the melancholic attachments of Strindberg, Ibsen, and Wilde are to an idealized time when form and meaning were one, when Unity of Being was possible in art—the unity sought by the Symbolists, but destroyed by the onset of modernism, concerned as it was with the dichotomies of self and other, art and artifice, organism and machine. Salome dies not as a warning against the progress of the New Woman in the sociopolitical sense, but rather to mark the passing of beauty in the sense of Kermode’s “Romantic Image,” which prizes the unity of meaning achieved by the perfectly proportioned body of a beautiful woman. Kermode muses, in considering the work of William Butler Yeats, “It is hardly too much to say that whenever Yeats refers back to the historical concept of unity of being, or to the aesthetic one of beauty as a perfectly proportioned human body, the image of Salome is likely to occur to him” (Kermode 1957, 76).

This fixation on “beauty” is the point upon which we may easily distinguish these three plays. As previously indicated, Strindberg was a conspicuous misogynist, and the execution of his protagonist is likely a punishment for Julie having overstepped the bounds of both class and gender. If he leads Julie to her death, it is not to somehow preserve
her ideal beauty or prevent her from further degeneration—instead, I read her death as an unavoidable outcome of the complex range of factors that prevent her, from her birth onward, from ever achieving this idealized female beauty. Her death is not simply a castigation of only women’s emancipation, but a naturalistic interpretation of the entire range of “degenerative” outcomes of modernity. As Strindberg comments, “I flatter myself that this multiplicity of motives is in tune with the times” (Strindberg 1998, 59). In other words, Miss Julie’s death was inescapable, for she is the product of a flawed culture that had a priori negated the possibility of ideal beauty.

Hedda’s suicide is in service to romantic ideals. Throughout the play, Hedda suggests that modern society is an artificial restriction of individual free will. As her own agency is diminished—by her pregnancy, her marriage, and the increasingly ominous sexual advances of Judge Brack—her eagerness for any sort of self-defining act of will increases. For instance, she praises Løvborg for having “more of life’s courage than the others,” even though his passions are entirely self-destructive (Ibsen 2004, 334). In the fourth act, when she learns that he has fatally shot himself, she remarks that he “had the courage to live life his own way, and now—his last great act—bathed in beauty” (Ibsen 2004, 351). When the full truth is revealed—that Løvborg’s fatal wound was most likely an accidental shot to the stomach—Hedda realizes that her quest for a romantic ideal is futile. She takes her own action and dispatches herself in “heroic” fashion, with a shot to the temple. Like the dancer, she represents action and meaning united as beauty.

Wilde’s objectives are a bit more obscure. He did, in early drafts, consider letting Salome live out her days in exile, subsisting on locusts and wild honey, as had John the Baptist. But to allow her to escape the bounds of the tragedy would disavow Wilde’s core principle in that, “all excess, as well as all renunciation, brings its punishment.” Salome must perish as a result of not only her initial commitment to chastity, but also her later self-consuming desire for Jokanaan’s physical beauty, not to mention Herod’s all-consuming desire for hers.

**Conclusion**

As the leaders of avant-garde theater, Strindberg, Ibsen, and Wilde demonstrate expectedly complicated and conflicted attitudes toward the preceding traditions of aesthetic idealism. Numerous authors considered as “Decadents” expressed their separation from Romanticism.
by valorizing artificiality (either thematically or stylistically) while at the same time maintaining the romantic interest in “erotic sensibility.” Decadence was not so much an inspired literary movement as it was the site of a collision between opposing literary tendencies: Ibsen’s and Strindberg’s brand of Naturalism sought to dissolve any illusions as to the pursuit of truth and purity through art, yet they could not shake off traditional concepts of honor; Wilde’s Aestheticism detested any attempt to mingle ethics and aesthetics, yet he worshipped the purity of the beautiful. Furthermore, a decadent work may be discovered to be simultaneously innovative and imitative, overtaking, as it were, parallel literary movements such as Realism and Naturalism to eventually become a style of writing that may be characterized as modernism.

These complexities notwithstanding, the notions of “Decadence” and “fin de siècle” both carry negative connotations, suggestions of decay, degeneration, and an unhappy end. The artistic and formal innovations of Decadence are perhaps eclipsed by its fixation on the past, which encourages one to read Decadence as a reaction to Romanticism and Realism, an attempt to dismantle the faulty notion of truth, whether it be the rage of Caliban seeing himself in the mirror or not seeing himself in the mirror (to paraphrase Wilde’s preface to Dorian Gray). But an ancillary argument posed by this essay is to read Decadence as a form of “proto-modernism,” not only for the “newness” of its style, but also because the backward gaze of Decadence is distinct from the nostalgia of Romanticism, and instead can be more accurately described as a particular form of melancholia that later evolves into the highly recognizable neoclassicism of modernism. In this way, we may understand this sort of unresolved longing for the lost object not as a process of decay or degeneration, but as a process of creation. Rather than a process of decomposition or deconstruction, this creative sort of melancholia constitutes instead a separation, an emphasis on the individual within society, however discomforting or painful it may be.

Notes

1. Most notable (and influential) were treatments by Gustave Flaubert in his quasi-historical 1877 novel Hérodias, Stéphane Mallarmé’s Hérodiade (begun in 1864 and published in parts until his death in 1898); a major section of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s 1884 prototypical decadent novel À rebours; not to mention famous artistic renderings by Henri Regnault in 1870, Gustave Moreau in 1876, and Gustav Klimt in 1909 (also


4. For further discussion of Strindberg’s intentions, see the preface to *Miss Julie* (pp. 60, 65, 63).


6. Although the terms “decadent” and “Aesthetic” are often used interchangeably, my general sense of the terms is that “decadent” refers to a movement in French literature, while “Aesthetic” refers to a similar movement in British literature.

7. The incantatory quality of Wilde’s dialogue may have been intentional, or a result of his lack of fluency in French. I argue that Wilde’s incantatory dialogue is an attempt to emulate the fairy tale plays of Maurice Maeterlinck, whom Wilde admired. See Zagona, *Legend of Salome*, p. 129, and R. Ellmann (1988) *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Knopf), p. 373.


12. In *Archive Fever*, as Jacques Derrida writes, to be *en mal d’archive* is to “have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irressistible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.” J. Derrida (1996) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 91.


17. Between 1862 and 1877, dozens of prominent French artists, writers, and composers created works based on the Salome story. In addition to literary works by Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Huysmans, and the paintings by Regnault and Moreau, a “second generation” of Salome works appeared between 1883 to 1893, including works by Symbolist poets Jules Lafourge, Jean Lorrain, Albert Samain, an opera by Jules Massenet. For a detailed discussion of many of these major works, see Zagona, *Legend of Salome*.


20. Wilde wrote two collections of children’s stories, *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), which are conventionally labeled as “fairy tales” (see Magali Fleurot’s contribution to this volume). The influence of fairy tales on Strindberg’s works has also been well documented (see E. Napieralski [1983] “Miss Julie: Strindberg’s Tragic Fairy Tale,” *Modern Drama* 26.3, p. 282). Strindberg also translated Hans Christian Anderson in the 1870s, composed a fairy tale drama, *Lucky Peter’s Travels*, in 1882, and wrote a collection of original fairy tales, *Sabor*, in 1903. Likewise, Ibsen was an avid folklorist, in his youth having received a public grant to support the collection of popular folktales, which led him to produce an essay “On the Heroic Ballad and Its Significance for Literature” (1857). He later spent two months in rural Norway, collecting folk ballads and tales, after which he composed *Peer Gynt* (1876).


22. As Strindberg continues in the Preface to *Miss Julie*, “I have not tried to accomplish anything new, for that is impossible, but merely to modernize the form ” (p. 56).

23. See Cantos 18 to 20 of Heine’s *Atta Troll*, which depicts the “Wild Hunt,” which according to legend also occurs on this date. Notably, Julie’s dog is named Diana, a cross-reference the Herodias-Diana conflation previously mentioned. Also note the role of the notorious (and implicitly lascivious) singer Miss Diana in *Hedda Gabler*.


28. In his preface, Strindberg professes that he has “motivated Miss Julie’s tragic fate with an abundance of circumstances,” including her upbringing, her “degenerate brain,” the festive atmosphere, her pre-occupation with animals, the “powerful aphrodisiac influence of the flowers,” and even her menstrual period (*Miss Julie*, p. 58).


32. We must remember that all of these classifications were established post hoc, and are often simply conflated as “Modernism.” As Moi comments, “Oscar Wilde’s radical aestheticism was as anti-idealistic as Emile Zola’s experimental novels” (see T. Moi, *Henrik Ibsen*, p. 67).
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PART III

Decadence and the Feminine
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Chapter 8

Mariia Iakunchikova and the Roots of Decadence in Late-Nineteenth-Century Russian Modernism

Kristen M. Harkness

No, I will never give myself over to decadence. I understand too well where it comes from.

Mariia Iakunchikova, 1892

Introduction

The word Decadence first appeared in Russian criticism in an 1889 article by Vladimir Grabar, a Hungarian-Russian law student studying in Paris who earned extra money by writing for a Russian newspaper. In it, he sympathetically defined Decadence as a rebellion against the strict formalism of the French Parnassian poets that emphasized subjective experience of the world.¹ In the same year, the promising young artist Mariia Iakunchikova (1870–1902) was diagnosed with tuberculosis and forced to move to Paris to avoid the strain the harsh Russian winters would put on her lungs.² Thus, due to a twist of fate, Iakunchikova entered the Parisian art world and began to battle her physical decline right when Russians were beginning to hear about Western Decadence. She wrote the words in the epigraph in her diary during her third year in Paris, which indicates that she had already formed her own opinion of Decadence and was determined to fight any strains of it appearing in her art. Nonetheless, upon exhibiting her works in Russia she found herself accused of Decadence—a nebulous
term even at its place of origin—which indicates the tenuousness of her definition of it, as well as that of Russian critics and artists.

In documents both public and private, Russian intellectuals bandy the word “Decadence” about confusingly at the fin de siècle. The World of Art (Mir iskusstva) group and the Peredvizhniki\textsuperscript{3} used it as a term of abuse for each other’s art; later Russian Symbolist artists used it to distinguish themselves from the earliest. The only thread uniting their use of the term is the concept that decadent art has no real ideas behind it—it is rank formalism.\textsuperscript{4}

While Decadence in Russian literature has been well studied,\textsuperscript{5} its presence in the Russian visual arts has received scant attention. Recent exhibitions of Russian art held both in Russia and in Europe avoid the question of Decadence altogether.\textsuperscript{6} There have been only two short scholarly articles about Decadence in Russian art, both by the art historian John Bowlt.\textsuperscript{7} Bowlt sees Iakunchikova not as a decadent artist, but rather as a modernist broadly defined. He dates the emergence of Decadence in Russia to the end of the 1890s, beginning with the World of Art group and their eponymous journal.\textsuperscript{8} While I agree that this period sees the full bloom of Russia’s fleurs du mal (flowers of evil), Iakunchikova’s works and contemporary critical reactions to them indicate that she had absorbed certain artistic trends that were being defined as Decadence even though she herself was unwilling to recognize them as such. The World of Art artists and later groups hailed her as a pioneer, solidifying her place in the history of Decadence in Russia.\textsuperscript{9}

The purpose of this essay is not to provide a concrete definition of Decadence in the Russian visual arts, but to consider how three prints Iakunchikova produced c. 1893–95 point to her absorption of strains of Parisian art that she and art critics deemed Decadence, as well as her struggle to become an artist at a time of real and perceived degeneration—of Russia, her self-identity, and her physical self. I have chosen to focus on these prints because they not only visually indicate the influence of Decadence, but also because it was her prints that first attracted the attention of critics and other artists and established her as one of the roots of Decadence in Russian art. Before examining the prints, however, it is important to consider her introduction to the art world and her reaction to her diagnosis to understand how the professional and personal strands of her life began to intertwine with Decadence.

\textbf{Iakunchikova, Tuberculosis, and Modern Art}

Born into a wealthy Moscow family in 1870, while still a young child Iakunchikova displayed the talent that ran throughout her artistic
family. In 1885, she began studying at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture (Moskovskoe uchilishche zhivopisi, vaiania i zodchestva, hereafter “Moscow School”), which was unique among Russian arts institutions because it began admitting women fairly early in its existence. Iakunchikova quickly distinguished herself at the Moscow School, winning a first prize for her painting Tsar in the Prayer Room (private collection) in 1886. She continued to progress in her studies and by the time of her diagnosis, she was already determined to pursue a career in the arts. In spite of her despair at her physical degeneration, upon arrival in Paris, Iakunchikova redoubled her determination to become an artist.

When Iakunchikova settled in Paris, a Russian arts community had long been present, so she could have formed bonds based on nationality should she have desired to. Iakunchikova, however, seemed to prefer other artistic circles in Paris and avidly sought information on non-Russian artists and schools. Nonetheless, she also kept abreast of artistic developments in Russia—a frequent theme of her diaries and letters—and became a touchstone for a group of her contemporaries who began coming to Paris in the mid-1890s. These were the artists who would form the World of Art group, which conservative Russian critics would come to see as the bastion of Decadence. She became a source of knowledge for the younger generation of artists in part because Russian artists did not begin looking at modern artistic developments in Paris with any real curiosity until late in the nineteenth century. While many Russian artists went to France to study and live, once tensions dating back to Napoleon’s destruction of Moscow eased at mid-century, their attitude to modern French art was largely one of sheer indifference. In the late 1870s, Vasilii Polenov was one of the earliest Russian artists to experiment with Impressionist brushwork, but Impressionism did not become a strong artistic trend in Russia until the late 1880s, by which point the French avant-garde considered it practically passé. Even then Russian artists often paid little attention to contemporary French art, being more interested in acquiring skills they believed necessary to further Russia’s national art. It was not until after the Exposition Universelle of 1889 that things began to change appreciably, which explains the fact that many Russian artists swallowed Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Symbolism whole, assigning them a single category: French modern art. It also explains why conservative Russian critics often lumped these distinct movements into the category “Decadence.” Like other Russian artists, Iakunchikova experimented with almost all the styles of French modern art of the prior 20 years. She borrowed elements from one or another, or a combination of them, as they suited her
expressive goals. Nonetheless, she approached French modernism with ambivalence. This attitude is encapsulated in a letter to the artist Elena Polenova in which she writes with enthusiasm about the salons, but notes about one Place de la Concorde, “it seems it wasn’t a Frenchman who painted it, which is why, most likely, it’s so good. A Frenchman needs only to try to paint his own Parisian street to completely ruin it.”

The Inescapable Allure of Decadence

One avant-garde movement that did stand out for Iakunchikova is Decadence, for it appears regularly in her letters and diaries. For late-nineteenth-century Russian critics, Decadence was marked by extreme individualism, an emphasis on aesthetics over content, morbidity, immoral sexuality, and an irrational turn toward mysticism, many of the characteristics of degeneration Max Nordau wrote of in his eponymous tome. The majority of Russian critics had grown used to the realist focus of the Peredvizhniki, Russia’s first art movement to rebel successfully against the strictures of the Imperial Academy of the Arts. By the late 1880s, however, a younger generation of artists began to see the Peredvizhniki as having lost their focus as artistic revolutionaries. In essence, they felt that Russian art was in decline. Stereotypical of a generational divide, the younger generation’s attempts to find new modes of expression created consternation among conservative critics. It is, however, too simplistic to see this as just a battle of fathers and sons à la Ivan Turgenev, for several older artists were very sympathetic to calls for change. In broad terms, younger Russian artists were interested in subjective sensual experience, myth, legend, mysticism, folk motifs, as well as the magic of fairy tales and Russia itself, which allies them with Symbolist artists in other countries across Europe. And, like other Russian artists, Iakunchikova often conflated Decadence with Symbolism.

This shift in artistic priorities among the younger generation coincided with increasing political turmoil that created a general anxiety that the powerful Russian Empire itself was in a state of degeneration. Tsar Alexander II was assassinated on March 1, 1881, in a plot organized by a woman, Sofiia Perovskaia. Thus, a reign that had begun with great promise to reform Russian society, but had grown increasingly more conservative as the populist movements gained power, ended in an act of terrorism. Perovskaia would subsequently become the first woman executed for political crimes against the Russian state,
which had a particularly repressive outcome for women. In response, in 1886, the Imperial Academy of the Arts, along with all universities, closed admissions to women.\textsuperscript{22} Not surprisingly, Alexander III’s reign (1881–94) was conservative to the point of being reactionary. These events provided further stimulus for artists seeking change, but also created an apocalyptic sense of decline in the broader society.

In January 1893 the writer Dmitrii Merezhkovskii published the slim volume *The Reasons for the Decline of and New Trends in Contemporary Russian Literature*,\textsuperscript{23} which contained the transcripts of two lectures he delivered in October and December 1892. In essence, Merezhkovskii argued that the decline is illusory and modern, Western trends in art and literature will bring renewal to Russian culture. Merezhkovsky’s text is often cited as the beginning of the Symbolist and decadent movements in Russia, marking the start of what later became known as Russia’s Silver Age, a period of greatly expanded and renewed activity in the arts before the Russian Revolution.

Of course, Russian artists are hardly unique in their strivings to cast off the old at the fin de siècle. Movements across Europe such as Art Nouveau, the Aesthetic Movement, and the Secession, coincided with Russian artists’ desire to redefine themselves. What is unique is how Russian artists positioned themselves in relation to contemporary trends in Europe. Iakunchikova’s career provides a particularly interesting glimpse into this negotiation of artistic space. By 1894, she had grown disillusioned with French art and recognized that while it was at an end, she was at a beginning: “This is such an interesting, such a complex moment in Parisian life . . . The French have done their thing . . . The French have done their thing . . . They have to step aside for others who are younger, full of strength.”\textsuperscript{24}

**Printing Death and Decline**

While Iakunchikova was seeking this new path, she was experimenting with printmaking. The aquatints she produced provide an example of how she negotiated a space for herself and why her art was associated with Decadence. In order to better understand this connection, it is vital to consider her evolving opinion of Decadence.

Iakunchikova’s nostalgia for Russia and her interest in unsettled psychological states allied her with Symbolist trends. Her continual investigation into the Parisian art world and the increased emphasis on emotional states in her own work, however, belie her outward rejection of it; as she wrote to Polenova, “All of this is terribly interesting to
me as confirmation of the sick trends in contemporary art—the search to make all feelings more acute and complex, which here they call *décadence* and toward which we are all inclined.”

She seems to have felt compelled to continue investigating these “sick trends,” for as she wrote wryly a couple of months later, “Our kind *incohérents* are very good this year. Among the known *blagueurs* with their dotted lines and nightmares are very genuine artists who are simply young.”

She was very negative about the Rose + Cross salon, however, describing it as a “religious order having the goal of introducing an exclusively mystical element into art... the majority are symbolic representations of some kind of prophets, in a word, *décadence*... This isn’t real art, but something sick, nightmarish.” The following year she wrote that it was not even worth talking about the Rose + Cross Salon, since it “had become the Symbolists’ show-booth. There the empty-headed charlatans have gathered to shock the Parisian public with blood and debauchery.”

At the same time she was pronouncing the Parisian Decadents nothing more than a nightmare on canvas, Iakunchikova had three works accepted into the Salon Champ-de-Mars, a significant career high point, but also one that marks the emergence of a new theme in her work, one particularly associated with Decadence: death. Death is a subject that appears in a number of her works of the early 1890s, such as her sketch *Death at the Piano* (private collection), which depicts a skeleton playing what appears to be a very lively tune. About the pastel *Meudon Cemetery near Paris* (1892, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow), Iakunchikova wrote, “all the fruit orchards are in bloom, forests, quiet, old houses, provincial sleepiness, an old church; in the cemetery there are merry, playful lilacs, greenery, sun, sparkling, candylike branches. The contrast of this spring with the death they personified struck me.”

Cemeteries and crosses—both Catholic and Russian Orthodox—appear frequently throughout her work, perhaps pointing to a preoccupation with death caused by her diagnosis, though tuberculosis and death were among the themes of degeneration and decline also explored in decadent art.

Iakunchikova was the first Russian artist to work in colored etching. She began experimenting with aquatints in 1892. Among her prints is one of the most striking depictions of death in her oeuvre: *Death and Flowers* (Figure 8.1). *Death and Flowers* brings together two major motifs of the Parisian Decadents: death and the *fleurs du mal*. On the one hand, flowers were a subject deemed acceptable for women painters. On the other, skulls most certainly were not,
unless perhaps set in a quasi-religious *vanitas* image. While the skeleton seems to be laughing (at gender norms? at death itself? at us?), the fact that we can see the leaves through its mouth suggests that it has collapsed in an open-mouthed faint against the blooms, swooning decoratively like a well-bred lady should. It is also possible that the skeleton is a symbol of the cycle of life—the body has decayed and the remains are now being overtaken by nature. At the same time, the composition exhibits a claustrophobic *horror vacui*.

While I have yet to find any direct evidence of how cultural attitudes toward tuberculosis affected Iakunchikova, as a well-educated upper-class woman she no doubt was aware of the presence of “consumptives” in both Russian and foreign literature and art.\textsuperscript{34} As Bram Dijkstra has argued, the consumptive woman was presented in art as a binary: both dangerous, a femme fatale, and yet alluringly weak.\textsuperscript{35} This duality is explored in a self-portrait print she exhibited in the Salon Champ-de-Mars in 1894, *L’Irréparable* (Figure 8.2),\textsuperscript{36} which delves deeply into the psyche. Iakunchikova portrayed herself having

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*Figure 8.1* *Death and Flowers*, c. 1893–95, aquatint, 19.3 x 16.2 cm. © V. D. Polenov State Historic, Art, and Nature Estate-Museum.
chopped down a wisteria vine. The position of her hands indicates that she has just let the hatchet slip from them. The vine curls around her, suggesting an intimate relationship. The broken vine may refer to her health, or it may refer to an unfortunate love affair she had with an Englishman, Nigel. It is also possible that this work references her loss of virginity, for in her diary she noted that the man she would later marry, Lev Weber, was disappointed to learn that she “had been very close to” Nigel, for, as Weber put it, “des choses comme ça laissent des traces.” The fact that she is sitting in a field with lily of the valley and carnations, two flowers often present in medieval paintings of the Virgin Mary in an enclosed garden, may further point to this rupture between image (pure virgin) and reality (“fallen” woman). The enclosed garden has been willfully breached.

At the same time, it is Iakunchikova who has chopped down the vine. It is possible that instead of being the victim here, she is the femme fatale who snuffs out all life, whether through dangerous sexuality, or

Figure 8.2  *L’Irréparable*, c. 1893–95, aquatint, 24.7 x 28.7 cm. © V. D. Polenov State Historic, Art, and Nature Estate-Museum.
a less sinister method like tuberculosis. Her weakness in the aftermath of physical exertion points to the duality of the consumptive that Dijkstra posited in his work. Whatever this print signified, what is perhaps most significant in this composition is the communication of the psychological experience of an irreparable break.

Another self-portrait print she exhibited in 1894 continues the theme of death while focusing on emotion. *L’Effroi* (Figure 8.3) immediately brings to mind Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, which was painted in 1893. Iakunchikova mentions Munch in some of her writings in a notebook of 1896 and made a small sketch of *The Scream* from the Salon des Indépendants; it is possible that she was familiar with his work before then, but uncertain. According to the Symbolist poet and art critic Maks Voloshin, Iakunchikova created this work based on unexpected terror she experienced once while in Meudon Cemetery at night. Whatever the impetus, it is obviously the psychological state that Iakunchikova wished to communicate. *L’Effroi*
perhaps makes the fear and anxiety she had about her health and her place in the art world clear. It is tempting to think that she may have wished to express an attempt to run from her inevitable decline from tuberculosis. The greenish flesh emphasizes sickness and decay and may indicate that the figure is a phantom haunting the cemetery, perhaps the double of the Iakunchikova who sketched there by day. The fact that her reddish hair is not neatly arranged as befits an upper-class lady, but streaming out behind her, further supports a reading of decline, of being slowly undone.\textsuperscript{40}

Although speculation about the content of her prints cannot be conclusive, their form does indicate that Iakunchikova was well versed in contemporary and traditional printmaking. They show her appropriation of the sinuous lines of Art Nouveau as well as the heavy outlines and the flattening of space in Japanese prints popular with many Post-Impressionists. Evidence indicates that Iakunchikova was familiar with Japanese prints; there is an extant photograph of her dressed in a kimono and holding a Japanese fan, and a sketch of her studio from the 1890s shows a Japanese lamp on top of a secretary.\textsuperscript{41} Flat space and heavy outlines are also prevalent in Russian woodblock folk prints (\textit{lubki}), which Iakunchikova knew well. These works may thus have been a synthesis of forms typical of Russian modern artists.

\textbf{Sensitive Subjectivity or Degenerate Narcissism?}

These self-portrait prints indicate that while Iakunchikova may have railed against Decadence, she was deeply concerned with exploring personal psychological states in her art, which coincided with the interests of contemporary French Decadents and the accusations of conservative critics regarding narcissism. The self-portrait may have been a choice Iakunchikova made to facilitate her art world success. It was a mode of inquiry and way to master technique for many modern artists, such as Vincent Van Gogh. But it was also a genre that women artists such as Sofonisba Anguissola had strategically employed since the Italian Renaissance.\textsuperscript{42} The self-portrait functions as both introspection and display. For women artists, it provided ways of exteriorizing the interior (the socially coded realm of the feminine) while demonstrating technical mastery.

The externalization of the interior is another theme typically associated with Decadence’s extreme subjectivity. The painting Iakunchikova submitted along with her prints to the Salon in 1894
underscores subjective psychological states. *Reflets intimes* (private collection) is another partly disguised self-portrait. A woman is seated in a room at night, clearly lost in thought. She is hazily reflected in the window behind her. In Iakunchikova’s works an interior view of a window is not unusual, but the inclusion of a human figure is. Here she is clearly associating the subjective world of the mind with mere reflections of the “real” world. At the same time, the figure appears to be dissolving or fading away, perhaps evoking sleep or the experience of physical decline, necessitating a greater reliance on the world of the mind. The intangibility of the inner world is expressed through the soft brushwork and the reflections of light on the window pane, flowers on the table next to it, and the brocade curtain, which make the painting shimmer slightly. The view through the window of Paris on a rainy evening, just barely discernable, heightens the contrast and yet provides an inseparable link between exterior and interior worlds.43

The handling of the reflection and exterior buildings suggests the Impressionist brushwork of some of her favorite European artists, Anders Zorn in particular. In addition, the formal treatment of the figure indicates that Iakunchikova also had absorbed the work of her idols Paul-Albert Besnard and Eugene Carrière, who often dealt with emotions that bubble ambiguously just under a hazy surface.44 If we consider the content of this painting, we can see Iakunchikova experimenting with developments in French Symbolism that emphasized interiority, dreams, fantasy, and anxiety.

At the same time, the interior is the traditional realm of the feminine, which holds true for Iakunchikova’s art. As has been well documented by feminist scholars, women artists often turned to depicting intimate domestic scenes and explorations of the interior world because they were denied the possibility of studying subjects required for academic history painting.45 As mentioned, many of Iakunchikova’s works are depopulated, but if there is a figure in her interior scenes, it is almost exclusively female, and most often contemplative. *Reflections*, however, places a woman in an ambiguous space; logically we know she is inside, but the treatment of the reflection makes the figure appear at first glance to be a phantom floating in the rainy night. In this instance, we cannot rule out the influence of the autobiographical. Iakunchikova knew that her tuberculosis would mean an early death; the question was only when. Needless to say, she was profoundly affected by it and fought to keep from dissolving into hopelessness in the face of physical decline, often using her art as a motivating factor.
Iakunchikova’s prints brought her considerable attention, some positive, some quite negative. In 1896, The Studio published an article that reproduced four of Iakunchikova’s prints, including L’Effroi. Hers are the only works reproduced in the article, even though it makes reference to other (male) artists. The author, Octave Uzanne, states that among contemporary printmakers “the cleverest are M. Albert Bertrand, M. Eugène Delâtre, and his pupil Mlle. Marie Jacounchikoff.” He notes that Iakunchikova, “by dint of enthusiastic labor, quite feminine in its ardour… has great gifts as a painter… Mlle. Jacounchikoff bids fair to lead us very soon into a new field of colour-printing.” In spite of the typically sexist reference to her “feminine… ardour” the article is highly complimentary, noting that she is more talented than her teacher, Delâtre, especially “in her vision of things.” It is likely that copies of Iakunchikova’s Quietude, L’Irréparable and L’Effroi were acquired by the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria and Albert Museum) at this time—a major coup for a 26-year-old woman artist in the nineteenth century.

By 1897, Iakunchikova had become acquainted with Sergei Diagilev and other members of the World of Art group, who looked to her as an innovative prophet of new art, and she enthusiastically participated in their activities both in Russia and in Paris. That the World of Art group, like Iakunchikova herself, inhabited a liminal space between Russianness and modernity (defined mostly by Parisian standards) may have accounted for their mutual attraction. The negative reactions of the Russian press to the works she exhibited with them firmly placed her in the “decadent” camp. One of the reviews of Diagilev’s (in)famous Russian–Finnish Exhibition highlighted her in particular:

[T]he “Parisian” artist Iakuchikov [sic] also suffers [from decadence], except in the beautifully painted pastel Winter in Petersburg and the tempera Bells, all of the rest of the pastels and “temperas” create a very strange impression!… But the picture entitled Irreparable can be called the height of decadence! It shows a young woman sitting on her haunches with a hatchet with which she has just chopped a grapevine. What is “irreparable” here only Allah knows! I am afraid that what is irreparable is the manner of painting, which this talented artist undoubtedly borrowed from the Parisian decadents.

This review is typical not only in its rejection of anything that even hints at “Decadence,” but also in its assumption that the artist was
male. No woman artist would produce such things, of course. To be charitable to the reviewer, Iakunchikova sometimes signed her works with just her monogram and many of her works are signed with the French version of her name, Jacounchikoff, which would give no information to a critic used to women’s last names being marked as feminine in Russian. Nevertheless, this response is typical of the dismissive attitude toward any art that did not meet conservative Russian critics’ Realist criteria.

While both Russian and Western critics present the gender bias present in the art world while Iakunchikova was forging her career, only the Russian critics reacted to the Decadence they perceived in her work. The phrase “borrowed from the Parisian decadents” hints at a rejection of anything not recognized as “ours,” such as the art of the Peredvizhnikhi, championed for bringing Russian art to levels where it could compete on the European stage, and yet still be recognizably Russian. It is clear that this is not part of the Decadence that so worried Iakunchikova in the epigraph to this article. She seemed to recognize that Decadence is part of the human condition, an emotional extreme that reveled in shock value rather than exploring human subjectivity on its own merits.

In the end, Iakunchikova was neither a fully Symbolist nor a fully Decadent artist. She was an independent artist who successfully negotiated the spaces between Paris and Moscow, modernity and tradition, in a way that allowed her art to be filled with the products of her innovative vision and become one of the solid roots of Russian Decadence.

Notes

1. V. Grabar (1889) “Parnassiy i dekadany,” Russkie vedomosti, 26.34, pp. 2–3. He was the brother of the Impressionist artist Igor Grabar, who later became director of the Tretyakov Gallery. In early 1897, Igor Grabar himself took up the defense of “so-called decadence” in an article he wrote for the journal Niva. He purposely gave it the confrontational title “Degeneration or Renaissance? Notes on Contemporary Trends in Art” (I. Grabar [1897] “Upadok ili vozrozhdeniia: Ocherki sovremennikh techenii v iskusstve,” supplement to Niva 1.) Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Russian are my own. I am grateful to the editors of this volume and Drs. Wendy Salmond and Rhonda Reymond for their generous feedback on earlier versions of this article.

2. Iakunchikova contributed significantly to the development of modern Russian art, but who remains virtually unknown outside a small group
of specialists. Pamela Chester has argued that “Iakunchikova forms, with Polenova, a kind of ‘missing link’ between the realist art of the 1880s and the modernist work of [Natal’ia] Goncharova and [Marina] Tsvetaeva”; see P. Chester (2000) “Painted Mirrors: Landscape and Self-Representation in Russian Women’s Verbal and Visual Art,” in C. Kelly and S. Lovell (eds.) Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 297. In 1979 and 2005, the Russian art historian Mikhail Fedorovich Kiselev published the only two monographs dedicated to Iakunchikova’s life and work. The later book is a revised and expanded version of the first. Her place in the Russian art world is confirmed by publications during her lifetime in the English journal The Studio and in Russia in World of Art. In 1904, World of Art published a retrospective article by Natal’ia Polenova that included 54 reproductions. In 1905, there was a retrospective exhibition organized by her husband, Lev Weber, and members of the World of Art group. In addition, the poet Maksim Voloshin published an article in Vesy in 1906 and the article appearing the prior year in World of Art was released as a separate booklet. After this, Iakunchikova disappeared from view, largely due to the fact that the majority of her works remained in Switzerland, where she died. As a wealthy bourgeois and a member of “decadent” fin-de-siècle art groups, she was essentially rendered an untouchable for Soviet scholars.

3. The Peredvizhniki (singular, Peredvizhnik) are commonly referred to in English as the Wanderers or Itinerants. I have chosen to follow the example of Elizabeth Valkenier and use the Russian term because, as she states, the English translations are “misleading with [their] connotation of aimlessness.” See E. Valkenier (1977) Russian Realist Art: The State and Society: The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition (Ann Arbor: Ardis), p. xi.


6. An exhibition of Symbolist art was held at the State Russian Museum in 1996, but the catalog makes no reference to Decadence. Y. Petrova (ed.) (1996) Symbolism in Russia (St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum). In
his article “Pour une typologie du symbolism russe dans les arts plastiques” for the catalog for L’Art russe dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle: en quête d’identité (Paris: Musée d’Orsay, 2005), Jeanne-Claude Marcadé specifically avoids the question, “Nous ne traitons pas ici la question de la décadence, qui est complexe et pour laquelle l’ouverture à l’Occident n’est qu’un aspect” (fn. 28, p. 269).


9. See, for example, Sergei Diagilev’s obituary for Iakunchikova (S. Diagilev [1902] “M. V. Iakunchikova,” Mir iskusstva 12, n.p.).

10. This school was supported by the Moscow Arts Society, which was under the “protection” of the Imperial Court from its founding in 1843, but the school remained fairly independent as it did not receive regular government support until 1898. V. Lapshin (2004) “Poslednii imperator Rossii i otechestvennaia khudozhestvennaia zhizn’ kontsa XIX—nachala XX veka,” Iskusstvoznanie, 1, p. 540.

11. In 1855, Anna Glebova was the first woman to graduate and received the title of non-class artist for her Portrait of a Boy. S. Stepanovna (2005) Moskovskoe uchilishe zhivopisi i vaianii. Gody stanovlenie (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo–SPB), p. 260.

20. I have no evidence that Iakunchikova ever read Nordau’s Degeneration, which was published in Russian translation in November 1893. Given that she was fluent in French and German and had fairly good English language skills, she may have picked up various fin-de-siècle anxieties before its original 1892 publication. The Russian translation caused quite a stir, provoking nine newspaper and journal articles in late 1893 and early 1894. A. V. Lavrov (ed.) (2002) Letopis’ literaturnykh sobytii v Rossii kontsa XIX—nachala XX v. (1891–oktiabr’ 1917). Vypusk 1 (1891–1900) (Moscow: IMLI RAN), pp. 131–32.
21. Avril Pyman contends that in literature Decadence preceded the Symbolist movement in Russia, see A. Pyman A History of Russian Symbolism, p. 1. Olga Matich, on the contrary, argues that for Russian writers there was no clear division between Symbolism and Decadence. For many writers the categories overlap to a greater or lesser degree in what she calls a “decadent utopianism.” Erotic Utopia, pp. 3–28. I agree that for Russian artists, Symbolism vs. Decadence is more a matter of degree than clear boundaries.


25. M. V. Iakunchikova to E. D. Polenova, January 11, 1892, in E. Sakharova, p. 478, and Tretyakov Gallery Manuscript Division, fond 54, no. 9691, sheet 1. It was typical of educated Russians to mix languages in their correspondence. I have left the French untranslated to make clear what Iakunchikova chose to write in her native language and what she felt French communicated better.


27. The Rose + Cross salon was a series of six exhibitions held from 1892–97 that focused on Christian mysticism and occult practices. They were intended to function as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and included visual art, music, and performances.


29. M. V. Iakunchikova to E. D. Polenova, May 15, 1894; see E. Sakharova, p. 500, and Tretyakov Manuscript Division, fond 54, no. 9697, sheet 3.

30. M. V. Iakunchikova to E. D. Polenova, May 28, 1892; see E. Sakharova, p. 484, and Tretyakov Gallery Manuscript Division, fond 54, no. 9693, sheet 3.


32. It is not always possible to date Iakunchikova’s prints exactly. Most can be dated to the early 1890s based on exhibition and publication dates. From her letters it is clear that she did not begin experimenting in printmaking until 1892.

33. I have found no evidence that Iakunchikova read Baudelaire, but since he was well known among Russian intellectuals and a frequent target for conservative Russian literary critics, in all likelihood she did at least know of him.

34. Tolstoy’s Nikolai Levin in *Anna Karenina* and Dostoevsky’s Katerina Ivanovna in *Crime and Punishment* are among the most famous examples from Russian literature. As her father was an Anglophile, Iakunchikova was likely also familiar with consumptive characters from Victorian English literature as well.

36. The titling of Iakunchikova’s works is inconsistent. Where the documents indicate she provided a title in French I have kept the original. I have translated Russian titles.

37. “Such things leave traces.” A young Englishman, Nigel, appears throughout Iakunchikova’s diary of 1890–91. Iakunchikova’s family protested that he was only pursuing her for her money. When her mother and aunt explained to him that there would be no inheritance if they married, he disappeared. M. F. Kiselev and D. E. Iakovlev (1996) “Dnevnik M. V. Iakunchikovoi 1890–1892 gg.,” in Pamiatniki kul’tury, novye otkrytiia (St. Petersburg: Nauka), pp. 490–91.


40. Contemporaries described Iakunchikova’s hair as “red-gold.”


42. See, for example, M. D. Garrard (1994) “Here’s Looking at Me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the Problem of the Woman Artist,” Renaissance Quarterly, 47.3, pp. 556–622. I am grateful to Christopher Nissen for pointing out this source.


46. O. Uzanne (1895–1896) “Modern Colour Engraving with Notes on Some Work by Marie Jacounchikoff,” The Studio, 6, 152.

47. The date of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s acquisition of these prints is uncertain. They are listed in the museum’s 1903 Catalogue of Prints and if the inventory numbers there provide any clue, the acquisition date seems to be 1896. In the Iakunchikov fond (205) in the Tretyakov Gallery Manuscript Division there is a press clipping (no. 334) that I have been unable to trace, but which notes, “Mlle. Marie Vassiliovna Jacounchikov…has had the satisfaction of having had some of her eaux-fortes purchased by the South Kensington authorities…A set of panels done in Paris last winter are now being exhibited at St. Petersburg, and meet with much admiration.” The final sentence suggests that the article was written in 1899, when Iakunchikova’s prints were exhibited in Diagilev’s Russian-Finnish exhibition. I have no evidence that she made a trip to England in that year, however.
48. On this topic, see Kiselev, Iakunchikova, pp. 105–09.

49. Sarmata [pseud.] (1898) “Kartinki zhizni,” Pridneprovskii krai. Ezbednevnaia, nauchno-literaturnaia, politicheskaia i ekonomicheskaia gazeta, pp. 2–3. The reference to Allah could be an ironic, orientalizing gesture. Considering that the review was published in an Ekaterinoslav (known as Dnepropetrovsk during the Soviet period) newspaper, however, it is possibly simply due to the fact that the city was in the southern part of the empire, where more Muslims were present.

50. I have not been able to locate a catalog for the exhibition to see how Iakunchikova was listed.
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CHAPTER 9

The Spectral Salome: Salomania and Fin-de-Siècle Sexology and Racial Theory

Johannes Hendrikus Burgers

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the most distinctive cultural characteristics of the fin de siècle is the proliferation of the femme fatale as a literary and artistic trope. Across Europe and America, novels, poems, paintings, sculptures, and theaters were teeming with dangerous Cleopatras, murderous Judiths, and treacherous Delilahs. Among these, the figure of Salome, the young Jewish princess whose mother coerced her into asking for the head of John the Baptist, was probably the most prominent. Salome could be found in poems, plays, stories, operas, and was the subject of paintings, posters, decorative objects; she even inspired imitative dances.\(^1\) She was so ubiquitous that in 1912 one scholar claimed to have recorded 2,789 French poets who had written about the dancer.\(^2\) Salome’s sensual “Dance of the Seven Veils” took on a life of its own, and young, exotically clad women could be seen dancing the “hoochy-koochy” from San Francisco to St. Petersburg. The dance was so widespread and provocative that after one show in Des Moines, Iowa, a law was passed prohibiting women from kicking their legs above 45 degrees.\(^3\)

This sudden popularity of Salome, or “salomania” as it came to be called, has often intrigued scholars, and prompted a wide range of explanations. Many of these explanations have focused on Salome’s intersection with late-nineteenth-century sexological and racial
discourses. Despite, or perhaps because of the concerted focus on this particular critical cross-current, these theories are often contradictory. In one light, it would appear that Salome, both female and Jewish, was an empowered and subversive challenge to late-Victorian gender and racial norms. Alternatively, Salome’s behavior was also seen as perverse and therefore served a normative function, as an admonishing figuration of how women were not supposed to act. Indeed, she has been read any number of ways, as “a male transvestite,” a sexually aggressive “New Woman,” “lesbian,” “deviant male,” and a powerful male fantasy of women’s innate perversity. Racially, Wilde’s Salome has been seen as the embodiment of Western Orientalist desire whose overtly constructed nature calls into question the very assumptions on which that Orientalism is based. These various arguments have created a compelling, if tangled, genealogy of the historical roots of Salomania. Nonetheless, with the notable exception of the excellent work of Sander Gilman, Neil Davison, and Janis Bergman-Carton, Salome scholarship tends to treat racial and sexual categories separately due to their unique histories. As Siobhan Somerville points out, however, “ideologies of gender also, of course, shaped and were shaped by dominant constructions of race.” That is to say, in the late nineteenth century, racial assumptions were embedded in notions of gender and sexuality, just as much as gender assumptions constituted racial assumptions. Consequently, there is room to reevaluate Salome as part of a logic of racial and sexual exclusion that was often mutually reinforcing. An adjacent and even larger critical lacuna lies in the fact that very little work has been done to chart Salome’s afterlife within fin-de-siècle sexological and racial theory. It is therefore a fertile site for investigation. It appears that while representations of Salome were sometimes based on contemporaneous sexological and racial theories, her immense popularity amplified the ostensible veracity of these theories. Nowhere was this truer than in the case of Oscar Wilde’s Salomé. Not only did Wilde’s extravagant and elusive Oriental Salome appeal to sexological and racial theories on several registers, but his own notoriety as a “sexual deviant” encouraged theorists to see the play as evidence of his perversity. Initially, his play functioned as an exemplar for a range of sexually deviant behaviors, but over time, established opinion coalesced around the Salome trope. This mapping completed a closed feedback loop in which the very cultural artifacts that had found inspiration in contemporaneous sexological and racial theories were now being used as evidence to prove those same sexological and racial theories. This deeply intertwined
relationship between art and science speaks to the often contradictory and tautological epistemological foundation of early-twentieth-century sexological and racial pseudoscience. Furthermore, it reveals that many of the deductive empiricist pretentions of the burgeoning social sciences were, in fact, presumption and prejudice veiled in scientific jargon. While there is certainly nothing groundbreaking in claiming that pseudoscience was unscientific, the salient point is that in the case of Salome, constructions of race and gender circulated freely between art and science at the very moment that those fields actively tried to establish mutually exclusive discursive parameters. More substantially, this tendency persisted even after it appeared that art and science no longer shared a common language. In doing so, Salome generally, and Wilde’s Salome in particular, was to have a remarkably long afterlife, especially in sexological literature.

**Art, Sexology, and Racial Science in *Salomé***

By the end of the nineteenth century the story of Salome as recounted in the Gospels of Matthew (14: 6–11) and Mark (6: 22–28) had become barely recognizable. The nameless biblical girl, who was merely a pawn in the power struggle between Herod and Herodias, had become a fully developed lascivious and perverse femme fatale. While the story had changed with each retelling from the medieval period onward, the most drastic changes occurred during the nineteenth century when Salome was transfigured into a symbol of Semitic female perversion. Romantic, Realist, and Decadent artists and authors such as Jacob Grimm, Heinrich Heine, Gustave Flaubert, Gustave Moreau, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Stéphane Mallarmé had all been influences into the composite picture of Salome that Wilde created. In many ways, therefore, his rendering of Salome was not unique. Yet, due to the notoriety of the play, it is fair to say that Wilde’s version became a central node in an extensive network of Salome representations.

Beyond the artistic influences that shaped Wilde’s version, he was likely drawing from concurrent discussions about racial and sexological theories. Although it is hard to establish a direct textual link between Wilde’s text and that of the theorists, there are intriguing parallels. In fact, in 1918, nearly 25 years after the writing of the play, Lord Alfred Douglas contended that Wilde had been reading the sexological texts of Richard von Krafft-Ebing before he wrote *Salomé*. Neil McKenna has even suggested that the inspiration for *Salomé* comes from a case
study about a young girl suffering from hyperesthesia, an abnormal
desire for sexual gratification.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite a lack of concrete textual evidence linking Wilde to spe-
cific theorists prior to the production of the play, it is fair to say that
these discourses inflected the representation and reception of Salome.
After all, here was a spectacle in which a young woman is consciously
modeled on the \textit{belle juive} (the beautiful Jewess) whose incestuous
stepfather, sadistic mother, and her own hysterical desires result in the
murder of a Christian martyr, a murder which, moreover, is punctu-
ated with necrophilia. Beyond echoing major anxieties within racial
and sexological discourse, his play more specifically touched upon dis-
cussions of gender, sexuality, and race in three ways: the relationship
between the moon and Salome’s menstrual cycle; the conflation of
her Jewishness with perversity; and the conjunction of hysteria and
female sexual desire.

Throughout the play the moon functions as a continuous analog
to both the mood and Salome’s desire. In the beginning the moon’s
pallor is “like a woman rising from a tomb” and “has little
white doves for feet.”\textsuperscript{17} The parallel imagery of death and innocence
foreshadows Salome’s arrival; and when she arrives, she is described as
incredibly beautiful and pale, so much so that she is “like the shadow
of a white rose in a mirror of silver” (Wilde 1907, 3). The image sug-
gests an extreme pellucidity that defies basic physics. The shadow of
a white rose would still be dark, and, at the same time, a mirror, by
definition, cannot show a shadow. Salome is therefore in a transitive
state between light and darkness, innocence and experience, good and
evil.

The moon changes from white to amber when she first requests
to see Jokanaan, and initiates her transition from a state of inno-
cence to that of an experienced woman. Interestingly, Wilde is bor-
rowring several Flaubertian inventions here. First, his spelling of John
the Baptist’s name resonates with Flaubert, who changed the name
to Ioakanann to make it sound more Semitic.\textsuperscript{18} Second, in line with
Flaubert’s transformation, the lunar shift indicates that this Salome is
to be far more sexual than her biblical predecessor. More generally,
the change in the moon anticipates the discord that is about to occur.
Not too long after, the Syrian guard watching over the prophet stabs
himself to death. Meanwhile, Jokanaan prognosticates even more
doom and claims that “the moon shall become red like blood” (Wilde
1907, 43). His prophecy is confirmed when Salome is about to dance
in the puddle of blood left by the Syrian soldier. Herod exclaims that
the moon has turned “red as blood” and that the prophet “prophesized truly” (Wilde 1907, 52). The redness of the moon not only highlights Salome’s sensuality during the dance of the seven veils, but also foreshadows Jokanaan’s death.

The pattern of symbols that runs throughout the play, the moon, the blood, innocence, experience, sensuality, deviance, and death, becomes intelligible when read in connection with Salome’s menstrual cycle. The reddening of the moon coincides with both Salome’s menarche and her symbolic deflowering, because as she tells Jokanaan’s severed head in her final monologue, “I was a virgin, and thou didst take my virginity from me” (Wilde 1907, 65). Late-nineteenth-century sexology largely pathologized menstruation and female sexuality. Krafft-Ebing argued that menstruation and pregnancy “were common causes of mental and nervous disturbances.”¹⁹ He would even dedicate an entire monograph to these “disturbances” in *Psychosis Menstrualis* (1902).

Moreover, it also aligns with the views of Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who believed that menstruation was a root cause for both crime and lasciviousness. He assumed, as many other scientists did at the time, that a woman menstruating was the same as an animal in heat, and therefore it made her abnormally sexual.²⁰ In their 1893 work *La donna delinquente* (the criminal woman), he and his son-in-law, Guglielmo Ferrero, echo claims by other scientists that in “all excessively lascivious women menstruations are more prolonged or more repetitious and always more neglected.”²¹ This sexological connection between menstruation and aberration that Wilde plays upon underscores Salome’s abnormality. Not only is she an unnatural young woman, she is in an unnatural state.

Compounding this deviance are the Semitic traits Wilde attributes to her and the setting. In the opening of the play, there are descriptions of “an uproar” that is caused by “the Jews” who “are always like that” (Wilde 1907, 2). When Salome meets Jokanaan she identifies herself explicitly as the daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judaea. This, along with her “gilded eyes,” stresses her Jewishness (Wilde 1907, 19–20). In turn, Jokanaan calls her “Daughter of Babylon” and a “daughter of Sodom,” and directly associates her to famous pre-Christian examples of racial and sexual degeneracy (Wilde 1907, 19–20, 23). After she has danced the Oriental-sounding “Dance of the Seven Veils,” Herod connects the sensuality to her Jewishness, proclaiming, “O sweet and fair Salome, you who are fairer than all the daughters of Judea” (Wilde 1907, 54). Salome herself also conjures up her Jewishness while she is
holding Jokanaan’s severed head and lamenting, “Thou didst treat me as a harlot, as a wanton, me, Salome, daughter of Herodias, Princess of Judea” (Wilde 1907, 64). Pointedly, in every key sequence, the audience is reminded of Salome’s Jewishness. Furthermore, this Jewishness always comes to the fore in moments of racial degeneracy, be it obsessively desiring Jokanaan, dancing sensually for her stepfather, or holding a decapitated head.

Much of the negative stereotyping of Jews in these passages has direct parallels in popular anti-Semitic literature. By the middle of the nineteenth century a new racial science had emerged that categorized Jewishness not as a religious or cultural category, but as a race. As nations became increasingly racially self-identified, Jews, “the eternal outsiders,” were seen as degenerate, and therefore a dangerous presence within the racially homogeneous state. During this period, anti-Semitism became more reactionary and Jewish women, who had never figured heavily in anti-Jewish thought, started becoming the subjects of racial science. In this light, Nadia Valman lucidly argues that in a British context the Jewish woman “came to stand for national anxieties about racial decline and revival” (Valman 2007, 174). Symptomatic of these anxieties of degeneration was that Jewish women were increasingly seen as sexually perverse and dangerously irresistible for Christian men. For example, in La France juive (Jewish France) (1886), Édouard Drumont, the most influential French anti-Semite of the nineteenth century, argues that the Jewish women of the leisure class live in Paris as they do in the Orient. Befitting their disposition, they lounge about all day and do not suffer the same violent passions that affect Christian women who have fallen away from their faith, because Jewish women have no ideals, which is “characteristic of Semites.” Lower down on the social scale prostitution is of a particular Jewish provenance and Jewish women aim to “dishonor our [France’s] aristocracy.” Unsurprisingly, for the anti-Semites the sexual standards of Jewish women are much lower. Jacques de Biez, one of Drumont’s acolytes, makes this point more explicit in his La question juive (1886), by claiming that the biblical Judith was never really a virgin when she decapitated Holofernes; instead she only had a “Jewish virginity,” since after all she spent the night with Holofernes on several occasions while she hatched her plans (De Biez 1886, 365). For De Biez, this lasciviousness is compounded by the danger Jewish women have represented historically, listing “moribund charms of the beautiful Esther” and the murders of Judith, Delilah, and Deborah (De Biez
1886, 122). The biblical Jewess operates as a prototype for the modern femme fatale.

Beyond Salome’s sexual and racial otherness, her speech is also marked by hysterical and perverse traits. For a lead role, Salome has a relatively uneven stage presence. Though she is continuously onstage after her first entrance, she only speaks in fits and starts, and when she does so it wavers between short, repetitious lines, and highly wrought symbolic monologues. The switching back and forth between these two modes of expression highlights Salome’s emotional instability and incoherence. For example, when she first goes down to the cistern to see Jokanaan she repeats the phrase “speak to him,” three times, and implores Narraboth, with “You will do this thing for me” or a version thereof six times. Her speech turns hysterical when she is continuously rejected by Jokanaan, and she obsessively repeats the phrase “I will kiss thy mouth” ten times. This pattern continues after she dances for Herod and she tensely and repetitiously demands the head of Jokanaan eight consecutive times.

The repetitious nature of her utterances are reminiscent of the cases of hysteria documented by Jean-Martin Charcot. Through his studies in hysteria at the Salpêtrière Hospital, Charcot established a medical framework that categorized the movements of women’s bodies as either signs of illness or passion. In doing so, he gave medical credence to the view that a woman who exhibited emotional excess was hysterical. This expression of hysteria was then subsequently linked to degeneration, which controlled women’s bodies by labeling demure, subservient, and passive behavior as normal while seeing an active and assertive stance as abnormal, even racially inferior. He wrote of one patient during an “attack” of hystero-epilepsy that she gives “utterances to strange words, and seems prey to a moody disposition.” In similar fashion, Salome appears to be having an attack of hystero-epilepsy.

It is only when Herod accedes to her wish and orders Jokanaan’s execution that her speech returns. Yet when it does, it is as an orgiastic mélange of sadism and necrophilia. She is disappointed that he does not “cry out” and encourages the executioner to “strike, strike,” vicariously punishing Jokanaan for his rejection. Once the head is revealed she not only kisses its mouth, but she also bites it with her teeth, “as one bites a ripe fruit” (Wilde 1907, 62–63). The necrophilia and destruction have a number of artistic precedents. The former reflects something that is first found in Heine’s “Atta Troll” (1841). Meanwhile, Wilde quite explicitly borrowed Salome’s destructive
aspect from Huysmans’s *À rebours* (against nature) (1884), in which the Decadent par excellence Jean Des Esseintes rhapsodizes that “she [Salome] became, in a sense, the symbolic deity of indestructible Lechery, the goddess of immortal Hysteria,” adding that she is “the monstrous, indiscriminate, irresponsible, unfeeling Beast who, like the Helen of Antiquity, poisons everything that comes near her, everything that she touches” (Huysmans 2009, 46). The passage was one that Wilde often recited for pleasure, and, in it, Huysmans explicitly connects Salome with perversity.28 These artistic representations mirror theories of sexual deviance that posit hypersexuality as an inspiration to women to destroy and consume their partners.

Ultimately, the perverted and hysterical imagery of Salome kissing and devouring Jokanaan’s head speaks to a sexual obsession well outside the bounds of fin-de-siècle norms. In her closing monologue, by far the longest in the play, Salome loses her self-possession entirely and is fully entranced by the spectacle of Jokanaan’s severed head. She asks him to open his eyes, tells him that he cannot treat her, Salome, princess of Judea, like a harlot, and scorns him for not taking her virginity (Wilde 1907, 63–65).

The closing tableau is thus that of a young Jewish woman standing in a puddle of blood after having performed an erotic dance, kissing and biting the severed head of a Christian martyr who had refused to take her virginity. It is a closing image that above all else represents the culmination of a perverted orientalist sexuality that has been evident throughout the play. Consequently, Wilde has created a diametrical opposite to the idealized image of white Christian womanhood that sexology and race discourses sought continuously to define in scientific terms.

**Salomé’s Afterlives**

Wilde’s Salome was to be the most influential of the decadent movement. Based heavily on previous incarnations, he “conceived Salome in aesthetic terms.”29 Through this aesthetic reconceptualization, Salome became the central, fully developed character, and the play’s focus was now on a young woman’s perverse desires, rather than the power struggle between Herod and Herodias. The reason for the immense popularity of Wilde’s version of the play has been attributed to a number of factors, including the adaptability of the play, and later the dance, from high culture to popular culture,30 and also the
emancipatory quality of the “Dance of the Seven Veils” for women. Still, by far the most commonly accepted explanation is that the play’s illicit status and Wilde’s immense popularity and later notoriety due to his infamous trial, coupled with the celebrity and equally controversial status of the great Jewish actress Sarah Bernhardt, who was to play Salome, created enough groundswell and anticipation around the work to guarantee its early success.

In this light, the reception of the work was undoubtedly framed in sexological terms because the staging coincided with the most notorious sex trial of the decade, that of Wilde himself. Furthermore, what has often gone unremarked is that it also coincided with the most infamous racial trial of the century, that of Alfred Dreyfus. As a result, European audiences could follow the spectacle of legislated normalcy in the courthouse, while at the same time being treated to the obverse of that spectacle in the playhouse. Together these trials, informed by the sexological and racial literature of the period, circumscribed categories of sexuality, gender, and race. It is therefore scarcely surprising that Salomé irked early audiences.

Salome was representative of everything white Christian women were not supposed to be. Evidence that Salome struck this particular chord can be found in the racial and sexological texts written after the play’s production. Rather than merely being a decadent rewrite of a biblical tale twice removed, Salome becomes an exemplar of the very discourse that framed her as a character. Interestingly, this appropriation was far more prevalent within sexological discourses as opposed to racial discourses. This is particularly true because the Salome trope lent itself well to theories of sadism. The height of this appropriation occurred after the turn of the century and started to wane in the 1920s. By the 1930s, she was still an occasional reference point for a sadistic woman, but she had become increasingly marginal.

One of the first instances of a racial description of Salome’s depravity is found in Les Juifs algériens (the Algerian Jews) (1898) by Henri Garrot, an anti-Semitic screed thinly veiled as cultural and political history. In a chapter tellingly entitled “Femme de France et Femme de Judée” he lays out many of the manifest differences between French and Jewish women. He casts French Aryan women predictably as pure virgins, while Jewish women are prostitutes, who use their charm to further the hatreds and interests of their nation. An example of such a woman is “Salome, daughter of Herodias,” who “through her lascivious dancing excites the virility of her mother’s lover, and gives herself to the Tetrarch in order to obtain John’s head, who has resisted
the lugubrious desires of Herod’s mistress [Herodias].” Garrot’s description is a significant departure from the biblical text and actually coincides with Wilde’s account. Such a replacement suggests that the Irishman’s own account had started to supplant the original versions. Significantly, in Garrot’s version Herod not only has eyes for Salome, she is also his mistress, thus adding to her sexual depravity.

The racial thematics sketched out in Wilde’s version are amplified in Richard Strauss’s opera of the same name, which reintroduced the theatrical Salome to German-speaking audiences. Written as an “Orient- und Judenoper” (Oriental and Jewish Opera) it was more openly and unambiguously anti-Semitic than its predecessor. This is something reviewers picked up on. In an article in The Medical Times, the author claims that the opera features sadism and necrophilia while representing “a decadent period in the Jewish race,” imposing a broad generalization over an entire people and not just Herod’s court. Problematically, he also contends that Strauss took his cue from a “degenerate who was during his life a by-word among degenerates, a boy lover, who had descended to the depths of viliness.” This, despite the fact that Wilde had now been dead for nearly seven years, and that the opera was not Wilde’s, but Strauss’s.

Floating somewhere between sexology and racial science is criminal sexologist Erich Wulffen, who sees crime as psychosexually motivated. He first classes Salome among the adulterers as a “dämonisch Weib” in his Das Weib als Sexualverbrecherin (Woman as Sexual Criminal, 1923), but later, in Sexualspiegel von Kunst und Verbrechen (The Sexual Mirror of Art and Crime, 1928) he argues that “The work Salomé is a sexual drama. The degenerate eroticism of the heroine is now well established by modern science.” Wulffen’s reference to Salome’s “entartete” (degenerate) eroticism speaks to a general perversity, but also registers as a common anti-Semitic pejorative, inasmuch as degeneration was often associated with Jewishness. His observation that this sexual degeneracy is common knowledge among modern scientists speaks as much to the prevalence of that observation as it does to Wulffen’s lack of thoroughness. Moreover, his initial association of Salome with adultery, and then his later switch to degenerate sexuality, emphasize her flexibility as a container of perversion.

The sexological appropriation of Salome tended to be focused on her perceived sadism. Although it is hard to establish an exact timeline, Salome was seen as a sadist relatively soon after Wilde’s play. No doubt, such a link appeared natural, given that Wilde himself was on trial for sexually aberrant behavior. This appropriation was particularly
robust in Germany where Wilde, due to his perceived sexual deviance, was immensely popular. In fact, Sander Gilman points out that between 1900 and 1934 there were more Wilde publications in Germany than any other British author barring Shakespeare. Hence, for example, in Das Sexualleben Unserer Zeit in seinen Beziehungen zur Modernen Kultur (The Sexual Life of Our Time and Its Relationship with Modern Culture, 1908), Irwin Bloch claims that “we observe sadistic love in Oscar Wilde’s Salomé,” without any further qualification. Meanwhile, the prominent sexologist and later gay rights activist Magnus Hirschfeld claims that some women are “like Salome” because they have “the desire to kiss those dead lips which rejected her while alive.” This expression of “Liebeshäß” (love-hatred), which comes from the “egoistischen Trieb” (egotistical drive), was understood by Hirschfeld to be an example of sadism. In the minds of many, Salome was the very definition of a sadist.

The importance of this inference cannot be underestimated. In using an entirely fictional character as representative of sexual pathology, these sexologists were constructing a normative vision of female sexuality based on prevailing prejudice. On occasion, this version of Salome even becomes detached from her creator, Wilde. In the misogynistic Die Sexuelle Untreue der Frau (The Sexual Unfaithfulness of Woman, 1921), in which Enoch Kisch spells out women’s innate desire to commit adultery, he claims that “the biblical Salome is an example of sadistic sexual lust.” This is, of course, inaccurate. There was no biblical Salome; Kisch is confusing the biblical tale of an unnamed princess with Wilde’s creation. The fictional version of Salome has thereby supplanted the biblical version, which purports to be historical.

Perhaps the most extensive treatment of Salome and sadism is by Isador Coriat. In a 1914 issue of the reputable Psychoanalytic Review that also features a piece by Carl Jung, Coriat lays out the relationship among Wilde, Salome, and sadism in his article, “The Sadism in Oscar Wilde’s ‘Salomé.’ ” He argues that Salome is a sadist because her creator Wilde was a homosexual, and therefore had sadistic tendencies. Thus, in viewing Salome, the spectator is treated to a perfect example of sadism. He explains:

Wilde, however, with his insight into sexual perversions and into the polymorphous sexual instinct of man, because he was himself a sufferer, made an innovation in his dramatic treatment of the legend as a sadistic episode. In his tragedy of Salomé, he portrays the daughter of Herodias
as a sadist and her desire for the head of John the Baptist is not for religious or political revenge, but to fulfill her sadistic desires.\textsuperscript{43}

Wilde’s own sexual history is therefore quintessential in interpreting the text of \textit{Salomé}. Curiously, Coriat does not touch upon the fact that Wilde fundamentally changed the story, only that he treated it as a sadistic episode. Accordingly, he argues for the inevitable biographical influence on the creation of the work, but fails to see that Wilde also had artistic goals in mind in shaping the text. It is a convenient interpretation of the mastery an artist has over his or her work: sexual desires reveal themselves inevitably, artistic motivations do so inconsequentially. This bifurcation allows Coriat to classify both Wilde and Salome as perverse without according the author any agency. As such, the two become relatively independent subjects, the perverse author and his perverted subject matter.

It is a pattern other critics follow. As Michael Monahan points out in his 1926 literary critical work \textit{Nemesis}, “Wilde connoisseurs prize it [\textit{Salomé}] for the sadistic suggestion that permeates it and find therein curious points of comparison with his darker personal legend.”\textsuperscript{44} Salome becomes a clinical representation of perversion both independent from and constitutive of the author. By extension, the people who enjoyed these types of productions must have some sort of innate perverse desire in them.

Salome’s perverse sexuality is also highlighted from a psychoanalytic angle. Though sexology and psychoanalysis were two independent but related discourses, the example is instructive. The Freudian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Stekel uses Salome as a means of diagnosing a patient in his \textit{Onanie und Homosexualität: Die Homosexuelle Neurose} (\textit{Onanism and Homosexuality: The Homosexual Neuroses}, 1921). He documents a long case study about a “homosexual” with sadistic tendencies. The unidentified patient recounts a long list of same sex, sadistic, and otherwise nonnormative acts, which include masturbating five to ten times daily,\textsuperscript{45} being aroused to the point of climax while watching his cook choke a chicken to death, and performing cunnilingus on his sleeping sister at age 15 years, to name a few (Stekel 1934, 209–10). The patient also mentions that he was interested in transvestism. When he cross-dressed he pretended to be Salome, and that his teachers were the prophets whose “cold severed heads” he kissed (Stekel 1934, 252). Importantly, the patient himself notes that for him Salome is a fantasy of transvestism “Verkleidungstrieb (crossdressing) desire.” This interpretation is entirely ignored by Stekel. Later when the patient has a dream about the year 4005, Stekel concludes that
“45 is the opus number of one of his favorite opera scores, the Salomé of Richard Strauss.” He then goes on to add that, “The Salomé of Strauss and a previous dream lead us to his sadistic trends. It becomes progressively clearer that his aboriginal sadism was extraordinarily great” (Stekel 1934, 270). The series of speculations here is highly problematic. After all, the number is not 45, but 4005. Despite the patient’s early identification with Salome as a transvestite, Stekel sees this as an example of sadism. Salome is thereby transformed from an example of sadism often cited by sexologists into a tool for psychoanalytic interpretation. Such appropriation of Salome, of course, ignores the fact that Strauss’s Salome, like that of Wilde, is an entirely fictional entity.

For Stekel, Salome functions as a fairly flexible category. In his voluminous Sadismus und Masochismus (sadism and masochism) (1925), he recounts the tale of a certain Viktor A., who, working as a gravedigger, regularly took home corpses and body parts for sexual gratification. In one case, he brought home the head of a 13-year-old girl, which he regularly kissed. While speaking of this pathology, Stekel remarks offhandedly in an endnote, “One thinks involuntarily of Oscar Wilde’s Salomé, who also kisses the prophet’s head.” The leaps of association that Stekel makes here are almost more improbable than his previous account of Salome. While the cases share some analogy, it is hard to maintain that a gravedigger using the decapitated head of a 13-year-old for continuous sexual gratification is similar to Wilde’s decadent drama; the former being a gruesome reality and the latter an entirely fictionalized account of a biblical story.

**Conclusion**

Stekel’s conflation of fiction and reality speaks to the close and complicated interrelationship among sexology, racial science, and decadent literature. To be sure, Salome was one of several demonic women, and these sexological texts are littered with similar examples of cruel Cleopatras, treacherous Delilahs, and murderous Judiths. Wilde’s particular version of Salome was perhaps preeminent among these, and therefore forms an excellent example of the afterlife of decadent literature and art in pseudoscientific racial and sexological theories. In fact, she will continue to appear in works in the thirties and forties, though not nearly with the same frequency.

Interestingly, her appearances after the First World War are limited to sexological works, while her function for racial theories was confined to the turn of the century. This divergence should not be
entirely unsurprising. As Gilman points out, anti-Semitic discourse significantly shifted after the First World War, and to National Socialist racial theorists like Hans Günther, women like Salome did not appear particularly “Jewish,” because her feminine qualities predominated over the Jewish ones. This is not to say that the Nazis did not traffic in many of the same stereotypes about Jewish women as their late-nineteenth-century forebears. To be sure, the Nazi regime actively cast Jewish women as aggressive and lascivious in criminal proceedings regarding crimes of racial mixing. Rather, the categories of Jewishness and femininity had bifurcated into separate categories.

Salomania, therefore, represented a unique moment in history that saw the intersection of an emerging sexology and race theory coalesce with decadent art. For a brief, but concentrated moment, there was a fluid exchange of ideas circulating between these different discourses. Uncovering this exchange, and the interdependent histories that frame these works, reveals the often unstable and capricious epistemological foundations of the early social and psychological sciences. The porous walls between these discourses made it hard to separate science from art and fact from fiction.

Notes


11. Once again, I would be remiss if I did not mention the work of Gilman, Davison, and Bergman-Carton in this respect. While their work does speculate about a reciprocal relationship between Salome and sexological and racial representations of women and, in particular, Jewish women, due to their different scholarly objectives, they do not trace its wider impact on sexual and racial discourse.


13. Heine still casts Herodias as the main culprit, but, diverging from the biblical account, she kisses John the Baptist’s severed head.

14. Gustave Moreau’s painting Salomé (1876), undoubtedly “inaugurated the late nineteenth century’s feverish exploration of every possible visual detail expressive of this young lady’s hunger for St. John the Baptist’s head.” Dijkstra, Idols of Perversity, p. 380.

15. Critics have speculated that Wilde first conceived of the idea of Salome after hearing Mallarmé read a passage of his poem Hérodiade out loud. While Wilde in all likelihood conceived of his own work before he heard the poem, the highly symbolic and dense language of Salomé certainly echoes that of Hérodiade and forms a linguistic complement to the sensual Orientalist imagery.

16. N. McKenna (2005) The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde (New York: Basic Books), p. 165. This claim is somewhat problematic since an English version of Krafft-Ebing did not appear until 1892, though to be fair, Wilde was fairly competent in German by that time. Nevertheless, Douglas, by then an enemy of Wilde, was giving testimony against him. It is possible he could have fabricated this detail to make Wilde sound more salacious.

17. O. Wilde (1907) Salome, A Tragedy in One Act, Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde, with Sixteen Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley, trans. A. B. Douglas (London: Lane, the Bodley Head), p. 1. The debate over Salomé and its translation is far from over. Indeed, it is one of those texts for which there really is no “original version.” Hence, despite the problems with Alfred Lord Douglas’s text, it is being used here because it was the version which contemporary readers would have read.


21. “in tutte le donne eccessivamente lascive mestruazioni più prolungate o più ripetute e sempre più abbondanti.” Lombroso, La donna delinquente, p. 373. The translation is mine, as are all translations from Italian, French, and German that follow, unless otherwise indicated.
22. Bergman-Carton, “Negotiating the Categories.” Bergman-Carton is speaking of France in particular, but her argument could equally well be applied to Germany and Austria-Hungary, both nations that were facing rising nationalist pressures. This trend is not quite as visible in Great Britain.
42. “die biblische Salome ist ein Beispiel für die sadistische geschlechtliche Lust.” E. H. Kisch (1921) *Die Sexuelle Untreue der Frau* (Bonn: Marrus and Webers), p. 68.
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“For the Strong-Minded Alone”: Evolution, Female Atavism, and Degeneration in Aubrey Beardsley’s *Salomé*

*Gülu Çakmak*

**Introduction**

In 1894, The Bodley Head of John Lane and Elkin-Mathews in London, and Copeland and Day in Boston published the first English edition of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act*, accompanied by illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley.¹ The *Art Journal* described it as “a book for the strong-minded alone, for it is terrible in its weirdness and suggestions of horror and wickedness.”²

Stepdaughter and niece of Tetrarch Herod Antipas, daughter of incestuous and adulterous Herodias, Wilde’s Salome is a teenage seductress who passionately pursues Jokanaan—Saint John the Baptist. Rejected by the saint who preaches the coming of Christ, Salome seduces Herod, and has Jokanaan executed. The play ends with Salome finally possessing him, kissing the lips of the freshly severed head. Herod, horrified, orders her to be killed on the spot by the palace guards. When Wilde decided to write a play on Salome, the theme had been extensively treated by a number of writers and artists in France and Germany.³

Initial public reaction in England must have deeply pleased Wilde and Beardsley: one woman who could not “bear” *Salomé* pleaded to be allowed to return a copy of Wilde’s play, “as the pages are still
Wilde’s attempts to stage the play in England were met with stern resistance, and the London Lord Chamberlain’s office banned the play due to its profane depiction of biblical characters. Beardsley’s illustrations exacerbate the play’s thematic association of female libido with death and destruction. Upon turning the cover of Salomé, even before reading the text, Beardsley’s viewers encounter a world laden with physical deformation, explicit expressions of sexual desire, gender ambiguity, and even mutilation. An armless Venus term, whose nipples and navel are shaped like eyes, welcomes the viewer on the title page. A snakelike woman ensnares a figure whose gender remains ambiguous in The Peacock Skirt. In The Stomach Dance, a grotesque pseudo-medieval jester, presumably accompanying Salome’s dance with his instrument, sticks his tongue out and looks straight at the viewer, not hiding his erect penis. In The Dancer’s Reward, Salome reaches out for the head that is presented to her on a shield, while dipping her finger into a pool of blood, her teeth glimmering against the darkness of her open mouth. The Climax shows Salome holding the severed head in her hands, uncannily soaring in the haze of her ecstasy, as if levitated by the intensity of her pleasure.

When analyzed against the background of contemporaneous scientific discourses on evolution, sexual differentiation, and pathological female atavism, the world as imagined by Beardsley—“terrible,” “weird,” “wicked,” as attested to by the Art Journal review—can be shown to have been in alignment with a novel definition of nature that established the disquieting alterity of the female as its foundation. In this essay I demonstrate the ways in which Beardsley, inspired by nineteenth-century scientific texts and illustrations by naturalists, criminal anthropologists, and others who tended to define woman in terms of evolutionary reversion, depicted the biblical Judean princess Salome as a harbinger of pathological atavism and degeneration.

Salomé, A One-Act Tragedy by Oscar Wilde

Together with the title page, table of contents, and the tailpiece, as well as three more original drawings that did not make their way to the first edition in 1894, Beardsley prepared 16 illustrations for the Salomé project. The placement of illustrations in the book very rarely suggests a direct relationship to the text, and identities of figures are often ambiguous and left to the viewer’s study of the text as well as the other drawings. “Neither book decorations, nor book illustrations, they are a series of fantasies suggested by the theme of the play”
was the verdict of the anonymous reviewer for the journal *Modern Art* in 1894.\textsuperscript{9} That Beardsley did not intend to contain this world at a safe distance within the temporal and geographical boundaries of the biblical narrative is clear from the salient presence of disjunctive contemporary elements—caricaturized portraits of Oscar Wilde in no less than three plates (*The Woman in the Moon, A Platonic Lament, Enter Herodias*); women’s fashion (*The Black Cape, The Toilette of Salomé*); furniture; and even books by contemporary French writers in Salome’s boudoir (*The Toilette of Salomé I & II*).\textsuperscript{10}

The centrality of an irreducible ambiguity and indeterminacy of meaning in Beardsley’s art has become a common trope in contemporary scholarship.\textsuperscript{11} Recent scholarship on Beardsley’s Salome illustrations recognizes a strategic manipulation of the subversive power of ambiguity, one which offers possibilities for political agency.\textsuperscript{12} The collapse of such categories as male/female or normal/pathological noted by many Beardsley scholars in fact took place against the background of a vibrant scientific discourse on evolution and sexual differentiation. In the next two sections, I briefly give an account of mid- to late-nineteenth-century scientific theories of sexual differentiation, and show the increasing prominence of theories that defined women as inherently atavistic, with a propensity for pathological degeneration. In the final section, I offer an analysis of some of the Salome drawings in order to demonstrate Beardsley’s complicity with mainstream scientific tropes of the period: women are trapped in structures of nature, and are functions of evolutionary mechanisms. What is normal as well as what is pathological are equally predetermined, and there is no space for political agency.\textsuperscript{13}

**Nature, Evolution, and Sexual Differentiation**

Taking different inflections in various fields of empirical research, by the 1890s, a few basic scientific concepts had attained, if not universal acceptance, then at least mainstream recognition. The first of these, famously formulated by Charles Darwin in *The Origin of Species* (1859), was “natural selection,” a process of variation and adaptation that sought to explain how all the present species in the world, seemingly so radically different from one another, had in fact all descended from a single ancestor.\textsuperscript{14} Upon observing a number of structures and instincts that developed only in males of certain species, Darwin hypothesized another mechanism of variation in nature referred to as
sexual selection, which he expanded on in *The Descent of Man* (1871).

Such characteristics that evolved in the history of a species only in the male through sexual selection were purely ornamental, and must have evolved merely to successfully “allure or excite the female.”

The postulation that males and females of various animal species developed differently as a result of sexual selection and gendered division of labor led to conclusions that exceeded the boundaries of biological difference. Darwin qualified such differences in terms of cognitive disparities that were indicative of a hierarchy of evolution. Stating that sexual selection seems to have had more of an impact on the male than the female, Darwin argued that “[t]hroughout the animal kingdom, when the sexes differ from each other in external appearance, it is the male which, with rare exceptions, has been chiefly modified; for the female still remains more like the young of her own species, and more like the other members of the same group. The cause of this seems to lie in the males of almost all animals having stronger passions than the females” (Darwin 1871, 263).

Darwin makes a subtle argument here: the reason why the secondary sexual characters were seen more frequently in the male than in the female was not only because the male was more passionate and eager to reproduce, but also because, inherently, the male was more open to, and adept at, transformation and development (Darwin 1871, 266). Darwin interpreted the adaptability of the male in terms of a hierarchical distinction between the two sexes: “Man differs from woman in size, bodily strength, hairiness, etc., as well as in mind, in the same manner as do the sexes of many mammals” (Darwin 1871, 13). Darwin’s formulation of an inherently gendered nature of the evolutionary hierarchy—that the male inherently had more propensity to change than the female—ascribed to the male a superior position on the evolutionary ladder.

Darwin was not the inventor of the term “secondary sexual difference,” neither was he the first one to associate the female with the young of the species, setting her off from the male. John Hunter, in *Observations on Certain Parts of the Animal Economy* (1786), had also observed a transformation in the male at a certain stage in its life that led to the development of secondary sexual characteristics, such as the male’s superior strength and copious body hair, as well as voice in the case of the human species. However, as opposed to Darwin, Hunter did not qualify the secondary sexual characteristics observed in males as a sign of higher development. Rather, he defined a set of “originary characteristics of an animal” common to both sexes, and referred to physical marks of sexual differentiation as “superadditions” (Hunter 1786, 45).
Anatomical differences between the two sexes, highlighted by earlier writers such as Hunter, went through a fantastic transformation in the work of scientists in the second half of the nineteenth century: sexual differentiation became nothing less than a yardstick to measure not only the difference between the male and the female, but also a mechanism to account for the male European as a species unto itself, more evolved than its sexual and racial Others. Carl Vogt, for instance, argued that the difference between the male and the female was so substantial that, in some animals, including the humans, the two sexes could be categorized as two separate species. French phrenologist Gustave Le Bon—described by Stephen Jay Gould as the “chief misogynist of [phrenologist Paul] Broca’s school”—maintained that even in most civilized societies, a notable proportion of the female population had skulls that were more similar to that of the gorilla than to that of the more evolved human male. In 1886, Richard von Krafft-Ebing asserted this truism as fact in his *Psychopathia Sexualis*: “The higher the anthropological development of the race, the stronger these contrasts between man and woman, and vice versa.”

What we observe in Vogt, Krafft-Ebing, and Le Bon is characteristic of the dominant discourse of the second half of the nineteenth century: woman, seen as less evolved than man, was therefore considered much closer to the ancestral species from which humanity had derived. She embodied primitive forms and was the carrier of old practices: both in her body and mind, she belonged to an earlier stage in human evolution, one which had been surpassed by the more evolved male. “Just as, in respect of morals, woman is the conservator of old customs and usages, of traditions, legends, and religion,” suggested Carl Vogt, “so in the material world she preserves primitive forms, which but slowly yield to the influences of civilisation... In the same manner the woman preserves, in the formation of the head, the earlier stage from which the race or tribe has been developed, or into which it has relapsed. Hence, then, it is partly explained the fact, that the inequality of the sexes increases with the progress of civilisation” (Vogt 1864, 82). The body of the female was seen as a repository of primeval forms—forms from which the evolving male dissociated himself speedily.

**Atavism, Pathology, and Degeneration**

The notion that physical rudiments of earlier stages of evolution could be contained in present forms was central to Darwin’s evolutionary theory. If science could empirically demonstrate that the present form
of the human species still kept a physical record of the earlier stages of the evolution in the body of each and every individual, then it would be possible to prove the hypothesis that current species had evolved from earlier, less complex ones (Darwin 1871, 3, 9–32). In Darwin’s theory, atavistic reversion was not inherently negative: on the contrary, it was an integral part of evolution, for this principle proved that the present structures of current species had their roots in earlier forms (Darwin 1871, 117–25).

French psychiatrist Bénédict Augustin Morel established an alternative account of reversion, defining biological degeneration as a specifically pathological variation from the norm. Two years prior to Darwin’s The Origin of Species, Morel had published his Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladives (Treatise on Physical, Intellectual and Moral Degeneration of the Human Species), in which he described degeneracy as a “pathological deviation from the primitive or normal type of humanity.” Morel’s self-assigned task was to present a system that discovered natural laws in which moral categories of degeneration were explained as biological malformations. According to Morel, degeneracy was a pathological state, and could be inherited. One other influential concept proposed by Morel was what he called the “physical stigmata” of degeneracy: those who were inflicted with biological degeneration displayed material symptoms visible to the discerning, informed eye.

One of the consequences scientists drew from Darwin’s theory of atavistic reversion, in combination with Morel’s notion of pathological degeneration, was that if physical traces of earlier stages of evolution lingered on in a latent state, it was equally possible not only that atavistic traits could reappear, but also that such a reappearance could be a symptom of evolutionary regression. The unidirectional movement from a primitive, uncivilized state to an evolved one attained the status of norm, and, as Max Nordau pithily argued in Degeneration in 1892, anything that deviated from it was declared abnormal and pathological. If these deeply coded primitive forms could then emerge as biological degeneration under the right circumstances, and their physical symptoms recognized within the body, then scientists could claim a role for themselves in safeguarding the progressive thrust of human evolution.

One of the most important self-proclaimed missions of science emerged as an empirical demonstration of the physical stigmata that symptomized biological degeneracy, in an effort to delineate the
boundaries that differentiated the healthy European male from his Others. It was in the work of Cesare Lombroso, an Italian criminal anthropologist, that the most influential systematization of pathological atavism as a means of placing science at the service of maintaining social order was attempted. Lombroso’s notion of a “born criminal” sought to systematically account for biological roots of criminality, with the umbrella term “crime” serving to define a variety of physical and behavioral deviations from the norm as represented by the healthy European male. According to Lombroso, a born criminal was “an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals.” However, while criminal man constituted an altogether different species of human being from the normative, healthy, fully evolved male, earlier notions of secondary sexual difference that described woman as lagging behind man and constituting a separate species colored the conclusion reached by criminologists. Lombroso, in *The Female Offender* coauthored with Guglielmo Ferrero, argued that each and every woman—even a healthy, “civilized” one—carried kernels of crime within her. A perfect illustration of hegemonic patriarchal discourse in its fin-de-siècle medico-criminological incarnation, *The Female Offender* offered an account of the emergence of criminal behavior in women. The authors claimed to have quantified women’s biological propensity to crime by painstakingly measuring physical features of women criminals. In arguing that atavistic traits could predominate and reverse the evolution of the human species more easily in women than men, Lombroso and Ferraro took their cue from naturalists and phrenologists, such as Vogt, Broca, and Le Bon, and explained their anthropometric findings by reiterating common tropes about the passive, derivative, and unintelligent nature of women as scientific facts.

In a characteristic chapter entitled “The Born Criminal,” the authors argued that a woman, any ordinary woman, had two specific kernels of vice that could turn into criminal action: “a normal woman is less sensitive to pain than a man,” and, repeating a trope we have encountered as early as in John Hunter, “women have many traits in common with children.” Distinct from their understanding of criminality in men as the consequence of anomalous biological traits not found in ordinary men, Lombroso and Ferrero located an uncanny predator lurking inside each and every woman, waiting for the right conditions to launch a full-scale evolutionary reversal. Under the right circumstances, Lombroso and Ferrero went on to explain, it was but a short leap for a woman to transition from a
natural lack of sensitivity to an abnormal “lack of compassion, and consequently to cruelty” (Lombroso and Ferrero 1895, 150–51). Similarly, as childlike adults, women’s “moral sense is deficient . . . they are revengeful, jealous, inclined to vengeances of a refined cruelty” (Lombroso and Ferrero 1895, 151). This criminal otherness lurking in a woman was normally subdued, thanks to her passive, submissive nature “neutralised by piety, maternity, want of passion, sexual coldness, by weakness and an undeveloped intelligence.” Every woman carried her radical alterity and the threat of evolutionary regression within her:

But when a morbid activity of psychical centres intensifies the bad qualities of women, and induces them to seek relief in evil deeds; when piety and maternal sentiments are wanting, and in their place are strong passions and intensely erotic tendencies, much muscular strength and a superior intelligence for the conception and execution of evil, it is clear that the innocuous semi-criminal present in the normal woman must be transformed into a born criminal more terrible than any man. (Lombroso and Ferrero 1895, 151)

What the authors offered in this paragraph was a definitive list of atavistic traits in a woman: intense erotic urges, physical overdevelopment, and high intelligence. Declared to be unnatural in a fully evolved woman, their presence indicated that an ancestral trait—which had been surmounted in the ordinary evolutionary process—somehow found an escape route and became expressive. If, in the process of evolution, women had become the feminine, maternal, pious, sexually frigid, and unintelligent creatures that they were, Lombroso and Ferrero assured their readers, it was because evolutionary development had, to a large extent, repressed the qualities listed above.

**Aubrey Beardsley’s Salomé: Female Atavism, Normal and Pathological**

In the *Salomé* drawings, Beardsley gives visual terms to scientific tropes of atavism inherent to female sexuality. Of the ten full-page drawings illustrating the 1894 edition of Wilde’s *Salomé, The Peacock Skirt* (Figure 10.1) is the first. Here we see two figures in conversation, commonly assumed to represent Salome and Narraboth, the captain of the guard at Herod’s palace. Wilde’s reader is given to understand that this young Syrian man has come under Salome’s spell: showing signs of a prolonged trancelike state, he cannot peel his eyes away from...
her. He imagines himself to be in love, and will eventually commit suicide before the end of the play. Salome, obsessed with the idea of seeing Jokanaan kept prisoner in a cistern on the grounds of the palace, is not interested in Narraboth. In *The Peacock Skirt*, Salome slithers like a snake toward her prey, in an endeavor to convince Narraboth to bring her the prisoner.

Chris Snodgrass interprets *The Peacock Skirt*’s Salome as a figure whose ontological oscillation between male and female succeeds in eschewing established norms and collapsing gender categories. Snodgrass also traces elements of “the self-fertilizing solipsism of the hermaphrodite” in the same drawing (Snodgrass 1989, 32). According to Snodgrass, the amalgamation of masculine and feminine elements in the figure of Salome transgresses boundaries of femininity, and leaves the discerning viewer with a definitive sense of epistemological uncertainty, subverting “the smooth logic of traditional categories and associations” (Snodgrass 1989, 33).
Snodgrass’s observations of two major elements of the figure on the left, namely, its combination of sperm and ova imagery in the tail of the peacock dress, as well as its reference to self-fertilization, carry a different message when viewed in the context of evolutionist discourse of the time. Such an indeterminate oscillation of categories does not necessarily lead to epistemological uncertainty and subversion, but instead highlights the figure of Salome as an atavistic female showing traits of regressive virility: “for what we look for most in the female is femininity, and when we find the opposite in her we conclude as a rule that there must be some anomaly. And in order to understand the significance and the atavistic origins of this anomaly, we have only to remember that virility was one of the special features of the savage woman.”

Beardsley gives palpable form to the trope of the inherently atavistic woman reiterated by scientists such as Vogt, Lombroso, George Romanes, and others. A potential to regression lies inside even the healthiest woman. Of course, Salome is not a healthy woman, according to the standards of Beardsley’s period. As an unmarried teenage girl, her experience of sexual desire, let alone her single-minded lust, was abnormal, and, as such, a pathological symptom. Salome’s sinuous movement in *The Peacock Skirt* is the manifestation of a type of behavior scientists associated with masculinity in the second half of the nineteenth century: this is how a sperm moves. Moreover, higher up the ladder of evolution, motility became an exclusive property of spermatozoa, while the female egg was characterized as sluggish and passive (Campbell 1891, 15). In its developed state, the female cell, once inseminated, nurtured the growing embryo—that was its essential task (Campbell 1891, 11). However, there was another account that linked reproduction to nutrition: one theory, addressing the question why monosexual organisms eventually became dimorphic in the course of evolution, separating as male and female, postulated that it was hunger that motivated one cell to devour another. Eugene Talbot claimed that “[t]he process of conjugation is a special form of nutrition” (Talbot 1898, 41–42). Hence, violation and death were thought to underlie reproduction: it was only when one cell was completely devoured by another that life could propagate itself. Therefore, Salome’s sinuous approach toward Narraboth is motivated by a desire to devour. Her hunger is that of a malnourished sperm, insofar as sperm cells are still motivated by “hunger” in their quest for a well-nourished female, in sexually differentiated organisms (Talbot 1898, 42).
Just as motility and hunger were described as fundamental characteristics of the sperm, the instinct to move, grasp, and hold on was also described as the primary trait of the male. In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin explained the emergence of a specific set of prehensile organs in the male as a consequence of the evolutionary process of sexual selection: “When the male has found the female he sometimes absolutely requires prehensile organs to hold her...The males of many oceanic crustaceans have their legs and antennae modified in an extraordinary manner for the prehension of the female” (Darwin 1871, 248). Akin to Darwin’s male crustacean, Salome’s antennae-hair strands reach out blindly, trying to grasp at something, anything. These prehensile organs are doubly pathological: not only does she demonstrate sexual instincts associated with masculinity, but in demonstrating physical traits associated with animals with prehensile organs, she also recedes from humanity, and even regresses to an earlier stage in the history of the species by climbing down the ladder of evolution. Even if she is not quite a crustacean, the unnatural activity of her hair seems to reflect the atavistic resurgence of a time when eyebrows functioned as antennae. In *The Descent of Man*, in a section in which he discussed the rudimentary organs that were not of any functional use, and were thus clearly vestiges of earlier stages one’s ancestors had passed in the evolution, Darwin claimed to trace in those with unnaturally long eyebrows an atavistic reappearance of such long-discarded traits (Darwin 1871, 24–25). As Darwin explains it, the higher one goes on the ladder of evolution, the hands became the exclusive organs of prehension, while the feet became specialized in support and locomotion, according to “the principle of the division of physiological labor” (Darwin 1871, 136). The prehensile gestures of Salome’s hair exceed this definition of a mere rudimentary organ, and suggest an active state of atavistic reversion: the hair remembers its long-discarded function as one of the organs of touch.

It is only in comparison to other drawings in the series, as well as in relation to Wilde’s text, that the true extent of the malice of Salome’s pathological atavism is revealed. Another illustration, *The Eyes of Herod* (Figure 10.2), has much in common with *The Peacock Skirt*. In these two drawings, Beardsley employs a certain visual tool to reveal the “morbid activity” referred to by Lombroso and Ferrero that takes place in Salome’s “psychical centres”: stippling. Small dots encircling Salome’s body and head, especially her eyes, are minute outward signs of an otherwise internal process. Here, Beardsley’s art proves to be superior in diagnosing and visualizing the mysterious inner workings
of female atavism, in comparison with the limitations of Lombroso and Ferrero’s anthropomorphic technique. While the two criminologists had to confess that their research failed to identify any distinct physiognomic signs of regression and degeneracy separating female criminals of passion, that is, prostitutes, from ordinary women—for the simple reason that according to the evolutionary law, prostitutes had to remain beautiful and attractive to remain in existence—Beardsley succeeds in providing a physical form that externalizes this invisible internal process (Lombroso and Ferrero 1895, 147).

The small dots coagulating to form concentric circles show Salome caught red handed by Beardsley in the act of “conception and execution of evil” in the words of Lombroso and Ferrero (1895, 151). These uncanny and blasphemous halos encircle not only Salome, but also Narraboth’s eyes in The Peacock Skirt. Once Beardsley applies the same stipple effect to the figure of Narraboth, he develops an
ingeniously economical and subtle way to make the viewer understand that the enamored soldier is in a delusional trancelike state, bewitched by Salome. Indeed, the extent of Narraboth’s delusion is superbly shown in the disjunction between his description of what he sees in Salome in Wilde’s text, and the creature Beardsley shows us. In the play, the young Syrian describes Salome’s hands as “little white hands [which] are fluttering like doves that fly to their dovecots. They are like white butterflies.” Narraboth projects virginal feminine innocence upon what the viewer sees in Beardsley’s drawing as a bestial creature. A blind fascination draws Narraboth to Salome in *The Peacock Skirt*, a fascination that threatens to devour him.

Looking at *The Peacock Skirt* and *The Eyes of Herod* one after the other reveals thematic as well as formal continuities between the two images. The careful viewer discerns that the same Salome shown from the back in *The Peacock Skirt* is revealed frontally in *The Eyes of Herod*. This formal continuity in Beardsley’s images hints at a recurring theme in Wilde’s text: both plates depict those moments in the play in which Salome makes a conscious decision to manipulate a male interlocutor to lead her to Jokanaan, the object of her lust. In the earlier scene with Narraboth, Salome’s recognition of and decision to take advantage of the young soldier’s weakness toward her becomes evident when she bribes him with intimations of future favors: “Thou wilt do this thing for me, tomorrow when I pass in my litter beneath the gateway of the idolsellers, I will let fall for thee a little flower, a little green flower” (Wilde 1907, 15). Similarly, Salome gives away her manipulative intentions to the discerning reader when she suddenly acknowledges Herod’s sexual advances for the first time, having resisted him multiple times until that point in the play: “Will you indeed give me whatsoever I shall ask, Tetrarch?” (Wilde 1907, 49). In line with Lombroso and Ferrero’s conviction that a woman in the grip of atavistic reversal shows signs of an unnatural degree of intelligence specifically geared toward evil and cruelty, Wilde and Beardsley reveal Salome as a vicious plotter possessed by a monstrous carnal desire.

Viewing Beardsley’s depiction of Salome against the background of contemporaneous science demonstrates the artist’s ultimate complicity with, rather than definitive subversion of, the period’s medico-criminal and evolutionist tropes of female sexuality. In her always-already atavistic normalcy as well as pathological regressions, Salome signifies the nonhuman and menacing otherness of natural processes. Even in her pathological degeneration, she is trapped: she is an agent of nature,
and nothing more. Her virile characteristics are physical markers of evolutionary reversal. Her carnal urges and intelligence are harbingers of death for the masculine subject, and moreover represent regression for the entire species. In such an overdetermined economy, there is no place for a woman to take on the position of an enunciative subject: the traits associated with femininity always register under the hierarchical dualism that casts the woman as the embodiment of an irreducible alterity to the masculine norm. If in Beardsley’s menacing world the atavistic woman’s bestial otherness reigns supreme, it is merely to sustain the hegemonic masculine economy of representation by contributing yet another episode to the phantasmagoric imagination of the female Other.

Notes

1. Aubrey Beardsley’s mature period as an artist is usually considered to comprise a six-year period beginning in 1892, which was brought to an end by his premature death from tuberculosis in 1898 (H. C. Marillier [1899] The Early Work of Aubrey Beardsley [London and New York: John Lane, The Bodley Head, pp. 4–5). The artist was 21 years old when his designs appeared for the first time in print in February 1893 in Pall Mall Budget Magazine, only a short time after he had definitively come to devote himself to art while still working as a clerk at an insurance company in London, during which period he had befriended key artists of the period such as Edward Burne-Jones and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. See R. Ross (1921) Aubrey Beardsley (with Sixteen Full-Page Illustrations and a Revised Iconography by Aymer Vallance) (London: John Lane, the Bodley Head), p. 78; Marillier, The Early Work, p. 5. Even before his works appeared in print, he had drawn enough attention to himself to receive a commission from J. M. Dent & Co. to illustrate Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur, a project intended to rival the efforts of William Morris’s Kelmscott Press (Ross, Aubrey Beardsley, p. 42). The volumes illustrated by Beardsley appeared in two installments in June 1893 and 1894 (Ross, Aubrey Beardsley, p. 78; Marillier, The Early Work, p. 6). According to Robert Ross, a close friend of Oscar Wilde’s as well as Beardsley’s, the young artist entered a phase of stylistic maturation during the period he worked on Le Morte d’Arthur, as he came under the influence of japonisme, and shed the self-conscious archaism of his early drawings that emulated Renaissance masters such as Andrea Mantegna as well as Pre-Raphaelite Art, and especially the work of Edward Burne-Jones (Ross, Aubrey Beardsley, pp. 43–44). The drawings Beardsley prepared for the English edition of Wilde’s Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act, his next book project following Le Morte d’Arthur and Bon Mots, were hailed by some of his
contemporaries as “the consummation of the new convention he created for himself” (Ross, Aubrey Beardsley, p. 45), and the attainment of “pure beauty”; see A. Symons (1918) The Art of Aubrey Beardsley (New York: Boni and Liveright), p. 30.


7. Three of the original drawings excluded from the first edition were added to the second edition that came out in 1907. As Joan Navarre notes, the play had 27 editions in English. Navarre’s analysis of the impact of internal and external censorship, and multiple editions deftly complicates the question of authorship of both the text and the images. See J. Navarre (1995) The Publishing History of Aubrey Beardsley’s Compositions for Oscar Wilde’s Salomé (unpublished doctoral dissertation. Marquette University, Milwaukee).

9. Anonymous (1894) “Salome: A Tragedy in One Act, Translated from the French of Oscar Wilde: Pictured by Aubrey Beardsley. London: Elkin-Mathews & John Lane. Boston: Copeland & Day,” *Modern Art*, 2.3. Robert Ross noted the independence of Beardsley’s drawings from the texts they purported to illustrate as a specifically modern phenomenon: “At all events it were safer to say, that appreciation of a drawing for itself, without relation to the book or page it was intended to adorn or destroy, is comparatively modern. It is necessary to keep this in mind, because the suitability of Beardsley’s work to the books he embellished was often accidental. His designs must be judged independently, as they were conceived, without any view of interpreting or even illustrating a particular author.” See Ross, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 33.


17. See also Laqueur, *Making Sex*, p. 208.


27. By way of demonstrating the mainstream status Lombroso’s system had achieved, see Gould, The Mismeasure, p. 165: “Dallemagne, a prominent French opponent of Lombroso, paid homage to his influence in 1896: ‘His thoughts revolutionized our opinions, provoked a salutary feeling everywhere, and a happy emulation in research of all kinds. For 20 years, his thoughts fed discussions; the Italian master was the order of the day in all debates; his thoughts appeared as events. There was an extraordinary animation everywhere.’ ”
28. For a comparison between Morel’s and Lombroso’s theories of degeneration, see Pick, Faces, pp. 132–36.
32. Lombroso, The Female Offender, p. 151. For another iteration of this trope, see H. Campbell (1891) Differences in the Nervous Organisation


36. Harry Campbell argued that “there is not the slightest doubt that a large proportion of women do not experience the slightest desire before marriage.” See Campbell, Differences, pp. 200–01. For a historical overview of the trope of women’s lack of passion, see N. Cott (1978) “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology, 1790–1850,” Signs, 4.2, pp. 219–36.

37. In his account of fertilization, German embryologist Ernst Haeckel described the movement of the sperm as follows: “Owing to its sinuous movements, the very mobile sperm-cell finds its way to the female egg-cell, penetrates the membrane of the latter by a perforating motion and coalesces with its cell-material.” See E. Haeckel (n.d.), The Evolution of Man: A Popular Exposition of the Principal Points of Human Ontogeny and Phylogeny (New York: Fowle/International Science Library), p. 174.

PART IV

Two Studies of Death
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CHAPTER 11
Death at Sea: Symbolism and Charles Cottet’s Subjective Realism

Maura Coughlin

INTRODUCTION
At the turn of the century, visual artist Charles Cottet exhibited seascapes and images of Breton women in mourning, a project he collectively titled In the Country of the Sea. Although almost forgotten today, in the period prior to World War One, Cottet’s works were prominent in public exhibitions; they received enthusiastic critical attention and were avidly collected.¹ Many critics noted that his focus on rural life, rooted in the specifics of Breton coastal culture, was a Naturalist offspring of the politically radical realism of Gustave Courbet and Jean-François Millet.² Nonetheless, when shown alongside international Symbolist works, his imagery also shared many of these artists’ formal strategies and thematic iterations of eternal, associative, and allegorical symbols. Léonce Bénédite, curator of the Luxembourg Museum, acquired works by Cottet for the French state at about the same time that he critically praised its “subjective realism” in reviews.³ Bénédite’s seemingly paradoxical phrase best demonstrates the way that his style and subject matter adhered to an appealing middle ground, or else struck a compromise between Naturalism and Symbolism.

That Cottet has not received a great deal of attention in recent scholarship is surprising, given that images of peasant culture in nineteenth-century Brittany are central to the history of art in France. From the mid-1880s to the World War One, Breton subjects had an almost universal appeal to artistic tastes at once academic, Naturalist, avant-garde, and nostalgic.⁴ What may explain Cottet’s marginal status
in recent scholarship is his awkward fit to one of the most pervasive late-twentieth-century approaches to modern art in Brittany. Ever since the early 1980s, following the lead of Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton’s influential article, “Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prairie de Représentation,” images of Brittany produced by Paul Gauguin and other Pont-Aven artists have been critiqued for their embodiment of a “tourist gaze” imposed on the rural world from without.\(^5\) Undeniably, there was a nostalgic appeal for many artists (and writers) for turning the clock back to an insular, premodern Brittany; by ignoring the region’s past prosperity, they veiled the modern economic decline and rural depopulation in order to lend existing Breton culture the appeal of an almost impossibly surviving, prehistoric species. Pollock and Orton’s work encouraged subsequent scholars to deconstruct “primitivism” in representations of Brittany as a nostalgic lie that overwrote all signs of the modern in preference for a “place myth” conducive to artistic representation.\(^6\) However, this exclusive approach reduced much imagery produced in Brittany to a type of misguided fantasy; it moreover denied the profound knowledge of the specifics of local culture that some artists, like Cottet, gained through prolonged contact with the place. Excessive reliance upon “primitivism” to explain visual representations of Brittany leans heavily on the assumption that a dramatic interruption of past practices occurred because of the arrival of modernity (this interpretation is especially focused upon new train lines that increasingly connected Brittany to Paris from the mid-nineteenth century onward) and that this change is exactly what artists willfully and consistently denied. The social constructivist approach, as typified by Orton and Pollock, tends to insist upon a modern break with the premodern past. Located sometime in the mid-to late nineteenth century, this overstated temporal rupture creates an apparent “victor” and a concomitant “loser”: the former associated with a Baudelairian embrace or critique of urban, industrial modernity and the latter connected to conservative nostalgia and the perceived stasis of the archaic countryside. But if we consider the provocative suggestion of Bruno Latour that “we have never been modern,” and we forgo the need to define the onset of modernity through such binary oppositions as nature versus culture, then the presumed urban observer’s fetishizing of rural difference matters much less.\(^7\) In Cottet’s work, his synthesis of traditional symbols, subjective associations, and Naturalist attention to everyday practice need not be explained by recourse to “primitivism.” Instead, I am interested in the ways that Cottet’s imagery found and created powerful, associative
symbols drawn from coastal Bretons’ material and ecological interactions with their contemporary environment: in families divided by the movements of Atlantic fishing and shipping, in their responses to death at sea, and mourning on the shore.

Placing Cottet

Cottet, like most artists working in Brittany in the later nineteenth century, was not born there, and he was only tangentially in touch with artists in the famed colony of Pont-Aven, which is about 100 kilometers distant from his residence in the port town of Camaret-sur-Mer. From 1885 to 1913, he spent many seasons in Brittany (staying there almost year round from 1888 to 1894) and he had a broad base of art world affiliations in the company he kept in both Brittany and Paris. As the following brief overview of his career shows, his work was allied with many different artistic groups and styles in the 1880s and 1890s. Before first visiting Brittany in 1885, he studied briefly at the École des Beaux Arts, and later (with Rodolphe Roll and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes) at the Académie Julian; he first exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1889. He then showed with the young, avant-garde Nabis at the Barc de Bouteville exhibitions in 1893 and 1894.

In a well-known group portrait by Nabi painter and printmaker Félix Vallotton (Five Painters 1902–03; Kunstmuseum Winterthur), Cottet is positioned literally, if retrospectively, at the center of the younger Nabi painters, Pierre Bonnard, Édouard Vuillard, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Vallotton. In Camaret from about 1886 to 1893, Cottet was part of an artistic community that included writers Gustave Toudouze and André Antoine (and after 1903, famed Symbolist poet Saint-Pol-Roux); the Symbolist artist Georges Lacombe; and the Naturalist painter Richard Richon-Brunet. By about 1895, Cottet was at the heart of a group of young painters and printmakers working in Brittany (including Lucien Simon and André Dauchez) who were dubbed la Bande Noire (The Black Band), for their dark palettes and moody scenes that set their work apart from the lingering effects of plein air (open air) Impressionism in so much late-nineteenth-century painting (Cariou 1988, 159). Cottet was a founding member of the Paris Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts (SNBA) in 1890 and his work had international visibility there. He also exhibited in avant-garde international Symbolist venues such as the Libre Esthétique in Brussels, the Salon Art Nouveau, and the Munich Secession; his career peaked when, in 1900, he received a gold medal at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. After 1912, because of illness, Cottet
stopped painting, and he died in Paris in 1925. Like many other fin-de-siècle Symbolist and Naturalist artists who seemingly disappeared in the early twentieth century, his work shared no common ground with the international avant-garde styles of Cubism or Futurism. Cottet’s imagery of mourning and death was anathema to the reactionary aesthetics of the Call to Order in the interwar years, although many Naturalist painters of rural life were celebrated at this time. For over 50 years, Cottet remained more or less forgotten until André Cariou, the former director of the Musée des Beaux Arts in Quimper, published his dissertation research (1972) on Cottet in 1988, and later collected his works for the collection in Quimper.

Death in Brittany

As a young artist, Cottet’s first critical attention came from the exhibition of a painting that seemingly tied his work to the legacy of French realist painting. The Burial (1894, Lille) is quite literally a dark canvas, depicting a coffin carried and followed by a group of hooded mourners in a nocturnal procession. Resembling the work of realists Courbet, Millet, and Alphonse Legros in style and subject, Cottet depicts a death ritual as an everyday occurrence in the local, rural present. Cottet’s realist approach to death, in the words of Linda Nochlin, treats the death of an individual with “the banal level of mere commonplace, everyday actuality.”

Although this image may have been based on Cottet’s observation of the devastating aftermath of a cholera epidemic that swept through Camaret in 1893 (and sent most other artists and writers packing), his later images of death in Brittany took a turn away from the realistic, particular and individual, and toward the mythic and allegorical (Cariou 1988, 201). From Cottet’s middle-ground position, his fascination with mortality, looked back to a realist precedent that articulated particularities of local practice, yet it also corresponded to Symbolist concerns with eternal, ritual practices of death and mourning. Cottet’s affinities with Symbolism have been little explored; the following reading of a few of his important images proposes ways of seeing Cottet’s imagery of death and mourning in the context of his contemporary Symbolist generation.

The Brittany that Cottet first encountered in 1885 already had a long and complex visual and literary culture; its Celtic and provincial Breton Catholic beliefs about mortality and the afterlife had been often chronicled and interpreted. The perilous life of the Breton
fisherman had been dramatized in the French popular imagination in essays and popular novels; fishermen’s widows frequently appeared in naturalistic art and popular visual culture in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A well-known precedent for Cottet’s images of female mourners, *The Widow (The Fisherman’s Family)* by Evariste Luminais (Salon of 1865, Musée d’Orsay) depicts a new widow as she is caught in a swoon of grief, echoing countless images of Mary at the foot of the cross. With her, four female figures ascend a path on a rocky cliff, leaving the scene of tragedy on the shore. Popular perceptions of Brittany as the “land of death” were further shaped by the geographical descriptions of Jacques Cambry, Émile Souvestre, and many later travel writers. This characterization of the region was only strengthened after the wildly successful publication of folklorist Anatole Le Braz’s *Légende de la Mort en Basse Bretagne* in 1893: a text that detailed the persistence of a superstitious, syncretic Celtic-Christian culture in Brittany. With the exception of the self-trained Breton artist and illustrator Yan’ Dargent, very few painters worked directly with the subject matter of Breton belief in death omens, the grim reaper (*Ankou* in Breton), and the interpenetration of the worlds of the dead and living. But even though Cottet dwelt on themes of mortality, his imagery was primarily concerned with Brittany’s present; he did not illustrate Le Braz’s tales, nor did he represent the reminders of Brittany’s past obsessions with death that could be seen on its late medieval architecture and sculpture (Cariou 1988, 33). As Bénédite so aptly acknowledged, it was the “subjective realist” tensions in Cottet’s work that produced his stylistic eclecticism and symbolic ambiguity.

**In the Country of the Sea**

_in the Country of the Sea_ was a thematic title that Cottet used repeatedly for paintings and prints that described the culture of death and mourning in coastal Brittany. While residing year round in the fishing port of Camaret and working frequently in the nearby port of Douarnenez, Cottet frequently traveled to the offshore islands of Sein and Ouessant where he staged many of these dramatic images. The leave-taking of a family, set on the island of Ouessant, is the subject of his large-scale triptych, titled _In the Country of the Sea: The Men Who Leave, the Farewell Dinner, the Women Who Remain_ (1898) (Figure 11.1). When it was shown at the SNBA in 1898, it was his first work to receive widespread critical acclaim, and it was purchased
straightaway for the Luxembourg Museum. This depiction of life by the sea was quite unlike the work of Claude Monet, Eugène Boudin, and others on the Normandy coast that depicted pleasurable, bourgeois spaces of modern seaside vacations. 16

The young German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, writing in 1900, read the triptych’s panels in dialogue with each other, noticing the way they established human relationships to place, subsistence, mobility, and the concrete or material facts of daily island life on Ouessant: “in the center section, lit by a hanging lamp, there are women and children at supper with sad, expectant faces. The evening sea shimmers blue through the window. In the left panel, one sees part of a boat and its crew on storm-tossed waves, and on the right, the shore at evening with women and children waiting for the return.” 17

Cottet articulated the gender divisions of peasant culture on the Isle of Ouessant that determined a local person’s relationship to place: on the island, an able-bodied adult was either globally nomadic or rooted to an extremely small island, circumscribed by the sea. As seen on the left panel, men fished or shipped out for most of the year (many circled the globe in the merchant marine). On the right side are the women who stayed on the island; cared for children and the elderly; maintained the home, fields, and animals; and only occasionally had contact with the outside world.

The Ouessantine family depicted in the center, a family that is most often apart, is therefore exceptionally united here: the discomfort of this moment and the knowledge of its ephemerality suffuses the dour gathering. Under the gas light of the domestic space the men’s faces, darkened from sun, wind, and alcohol, look uncomfortably feral

Figure 11.1 Daniel Mordant. Engraving after Charles Cottet, *In the Country of the Sea. The Men Who Leave, the Farewell Dinner, the Women Who Remain* (original painting 1898, Musée d’Orsay), published 1904. Photo credit: Musée des beaux-arts de Quimper.
and out of place. Critic Jean Chantavoine reads this as “a brief pause between the sea where the men will wander and the shore where the women will await them.” The sea’s persistent presence is reinforced by its continuous horizon across the triptych’s three panels. To bring the Atlantic inside the home, Cottet paints a large window in the central panel that resembles restaurant picture windows, a detail sometimes found in images of festive wedding banquets in Brittany. But such a window is utterly atypical of Ouessant’s peasant cottages that were built as snug havens that muffled out the sounds of the omnipresent breaking waves. The notion of a home with a “water view” is something that only summer residents in Brittany (such as Cottet and his circle of friends) indulged in. But perhaps more importantly, this window functions symbolically to render the composition an inversion of a favorite regionalist theme: the Breton marriage feast (Cariou 1988, 65, 69).

The triptych’s obvious symbolic reference to religious art was spotted immediately. Bénédite, for example, comments: “[o]n the right and on the left, as if answering the thought of the humble Last Supper guests who are so religiously and so simply moved, on the one hand those who leave, on the other those who remain: mothers, women, young girls, eternally fixed on the shore in an eternal anguish and an eternal resignation.” Cottet capitalizes on the symbolic associations of impending doom in the biblical tale. He reinforces this in the painting’s darkness, both emotionally and literally: the interior of the house is dim, despite the gas light overhead, the sun has not yet risen on the ship’s deck to the left, and the women on the cliffs to the right sit below heavy clouds on a wan autumnal day as they scan the empty horizon.

The middle panel is a home port, a place of only temporary separation from the sea. Rather than a comforting shelter from the storm, this is a space of ambivalent union, a place of stress, worry, and concern. At the very center, a female figure, harshly lit by the gas light overhead, is marked as a wife by her simple white coif and wears an expression of distracted worry. By her side stands a man—presumably her husband—who is almost engulfed by the inky blackness of the sea beyond the window. To her left, clasping hands with her fiancé, a young girl (wearing the bonnet of an unwed girl) echoes her distracted gaze. The gloom of this massive triptych suggests a foreboding Symbolist narrative: the title of the triptych’s central panel, *Le Repas des Adieux*, has been translated to English alternately as the *Farewell Dinner* or the *Funeral Meal*. Despite the fact that the former phrase is a more literal translation, the latter mistranslation speaks cannily
to the ambiguity of this image whose sacramental, symbolic content exceeds an ostensibly realist context. As one critic notes, this group seems characterized by a certain withdrawal and distraction, or a sense of collectively repressed emotion, so much so that if this is not a somber funeral meal, at the very least, this is a family group that feels intense awkwardness and estrangement rather than natural harmony when gathered together.20

Melodramatic and pious scenes of leave-taking in popular Breton seafaring novels such as Pierre Loti’s *My Brother Yves* (1883) and *Fishermen of Iceland* (1886) and Anatole Le Braz’s *Pâques d’Islande* (Iceland Easter) (1897) may have inspired Cottet and, perhaps more importantly, they provided a popular lens for the reception of his work in Paris and other international exhibitions and lent it an undeniably emotional appeal.21 Cottet’s ambiguity leaves open the possibility of a viewer imagining a dramatic, alternative narrative to a simple leave-taking: this family could be understood as gathering in memory of one already lost at sea. For much of the twentieth century, it was customary for Breton families to hold wakes in the home, often using the dining table for the laying out of the dead. On Ouessant, where men were so often lost at sea or buried far from home, a unique rite of corporeal substitution was invented in which a small waxen cross called *proëlla* was given a home wake on the table in lieu of the missing body.22 The inevitability of loss is noted by Bénédite who describes the figures as displaying

<n>no effusiveness, no outward displays of tenderness; these simple hearts do not have eloquent feelings. But the groups sit close; the pensive women move the small faces of the children towards the men. And the mothers, who can no longer count the number of departures from which there were no returns, seem withdrawn into dreams and memories. (Bénédite 1904, 114)</n>

Cottet’s island women are defined by place, by waiting, by missing, and by mourning the departed; their division from the nomadic, seafaring men has a seemingly ritualistic, spatial dimension that implies an unknowable interval of separation.

**Symbolist Altars**

The importance of the triptych format for *In the Country of the Sea* cannot be ignored, for this rather heavy-handedly demands certain associative patterns of viewing that owe their affect to rituals of
Christian devotion and suggests a symbolic overlay of religious iconography onto the cycles of a family’s life (imagined as a ritualized sequence of transition, farewell, or mourning). Painted triptychs (and, more generally, polyptychs) in Northern Europe, from the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries became highly developed iconographic frameworks suitable for the side-by-side presentation of present-day portraits (donors, families), sacred figures, and biblical narratives. The multi-paneled form was revived by Pre-Raphaelite and Nazarene painters in the mid-nineteenth century to heighten the archaic references of their religious paintings. At the turn of the century, the decorative and symbolic potentials of the triptych form appealed to many painters; it is frequently referred to in the context of medieval revivalism and decorative abstraction in Pont-Aven painting (e.g., Émile Bernard, *Four Seasons*, 1891 [private collection]; Paul Sérausier, *Pont Aven Triptych*, 1892–93 [private collection]).

However, the triptych had no fixed meaning: it could be decorative or religious or convey social realist themes of labor. The form could even accommodate the quasi-religious-fetishistic frenzy of modern consumer culture, as in Félix Vallotton’s ode to the department store, *Bon Marché* (1898, private collection). A three-panel format might simply break up a continuous, horizontal composition, but in triptychs with more complex interactions between panels, symbolic dialogues could be established across temporal and spatial dimensions. When obvious disjunctions of scale occur, such that the three panels cannot be read as one continuous picture plane, a synthetic association of images, neither explicitly synchronic nor diachronic, is presented for the viewer’s contemplation. Unlike a series, whose panels may be spread out at intervals in a room, and which may easily be broken up and sold as independent images, the triptych’s composition and available meanings more strongly depend upon associations made by the close proximity of its sections. In Cottet’s example, the large central panel holds our attention and encourages our eyes to move outward to the wings and then back. Men leave across the sea, ever moving onward to the rest of the world and women stay behind on this tiny island in the North Atlantic; both are forever in dialogue with the longed for, yet always uncomfortable reunion in the center. His choice of format, therefore, is crucial: it literalizes physical separation and insists that we (like Modersohn-Becker) understand this relationship as our eyes move back and forth across the panels.

Opening a review of the exhibition of SNBA in 1898 with a comparison of triptychs by Cottet (*In the Country of the Sea*) and Léon Frédéric (*Stages of a Worker’s Life*), Bénédite proposes that
in the process of becoming a modern painting format, “the lateral panels forgot their former function as shutters and instead form additional compositions intended, like the reverse of a medal, to supplement, reinforce or explain the principal subject” (Bénédite 1898, 66). He singles out Cottet and Frédéric for their depictions of monumental, social themes without falling into the “insincere naturalism” and “confused mysticism” typical of the Naturalist followers of Bastien LePage (Bénédite 1898, 58, 69). Significantly, he relates the paintings’ forms to Symbolist associations of art and music, noting that the “triptych arrangement is recognized as having a character that one could readily call ‘symphonic,’ in as much as the work has a sort of musical development” (Bénédite 1904, 114). Thinking about the way in which viewers are asked to read these panels’ relationships musically, in concert, or in dialogue, I made several visits to them in the Musée d’Orsay, where they are both displayed in a large room dedicated to Naturalism and religious imagery.

In both triptychs, there seems to be a continuous, yet spatially impossible horizon line across the three panels. This composition unifies Frédéric’s urban spaces, and, in Cottet’s case, it joins these moments “in the country of the sea.” In a strategy similar to Cottet’s, in Frédéric’s *Stages of a Worker’s Life*, laboring peasant bodies are divided among the panels by gender: masculine work is on the left and feminine labors on the right. Moreover, as in Cottet’s central panel, these polarities of gender meet, albeit for other ends than leave-taking. In comparison to the flushed, meaty faces of Frédéric’s urban proletariat and the rosy fecundity of his nursing mothers, Cottet’s dusky men and starched island women seem distant and withdrawn. Clearly sited on the coast, this complex trio of peasant images sets up relationships to place, subsistence, mobility, and the concrete or material facts of daily life as Cottet observed it on Ouessant, and as he invested it with mortal Symbolism. His triptych insists upon mapping out women’s daily practices of praying, mourning, and keeping watch on the horizon: on the right panel, several women look to sea from the cliffs that overlook Ouessant’s deep harbor. The island is shaped like a crab-claw whose pincers enclose its deep-water harbor; this is where Cottet positions this group of women: just to the east of the port on the cliffs. If one imagines the immobile “wings” of the triptych swinging away from the walls and into the viewer’s space, these appendages might mimic the shape of the island, positioning the farewell meal in the home port.
The Deadly Sea

Folklorist David Hopkin, in his work on the cultures of fisherfolk on the Brittany coast, has shown that the sea and coast of Brittany were often represented as ominous spaces of mortality, desolation, and anguish. The notion of the sea as death, as a devourer, an uncontainable sublime, with mysterious, seductive, and deadly depths, has a very long history in European thought. As John Gillis and Alain Corbin have so eloquently outlined, this pervasive image was only gradually replaced in literature and the visual arts in the later eighteenth century by an appreciation for its unknowable beauties. But in spite of shifting perspectives on the part of those who visited, wrote about, or painted the sea, many coastal residents, in the words of the travel text, La Normandie Illustrée (Normandy Illustrated) (1852), viewed the sea as “a vast coffin that the priest comes to bless.”

Closest to home, Cottet’s friend and neighbor, Gustave Toudouze, in a dramatic novel Péri en Mer! (Lost at Sea) of 1890, set in Camaret, elaborated at length on the ocean’s deadly perils, and the profound effects of men lost at sea on the coastal community. Toudouze describes at length the water’s destructive powers and even ominous sounds such as its “monstrous sob” or “lugubrious howl of death”; the omnipresent ocean continuously assaults the senses of those on shore with its menacing violence.

To return to the critical response to the triptych, and to place it in this sinister context, journalist Bojidar Karageorgevitch (who also spent summers in Camaret) observed that the adult islanders at the table turn their backs to the sea, which “is now the picture—the sea which is the life and the terror, the anguish and the poetry of that land, which gives gloom to its Gaelic legends, which darkens it with widows year after year, and which the natives love nevertheless, to the point of dying when they cannot see it” (Karageorgevitch 1902, 487). Bénédite fatalistically refers to the sea in this painting as an ever-present specter of death: “all eyes seem distracted, they are not looking outward, they only see in their minds the great devourer, the somber mysterious one whose complaint accompanies these good-byes and which follows the eternal pattern of their life” (Bénédite 1898, 66). Breton-born Symbolist (and later Surrealist) poet Max Jacob dramatically states that for Cottet “the fisherman is a man in the grip of a monster which he must incessantly overcome: the deep, green ocean, where fathers and sons sleep.” Critic Paul Gsell likewise imagines that “the sea calls these sailors: at this moment, this great devourer of
men murmurs and sings in the night a few steps from the cottage: it is
danger, it is death, watching its prey.” And the monstrous, devouring “traitorous sea” is a presence, a place, but also a character in this
painting’s drama.

**Mourning Culture**

In the 1890s, viewers of Cottet’s painting would have been familiar
with a Symbolist touchstone for fin-de-siècle painters of almost every
stylistic and political persuasion: *The Poor Fisherman* (1881, Musée
d’Orsay, Paris) by Cottet’s mentor, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes. This image, totally unlocated in place or time, is neither completely
Naturalist (in its distorted colors) nor overtly Symbolist (never leaving
the world of the believable). Both Naturalist and Symbolist readings
would also have been encouraged by viewing Cottet’s triptych in the
context of many other images of impoverished, pious, and grieving
fishing families from Brittany, Normandy, and the Channel coast.
Several very close analogs, drawn from artists working in Brittany with
very similar themes, make this case quite well.

A close friend of Cottet’s in Camaret, Richon-Brunet, paints an
imposing and spectral image of a coastal widow, cloaked for life in
black. His *Widow of Camaret* (1888, Brest) (Figure 11.2) domi-
nates the protected harbor of Camaret-sur-Mer, recognizable for its
portside sixteenth-century chapel of Notre Dame de Rocamadour and
the military tower designed by Vauban. Her mourning cloak is so
black that it seems to suck the light and air out of everything around
her; she becomes the most dominant “monument” in the landscape.
The image has qualities of a Naturalist portrait, or a regional type set
in place, but Richon-Brunet also finds an ominous Symbolist content
there.

Lucien Levy-Dhurmer’s Symbolist *Notre Dame of Penmarc’h*
(1896, Quimper) is a reinvented Byzantine icon of the Virgin and
child that depicts a widow of a man lost at sea. Penmarc’h is on the
extreme tip of a small peninsula on the southeast coast of Finistère:
over 80 kilometers from Cottet’s home in Camaret by land, but much
closer by the **vapeurs** or steam-powered packet boats that connected
towns on the coast. In this collision of a portrait and imagery derived
from the many local chapels dedicated to the Virgin along the Brittany
coast, Levy-Dhurmer practices a type of “subjective realism” akin to
that of Cottet.

Georges Lacombe, Cottet’s close artistic neighbor in Camaret,
in *Offerings to the Dead* (1896–97, Bremen), depicts a woman in a
mourning cloak, standing on the rocky cliffs at Camaret (that he had so often painted), leaving flowers for the lost at sea. In paintings and sculptures of his Nabi period, Lacombe repeatedly used symbolic serial imagery to stand for women’s cycles of life from birth to death (e.g. *Love, Death and Birth*, 1894–96, Musée d’Orsay). Here, the black cloak of high mourning and the mauve mourning dress fuse in colored harmony with the rosy sunset over the sea, the almost flesh-colored roses, and the purplish cliffs. As we see in these contemporary examples, Cottet’s contemporaries touched on the symbolic theme of the black-cloaked widow, but only Cottet explored it extensively;
he both understood the material Symbolism of this local practice and exploited its emotional gravity.

After showing the triptych in 1896, his later images of women in mourning were often received in similar terms by critics familiar with Symbolist themes. Cottet’s focus on the omnipresent nature of death and mourning in Breton women’s lives was most evident in his work shown at the Salon of 1899, where his four paintings, each titled *Mourning* (*Deuil*) hung side by side. Colorless forms of mothers and daughters, without form or texture, merge together in triangular piles of grief, as they hold each other up, or collapse under the weight of their losses. Reviewing this series, critic Maurice Hamel praised the strong and serious color of this “mournful poetry,” and Belgian critic Maurice Sulzberger characterized the series as “prostrate despair, more eloquent than loud wailing” having a sort of “funereal harmony.”

Repeated cloaked female bodies—generations of women who share the relentless cycle of loss—take most powerful form in the painting *Marine Grieving* (1903) (Figure 11.3). Like the triptych, this image of three female figures in mourning costume is also set on Ouessant. On this small island, in the late nineteenth century, widows wore heavy black cloaks made of industrially manufactured cloth held together by an elaborate array of pins. Long after mainland Breton women shed traditional dress for provincial bourgeois fashion, Ouessantines kept to a local costume that was, nonetheless, specific to its moment. Generally speaking, in Finistère, the widow’s black woolen cloak (also seen in the Lacombe and Richon-Brunet paintings) was worn in high mourning to the wake, the funeral, and high mass for several Sundays following the death of a close relative. It was an outward expression of respect for the dead and for social codes of propriety, penance, and self-mortification (Badone 1989, 122, 125). Cloaking the bereaved female body performs the sort of *piacular* rite (first described by Émile Durkheim) in which female family members are separated from outside contact while dutifully mourning according to familial and social expectations. But on Ouessant, the liminal state of mourning did not definitively conclude: after the death of their husbands, many widows remained cloaked for the rest of their lives and as such were visible, prominent members of the community. As I have argued elsewhere (2009), the image of the black-cloaked Breton widow was a favorite trope of folklorists such as Anatole Le Braz, who often heavy-handedly invoked these cloaked elderly women as sinister specters of death.
For instance, in a scene from Le Braz’s story set on Ouessant, “Le Sang de la Sirène” (1895), the narrator observes a group of cloaked women at a wake:

On the other side of the table, the “funeral trestle,” in the Breton vernacular, three women are seated on benches, all three enveloped in similar mantles, thick black cloaks with stiff folds, their hoods pulled down over their bowed heads. Custom dictates, it seems, that on such occasions the “new widow” is attended by the two widows of the island… the three motionless and veiled figures remained enigmatic, similar to three Fates, the goddesses of death, shrouded in their long funeral vestments.40

In Marine Grieving, three ages of women in widow’s weeds suffer loss as child, wife, and mother of the departed (we do not know it for sure, but the absent mourned body in Cottet’s works always seems to be implicitly male). Cottet’s use of the body of the Breton woman in

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Figure 11.3  Charles Cottet, Mourners, Brittany (Deuil Marin or Marine Grieving). Photograveure after the painting (1903, Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp). Published in Maurice Hamel and Arsène Alexandre, The Salons of 1903. Paris: Goupil, 1903. Collection of the author.
mourning here functions as a powerful symbol for grief, loss, isolation, memory, and perhaps even death itself. Symbolist author and art critic Paul Adam described this triad as if they are the Fates themselves with “resigned faces that are covered in wrinkles, or wan and sad, on the look out for the next imminent calamity.”

Conservative cultural critic Max Nordau, in On Art and Artists (a text of 1907 that recanted some of his fanatical condemnation of modern art in Degeneration), celebrates Cottet’s return to the twilight, gloom, and darkness of Courbet’s Realism. Describing the cloaked women of Marine Grieving in words that almost echo Le Braz’s story, he notes: “grandmother, mother, and daughter...all three wearing widow’s weeds” are “abandoned to their thoughts, which abide with their dead” as they turn their backs to the sea “in insidious calm behind two storms.” The sea, he tells us “which has swallowed their husbands” leaves behind on shore

only old and young widows and children, who, in turn, also will be trained for the sea, the merciless sea, on which the poor devoted fishermen and sailors seek their living and find their death. The existence of a population, its truceless fight with hostile nature, is comprised in the black figures of these three modern Niobes. Today, too, as in its beginnings, true art is myth-making.

Whether they have the agency of the Fates, or follow Niobe, the archetypical grieving mother, the symbolic content of Cottet’s mourning women was not lost on his contemporaries.

Conclusion

Like the images of Breton piety and mourning produced by his Naturalist and Symbolist friends and peers (with whom he socialized and exhibited) Cottet’s themes of loss and mourning understandably struck a powerful cord with his viewers and critics. Rather than repeating a generalized or romantic perception of rural people as exotic “primitives,” his images of life on the coast and islands synthesized observation, practice, and material relations of his present day. In contrast to a seductive myth of primitivism, Cottet’s coastal Brittany was not outside of history at the fin de siècle. Through his long residence there, the artist developed and expressed an understanding of life on the coast that included the human cost of living on and by the sea. Rather than repeating a mythic romance of instinctive and
harmonious peasant “nature,” Cottet depicted a coastal culture that was at once fragmented, mobile and isolated. In his dark imagery of mourning, Cottet invoked a materially-grounded symbolism of women’s practice. As scholars of art and visual culture continue to explore the complex thematic associations and symbolic forms of the fin de siècle, Cottet’s “subjective realist” images of death and mourning may eventually attain a more central position in the dark and ambiguous dialogues of Symbolism.45

Notes

Many thanks for research assistance in Brittany to Marie El Caidi, archivist of the Musée du Prieure, St. Germain-en-Laye, Marie-Rose Prigent at the Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique in Brest, Laurence Imbernon at the Musée des Beaux Arts in Rennes, André Cariou at the Musée des Beaux Arts, Quimper and Caroline Boyle-Turner and Anne Bez in Pont-Aven. My friend, colleague, and collaborator Emily Gephart read and made invaluable comments on several drafts of this essay. All translations from French are mine unless otherwise noted.

1. See A. Cariou (1988) Charles Cottet et La Bretagne (Moulin de Perret, Raillé: URSA/Le Chasse Marée); this is the primary text on Cottet and is a revision of his thesis (1972) Charles Cottet, vie et œuvre (Rennes, Université de Haute-Bretagne).


4. Throughout the later nineteenth century, countless French and international artists were drawn to northwestern coastal France (and Brittany in particular). A brief and partial inventory includes: Naturalists like Jules Breton, Léon Lhermitte, Pascal Dagnan-Bouveret, Stanhope Forbes, Jules Bastien Lepage, Virginie Demont-Breton, and Albert-Guillaume Demarest; the Nabis and Pont-Aven modernist circle: Maurice Denis, Émile Bernard, Paul Gauguin, Charles Filiger, Georges Lacombe, Paul Sérusier, Cuno Amiet; and many artists oriented somewhere between Naturalism and Symbolism, such as Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer, Richard Richon-Brunet, Helene Schjerfbeck, Mela Muter, and Marianne Stokes.


10. For a discussion of the reception of Cottet’s Burial, see Cariou, Charles Cottet et La Bretagne, pp. 31–35.


33. Prominent Naturalist examples of this genre include Francis Tattegrain, Mourners at Etaples (1883); Alfred Guillou, Farewell (1892); Louis-Adolphe Demarest, To Those Lost at Sea (1893) and Le Vœu (1894); Richon-Brunet, Près de la Mer 1895; and Virginie Demont-Breton, The Tormented (c. 1905). The triptych would have also been seen in the context of countless images of death that filled the SNBA exhibitions in the 1890s: the catalogs attest to a proliferation of widows, sickrooms, dead or stillborn children, and the administration of last rites. In these images, most of which are long forgotten or lost, death is often allegorized as a grim reaper, a seductress, a lover, an angel of death, or a dark bride.


41. This triad of women shares formal and thematic similarities with Ferdinand Hodler’s Symbolist works that so often depict multiple female figures in various states of mind, postures, or ages of life, such as *Emotion*, 1902 (Zurich).


45. The work of Cottet was markedly absent from L’Ange du Bizarre, the 2013 exhibition devoted to “Dark Romanticism” at the Musée d’Orsay, even though one room was filled with images of death and mourning by Cottet’s contemporaries Frédéric and Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer as well as several images by Nabi painters.
CHAPTER 12

The Seduction of Thanatos: Gabriele D’Annunzio and the Decadent Death

Marja Härmänmaa

Introduction: Decadent Necrophilia?

D’Annunzio was obsessed with death. In his last autobiographical work, Libro segreto (The Secret Book, 1935), he calls his peculiar memories “studies of death,” as death in one way or another often appeared in his childhood. Death as a personal muse is constantly present in his other nonfictional works through his recollection of deceased friends, and it is also an important element in his literary production. Many of his plays are constructed around death, and death is an important element in some of his poems. In a similar vein, murder, death, and suicide are central topics in several short stories and novels.

The importance of death during the fin de siècle, particularly in décadisme and decadentismo (the French and Italian decadent movements), was closely related to the idea of cultural and societal decay. In addition to this, the emergence of mass society that Europe witnessed during the second half of the nineteenth century was accompanied by fears of the end of civilization. In France, the humiliating defeat at the hands of the Prussians in 1870 further fueled the idea of the decay of the Latin race. According to Théophile Gautier, in a decadent period, death and corruption would naturally find their way into the aesthetic domain, too.

Death was such a significant topic that Elio Gioanola has called it “the emotional epicenter, the inspiring matrix, and the constitutive foundation” of the culture of Italian decadentismo. Several ideas related to death that came to the fore during the fin de siècle had
a considerable afterlife and were further developed, for instance, by Sigmund Freud, and even found their way into Italian Fascism. Thus, the aim of this essay is to shed light on how Gabriele D’Annunzio (1863–1938), the most monumental figure of the decadentismo, represents death, and what death actually represents to him.

**Giorgio’s Case**

In addition to being a symptom and consequence of the cultural crisis of the time, the popularity of the macabre, the perversity and the sadism that the fin de siècle inherited from De Sade and Baudelaire, was also due to their profitability. In a period when the publishing industry began to produce cheap editions for the emerging mass audience, books were considered more than ever to be products like any other. Since the writer, now for the first time at the mercy of the market, had to sell in order to earn a living, writing was inevitably conditioned by the demands of commerce.

During his lifetime, D’Annunzio was a highly popular author, whose works were both well marketed and sold. Given this popularity, many of the various murders, suicides, or fatal accidents that appear in D’Annunzio’s literary works may be regarded as little more than gratuitous ornaments, aimed at captivating, surprising, or even shocking his middle-class readers. As a consequence, the protagonists often commit suicide or murder simply to destroy themselves or eliminate an enemy, without any deeper reflection on the real nature of death. In this regard, however, the novel *Trionfo della morte* (*The Triumph of Death*) stands as an exception, since here, through the experiences of the protagonist Giorgio Aurispa, D’Annunzio offers his first extended treatment of the meaning of death.

Indeed, as the title suggests, death is the main theme of the *Trionfo della morte* (*The Triumph of Death, 1894*). Like most of D’Annunzio’s literary works, this novel is in many ways autobiographical. The title is taken from a medieval fresco in Pisa, although there seems to be no other connection between the two. Death is present in the very first pages of the novel, when the protagonists Ippolita Sanzio and Giorgio Aurispa discover a suicide victim below the Pincio hill, one of the most romantic places in Rome. The suicide turns into a symbol of Giorgio’s and Ippolita’s dying love, representing the dichotomy between love and death, Eros and Thanatos, one of the central themes of the novel that is also to be found in many of D’Annunzio’s other works. From then on, like a kind of Wagnerian leitmotif, death is constantly present in the novel in different ways. The drowning of
a boy and the memory of Giorgio’s beloved uncle Demetrio, who committed suicide, are some of the most illustrative examples. Yet, most of all, the very idea of death haunts Giorgio Aurispa. It becomes an obsession, until finally, at the end of the novel, Giorgio kills both himself and the woman he loved.\textsuperscript{16}

As the basic plot can be reduced to little more than the meetings of the two lovers, the novel is essentially to be regarded as a psychological study of the modern, cultivated, upper-class man, embodied by Giorgio Aurispa.\textsuperscript{17} Giorgio suffers from a deep, yet puzzling, existential crisis. He yearns to live, and most of all to feel “complete and harmonious.” Nonetheless, he is tortured by the idea that everyday life is constantly escaping him. In addition to lacking any “reason to live,” Giorgio also believes that his real life is under the control of a mysterious force. The possibility that a part of him is already dead ultimately leads him to be attracted to death itself, for only in death would he be able to regain his lost integrity.\textsuperscript{18}

Giorgio Aurispa, one of D’Annunzio’s most complicated protagonists, in many ways personifies the pessimism and sense of crisis that lie at the very heart of fin-de-siècle culture.\textsuperscript{19} He bears a close resemblance to the literary prototypes of the period, among whom the best known is Des Esseintes, from Joris-Karl Huysmans’s novel \textit{À rebours} (against nature). He is a man without vital energy, dominated by morbid sensibility, and suffering from a secret illness that corrodes his will and impedes his efforts to face reality, thus condemning him to inactivity.\textsuperscript{20} As Guido Baldi indicates, this man stands as a literary metaphor, both for the crisis surrounding the role of the intellectual on the eve of the triumph of industrial and capitalist civilization, and of the impotence of the individual in the emerging mass society.\textsuperscript{21} For him, suicide is a logical solution, representing a protest against life—and not a celebration of death, as the title of D’Annunzio’s novel seems to indicate.\textsuperscript{22}

The \textit{Trionfo} stands at the turning point of D’Annunzio’s ideological development, when the poet moved from a Wagnerian credo toward the doctrines of Nietzsche. Even though D’Annunzio had discovered Nietzsche by the early 1890s, and his ideal of the ascendant life is evident in the novel, the composer’s influence is still dominant.\textsuperscript{23} Giorgio Aurispa is indeed D’Annunzio’s last Wagnerian (and Schopenhauerian) antihero,\textsuperscript{24} who follows the composer’s lessons according to which peace could only be found in a “burning and profound desire for death. Complete unconsciousness, dissolution of all dreams, [and] absolute annihilation. Here lay liberation!”\textsuperscript{25}
Before committing suicide, Giorgio attempts to find a solution to his existential problem in different ways, such as by seeking a superior Dionysian life in symbiosis with nature in the countryside, and in love for Ippolita. Nonetheless, Giorgio’s relationship with her is revealed to be morbid right from the beginning. Since Giorgio considers that the sole certainty in life is knowing that another human being lives only for him, his love is transformed into the will to entirely possess the woman (140–41).

At first Giorgio considers death to be the ideal transfiguration of vulgarity into beauty. After her death the woman would reach “the supreme perfection of her beauty” and become “an object for thought, a pure ideality.” Only then could the man love her “without jealous inquietude, with a soothing, changeless sorrow.” However, when Ippolita arrives in the countryside, where Giorgio is attempting to heal himself, the man discovers that his love for her is dead. In his eyes the woman has been transformed into a “sexual being exclusively, the inferior being deprived of all spiritual value, a simple instrument of pleasure and luxury, the instrument of ruin and death” (Trionfo, trans. Hornblow, p. 198). For this reason, love becomes a burden; and instead of the solution to Giorgio’s crisis, the woman turns into an “Enemy,” “the Obstacle” that impedes his salvation. The final motivation to kill Ippolita, along with himself, is a paradoxical combination of repugnance and possessiveness. The ties that bind the man to the woman are too strong; Giorgio cannot live with Ippolita, nor can he leave her to someone else. At the end of the novel, as the woman refuses to die, the Wagnerian act of “dying in beauty” is transformed into a brutal and savage struggle that concludes when Giorgio throws the woman, together with himself, over a precipice.

Encountering Thanatos

The fin-de-siècle authors were mainly interested in dwelling on the prurient rather than on the metaphysical dimension of their subjects. For this reason, as Kline and Schor have indicated, true meditation on death is rare in writings on Decadence. Likewise, the reasons why Giorgio simultaneously commits suicide and murder are quite confusing. Not in this novel, nor indeed anywhere else, does D’Annunzio provide a coherent and exhaustive theory about the meaning or necessity of death. Nevertheless, in the Trionfo, D’Annunzio treats many of the ideas about death, life, and the afterlife that return in his other works.
The romantic dichotomy between love and death, Eros and Thanatos, which is already present in *Trionfo*, also lies at the core of the lyric poem “La visitazione” (1889, The Visit). Here Death, who kisses the sleeping Love, is depicted in a traditional way, with wings and a scythe. In a short autobiographical essay entitled “Dell’amore e della morte e del miracolo” (Concerning Love, Death, and Miracle, 1905), D’Annunzio reports his personal experience in the face of death. In this so-called favilla (spark), he writes of how he stood by the bed of one of his lovers, Alessandra di Rudini, who was suffering from uterine cancer. The woman comes close to death three times, but finally she recovers, thanks to what D’Annunzio calls “the miracle of the Will to love that overcomes death.” As in the case of “La visitazione,” in this personal experience, death is seen as the opposite of love. Eros and Thanatos are two antagonistic forces that fight over the soul of the woman. Death, which aims to separate the two lovers, is represented as a horrific and devastating experience (1650).

However, the idea of the cruelty of death is an exception in D’Annunzio’s production; in *Maia* (1903), he gives a completely different image of death. This epic poem about life is in part imaginary and in part autobiographical—as is the case in many of D’Annunzio’s works. It starts with D’Annunzio’s description of his voyage to Greece in the summer of 1895. In a series of poems, D’Annunzio concentrates variously on a certain detail of a place he visits, or on the impression the place had upon him. The fourth section of Part 12 is dedicated to the Acrocorinth, the ancient citadel of Corinth, where D’Annunzio metaphorically meets Thanatos, “the gloomy youth”:

At times a funereal wing whirred / in the wind upon the plundered Acrocorinth. / And I saw Thanatos, the gloomy youth, / who blew into the delicate nostrils / and onto the drooping eyelids of those / who took pleasure in you, / O Dorian, / crushing the withered garlands / that have fallen on your wine-besprinkled marble. / And I saw him carried by your Night, / as in the tomb of Cypselus; / and thereafter I always kept him veiled / by my side. / And, ever since I’ve had him with me, / he seems to make redder the roses / of my pleasure, deeper the sound / of my laughter, ever stronger / my teeth. The torch / that he carries / has gone out, but beneath his gaze / my fires burn more ardently.

These verses are significant in many ways. First of all, the description of a young boy carried by her mother, Night, is one of the few cases in which D’Annunzio anthropomorphizes death. The Western
personification of death as a man or woman has roots both in antiq-

uity and the Bible. Thanks to the studies of Gotthold E. Lessing (1729–81), the figure of Thanatos became particularly popular at the end of the eighteenth century, and revealed a changed attitude toward life and death. According to Lessing’s interpretation of the Greek god, the cruel Death was domesticated, now appearing as the figure of a gentle, friendly youth, “the last best friend.”

Thanatos no longer appears as a pitiless killer, the fearsome skel-

eton that had long been the traditional symbol of Death; instead, he symbolically intimates the extinction of life.36

D’Annunzio’s Thanatos is thus also the opposite of the common image of death as a dangerous, irresistible seductress that was highly popular during the fin de siècle.37 Instead, the Greek youth corre-

sponds to D’Annunzio’s idea of death as a pleasurable experience, which is a recurrent theme in his works. In two lyric poems, entitled “Ammonimento” (1888, Admonishment) and “Suspiria de profundis” (1890, Sighs from the Depths), death is associated with a longed-for rest at the end of life.38 Furthermore, when D’Annunzio recounts his childhood memories in the aforementioned Libro segreto, he overtly expresses his idea of the mellifluousness of death: “These meetings and encounters did not leave horror, nor terror, nor chills within my spirit, but rather something resembling a modest intimacy, a calm familiarity, a self-assured confidence” (D’Annunzio 2005, 1:1682). In another autobiographical work, Notturno (1921, Nocturne), he describes the fascination of death as follows: “In fact, death is pres-

ent in the way that life is; like life, it is warm; like life, it is beautiful, inebriating, promising, transfiguring.”39

This idea of death as a sweet, gentle, and even sensuous experience partly explains the constant death drive that D’Annunzio expressed for the first time when he, at the age of 15 years, wanted to die (D’Annuzio 2005, 1:1682). Following the canons of decadentismo, in the short novel La Leda senza cigno (Leda without a Swan, 1913), he personifies the death drive (but not death itself) as a beautiful and fascinating, yet mysterious and fatal, woman. The Leda is a sort of a detective story told by a fictitious man, Desiderio Moriar (whose name, loosely translated from Italian and Latin, means “desire, I will die”), about an adventurous woman he meets at a concert. After vari-

ous attempts, the woman finally commits suicide.40 In the long auto-

biographical afterword to the Leda, entitled Licenza (Envoi, 1916), he describes the beauty of the death drive as follows: “In the Leda, the call to death was expressed with such a novel musicality that it
enraptured me. I had given a stupendous woman’s face to the ‘overriding thought’ ” (i.e., the death drive).41

In the Licenza, D’Annunzio also reports the meaningless of life and how the death drive springs from contact with sublime nature during a lonely ride in the country: “The past is worth nothing, nor does the present have any value. The present is nothing if it is not a leavening.”42 The experience creates the will to die: “I have some sort of desire to die. I listen to the melody of the world that says: ‘It is time to die, tempus moriendi’... No desire to return home, to go on living.”43

Red Roses

Another thing that is expressed in the verses of Maia cited above is the constant presence of death in life: “And, ever since I’ve had him [Thanatos] with me.” From the Classical Age until Romanticism, life and death had been distinguished as two opposing concepts, death being the moment of dissolution that precedes the entrance into nothingness. With decadentismo, thanks to the philosophy of Schopenhauer, the discovery of the unconscious and the crisis of rationalism, death begins to be present in life. It is no longer a chronological moment that extinguishes the light of existence; rather it is an inner condition that accompanies life after birth. This is not to be taken in the traditional sense, according to which one starts to die when one is born; instead it reflects the awareness that a human being is the one who will die. As Schopenhauer writes: “In human beings, the terrifying certainty of death necessarily found its place with the faculty of reason.” It was this certainty that differentiated a human being from a brute.44 For these reasons, states Gioanola, the entire existential meditation of decadentismo culminates in the individuation of death as the basis of being (Gioanola 1993, 176–77).

Schopenhauer, perhaps the most influential thinker of the fin de siècle, dedicates an entire chapter to death in The World as Will and Presentation (1819), entitled “On Death and Its Relation to the Indestructibility of Our Essence in Itself” (Schopenhauer 2008, 2:518–68). As for the German philosopher and D’Annunzio alike, the pulsation of death is a natural and inseparable part of life. In one of his “faville,” entitled Il Vangelo secondo l’Avversario (The Gospel According to the Adversary, 1924), written to commemorate the death of Eleonora Duse, he states that “The one who gives life, must accept death.”45 For D’Annunzio life was “nothing if not a leaven
for death.” Curiously, for D’Annunzio (and unlike Schopenhauer), consciousness of death was neither destructive nor nihilistic. On the contrary, in *Maia*, the company of “the gloomy youth,” the presence of death engenders a zest for life, since “he seems to make redder the roses of my pleasure, deeper the sound of my laughter, ever stronger my teeth.” In a similar way, in one of his notebooks, dated August 7, 1915, just before he took off on one of his legendary flights during the First World War, he wrote: “The thought of death makes life essential.” In other words, consciousness of death gives rise to the cult of life.

However, since death is the fulfillment of life, the manner of death is far from incidental, and D’Annunzio’s life of a hero is supposed to end heroically. As he declares in an autobiographical work *Contemplazione della morte* (The contemplation of death, 1912), “I do not want peace. I want to die amid passion and strife. And I want my death to be my sweetest victory.” Unfortunately, this was not the case, as the patriotic hero of the First World War was not fated to die on the battlefield. This “failed death” occupies a central position in *Notturno*. While his friends were dying at the front, an accident left D’Annunzio bedridden, with eyes bandaged, for several months at the beginning of 1916. The consequent frustration provoked these bitter lines: “Now death, which was supposed to take the two, took only one, contrary to the pact, contrary to the offering, contrary to justice, contrary to glory.” Instead of achieving glorious martyrdom in battle, D’Annunzio died of a stroke long after the war, in solitude in his villa on Lake Garda.

**When God Died**

If the meaning of death was so important for life, we may well wonder about D’Annunzio’s conception of the afterlife, as this may also clarify why he considered death such a desirable and marvellous experience. In the *Trionfo*, when Giorgio contemplates the situation after his death, he is only concerned about the feelings of Ippolita and his friends while viewing his body during the wake (125). In other works as well, when focusing on the situation after death, D’Annunzio tends to be mainly interested in the grief of the survivors. For instance, the patriotic poem “Per i marinai d’Italia morti in Cina” (For the Italian Seamen Dead in China, 1900) is almost entirely dedicated to the sorrow of the mothers of the dead seamen. But if D’Annunzio is so concerned about the feelings of the survivors, what did he imagine would happen to the one that dies? In order to answer to this,
it is crucial to examine D’Annunzio’s attitude toward the Christian religion.

In the *Trionfo*, both Giorgio and Demetrio are described as religious; nevertheless, they do not believe in the Christian God. They are interested in Catholic rituals, but not in the religion itself.\(^54\) This situation profoundly torments Giorgio, and one of his most fervent desires is to be able to believe in God, to find the true faith: “And this was not a vague or passing desire; it was a profound and fervent aspiration of his entire soul, and it was also an extraordinary anguish, which distressed all the elements of his substance” (*Trionfo*, trans. Hornblow, 237–38). The same grief was shared by many fin-de-siècle intellectuals, and by D’Annunzio himself, who faced a world in which scientific discoveries in fields such as geology, biology, astronomy, and anthropology had “killed God” and opened the way to criticize institutionalized Christendom and the Church.\(^55\)

D’Annunzio’s first creative period, starting with the poems of *Primo vere* (First Spring, 1879), was already characterized by an anti-clerical polemic that he had inherited from the Italian poets Giosuè Carducci and Lorenzo Stecchetti.\(^56\) In his later literary works, the Catholic religion was interpreted as fanaticism and superstition.\(^57\) In the *Trionfo*, the critique of the peasants’ religiousness culminates in the scene of the pilgrimage to Casalbordino. Participating in the pilgrimage is Giorgio’s last attempt to find faith, but here the devotion of the peasants is revealed to be nothing more than an insane display of superstitious fanaticism. It becomes clear that there is no similarity between the peasants and the urban intellectual, and that the Catholic religion can offer no solution to the latter’s quest for faith.\(^58\)

For the fin-de-siècle generation, the death of God, the absence of the Absolute, and the denial of the hope of resurrection also changed the idea of life. Schopenhauer had characterized life as a short and meaningless episode, an incomprehensible expression of the spirit of Nature in a ceaseless stream of time (Schopenhauer 2008, 2:529–30). Successively, Nietzsche declared life and the world to be only an aesthetic spectacle that required no further justification. Humanity had no goal, nor was there any cosmic support for moral aspiration. What he added to Schopenhauer was the quest for a god, and as God was dead, human beings were impelled to create their own god.\(^59\) In much the same vein, for D’Annunzio, life had no aim, and the only god was man himself:

> Life knows only one destiny, it fulfills only one function: its sole intent is to perpetuate itself and multiply itself. There is no purpose, no goal,
no objective in the Universe; and there is no god. “My son, there is no other god but you.”

**The Seduction of Pan**

Although scientific discoveries and philosophical notions had shattered the picture of the universe as governed by Providence, and had transformed Nature into a mere biological process or a neutral, animalistic, and blind mechanism, the quest for transcendence during the fin de siècle did not disappear. Since traditional Christianity was not able to offer a solution, many people turned to other creeds: to esoteric philosophies, to occultism, to mysticism, and to Asian religions—among others. Likewise, D’Annunzio, regardless of his anti-teleological vision of the universe and life, was nevertheless deeply religious from the very beginning of his literary career until the end. His religion consisted of devotion to Saint Francis, and a fascination for Eastern mysticism, with which he first became acquainted through Schopenhauer. Yet the most coherent idea of his is a sort of panic sense of life. According to Ettore Paratore, *panismo* or nature worship is “the original and constant thread in D’Annunzio’s poetry.”

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in order to rediscover the lost God “killed” by the rationalism, the romantics had turned to Nature. The consequence was the rebirth of pantheism that accompanied the philosophical debate marking the switch from enlightened rationalism to romantic idealism. Pantheism seemed to be able to offer a solution for those who were in search of a new religion to replace the apparently defunct Christian faith. In Italy, the romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi displayed a panic perception of Nature. Successively, says Pietro Gibellini, Giovanni Marradi transmitted a *panismo*, a pantheism infused with Christianity, to the generation of Giovanni Pascoli and D’Annunzio.

According to certain francophone poets (Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Émile Verhaeren in particular), the traditional Christian religion and the nineteenth century’s positivist *credo* committed an identical error in that they both offered a fragmented conception of the world. The appeal of pantheism consisted precisely in providing a unified picture of reality, a picture that can be traced back to the seventeenth century. For Spinoza, God and Nature were two names given to the one and only reality that is the basis of the universe and of which all minor entities are only variations, “Deus sive Natura.” The most attractive
aspects of his philosophy were the unity of all that exists, the regularity of all that happens, and the identification of spirit with nature.\textsuperscript{67}

D’Annunzio’s \textit{panismo} consists of the exaltation of “immense, holy, sacred Nature”\textsuperscript{68} as a transcendent space of beauty, and the idea of the cosmos as a single holy unity.\textsuperscript{69} The quest to participate in this unity is constantly present in D’Annunzio’s life and works. Furthermore, the courage to become “the whole man,” the basic concern of Giorgio in the \textit{Trionfo}, ultimately means to experience this unity of man with the cosmos, as finally “the spirit dissolved in the grand rhythm.”\textsuperscript{70} For this reason, the image in \textit{Notturno} of the coffin of D’Annunzio’s dead friend in the Venetian lagoon conveys nothing more than a sense of harmony with nature:

\begin{quote}
The evening is made of opal, of gold, of amber. / The horizon is bejeweled like a long array of thrones. / Subsequently, this extravagance becomes dim and cold. The sky and the lagoon are two frozen beauties. / Is there a sweetness that wounds? It is this. / The man in the coffin is one with the horizon, the ring of the Universe.\textsuperscript{71}
\end{quote}

For D’Annunzio, “death is not destruction, but rather transfiguration.”\textsuperscript{72} It was a metamorphosis of a person from a carnal being into mere spirit, the liberation of the latter from the prison of the body. The beauty of death, and its fascination, lies precisely here, as he writes in the \textit{Licenza}, when he describes a flight over the Venetian lagoon during the war:

\begin{quote}
At that moment, more than any extreme point in my misery, I came to realize that the soul is a perpetual thing, not bound to bodies as a prisoner, but drawn out of bodies, the way a vase draws water and holds it, and then pours it out. Now the soul welled up and flowed like a flood, augmented enormously by the slaughter that emptied numberless bodies every day. Restored to freedom by heroism, the soul floated above the charnel house, transforming the appearance of the land and the meaning of the common breath of our humanity.\textsuperscript{73}
\end{quote}

\section*{Becoming Posthumous}

Death, comprehended as the fulfillment of unity and liberation of the spirit, does not mean separation from the survivors. On the contrary, in \textit{Trionfo della morte}, after Giorgio’s beloved uncle and spiritual mentor Demetrio dies, he is not only closer than ever to Giorgio, but also continues to exist solely for him.\textsuperscript{74} Similarly, in \textit{Contemplazione}
della morte, the afterlife of Adolphe Bermond is depicted as a mystical experience that allows the man to continue to exist in the memory of the living, after first having conjoined his physical existence to theirs:

The dead man entered into the living; and, before transforming himself into memory, he lived again within them, with his white hair, his wrinkles, his hunched shoulders, his pallid eyes, his quavering voice, his ulcerated innards. One after another they entered the gorge of shadow; they knelt down, they crowded around the bed, they became a compact thing that the dead man weighed down upon, as if on a bier of flesh and bone.75

Personal survival after death was indeed a significant preoccupation for D’Annunzio, and it culminated in the quest for immortality that death would ultimately fulfill. The connection D’Annunzio made between death and immortality is present in the play Fedra (Phaedra, first published in 1908),76 and it is unambiguously expressed in Notturno, where he writes: “Such a thirst for life is similar to the need to die and become eternal” (121). Later he repeats: “Never was sleep so alien to me; never amid so much death did I have so much longing for immortality” (214).

Personal survival in works of art or in fame became a veritable cult, especially in the Renaissance. Mortality validates immortality, for as life is extinguished, it enters into memory, which preserves it and thus gives it permanence. The idea that death bears witness to life is universal; once life is over, it becomes part of history.77 D’Annunzio’s death drive is thus also justified by the proposition that through death he would gain immortality by surviving in the memory of his public, both thanks to his works and to his life. For this purpose, during his entire life D’Annunzio put an enormous emphasis on creating a personal cult, a “cult of the self,” a notion made fashionable by the French novelist Maurice Barrès.78 He marketed his works efficiently, he made his last home at Lake Garda a national monument, and he wrote many autobiographical works that sublimated the past with fantastic imagination and personal mythology.79

D’Annunzio’s spectacular life was characterized by endless love stories, financial crises, and political and military activism. If we consider it in terms of death, there is still one point to be taken into consideration. Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence, which, together with the ideas of Schopenhauer, finds an echo in D’Annunzio’s works, has also been interpreted from the aesthetic point of view. In this regard, the doctrine indicates how to construct one’s life (and one’s interpretation
of it) as an artistic whole, with sufficient aesthetic merit to make its recurrence desirable. The same problematic is already present in D’Annunzio’s first novel, *Il Piacere* (The Child of Pleasure, 1889), in which the father of the protagonist Andrea Sperelli advises his son: “It is necessary to fashion oneself, as one fashions a work of art. It is necessary that the life of a man of intellect be of his own making. All true superiority lies in this.” If the aim was to create a life that would be worthy of being repeated after death, in this regard, for D’Annunzio, “the inimitable life” was thus another guarantee of becoming immortal. It was the very question of life and death.

**Notes**


2. Namely, *La Città morta* (The Dead City, 1899); *Francesca da Rimini* (1902); *La figlia di Iorio* (Jorio’s Daughter, 1903); *La nave* (The Ship, 1908); *Fedra* (1909); *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien* (The Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian, 1911); *La Pisanelle* (1913).


4. As to the novels, both *Giovanni Episcopo* (1891) and *L’Innocente* (The Intruder, 1892) are constructed around a murder. In *Il trionfo della morte* (The Triumph of Death, 1894) there are a fatal accident, a murder, and two suicides. In his last novel, *Forse che sì, forse che no* (maybe yes, maybe no, 1910), the reader is diverted by one death and one suicide.


8. All the translations from Italian to English are by Christopher Nissen, unless otherwise indicated.


11. For D’Annunzio’s relationship with his readers, see Cantelmo, *Il piacere dei leggitori*.


15. The nexus of love and death is particularly important in the tragedies *La nave* (The Ship, 1908), *Fedra* (1909), and *La Pisanelle* (1913).


21. According to Baldi, the *Trionfo della morte* is an avant-garde work with respect to the study of this kind of antihero. Baldi, *Le ambiguità della “decadenza,”* p. 77.
24. In subsequent novels, this character type was replaced by a Nietzschean superman. The paramount examples of D’Annunzio’s supermen are Claudio Cantelmo in *Le Vergini delle rocce* (the maidens of the rocks, 1895) and Paolo Tarsis in *Forse che sì, forse che no* (maybe yes, maybe no, 1910).
30. The sonnet is included in the collection entitled *Chimera*, now in G. D’Annunzio, *Versi d’amore e di gloria*, vol. 1, p. 458. In another sonnet entitled “I gigli” (The Lilies, 1888), there is a dichotomy between death and pleasure. The poem is also included in the collection *Chimera*, now in D’Annunzio, *Versi d’amore e di gloria*, vol. 1, p. 548.

32. D’Annunzio used the term “favilla” (spark) to describe the fragmented autobiographical short stories he started to publish at the beginning of the twentieth century. For the term “favilla,” see Costa, D’Annunzio, pp. 278–84.


37. For the representation of death during the fin de siècle, see Guthke, The Gender of Death, pp. 173–228.


42. G. D’Annunzio, Licenza. BIZ, Licenza 2, paragraph 122.
43. G. D’Annunzio, *Licenza*. BIZ, Licenza 2, paragraph 123
47. As Gioanola writes, in decadent literature, the presence of death gives a person the ability to choose the essential; the awareness of death makes one appreciate life, whereas learning to die means learning to live. Gioanola, *Il decadentismo*, pp. 179–80.
49. Turchetta has also come to the conclusion that D’Annunzio’s will to die is identified with his will to live. See G. Turchetta (1995), introduction to *Notturno* by G. D’Annunzio (Milan: Mondadori), p. xxxii.
51. D’Annunzio wrote this in two autobiographical works, both in *Licenza* (1916) and *Notturno* (1921); see D’Annunzio, *Licenza*, Licenza 2, paragraph 49; D’Annunzio, *Notturno*, p. 17. In *Il Libro segreto* he writes about the necessity of violent death: “Of all simple things, the simplest: characterized by an essential simplicity, quite necessary for me, almost my soul’s honor, the harsh culmination of my life: such is violent death to me.” D’Annunzio, *Prose di ricerca*, vol. 1, p. 1865.
53. For the *Contemplazione della morte*, see Costa, D’Annunzio, pp. 254–58.

60. D’Annunzio, *Licenza*, Licenza 2, paragraph 316. The last quote is from the novel *Forse che sì forse che no*, in which the protagonist, with his flight over the Tyrrhenian sea, turns into a Superman. See G. D’Annunzio (1998) *Forse che sì forse che no*, ed. R. Castagnola (Milan: Mondadori).


64. For pantheism at the beginning of the nineteenth century, see, for instance, C. Bouton (ed.) (2005) *Dieu et la nature: La question du panthéisme dans l'idéalisme allemand* (Hildesheim: Olms).


67. In addition to this, the popularity of Spinoza’s ideas at the end of the eighteenth century can be explained by the fact that they represented an alternative to materialism, atheism, and deism. Among the later philosophers who were most influenced by Spinoza are some contemporaries of D’Annunzio: Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Einstein. S. West (1993) *Fin de Siècle* (London: Bloomsbury), p. 124.


70. D’Annunzio, *Contemplazione della morte*, p. 22.
73. G. D’Annunzio, *Licenza*, Licenza 2, paragraph 419.
78. Barrès published his influential novel trilogy *Le culte du moi* between 1888 and 1891.
79. This is also Angelo Piero Cappello’s definition of D’Annunzio’s autobiographic works. See Cappello (2005) “Note e notizie sui testi,” p. 3426.
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