

“THE END AT THE BEGINNING”: DECADENCE AND MODERNIST INNOVATION

by

GABRIEL ALEXANDER LOVATT

(Under the Direction of Jed Rasula)

ABSTRACT

Over the past thirty years, scholarship on the connections between Decadence and modernism has expanded into its own field of inquiry. Despite the publication of cultural studies addressing the international scope of Decadence and theoretical reconsiderations of its aesthetic function, there remains comparatively little work that closely examines the wide-ranging texts of Decadence in relation to these changes. I address this gap by reading the aesthetics of transition in works of Decadence that have been either largely overlooked, like the sensationalist “Keynote Series,” or writing that need to be reconsidered in the context of a modernist vanguard, such as the poetry of Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson. I examine how the productive disruptions of Decadence exhibit an aesthetic commitment to destruction that precedes twentieth-century modernism’s obsession with discontinuity. The complex issues that surround Decadence—the slippery aesthetics, the unstable relationship it establishes between cognition, the body, and the manifest artwork—represents the advent of a century of radical works that challenge discrete notions of being, interacting, perceiving and creating.

INDEX WORDS: Decadence, Modernism, Avant-garde, Lionel Johnson, Aubrey Beardsley,
Aesthetics, Aestheticism, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Machen, M.P. Shiel,
Arthur Symons, Surrealism, Vorticism, Futurism, Dada, Expressionism.

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DEDICATION

For my grandmother, Ruby Etters, mother, Kathryn Etters Lovatt, and daughter, Asa Katherina Hussey-Lovatt.

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Without Jed Rasula, the ideas here would have never made it to the page. Not only has Jed proved an eagle-eyed reader of my work, but he's also served as a model and inspiration for how to intellectually and creatively engage the long history of aesthetic innovation. Richard Menke and Adam Parkes have given me incisive feedback on this project, and encouraged me to pursue the big ideas.

An illuminating visit to the Tate Modern's marvelous Futurist exhibition (2007) was the catalyst for my interest in the dynamic inventions that preceded the Futurists' bombastic claims. Though I have a great love of the twentieth-century Avant-garde, the contrarian in me doubted that any innovation was entirely without precedent. In the subsequent years, my study of the Historical Avant-garde with Jed, *fin de siècle* works with Adam, and Victorian culture with Richard allowed me to begin thinking about the long Avant-garde and the seeds of modernist procedures that were planted in the nineteenth century.

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means for artists and intellectuals was key to my understanding that the maintenance of one's family life doesn't take away from the work, but bolsters and feeds it.

My own family has provided a source of stability and a home wherever we go in the world. From Virginia to North Carolina to New Jersey to Indonesia to Hong Kong to London to South Carolina: my parents, Dan and Kathryn Lovatt, and my brother, Xan Lovatt, have been the best sort of gypsy tribe. Finally, I could have never done any of this without the support of my best friend and husband, Joshua Hussey, who not only spurs me creatively, but also inspires me to be a better person in the world. When we are sitting at the table with our beautiful, funny Asa—our house a disaster and eating a quickly assembled, flavorless meal—I am the happiest I've ever been. Our little family is everything.

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CHAPTER 1

“WHIRLED, EXPLODED, DECOMPOSED, RECOMBINED”:

THE ANTICIPATORY DESTRUCTIONS OF DECADENT MODERNISM

The advent of twentieth-century modernism, ushered in by Avant-garde movements that profess substantial ideological and aesthetic breaks with the nineteenth-century, makes the connection between Decadence and modernist experimentation difficult and contentious terrain. Many of the early modernist and Avant-garde writers publicly turned away from the Decadent movement by converting the pantheon of its engagements into musty caricatures. F.T. Marinetti, in his *Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, published in *Le Figaro* in 1919, describes the somnambulistic artistic milieu within which he and his colleagues are trapped (albeit luxuriantly) before they are awakened by a “mighty noise of the huge double-decker trams that rumbled by outside” into the society of the future.¹ The scene is decidedly a parody of the perceived Decadent fetishization of material beauty and physical lethargy:

We had stayed up all night, my friends and I, under hanging mosque lamps with domes of filigreed brass, domes starred like our spirits, shining like them with the prisoned radiance of electric hearts. For hours we had trampled our atavistic ennui into rich oriental rugs, arguing up to the last confines of logic and blackening many reams of paper with our frenzied scribbling.²

¹ Umbro Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, The Documents of 20th Century Art (New York: Viking Press, 1973). 19.

² Ibid.

The same spirit of vigorous denial pervaded London, where Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis were equally invested in the repudiation of their forerunners. A list of “Blasts” and “Curses” unfurled boldly down the page in “Manifesto—I” of the first issue of *BLAST* (1914). When accumulated, these snubs point to a broad and aggressive rejection of Decadence as a valuable predecessor.³ Among Pound and Lewis’s inventory of things to discard: “BRITANNIC AESTHETE,” “DANDY,” “SNOBBERY (disease of femininity),” “RHETORIC of EUNICH and STYLIST.”⁴ Like Marinetti, Pound and Lewis seek to distance themselves from the previous generation through a renunciation of the emblems of the Decadent era.⁵

Despite insistences that a decisive break occurs between the burnt out end of Decadence and the perpetual innovations of modernism, there remains connections between the two generations. In his manifesto’s pivotal rejection of the Decadent figure, Marinetti omits the fact that he was quite recently a Symbolist/Decadent Poet and publisher of the relatively conservative *Le Papyrus*. In Pound’s insistent “blast” of Decadence, there is no indication that he had arrived in London a mere five years earlier only to walk about town the very vision of a second generation Decadent, with his “beard cut to a point to resemble a Spanish conquistador, and as a final touch a singular turquoise earring.”⁶ And Pound did not only follow the sartorial initiatives that were the purported visual code of the Decadent.⁷ One of the poet’s early alliances in London

³ Wyndham Lewis, ed. *Blast I* (Black Sparrow Press Santa Barbara: 1981), 11-28.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15, 15, 15, 18.

⁵ Many of the authors of the 1890s share this impulse to distance themselves from Decadence. For instance, in Arthur Symons’s editorial note to *The Savoy*—perhaps, the most beautiful and distilled periodical of English Decadence—he announces: “We have no formulas, and we desire no false unity of form or matter. We have not invented a new point of view. We are not Realists, or Romanticists, or Decadents.” Arthur Symons, “Editorial Note,” *The Savoy*, no. 1 (Jan. 1896): 5. In his biography, Arthur Machen declares that his involvement in the movement was but a passing (and trendy) phase, “when yellow bookery was at its yellowest.” Arthur Machen, *The Autobiography of Arthur Machen* (London: The Richards Press, 1951). 238. Machen retrospectively reduces Decadence to “a storm—in a doll’s teacup.”

⁶ John Tytell, *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano* (Anchor Press: New York, 1987). 5.

⁷ Which is a late-century refashioning of the “dandaical body” that Thomas Carlyle diagnosed in *Sartor Resartus* (1837) as the vessel of man whose “[e]very faculty of soul, spirit, purse, and person is heroically consecrated to this

was with Elkin Mathews, who was also a preeminent publisher of British Decadence. Mathews founded the Bodley Head with John Lane, which issued, among other titles, the infamous *Yellow Book*.⁸ Pound and Mathews's later association resulted in the publication of *Cathay* and *Personae*. William Butler Yeats famously had a foot in both the experiments of the 1890s and those that came after as a member of the Decadent and Symbolist leaning Rhymers' Club, as well as an influential figure of modernism in the early twentieth century.⁹ T.S. Eliot, while loath to admit any contemporary influence, incorporates tropes and phrases that are reminiscent of Dowson's work into poems such as *The Waste Land* and *The Hollow Men*. The images in Djuna Barnes's *The Book of Repulsive Women* clearly pay homage to the sinuous and diabolic illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley.¹⁰ Each of these major figures of modernist literature, in

one object, the wearing of Clothes wisely and well." Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, ed. Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor, The World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). 207.

⁸ The Bodley Head came under fire during Oscar Wilde's trial, when the writer carried a yellow-covered French novel into the courthouse that was wrongly assumed to be a copy of the notorious *Yellow Book*, and consequently provoked riots at Lane and Mathews's publishing offices. Stanley Weintraub, *The Savoy: Nineties Experiment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966). xiv. This very public backlash seems to have affected Mathews, whose relationship with Pound was plagued with anxiety over potentially scandalous material. When Mathews sent Pound an edited copy of *Lustra* it was so heavily censored that Pound responded: "Do for god's sake send me a set of proofs unmarked This thing you have sent is like the greek statues in the Vatican with [illegible] fig leaves wired onto them." Ezra Pound, "A.L.S. to Elkin Mathews" in *Ezra Pound Collection, [ca. 1906-1958]* (UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library, 3 June 1916). The persistent question of prosecution and indecency lead Pound and Mathews to consult attorney Augustine Birrell, who concluded that it was "simply out of the question that any of the poems are exposed to the risk of a prosecution for Indecency." Augustine Birrell, "A.L.S. to Elkin Mathews," in *Ezra Pound Collection, [ca. 1906-1958]* (UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library, 21 May 1916). Still, Mathews's concern remained unabated: "But are not there other considerations for a publisher besides the mere avoidance of a prosecution? Also I am not at all sure that my objections were unnecessary...and how is a layman to determine the limits of safety in these matters?" Elkin Mathews, "A.L.S. to Augustine Birrell," in *Ezra Pound Collection, [ca. 1906-1958]* (UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library, 31 May 1916).

⁹ Yeats's autobiography manages to both situate his legacy outside of his early Decadent years and mythologize his compatriots in the Rhymers' club as the tragic generation. For sure, the fact that many of the key players didn't survive past 1900—and even if they did, they were professionally finished—leaves Yeats the only credible man standing to tell the story. But Yeats's enduring portrait of the 1890s has to be taken with a grain of salt. As Stephen Regan reminds us, in the poet's version of Irish nationalism, "England and Ireland are frequently subjected to the kind of mythologizing that Yeats himself was fond of. If late-Victorian England is redolent of wine and roses, then Ireland at the turn of the century is a place of fairytale and folklore." Stephen Regan, "W. B. Yeats and Irish Cultural Politics in the 1890s" in *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 67. For a particularly trenchant study on the dynamics of Yeats's influence on the younger modernists, see James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

¹⁰ Djuna Barnes also struggles with the legacy of Decadent modernism in *Nightwood*. According to Robin Blyn, Nikka, the circus performer who is the centerpiece of Dr. O'Connor's monologue, "is the inheritor of a Decadent

addition to a constellation of unnamed ones, had relationships with Decadence that were not simply generational, but ideological and aesthetic.

Scholarly interest in these connections and the resulting inquiry into the transitional dynamics between the 1890s and the seemingly unparalleled innovations of twentieth-century modernism has become its own field of study. That criticism, however, largely centers upon the cultural and material links between the Decadents and the modernists. Karl Beckson and Matthew Sturgis's illuminating cultural studies of the nineties identify the ways in which the cenacles of the 1890s defy the moral and cultural principles of Victorian society, suggesting that those tactics reappear in early modernism.¹¹ James G. Nelson's material histories depict the restless industry behind the late-nineteenth-century Decadent journals and independent publishing world that ultimately provides a template for the twentieth century boom of little magazines.¹² G.A. Cevasco and Cyrena Pondrom have tracked the connection of French

Aesthetic practice whose resurrection in the 1930s represents a critical appropriation tailored to, and reflective of, its own historical moment." Robin Blyn, "Nightwood's Freak Dandies: Decadence in the 1930s," *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 3 (Sep. 2008): 504.

¹¹ Beckson sees Wilde's legacy, in particular, as the beginning of the modernist dedication to freedom of expression: "It has often been said that Wilde's imprisonment marked the end of Decadence, but it is now clear that the phenomenon was a significant manifestation of early Modernism in its demand for greater freedom in exploring hitherto forbidden subjects, in its insistence on the autonomy of art, and in its contention that art owed less to nature than to the imagination of the artist." Karl E. Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992). 69. Beckson's monographs of individual figures also attempt to expand the story of Decadence beyond its doomed mythology. In particular, see his work on Henry Harland and Arthur Symons. Karl E. Beckson, *Henry Harland: His Life and Work*, Makers of the Nineties (London: Eighteen Nineties Society, 1978). Karl E. Beckson, *Arthur Symons, A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). Sturgis's study attempts to render the Decadent milieu as a varied, active scene beyond the scope of a few key figures. Though his work is primarily a cultural study, Sturgis does identify the reemergence of key concepts of Decadence in modernism, such as "the cultural relativism, the intense personal vision, the contempt for the general audience," and rightly acknowledges the modernists' general disavowal of the influence. Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Macmillan, 1995). 300.

¹² See James G. Nelson, *The Early Nineties: A View from the Bodley Head* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971). James G. Nelson and Peter Mendes, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson*, Penn State Series in the History of the Book (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).

Decadence upon its British counterparts and the emergence of Anglophone modernism, identifying the key texts and players in Britain and France involved in the exchange.¹³

David Weir and Linda Dowling's work begins to conceptualize Decadence in a way that allows it to expand into questions of formal and aesthetic connections, rather than contract into a series of explicitly material associations. By focusing on the ways that Decadence "amounts to a reformation of the aesthetic code whereby art brings forth its meaning," Weir surveys how the constantly shifting ground of the European *fin de siècle* functions as a prelude to the volatile transformations of modernist art.¹⁴ Weir emphasizes that "Decadence is transition, a drama of unsettled aesthetics, and the mixture of literary tendencies constituting that transition is at once within and without tradition and convention."¹⁵ Despite his attempt to situate Decadence as a porous site where oppositional binaries uncomfortably coexist, Weir still forces the aesthetics of Decadence into direct dialogue with other late-nineteenth-century movements such as Naturalism and Symbolism and, in doing so, demands that Decadence be viewed as a response that derives most of its power from reactionary subversion as opposed to creative production.

Dowling reads the emergence of Decadence against a linguistic crisis that was developing long before the end of the nineteenth century. The backdrop for Dowling's work is the failure of the Romantic philological concept of English literature as the *lingua communis* that will carry the ideals of Britain over the world, becoming a tool for the transference of national ideology and its imperializing drive. When the ideal of a homogenous English language—faced with an increasingly varied national tongue and a literature in which "even its greatest authors were compromised at every turn by its anarchic and inescapable linguistic heterogeneity"—can no

¹³ G. A. Cevalco, *The Breviary of the Decadence: J.-K. Huysmans's *À Rebours* and English Literature*, AMS Studies in the Nineteenth Century (New York: AMS Press, 2001). Cyrena N. Pondrom, *The Road From Paris: French Influence on English Poetry, 1900-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

¹⁴ David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995). 14.

¹⁵ Ibid.

longer be believed, Decadence emerges as the aesthetic enactment of that collapse.¹⁶ While Dowling's research focuses on the build-up to the Victorian linguistic crisis and the role of Decadence within it, she does emphasize the extent to which twentieth-century philosophies such as "Foucault's theory of discourse or Derridean deconstruction [are] none other than the dark spectre of autonomous language that haunted literary Decadence."¹⁷

The prevalence of material or cultural studies on Decadence results in a movement more known for its scandals and scintillating gossip than the enduring legacy of its aesthetic innovations. There remains a minimum of attention paid to the individual texts of Decadence, excepting the extensive work on *À Rebours* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. On the point of the actual literary texts of British Decadence, many critics have neglected to look closely at the strategies of individual works. There is the dismaying sense that the interest in Decadence defaults to broad strokes rather than specific inquiry. As Liz Constable, Matthew Potolsky, and Dennis Denisoff acknowledge, "Decadent style is so notoriously challenging that an entire critical cottage industry has sprung up to confront its near 'unreadability.'"¹⁸ To further complicate matters, close study of Decadent work has been stalled by a historically vocal criticism on the value of Decadent output. Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley could be summed up, according to E.T. Raymond, as each being "guilty of most extraordinarily bad taste, not a simple but a complex bad taste, reminiscent of the decaying Roman world."¹⁹ This indictment of bad taste is rampant not only in detailed studies of Decadence in its era, but broader surveys of art and culture. For instance, Arnold Hauser's sweeping compendium, *The Social History of Art*,

¹⁶ Linda C. Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986). 90.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁸ Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds., *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, New Cultural Studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 3.

¹⁹ E. T. Raymond, *Portraits of the Nineties* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1921). 194.

finds English Decadence particularly unbearable, despite his sympathies towards the entrenched social conservatism it faced:

In France, impressionist art and literature was not expressly anti-bourgeois in character; the French had already finished with their fight against philistinism and the symbolists even felt a certain sympathy for the conservative middle class. The literature of decadence in England has, on the other hand, to undertake the work of undermining which had been carried out in France partly by the romantics, partly by the naturalists. The most striking feature of the English literature of the period, in contrast to the French, is the proneness to paradox, to a surprising, bizarre, deliberately shocking mode of expression, to an intellectual smartness, the coquettish complacency and utter lack of concern for truth of which seems in such bad taste today.²⁰

Besides being deemed unendurable, Decadence has constantly encountered a categorical devaluation in comparison to other turn-of-the-century movements. Decadence is usually theorized as a brief, decade-long movement—"The Yellow Nineties"—in which it always fails to define itself as a cohesive whole with the same stylistic and thematic hallmarks of more fully realized "isms." Even Arthur Symonds, one of the most prominent literary figures in British Decadence, feels compelled to push the movement to the periphery when he revises his original study, *The Decadent Movement in English Literature* (1893), by subsuming Decadence within the larger context of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899): "The Interlude, half a mock-interlude, of Decadence, diverted the attention of the critics while something more serious was in preparation. That something more serious has crystallized, for the time, under the form of

²⁰ Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, 3rd ed., 4 vols., vol. 4 (London; New York: Routledge, 1999). 130.

Symbolism, in which art returns to the one pathway, leading through beautiful things to eternal beauty.”²¹ Symons situates Decadence as a pallid early sprouting that anticipates the full bloom of Symbolism. Decadence is a movement that, for Symons, is ultimately inferior to the serious, unified Symbolist aesthetic and intellectual program. This early move by Symons begins a long pattern that Constable, Potolsky, and Denisoff recognize as rendering Decadence “the weak other of some ‘strong’ literary movement, distinguishing the (good) Aesthetes from the (bad) decadents, the (transcendent) Symbolists from the (materialistic) decadents, or the (original) Romantics from the (imitative decadents) who merely parrot or plagiarize their imagery and doctrines.”²² Once one gets past such proclamations, the central aesthetic problem of Decadence remains that its critics attempt to situate it within the context of a staunchly formal category. Under this type of analysis, things fall apart—Decadence seems a lesser moment, an embryonic movement marked by disunity of any cohesive style that never realizes its full potential.

But why explicitly tie Decadence to the advent of modernist experimentation? What does Decadence anticipate regarding issues of artistic identity, artistic production, and formal innovation? Why Decadence and not, as Symons would have it, Symbolism? Part of what I’d like to recuperate is a sense that destruction, decay, and dissipation—the very attributes of Decadence that even many of its most lauded supporters are quick to deny—is what makes it such an apt starting point for the myriad destructions and deconstructions of modernity. Its very insistence of the creative act as one that is invested in social and aesthetic dissonance, as well as the ravaging of compactly wrought symbols, makes Decadence a movement that breaks the unified ground of nineteenth-century Realism. What Symons fails to anticipate in his

²¹ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: W. Heinemann, 1899). 7.

²² Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, 7-8.

pronouncement that under the umbrella of Symbolism a path towards beauty will be realized, is that the dream of the future is no longer one of unity and beauty—it is not a throwback to the Romantic Imagination—but an environment of fractured symbols.

Instead of attempting to hash out the explicitly stylistic traits of Decadence or assess it against the backdrop of other nineteenth-century movements,²³ I argue that the conceptual commitment of Decadence to destruction signals the beginning of what we often think of as a twentieth-century modernist phenomenon of disassembling the formal and conceptual work that precedes it. Formal destruction, ideological destruction, political destruction, material destruction, social destruction: modernism becomes synonymous with the implementation of procedures that unsettle art. Some of the most trenchant theoretical and aesthetic comments on the goals of modernist experimentation reinforce this idea. Wassily Kandinsky understands the emergence of new creative and intellectual forms as dependent upon destruction: “What thus appears a mighty collapse in objective terms is, when one isolates its sound, a living paean of praise, the hymn of that new creation that follows upon the destruction of the world.”²⁴ In his “History of Dada,” Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes recalls a program printed for a Dadaist demonstration, declaring that to participate in Dada is “to become aware of human progress in

²³ This task has proved futile many times. Almost every book on Decadence begins with an admission to the impossibility of defining it. Most famously, Richard Gilman dedicates an entire book on the ineffectiveness of coming up with an acceptable working definition of Decadence. Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979). John Reed announces, at the beginning of his study on the formal attributes of Decadence: “I share Richard Gilman’s dismay at the inaccuracy of the term *decadence*.” John Robert Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985). 7. This feature of many books and articles on Decadence—to undergo the process in which one tries (and fails) to define it—even crosses over into Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli’s study on Italian modernism, in which they explain the “pre-modern features of the term ‘decadence’” in order to foreground the “uncertain status” of modern Decadence. Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli, *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture Between Decadentism and Avant-garde*, Toronto Italian Studies (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). 66, 67.

²⁴ Wassily Kandinsky, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth Clement Lindsay and Peter Vergo, 1st Da Capo Press ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994). 388.

possible works of destruction.”²⁵ In 1915 Hugo Ball announces: “There is no language any more, the literary astrologers and leaders proclaim; it has to be invented all over again. Disintegration right in the innermost process of creation.”²⁶

The historians and critics of modernism are no less prolix on modernism’s destructive compulsion. One of the central premises of Marshall Berman’s now classic Marxist analysis of modernity explores the dissolution of recognizable forms. Berman conceives of Marx as a modernist who deftly diagnosed the ideas that would eventually define the times in “the glory of modern energy and dynamism, the ravages of modern disintegration and nihilism, the strange intimacy between them; the sense of being caught in a vortex where all facts and values are whirled, exploded, decomposed, recombined.”²⁷ And what is Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* if not a retrospective recasting of the nineteenth century through the prismatic lens of modernist discontinuity, a performative riff on the disordering effects of modernist dis-ease on memories of nineteenth-century order? These images of modernist destruction, which have historical analogues in the actual destroyed territory left by world wars and militarized warfare, forge a discourse between the natural function of destruction and the aesthetic one that presciently appear in the works of Decadence.

Despite the seeming alliance of British Decadence with withdrawal and fatigue, it is a particularly productive point at which to consider the ways that international Decadence constitutes a force at the forefront of dynamic aesthetic shifts towards abstraction. British Decadence certainly participates in and is influenced by the European Decadence and, in this

²⁵ Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, “The History of Dada,” in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell and Jean Arp (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), 115.

²⁶ Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 25.

²⁷ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1988), 121.

sense, it is a part of the emergence of the global Avant-garde that will drive the productive destructions of the first half of the twentieth century. The admiration of the British arm of Decadence for the French Decadence visibly emerges in Oscar Wilde's homage to the curious collections of *À Rebours* in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* or Arthur Symonds's organization of Paul Verlaine's tour of England. These instances and others represent a direct link, rather than a vague influence, between the European vanguard and the British one. In many ways, the power of British Decadence to shock lies not only in its immediate fidelity to taboo subjects and an aesthetics of excess, but in the fact that it revels in a version of modern England breached by foreign influences. In *Lectures in America*, Gertrude Stein famously declares the history of English Literature as the writing of "daily island life."²⁸ In light of this appraisal of English literature, what do we make of earlier instances of British Literature when its sensibilities are exposed to foreign ideas? Tobias Smollett's spleen filled narrative in *Travels Through France and Italy* certainly highlights the discomfort of the Englishman taken outside the structure of his routine. Though the Romantics seemed to value their time abroad—with Shelley and Byron in self-imposed exile and Coleridge and Wordsworth spending the better part of a year in Germany—a sense that European experiences should take place abroad, on the continent, and shouldn't cross over into English territory persevered. In his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), William Wordsworth lamented the importation of German literature onto English soil and its deleterious effects: "The invaluable works of our elder writers, I had almost said the works of

²⁸ Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985). 33. Read in the context of charting a territory for American literature, Ulla E. Dydo contrasts Stein's "description of the self-contained 'English daily island life' in a circumscribed space" to the more expansive terms by which she theorizes an independent American literature. Ulla E. Dydo and William Rice, *Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, 1923-1934, Avant-garde & Modernism Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2003). 619. Liesl Olson has focused on the extent to which Stein's idea of "daily life" derives from her "lifelong interest in the relationship between habit and political stability." Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). 97. According to Olson, Stein depicts English life as "homogenous, prosperous, and seemingly untroubled," an environment in which writers can afford to be "obsessed with themselves, with dailiness."

Shakespear and Milton, are driven into neglect by frantic novels, sickly and stupid German Tragedies, and deluges of idle and extravagant vagaries in verse.”²⁹ But at the end of the nineteenth-century, the periphery of that island would increasingly appear unstable and permeable. Decadence compromised its boundaries, allowing ideas derived from what J.K. Huysmans called “*le style tacheté et faisandé*” through the border.³⁰

For both the detractors of Decadence and its participants, these trespassers were constituted of chimeric qualities. Formally, the alliances of Decadence with baroque excess moves towards abstraction by using procedures that employ a surfeit of sound or image to break apart the line of verse or the narrative logic. In Decadence, we can witness representative art undergoing the initial phase of destruction, a path that will lead toward pure abstraction. Clement Greenburg notably attributes this sort of artistic reflexivity to the advent of twentieth-century modernist art after centuries of refining representative forms: “Realistic, illusionist art had disassembled the medium, using art to conceal art. Modernism used art to call attention to art.”³¹ However, many of the processes in Decadent literature entail some of the very same approaches that Greenburg outlines. Theodore Wratislaw’s work, for example, is so laced with double entendre and heightened descriptions of the natural world, that his poetry draws attention to the materiality of language. The same focus on language as a medium erupts in Michael Field’s collection of verses, *Underneath the Bough*, which essentially functions as a mash-up of lines from their earlier verse plays, converting dialogue into a skittish patchwork of decontextualized monologues.³²

²⁹ William Wordsworth, *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Charles Gill, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). 500.

³⁰ Translated by Arthur Symons as “high-flavored and spotted with corruption” and quoted in Arthur Symons, “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” *Harper’s New Magazine* 87, no. 522 (1893): 859.

³¹ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 86.

³² Emily Harrington argues for a closer analysis of the way Field’s recycling transforms both the original publication

Regardless of the links between the late nineteenth and twentieth century, modernism has traditionally been viewed as emerging from the ashes of Decadence. Besides the reactionary expostulations of Marinetti, Lewis, and Pound, the very theorization of modernism tended to emphasize the difference between the waning end of the nineteenth century and the emergence of the new. Even early theorization of modernist literature took this position. According to Michael Levenson, T.E. Hulme's construction of modernism ultimately depended upon a stance which declared that the "modern individualizing tendency was no longer conceived as the furthest stage of development but as the decadent conclusion of a romantic phase."³³ Innovation required a "rejection, not an embrace of those individualizing habits and a return to classicism."³⁴ For Hulme, Decadence is in no way a step towards modernism, but something oppositional. Lionel Trilling's final book seemed to assert a career-long set of assumptions that the twentieth century is aesthetically divorced from previous ones, contrasting the "sincerity" of the Romantic Era to the "authenticity" of the modern, characterizing the "original energy" of the modernists as a "sudden impatience with the idea of the organic."³⁵ Despite the invaluable ideas that emerge from Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony*, he places Decadence at the tail end of a long evolving phenomenon as the coda to Romanticism.

More specialized studies of the historical Avant-garde tend to represent the vanguard as an aesthetic upheaval without precedent. Decadence troubles this narrative. That Decadence entails the breakdown of mimetic art forms, a hybrid with one limb in representative art and another

and the later book of poems: "Because this collection de-and re-contextualizes its poems, it insists on the indeterminacy of lyric and works against any attempts to gather these fragments from multiple dramas into one cohesive new narrative [...] This material variability changes potential answers to the question of who, if anyone, is speaking, singing, or writing. Michael Field thus asserts not only the instability—and the portability of the lyric "I," but that the processes of detachment and attachment are fundamental to the lyric as a genre." Emily Harrington, "Michael Field and the Detachable Lyric," *Victorian Studies* 50, no. 2 (2008): 221.

³³ Michael H. Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). 100.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972). 128.

pulling away towards abstraction, challenges the explosive, self-mythologizing origin stories of Avant-garde modernism. For most critics, the radical experiments of modernism are contained in the twentieth century. And even if, on the theoretical level, this isn't *entirely* true—it is practically true: Decadence gets mentioned in the introduction or as context, but its individual works are rarely analyzed in depth or on equal footing with its later analogues.³⁶ Renato Poggioli recognized a certain kinship between the Decadent worship of ancient civilizations and the Futurist drive towards the new: “Degeneration and immaturity equally aspire to transcend the self in a subsequent flourishing; thus the generations that feel themselves decrepit, like those that feel themselves adolescent, are both lost generations.”³⁷ And yet, Poggioli continues to deny that Decadence had any sort of awareness of the future and its aesthetic transformations, declaring that it had a “tendency to ignore the anticipatory.”³⁸ Marjorie Perloff, who acknowledges the trace of English Decadence in something like Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*³⁹ and admires the “psychological depth, vision, and metamorphosis” of Rimbaud's “*Je est un autre*,” remains focused on the twentieth century.⁴⁰ For Perloff, as for many other scholars, Futurism represents the instituting movement of experimental modernism and the International Avant-garde.⁴¹

The relationship between Decadence and Futurism—and the critical attention paid to the latter movement's claim to modernity—is a prominent obstacle in any theorization of innovative Decadence. Futurism, making its claims based on its antithetical relationship towards Decadent

³⁶ The most notable exception here is Matei Calinescu's *Five Faces of Modernity*, which dedicates an entire chapter to Decadence and situates it as one of the key movements in the creation of modernism. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

³⁷ Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968). 76.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990). 164.

⁴⁰ Marjorie Perloff, *Wittgenstein's Ladder: Poetic Language and the Strangeness of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). 73.

⁴¹ Actually, John J. White's entire book is predicated on establishing Futurism as the instituting force of the Avant-garde. John J. White, *Literary Futurism: Aspects of the First Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

modernity, demands a rejection of everything prior. Valentine de Saint-Point plots out just such a course in order to reclaim modernity from the sterile threats of Decadence in his January 1913 “Futurist Manifesto of Lust,” “ART AND WAR ARE THE GREAT MANIFESTATIONS OF SENSUALITY; LUST IS THEIR FLOWER. An exclusively intellectual people or an exclusively carnal people are condemned to the same decadence: sterility.”⁴² The Futurist fantasy rejects the overwhelmed Decadent figure and replaces him (for in Futurism, just as in Decadence, the subject is almost always a *him*) with an excited antagonizer. Perhaps nowhere is this kind of conversion more apparent than when Henri Gaudier-Brzeska defends the Futurist vision of war from the trenches. The sobering notice of Gaudier-Brzeska’s death on the frontlines follows the sculptor’s insistence, to the end, that “THIS WAR IS A GREAT REMEDY. IN THE INDIVIDUAL IT KILLS ARROGANCE, SELF-ESTEEM, PRIDE.”⁴³

But the thrill is brief. The legacy of Decadence becomes apparent in the literature and art produced in between the two world wars. As the dream of a hygienic, efficiently mechanized world is replaced with its real horrors, literature and art seem to offer a revised vision of the world more in line with the predictive collapse in Decadence. Against the energized, machine-driven credo of the Futurists, I contend that it is Decadence that becomes the *de facto* thesis of the modernist experiment. This realignment of the twentieth century in a Decadent vein is starkly evident in movements like German Expressionism and Dada, which are not corrective forces to Decadence, but reveal ideological and formal debts to its precursor. If the Futurists promised a reprieve from what they interpreted as turgid Decadent prophesies of discontinuity and collapse, the landscape at the end of World War I signals a return to the ruling metaphors of Decadence:

⁴² Valentine de Saint-Point, “Futurist Manifesto of Lust,” in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 130.

⁴³ Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, “Vortex Gaudier-Brzeska: (Written from the Trenches),” *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex*, no. 2: War Number (July 1915): 33.

confusion, breakdown, failure, retreat. The innovations of Decadent modernism are in advance of modernist strategies that will continually recommit (and reinvent) the process of destruction as an aesthetic ambition. In her analysis of the transformation of monolithic English culture through the unparsable language of Decadence, Linda Dowling rightly refers to Decadence as an Avant-garde movement. While Dowling's invocation of the Avant-garde primarily evokes the accumulated associations with invention and difficulty when avant-garde is employed descriptively, Decadence more precisely functions as the beginning of what we normally categorize as the historical Avant-garde of the twentieth century. By employing Dowling's expressive label as a precise category of inquiry, we can explore the ways in which the ideological, aesthetic, and procedural functions of Decadence augur the productive destructions of modernism.

The function of the permeable boundaries of Decadence are not so different than the shifting parameters that allows even the staunchest factions of the modernist Avant-garde to transform from one decade to the next. After all, axiomatic to groups on the vanguard of innovation is the principle of movement: the front guard must push ahead in order to maintain their edge. From our vantage point or even the Futurists', Decadence may appear increasingly further in the back lines as innovation marches on, but it still constitutes part of the core troops of the historical Avant-garde. Many of the fundamental attacks of Decadence upon nineteenth-century aesthetic forms provide a template for the processes that the modernist Avant-garde implements. The assaults of Decadence upon continuity, clear meaning, and Cartesian reasoning are expanded throughout the twentieth century.

The thematic and ideological resonances of Decadence have formal equivalents that succeed in breaking up the reflective surface of realism. The Decadents texts I explore reveal the

multiple iterations of formal and conceptual destruction that inform the disintegrative properties of modernism. Each chapter takes on a strategy of aesthetic destruction—such as ruin, fragmentation, erasure—and considers how individual texts work within these categories. Section by section, I study how the aesthetic destructions attributed to the innovations of twentieth-century literary modernism were, in effect, engaged by Decadent writers in the last decade of the twentieth century.

This is an approach that reads individual works as a part of the extended reconceptualization of Decadence. As Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky argue, there has previously been too much emphasis on trying to define the limits and hard markers of Decadence, instead of exploring how it manages to “interfere with the boundaries and borders (national, sexual, definitional, historical, to name but a few) that criticism normally relies upon to make its judgment.”⁴⁴ As opposed to attempting to stabilize a discrete theory of the aesthetics and canonical texts of Decadence, I think of it as a protean movement that, while historically situated, touches more texts and authors than may ordinarily be considered. To expand the ways in which we talk about the engagement and influence of British Decadence, I have chosen a mix of essential texts and authors, as well as some that are not closely associated with the movement. In part, this illustrates that Decadence does not merely die out with the demise of the core group of the “tragic generation.” Its status as a decentralized aesthetic program allows it to continue to exert influence beyond the traditional historical parameter of the 1890s.

At the end of the century, many British Decadents seem preoccupied with the narrowing of the cultural field ushered in by social conservatism and commercialism. Despite the tropes of ennui and infertility, the experiments of the period speak to a creative vitality that finds new approaches to aesthetic expression in such a restrictive climate. The tropes of Decadence

⁴⁴ Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, 11.

resist the emergence of the commodified art object and literary market. Even in the cases of the more commercially successful and economically viable works that I discuss, such as Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations or John Lane's "Keynotes" series, there is an irrefutable commitment to the subversion of populist and marketable forms. My close readings zero in on the way that language or imagery works in a specific instance, but the broader implications of my argument reimagine Decadence as an aesthetic disruption of its contemporaneous society and culture rather than a rarefied withdrawal from the modern world. Underpinning my formal critique is Theodor Adorno's insights that Decadence rejects the demands of capitalist culture by refusing to contribute to a culture that aspires to standardization. For Adorno, the Decadent figure is emblematic of non-participation in the capitalist system, "the refuge of a better potentiality by virtue of the fact that it refuses obedience to this life, its culture, its rawness and sublimity."⁴⁵ Apathy and impotence is a dynamic inversion of the doctrines that drive industrialization and capitalism, a reversal, Adorno goes so far as to say, that may offer us a chance to endure: "That which stands against the decline of the west is not the surviving culture but the Utopia that is silently embodied in the image of decline."⁴⁶ Matei Calinescu understands Adorno's thoughts as a shift in the interpretation of Decadence, in which it "no longer appears as a poisonous manifestation of 'bourgeois ideology' but, on the contrary, as a reaction against it, and, moreover, as a deep and authentic awareness of a crisis to which no easy (or even difficult) solutions can be prescribed."⁴⁷

When one takes on, rather than avoids, the individual works of the Decadent movement, we are forced to study not only the ways in which they resist the dominant culture of their time, but how they contribute to the confrontations that follow. Decadent works pose many of the

⁴⁵ Adorno, "Spengler Today," *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 2 (1941): 325.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*: 210-11.

same questions about the limits of artistic representation asked in studies on twentieth-century modernism: what kind of art can survive the political disorder, the technological efficiency, and the permeation of the marketplace into every form? Though modernist studies has always claimed key figures as predecessors—individuals like Charles Baudelaire and Walter Pater, who set particular currents of thought in motion—that sense of a large-scale sea change was already present in the 1890s. Many of the texts presented here offer various points of turbulence in that shift. While this study is explicitly about the individual textual interventions of Decadence that represent nascent versions of what will become more extensively developed in modernism—procedures such as ruin, disorder, collage, palimpsest—it is also about the ways that the dedication of Decadence to ends—the end of century, the end of culture, the end of health—sets in motion a dark modernism. Decadence was—excepting its lack of a tell-tale suffix—at the beginning of the “isms” of modernism, not just because the cadre of Decadent writers seemed to work as a collective in ways that so many of the most politicized movements of Avant-garde modernism did, but because it understood the renovation of art necessitated its destruction.

The particular formal and thematic traits of Decadence will continue to be present as important markers of its preoccupations. But just as surrealism had automatic writing and Futurism had revolutionary typography, Decadence had its own systematic strategies of disruption. We can see some of these in hallmarks such as the recycling of older verse forms for new purposes, the attempt to evoke synaesthesia by graphing one sensory experience onto another, the unreadable and extensive catalogues of exotic things, the cultivation of unnatural themes and syntax.⁴⁸ As early as 1903, Ralph Strode and Louis Marlow described what we now

⁴⁸ Patrick McGuinness surmises that the Decadent penchant for exotic things is actually a reflection of the boom in archaeological excavations during the late-nineteenth century. Patrick McGuinness, *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin de Siècle: French and European Perspectives* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000). 230. In this sense, the Decadent catalogue, as a literary analogue to those expedition catalogues, is as influenced by the cultural and

think of the effects derived from techniques synonymous with Decadence in their send-up, “The Last of The Decadents”: “Years ago, the esthete, whirling the ebony cane of improbability with a fastidiousness that was all too natural, brought new life to us. The new philosophy shows us glimpses of a strange, unknown world—where art transcended nature, where men were not ashamed of themselves, where sense was subordinate to sensation.”⁴⁹ Significantly, Strode and Marlow write about the 1890s with the same skewering retrospect of Marinetti, and make fun of the last, anachronistic Decadent who lives in an estate called “Craven Mansions,” detests “commercialism in any forms,” and aspires to be known as “minor poet.”⁵⁰ Still, the stereotypes of Decadence—whether or not they are dismissals—reveal something crucial about the centrality, if not the cohesion, of its commitment to an aesthetic strategy for engaging modernity through refutation.

In investigating the destructions of Decadence, one naturally comes up against the uncomfortable rhetoric of Degeneration. If the commitment of modernism to demolishing the cultural and artistic models of earlier centuries was seen, paradoxically, as reinvention, the critics of Degeneration saw the demolitions of Decadence as advancing towards a termination. While theories of Degeneration have long been retired as a credible mode of critique, in the appraisals of taste that I referred to earlier there still lingers the tone of distaste that was so conspicuous in the works of Max Nordau, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis. This raises serious questions about Decadent criticism’s seemingly two pronged response to the decay entailed in Decadence: to either embrace Decadence as a coda to an era—the capstone to the Victorian age—or to declare that a deep engagement with decay is not really the provenance of Decadence,

advances of its era as the mechanized graphics of the Vorticists and Futurists is influenced by the technological progress of the twentieth century.

⁴⁹ Ralph Strode and Louis Marlow, “The Last of the Decadents,” *The Smart Set: A Magazine of Cleverness* 11, no. 4 (Dec. 1903): 75.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 77, 78, 80.

thus recuperating it into a space of production and the regenerative. But these processes and images of disruption, decay, impotence, and sterility provide the ground in which the Moderns flourish. I reflect on the importance of these concepts in the texts of British Decadence, as well as the associations with modernism. The rhetoric *against* Decadence, much of which descends—if not in letter, in spirit—from theories of Degeneration, can become a case *for* the inventiveness of Decadence when converted into an analysis of formal and conceptual strategies.

The six body chapters individually explore the abstract and concrete ways towards that end through issues such as disordered embodiment, the processes of natural and cultural ruin, the emergence of the fragment as a primary building block of modernist aesthetics, the obliteration of meaning through repetition and recycling, and the modernist palimpsest. Each of the chapters covers how these procedures are defined within the context of modernist studies, and how they begin to emerge in specific works at the end of the nineteenth century. As I move from chapter to chapter, I survey how these processes are manifested by key figures in British Decadence. In some cases, the relationship of these artists to the preceding centuries years is unsentimental—they pilfer and reimagine old forms and themes for modern expression. By considering Arthur Symonds, Aubrey Beardsley, M.P. Shiel, and Ernest Dowson's Decadent modernism from the context of aesthetic practice, rather than cultural context, their artistic concerns more clearly predict those of later generations. In others, the relationship with the past is nearly a haunting—the artists struggle with the illusion that previous centuries offered an aesthetic unity and the possibility of lucid self-expression that eludes the chaotic shifts of modernity. While Arthur Machen and Lionel Johnson's formal innovations may seem less audacious, the anxieties that they articulate about new ways of being in a changing world forecast the concerns of many writers in the following generations.

In the first chapter, I put Arthur Machen and M.P. Shiel in the framework of a larger conversation about Decadent embodiment. In *The Great God Pan* and “The Inmost Light” Machen uses a boilerplate supernatural mystery to frame a story governed by fevered disorientation. Out of all of the authors discussed, Machen employs a narrative that is most analytically engaged with the issues of Decadence, providing cogent observations that run throughout both stories. Machen’s “Keynotes” works function as texts about Decadence, as well as Decadent texts. Also in this category is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which explores the movement without fully capitulating to its formal excesses.⁵¹ Even though Machen’s narrators do not entirely succumb to the most extreme aesthetic innovations of Decadence, there are passages that fall into an unreadable glut of textual detail, with lists and descriptions that obfuscate clear meaning and call attention to the medium of language. Shiel, on the other hand, exemplifies Decadent prose style at its most inflamed state. If Machen distills the fears surrounding Decadence by containing those terrors within a generally lucid narrative exegesis, Shiel’s narrators have been entirely colonized by the “virus” of Decadence. *Shapes in the Fire*, a collection of short stories that is almost unreadable for its compendium of ancient languages and crypto-archaic references, exemplifies a textual disorientation that marks Decadent prose at its formal limit. By focusing on these three works, I consider how Decadence is not just a culture, but also an aesthetically innovative category that writers can participate in without being wholly invested in the social world that we think of surrounding British Decadence. Shiel and Machen’s work exemplifies what I might call a Decadent phase, their stories testifying to the brief vogue

⁵¹ A contentious statement to be sure—after all, *Dorian Gray* is probably the most widely read literary example of British Decadence. But I contend that, like Machen, Wilde’s novel reflects and engages the Decadent motif while standing a bit outside. Still, what strikes me about the Machen, as well as the Wilde, is the sense that the aesthetic of Decadence is a way of life that institutes a contagious, uncontrollable influence.

for Decadence. We can, of course, see this same modeling of aesthetic styles throughout literary history, but to my mind Decadence exemplifies the modern move towards aesthetic modes in which the roles of artists and artworks are increasingly mutable.

Chapters two, three, and four look at three of the central figures in the lyric poetry of Decadence: Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, and Ernest Dowson. While Dowson, Symons, and Johnson's poetry is frequently referenced as paradigmatic of the British Decadence, there remains little criticism on the actual work outside of studies that either summarily address each author in an attempt to delineate an overarching theory of Decadent poetry or set the poets within the social milieu of the era. In my section on Johnson, I claim that the nostalgia for the past generally ascribed to the poet as a sign of his ambivalence towards contemporary life is actually aligned with modernist conceptions of ruin. It is this instability in Johnson's work—with its striking alternations between austerity and excess, longing and immediacy—that marks him as one of the most conceptually and formally modern of Decadent poets. My argument moves through discussions of religious anxiety, the suffering body, and the landscape of silence and sound to suggest how we might read Johnson's writing of the ruins as a forecast of the modernist preoccupation with formal and thematic devastation.

Chapter three explores how Arthur Symons's nineties poetry employs fragmentation to break up the settings and subjects of his work. In *London Nights*, *Silhouettes*, and *Amoris Victima* Symons employs proto-cinematic processes, such as montage and cropping, to call attention to the erratic terrain of experience. The result is incoherent poetic images that are disorienting and decontextualized. Symons vacillates between the poles of a heightened objectivity, what I might call an antiseptic modernism—almost detached from any personal subjectivity—and a completely subjective exploration of sensual experience. The radically different positions that his

poetic narrators occupy find equivalence in Symons's critical writings, which bounced between intellectual audacity and sterile precision. Some of Symons's distance can certainly be seen in his work as the critical impresario of British Decadence. His statement on Decadence is perhaps the most straightforward and cogent of manifestos—Beardsley's *Art of the Hoarding* works playfully and elliptically, while Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying" and Max Beerbohm's parodic *Defence of Cosmetics* reveal their sentiments through oblique insistence rather than outright declaration.

The penultimate chapter considers Ernest Dowson's uses of repetition under the aegis of a modernist strategy that overwhelms logical sense and temporal progression. In Dowson's verse, the refrains reveal a poetry of exhaustion rather than a spirited recycling of significant phrases. Instead of investing in the capacity for the modern lyric to reinvent itself, such as through *vers libre* or found poetry, he employs traditional forms and rhyme schemes to expose the collapse of those forms and phrases. Dowson's regular use of the villanelle, for instance, does not indicate precision and linguistic dexterity, but signifies a conterminous moment in which all lines are involved in a cycle of repetition and refusal of anything new in the poetic and experiential landscape. Pair this with the abject condition of many of Dowson's subjects—the mad, the drunk, the damaged, the imprisoned—and we have a type of excess that uncovers a world suffuse with waste and emotional numbness rather than the surfeit of luxury normally allied with Decadence.

In the final chapter, I analyze Aubrey Beardsley's *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* as an example of the modernist palimpsest in which innovation comes from omnivorous reappropriation and erasure. Beardsley overwrites the original folk song and Richard Wagner's version of the German Minnesänger's tale with a celebration of subconscious desires that

anticipates the investigations of expressionism and surrealism. Surrealism, with what is now its almost codified pantheon of dream images and procedures, such as automatic writing, may represent the height of artistic experiments into the subconscious. However, Beardsley's exploration of the dream state as a space for creative and social reinvention is just as precise. In Tannhäuser's unrepentant dream of the Venusian Hörselberg, he explores the erotic and imaginative potential of transgression.

While each of these chapters emphasizes individual authors and examines how their work plays a part in the development of modernism, I imagine that the issues I bring up in the following pages have wider application. There are many British Decadent texts that remain out of print and unaddressed in critical literature. The lack of attention to these works has less to do with their status as minor literature than with a critical discourse that has too long focused on how Decadence can be defined, rather than how its many permutations are reflective of its alignment with the variability of modernist aesthetics. My hope is that these chapters function less as a tidy series of case studies but, rather, that each section works as an intervention in previous ways of interpreting the texts of Decadence. For as many declarations as there are from modernist artists, critics, and, Decadent writers, themselves, that the 1890s represent an endpoint, Decadence offers an aesthetic response to social and economic shifts that chart a course for the modernist literature of the twentieth century.

CHAPTER 2

SENSE SWALLOWED UP:

CONTAGION AND BREAKDOWN IN THE “KEYNOTES” VOLUMES

‘Twas rollog, and the minim potes

Did mime and mible in the cafe;

All footly were the Philerotes,

And Daycadongs outstrafe.

Beware the Yallerbock, my son!

The aims that rile, the art that racks,

Beware the Aub-Aub Bird, and shun

The stumious Beerbomax.

—— Mostyn Turtle Piggott

“The Second Coming of Arthur.

(A Certain Past Adapted to a Possible Future.)”⁵²

Prior to addressing the central feature of this chapter, let me discuss the preceding epigraph. In 1895, Mostyn T. Piggott’s parody of “Jabberwocky” appeared in London’s *World*, imitating Lewis Carroll’s celebrated nonsense verse in order to scorn the increasingly high profile of the 1890s movement. “Daycadongs” are proliferate enough for this satire, which skewers the aesthetic aims of Decadence by inferring that it is so much childish gibberish, to

⁵² Mostyn T. Piggott, “The Second Coming of Arthur (A Certain Past Adapted to a Possible Future),” *The World (London)*, no. 1088 (8 May 1895): 29.

resonate with the readers of *World*. Despite its attempt at light-hearted mockery, the note of anxiety in Piggott's parody reveals the public discomfort with Decadent art, Decadent artists and, perhaps most acutely, a Decadent lifestyle. In addition to its humor, central to the poem is the warning against Decadence with its disturbing corporeal provocations, with its "aims that rile" and "art that racks."

By the time Temple Scott cites Piggott's "Second Coming of Arthur" in his report on the state of London's literati in an 1898 issue of *The Dial*, the contentious and important aesthetic ground laid by Decadence is already being resurfaced to minimize its impact. While only two years earlier, the "air was resonant with the praise for lately discovered geniuses," Scott commends the new sobriety as if Decadence was so much empty fun: "There were 'jawblings' and 'jucundings' and the 'Yallerbock' was at large. But the year just ended has brought a change. We have had our fun, and now we are meditating on the foolishness of it all."⁵³ Scott's notice expunges the increasingly censorious climate that produces such change, relegating the intolerant climate encompassing the Wilde trials as a sensible corrective to so much "foolishness."⁵⁴ Both Piggott's parody and the more sober denunciations of Decadence demonstrate the extent to which the body—whether it be tortured, lustful, racked with desire, or decaying—becomes not only a part of the aesthetic of Decadence, but also of the surrounding reactions and discussions.

Compared to its late nineteenth-century counterparts, the insistence of Decadence on experiential meaning separates it from the more systematic approach of Realism, which qualifies experience with arguments about objective and universal knowledge, or Symbolism, which

⁵³ Temple Scott, "English Correspondence," *The Dial* 24, no. 279 (Feb. 1, 1898): 86.

⁵⁴ Oscar Wilde's trials represent cultural conservatism at its most public pinnacle, openly and politically dividing the artistic community between the Avant-garde and "conservative and morally high tone authors." Nelson and Mendes, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson*: 57. Major publishers bend to moralist backlash, making it increasingly difficult for fine artists, like Aubrey Beardsley, to find work, and poets, like Arthur Symonds, to be published.

erects a parallel system of meaning. The fidelity of Decadence to expressions of abnormality and discontinuity as the most apt engagement with the contemporary world anticipates experimental modernism's preoccupation with the relationship between exterior space, the body, and interior perception. As a consequence, aesthetic meaning often trumps logical meaning to reveal the interpenetration of conceptual and perceptual structures. Twentieth-century consideration of embodied being is, at this point, a rich and wide-ranging discursive field. Philosophers and critics reassessed the ways that sense-experience and physical perception are married to cognition and conceptualization. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's inquiry into the body is foregrounded by the long-shadow of Enlightenment thinking, wherein "the experience of one's own body runs counter to the reflective procedure which detaches subject and object from each other, and which gives us only the thought about the body, or the body as an idea, and not the experience of the body or the body in reality."⁵⁵ Tracking the enduring consequences of the separation between intellectual and physical knowledge, Michel Serres considers what a system of knowledge that incorporates the body might look like by displacing logical disassociation with sensory association.⁵⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson explore how "the very mechanisms responsible for perception, movements, and object manipulation could be responsible for conceptualization and reasoning."⁵⁷ But what if one's perceptions and experiences are increasingly disordered and resistant to reason? I propose that one of the major aesthetic innovations of Decadence lies in the conditions of embodied perception it imposes upon its subjects. In its most extreme realizations,

⁵⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London; New York: Routledge, 1962). 198-99.

⁵⁶ Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London; New York: Continuum, 2008).

⁵⁷ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). 38.

Decadent art revels in experiences of the body that resist logical ordering and reasoning to produce irreducible metaphors and images that participate in meaning despite their imperviousness to linguistic interpretation.⁵⁸

Under the conditions of Decadent embodiment, stable experience and observable truth become increasingly abstracted. This razing of the epistemological and phenomenological grounding upon which Victorian Realism staked its claim begins its charge well before the 1890s.⁵⁹ The Pre-Raphaelite importation of Quattrocento Italy, Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, and A.C. Swinburne's quixotic mix of dense sound and hallucinatory image all make headway in producing alternatives to Realism. Decadence seizes on the inroads made by both these domestic forerunners and their European equivalents, culminating in an aesthetics that spans the gap between elite artistic culture and the sensationalism of popular culture.⁶⁰ Decadent novels are particularly suited to exploiting this position by merging populist form with subversive proposition.⁶¹ Such a union is obvious in a work like Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which unites the increasingly conventional formula of potboiler Gothic horror with

⁵⁸ For further discussion of the role of illogic in perception and meaning, see Mark Johnson's work on embodiment independent of Lakoff. Johnson's theory of embodiment explores the way images that are logically non-propositional—that do not express a statement that can be logically true or false—are propositional in a special sense that makes them central to our rationality." Mark Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). xxi. While Johnson allows that it's widely acknowledged that the body plays a part in experience and meaning, this "received notion of the role of bodily input (into meaning and inference patterns) does not include a place for non-propositional, figuratively elaborated schematic structures."

⁵⁹ One of Victorian Realism's most strident champions, George Lewes, conflated objectivity with truth, uniting Realism with a moral imperative: "Art always aims at the representation of Reality, i.e. of Truth; and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but Falsism." George Lewes, "Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction," *The Westminster & Foreign Quarterly Review*, no. 70 (October 1, 1858): 493.

⁶⁰ For further discussion on the role of popular culture in Decadence, see Kirsten MacLeod's examination of the "Keynotes" Series. Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing, and the Fin de Siècle*, Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). 116-34.

⁶¹ In chapters three through five I discuss the particular subversive strategies of the poetry of Decadence, which takes a different route to disruption than its prose. The poetry of Decadence presents specific formal innovations that result in a submerging of the lyrical self within sensation to such an extent that it nearly erases the unity of a discrete and all-encompassing "I."

a philosophical claim for the primacy of the body. While critics have often argued that Decadence rejects mass culture and upholds exclusionary principles,⁶² the division between the two is not absolute. Many instances of literary Decadence harness nascent forms of genre-fiction to disseminate radical ideas about the way in which embodied experience not only shapes artistic engagements, but cognition as well. The marriage of commercial forms and radical concepts emerges from the literary work of many writers of the 1890s, particularly the prose fictions of the “Keynotes” series, a group of novels commissioned by Decadent impresario John Lane, and embellished with Aubrey Beardsley covers, key prints, and title pages.⁶³ For Lane and company, the “Keynotes” series capitalized on the most sensational and radical of the experiments of the period, serving a powerful role as an organ for the dissemination of British Decadence.⁶⁴

Arthur Machen’s doubleheader of “The Great God Pan” and “The Inmost Light” (vol. 5), and M.P. Shiel’s *Shapes In The Fire* (vol. 29), represent original contributions to the series. Filled with aesthetic excess and cheap thrills, both works teeter on the seam that divides Decadence between highbrow and lowbrow art. By choosing Machen and Shiel, typically considered genre innovators (of the horror and crime novel, respectively) rather than major literary figures, I want to consider the extent to which Decadence functions dynamically rather than prescriptively. Towards this end, Machen and Shiel serve as case studies of the varied prose terrain of English Decadence.⁶⁵ Both writers explore the symbiosis between physical sensation and interior perception against the backdrop of an unstable and increasingly unrepresentable

⁶² For instance, Matei Calinescu points out that Theodor Adorno interprets Decadence as “plainly opposed to manipulative and anti-intellectual ‘Mass Culture.’” Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*: 350.

⁶³ Nelson, *The Early Nineties: A View from the Bodley Head*: 263.

⁶⁴ Matthew Sturgis writes that Lane’s stable of authors were aware that his support “was based more on commercial canniness than artistic admiration” and of “the trace of opportunism that lay behind his promotion of their ‘decadent’ work.” Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s*: 203.

⁶⁵ Of the two authors I have chosen as exempla of British Decadent fiction, neither is definitively British: Arthur Machen was a Welshman and M.P. Shiel originally hailed from the West Indies. And, it goes without saying, the most infamous figure of the British Decadence, Oscar Wilde, was an Irishman.

modern world where disorientation is a principle experience. The authors' respective preoccupations point to the diverse zones that Decadent embodiment crosses over and into. Advancing through the theoretical issues that surround the Decadent body, I move from Machen's encounters with contagion to Shiel's portraits of the body and mind in chaos.

"A Horror in the Air"

Contagion as a metaphorical warning for contemporaneous societies about everything from physical disease to spiritual disintegration pervades literature. From the dark conversions in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to the fear of spreading disease that runs rampant through the factory slums of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, the motif often functions as a signal of corruption or aberration. But contagion as a way of coming into being—body to body transmission as the formative aspect of awareness—functions, for modernity, less as metaphor than an emergent ethos that understands infective momentum as a new sort of consciousness. For Tristan Tzara, this is figured in Dada as "a virgin microbe" that is the "chameleon of rapid, interested change."⁶⁶ In an even more specific characterization of modernism as pathological, Kazimir Malevich defines modern art by "the new *additional* element which has forced its way into the creative organism of the artist and brought about an alteration of our conception in art."⁶⁷

For Dennis Denisoff, Decadent transformation is as diffuse and insidious as any "virgin microbe." Arguing that Decadence was subversive rather than overtly rebellious, Denisoff claims that the "dissipative model highlights not only the lack of clear lines of confrontation, but also

⁶⁶ Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifestos and Lampisteries* (London: J. Calder, 1977). 45.

⁶⁷ Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism* (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 2003). 12. Malevich's italics.

the role of agents that are often inconstant and deindividuated.”⁶⁸ Decadence, according to Denisoff, adopts animistic aspects of paganism, such as species intersubjectivity and a vital connection to nature. Deleuze and Guattari’s *becoming-animal* offers a template for dissipation in which the process of the individual breaks down, “replacing the idea of identity self-fashioning with that of multiplicity and mutual contingency that characterizes life forms that operate in swarms or packs” (437). For Denisoff, the Decadent figure *becomes animal* and, by embracing the diffusive process, comes to be a part of a collective that repopulates itself through large-scale biological and social events such as contagion, mutation, widespread illness, or global warfare, rather than heteronormative sexual reproduction (439).⁶⁹

This embrace of contagion as a modern form of creation erupts throughout Decadence. For instance, Ernest Dowson’s long-suffering poetic narrators are often either carriers or, in the case of “Cease Smiling, Dear,” the recipients of fatal communications that “[r]eap death from thy live lips in one long kiss.”⁷⁰ Paul Bourget, in attempting to delineate a theory of Decadence, understands it as a phenomenon of collective anarchy in which society fails to function efficiently:

A society is comparable to a living organism: like an organism, it consists of a collection of lesser organisms, which in turn consist of a collection of cells. The individual is the social cell. For the whole organism to function energetically, the lesser organisms must function energetically, but with a lesser energy; and, for these lesser organisms to function energetically, their component cells must function energetically, but with a lesser energy. If the cells’ energy becomes

⁶⁸ Dennis Denisoff, “The Dissipating Nature of Decadent Paganism from Pater to Yeats,” *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 3 (September 2008): 432. Hereafter, pages cited in the text within parentheses.

⁶⁹ Denisoff identifies an early version of this in Pater, who describes “thinking as a bodily process” that uses a “classical notion of the human as a part of an animist collective” (439).

⁷⁰ Ernest Christopher Dowson, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson* (London, New York: J. Lane, Dodd, 1905). 71.

independent, the organisms that make up the total organism similarly cease subordinating their energy to the total energy, and the subsequent anarchy leads to the decadence of the whole.⁷¹

In Bourget's example, the insubordinate member of society is a potential danger to the whole, a rampant malaise capable of compromising the efficiency of the social body.

Beyond the general conceptual and formal traits of Decadence, contagion becomes a crucial litmus test for identifying Decadence in literature. Decadence does not have a canon of representative texts as much as it has a qualifying question: *has the work in question come in contact with the movement and does it show symptomatic signs of Decadent excess?* Charles Bernheimer points out that this approach remains essential to Decadence, that investigations into the movement should engage "paradox and ambivalence" and an opening of a "semantic wound" teeming with a "contaminating crossover" between the "slippage from poetic metaphor to historical fact, from aesthetic dream to real life, from a book about decadence to a decadent existence."⁷² That Decadence, as a movement, invokes more of an unremitting process of turning potentially finished literary products into extravagant vagaries is central to its aesthetic and cultural praxis. The texts of Decadence intimately engage this issue of infectivity and its impact on perception through narrative structure and philosophical interrogation. By playing with self-reflexivity in a way that creates a linguistic hall of mirrors, individuality is always at odds with the multiple (and multifarious) influences that contaminate any auspices of autonomy.⁷³ A most

⁷¹ Paul Bourget, "The Example of Baudelaire," *New England Review: Middlebury Series* 30, no. 2 (2009): 98.

⁷² Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor, Parallax (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002). 5.

⁷³ In Stefania Forlini's essay on Machen's other "Keynotes" entry, *The Three Imposters*, she identifies another way that Machen troubles divisions. Forlini examines the multiple levels (from the material history of the Victorian illustrated book to the focus on beautiful items in the novel) through which "Machen builds a narrative around an ancient coin that self-consciously questions the primitive versus modern distinction of anthropological narratives of his time and the conceptual separation of people and things that supposedly defines modernity." Stefania Forlini,

famous case in point is that Dorian Gray's transfiguration precedes vis-à-vis the central object of a "poisonous book," Joris-Karl Huysmans's unnamed *A Rebours*.⁷⁴ *Becoming-Decadent*—to amend Deleuze and Guattari—is a process that goes from the outside in, wherein passing a book from one person to another can act as just as much of a catalyst towards change as a self-determined action.

The specter of a decentralized collective that submits to the overwhelming sensations of the body and repopulates through an inexplicable blight haunts Arthur Machen's *Great God Pan* and *The Inmost Light*. While trafficking in the nineties vogue for the occult and playing with the boundaries of genre, Machen's work more broadly explores the anxieties surrounding the ontological shift entailed in Decadence. Uncontrollable breakdown spreads from the individual to the community.⁷⁵ Just as the perimeter between the experiences of the body and the perceptions of the mind disintegrates, so do the boundaries between people. Machen extends this preoccupation with contagion to operate as the dominant element of both plots. Both of Machen's stories purport to expose the underbelly of seemingly contained societies, which seethe with uncontainable impulses. Such corruption enacts a process that replaces sexual

"Modern Narratives and Decadent Things in Arthur Machen's *The Three Impostors*," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 55, no. 4 (2012): 480.

⁷⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: An Annotated, Uncensored Edition*, ed. Nicholas Frankel (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011). 156. The initial effects produce a physiological response, portraying the relationship between the perceptual and intellectual to be a continuum rather than oppositional functions. Reading language is like listening to music or inhaling a "heavy odour of incense" that "seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain" and induce "a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming" (186).

⁷⁵ Darryl Jones argues for a reading of "The Great God Pan" in the context of the *fin de siècle* rage for occultism (and Machen's participation in the Order of the Golden Dawn), while Paul Fox calls for an exploration of the specifically Decadent bent of Machen's detectives, whom "arrive at an aesthetic understanding of the pattern of events in which they have been swept up" rather than from purely deductive logic. Darryl Jones, "Borderlands, Spiritualism and the Occult in *Fin de Siècle* and Edwardian Welsh and Irish Horror," *Irish Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2009); Paul Fox, "Eureka in Yellow: The Art of Detection in Arthur Machen's Keynote Mysteries," *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 25, no. 1 (2006): 61.

reproduction with proliferate mutation. Walter Benjamin describes this as a “motif of sterility” in Germany’s variety of Decadence, *Jugendstil*, wherein “procreation was felt to be the least worthy manner of subscribing to the animal side of creation.”⁷⁶

In “The Great God Pan”, Dr. Raymond assumes the role of a cut-happy surgeon redolent of the mad-scientist in *fin de siècle* fictions such as *The Island of Dr. Moreau* or *Olga Romanoff*. Raymond coaxes his guttersnipe charge, Mary, to undergo an experimental neurosurgery in order to open her consciousness to unrestricted Dionysian visions. For the surgeon, Mary’s ability to see beyond the prosaic world is contingent upon altering the body in order to make it susceptible to those visions. In a characteristically manic monologue, Raymond describes this phenomenon to his friend Clarke, who will bear witness to the change, as “seeing the god Pan.”⁷⁷ That one must see the god, that the embodied experience of the world beyond the pedestrian is a physical effort, is as central to Raymond’s thesis as is his method to effect this transformation via investigational neurological surgery: “Yes, the knife is necessary; but think what that knife will effect. It will level utterly the solid wall of sense, and probably for the first time since man was made, a spirit will gaze on a spirit-world” (7). Raymond’s determination that one can only transcend the everyday world through an absolute submission to the body establishes the essential condition necessary for change: the body must be made available, free from the dominant moral and social constraints of nineteenth-century culture, for a revolution to occur. The final result may, arguably, serve as a warning—see the desiccated corpse in Dorian Gray’s attic or the sterile frailty of Jean Des Esseintes—but despite these possible outcomes, the taint of Decadence, the way it infects and alters, remains part of its allure. Aestheticism recuperates,

⁷⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). 560.

⁷⁷ Arthur Machen, *The Great God Pan and The Inmost Light*, 2 ed. (London: John Lane, 1895). 3. Hereafter, pages cited in the text within parentheses.

argue William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnston, “the dirty interests Ruskin had found so appalling in art criticism written at the end of the eighteenth century, especially the notion that beauty could be found in the contemplation of dirt, disease, or even death.”⁷⁸

Although Mary is the origin point of the contagion tracked throughout “The Great God Pan,” its second victim, Clarke, is the single witness to the event. Clarke becomes the figurative site of transformation, unable to shake the obsession with what he has seen. Afflicted by the memory of the surgery and its consequences—three days following surgery Mary’s existence seemed to be that of a lobotomized patient, “lying wide-awake, rolling her head from side-to-side, and grinning vacantly”—Clarke spends years alternating between trying to suppress and recall the results (15). If Clarke’s unrelenting obsession is the warning sign of things to come, then the preternatural child born from Mary’s encounter with Pan, Helen Vaughn, becomes the embodiment of contagion. A demonic force that adopts different guises to seduce and terrorize, Helen’s presence permanently changes the material sites of places she resides. As *femme fatale*, Helen is a catalytic figure, less of a stable archetype than a protean, dynamic element, eliciting more of “a feeling of repulsion” than “a mere matter of the imagination” (59). Helen’s influence works somatically rather than psychologically: “No, it was more physical than mental. It was as if I were inhaling at every breath some deadly fume, which seemed to penetrate to every nerve and bone and sinew of my body. I felt racked from head to foot, my eyes began to grow dim; it was like the entrance of death” (59). The depiction of this experience as sensory overload and adaptation takes us back to the prevalent motif in *Decadence* of expansion through mutation: the alteration of previously stable forms into unstable entities, the degeneration of the individual body into a porous site.

⁷⁸ William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005). 136.

These changes not only affect the body, but also spread throughout the population, a blight that invisibly passes from one person to another, a “horror in the air” that alters both individual agency and consciousness (73). Helen may be the host body, but what makes her version of the demonic so potent is its pervasiveness: everything she touches irrevocably changes. For instance, a number of prominent men who come into contact with her appear to commit suicide; their deathbeds resemble scenes of autoerotic asphyxiation. The corpses are found tethered to the end of their bedposts, strangled by the weight of their bodies “leaning forward at an angle from the bottom of the bed” (71). While notices of these deaths appear in papers and are gossiped about in social circles, Helen’s connection is known by only a very few. A sense of deadly potentiality disperses as though it were perceptibly circulating, creating a “queer, heavy feeling about the air” or an “air [that] seemed full of noise and terror” (49, 78).

The transmission is of an esoteric and potentially fatal knowledge passed from body to body. Clarke begins to suspect the deaths are a continuation of the experimentation he saw years before in Dr. Raymond’s laboratory. In his search for answers, he teams with Villiers, who considers the consequences of the phantasmagoric world made tangible:

[I]t is an old story, an old mystery played in our day, and in dim London streets instead of amidst the vineyards and olive gardens. We know what happened to those who chanced to meet the Great God Pan, and those who are wise know that all symbols are symbols of something, not of nothing. It was, indeed, an exquisite symbol beneath which men long ago veiled their knowledge of the most awful, most secret forces which lie at the heart of all things; forces before which the souls of men must wither and die and black, as their bodies blacken under the electric current. Such forces cannot be named, cannot be spoken, cannot be

imagined except under a veil and a symbol, a symbol to the most of us appearing a quaint poetic fancy, to some a foolish tale. But you and I, at all events, have known something of the terror that may dwell in the secret place of life, manifested under human flesh; that which is without form taking itself to a form.”
(93)

There is, perhaps, no more concise expression of the anxiety surrounding the cryptic symbols of Decadence than Villiers’ observation that these signs are “symbols of something, not of nothing.” For Aaron Worth, Helen Vaughn is “an embodiment of the kind of terrifyingly expansive past that had forced itself into the Victorian consciousness during the previous decades.”⁷⁹ The emphasis on the body, both its human limits and the accompanying horror of possession, discloses a dread of physical vulnerability that would fracture the autonomous self and turn the individual into a dissipating force of Decadence. Villiers understands the signs as fragments that portend such a breakdown of meaning and order.

Even Helen’s eventual death reinforces her presence as a transmitter of hazardous physical and metaphysical mutations. Helen’s threat is such that Villiers and Clarke cannot even approach her to kill her, but must compel her to take her own life. Her death requires that a medical doctor witness and document the dissolution of the body. The accompanying synaesthetic “odour of corruption” is akin to a rapidly evolving malignancy, “the form waver[ing] from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited” (100). The flesh, bone, and muscle disintegrate and in its place emerges: “The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed” (100). Christine Ferguson has

⁷⁹ Aaron Worth, “Arthur Machen and the Horrors of Deep History,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 40, no. 1 (2012): 216.

argued that Helen represents the “antithesis of stability.”⁸⁰ Her main power is “to introduce the same type of ontological collapse that accompanied her birth in all those who look on her.” I would go even further and argue that Helen embodies wider principles of Decadence as a swarm that disperses—initially undetectable through the population—and regenerates through contact that absorbs individuals into the collective. To glimpse the god Pan is to be absorbed into the pack, to become assimilated into a collective process of continual transmutation. Walter Pater invokes an early version of this sense of reproduction as dependent on mutation rather than procreation with his literary portrait of La Gioconda as “older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire she has been dead many times and learned the secrets of the grave.”⁸¹

The apprehension surrounding this model of Decadence, which proliferates through improper channels and outside of official culture, frequently emerges in critical works that seek to distance authors from the movement to secure their place in history. An illustration of this tendency appears in Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton’s claim that while Machen shares many of the “effects” of Decadence—such as the “femme fatale, vampire, androgyne, evil as something positive and active”—his evocation of evil is simultaneously “less crude and more and more sinister than theirs.”⁸² Reynolds and Charlton perform a tacit reading of Decadence as trafficking in static stereotypes that are crudely invested in the contagious (and desiring) body. For the critics, Helen, as the demonic entity at the center of “The Great God Pan,” is an example of the contrast between Machen’s vital, metaphysical engagement and the corporal one of Decadence: “The regular androgyne is an ordinary, frigid hermaphrodite, not a being that

⁸⁰ Christine Ferguson, “Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment,” *PMLA* 117, no. 3 (2002): 475.

⁸¹ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, ed. Matthew Beaumont, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). 71.

⁸² Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton, *Arthur Machen, A Short Account of His Life and Work* (Dufour Editions: Philadelphia, 1964). 46. Hereafter, pages cited in the text within parentheses.

changes from sex to sex during a process of dissolution; the ordinary vampire sucks physical blood, whilst Helen Vaughan's operations are primarily on a spiritual plane" (46). Categorizing "The Great God Pan" as an examination of machinations on "a spiritual plane" wrongly extricates Machen from the discourse of the body; physicality is inextricable from the novella's invocation of polymorphous sexuality and the sadomasochistic urge that links desire and fear.

Just as in "The Great God Pan," the patient zero in "The Inmost Light" remains outside of the central plot events. And, similarly to "The Great God Pan," the constituting event of "The Inmost Light" is the corruption of a woman, Mrs. Black, by a malevolent doctor. In a slight turn, Mrs. Black happens to be married to her doctor, who has been long intrigued by the occult and a "desire of knowledge of a peculiar kind" (163). He works diligently to find a procedure that will separate soul from body. When Dr. Black discovers a technique he believes will successfully complete the transfer, his wife becomes his test subject. Like Helen Vaughn, Mrs. Black dies, but not before transmitting the profane consequences of her change to those who come in contact with her. Her husband confesses to the mercy killing in a letter found after his own death, a confession that both ensnares and warns its reader:

In that work, from which even I doubted to escape with life, life itself must enter; from some human being there must be drawn that essence which men call the soul, and in its place (for in the scheme of the world there is no vacant chamber), in its place would enter in what the lips can hardly utter, what the mind cannot conceive without a horror more awful than the horror of death itself. (165)

Part of what Machen exploits is the intrinsic pleasure of his own variation of pulp Decadence. There is too much temptation *not* to fill in the blanks of what the "lips can hardly utter" and

“what the mind cannot conceive.” The reader’s textual experience of “The Inmost Light” mimics the viral process against which Black warns. Decadence implicates the reader in the pleasure of violence.

By situating the catalyzing event of the Blacks’ experiment outside of the primary action of the novella, Machen formally emulates the spread of contagion by pulling a peripheral character into the fray—transmission occurs even through remote contact. In the present day plot, Dyson, a once idle dandy, runs into an old school friend, Charles Salisbury, on the street. They retreat into a restaurant for the evening. This allows Dyson to recount, at some length, his contact with the Black couple. Central to the set-up of the story is Dyson’s description of the urban backdrop of London, with its dense population and intermix of class and race, as surpassing even Paris (usually the benchmark, for the English, of the constitutionally degenerate metropolis) in its capacity for malevolent possibility. By presenting London as a compressed space conducive to evil, Dyson parallels what Julian Nelson identifies as “[m]etaphors of infection [that] were undoubtedly symptomatic of profound anxieties about the unprecedented technological compression of time and space, resulting in the permeability of bodies and borders in the early part of the twentieth century.”⁸³ The anticipatory confrontation of twentieth-century anxieties in “The Inmost Light” is potently realized because of the capacity, in the teeming population of late-nineteenth-century London, for contact between classes and social groups. Contrasting the two, Dyson asserts that “[i]n Paris you may say: here live the actresses, here the Bohemians, and the *Ratés*; but it is different in London. You may point out a street, correctly enough, as the abode of washerwomen; but, in that second floor, a man may be studying Chaldean roots, and in the garret over the way a forgotten artist is dying by inches” (115). Dyson maps the

⁸³ Julian Nelson, “Modernism and The Technologies of Insight,” in *Modernism: A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages = Histoire comparée des littératures de langues européennes*, ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Pub., 2007), 428.

city as unzoned and unboundaried, vulnerable to invading influences. When Salisbury refutes Dyson's depiction of London, claiming that there is a dearth of "really artistic crime in London," Dyson contends that London is actually a city of extraordinary happenings: "Where we fail is for want of Homers, not Agamemnons" (115, 116). Thus crucial to the premise of "The Inmost Light" is turn-of-the-century England as a site of imagination where problems of transmission are significant for two reasons. First, the diversity of the population across an urban center allows for the boundaries between social categories to be breached. Second, an innovative artistic engagement commensurate with these newly erected pathways is necessary for the invention of the modern city.

Dyson's first contact with Mrs. Black occurs while wandering through the colliding network of places and people that comprise the boroughs of London. He describes their Northwest London neighborhood of Harlesden in terms analogous to his depiction of London as unconfined. Harlesden is "a place of no character," so bland that its primary characteristic becomes its shiftiness, for "just as you think you're going to grasp the physiognomy of the settlement, it all melts away" (117). Harlesden is both without memory and unmemorable: "It is like a city of the dead; the streets are glaring and desolate, and as you pass it suddenly strikes you that this too is part of London" (118). It is Harlesden's desolate and changeling space that provokes the Doctor's desire to see if another human being can be rendered as empty and protean as the landscape. Harlesden's primary skill—to erase and rearrange—seems to affect the very bodies of its citizens, resulting in a populace that mimics the terrain. If London exemplifies the ever-changing, varied landscape of urban modernity, Harlesden, the new borough that represents the latest limb of the shape-shifting city, represents this mutable terrain at its apex.

While visiting the forgettable streets of Harlesden, Dyson catches sight of the “not human” Mrs. Black through a window (121). Before he has the opportunity to even process the sight, he becomes struck ill, “my breath caught back, and my teeth began to chatter, and the stick I had in one hand snapped in two with the grip I gave it” (121). He feels an “electric current down his spine,” proximity makes his very “heart shudder” and his “bones grind together in agony” (121). In other circumstances, Dyson’s reaction might serve as a warning, but it’s already too late for prophylaxis. He returns to Harlesden obsessed by what he has seen, plagued by “vague terror” and the inability to logically resolve his spontaneous physical reaction to Mrs. Black (123). Dyson’s physical senses suffer in advance of any intellectual response. Mrs. Black embodies the disease that cannot be inoculated against, stopping Dyson in his tracks before he can even know its coming.

While still attempting to make sense of his experience, Dyson reads a newspaper notice of Mrs. Black’s death, which occurred under strange enough circumstances to merit an inquest and autopsy. Though the doctors who perform the autopsy can find no evidence of wrongdoing, Mrs. Black’s body poses more questions than answers. The doctor comments that he “was astonished to find appearances of character entirely new,” that he “could scarcely believe that the brain before me was that of a human being at all,” and that the brain “indicated a nervous organisation of a wholly different character from that either of man or the lower animals” (125). The incursion of medical textuality reinforces the powerful changes that Dr. Black’s experiment sets into motion—brain matter, the physical emblem of our own human ability for logic, is subject to inexplicable change and influence. In “The Inmost Light” the brain is converted from a metonymy of the reasoning mind into an element of the ever-adapting animal body.

As Dyson concludes the story of his strange encounter with the Blacks, he reengages his listener, Salisbury, and tells him they must meet another time to finish the story. Though this interruption in the narrative is brief, it sets up the ensuing shift in Salisbury's mental stability. Despite the fact that Salisbury logically doubts that the story is anything other than Dyson's imagination, dismissing it as a sign of his own friend's Decadent tendencies, a "perverse dexterity which could transmute the face of a sickly woman and a case of brain disease into the crude elements of romance," he feels compelled to hear the story to its very end (127-128). Just as unspeakable knowledge seized Mr. Black, Mrs. Black, and Dyson, the same "perverse dexterity" of transmutation grips Salisbury. While Salisbury intellectually questions Dyson's testimony, he is physically compelled by its promises, wandering the city in the middle of the night, newly open to the city's "artistic crime" (115). Machen tracks the inception and progression of obsession in Salisbury, paralleling the earlier evolution of Dyson's fixation, and creating a narrative chain of dispersal from one person to the next.

When Salisbury discovers a discarded piece of paper, he is consumed by its possible meaning, moved to distraction by the discovery of an indecipherable rhyme on the page. Just as the enigmatic figure in the window hooks Dyson, Salisbury is unable to let go of what he believes to be a coded message, as the "jingle of the paper found in the archway had 'got into his head'" to such an extent that he continuously mumbles the rhyme "over and over" until it becomes a "positive pain" (136). Not only do narrative formulas of horror connect this letter to the spectral Black couple, but so does the dissipative course of Decadence wherein the captivating power of a demonic glance can transfer to a cipher on a piece of "common dirty

paper” (134). Salisbury is only lured out of his soporific state by the promise of his appointment with Dyson and when he arrives at the latter’s apartment, the narrative fulfills the earlier intimations that Dyson is a nineties-styled Aesthete.

There is no stronger cue that the connection between the Blacks, Dyson, and Salisbury is situated in the embodied transmission of Decadence than the revelation of Dyson as tainted by *sub rosa* culture in advance of his contact with the Blacks. Among “the mingled fumes of incense and tobacco,” Dyson’s rooms invoke the Decadent combination of the natural world refashioned by artifice (138). The quarters are decorated with floors that “glowed and flamed with all the colours of the East,” esoteric etchings on Japanese paper, “strangely worked curtains” shot through with gold thread (137). Dyson’s apartment mesmerizes Salisbury, who is struck “wondering and dumb before all this splendor” (138). When Dyson resumes his story, he accuses Salisbury of being a slave to “a matter of fact,” emphasizing that the story of the Blacks defies belief based on concrete, measurable data (138). Instead, the Blacks represent an extension of the sybaritic world that Dyson cultivates in his surroundings.

The elements of horror are apparent—everything from the fear of incubi to the demonic spawn makes Machen ripe for appropriation and homage for later masters of the genre. After all, H.P. Lovecraft essentially rewrites “The Great God Pan” for American audiences in “The Dunwich Horror,” even having one of his characters cite the novella as precedent for what happens in the fictional Massachusetts town.⁸⁴ But, along with his role as an early innovator of horror, Machen’s influence on the formal and ideological work of Decadence remains significant. As Paul Fox has observed, Machen’s nineties work was maligned by contemporaneous critics (and remains peripheral for many present day scholars) for the

⁸⁴ Leif Sorensen has argued that Lovecraft’s admiration for both Machen and Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers evidence that the roots of the “horrific book” lay lie in the fatal book of Decadence. Leif Sorensen, “A Weird Modernist Archive: Pulp Fiction, Pseudobiblia, H. P. Lovecraft,” *Modernism/modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010): 513-14.

modernist aesthetics in which “the form of the stories was fragmented to an extent that made a nonsense of linear plotlines, and that coincidence in the mysteries was rampant to a stylistically bizarre degree.”⁸⁵ Along with his formal innovations, Machen’s work during the nineties involved a rewriting of the body’s procreative possibilities, making him, as Adrian Eckersley notes, “one of the first writers to create a sense of horror with roots more in biology than in spirituality.”⁸⁶ While the goal of Machen’s “Keynotes” stories may seem to be a warning against the social and moral breakdown entailed in Decadence—indeed, the horror derives from how frighteningly communicable breakdown is—the texts cultivate an intense immersion that overrides any warning. Just as Dyson and Salisbury catch the unspeakable horror by following the thread of intrigue until it engulfs them, one must soldier on and yield to the toxic properties of the text in order to be fully apprised of all possibilities. To be warned is, of course, negligible: one has already been contaminated. And here in lies the impossibility of an entirely successful counter-Decadence: one must be touched or assaulted by the Decadent symbol—the “electric current” of the revealed symbol—in order to apprehend its danger (93). Decadence cannibalizes its own opposition.

“Apples of Sodom in the Mouth”

While Arthur Machen details physical contingencies that influence and disorder the self, the formal scope of his Decadent treatment remains invested in making sense. Despite the fact that some of the sections—particularly the moments when obsession becomes the ruling intellectual and emotional state of the characters—employ syntax and temporal arrangement that

⁸⁵ Fox, “Eureka in Yellow: The Art of Detection in Arthur Machen’s Keynote Mysteries,” 59-60.

⁸⁶ Adrian Eckersley, “A Theme in the Early Work of Arthur Machen: ‘Degeneration’,” *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 35, no. 3 (1992): 285.

reflects chaos, the scenarios still have a semblance of communicative purpose. If the infected body renders the mind equally vulnerable, Machen is stylistically invested in rewriting that process outward towards his audience under the aegis of narrative disclosure. Semantic and structural order parallel the conceptual disorder of the texts. Though M.P. Shiel explores adjacent ideas of how consciousness follows embodied experience, he works towards a Decadent text in which there is no reliable narrator to consistently reorder the signifiers of breakdown that unsettle characters' cognitive order. Whereas Machen traces the communicable path of Decadent modernity's proliferation, Shiel's work exhibits its symptoms. Shiel's Decadent impulse explores the way that embodied experiences of physical disorder creates internal disorder, a central preoccupation that will rule what are considered hallmarks of the modernist psychogeographical odyssey, prose works such as Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* or poetry like Ezra Pound's *Cantos* and F.T. Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tuuum*. Where *Nightwood's* nocturnal perambulations through Paris are matched by a somniloquent prose or *Zang Tumb Tuuum's* Battle of Adrianople can only be rendered by typography that is the graphic equivalent of an explosive movement, Shiel presents the disorienting experience modernism's surfeit of sensation and information through an unwieldy, shaky narrative in which it is impossible to reorient oneself.

Shiel's contributions to "Keynotes," the short story collections *Prince Zaleski* and *Shapes in the Fire*, constitute the height of Shiel's Decadent phase before he begins to work more in straight science fiction and mystery.⁸⁷ In *Prince Zaleski*—a collection of mysteries solved by the titular character, a Decadent detective—louche indulgence and practical reasoning merge as the

⁸⁷ They also represent his only two publications under the John Lane imprint. After the Wilde trial and increasingly negative portrayal of Decadence, Shiel would turn away from literary experiment and concentrate on popular fiction action-adventure serials. Kirsten MacLeod, "M. P. Shiel and the Love of Pubescent Girls: The Other 'Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name'," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 51, no. 4 (2008): 357.

Prince employs deductive logic to solve mysteries without ever venturing far outside of his sumptuous lair.⁸⁸ Shiel extends the conventions of genre while exploring the position of the Decadent artist as exemplified by Zaleski, whose life and environs are subject to constant reworking and aesthetic exploration. Decadent texts usually include narrators that take one of two positions: either the works are focalized by the Decadent subject, offering us the world as interpreted by a new subjectivity, or by a decidedly more conventional narrative voice, in which the Decadent subject is appraised and catalogued. *Prince Zaleski* falls into the latter category. The story's unnamed narrator witnesses the Prince from a distance, detailing everything from his labyrinthine route to his "darksome sanctuary," as well as the odor that suffuses the building, "the fumes of the narcotic *cannabis sativa*—the base of the *bhang* of the Mohammedans."⁸⁹

Filled with broken relics, the house mixes eras and cultures with a curatorial obsession equal to *The Yellow Book* or *The Savoy*. Before revealing the Prince, the narrator surveys the clutter with an astonishment that reaches its highest pitch when the Prince is described as a "consummate *cognoscente*," nestled within "a multitudinousness of the curious he had contrived to crowd into the space around him," creating a "*bizarrierie* of half-weird sheen and gloom" (4-5). Zaleski's menagerie is a catalogue worthy of Sir Pitt Rivers: "a palæolithic implement, a Chinese 'wise man,' a Gnostic gem, an amphora of Græco-Etruscan work"; "Flemish sepulchral brasses companied strangely with runic tablets, miniature paintings, a winged bull, Tamil scriptures on lacquered leaves of the talipot, mediæval reliquaries richly gemmed, Brahmin gods"; "an organ whose thunder in that circumscribed place must have set all these relics of dead

⁸⁸ Zaleski asserts a trans-genre Decadent typology that even makes its way into the unlikely field of early detective fiction. After all, Sherlock Holmes belongs to no cultural category as much as he does the nineties decadent.

⁸⁹ M. P. Shiel, *Prince Zaleski* (London: John Lane, 1895). 60, 4. Hereafter, pages cited in the text within parentheses.

epochs clashing and jingling in fantastic dances” (4-5). When we finally reach the Prince in his private chambers, he is laid out amidst an embarrassment of riches:

As I entered, the vaporous atmosphere was palpitating to the low, liquid tinkling of an invisible musical box. The prince reclined on a couch from which a draping of clot-of-silver rolled torrent over the floor. Beside him, stretched in its open sarcophagus which rested on three brazen trestles, lay the mummy of an ancient Memphian, from the upper part of which the brown cerements had rotted or been rent, leaving the hideousness of the naked, grinning countenance exposed to view. (4-5)

This introductory scene implicitly reveals the connection between Zaleski’s extravagant environment and his ability to adapt his thinking to the most circuitous circumstances. William L. Svitavsky maintains that Shiel’s involvement with Decadence would influence the themes that resonate throughout his entire body of work from a “Decadent preoccupation with illness and its treatment” to “a Decadent’s concern for the failings of the present.”⁹⁰ But for Svitavsky, Zaleski is Decadence at its most optimistic: if the Decadent outlook “holds that periodic decline is the inevitable outcome of an inescapable cycle,” then the promise Zaleski offers is escape from that cycle through the attainment of a more comprehensive perspective, allowing the possibility that the successive rise and fall of civilizations might actually lead to something greater (8).

The detective’s eccentricity is translated into a straightforward prose style in *Prince Zaleski*, but Shiel’s subsequent contribution to “Keynotes” eliminates the expository buffer. *Shapes in the Fire*, a group of short works, deals with a range of ancillary issues from unrequited love to the degeneration of nobility, but connecting each of the pieces is an exploration of the

⁹⁰ William L. Svitavsky, “From Decadence to Racial Antagonism: M.P. Shiel at the Turn of the Century,” *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 1 (2004): 9,8. Hereafter, pages cited in the text within parentheses.

processes through which physical chaos molds an internal self that is correspondingly tumultuous. It is especially significant that Shiel deals with these issues on the precipice of the twentieth century, when everything from the noise of industrialism to the urban congestion manifested by large population influxes critically shifts cognition. Shiel explores the way embodied subjects process that increasingly chaotic world. A pastiche of forms, the collection begins with an introduction that proposes the stories should be read “one by one” as they are intended not to be gulped “like porridge,” but savored.⁹¹ Shiel admits writing the book between periods of sleeping and eating, and encourages the reader to do the same. Making the book less of a sequential event, and more of an assemblage of pieces recovered in the interstices of daily life—what Shiel terms “designed by heterogeneous”—promotes an approach to reading that emulates the terms on which the stories were created (v). Shiel denies the progressive, representational plot—neither basic continuity nor the tenets of Realism are the primary impetus here—and draws a direct relationship between reading and writing.

Nearly all of the stories invoke the specious domain of memory through a variety of modes such as Diary (“Xélucha”), folk tale (“Maria of the Rosebush”), or memoir (“Vaila”). The patchwork of recollection is further troubled by the fact that the events recounted are themselves unsteady. The stories run the gamut of settings and themes, from Austrian Schlosses to ancient Nordic castles, from the unrequited to the haunted, but foregrounded in each is the physical chaos that engenders an equally disorderly mind. Split between aesthetic philosophy and a collocation of intricate effects, *Shapes in the Fire* takes up the task of theorizing the shifting priorities of art and the boundaries of the artist while crafting a Decadent prose in which form and content correspond.

⁹¹ M. P. Shiel, *Shapes in the Fire*, The Decadent Consciousness (New York: Garland Publishing, 1977). v. Hereafter, pages cited in the text within parentheses.

Artistic credo overtakes the storyline in “Premier and Maker” and “Maria In The Rosebushes.” In both, the construction of modern culture and the modern mind are bound together. Modern consciousness—disordered and acutely sensitive to the ever hastening speed with which information is imparted—cannot be separated from the physical body’s immersion in an increasingly technologized landscape. “Premier and Maker” is nothing as much as a manifesto personified in the form of Mr. O’Malley Phipps (whose last name, as a match with Shiel’s middle, only increases the sense that it is a statement of aesthetics), a prolix Aesthete who, after sending his treatise “Life and the Poppy” to the prime minister, is called into an interview with the leader to expound on his theories. Formally, its method mimics the Socratic dialogue, but like Wilde’s “The Decay of Lying,” “Premier and Maker” tweaks the principles of logical induction in the direction of association.⁹² Instead of the meted progression of an instructional discussion, “Premier and Maker” bursts with linguistic ornamentation. In a sort of baroque call and response, the prime minister elicits a continual stream of speech from Phipps using a number of variations on the image of an ear as a fleshy apparatus that perceives beyond the scope of sound. Here are a few of the more evocative riffs:

“My ear is a word-perceiving Eye which never shuts in sleep.”

“My ear is an only half-filled museum.”

“My ear is a pit of receptiveness.”

“My ear opens like a flower-calix to the breeze of your mouth.”

“The ear is feminine: the mouth is masculine: I lie naked and wanton at your aggressions.”

“My ear is a weighing-machine.”

⁹² Like much of Decadence, “Premier and Maker” pays homage to classical antiquity, preferring it to Christian culture, while updating classicist motifs—sometimes with great irreverence—to fit specific aesthetic aims.

“My body bursts into blossom with ears.”

“My ear is a harbour-basin for the fleets of Yourmouth.” (129, 29, 29, 30, 35, 36, 82, 89)

The conflation between ear/mouth/body/eye reveals something key about Shiel’s variety of Decadence. When the whole body is involved in sense-perception, when the sensing body is one without delimited organs—eye moves into mouth, melds into body, opens up as ear—the information that is perceived is no longer distinct. In this sense, synaesthesia is less an aesthetic trait of Decadence than the result of an urging to begin perceiving with the body rather than categorizing with the mind. It becomes not a technique, but an ontology.

The conventional subjects of Decadence are touched upon here, too, with Phipps extolling the virtues of opium as permitting the poet to see beyond prosaic details, allowing Paris’s “opiated eyes” to see Helen’s beauty as opposed to the “mass of gore and livery carrion—glamoured over with a pink skin” (136). This way of seeing and feeling transcends the popularity of Realism, what Phipps allies to the “photographic,” and allows something original to flourish instead of the mimetic or representational (136). Phipps’s theories connect the revitalization of the senses and artistic creation to innovation. As a precedent to Pound’s famous dictum to “make it new,” Phipps’s Decadent platform offers an early example of obsession with the new in the Decadent definition of art: “Art, then, is the production, by elaborate new contrivance, of intended effects upon intended minds” (141). The Premier presses for further elaboration: “You speak of *new* contrivance” (143). To which the maker answers: “Yes; for it is clear that, though the inventor of the three-card trick (whatever that be) was a genuine artist, no one would call the *second* operator by such a name” (143). These eccentricities of form—the play on classical debate, the use of repetition to exhaust meaning as opposed to conveying

it—reinforce vanguard concepts about the body’s preeminence in any artistic project that emphasizes both aggressive purpose and aesthetic originality.

“Maria In The Rose-Bush” is less overtly programmatic than “Premier and Maker,” embedding its theories in an almost impassably turgid description of the setting and characters. The setting, a schloss in Schwangau, Germany, contains, among other things, “two Gothic slits in the Cyclopean walls,” “a Zeus Herkeois in the centre,” “Painted French watches,” “an Isis of Egypt,” “two small golden serpents, deadly, black-freckled, of Hindostan,” “pietàs in wax,” and “enoptra (mirrors)” (27). The anti-heroine, Deianira, takes her own life after having the apotheosis of the concept of beauty revealed to her. Shiel describes Deianira’s search for aesthetic perfection: she collects both art and artists, acquiring Raphael’s cartoons, demanding that her lover retrieve Stefan Lochner’s “Die Madonna in der Rosenlaube” from a political rival, cultivating an obsession with an Albrecht Dürer portrait and, ultimately, the artist, himself, when he passes through on his travels. Deianira’s initial theory aligns with that of Aestheticism’s preference for art over nature: “Nature, you see, is nearly everywhere rude, crude, and waits for the rearranging touch of *our* hand” (30). But, before she dies, she sees that her previous philosophy was burdened by stagnancy, by an overreliance on creator and object. She sees her spurned lover, Caspar, in battle over the claim of the stolen Madonna and suddenly doubts her previous beliefs: “The doer, then, was as great as the maker? Conduct as art? Marathon as lovely as the Parthenon? The Crusades as Aphrodite? Caspar as Raphael?” (59). This notion of “conduct as art,” a touchstone of Decadence, emphasizes being in the world: that a body in the world can hold the same aesthetic merit as the art object recalibrates the notion of art as process, reimagining the boundaries between what happens and what is made as part of the same project. The artist’s life, the relationship to work, becomes a vital part of the body of work, itself. If

Deiniara's revelation is one of interconnection and the primacy of embodied experience and action in the world of things made and unmade, then it is a theory that is echoed in the prose and poetry of Decadence, work that requires submission to the text and requires piecing together of bit parts, the work of a maker. Shiel proposes that the external conditions experienced by bodies and assimilated by the mind—whether it be the conditions of reading as a practice of construction or the conditions of the setting imposed on the characters—often pushes us beyond the limits of understanding. This becomes especially evident in a number of Shiel's stories, where the disintegration of material space results in a commensurate cognitive breakdown.

In what is perhaps the most famous "shape" of the collection, "Xélucha," the archetypal Decadent *femme fatale* works as what Charles Bernheimer proposes is an active metonym for the possibilities of negation and destruction in both the desiring gaze and language.⁹³ Shiel's serpentine descriptions compose such a dense collection of classical and mythological references they negate the logical significance of words. Meaning, here, is always undergoing unexpected change—the sudden metamorphosis, for instance, of a Greek Daemon into to an Egyptian Goddess. The narrator describes his relationship to drug addiction—"the sedative influence of a tincture which has become a necessity to my life"—in ornate terms: "Nux bore not less Thanatos than Hupnos, and the bitter tears of Isis redundulate to a flood" (6). Just as this hybrid monster of antiquity serves the sense of the narrator's impressions, the portmanteau "redundulate" serves to combine both the sense of Isis's redundant tears and undulations. How the narrator and the reader make sense out of the Byzantine depends upon their relationships to the limits of representability. If representation is a way to access a universal truth based on a collectively apprehensible reality, a world ordered by the logic of the mind—then "Xélucha" is the diary of a

⁹³ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*: 106.

madman. In step with the contemporaneous criticisms of Decadence, we could dismiss it as testimony of a degenerate mind, a self-professed addict. If, however, the body takes precedent, we have access to sense-perception that transgresses the limits of logic. Xélucha, herself, issues a warning about dependency upon too prosaic a sense of reality: “Matter does not exist, then, there is no such thing, really,—it is an appearance, a spectrum—every writer not imbecile from Plato to Fichte has, voluntary or involuntary, proved that for your good. To create it is to produce an impression of its reality up the sense of others; to destroy it is to wipe a wet rag across a scribbled slate” (12). This concept of a malleable reality refocuses emphasis on experience and the process of production rather than the product—an element of Decadent critique regarding the steadily increasing powers of Capitalism and its power in not only the social and economic, but also upon aesthetics. Xélucha’s philosophy rejects the concrete outcome and reclaims the vicissitudes of experience. Transformation, mutation—all points possible on the spectrum—become the making and unmaking of the world.

These cycles of creation and destruction rule “Vaila.” The narrator exhibits an early interest in mental breakdowns, beginning with his student days in Paris when he witnessed a number of “cases of mind malady” (69). The catalyst for these psychotic breaks from reality are due to a newly realized physicality, a sudden awareness of the body in space: a girl, after being told that the earth moves in orbit at an incredible rate of speed, begins to imagine the sound of the world moving (69); a young man, a consumptive but a relatively healthy twenty-five, becomes obsessed with political pamphlets which manifests in a rapid advance of disease (70); a man suffers from “aural hypaesthesia,” a condition in which “every sound brought him minute information of the matter causing the sound” (71). For the narrator’s friend, a psychologist, the incidents which contribute to mental breakdown are not intrinsic issues, but evidence of an

increasingly frantic world working upon the body and mind: “There are minds precisely so sensitive as a cupful of melted silver; *every* breath will roughen and darken them: and what of the simoon, tornado?” (71) In a familiar Decadent paradigm, the natural is not the realm of peace but of turbulence. Shiel’s particular vision is that of a wasteland that bridges the gap between the Decadent vision of nature and Futurism’s invocation of the mechanized world. For the sensitive, the world “is clearly no fit habitation, but a Machine of Death, a baleful Vast” (71).

While “Vaila” documents a constellation of characters sensitized to the environment wherein the literal noise of everyday life creates an amplified internal noise, they serve as studies to foreground the account of an even more acute case. The narrator’s friend, Harfager, is the son of an ancient Nordic family whose home, Vaila, carries a centuries long curse of madness and incest. Harfager is introduced with a description that could be the very definition of the Decadent figure: “He suggested the last moment of an æon. No nobleman have I seen who so bore in his wan aspect the assurance of the inevitable aristocrat, the essential prince, whose pale blossom is of yesterday, and will perish to-morrow, but whose root fills the ages” (74). After twelve years, Harfager has fulfilled his destiny, returning to Vaila and succumbing to the innate tumult and madness of the place. Readings that metaphorize space as an extension of the disordered mind’s projections neglect the literal way in which disorienting space can imprint the mind. Vaila, the physical space, intensifies the physicality of Decadence. Belonging to the history of horror houses and haunted places, Vaila acts upon the body in malevolent ways and transforms the brain through these confounded, intensified sensations.

Vaila’s particular art is the ability to summarily increase or eliminate certain elements of perception. “The earthquake of the mansion was intense,” observes the narrator, but such upheaval in balance is nearly erased by the fact that “all sense seemed swallowed up and

confounded by the one impression of sound” (88). The sound is so overwhelming that he is unable to hear anything Harfager says when he stumbles upon his now ravaged old friend. But Harfager’s experience is altogether different; rather than being overwhelmed by noise, he has an increased sensitivity to all the noises in the house—a sensitivity that manifests itself as vertigo, wherein hearing and movement are intimately linked. The house portends Harfager’s mental decline, linking extrinsic physical space to the physical body and, ultimately, the mind.

Perhaps no “shape” reflects the schism at the center of modern consciousness as acutely as “Phorfor,” the final story of the collection. “Phorfor” deftly combines the obsession with manifesto, magic, insanity, and excess that occur in the previous shapes. Like “Vaila” and “Maria,” “Phorfor” begins with the same invocation of an exotic and tumultuous landscape as the protagonist travels towards the “ancient home” (241). The fidelity of *Decadence* to the continuum of decline and restoration reverberates here. The ancestral estate stands in stark contrast to the utilitarian modifications of modern architecture, as if to suggest that underneath the progress of modernity lies a crumbling infrastructure. The ancient house wipes out individual memory and replaces it with the collective memory of its space. Shiel’s gothic sensibility rears its head in the depiction of space as integral to experience, even when its job is to disintegrate and disorient. The walls of the estate are alive and the house functions as a body capable of both perception and action.

The central plot combines the struggles of a love triangle (albeit with one member of the triad dead) and the fight to overturn a diabolical antagonist. The protagonist, Numa (his name suggesting divinity), returns home following the death of his cousin, Sergius, and tries to wrest the great love of his youth, Sergius’s sister and his cousin, Areta, from both her incestuous obsession with her brother and out from under the control of Theodore the Elder, the priest-

servant who has both served and controlled Phorfor for years. While “Phorfor” is temporally and geographically vague, the Theodore’s geographical origins are equally ambiguous. Sergius, to whom Theodore was the closest, alludes to him being Armæn or Syro-Chaldean, even descended from Cophtic priests (249). But it is not only this mysterious national identity that distinguishes Theodore and causes Areta and Sergius to call his name in “pious, lower voices” and grant him “[v]ast powers over nature,” rather it is the baroque decoration of his body that inspires awe (249). To this extent, Theodore represents the human analogue to the house, and embodies the central characteristics that mark the physical world of Phorfor—a world in which logic and perception are highly volatile. Theodore’s face is normally veiled, “too chill a horror for the glance of a fellow-mortal” (249). This is in contrast to the beauty of the rituals that Theodore performs, eliciting a rapt and deferent audience from the three cousins. Theodore’s beautifully decorated body, marked by a surfeit of promises and secrets, is mirrored by his home, an isolated tower filled with arcane instruments.

Numa’s years away from home allow us to see the disorientation that “Phorfor” effects. In the first pages the first-person narrative cogently describes the strange scene Numa enters, but as the story moves forward, it becomes increasingly temporally and descriptively discontinuous. Numa offers long descriptions of his past life with Areta and Sergius, and within those accounts he details their strange philosophies, which are obsessive and circular. The brother and sister derive their beliefs from long-theorized fields of knowledge, co-opting metaphysics, Kabbalah, Christian Prophecy into a nearly incoherent mash of ideas. Interpreting the ideas in “Phorfor” becomes much like Numa’s attempts to reconstruct the place: mired in disorientation. All of Shiel’s “shapes” in some way reflect the anarchic experiences of “Phorfor,” and suggest a

chaotic world in which the only possible response becomes increasingly abstract. As each character succumbs to a cognitive confusion, the narrative disassembles the initial representation of events.

For both Machen and Shiel, Decadence is a mode of embodied being that reveals a relationship between conceptual and perceptual structures, an aesthetic position that differs from either the mimetic qualities of Realism or the allegorical properties of Symbolism. By reclaiming Decadence as a mode of modern, embodied being, we can see how the relationship between the Decadent self and Decadent art influences the model of the twentieth-century modernist artist. If Decadent embodiment reveals how the experience of modernity augments our concepts of the world, then the stylistic and narrative confusion that often marks Decadent narratives should not be seen as merely a type of representation, but as the beginnings of modernist procedures in which the ability to represent experience falls away. Such an approach exposes the ways that Decadence functions as an origin point for the emergence of non-representational art. To consider Decadence at the threshold of abstraction, as the conversion point between representation and conceptualism, is to acknowledge that the new forms—even those that promote an origin story that does away with forbearers, such as Futurism or Constructivism—are portended by an earlier shift. For David Weir the shift entailed by Decadence “amounts to a reformation of the aesthetic code whereby art brings forth its meaning” in what can be understood as “less a period of transition than a dynamics of transition.”⁹⁴ The concept of Decadence as a reforming dynamic augurs in the modernist Avant-Garde; these dynamics exalt in physical experience and sensation as knowledge that cannot be avoided, but should instead, be embraced rather than suppressed.

⁹⁴ Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*: 14, 15.

The connection between embodiment and cognition—particularly the fraught, disoriented results that mark Machen and Shiel—helps us understand the Decadent emphasis on physical experience and its relationship to perception in a way that rehabilitates the Decadent Dandy from a one-dimensional stereotype into a forerunner of the Modernist provocateur. Though it would be a suspect trajectory that simply drew a line from Arthur Machen to Duchamp or M.P. Shiel to Hugo Ball, the movements of Avant-garde modernism share the Decadent reconceptualization of artistic function as one integrally invested in embodiment and sensation and the teasing out of those questions in the material of the work. When Man Ray was asked to define Dada for the *New York Evening Journal*, he coolly proclaimed that: “Dada is a state of mind.”⁹⁵ For Man Ray, Dada is being: an encompassing purview of the world that is not limited to the finished art product, but informs even the most basic ways of interacting and processing encountered objects and phenomena. While the trajectory from Decadence to Vorticism to Dada to Lettrism is tremendously differentiated—they are, after all, comprised of supremely different aesthetic trademarks—they use art as dynamic intervention instead of static product. In doing so, they explore the exterior space of the modern landscape, the body’s responses to that space and its objects, and the interior perceptions that are formed without. To return to Mostyn Piggott’s warning, it is art that riles and racks.

⁹⁵ Francis M. Naumann, *New York Dada, 1915-23* (New York: Abrams, 1994). 201.

CHAPTER 3

LIONEL JOHNSON'S MODERN RUINS

*Palaces tremble down, or reel
To ruin, while the stars in dread
Fade far into their quiet deeps,
Before the deep destroying roar:
Heavenward the costliest incense leaps
And madness falls from Heaven the more.*

—Lionel Johnson

“Dawn of Revolution”⁹⁶

Lionel Johnson’s “Dawn of Revolution” conjures a dream vision of the world in violent flux, where the end “that shall begin new earth” has already begun to arrive. Revolution becomes naturalized, taking the form of a gale force that seeks to “storm life out,” and leaves us to “wander the waste” through. These apocalyptic presentiments exhibit the same agitation that powers much of Johnson’s poetry. I argue that alongside all of Johnson’s anxieties about the future, the past figures in distinctly modern terms as “the wreck of immemorial years”—that is to say, as ruins.

The ruins of Decadence collude with other savage forces of modernity, such as contagion and fragmentation, but where the fragment or transmission typify destruction in a relatively abbreviated span of time, the ruin involves longer stretches. Entailing history and memory,

⁹⁶ Lionel Pigot Johnson, *The Collected Poems of Lionel Johnson*, 2nd and rev. ed., Garland English texts (New York: Garland Pub., 1982). 107.; Hereafter pages cited in the text within parentheses.

generational and epochal ends, the ruin excels in its existence as the benchmark of time.⁹⁷ If the creation of the fragment denotes an explosive energy that obliterates all contexts and the remnants lack any aesthetic unity that would offer a stable relationship between parts, then the ruin retains the traces of its past. Georg Simmel theorizes the ruin as an aspect of “our general fascination with decay and decadence,” where the contradictions inherent to the ruin work out through “[t]he rich and many-sided culture, the unlimited *impressionability*, and the understanding open to everything, which are characteristic of decadent epochs.”⁹⁸ Paul Zucker perceives ruins as heterogeneous monuments to the assembling powers of art and the disassembling capacity of nature that “can no longer be considered genuine works of art, since the original intention of the builder has been more or less lost.”⁹⁹ With the fabricator’s original stamp lost, the ruin becomes a blank ready to be imprinted by another, however “there always remains an aesthetic unity dominated by whatever has been preserved as fragments of the original architecture.”¹⁰⁰ More recently, Robert Ginsberg has delineated the aesthetic experience of ruin as a precise engagement with a “*newness or freshness*” constituting “genuine innovation in the face of the familiar” as “[t]he ruin invents and not merely endures.”¹⁰¹ Peter Fritzsche also addresses a theory of ruin accounting for its variations, distinguishing between the ruins of

⁹⁷ Not only are the ruins of Decadence an aesthetic and conceptual category of early modernism, but they are also an origin point of that older phase of Decadence, the decline of the Roman Empire. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle remind us that part of the very rhetoric that informs Romanticism and Victorian Decadence arises from the late eighteenth-century discovery of Pompeii, “the city of Roman ‘decadence,’ [that] quickly became one of romanticism’s favorite sites for ruin gazing.” Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, *Ruins of Modernity*, Politics, History, and Culture: A Series from the International Institute at the University of Michigan (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010). 2. Out of this physical interaction with this city of ruins emerges a multitude of texts that confront some of the central anxieties that emerge at the advent of modernity, such as “the nature of modern, its aesthetics, and its philosophies of history,” as well as the emblem of Rome “which constitutes one of the most enduring topoi of the ruin archive, the theme of the rise and decline of empires.”

⁹⁸ Georg Simmel, “Two Essays,” *The Hudson Review* 11, no. 3 (1958): 385.

⁹⁹ Paul Zucker, *Fascination of Decay; Ruins: Relic, Symbol, Ornament* (Ridgewood, N.J.: Gregg Press, 1968). 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins*, vol. 159, Value Inquiry Book Series (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2004). 155.

nature, which are a part of the “natural cycle of degeneration and regeneration,” and the ruins of history, which are the sites of human destruction witnessed in social, economic, or political catastrophe.¹⁰²

Johnson’s expressions of ruin involve both the natural cycle and what Fritzsche terms the historical cycle, but the capacity of the ruin as literary emblem renders it impossible to separate these two functions—after all, the material substance of the architectural ruin becomes dematerialized through language. Consequently, Johnson’s writings often mediate the nostalgia generated by natural ruin with awareness that the turn-of-the-century’s volatile social landscape engenders its own devastation. Thus Johnson’s depictions of natural ruin are always entwined with anxieties about the present and future. Though critical work on Johnson remains relatively sparse, it is widely agreed that his poetry reveals a complex relationship between antiquity and modernity. James G. Nelson attributes this to a strain of autobiography running through Johnson’s work, writing how, even at fifteen, he removed himself from “the crass and feverish world of his day, losing himself in books, a small group of literary friends, and his dreams of more comely ages.”¹⁰³ In the introduction to his important edition of Johnson’s poems, Ian Fletcher contends the poet constructs a country out the past by blending Classical and Celtic, ritual and legend, into a textual space offering “refuge” (xviii). While Murray G.H. Pittock reasons that Johnson’s “fear of existence” is a “surprisingly modern phenomenon,” ultimately

¹⁰² Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004). 101.

¹⁰³ James G. Nelson, “The Nature of Aesthetic Experience in the Poetry of the Nineties: Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, and John Gray,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 17, no. 4 (1974): 229.

the poet reveals a certain “desire to detach himself from contemporaneity and to explore the past intertextually.”¹⁰⁴ Gary H. Paterson has addressed, in great depth, how Johnson’s formal motifs specifically reflect these tensions between history and modernity.¹⁰⁵

But Johnson’s work does not merely engage a binary in which history remains discrete from the contemporaneous world. I believe the poetic reflexivity between temporal spaces is best understood through a theorization of Johnson’s poetry as a writing of ruins that complicates the division between past and present. In this essay, I describe the ways that Johnson’s ruins follow the patterns of modernist ones, which overlay natural destruction with historical disaster.¹⁰⁶ To follow Fritzsche’s synoptic assertion, it is not merely the ruin, “but the ruin of the ruin [that] is the hallmark of modernity” (102). In fact, Johnson’s ruins offer an alternative to the long running story of Decadence’s influence on modernism, which situates Decadence as the fallow ground from which modernism emerges. By examining Johnson’s ruin, we can begin to see the ways in which some of the primary ideological and aesthetic investigations of Decadence continue to thrive and inform the twentieth century. Modernism echoes and intensifies the anxieties that Johnson’s poetry traces, ultimately resembling the ruin with which Johnson struggled more than the energetic Futurist moment, during which efficiency and progress seemed inevitable. In Johnson’s case, ruin is not just a poetic symbol, but also a conceptual function that drives the central subjects of Johnson’s work. I will first consider how Johnson explores religion and ritual as idealized sites eroded by the forces of natural and historic ruin. I then look at how Johnson’s

¹⁰⁴ Murray G.H. Pittock, “The Poetry of Lionel Johnson,” *Victorian Poetry* 28, no. 3/4, The Nineties (1990): 44, 43.

¹⁰⁵ See Gary H. Paterson, *At the Heart of the 1890s: Essays on Lionel Johnson*, AMS Studies in the Nineteenth Century (New York: AMS Press, 2008).

¹⁰⁶ Holly Laird proposes that Johnson needs to be looked at anew and that the “intimate relations between the forms and thematics of ‘fragmentation’ and those of ‘destruction’ are expressly in need of analysis.” Holly Laird, “The Death of the Author By Suicide: Fin-de-Siècle Poets and the Construction of Identity,” in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 85. The theory of the ruin, as both a formal and thematic emblem of Johnson’s verse, addresses exactly this gap in Johnson criticism.

critical writing reflects anxiety about the ruin of the physical body. Finally, I analyze how Johnson employs motifs of silence and sound to imagine the populations who once filled the ruined spaces. While these ruins straddle different conceptual and material terrains—from the architectural degradation of religious monuments to the degenerate body to the echo of ancient saints, politicians, and poets—it is the very instability of the categories that reveals the extent to which Johnson’s tendencies survive in modernism.

Religious Ruins

Guided by an ardently Catholic guilt—in spirit, if not by letter—Johnson’s poems demand constant repentance from the postlapsarian subject.¹⁰⁷ Johnson’s poetry does not just volley back and forth between neatly divided polarities; instead, it explores the disparity between religious subordination and aesthetic self-dominion into a survey of contradicting pressures, flirting with all the points of instability on the terrain between absolutes. Johnson’s poetic personae, with their longings for pure religious experience, represent a most serious version of Decadence’s relationship with Catholicism.¹⁰⁸ But against the background of the secular world, piety becomes uncomfortably proximate to the historical ruin and the nostalgia that it elicits. The poetic exploration of religious experience, whether through the image of a “ruinous church door” or the vicissitudes of “lonely faith,” becomes the literary equivalent of imaginative interaction entailed

¹⁰⁷ For a concise but illuminating read of Johnson’s relationship to Catholicism (to which he converted in 1891, at twenty-five), see G. A. Cevasco, *Three Decadent Poets: Ernest Dowson, John Gray, and Lionel Johnson: An Annotated Bibliography*, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities (New York: Garland, 1990). 259-67. Cevasco considers how Johnson’s exacting knowledge of Catholic doctrine affected everything from his homosexual desires to modernism to politics.

¹⁰⁸ Decadence’s thorny relationship with Catholicism frequently erupts through the appropriation of the Church’s vast repository of iconography and imagery for inflammatory purposes. For a thorough analysis of the formal and ideological persistence of Catholicism in Decadence, see Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); Johnson, *The Collected Poems of Lionel Johnson*.

in viewing an architectural ruin where one attempts to see the unified whole from the remaining parts (47, 100). The formal commitment to motifs of history that includes a commitment to religious culture is the result of an aesthetic engagement venerating the past. Johnson's own aesthetic concepts model early theories of Walter Pater, which contend that the artist remains responsible for recreating the past, as "[w]hat is over and alone is perfect" (45).¹⁰⁹ This is not the flame-like existence of *The Renaissance's* coda, nor is it the deathless smile of *La Gioconda*. Rather, it is an interpretation, Pittock argues, that "leads to Johnson's view of death and defeat as a triumph for the artist, because it returns him to the place where his allegiance must always lie" (45).¹¹⁰

Throughout Johnson's nineties poetry, the religious ruin is especially prevalent, representing a site of prior ethical and social order in contrast to the morass of modernity. G.A. Cevasco understands Johnson's Decadence as an aestheticization of rituals that becomes a substitution for direct action, thereby aligning the ritual with surrogate experiences rather than direct ones: "'Life is ritual' became his catch phrase, and Johnson lived *a rebours*. Vicarious experiences, he held, being less common and detached, were more exquisite than actual engagements."¹¹¹ Cevasco's interpretation of Johnson's personal use of ritual for indirect experience is a perceptive lens through which to read the poet's literary work. As Johnson directly links dedicated observation of rituals—especially religious ritual—to earlier eras,

¹⁰⁹ Pittock notes that Johnson admires the Pater derived from his 1885 reading of Marius the Epicurean, which realizes that this vacillation between past and present can only be resolved through death.

¹¹⁰ Pittock, "The Poetry of Lionel Johnson," 45. This sense of death as defeat is present in an 1883 letter, in which Johnson articulates a fear that Catholicism is fast becoming an anachronism: "It is so strange to live in a world of intense faith! there is something so grand in the idea of limitless faith in the unseen, and distrust in the seen and reasoned. I have great fear for our religion all the same. The number of people who profess Buddhism astonishes me, when I consider that so few try and live up to their professions. But still truth must prevail in the end. I think the frame of mind in which people commit suicide is one which is to be cultivated: I mean that longing to have done with the things of the world, and precipitate oneself into the illimitable vacancy of death, for then we can really rise above the desire for death by dying, as Paul says, daily in the flesh." Lionel Pigot Johnson, *Some Winchester Letters of Lionel Johnson* (London; New York: G. Allen & Unwin Ltd.; The Macmillan Company, 1919). 47-48.

¹¹¹ Cevasco, *Three Decadent Poets: Ernest Dowson, John Gray, and Lionel Johnson: An Annotated Bibliography*: 172.

Johnson's experiences are not only vicarious, but also temporally removed, dictated by "august decrees that were when Time was not" (227). Against nature, here, is not only against direct action, but against the progressive order of time.¹¹²

This desire to exist outside of contemporary experience resounds most acutely in the contrast between the modern city and religious sanctuary. Matthew Bradley argues, "[w]hilst simultaneously proclaiming the fitness of urban subjects for poetic exploration, decadent writing tends in practice simultaneously to associate the city with ideas of wrongdoing, of transgression, and of sin."¹¹³ The urban space of Decadence "is a *civitas terrena* in the Augustinian sense, that is, it is a space at least partially defined by its opposition to the *civitas dei*, the City of God."¹¹⁴ For Johnson, rituals that act as initiations to the City of God are, as Cevasco notices, decidedly artificial, but they also reflect a rejection of the direct experiences of urbanity. However, for Johnson, *civitas dei*—"the perfect City of true God"—functions analogically to ruin, alive only through acts of imagination (81). This conflict between disaffection with the modern, secular world and inaccessibility to the theological one surfaces in "The Church of a Dream." Describing a church abandoned by the society that surrounds it, wherein the only regular occupants are enshrined saints, Johnson's opening lines reveal an exhausted contemporary world, both the site of historical ruins and natural decline: "Sadly the dead leaves rustle in the whistling wind, / Around the weather-worn, gray church" (65).¹¹⁵ Against this scene of "autumnal" dormancy, the dead saints and Church's artifice remain the only noble elements. As the saints rest in "golden

¹¹² On Johnson's lyrical treatment of the death and resurrection of Christ as a source of individual hope, see Gary H. Paterson, "Lionel Johnson and Arthur Hugh Clough: An Ironic Debt?," *Victorian Poetry* 40, no. 3 (2002): 255-60.

¹¹³ Matthew Bradley, "Sinful Cities and Ecclesiastical Excuses: The 'Churches for Art's Sake' Movement from the Century Guild to Eliot," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 37, no. 1 (2007): 202.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹¹⁵ "The Church of a Dream" is dedicated to Renaissance art historian and art-market pioneer Bernhard Berenson, which nicely exemplifies the conflict between the material and rarefied worlds with which Johnson so frequently contends.

vesture” and the “glorious windows shake” a priest offers the sacrament replete with ritual that offers the only dynamism, “the old censer full of spice, / In gray, sweet incense clouds; blue, sweet clouds mystical” (66). These richly textured images—reminiscent, as the title points out, of the immediate sensory input of dream life—are surrounded with corrosive forces.

Whereas “The Church of a Dream” constructs an isolated sanctuary entombed within the larger image of the world in seasonal and cultural decline—in short, a historical ruin within the context of its contemporary counterpart—“Renegade” places the poetic narrator within the scene, as an additional subject transformed by ruin rather than merely an onlooker. Still, the same sense of isolation and passive lament rules. The variations that begin each of the three stanzas reiterate, in different conjunctive forms, the termination of everything: “But all that now is over,” “For all that now is over,” “Since all that now is over” (78). “That” looms as the indefinite pronoun of everything lost, while the renegade figure documents the ruins, from the “remembrances of Holy Land,” to “charmed communion with high things unseen.” “Renegade” tracks the shift from an inner life that can see and hear beyond the apparent, to an all-encompassing blindness and deafness to those perceptions. The figure of the renegade, by this token, lives at the threshold of the ruins of faith and culture, having become the “Mere merchant of earth’s marketplace.”

Johnson figures the earth as a congested city, in which “broken echoes fill the mart, and call / Back to my silent memories.” Language becomes a material ruin under these conditions; in this sense, “broken echoes” is not only a motif, but also a site at which we can observe the linguistic breakdown that will ultimately inform the language play of modernism. For Linda Dowling, Johnson’s poetry enacts the last moments before language is entirely untethered: “Johnson’s scholarly conventions of diction, rhyme, and even punctuation supply a last frail connection to the classical tradition of civilized speech; the restrain the disembodied voice from dissolution

into the merely personal.”¹¹⁶ While Johnson’s poetry explores potential places for reprieve and grace in ancient sacred spaces, there always remains the shadow of the poet as the human site of modern ruin.

Ruined Bodies

How do images of widespread physical and ideological ruin extend to the individual body? Page DuBois considers how the metaphor of the “ruin of the aging body” works alongside the classical ruins of antiquity to “recall a lost whole, a fleeting ephemeral totality.”¹¹⁷ Cecilia Enjuto Rangel cites the Baroque “obsession with death and decay” that expands “the topos of the ruins from the city’s space to the human body.”¹¹⁸ And, of course, the most incendiary arguments against *fin de siècle* Decadence were couched in terms of degeneration, which warned that the decline of prior civilizations were in part due to moral ruin and bodily deterioration, thus warning that visible sign of the ruined body portended macrocosmic destruction.¹¹⁹ Theories of degeneration collapse natural ruin and historic ruin into each other: the degenerate body is at once a place of natural and cultural decline. In this sense, Johnson’s catalogue of the individual private ruin that results from submitting to the senses reflects how the body is subject to both human-made and natural destructions. The variety of these destructions is presented in a mode of

¹¹⁶ Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*: 198-99.

¹¹⁷ Page DuBois, *Out of Athens: The New Ancient Greeks* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010). 54-55.

¹¹⁸ Cecilia Enjuto Rangel, *Cities in Ruins: The Politics of Modern Poetics*, Purdue Studies in Romance Literatures (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2010). 8.

¹¹⁹ For instance, Richard Krafft-Ebing warns: “The material and moral ruin of the community is readily brought about by debauchery, adultery, and luxury. Greece, the Roman Empire, and France under Louis XIV. and XV., are striking examples of this assertion. In such periods of civic and moral decline the most monstrous excesses of sexual life may be observed, which, however can always be traced to psycho-pathological or neuro-pathological conditions of the nation involved.” Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: With Especial Reference to the Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*, trans. Franklin S. Klaf, Complete English-language ed. (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1998). 4.

Decadence as confessional poetry, but confession extends from the individual transgression back out to the larger world. A mixture of guilt and pleasure rules the dominant figures of Johnson's poems, who waver between the constraints of religious life and the freedom of artistic life, who either lose themselves in the "perfect pain" of religious life or become freed "By grace of art, that never dies" (68, 70). For Johnson, this exchange constitutes a Faustian bargain: to forsake the solace of religion for the pleasure of the contemporary world is to renounce the past for the present, to become an eradicating, ahistorical force allied with the contemporary sources of social (and, particularly in this case, ethical) ruin. The individual who fully succumbs to the pleasures of the modern world might finally become, as Johnson declares in "The Destroyer of a Soul," a "living body, hiding its dead soul" (74).¹²⁰

In Johnson's terms, to stray from faith has both a geographical component and a temporal aspect—one can wander too far from the sanctuary into the city and one can invest too fully in the modern world. In these respects, contemporary society is a purgatorial space in which the self is separated from historically unifying forces. In "The Darkness" spiritual suffering is depicted as natural violence in contrast to a state of grace that is a preternatural "beauty of the crystal and the dew" (125). In "The Dark Angel," Johnson invokes a Satanic other full of the "aching lust" of homosexual desire (52). For Ellis Hanson, the "Dark Angel" exemplifies the type of poem where Johnson "wrestles with his sexual shame and guilt without fleeing desperately into a seraphic pose," instead of straining for "sentimental piety and an absurdly idealized homoeroticism."¹²¹ The transformation of idealized desire to embodied desire is aligned with the conversion of nostalgia into terror, in which Muses turn into Furies and the "land of dreams" into a "gathering

¹²⁰ "Destroyer of a Soul" is, of course, thought to be a denunciation of Oscar Wilde for his "corruption" of Lord Alfred Douglas.

¹²¹ Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*: 87.

place of fears” (52). Though there is pleasure aligned with the renunciation of spirit for flesh, the exchange triggers crisis. The world reflects, in its disorder, the extent to which the dissolution of internal codes has extrinsic effects.¹²²

The tripartite poem “Visions,” written over the space of two years, offers multiple stages of this wholly encompassing dissolution. As the title would suggest, Johnson literalizes spiritual vision as a type of sight. But, typical of Johnson, even an onlooker is unsafe, liable to be engulfed within the scene by lingering at the periphery. The poem begins with an anaphora that lines up the dwellers of purgatorial space, with “Each in his proper gloom / Each in his dark, just place” (61). These “Heirs of Eternity” beget syncopated exclamations: they are “Lost! lost! fallen and lost!” and “Each suffers in the ghost / The sorrows of the flesh.” Such suffering provokes apoplexy within the visionary, whose apostrophe invokes three stanzas of testimonial:

O miracle of sin!
That makes itself an home,
So utter black within,
Thither Light cannot come!

O mighty house of hate!
Stablished and guarded so,
Love cannot pass the gate,
Even to dull its woe!

¹²² For another consideration of the way in which the issue of the body in pain plays out in Johnson’s writing, see Linda Dowling, “Nero and the Aesthetics of Torture,” *Victorian Newsletter* 66(1984): 1-5. Dowling specifically addresses the way in which Johnson’s “On the Character of Nero” takes the position of Oxford’s new historiography that questions the veracity of Nero’s decadence as a contributing factor in Rome’s decline. Dowling examines Johnson’s participation “at a distance, in the French culte de Néron begun by Sade” and looks at the precedents of his depiction of Nero as “a sort of mischievous boy fond of engaging in grisly practical jokes” (2).

Now Christ compassionate!
 Now, bruise me with thy rod:
 Lest I be mine own fate,
 And kill the Love of God.

While condemning the transgressions that take place outside of the bounds of religious agony, the verse culminates in an ecstatic testimony on physical pain. The phallic imagery of Christ's bruising "rod" emphasizes the extent to which Christian imagery, when eroticized and aestheticized, becomes a code for talking about the pleasures of dissipation, agony, and the progression of physical ruin as a necessary component of faith.

Johnson's invocation of "rod" clearly refers to 1 Samuel 14:43 in which Jonathan, the son of King Saul, faces punishment after breaking his father's edict that the troops must fast until his enemies have been vanquished by eating honey off of the end of his staff.¹²³ But Johnson's use of Samuel also participates in the *fin-de-siècle* conversion of the passage into an example of the virtues of the sensual, such as Pater's use of 1 Samuel 14 in Winckelmann, in which he cites the passage to explain pleasure free from Christian guilt,¹²⁴ and Oscar Wilde's rewriting of Samuel in "Helas," in which the poetic narrator admits that "with a little rod / I did but touch the honey of romance."¹²⁵ If the biblical instance represents surrender to physical desire against the direct orders to abstain, Johnson makes Christ the possessor of the rod, and turns it into a symbol of

¹²³ The Biblical Jonathan has long been a figure that raises questions about where homosociality ends and homosexuality begins. While an extensive investigation of this issue, in terms of Johnson, goes beyond the scope of my essay, for a closer examination of the relationship between Jonathan and David see Susan Ackerman, *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David*, Gender, Theory, and Religion (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

¹²⁴ Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*: 111.

¹²⁵ Oscar Wilde, *Complete Poetry*, ed. Isobel Murray, The World's Classics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). 132.

transgressive pleasure and religious subordination. This reverie becomes a grotesquely realized pastoral, a “place of happy pains,” wherein the tortures of faith (as opposed to the tortures from lack of faith) are enmeshed in a *bizzarie* of almost Boschian detail where “love divine detains / Glad souls among sweet fires.” Within this scenario the central image of the ruined body, burns by the fires that “embrace / The red-scarred, red stained soul.” But central to “Visions” creation of all encompassing ruin is the portrayal of the material world as equally devastating:

Us the sad world rings round
 With passionate flames impure:
 We tread an impious ground,
 And hunger, and endure: (62)

The visionary figure is surrounded by destruction, whether it come by way of punishing theological codes or the contemporary world’s anomie. The final segment reveals a redemption, not of the land, which has burned, its “ordeal done,” but of “Christ’s poor slave,” who is “fresh from the white fire,” and does not want to approach “God’s face / Perfectly white and whole,” preferring to linger at a distance. For Johnson, the ruination of the soul constitutes an equivalent ruination of the individual body, ecstatic as it might be.

“Visions” exemplifies the body in sumptuous pain that diverts erotic odyssey into a religious one. Johnson replicates this motif—though inverts its trajectory—in “A Proselyte.” Unlike “Visions,” the poetic persona of “A Proselyte” works through a first person point of view that both focalizes and experiences the events. Here imagination—the return to prophetic vision—does not rule. These are not dreams of the redemption of the self through a penitential ruin of the body, but the exploration of faith as a process of self-erasure. The poetic figure—a person of faith who dedicates their life to Benedictine-like silence in “cloistral peace”—is

undone by the arrival of a chaotic force (83). The proselyte begins to worship this force that cultivates turbulence over peace. The encounter annihilates the prior joys of quiet observance: “One glance / From thee hath all its joy undone.” The persona is “now in vehement disarray,” “Distracted / With passion kindled,” as “devastation came, / Sudden and swift; / A gift / Of joyous torment without name.” The impression that the very temptations that can undo faith are, in fact, the most potent sort of faith experiences, is even duplicated in a stanzaic form that aligns the disruption of meter with spiritual fulfillment. For example, the final stanza of the poem:

Thy spirit stings my spirit: thou
 Takest by storm and ecstasy
 The cloister of my soul. And now,
 With ardour that is agony,
 I do thy will;
 Yet still
 Hear voices of calm memory.

The motif of devotion married to destruction carries through to the poem’s final resolution. The signifiers of coupled pain and pleasure—the “stings”, ecstasy, ardor, agony—are also the indications of devotion. The persona is dominated and supplanted of their own will towards prescriptive notions of piety. The shape of this stanza—which exactly duplicates the three preceding it—reflects processes of breakdown, with the fifth and sixth line falling into dimeter and then monometer.¹²⁶ Even the body of the verse form reflects ruin.

¹²⁶ This directly contradicts John Reed’s argument that in Johnson’s poetry, transgression is thematic, whereas they “do not express dissolution in their form or exploit tantalization and suspension in their syntax.” Reed, *Decadent Style*: 115.

In Johnson's work the persistent idea that the decline hastened by Decadence compromises the body—that it not only corrupts culture and ethics, but individual physiology, as well—is exhibited in the conflicted relationship between physical degradation and nostalgia. Contra notions of modern advancement, Johnson's poetic exegesis tends to ally the forces that created historical ruins with ongoing decline: modernity does not represent a progressive shift, but simply an increasingly efficient momentum that amps up the rate of that decline. Johnson's intellectual alliances can appear uncomfortably close to Max Nordau's theories of degeneration. Of course, Nordau infamously ties his diagnoses of the degenerate tendencies of *fin-de-siècle* culture to the decay of the social and individual body, but the breadth of *Degeneration* doesn't so much reveal a comprehensive logic of decline as it exposes the immense fears surrounding signs of excess and transformation—fears that Johnson seems to share despite his aesthetic allegiance to the very same signs. As a result, the relationship between the unhealthy body and the unhealthy text becomes progressively linked.

Nordau warns against the dire problems of the *fin de siècle* by comparing it to Christian millenarianism at the end of the tenth-century; but even if both transitions contain the widespread “horror of world-annihilation,” at least the “despair at the turn of the first millennium of Christian chronology proceeded from a feeling of fulness of life and joy of life.”¹²⁷ The nineteenth-century turn threatens because it contains nothing of this imagined vitality, instead it promulgates physical and moral sickness.¹²⁸ Nordau's systematic theorization of the connections between nineteenth-century movements such as Decadence, Symbolism, the Pre-Raphaelites, the Parnassians, and Realism and widespread breakdown that compromises social and physical health is figured as a present condition of ruin in which degraded forms from the past prevail

¹²⁷ Max Simon Nordau, *Degeneration*, 4th ed. (New York: D. Appleton and company, 1895). 2.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

over future perfection. Physiologically, this breakdown runs the gamut from tooth decay to cocaine use to sexual “psychopathy.”¹²⁹ Aesthetically and intellectually, it manifests in literature like that of proto-Decadents Theophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire whom, according to Nordau, are not aesthetic innovators that employ new positions and techniques to reveal a distinctly modern subjectivity, but merely describe “the disposition of the mystically degenerate mind, with its shifting nebulous ideas, its fleeting formless shadowy thought, its perversions and aberrations, its tribulations and impulsions.”¹³⁰ Nordau espouses a programmatic approach to rooting out the degenerate, to “distinguish the healthy from the diseased impulse, and demand that the latter be combated.”¹³¹ The degenerated body and mind—that is, the body and mind that the degenerative processes work upon—is an analogue to the architectural ruin. They both remain redolent of a prior unity and, in this sense, the degenerate body provokes nostalgia for idealized versions of the perfect, vital bodies of earlier previous eras

At this point, an extended critique of Nordau’s pseudo-science is needless—there is a long critical history of Nordau debunking. Justifiably, defenders of Decadence distance it from Nordau’s manic polemical flourishes. Decadence’s recovery—its very *health*—seems dependent on extricating it from the rhetoric of disease, fracture, disintegration, and dissipation of the Degeneration camp. G.A. Cevasco encourages the differentiation between decadence (*lower case*) as the decline—morally and culturally—in life and aesthetics, and Decadence (*capitalized*) as the literary concept.¹³² In David Weir’s introduction to his thorough examination of the

¹²⁹ Ibid., 42, 538, 38.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 300.

¹³¹ Ibid., 325.

¹³² Cevasco, *The Breviary of the Decadence: J.-K. Huysmans's *À Rebours* and English Literature*.

rhetorical entanglement between Decadence and Degeneration, he likewise extricates them from one another in this concise maxim: “Decadence and Degeneration have little in common: one refines corruption and the other corrupts refinement.”¹³³

But Weir’s chiasmic logic divulges the extent to which Decadence and Degeneration remain yoked. He may imagine them as inversions, but axiomatic to both is the process of corruption. Whitney Davis points out the dependence of Decadence on the constant return of decay as an interpretive function:

[A]t its heart decadence is really a metaphor of Culture applied to Nature—of a human necessity evident to us *in* and *as* culture applied to all nature both within and without human culture itself [...] The metaphorical transfer that I have mentioned builds upon a wholesale—a radical—cultural recognition of the flux of death in human experience as a fact of life. To use Friedrich Nietzsche’s term, the “historical sense” of Decadence—the Decadent historical sense—proffers a radically thanatological hermeneutics of the self-cultivation of what I am calling the culture of nature: all life comes into being and passes away in irreversible metastasis and consumption, whether imagined as the fire and flame at the end or the ever-increasing attrition of the least-fit descendants of a once-well-constituted stock.¹³⁴

Davis emphasizes that degeneration is neither a pejorative term used by late-nineteenth-century critics to transfer moral critiques onto aesthetics, nor is it the polar opposite of Decadence. Instead, degeneration is one aspect of a larger cultural movement that privileges images and ideas of decline over progress. In fact, in *Degeneration*’s indictment that the physical, degenerate

¹³³ Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*: xi.

¹³⁴ Whitney Davis, “Decadence and the Organic Metaphor,” *Representations* 89 (2005): 138-39.

body is endangering the fitness of the future, Nordau uncovers the extent to which modernity commits to representations of deterioration. I would like to reclaim the uncomfortable thorn of degeneration that lodges in the side of Decadence, worrying its most ardent supporters, by understanding it—in Johnson’s work particularly—as a conceptual function that drives Decadence up to the precipice of the twentieth century—that, in fact, makes it modern—rather than as a pejorative ascription that attempts to classify states of aberration and, consequently, make them easier to contain.

Karl Beckson places the origins of British Decadence in Swinburne and Pater, who both understood the aesthetic life of ruins as an alternative to the sterility of mass culture. For Beckson, Decadence binds veneration of beauty with the forms of degradation that corrupt it. The forbearers of Decadence work with language and concepts already dead, in which innovating is a process of recycling archaisms. Pater’s works, “consisting of numerous quotations in Greek and Latin, a convoluted hesitant sentence structure, and a tendency to invent new forms of expression, suggest a newly devised literary language design for learned readers with cultivated aesthetic tastes.”¹³⁵ It is as though, Beckson argues, Pater writes in Decadent Latin as opposed to nineteenth-century English. Such defiance of traditional style goes to the core of the threat of Decadence as, traditionally, “pride in the achievements of the English language and in the civilizing ideals of the British Empire were ineluctably fused.”¹³⁶

In Johnson’s poetry, the ruin as an exemplum of degenerative anti-momentum creates its own category of effects and procedures, from the religious ruin to the tortured body, from slow memory loss to sudden disassociation. Johnson searches for cohesive meaning in remains that could offer foundational materials for the erection of renewed ethical and social codes. This

¹³⁵ Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History*: 42.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

desire for stability is reflected in Johnson's *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, which insists upon the need for a traditional literary heritage despite evidence of an increasingly fractured modern life which produces art that bears the mark of destruction. In its dizzying opening chapter, Johnson traces literature from Greek tragedy to eighteenth-century epistolary novels such as *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, from Dante to English and German Romanticism, from the *Iliad* to Dickens, "from the weighty masterpieces of George Eliot, down to the daintiest trifle of Mr. Henry James."¹³⁷ As spry macro-histories of literature go, so does "Critical Preliminaries," parading a litany of historical precedents in order to situate a contemporary aesthetic argument. In light of this, it is an enormously conflicted statement that uses some of the very same criticisms against modern literature levied against Decadence. Johnson's assertions even shape conservative critique for a staunchly British cognoscenti, as while situating Hardy's fiction within the specific lineage of English literature, Johnson excludes "foreign influences" that have molded the shape of the English novel: "to discriminate between the influence of Goethe and of *les Goncourts*, of Stendhal and of M. de Maupassant, of Balzac and of Count Tolstoi, of Flaubert and of George Sand" would be redundant, writes Johnson, as "it is done admirably, by skilled critics, every week."¹³⁸ Aside from speaking to Johnson's appraisal of his contemporaneous critical scene as invested in the exploration of transnational artistic influences in an era on the brink of globalism, the poet's stance represents a sort of constant prevarication between oppositional forces. On one hand, Johnson can admit both an ancient and modern sphere of aesthetic influences that is interpenetrative and fluid, as he traces a lineage that moves easily from one country to the next, from one age to another, and between formal categories. On the other hand, he launches into his study with a focus that radically verticalizes the provenance of English literature, claiming that

¹³⁷ Lionel Pigot Johnson, Joseph Edwin Barton, and John Lane, *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, New ed. (London, J. Lane, 1895). 35.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 35-36.

his purpose is not so much the larger picture but “the works of an English novelist, who, continuing the high traditions of his art, is faithful to the spirit of his age; but faithful also to the spirit of his country.”¹³⁹ While Johnson’s argument is reasonable in terms of the book’s project, it also abruptly closes much of the preceding consideration of global contexts, a termination that is both illuminating and contradictory in terms of Johnson’s relationship to Decadence and the artistic developments of the 1890s. Johnson argues that the advent of literary degeneration occurred abroad:

For our century has in succession enjoyed the *Welt-Schmerz* of Germany, and the *Névrose* of France: an immense and desolate melancholy from Russia, a perverse and astringent misery from Scandinavia. We ‘refine our pleasures,’ as Congreve has it; and our refinement takes the form of that paradoxical humour, which confounds pleasure with pain, and vice with virtue. It is a sick and haggard literature, this literature of throbbing nerves and of subtle sensations; a literature, in which clearness is lost in mists, that cloud the brain; and simplicity is exchanged for fantastic ingenuities. Emotions become entangled with the consciousness of them: and after-thoughts or impressions, laboured analysis or facile presentation, usurp the place of that older workmanship, which followed nature under the guidance of art. Ages of decay, seasons of the falling leaf, are studied for love of their curious fascination, rather than ages of growth and of maturity: ‘the glory that was Greece, and the grandeur that was Rome,’ are chiefly welcomed in the persons of those writers whom it is convenient to style *Cantores Euphorionis*. Literature, under such auspices, must lose half its beauty, by losing

¹³⁹ Ibid.

all its humanity: it ceases to continue the great tradition of polite, of humane letters: it becomes the private toy of its betrayers. Many and many a book, full of curious devices, and of distorted beauties, full of hints and of suggestions, can charm our modern taste, with its indulgence, not to say its appetite, for all sorts of silly audacity: but we dare not prophesy for such books an immortality, nor contemplate them by the side of classics.¹⁴⁰

Perverse, sickly, haggard: all modifiers that could easily be ascribed to Decadence by its detractors. The argument Johnson builds presents qualms about a series of aesthetic and ideological engagements that portend some of the core issues taken up by the avant-garde: modern literature as the destruction of limits; the emphasis on artistic forms that do not seek to represent an absolute, but express variable perceptions; a preference for art over nature, and a widespread challenge to nature as the principle manifestation of beauty to which art must endeavor to attain. But even more extraordinary than Johnson's anxieties about the state of modern literature, is the fact that they are penned by one of the nineteenth century's most preeminent poets, an indication of the extent to which theories of degeneration affect even those who might be perceived as degenerate. In fact, Johnson's description of modern writing as a "literature of throbbing nerves" lines up easily with Max Nordau's theory that "the impressionability of the nerves and brain in the degenerate subject is blunted" to the extent that "he only perceives strong impressions."¹⁴¹ Crucially, within Johnson's indictment of art which involves proto-Decadent techniques persists the sense that it is a part of a destructive process of systematic degeneration, undermining the custom that constructs the precepts of canonical longevity. Johnson lays claims to a philosophy of major literature that reflects a central historic and social narrative, views

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 2-3.

¹⁴¹ Nordau, *Degeneration*: 283.

minor movements as subversive and corrosive, and prefers shelf-life to topicality, elegant restraint to immediacy. But if tradition is immortal (in contrast to the literature of decay, which dies alongside its era), its immortality comes at the price of an almost deathlike intransigence, paralyzed in the venerable tradition. Paradoxically, it is reprobate literature that lives, remains spry, that teases and beckons with its “curious devices” and “distorted beauties,” and challenges orthodox assumptions about greatness to subvert and unsettle instead of merely stabilize.

All Around Is Silence

In Johnson’s poetry, the conflict entailed in ruin—the nostalgia for the ruins of history opposed to anxiety over the contemporary sites of ruin—has an adjacent sonic state. Johnson uses sound and silence to convey the aural texture within the environmental and emotional experiences of ruin. Johnson’s idealization of “silence sweet” becomes an analogue to the tranquility of his historical imagination and directly contradicts the world “full of noise” that accompanies the advent of both industrialization and urban migration (156, 122).¹⁴² In fact, it might be possible to assess the advent of modernity and everything after as the steady and exponentially increasing onslaught of noise: mediated noise, electronically amplified noise, machine noise, visual noise, the deafening noise emitted by the metropolis’ ever increasing crowds—*everywhere*, noise. While many variations of sounds erupt, no less manifold are the reactions to its ubiquity. Nietzsche hypothesizes in *Human, All Too Human*: “We can now endure a much greater volume, much more ‘noise’, than our forefather could because we are

¹⁴² Daniel Rutenberg’s brief article on the depiction of death in Tennyson’s “Crossing the Bar” and Johnson’s “In Falmouth Harbour,” interprets the latter’s poem as a “negation of life” that understands death as freedom from “the chaos of life.” Daniel Rutenberg, “Crisscrossing the Bar: Tennyson and Lionel Johnson on Death,” *Victorian Poetry* 10, no. 2 (1972): 179. Furthermore, Rutenberg points out Johnson’s central image in the “quiet waters” of the harbor as “appropriate to death.” *Ibid.*, 180.

much more practiced in listening for the *reason in it* than they were.”¹⁴³ In a notebook from 1894, Henry James records an idea for the story of a man “who has become afraid of himself when alone-vaguely afraid of his own company, personality, disposition, character, presence, fate; so that he plunges into society, noise, sound, the sense of diversion, distraction, protection, connected with the presence of others.”¹⁴⁴

In this climate of increasing aural inundation, silence takes on a consequence equally various. Johnson’s silence is problematic in the sense that it treads a complex relationship between longing for the past along with the insistence of the present and future, in which case “the tumult of the street” is music (117). For Johnson, silence intimates a fidelity to codes of seclusion and renunciation. In this mode, silence is golden. Johnson connects the silence of the ruin to venerable tradition; both offer relief from a modern world mired in cacophony. If, as Nietzsche supposes, becoming modern entails a heightened level of sensitivity (as a result of practice) to subtle denotations in the otherwise riotous, then silence begins to loom as unquantifiable. In fact, silence as dissent from the modern world is Johnson’s preferred mode. Longing for the past is not only idealized, but aestheticized in spatial and experiential terms. Johnson’s model of Christian antiquity has less to do with history than the formation of a utopic space constructed out of its spoils; his depiction of paradise is not so far from Charles Fourier’s eighteenth-century version of the utopian city conceived as multiple layers of physical space, each strata designated for a specific sort of work so that the principles of harmony would be reflected architecturally as well as ideologically: “The center of this construction should be a place for quiet activity [...] This central section includes the temple, the tower, the telegraph, the coops for carrier pigeons, the ceremonial chimes, the observatory, and a winter courtyard

¹⁴³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, Texts in German Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). 100.

¹⁴⁴ Henry James, *The Notebooks of Henry James* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947). 150.

adorned with resinous plants.”¹⁴⁵ This vision of a community that understands individual freedom not in terms of the individual voice, but of its silence, is shared by nineteenth-century Viennese Art Historian Alois Riegl for whom silence, at its apex, is much like religious communion. Jonathan Crary argues that Riegl’s analysis of the Dutch Masters extols them as forming the “dream of community, of a hushed moment of psychic communion” that was completely different than “modern forms of interiority, absorption, and psychic isolation, or to the dissolution of this communal world.”¹⁴⁶ Silent communion is predicated on the concept that silence, as an internal condition, cannot be monitored from the outside. Just as Fourier envisions a utopia that improves upon the chaos of his contemporaneous France by replacing the noise of Paris with a nucleus of silent withdrawal or Riegl contrasts his admiration of the Dutch masters and their cultivation of silence against the noisiness of modernity, Johnson imagines another existence—largely figured in romanticized versions of antiquity—in which silence prevails. Johnson’s invocation of ruined sanctuaries and antique cultures rests partially on his interpretation of a past that privileges external silence as the crucial state for accord.

In “The Precept of Silence,” this quandary is configured in compact, plaintive verse—an almost logical proposal that ultimately frays towards the end rather than neatly binding its propositions. The poem unfolds in the poetic equivalent of a balanced, measured 4/4 rhythm-tetrameter verse contained by quatrains:

The winds are sometimes sad to me;

The starry spaces, full of fear:

¹⁴⁵ Charles Fourier, *Théorie de l'unité universelle* (1822), in vol. 3 of *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Librairie sociétaire, 1846), 458, quoted in Armand Mattelart, *The Invention of Communication*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 135.

¹⁴⁶ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), 51.

Mine is the sorrow on the sea,
 And mine the sigh of places drear.

Some players upon plaintive strings
 Publish their wistfulness abroad:
 I have not spoken of these things,
 Save to one man, and unto God. (17)

Johnson acknowledges human silence's interpenetration of the entire environment upon which his own experiences play out, from earth to air to ocean. The natural world, in the fashion of Decadence, cannot stand alone, but is attenuated by a tortured aestheticism that marries "solitary griefs" and "ashen flowers." This collocation of direct admission and arcane symbolism—in this instance a member of Decadence's herbarium of artificial flowers—creates the sense of a confessional in which the intermediary is not just a priest, but the mechanism of the individual aesthetic drive. The incongruity at the foundation of Johnson's poetry is the division between imagery that corresponds to the variable experiences of the senses and the oppositional persistence of an ecclesiastical logic of austerity. Johnson appeals to Catholic intermediation—a ritual that requires speech for absolution, an exchange of external sound for internal silence. Silence, here, is the silence of reprieve and pardon, but its price is an initial utterance.

In "Precept of Silence," Johnson implicates textual silence as well. This self-abnegating element of Johnson's work constantly flirts with the idea that the author's own erasure is the ultimate goal. His rebuke of writers who "publish their wistfulness abroad" reads like a rebuke of public writing as a stand-in for speech. It begs the question: how do we read a precept for silence that censures the sound made by communities—even the resonances implied by the printed

page—in a poem that participates in communal noise-making? And it is a sumptuous, decorative noise at that, one using, to full effect, the back and forth between assonance and alliteration, between sibilance and masculine rhyme. Despite the declaration of its title, “Precept of Silence” is less about rules than about how those rules are compromised and complicated. Johnson probes the disparity between socially and artistically motivated speech and the private conversation entailed of Confession. The apparent value of sacred speech and dismissal of conversation has a distinctly temporal context; for Johnson, silence and confession involve the same kind of enduring values that permeate his poems on nostalgia for the Catholic rituals of the pre-modern world.

The Noise of Ancient Cities

Johnson’s textual appeals for silence are countered by the formal grandiloquence of his verse, which asserts its own polyphony, as well as the recurrent invocation of ancient voices as subjects of his historical poems. To find beauty in the everyday of the modern city, “Hear London’s voice upon the night! / Thou hast bold converse with things rare” (6). To access the ancient secrets, just listen to the “great ghosts” as “[e]ach tells his story, sings his song” (67). For Gary H. Paterson, Johnson associates silence with “eternal life,” while sounds evoke “everyday reality.”¹⁴⁷ But parallel to Johnson’s everyday sounds and eternal silences lies a series of poems that give voice to historical figures, reimagining and reanimating the ruins of history. In these cases, the cacophonous soundtrack of modernity becomes drowned out by noises from the past. Linda Dowling conceives of Johnson’s relationship with historical figures as part of “the

¹⁴⁷ Paterson, *At the Heart of the 1890s: Essays on Lionel Johnson*: 81.

conversational tradition of poetry” which treats even books “less as treasured objects than as living personages or voices.”¹⁴⁸ Ezra Pound describes Johnson’s language as informed by literary history rather than “the language as spoken,” claiming that his poetry is “a curial speech”—that is, itself a type of modern ruin in which “inversions” and anachronisms abound. Johnson’s language specifically enacts the broader processes of linguistic breakdown that British Decadence must deal with to “save something from the wreck,” as Dowling observes, of “the incidentally bleak implications of the new linguistic science: the idea that written language, the literary tongue of the great English writers, was simply another dead language in relation to living speech.”¹⁴⁹ More recently, Robert Macfarlane has argued for a reading of Johnson’s poems as “dialogues of Johnson’s voice with the voices of other, earlier writers,” rather than internalized dialogues.¹⁵⁰ Johnson himself admired other artists’ ability to revive history, revering Pater’s “imaginary portraits” for the fact that they not only identified “the best things” of the past, but revived them in the contemporaneous moment and “let his imagination brood upon it, breathe life into it at make it his.”¹⁵¹ Ultimately, this urge to make the past speak, to construct an alternative to the present from a reactivation of the ancient imagination constructs a poetic necropolis by crowding different historical figures and cultural milieus into a single literary corpus. The poems do not so much mourn, in Romantic fashion, the entire vanished culture provoked by gazing at individual artistic representations and antiquities, but incorporate the collective richness of history into the desaturated present.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁸ Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*: 191, 92.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., xiv.

¹⁵⁰ Robert Macfarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). 298.

¹⁵¹ Lionel Pigot Johnson, *Post Liminium: Essays and Critical Papers*, Essay Index Reprint Series (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1968). 24.

¹⁵² For a more extensive consideration of how the British Museum’s collection of ruins affected the Romantic imagination, see Eric Gidal, *Poetic Exhibitions: Romantic Aesthetics and the Pleasures of the British Museum* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; Associated University Presses, 2001). And for a focused discussion of ruin

Ancient England and Ireland are sites for the trace sounds of irrecoverable civilization. In fact, Johnson attempts retrieval akin to the aesthetic spirit of Yeats' Irish Revival in his presentation of Celtic history as reenergized and coming out of silence.¹⁵³ This is literally figured as the maintenance of language in "Celtic Speech," which issues a declaration about the necessity of preservation: "Never forgetful silence fall on thee, / Nor younger voices overtake the, / Nor echoes from thine ancient hills forsake thee" (37).¹⁵⁴ To lose Celtic is to lose an almost alchemical property, "The speech, that wakes the soul in withered faces, / And wakes remembrance of great things gone by." The contemporary world is complicit in the ongoing destruction of cultural memory:

Like music by the desolate Land's End
Mournful forgetfulness hath broken:
No more words kindred to the winds are spoken,
Where upon iron cliffs whole seas expend
That strength, whereof the unalterable token
Remains wild music, even to the world's end.

and lament surrounding the exhibition of the Elgin Marbles, see Grant F. Scott, "Beautiful Ruins: The Elgin Marbles Sonnet in Its Historical and Generic Contexts," *Keats-Shelley Journal* 39(1990).

¹⁵³ Despite each poet's aesthetic interest in Celtic heritage, there remains a vast difference between Yeats' political investment in Irish cultural autonomy and Johnson's literary interventions. Even early critical work distinguishes between the two, as when Ernest August Boyd writes "Lionel Johnson cannot be considered an Irish poet in the sense that Yeats is." Ernest Augustus Boyd, *Ireland's Literary Renaissance* (New York: John Lane Company, 1916). 180. Boyd attributes the difference to the biographical factors of Johnson's English birth and Oxford indoctrination, but I'd add that Johnson's treatment of cultural history—enmeshed as it is in the nostalgia and lament attributed to ruins—further distances him from the material ambitions of the Irish revival. In W.B. Yeats' preface to *A Book of Irish Verse* (1900), which he edited and in which Johnson is included, Yeats' himself notes that Johnson, while invested in Irish art and thought with some "imaginative energy," ultimately serves a "deliberate art" that is marked by a "preoccupation with spiritual passions and memories." W. B. Yeats, *A Book of Irish Verse*, Routledge Classics (London; New York: Routledge, 2002). xxvi.

¹⁵⁴ "Celtic Speech" was included in the W.B. Yeats edited *A Book of Irish Verse* (1900).

Celtic endures as “wild music” unsullied by cultural markers—a music impossible to tame and understand, somehow purer in its resistance to be absorbed within the linguistic economy of modernity. Johnson’s lamentation is for the loss of a pure, expressive language that disappears in the contemporary world, replaced by language that reveals the failure of communication. Johnson’s both mourns this loss while participating in the construction of a modern linguistic ruin that incorporates fragments of language from the past in order to construct a modernist linguistic ruin. For Nicholas Frankel, “Celtic Speech” parallels Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of minor literature, in which a major language is deterritorialized by an incursion of minor speech—that is the language of the marginalized—within the major language. Frankel sees “Celtic Speech” as involved in this process of subversion as it is “unable or unwilling to become subordinated to a hegemonic signified.”¹⁵⁵ Johnson underscores the power of Celtic to endure, despite being “forced to occupy cramped metropolitan spaces, obliged to articulate itself in a fashion at once alienated and subversive even as it acquires the force of collective enunciations.” However, “Celtic Speech” not only traces political and linguistic categories, but also the impact of the historical imagination upon the contemporary world. Johnson’s verse emphasizes Celtic as the remains of a harmonious world trapped at the “world’s end,” an image with geographic and temporal resonances: while the former emphasizes the expanse of waste and ruin, the latter emphasizes the temporal relationship to end times and the ascension of formerly meaningful sound into babble. Johnson’s lyrical monument to the endurance of Celtic music occurs against the backdrop of a world that recognizes it as linguistic ruins.

¹⁵⁵ Nicholas Frankel, “The Books of the Rhymers’ Club as Material Texts,” in *The Fin-de-Siècle poem : English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 147.

Johnson not only considers cultures that have almost entirely disappeared—he incorporates the individual figures that inhabited those societies into his poems, as well. In “Men of Assisi,” he reanimates Saint Francis and Sextus Propertius, the most famous inhabitants of the Umbrian city, through speech-acts. Propertius’ elegies for Cynthia “sang / Cynthia, and revelry, and Rome,” his verse a “passionate music [that] thrills through us,” while Saint Francis is worshiped because of his position as an intermediary to God: “we hail thee, thus: / Praying, *Sweet Francis! Pray for us*” (55). Throughout the poem runs a conceit that the personae emerging from the past might offer relevant ethical guidance if only they could somehow be deciphered. The final lines of “Men of Assisi” testify to the “glory of remembrance” that is tempered by the closing words, given to Saint Francis, that “*These are among my vanished ones*.” Efforts to engage history through a puppeteering of its voices eventually gives way to a final confirmation of their fading. Thus Johnson’s chorus of celebrated figures never really becomes substantial, but remains residual. As a sort of companion piece to “Men of Assisi,” “Men of Aquino” compactly treads from the Roman Empire’s decline and Juvenal’s satirical excoriations of social and political venality, to the rise of Christian philosophy and St. Thomas Aquinas, who is symbolized by his ability to sing and speak clearly, “Using God’s voice” (72). Despite Juvenal’s development of a “scorn sublime” that attempts to reveal the depravity of paganism, he cannot transform society; instead, it falls to Thomas Aquinas to shift Latinate culture towards Christianity. Johnson aestheticizes Aquinas as a musician and singer whose approach to Christian tenets ascends to the condition of music:

A fourfold music of the Host,
He sang: the open Heavens shone plain.
Then back he turned him to his post,

And opened heavenly Laws again,
 From first to last, both least and most.

O little Latin town! Rejoice,
 Who has such motherhood, as this:
 Through all the worlds of faith one voice
 Chaunts forth the truth; yet stays not his,
 Whose anger made a righteous choice. (72-73)

This is, of course, a historical utopia that reanimates the ruins of antiquity as exemplum for modern life and perceives Juvenal's attacks on Roman vice as folly in comparison to the divine "fourfold" music that Aquinas sings. Even while the poet points out the failure of Juvenal's approach—chiefly, that he appeals to his own sense of opprobrium rather than spiritual instruction—he engages historical context as the domain of vital arguments and revolutions. The poem registers a preference for the models provided by the past, which offers a truth that goes beyond the original site. Temporal perimeters suddenly dissolve to offer an ideal that borrows the best parts of our history and present while existing outside of its limitations. In "Tobacco Clouds," an essay for *The Yellow Book*, Johnson conceives of human history as revived by the imagination. The poet asserts that he is "no melancholy spectator of things, cultivating his intellect with old poetry, nourishing his senses upon rural nature."¹⁵⁶ He does not, in other words, pine for the lost world evoked in natural ruins; instead, his attentions activate and reclaim the past. As he watches the clouds in the sky pass out of view, his "thoughts go with them, into the morning, into all the mornings over the world. They travel through the lands, and

¹⁵⁶ Lionel Pigot Johnson, "Tobacco Clouds," in *The Yellow Book* (London; Boston: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894), 146.

across the seas, and are everywhere at home, enjoying the presence of life. And past things, old histories, are turned to pleasant recollections.”¹⁵⁷ While the stakes of Johnson’s poetry go further than this essay—old histories are recuperated for far more than just pleasure—“Tobacco Clouds” demonstrates a recurrent move of Johnson’s poetic corpus with its importation of a multiple historical narratives into the contemporary world. By focusing our attention on the overlapping zones of past and present, both in cultural and experiential terms, Johnson configures literary modernity as a necropolis in which the figures of cultures fallen into ruin mingle with spoils of the contemporary world. Johnson’s construction of the literary necropolis reflects an emerging insistence of heteroglossia in poetry that will emerge full-tilt in high modernist works such as Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, representing the extension of the Decadent moment through the twentieth century. Modernism does not rise up from the ruins of Decadence as much as it continues and embellishes the forbidding promises of the 1890s. We can see the continuation of Johnson’s ruins in the pages of modernism, which transform the conceptual “wreck” into the formal fragment.

Ruin becomes Johnson’s *métier*, and the welter of conflicting states that marks Johnson’s ruins informs everything from religion to the body to history. Despite the capacity of the ruin to interpret the advent of modernity as a composite of eroded images and concepts, Johnson’s poetic economy is not ultimately invested in recovery. There are no transparent, eternal sets of signifiers here. Instead, partial views and incomplete references give way to a host of meanings that continually transform beneath the surface of the poems. We must decipher his allegiance to ruin, both in conceptual and procedural terms, as an interpretation of the world that gathers all its remnants in a radically collapsed temporal space. Johnson’s Decadence insists that modernity transport the cumbersome remains of the past into the future, aligning it with the more general

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 152.

decadent preoccupation with cultural ruin that offers an alternative to narratives of modern progress. As Matthew Potolsky points out, “[p]raising works that epitomize the decline of the paradigmatic Western empire is a form of protest against contemporary nationalism and imperialism.”¹⁵⁸ Read against the promises of modernity that will reach a fever pitch as the end of the nineteenth century swerves into the beginning of the twentieth, the omnipresence of the ruin burdens narratives of efficiency and progress with the menace of failure and breakdown. For Johnson, the ruin becomes the *sine qua non* of modernity, divining a catastrophic future as it encompasses the past.

¹⁵⁸ Matthew Potolsky, “The Decadent Counterpublic,” *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net* 48(2007): par. 8.

CHAPTER 4

GONE TO PIECES;

ARTHUR SYMONS'S POETRY OF FRAGMENTS

That the fragment comprises modernism's *prima materia* functions as one of the central tenets of its claims to aesthetic innovation.¹⁵⁹ As William Tronzo reasons, the creation of the formal category of the fragment is accompanied by the trauma of fragmentation, "an action whose results can never be entirely foreseen, in contrast to other, more deliberate forms of partitioning or division."¹⁶⁰ For Diego Rivera, such unpredictable breakup provided a breeding ground for Cubism, which he conceives of as absorbing civilization's detritus to erect an entirely new aesthetic that reveres the disjunctive gaps between shattered parts, rather than unity and verisimilitude: "As the old world would soon blow itself apart, never to be the same again, so Cubism broke down forms as they had been seen for centuries, and was creating out of the fragments new forms, new objects, new patterns and—ultimately—new worlds."¹⁶¹

Constructivist and *De Stijl* founder Theo van Doesburg publishes his own principles of contemporary art under the pseudonym I.K. Bonset in 1923's "Towards a Constructive Poetry,"

¹⁵⁹ For Fredric Jameson, fragments are such a definitive trait of modernism that they do not signify "pieces of a former work of art but rather the terms themselves." Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Post-contemporary Interventions (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991). 103. Susan McCabe attributes the modernist employment of the fragment to T.S. Eliot, who "almost 'invented' the fragment upon which modernist poetic composition relies. Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism : Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). 40.

¹⁶⁰ William Tronzo, ed. *The Fragment: An Incomplete History*, Issues & Debates (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2009), 1.

¹⁶¹ Diego Rivera, *My Art, My Life: An Autobiography*, 1st ed. (New York: Citadel Press, 1960). 58.

proclaiming, “Destruction is a Part of the Rebuilding of Poetry.”¹⁶² Confronting the new modes that emerge from a broken-up world, German Expressionist Ludwig Weiner considers how to depict the light of the modern city: “The light seems to flow. It shreds things to pieces. Quite clearly we experience light scraps, light streaks, and light beams.”¹⁶³

Equally crucial to the origin story of modernism are historical interpretations that identify fragmentation with the catastrophic violence that twentieth-century automated warfare creates, and from which the unassimilable piece seems the only surviving form.¹⁶⁴ The devastating effects of trench warfare in World War I resonates in the fragments that Eliot has “shored” up against total ruin in *The Waste Land* or the fractured limbs of Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*. Theorizing the long history of the modern fragment, Linda Nochlin foregrounds the diagnoses reported by Rivera, Doesburg, and Weiner by tracing its genesis to Revolutionary France, where it emerges from two different scenarios. In the first, citizens of the burgeoning republic destroy everything from statuary to reliquary that “enacts the deliberate destruction of that past, or, at least, a pulverization of what were perceived to be its repressive traditions.”¹⁶⁵ The second scenario involves the actual decapitation and dismemberment of the political body of King Louis XIV, his court, and the accompanying violence that threatens to raze everything in its path. Nochlin argues that both the formal and philosophical tendencies of modernism absorb the literal and figurative fragmentation that engulfs Revolutionary France:

¹⁶² Theo van Doesburg (I.K. Bonset), “Towards a Constructive Poetry,” in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 422. Van Doesburg goes on to identify three manifestations of destruction of which one—“atrocities (psychic disturbance)” —seems particularly germane to the incantatory provocations of Decadence.

¹⁶³ Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed. *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, The Documents of Twentieth Century Art (New York, Toronto: G.K. Hall; Maxwell Macmillan, 1993), 102.

¹⁶⁴ See Lecia Rosenthal’s work on fragmentation within the context of twentieth-century violence. Lecia Rosenthal, *Mourning Modernism: Literature, Catastrophe, and The Politics of Consolation*, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

¹⁶⁵ Linda Nochlin, *The Body In Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994). 8.

[The Impressionists] paintings of the urban, specifically Parisian, vista share with Marx and Baudelaire a sense of that loss of solidity, a compensatory dynamism and flow, a sometimes centrifugal and often random organization and, above all, the notion that fragmentariness, in the broadest sense of that term—including both the cut-off view of the body and the cropped picture-surface—is a quality shared in the modern city by both the perceiver-constructor and the object of perception.¹⁶⁶

In this model, the fragment of modernity formally and conceptually reflects the ruptures of the modern world.

In British literary Decadence, perhaps no poet better exemplifies the emergence of the modern fragment as the primary unit of sensory-experience than Arthur Symons, who aestheticizes contemporary desolation in atemporal sequences composed of patchy images and interludes. Symons's verse systematically employs the primary modes of fragmented representation that Nochlin identifies—the “cut-off view of the body” and the “cropped picture-surface.” Additionally, Symons's poetry contains formal and conceptual alliances with new forms of entertainment and aesthetic representations—such as the music hall revue or early motion pictures—which, despite curatorial or editorial guidance that creates an illusion of a whole, remain fundamentally fragmented.¹⁶⁷ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the English music hall's audience became increasingly elevated, its variety show combination of dramatic skits, dance, comedy, and animal tricks drawing in middle-class audiences alongside its working-class patrons.¹⁶⁸ Symons's contact with mass entertainment and spectacle was largely as

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 24-25.

¹⁶⁷ While early motion picture devices such as Emile Reynaud's Praxinoscope (1887), Edison's Kinetoscope (1892), Herman Casler's Mutoscope (1894), Charles Francis Jenkins's Phantascope (1894), and the Lumière Brothers' Cinématographe (1895) propose different mechanical approaches for motion capture and projection, they share the fundamental process of isolating individual images and converting them into quickly moving sequences. In other words, they create the illusion that the fragment has been transformed into a whole.

¹⁶⁸ Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall & Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Athens: Ohio

a music hall and dance reviewer for a variety of publications, from London evening newspapers like *The Star* to more specialized journals such as *Fortnightly Review*. As a critic, Symons was already immersed in emerging cultural trends that used formal variation and were guided by an editorial sensibility towards disruptive, artistically renovating ends.¹⁶⁹ Symons took the widespread popularity of the music hall and its challenge to conventional aesthetic judgment seriously and his essays on the performances “evidence a reflexive awareness of the tastemaking process and challenge traditional notions of cultural hierarchy.”¹⁷⁰

While working as a music-hall critic, Symons was also advancing the British arm of Decadence, publishing the famous “Decadent Movement in Literature” in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*—later revised in *The Symbolic Movement in Literature*—and serving as literary editor of *The Savoy*.¹⁷¹ As a chronicler of new media and entertainment forms, as well as a champion of Decadence, Symons contributes to an emerging discursive literature that runs the gamut between populist entertainment and early Avant-garde manifesto. In some sense, the work that Symons performs as a critic of modern entertainment, with its formal variety, logic of admixture, and principles of accretion and curation, allows him to make the switch from theorizing and reporting on these new forms to enacting these same processes of extraction and

University Press, 2004). 50.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 51.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ In 1896 Arthur Symons served as literary editor for *The Savoy* during its brief one-year lifespan. The textual experimentation within its pages was something of a predecessor for the fiercely independent modernist magazines that followed. From its attention to typography and layout, to its content and intent to publish the finest examples of contemporary literature, criticism, and illustration, *The Savoy* hoped to channel the original incendiary spirit of *The Yellow Book* (1894-1897), which had subdued its content after the Wilde trial aroused conservative bile. The high profile of *The Yellow Book* in the Wilde case—he carried a yellow covered French novel into the courthouse, incorrectly presumed to be a copy of the notorious journal—provoked a wave of righteous indignation in the form of a riot at the offices of the publisher, John Lane. Weintraub, *The Savoy: Nineties Experiment*: xiv. If *The Savoy* has come to epitomize a crowning achievement of Decadent publishing, the backgrounds and interests of its principle staff disclose the tense cultural debate—one that took place under the auspices of morality, ethics, and the health of the social body—at the time of its circulation; the three major forces behind the journal were its publisher, Leonard Smithers, illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, and Symons.

manipulation in his own literary language. For Symons, this results in an aesthetics that resembles montage, wherein experience can only be represented through the piecing together of discrete units that always reveal seams rather than reinforce continuity. While Symons's criticism surveys and indexes a new critical vocabulary to describe the modern aesthetic, as a poet he employs these techniques in his poetry so that the fragment becomes the major unit of modern aesthetics. In *Silhouettes*, *London Nights*, and *Amoris Victima*, the *fin de siècle* works that represent Symons at his most unabashedly Decadent, he incorporates abbreviated or cropped images that favor the piece over the continuous whole, working towards a poetic montage that radically abbreviates both the contexts and the human subjects within.¹⁷²

Silhouettes

Does Decadence have any validity as a formal movement equivalent to, say, the Realist movement that precedes it and the surrealist one that follows? This question endures in contemporary criticism on Decadence, but was being debated in the heyday of the movement.

¹⁷² The 1890s represent Symons's most productive period, and alongside his critical, editorial, and poetic work, emerged a series of short stories that would later be published as *Spiritual Adventures*. Half of the portraits in *Spiritual Adventures* first appeared in journals. During his tenure at *The Savoy*, "Childhood of Lucy Newcome," which would later become the fourth chapter in *Spiritual Adventures*, was published in the December 1896 issue. Three of the remaining seven portraits were also published prior to their inclusion in the larger collection of *Spiritual Adventures*: "Esther Kahn" in the October 1902 issue of *Smart Set*, "Peter Waydelin's Experiment" (reprinted as "The Death of Peter Waydelin") in the February 1904 issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, and "An Autumn City" over the course of three issues in the *Weekly Critical Review* on June 25, July 2 and 9, 1903. *Spiritual Adventures* offers a prose version of the world in pieces through the portrayal of people who are unable to piece together the unintelligible messages of the modern world into a larger meaning. Nowhere does the tension between the fragmented self and an equally fragmented society erupt more consistently than in the troubled boundaries between sleeping, dreaming, waking and the corresponding states of consciousness that those conditions engage. The very existence of the individuals who populate *Spiritual Adventures* is split between states of consciousness. These stories, influenced by the literary portraits of Walter Pater, will, in turn, be a great influence on James Joyce. In a 1914 letter to the Elkin Mathews, erstwhile publisher of *The Yellow Book* and later publisher to James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and W.B. Yeats, Joyce—whose *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* was being serially published in the modernist little magazine *The Egoist* at the time of his writing—inquires of his publisher: "Could you please tell me when replying if Mr. Arthur Symons is better and what is his present address? He was very kind to me years ago and took a great deal of trouble with my verses and therefore, if he is better, I should like to present him with a copy of my book of stories." "Elkin Mathews: Poets' Publisher, 1851-1921. Exhibition held in the Library of the University of Reading during the month of May 1967," (Reading: University of Reading Library, 1967), 14-15.

The instability that marks Decadence even gives Symons pause as he notes, in “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” that the vast material and philosophical differences between French Decadents like the Goncourt Brothers and Mallarmé seem to unravel any claim Decadence has to a major centralized movement.¹⁷³ Tracing Decadence requires the charting of a diffuse and tentative terrain. Symons’s 1893 volume of poetry, *Silhouettes*, seizes upon this sometimes disconcerting amalgam of influences and convert it into an aesthetics of skittishly disjunctive poetry that evades alliances—formal, ideological, moral—rather than securing them.

My analysis of Symons’s style reclaims the poet from often excoriating contemporaneous criticism of his nineties poetry, which initially relegated the poet to the status of imitator, his work perceived as mere parroting of the British Aesthetes and, later, French Decadents, that he admired and spent much of his time as a critic supporting. A review for his first book of poems, 1889’s *Days and Nights*, notes that while Symons appears an “extremely careful and cultured writer,” he suffers from the general tendency of his generation to merely emulate the innovations that came before, namely the work of the Pre-Raphaelites and Aestheticism: “As is almost inevitable in the work of a young poet in this over cultured age many of the pieces of the book are in style and manner distinctly derivative showing clear traces of the influence of this or that poetic master.”¹⁷⁴ By the time *Silhouettes* was released, critics had begun to take note of Symons’s fidelity to the French Decadents, specifically Verlaine. For William Archer, *Silhouettes* “scarcely needs the titles of some of these little poems or the dedication of one of them (*Hommage à Paul Verlaine*) to indicate the influence which has left upon them so unmistakable an impress.”¹⁷⁵ According to Archer, Symons, like so many of his cadre, emulates

¹⁷³ Arthur Symons, “The Decadent Movement in Literature.” Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

¹⁷⁴ J.M. Gray, “Review of *Days and Nights*,” *The Academy* 35, no. 885 (April 20 1889): 266.

¹⁷⁵ William Archer, “Three Poets of the Younger Generation,” *The London Quarterly Review* 81 (October 1893): 44.

the European vanguard, having come under the “spell of that strange nature— half battered Bohemian, half unhappy child—with its exquisite sensitiveness to every aspect of outer life.”¹⁷⁶ Archer makes sure to remind his readers that *Silhouettes* functions, at best, as weak homage, and that it is the influence of Verlaine’s “charm alone which gives value to work intrinsically so slight as this.”¹⁷⁷ His critics characterize him as seduced by a strange and puerile cult.¹⁷⁸

While Symons’s early theorization of Decadence exhibits more analytical distance from the movement than his detractors describe, he does depict the pull of Decadence as offering an irresistible new approach that corresponds with modern life, emphasizing variegation and mutation in an “unstable equilibrium, which has overbalanced so many brilliant intelligences into one form or another of spiritual confusion” (859). Symons emphasizes Decadence as the kaleidoscopic reflection of “all the moods, all the manners, of a sophisticate society; its very artificiality is a way of being true to nature” (859). His conceptual understanding of Decadence depends upon its refusal to reduce the multivalences of the contemporary world into a single thread. This position, claims Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, appears in his editing of pastoral poet John Clare’s collected works. In his stewardship of Clare’s poetry, Symons articulates what he understands as the revolutionary aspect of modern art, pointing out that Clare’s Asylum poems are his best work because “his madness sever him and his art from the concrete world, forcing him to infuse mimetic referentiality with ‘gentle hallucination’ and ‘exalt[ing] him as a poetic consciousness.”¹⁷⁹ This emphasis on a process that refuses mimesis in favor of variegation

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ On the release of the second edition *Silhouettes*, a critic for *The Review of Reviews* chided that it was “the one notable volume of poems that the little band of writers whom the public has dubbed decadent has produced.” “Our Monthly Parcel of Books,” *The Review of Reviews* 89(July 1896): 87.

¹⁷⁹ Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, “The Aesthetes’ John Clare: Arthur Symons, Norman Gale and *Avant-Garde* Poetics,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 51, no. 3 (2008): 244.

doesn't so much revel in the creative genius theorized in the Romantic imagination, but privileges, instead, the multiplicity inherent to the a recycling of the surrounding cultural materials.¹⁸⁰

Symons's admiration for the process and outcome of Clare's more unorthodox work reveals a keen interest in formal innovation that attempts to find a new idiom with which to characterize modern life. This interest evolves into a practice exemplified in *Silhouettes*, a collection of proto-modernist assemblage poems that incorporates the wide array of materials of modern life into its volume. While *Days and Nights* exhibited an eager involvement with the most prevalent images of the Decadent movement,¹⁸¹ it is the organizational logic of *Silhouettes* that begins to reflect an involvement with the labile, reflexive form that signals the movement's aesthetic innovations. Symons himself thought that *Silhouettes* was a "great advance" on *Days and Nights* and described the work as "transcripts of moods and memories, faces and places—treated, too, in a much freer rhythm, and with more colour."¹⁸² Even the publishing history of *Silhouettes* signals his dedication to changeable forms. After the 1892 first edition met with rancor, Symons reprinted an enlarged and expanded edition, adding nineteen poems and a preface, "Being a Word on Behalf of Patchouli," in which he claims the right to depict "every mood of that variable and inexplicable and contradictory creature which we call ourselves, of every aspect under which we are gifted or condemned to apprehend the beauty and strangeness

¹⁸⁰ For a more protracted investigation of Symons's relationship with *Romanticism*, see John Stokes, "Arthur Symons's 'Romantic Movement': Transitional Attitudes and the Victorian Precedent," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 31, no. 2 (2010). Stokes explores Symons's 1909 collection of long unpublished essays, *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry*.

¹⁸¹ In *Days and Nights* (1889) "The Opium-Smoker" participates in the rage for poetic emblems of exotic intoxication, describing the synesthetic engulfment of a drug haze, which creates "Soft music like a perfume and sweet light / Golden with audible odours exquisite." Arthur Symons, *Days and Nights* (London, New York: Macmillan, 1889). 18.

¹⁸² Arthur Symons, *Arthur Symons, Selected Letters, 1880-1935*, ed. Karl E. and Munro Beckson, John M., 1st ed. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989). 77.

and curiosity of the visible world.”¹⁸³ Ultimately, Symons wants to portray the chaotic, transient, and fragmented state of urban life, which demands its own aesthetic register. “I prefer town to country,” admits Symons, “and in the town we have to find for ourselves, as best we may, the *décor* which is the town equivalent of the great natural *décor* of fields and hills” (xv).

In accord with its title, the sections of *Silhouettes* sketch outlines of varying physical and emotional states. “At Dieppe,” “Masks and Faces,” Love’s Disguises,” “Nocturnes,” “Fêtes Galantes” and “Moods and Memories” render experience as a series of decontextualized scenes joined by something akin to a poetic jump-cut rather than sequential logic.¹⁸⁴ “At Dieppe” begins the volume and consists of short *en plein air* sketches of actions and impressions primarily dealing with the changing natural cycles at the seaside. It links a *décor* of the natural world—in this case, the shoreline—to the sections that will follow, which establish an urbane poetic *décor* of “beauty in the effects of artificial light” (xv). Each piece functions like a postcard from an extended vacation—individual still images that offer a momentary snapshot of a place alongside personal notes that précis experiences and perceptions. Presented linearly down the page, the poems contain, at the center, a dividing line between the objective, externally observable and its subjective, internal provocations. For example, “On the Beach” opens with a lucid description of the coastline as a dynamic space, with images moving in and out of the foreground and background. Symons cuts into an ongoing natural scene, creating a sense of abrupt arrival, of beginning *in media res*, a device that will become essential to his poetic work. In the following three stanzas, the sudden descent from aerial observation to a limited spectator’s

¹⁸³ Arthur Symons, *Silhouettes* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896). xiv. Hereafter pages cited in the text within parentheses.

¹⁸⁴ Of the poems added to the Second edition, eight of the nineteen appear in “Fêtes Galantes,” which only contained one poem—“From Romances sans Paroles”—in the first edition.

position emphasizes the extent to which Symons's perch is not the center of the lyrical self, but a roving, discontinuous motion.

The tide is rising, I can hear
 The soft roar broadening far along;
 It cries and murmurs in my ear
 A sleepy old forgotten song.

Softly the stealthy night descends,
 The black sails fade into the sky:
 Is this not, where the sea-line ends,
 The shore-line of infinity?

I cannot think or dream: the grey
 Unending waste of sea and night,
 Dull, impotently in it,
 Blots out the very hope of day. (4)

In the context of the individual pieces of "At Dieppe," the perspective shift tracks individual mediation as a process that begins with meditation on the outer world. Furthermore, this process entails a swift shift from the telescopic to the microscopic. But if these pieces are spliced together as components of the larger goals of the "At Dieppe" section, they less effectively capture an individual moment than they represent something like a frame in a time-lapse sequence in which the end composite reveals the temporary and shifting nature of what, initially apprehended, seemed still.

The emphasis on all-encompassing perception that is able to survey beyond the grounded scope of human vision while remaining steadfastly non-representative of universal experience will become explicit goals of many technical manifestos of Modernism. But Symons employs these principles of mobility and fragmentation before the explosion of what, decades later, will dominate the abstracted aerial views of Blaise Cendrars's *simultaneist La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* or what Dziga Vertov will theorize as the *Kinoglaz*.¹⁸⁵ The four interior sequences—"Masks and Faces," "Love's Disguises," "Nocturnes," "Fetes Galantes (After Paul Verlaine)"—apply these fracturing processes to women's faces, breaking down the boundaries between observation and interaction, as well as objective appraisal and subjective impression. Symons maintains a momentum throughout his series that recognizes that this fuzzy perceptual terrain is largely due to the speed and quantity with which experiences accrete. A poem like "In An Omnibus" distills these effects in an ode on fleetingly glimpsed beauty, erupting out of the rush of crowds in the frenetic passage of public transportation—a beauty mediated by the technologies and advertisements of modern urban life:

Your fleeting Leonardo face,
 Parisian Monna Lisa, dreams
 Elusively, but not of streams
 Born in a shadow-haunted place.

Of Paris, Paris is your thought,

¹⁸⁵ Dziga Vertov's "Cine-Eye" explores multi-positionality through film techniques that confront the limits of the human eye to process the modern world. A mechanical eye is what is required: "Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd. I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an airplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies." Dziga Vertov, *Kino-eye : the writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 17.

Of Paris robes, and when to wear
 The latest bonnet you have bought
 To match the marvel of your hair. (21)

Symons's ambivalence toward the contemporary landscape is deeply embedded in aesthetics. Classical beauty is only a superficial characteristic—a style to be copied—as Greco-Roman culture has been replaced by the idols created in consumer culture. Despite Symons's philosophical anxiety over modern frivolity, the poetry privileges variety and heterogeneity over monolithic ideal, creating a blend of everything from marketplace novelties to tokens of antiquity.

Such fragments of places, partial views of people, and heightened yet brief responses populate *Silhouettes*. The sequences propose a poetic Decadence that refuses the single lyrical moment, incorporating individual images and conceits into an aggregate of disjunctive parts. This depiction of a life composed of temporary encounters processed with an overwhelming visual and perceptual acuity is recognizable not only in Symons's index of images, but also in his confrontation with the double edged sword of the senses: while they tempt us into submission and indulgence, they also tread close to obliterating excess. By the time we reach the closing two episodes, "Fêtes Galantes (After Paul Verlaine)" and "Moods and Memories," any sort of progressive apprehension of individual experiences collapses under the weight of the number of scenes encountered. "Fêtes Galantes" interrupts the successive scenes of urban London encounters with a sequence deeply influenced by the symbolic mode of Paul Verlaine, though Symons's version of Decadence is, in fact, more of a direct engagement with the modern

world.¹⁸⁶ “Moods and Memories” attempts to retrieve the very sort of experiences and environments that glut the central sections: moments of urbane sublimity, a continuous thread of eroticism and the excitement of a “dazzling vista of streets” (81).

London Nights

A mere three years after the first edition of *Silhouettes*, *London Nights* fully embraces the abstracted, disoriented poetic engagement with metropolitan modernity that *Silhouettes* begins. Like *Silhouettes*, *London Nights* was greeted with scornful reviews. The *Pall Mall Gazette* printed such a personal attack in its notice that Symons initially demanded his solicitor to call for an apology, only to withdraw as he felt that he could not battle the immense financial and social power of the American owner, William Waldorf Astor.¹⁸⁷ With its often ecstatic portrayal of prostitution, anonymous sex, and fetish, *London Nights* functions as something of a lightning rod for all of the moral anxiety surrounding decadence. While the temporal context of *London Nights* is nocturnal, the poems otherwise have little to no chronological girding. As a result, the experiences the Symons recounts occur outside of any ruling sequential order, allowing the poems to deflect progression in favor of a complete immersion. The ruling compositional structure mimics a performing arts programme—with three separate sections of “London Nights” as major acts divided by the entr’actes of “Intermezzo: Pastoral” and “Intermezzo: Venetian Nights.” Symons’s prologue to *London Nights* likens life like to the process of a dancer in a music-hall, “chained” to a ceaseless series of performances, lurching through them as a “thing

¹⁸⁶ Symons’s expansion of this section from a single poem in the first edition to nine in the second probably only increases the possibility that he will continue to be perceived as a mere follower of Verlaine’s, “raising small exotic plants from English soil.” A.T. Quiller Couch, “Reviews and Reminders,” *The English Illustrated Magazine* 1892-93, 905.

¹⁸⁷ Symons, *Arthur Symons, Selected Letters, 1880-1935*: 112.

that turns and trips.”¹⁸⁸ The poetic narrator rejects the constraints of Victorian society and submits to the splintered sensations of modern life, which is depicted through the dispersal of coherent experience into multiplicity and the break down of poetic unity into scattered fragments.

In an obvious debt to poetry as performance, cues mix the technical language of drama, opera, dance, and the music hall, the actual poems invert the conditions of fractured exteriority onto inner life. The ontological condition of *London Nights* breaks up the intelligible whole into illegible pieces. Paul Bourget conceives of such breakdown as entrenched in the natural processes of decomposition. For Bourget (as translated by Havelock Ellis) this is not only one of the thematic motifs of Decadence, but a formal attribute, as well: “A style of Decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word.”¹⁸⁹ Bourget’s claim could easily be transferred onto the chain of breakdown that preoccupies *London Nights*, as the unity of the larger project gives way to the individual poem, and the unity of the individual poem gives way to the individual image. Symons’s use of acutely sensory images embedded in the larger context of segmented spectacle tears down any sense of continuous accord between either the sections of the poetic cycle or the individual encounters that they detail. His own diagnosis of Decadence—in the spirit of Bourget—as “a beautiful and interesting disease” becomes the ruling topos of *London Nights*.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Arthur Symons, *London Nights* (London: L.C. Smithers, 1895). 3. Hereafter pages cited in the text within parentheses.

¹⁸⁹ Havelock Ellis, “A Note on Paul Bourget,” in *Views and Reviews: A Selection of Uncollected Articles, 1884-1932* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1932), 52.

¹⁹⁰ Symons, “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” 859.

Symons erects, in almost ekphrastic detail, portraits of bedrooms and theatre stages that fluctuate under the pressure of individual perception. In this terrain, the work of consciousness becomes an increasingly protracted exercise in the awareness of compromised perception. This perceptual disintegration finds its formal analogue in literary montage comprised of juxtaposed fragments. “To One in Alienation” acutely evokes the sense of an experience comprised of pieces that fail to cohere upon intense examination. In the first part, the poetic narrator watches as a prostitute, the object of his obsessive desire, meets her client. Voyeurism turn into fantasy as the watcher, no longer gazing at the couple, imagines what happens in the bedroom. He mirrors the actual prostrate bodies of the woman and her client, lying down in order to envision, with exacting spatial perspective, what happens between the couple. The poem’s images function to create something of a phantasmagoric *ménage à trois* in which each of the three bodies occupies the room.

So the man came and took you; and we lay
 So near and yet so far away,
 You in his arms, awake for joy, and I
 Awake for only misery.
 Cursing a sleepless brain that would but scrawl
 Your image on the sleeping wall,
 That would but pang me with the sense
 Of that most sweet accursed violence
 Of lovers’ hands that weary to caress
 (Those hands!) your unforbidden loveliness. (65)

It is a strange stanza, not in the least because—amidst an increasingly hysterical tone—the parenthetical exclamation of “Those Hands!” interrupts the syntactical ease of the couplets, functioning as a linguistic counterpart to breakdown by puncturing the neatness of the verse form with interjection. These eruptions occur twice more in the last stanza:

And with the dawn that vision came again
 To an unrested and recurrent brain:
 To think your body, warm and white,
 Lay in his arms all night;
 That it was given him to surprise,
 With those unhallowed eyes,
 The secrets of your beauty, hid from me,
 That I may never (may I never?) see:
 I who adore you, he who finds in you
 (Poor child!) a half-forgotten point of view. (65)

The poem’s form, with three stanzas of ten lines comprised of three sentences adjoined by correlating conjunctions, implies balance and progression. But the incursion of exclamatory language subverts this, inserting the fragmented images (and abrupt counter-dialogue) that rattle around in “an unrested and recurrent brain.” These accumulations are mirrored by a sudden volley of “I”s in which the narrator attempts to etch over the experience, erasing the man ashamed of his desire and dismissive of its object.

In the second part, the poetic narrator is with a new prostitute, and his perceptions have become disjointed, “Desiring only memory dead / Of all that I had once desired” (66). Formally, the character’s shift forward omits descriptive context and orientation, creating a montage-like

segmentation. The images that seem to emerge from physical observation becomes an internalized, anxious narrative. Symons generates a sense of ever-increasing deterioration, wherein the substantial fragments of any experience are amplified by a terrorizing and obliterating memory that only increases the sense of destruction. Jan B. Gordon understands this as a poetic engagement with the failure of love and the increasing alienation from society “within the confines of self-consciousness, unable to achieve the union emblemized in a dance amidst the footlights. Ultimately, the poet is able only to love the concept of love, which, of course, is self-generative, and hence another way of talking about aesthetic onanism.”¹⁹¹ Gordon places Symons’s poem within themes often ascribed to Decadence: isolation and unproductive sexual desire. However, the persona of “To One Alienation” is not merely isolated—and not nearly cohesive enough to impose a character as pronounced as Gordon interprets. Instead, the persona is constantly negated and reinscribed with fragments of language that attempt to articulate a unified subject position (the frenetic “I” that erupts at the end, for instance). This fracturing of the autonomous self into a tangle of experiences and perceptions erupts throughout *London Nights* as Symons maximizes the multiple levels of fragmentation in play by placing destabilized poetic narrators within series of equally fragmented scenes.

Against this increasingly fractured backdrop, in which both subject and setting splinter, Symons embeds female objects of desire that are equally unstable. The beginning of “Idealism” perfectly illustrates the complicated dynamics of Symons’s Decadence-era female avatars:

I know the woman has no soul, I know

The woman has no possibilities

Of soul or mind or heart, but merely is

¹⁹¹ Jan B. Gordon, “The Danse Macabre of Arthur Symons’ ‘London Nights’,” *Victorian Poetry* 9, no. 4 (1971): 438.

The masterpiece of flesh: well, be it so
 It is her flesh that I adore; I go
 Thirsting afresh to drain her empty kiss
 I know she cannot love: it is not this
 My vanquished heart implores in overthrow.
 Tyrannously I crave, I crave alone,
 Her perfect body, Earth's most eloquent
 Music, divinest human harmony;
 Her body now a silent instrument,
 That 'neath my touch shall wake and make for me
 The strains I have but dreamed of, never known. (44)

The speaker's conceit echoes proscriptions surrounding female interiority and sexuality that makes her a vacant and desirable object. She is a model companion to the erotic death throws that are the currency of Symons's brand of Decadence. "The woman," in her morbidity and immobility, becomes—at best—a static masterpiece. From the depiction of an aestheticized female object to the acknowledgment of the death drive provoked by desiring such an object, the progression tracked in "Idealism" follows the dizzying energy that pervades much of *London Nights*.

For Symons, both the symbols of femininity and women, themselves, are dangerous entities. The conversion of female subjectivity into object issues a distinct threat: the empty and inert object must procure vitality from the external world and, in Symons's case, this is often figured poetically as men's "souls," a multivalent signifier for everything from male ambition to patriarchal order to the control of libidinal desire. While "soul" functions as something of a

metaphysical entity in Symons, it is even more prominent as a code for the discrete and uncompromised self. Symons's model of a male/female relationship parallels the predominant model of heterosexual discord prevalent in Decadence: the vampiric woman and the impotent man. It is a parasitic relationship, in which the man is exhausted through his encounters with women. Michelle Sipe argues that Symons includes the modern metropolis within the fraught relationship between genders and that "by figuring the city as feminine vagueness and fragment, [Symons] puts a decadent spin on the rather familiar trope of women as the fictional ground from which to write and affirm a coherent masculine identity."¹⁹²

Sipe precisely articulates the backdrop of *London Nights*, but in Symons's case, we must amend her diagnoses: male identity is never made coherent. Symons shatters both the scenes and the bodies that inhabit it, tearing apart a sense of coherence and erecting, in its place, a series of fragments that distorts time and place. What joins these poems is a sense of an increasingly compromised consciousness. The "I" is not a lyrical device that creates the "moment's monument" that Gabriel Rossetti theorizes as the memorializing drive of Victorian lyrical poetry to make, as Jennifer Anne Wagner argues, "a product—a monument, a crest, a coin—that is *visible*"¹⁹³ Instead, the lyrical voice concerns itself with the disappearance of the individually experienced instant. The poetic subject present at the site of the events witnesses himself in action and, in doing so, creates a distance between event and perception that erodes experience.

¹⁹² Michelle Sipe, "Romancing the City: Arthur Symons and the Spatial Politics of Aesthetics in 1890s London," in *Imagined Londons*, ed. Pamela K. Gilbert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 73.

¹⁹³ Jennifer Ann Wagner, *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet* (Madison, London, Cranbury, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Associated University Presses, 1996). 131. Though Wagner's work expands the idea of Rossetti's moment, discussing it in temporal, spatial, historical, and ekphrastic terms, my main point here is that Symons's work involves—even at the textual level—a sense that it is impossible to trust or commemorate anything, even on visual terms.

Earlier readings of *fin de siècle* art and literature emphasize the extent to which the women of Decadence serve the symbolic function of stock characters within the Decadent pantheon. Numbering among these, according to Philippe Jullian, are the saintly Beatrice and Salomé (via Dante and the Italian Renaissance), the sado-masochistic Mona Lisa (via Pater and Aestheticism), the drowning Ophelia (via Millais and the Pre-Raphaelites).¹⁹⁴ For Eva Kurylak, Salomé remains the apex of the terrifying fatal woman of Decadence. Charles Bernheimer updates studies on Salomé as eroticized sadist in order to partially recuperate her as a metonym for the possibilities of the negative in both language and the mind.¹⁹⁵ Still, Bernheimer concludes his own reading by reverting to the familiar specter of Salomé as “the archetypal femme fatale, whose castration motivates her insatiable desire for a male organ” (138). Bram Dijkstra institutes his own register of aggrieved figures, all suffering from the conventions (though disguised as innovation) of “simplistic dualistic antifeminine content of late nineteenth-century thought.”¹⁹⁶

But in Symons’s poetry, women do not serve as mere shorthand for these more expansive concepts of historic and aesthetic femininity.¹⁹⁷ They serve as sites of violent fragmentation that can never be whole. Symons’s poetry participates in the logic of the cut-up, with all the aggressive disassembling and refusal of representation that implies. Through juxtaposition of female bodies in pieces—framed within an atemporal trajectory that erodes sequential order and emphasizes immediacy and immersion—Symons evokes a city filled with emotional and physical debris. In these tightly cropped spaces, Symons’s underscores a sense of abbreviation by dismembering the female body. Rapidity and compactness are the aesthetic qualities of

¹⁹⁴ Philippe Jullian, *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* (New York: Praeger, 1971).

¹⁹⁵ Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*: 106. Hereafter pages cited in the text within parentheses.

¹⁹⁶ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Turn-of-the-Century Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). 150.

¹⁹⁷ Though, to be clear, I’m not arguing that Symons’ depictions aren’t misogynistic—just that the particular form that misogyny takes is not in the illustration of an intact and monstrous femininity, but rather in a severing of the female body into inert pieces.

Symons's explorations and the women whom he depicts are radically attenuated, cut down to size for poetic frames and comprised of snippets. In "Idealism" that suppression is presented as an object of no utility (a masterpiece) to one of utility (an instrument). But, if that desire is sublimated throughout the poem, it reappears as the desire to salvage the body for spare parts.

In *Silhouettes* the female body is violently broken up within the already abbreviated settings of the poems. Symons forces us to deal with a physical environment aesthetically and conceptually engaged in fragmentation, but the female bodies that appear within—that are almost always at the center of the poem's lascivious gaze—are also assembled from pieces. This assemblage of doll parts creates the textural detail of much of *Silhouettes*. The second section, "Masks and Faces," tussles with them in highly focused ways. "Maquillage" exemplifies, in subject and deployment, the way in which Symons zooms in on a part of the body, focusing on the aesthetic components that lend it a pictorial specificity:

The charm of rouge on fragile cheeks,
 Pearl-powder, and, about the eyes,
 The dark and lustrous Easter dyes; (14)

Immediately following the hyper-focus upon the painted mask of beauty, Symons pulls away—not to reveal the entirety of the person, but to consider how the objectification of female physicality creates subjective responses. Her individual features recede in the wake of her perfume,

The floating odour that bespeaks
 A scented boudoir and the doubtful night
 Of alcoves curtained close against the night. (14)

The female body is a vehicle for (rather than a site of) sensation; her individual portions are not components of an independent self, but entryways into the spectator's memories and senses. The female body undergoes an inventory of sorts, in which each poem takes a body part and qualifies its erotic use value. Instead of characterization, there is a consistent survey of features and their myriad effects. There's Pattie, who can "smile the clouds away" (20). In "On the Heath," the woman's "fateful beauty" discovers her match in the natural world, becoming merged with the "fierce wild beauty of the light" (18). "An Angel of Perugino" extols the "simple child" whose "pale piety of eyes / Was as God's peace upon the world" (16).

Through the extensive parceling of the female body, female physicality is colonized by a host of imported meanings that reveal the male persona's experiences—in sensation, revelation, experience, memory—rather than female subjectivity. Symons's work enacts a proto-surrealist literary dismemberment through associative literary experiment that gives ways to fantasies of women's fragmented bodies. Mary Ann Caws plea for readings of surrealism sensitive to the movement's rife physicalized misogyny begins with a call to arms that could easily be applied to Symons: "Headless. And also footless. Often armless too; and always unarmed, except with poetry and passion. There they are, the surrealist women so shot and painted, so stressed and dismembered, punctured and severed: is it any wonder she has (we have) gone to pieces?"¹⁹⁸

Symons does not simply objectify women—his language constructs a compendium of mannequin parts. Each piece seems completely detached from any unifying subjectivity. Despite the desire that their bodies inspire, Symons's women in pieces are inert. A chaste girl is figured in such extreme inanimation that the speaker's latent desire seems necrophilic as he rhapsodizes, "White girl, your flesh is lilies / Grown 'neath a frozen moon" (13). Another woman is similarly

¹⁹⁸ Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, and Gloria Gwen Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women*, 1st MIT Press ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991). 11.

static, “Her dark face, calm as carven stone” (19). The creepiest example comes later in the volume, in “Alla Passeretta Bruna,” which makes overt what has been implied throughout the poems. Woman as object is subordinated to the disordering and reordering principles of memory and desire, ultimately under the heel of male authority: “If I bid you, you will come, / If I bid you, you will go” (59). These precepts extend through depictions of women as mementos, commodities, and accessories:

I shall keep you as we keep
Flowers for memory, hid away,
Under many a newer token
Buried deep,
Roses of a gaudier day,
Rings and trinkets, bright and broken. (59)

“Alla Passeretta Bruna” reveals the drive that governs this fetish collection as an assertion of physical control over its addressee. A distinctly visual dynamic, it is one that cloaks its predictably proscriptive nineteenth-century gender politics in the garb of fashionable transgression. Cassandra Laity enticingly argues that the modernist feminization of Decadence “may have alerted those [modernist] women writers who felt confined by the modernist poetics of male desire to the empowering valorization of the feminine contained within the Decadent poetic.”¹⁹⁹ But despite Laity’s persuasive discussion about how this process works in terms of aesthetic influences, haunting the Decadent obsession with embodiment and the senses is the fact that much of Decadent poetry’s fixation on the female body only reifies the notion that women are, ultimately, just bodies that primarily exist to provoke effects in men.

¹⁹⁹ Cassandra Laity, “H.D. and A.C. Swinburne: Decadence and Modernist Women's Writing,” *Feminist Studies* 15, no. 3 (1989): 470.

The reduction, in *Silhouettes*, of the female body into alternately exotic, toxic, and precious curios is a process extended in *London Nights*. Of the three long poems that dominate the last section of *London Nights*, two—“Céleste” and “Bianca”—offer portraits of women that offer something of the cut-up body akin to modernism’s—particular Cubism’s—obsession with multiple angles that collapse any possibility of a single authoritative viewpoint. The third sequence, “Variations Upon Love,” offers a kaleidoscopic view of erotic experience. As such, these sections iterate a formal logic that invokes the collapse of objective perspective.

The eleven-part “Céleste” represents syntactic breakdown as an analogue to the breakdown of internal objectivity. The first two sections imagine the feminine ideal as unconsummated fantasy, while the latter sections track the ruin of that ideal that follows consummation. “Céleste” renders this portrait of breakdown through a sequence of barely contextualized scenes bound by a central obsession. The portrayal of Céleste as the center of erotic longing amplifies these discontinuities as her body is a sum of parts that only cohere through the narrator’s description of his love for her as “the quickening life that came /To bid my life’s long-slumbering move” (75). His confession to Céleste serves as the poem’s central concession to the rage and despondence that retroactively suffuses the entire sequence with its desperation:

I did not know; child, child, I did not know,
 Who now in lonely wayfare go,
 Who wander lonely of you, O my child,
 And by myself exiled.” (76)

The state of unknowing is central to the final poem’s hurried tempo as it devolves from ode to invective. Like a Pandora’s box of Decadent ideology, this repository of knowledge is embedded

only in subtext, in which the whole symbol is never seen, only felt and anticipated as the force of destruction:

I fall, and if you leave me, I must fall
 To that last depth of all,
 Where not the miracle of even your eyes
 Can bid the dead arise.
 I charge you that you save not your own sense
 Of liliated innocence,
 By setting, at the roots of that fair stem,
 A murdered thing, to nourish them.²⁰⁰

The last aberrant image proposes that regeneration comes from destruction rather than procreation, reinforcing the Decadent motif of deformity and corruption in place of the fecundity.

The concluding two poems of the cycle, “Love in Autumn” and “A Prayer to Saint Anthony of Padua,” are bereft of the climactic urgency of “De Profundis Clamavi’s” thirty-eight couplets. “Love In Autumn’s” envelope stanzas work to contain what is already dead:

It is already Autumn, and not in my heart only,
 The leaves are on the ground,
 Green leaves untimely browned,
 The leaves bereft of Summer, my heart of Love left lonely.²⁰¹

“A Prayer” likewise curtails any further mediation, offering only two rhymed couplets of such succinctness that it seems more like an epitaph than an ending.

²⁰⁰ Symons, *London Nights*: 76-77.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 78.

Saint Anthony of Padua, whom I bear
 In effigy about me, hear my prayer:
 Kind saint who findest what is lost, I pray,
 Bring back her heart: I lost it yesterday.²⁰²

The ending exemplifies the momentum of “Céleste,” which collapses an extended transformation into a succession of rapid images. “Celeste” breaks up the female body into parts, scattering them across the narrator’s trajectory, which moves from idealism to despondency. The images of Celeste’s fragmented body serve as markers to register the stages of change. Compression rules “Celeste,” condensing extended experience into an abbreviated sequence, while its disorientating drive comes from the juxtapositions between one section and the next. The many references to events outside of the poem accumulate from one section to another, conveying an enormous array of internal and external experience of which the printed poem only offers glimpses. This poetic montage involves rapid accretion and violent shifts, which increasingly undermines any of thematic and formal consistency.

In “Bianca,” Symons inverts the deft abridgement that controls “Celeste,” choosing a more expansive mode to explore a single idea. If “Celeste” compacts the extended arc of a whole relationship into a single poem, Symons expands a single moment into a series of multi-perspectival observations. Bianca undergoes an almost clinical scrutiny in which the narrator fractures her subjectivity through an obsession with the visible body. The poem moves between a meditation on physical longing and an almost clinical fixation on body parts. In the opening section, Bianca embodies desire and is figured as smoldering embers:

What drowsing heats of sense, desire
 Longing and languorous, the fire

²⁰² Ibid., 79.

Of what white ashes, subtly mesh

The fascinations of her flesh

Into a breathing web of fire? (91)

That Bianca both personifies sexual desire and herself suffers an “agony of drouth,” longing for sexual intimacy despite a “desert of virginity” that “[a]ches in the hotness of her mouth,” offers some sense of female subjectivity by acknowledging that the female body connects to an internal self capable of suffering and desire (91). But this moment of subjectivity converts, through the poem’s persistent metaphor of drought and thirst, into a literal fixation upon the mouth: “her thirsting lips,” “her closed lips that cling to mine,” “her fainting lips,” “her lips that open to my lips” (91-92). Left alone, these images exist as the poetic exhaustion of a central image, but as a part of a cycle, it is the inaugural verse of an ongoing procedure that dismantles the body.

“Benedictine,” the poem section that follows, only develops this image as we move from the white-hot heat of the body’s insistent, probing mouth to “the langour of your pallid lips” (93). In the following excerpt, that single image becomes a poetic event:

And on my lips your lips now pressed

Cling moist and close; your lips, begin

Devouringly to gather in

Your kisses that my lips possessed. (93)

The repetition of “lips” signals the emergence of a tactic that governs the sections that follow, wherein Bianca is not so much described or illuminated, but surveyed in anatomically particular inventories. The sequence takes a sharp turn in the seventh part, “Presages,” as the accumulated pieces of Bianca— her “beseeching eyes” and “appealing lips” — become divinatory, “[a] presage of departing things” (99). This partitioning of the individual female body into pieces

creates a local destruction, but it also allows those body parts—with their individually eroticized constituents—to function generically, moving from the depiction of a lover’s body as personal engagement to a universal appeal that even lures “Death’s eternal lust” (99). “Memory” takes this same fixation upon individual parts—the lips, the neck—and dematerializes it into “Perfumed thoughts” (100). In these abstractions, the individual body that Symons has dissembled into pieces becomes an anonymous site upon which fantasies and anxieties are projected.

Amoris Victima

While *Amoris Victima* (1897) employs an aesthetic procedure analogous to the fragmentation of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*, Symons uses a central female subject, Lydia, to reveal the way a single subject can exponentially refract. Moving from erotic bliss, to torment, to rage, *Amoris Victima* engages the themes of Sado-Masochist love that dominates much of Decadence. *Amoris Victima* abandons the dense populations of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* so that montage logic descends upon one person rather than a group. If those works fetishized individual body parts to such an extent that they seemed to break up female subjectivity into fleshly curios, the presence of Lydia’s body is made sacrosanct, perhaps the only tangible memories the narrator retains. Despite the vicissitudes that make *Amoris Victima* a sum of violent contradictions and render Lydia an entirely elusive and unstable entity, the parts of her body continuously act as markers of specific erotic and emotional resonances. In Symons’s exploration of the wide range of emotional responses elicited by a single experience, the fragments of Lydia’s body serve as a material index.

While Symons's earlier poetry cuts from city scene to city scene, splicing the disparate pieces into succession, *Amoris Victima* hyper-focuses on the psychological effects of the failed affair with Lydia from so many angles that she populates the volume as if multiplied. This shift in emphasis, from the multiplicity of the world to the multiplicity of an individual, is reflected in a conflicted interiority that doubts its central experiences, with later poems correcting or denying the ones that come before. If Symons's *Amoris Victima* tracks the various angles of a single experience, the poetic process involves a similar revelation of the chaotic mixture that underpins the most basic encounters and perceptions. The first section, "Amoris Victima," proposes that Lydia's impact on the narrator reveals the reality of the self as instable and impermanent. Lydia appears as an omnipresent specter, dispersing throughout the narrator's suffering body and mind. The death of love and destruction of an intact self go hand in hand:

For I have lost you, and you fill the whole
Of life now lost; and I have lost my soul,
Because I have no part or lot in things
That were to be immortal: grave mould clings
About my very thoughts; and love's dead too.
All that I know of love I learnt of you.²⁰³

The second part of the poem creates a poetic liaison by repeating this stanza's last line as its first, but it's only a formal continuity—what follows is an entirely new subject discontinuous with what comes before. This kind of piecemeal existence—the disjunctive union of momentary

²⁰³ Arthur Symons, *Amoris Victima*, 1897; *Amoris Victimia [sic]*, 1940, *Degeneration and Regeneration* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984). 3. Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

perceptions—tends to erode the boundaries between the interior self and that with which it interacts. Here, the splintered self looks outward, projecting self onto the other and back again:

“My very nerves, my very senses, yours?” (4)

Overarching Symons’s mourning for the failure between lovers is a corresponding preoccupation that romantic destruction parallels an essential experience of the world. Just as the narrator is preoccupied with the rent pieces of memory, “each remembered rapture” or “the mysterious jewels of her eyes,” he is equivalently consumed by the degree to which his life is fractured, all information revealed in unstable slivers that only reveal the extent to which everything is in flux (4, 10). An obsession with these unreadable pieces culminates in an intense paranoia figured as the continual surveillance through Lydia’s disembodied eyes. Where the female bodies in pieces that rule *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* were locales of clinical dismemberment upon which Symons projected fantasy, the body in pieces of *Amoris Victima* reverses the terms—Lydia is all-seeing and transcendent. This intensifies the poetic narrator’s anxiety:

I cannot work: I dare not sit alone.

There’s not a corner here that has not known

Some moment of you, and your pictured eyes

Pursue me with relentless memories. (11)

Elsewhere, he is followed by “inexorable eyes” (7), and the “mysterious jewels of those eyes” that render him “blind with exceeding dread” (10), he encounters “Love’s ghost” with “the same eyes, and the voice that speaks / The very voice” (12), he recalls “the hunger in your eyes” (15). As the book moves through the broader implications of loss as the sustained experience of the world, these images of the penetrating eye continue. He dreams of “[t]he desire of her eyes

unappeased, and the peace of her brows” (22). He recalls that his love of Lydia’s silence, that her “eloquent eyes” surpassed the powers of mundane communications: “All that Love ever had to say / Your eyes have said to me, in vain” (24). The motif of the silent, all-seeing Lydia invades the section, and, indeed the remainder of the book; it is often tempered by temporal distance and tonal immediacy, by a decisive shift from present tense to past, but it always reappears.

If Symons represents the obsession with Lydia’s body through the recurrent and obsessive recasting of her eyes, the general encounter with parts, rather than the whole, rules much of *Amoris Victima*. It is as if, in his volume of Decadent poetry, Symons recognizes that fragmentation is not merely situational, but an inescapable aspect of modern subjectivity. The employment of the piece works towards an aesthetics predicated not on representation, but on its progressively prohibitive limits: the loss of reliable touchstones results in total submission to chance and unpredictability. This volatility is reflected in the back and forth of the poems, which charts the fitful process entailed in a transition from stability and coherence to instability and confusion. “The Relapse” registers this experience as the recurrence of “the intolerable agony of love” and the desire to return to its illusions, a desire that quickly reverts to scathing rejection (45).

Encountering the unrecoverable fragments of experience is a turbulent process that can only be described in a formal register that admits the violence of that fragmentation rather than covering it. And, in the terms of *Amoris Victima*, such encounters confront the limits of expression. Symons’s linguistic pieces admit the limits of language through the use of stock images and phrases—the recurrence of the eye, for instance, or the stultifying employment of “love,” which appears over seventy-five times. Symons struggles with the extent to which language is a strategic game, with its syntactical fragments and limited words, and offers a

commensurate challenge in requiring one to struggle with limited pieces in order to communicate. This is modernism as failure at its very root: language falls apart just as if it were a shoddy assembly of inadequate spare parts, with clichés standing in for any number of experiences and eroded symbols serving as a placeholder for irrecoverable memories. This process results in reorientation of the self and, by proxy, one's relationship with others as an illusion of unity that is actually comprised of many amputated pieces edited together by a constantly shifting consciousness. Such transformation is iterated in "The Pause," the final poem of the penultimate section of the book, "Amor Triumphans," in which the loss of love magnifies the loss of recognition of the entire world:

There is an end for us of old familiar things
 Now that this desolating voice has spoken aloud.
 I look out on the world with blind eyes seeking you
 In old familiar places where your feet have been. (54)

It's easy to gloss Symons's project as overwrought love-sickness that culminates in increasing despondency. In fact, the criticism levied against Decadence by its modernist successors reacts to this mix of pining, impotency, and lethargy with aversion. But from the outset, Symons entwines erotic love and desire, as a component of a procreative desire, with the regenerative world. In this sense, the destruction of love is not simply private devastation, but destruction of the world.

In "Mundi Victima," the closing section of *Amoris Victima*, this damage is inflicted not only by the lover, but the world. "Mundi Victima" is an eleven-part tour de force that extends the condition of being love's victim to being the world's victim, while simultaneously separating the condition of love from the material world. If we consider the trajectory that the book plots out, an irresolvable conflict lies at the center of Symons's confession: essentially, at the final hour, it

shifts blame from Lydia to the world. “The Destroying Angel” exemplifies this move, wherein the woman appears as a revenant moving through the city to prey upon desire:

She passes, the Destroying Angel of Love’s host.
 Her heart is a little loving woman’s heart,
 Here hands are full of pity, and of love her eyes;
 Yet at her look there withers, at her touch there dies,
 The lily of peace, love’s flower that life has set apart. (52)

Here the bustle of the noisy street and the character’s dainty appearance act as camouflages for more destructive powers. But throughout “Mundi Victima” Lydia is transformed from a potent figure into another victim of the world. Certainly, there is something about the process of healing or recovering from private disappointment that mirrors these radical shifts from desolation, to denial, to rage, to acceptance. But the narrator ultimately understands the fracturing of the relationship and its unreliability as a consequence of the disassembling modern world, a world so precarious that the narrator addresses the invisible Lydia, asking: “Did not the world’s voice treacherously move / Even your fixed soul?” (64). Symons assembles these pieces as a testament, not to closure and conclusion, but rather the destruction of a single representation. Symons’s narrator observes from a number of different positions and comments upon them in rapid succession, so Lydia appears drastically shifted from angle to angle through “changes manifold” (60). This closing section of *Amoris Victima* radically inverts the preceding sections. Rather than a series of interlocking parts that track social change and its influence on private lives, these sections ultimately serve as culled pieces testifying to a surfeit of experience and sensations. It is the culmination of Symons’s proto-cinematic editorial eye, which utilizes montage and perspective shifts and revels in the unit of the project as an assemblage of pieces rather than one

monolithic unit. What remains are the remnants and pieces of emotional and physical desire that cannot be unified, that can only be collated in order to reveal the extent to which they are unassimilable parts.

CHAPTER 5
 LOOP DE LOOP:
 ERNEST DOWSON'S VACATING REPETITIONS

In an 1891 letter to Victor Plarr, the friend who would eventually become his biographer, Ernest Dowson describes his experiments in poetry as work at the edge of meaning. "Sound verse," he wrote, "with scarcely the shadow of sense in it."²⁰⁴ In the years following, Dowson's reputation as a writer would become overshadowed by his reputation as a drunk, which seemed to bear out that any of his poetics were a part of the impulsive tumult of Decadence rather than a determined aesthetic of productive destruction.²⁰⁵ The relative prominence of Dowson's biographical details is in no small part due to the reputation Arthur Symons cultivates in the August 1896 issue of *Savoy*. Symons speaks of Dowson "with a frankness with which we usually reserve for the dead."²⁰⁶ Describing Dowson with his "sort of Keats-like face, the face of a demoralised Keats," Symons allies the poet with another nineteenth-century icon of suffering (91). For Symons, Dowson provides a case study in decline, progressing from relatively restrained days at Oxford, then "gradual[ly] slipping into deeper and steadier waters of oblivion,"

²⁰⁴ Ernest Christopher Dowson, Desmond Flower, and Henry Maas, *The Letters of Ernest Dowson* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1968). 189. In addition to offering us a sense that his experiments in modern verse was a journey through nonsense, Dowson offers, in his description of Pierre Loti, a tacit definition of contemporary innovation as an "exquisite, artificial, exotic, modern thing" (201).

²⁰⁵ Displeasure with biographical interpretations of Dowson and the way in which they undermined his poetic innovations crops up fairly early. In a 1966 review of Thomas Swann's *Ernest Dowson*, Philip Armato makes no bones about the inadequacy of such approaches: "In his preface to *Ernest Dowson*, Mr. Swann observes that Dowson's poems are enriched by the Dowson Legend. Dowson scholarship, however, has not been enriched by the Dowson Legend and approaching the poet's work via his legend reduces the value of Swann's critical study. The author's heavy reliance on the legend and his tendency toward oversimplification are most unfortunate." Philip Armato, "Dowson: Legend or Revaluation?," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 9, no. 1 (1966): 48.

²⁰⁶ Arthur Symons, "A Literary Causerie: On a Book of Verses," *Savoy*, no. 4 (Aug 1896): 91. Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

and ultimate succumbing to a “curious love of the sordid, so common an affectation of the modern decadent” (39). Symons successfully establishes Dowson as the definitive tragic poet of Decadence well before Dowson’s actual death. The fact that Symons reworks and expands the *Savoy* essay for his introduction to the posthumous volume of Dowson’s collected works only enhances the seamless creation of the Dowson legacy.²⁰⁷ The persistently wretched figure of Dowson as a demon-plagued genius is due, in some measure, to Symons representation of him as alternately delicate and violent, debauched and saintly—a sketch that manages to cast Dowson as the apex of the Decadent temperament, while subordinating his work to a cult of personality.

Despite the biographical emphasis on Dowson, which tends to reinforce Symons’s version of the story, Victor Plarr’s 1914 biography (and the first real appreciation) of Dowson would begin to articulate the conceptual and aesthetic terrain of the poet’s innovations. Ezra Pound acknowledged that Plarr’s reconsideration of Dowson debunked the romantic mythology of the British-born *poète maudit*, but also enabled a revisitation of his work. Pound argued that “[s]ome will resent what they will call Mr. Plarr’s attempt to make Dowson more acceptable to people who live in three story houses instead of in chambers and attics.”²⁰⁸ Other appraisals of Dowson would be more begrudging. Friends and reviewers were conflicted. While appreciating Dowson’s aesthetic ambitions, they were ambivalent about its actual ideas and understood their uncertainty as resistance to a poetry that seemed static. The traditional narrative on Dowson’s

²⁰⁷ Arthur Symons, “Ernest Dowson,” in *The Poems of Ernest Dowson* (London; New York: John Lane, 1905). While Symons’s introductory memoir certainly supplements *The Savoy* article with much more precise criticism and genuinely laments his friend’s death, the material also amplifies his initial portrait of Dowson as doomed genius. A sampling of Symons’s posthumous depiction of Dowson: Symons on Dowson’s constitution—“Never robust and always reckless with himself” and “[m]orbidly shy” (vii); on Dowson’s love of alcohol—“Under the influence of drink, he became almost literally insane, certainly quite irresponsible. He fell into furious and unreasoning passions; a vocabulary unknown to him at other times sprang up like a whirlwind; he seemed always about to commit some act of absurd violence” (xv); on his aesthetics—“his theories were all aesthetic, almost technical ones, such as a theory, indicated by his preference for the line of Poe that the letter ‘v’ was the most beautiful of the letters, and could never be brought into verse too often” (xxv).

²⁰⁸ Ezra Pound, “Review of *Ernest Dowson*, by Victor Plarr,” *Poetry* 6, no. 1 (1915): 44.

poetry dismisses it as thematically burned out, a poetry that cannot last, and which, as Oscar Wilde wrote after hearing of Dowson's death, represents the end of both poet and poetry: "Poor wounded, wonderful fellow that he was, a tragic reproduction of all tragic poetry, like a symbol, or a scene."²⁰⁹ In a literary world intent on a narrative of advance, Dowson's poetic inventions are interpreted as running out of energy, falling behind the push of innovation. The material is criticized as repetitive to the extent of emptying originality.

Aldous Huxley responds to Dowson's poetry as formally exhausted, judging Dowson to have "no great desire to achieve originality" having a "limited stock of ideas" and a "very limited poetical genius," who, nevertheless, manages to rally a "drooping, evanescent music, a 'dying fall' of poetry."²¹⁰ For Huxley, Dowson's poetry is one of "resignation, not rebellion" (601). In describing Dowson as a poet most notable for maintaining the "slow and passionless" tempo of "the music of sadness," Huxley manages to intimate that Dowson's poetry (and Dowson's person) somehow embodies the end of the nineteenth century. He suggests that Dowson and his poems drag the era "towards its close, trembling on the verge of silence," summoning "the feelings of quiet sadness evoked by a song that draws to an end—a great period of human activity that closes" (602-03).

As disparate as the earlier appraisals of Ernest Dowson are, more contemporary interpretations of the poet are equally broad. Barring cultural studies that place Dowson high on the list of British Decadent poets that appeared in the pages of the little magazines of Decadence or belonged to the Rhymer's club, Dowson's aesthetic relationship with modernism remains equivocal. He is, for Stephen Thomson, an emblem of the somnambulistic Decadent poets,

²⁰⁹ Quoted in Jad Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris; Distributed by St. Martin's Press, 2000).

²¹⁰ Aldous Huxley, "Ernest Dowson," in *The English Poets*, ed. Thomas Humphry Ward (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), 602-03. Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

whose tendencies lead them to wander into modernity sleepy-eyed and non-responsive.²¹¹

According to Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, Dowson's poetry inverts the "minutely observed, artificial beauty" equated with the poetry of Decadence, creating instead an "artificial poetry, free from the burdens of observing and describing the world."²¹² For Linda Dowling, Dowson conjures a depleted world through a "poetic reductionism" that involves a stream of undifferentiated poetic personae, as well as repeated phrases and themes.²¹³ In Dowson's poetry, Dowling finds "extinction is personal rather than cultural or historical." In their distinct ways, each of these interpretations reads Ernest Dowson as part of the larger narrative of Decadence as the coda to an era, the wreck out of which modernism will emerge.

I argue that Dowson's commitment to formal and conceptual repetition actually functions in a manner similar to the modernist procedure of inventive unoriginality that emerges in twentieth-century visual arts. As Rosalind Krauss observes, the twentieth-century Avant-garde is constructed through a "discourse of originality" that is in opposition to the "actual practice of vanguard art [that] tends to reveal that 'originality' is a working assumption that itself emerges from a ground of repetition and recurrence."²¹⁴ In any formal employment of duplication—whether language or image—the borders of the page or canvas act less as closure than as an extension; despite the fact that the material surface ends, the idea extends.²¹⁵ Repetition, then, forms a closed loop in which motion must always follow the same path. Paul Sheehen's

²¹¹ Stephen Thomson, "Sleepwalking into Modernity: Bourdieu and the Case of Ernest Dowson," *Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts* 41, no. 4 (1999).

²¹² Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, "Sight and Sound in the Poetic World of Ernest Dowson," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 60, no. 4 (2006): 482.

²¹³ Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*: 207-05.

²¹⁴ Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984). 157-58.

²¹⁵ Derrida famously makes an analogous argument, in *Truth in Painting*, when he considers Heidegger's interpretation of Vincent Van Gogh's "A Pair of Shoes" (1886) to propose that the border of a frame invites us to contemplate what lies beyond the visible field rather than simply containing the picture within. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). 320-22.

understanding of the modernist loop as one that embeds events so that “they cannot break out of the cycle of repetition” and in which “[t]here cannot be any culmination in the endless loop of recurrence.” The modernist circuit reconfigures the fragments of modernity into an apparent whole, but as we move through the processes of reading or viewing, we realize that duplication has taken the place of invention.

While Arthur Symons uses the fragment to reveal the disjunction between sections, Dowson inserts it into a rotating coil. Though the initial encounter with an image or a series of ideas might momentarily render them novel, to read through Dowson’s poetry means to encounter the incessant return of individual phrases, ideas, and images. The pieces are recycled into what appears to be a cogent, new iteration, but what eventually appears as redundancy. In this sense, a discussion of fragmentation is as essential to Dowson’s poetry as Symons’s, but whereas the world of Symons’s pieces is distinctly phenomenological—the frenzied encounter with sensation broken into bits—Dowson’s works towards epistemic ends wherein invention is ultimately revealed to be repetition.

Intoxication and Obsession: Body Experience as Recurrent

Even if it were possible to entirely redirect the conversation on Dowson away from biographical and cultural studies that reinforce his longstanding reputation as tragically addicted, Dowson’s poetry is itself incriminating as it often employ motifs of intoxication. Of course, there is the tendency of Decadence, in general, to overlap aesthetic pleasure with physical inebriation. In French Decadence, this is well-tread territory. Arch-Decadent Charles Baudelaire’s drug and alcohol experimentation is well documented in *Artificial Paradises*; Paul Verlaine and Arthur

Rimbaud's opium-saturated affair comprises the stuff of legend. The interest in altered states also makes its way into British Decadence. Arthur Symons's poetry incorporates drugs and alcohol as ornamental elements, as though their effects are aesthetically observable. In "The Opium Smoker" Symons describes the synesthetic engulfment of a drug haze, which creates "Soft music like a perfume and sweet light / Golden with audible odours exquisite."²¹⁶ But Dowson's frequent allusions to alcohol takes on different properties, as if intoxication is not an entry into an altogether new way of seeing, but an inescapable state of being in which the promise of escape transforms into a stuttering cycle.

While Decadence is often tracked by its dedication to external effects—for instance, the esoteric collections of Decadence offers a material representation of internal obsession—Dowson's patterns are comparatively dematerialized. Dowson's language is not nearly as baroque as Theodore Wratislaw or Lionel Johnson's; his imagery is less sensual than Symons's. For John R. Reed, Dowson's poetry is marked by idealized desire and the "craving for this ideal, or merely the representation of it, is itself a passion which is unquenchable and essentially doomed to frustration."²¹⁷ While Reed's synoptic appraisal of Dowson tends towards an interpretation in which the other side of Dowson's frustrated verse is a perfected ideal (and, to my mind, one that isn't really there—as far as I can tell, Dowson's images and subjects are equally susceptible to degradation), he points out the cyclical tendency resonating in the verse.

²¹⁶ Symons, *Days and Nights*: 18.

²¹⁷ John R. Reed, "Bedlamite and Pierrot: Ernest Dowson's Esthetic of Futility," *ELH* 35, no. 1 (1968): 105. Reed's article on Dowson appears in the sixties during the first spate of criticism on Dowson other than the posthumous recollections in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century. It also aligns with the tendencies of this era of criticism on Dowson to read his poetry as an intense back and forth between oppositional poles. For instance, in the late sixties Houston A. Baker interprets the dichotomies in the nature imagery Dowson's poetry—between images of barrenness and fecundity—as representative of the split between the "ideal moment" and the "lost ideal." Houston A. Baker, "A Decadent's Nature: The Poetry of Ernest Dowson," *Victorian Poetry* 6, no. 1 (1968): 24. But Houston's point that these images recur frequently only emphasizes the extent to which they begin to fail at representation, becoming merely artificial categories for each abstraction.

Unquenchable, frustration: these are terms that hint at the essentially non-progressive spirit of Dowson's work. By moving our focus from Dowson's admittedly intriguing backstory of resolute self-destruction towards an inquiry of his conceptual obsession with the individual who, undone by the experience of modernity, retreats to the comforts of inebriation, we can see how intoxication works less as shorthand for Decadent preferences than as an engine of disorientation in which repetition replaces progress. Dowson's poetry comes to resemble something of an echo chamber. Instead of change and possibility, compulsion takes over in what David Punter calls "the hard reign of the repetition [that] comes to end that process of transmutation, to freeze the subject in a position of fear and joy, to render pointless any further attempts on meaning and to settle instead for the half hard sounds amid the noise."²¹⁸ Rather than interpreting Dowson's extensive references to alcohol as signs of cultural belonging or biographical markers, I would like to consider the trope of intoxication as somatic *topoi* for the processes of the neurotic mind. Instead of eliciting a Dionysian pleasure, Dowson's refrain of drunkenness becomes emblematic of disorienting reoccurrence.²¹⁹

Dissipation as the bodily state equivalent to the dissolving powers of modernity endures through much of *Verses*, from the invocatory trill that rules "Vitae Summa Brevis" to the portrait of madness in "To One in Bedlam," in which divine madness is contrapuntal to the "dull world" that stares at the madman in "stupidity."²²⁰ Here, madness and intoxication are terms of comparison, as the poem denigrates the banality of the world outside and imagines that even "behind sordid bars" the madman is able to capture glimpses of divinity that outpace the confines

²¹⁸ David Punter, *Rapture: Literature, Addiction, Secrecy*, Critical Inventions (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2009). 146.

²¹⁹ For another discursive reading of the trope of intoxication in Decadence, see Susan Zieger's work on Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray*, which emphasizes the Decadent strategy of providing a "context of arcane connoisseurship for the pleasures of intoxication and of homosexual desire aligned *against* discourses of addiction." Susan Marjorie Zieger, *Inventing the Addict: Drugs, Race, and Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century British and American Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008). 178.

²²⁰ Dowson, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*: 10. Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

of the workaday world's orderly lives: "Know they what dreams divine / Lift his long, laughing reveries like enchanted wine, / And make his melancholy germane to the stars?" (10) Forms of disruption, whether physiological or psychological, seem to offer the only terms that make it possible to exist in the world at the end of the nineteenth century.

1896's *Verses* begins with the aphoristic "Vitae Summa Brevis," urging surrender towards the cycle of emotional and physical experiences of the world. The received interpretations of "Vitae Summa Brevis" stick close to what is perhaps the most famous of Dowson's sound bites: "They are not long, the days of wine and roses" (2). This poem offers a rallying cry along the lines of "*carpe diem!*" But that single line—the escape route from what is a brief life of dreary monotony, at best—is actually buried by the lines that follow and reinforce a sense of circular experience rather than reprieve: "Out of a misty dream / Our path emerges for a while, then closes / Within a dream." For Dowson, the "days of wine and roses" are fantastic, intensely felt intervals ultimately engulfed by a larger illusion. More importantly, they are a part of the repetitive cycles that occupy Dowson's poetry in which any progressive "path" lies submerged in the monotonous, somnambulistic rotations of modern life. The formal and thematic binaries that mark Dowson's poems—love and pain, faith and dissipation, turgidity and scarcity—are destabilized by the erratic relationship that the poetic subject has to extremes, never able to occupy these categories fully, always traveling back and forth between poles. Experience becomes less of a sequential process than a circle.

If the lines of "Vitae Summa Brevis" hint at the joyless redundancy underlying any moment of revelry, "Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regon Cynaraea" (often referred to, as it will be hereafter, as "Cynara") underscores the toll of repetition by joining it with obsession. Dowson's twenty-four line *magnum opus* and a stalwart representative of Decadent verse in

Norton Anthologies to this day, “Cynara” typically appears as an example of a major poem by a minor poet, a poem that reinforces all of the broad assumptions about Decadence—assumptions that conflate Decadence with its adjectival form—as primarily dedicated to rhapsodic debauch and excess. Alongside the extracts of Pater (almost always “La Gioconda” and the “Conclusion”) and Wilde, the combination of ennui and desire in “Cynara” betrays a rhapsodic longing that testifies to central traits of Decadence such as the fantastic imagination, nostalgia, and sensuality. The Latin title of “Cynara” acts as a declaration, a line taken from Horace’s *Fourth Book of Odes* that “I am not the same since the reign of Cynarae.” But Rowena Fowler urges caution when considering Dowson’s “Cynara” as an extension of Horace’s ode:

In Horace the object of love is not Cynara but a youth, Ligurinus, and the poet dreams not of a love which he had once known but of one which he still hopes to win. The glance at Cynara’s ‘regnum’ recalls the time of his youth and sexual prime only to contrast it with his present unaptness for love; there is no causal relationship between the reign of Cynara and the poet’s present state, as there is in ‘Non sum qualis’. Horace’s ode is concerned with the future: Dowson’s poem focuses on a present pervaded with loss because it cannot escape an overwhelming sense of the past.²²¹

The quality of change, then, is a shift towards an unchanging state, in which reoccurring obsession yields a commensurately static mode of expression. The poem, which employs four stanzas of Alexandrines to document the experience of romantic infatuation and its devastating effects, conceives of intoxication as an altered state equivalent to emotional preoccupation. This equivalency between the body and the mind, between forms of fixated physical behavior and internalized ones, and between the cognitive experience of obsession and verse repetition, allows

²²¹ Rowena Fowler, “Ernest Dowson and the Classics,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 3 (1973): 251.

Dowson to construct a poetics in which recycled language moves towards abstraction rather than representation. The repetition eradicates denoted meaning rather than reinforce it. As a result, Dowson's destruction of the initial statement through formal repetition forms a modern poetry that swaps temporal expansion for contraction and replaces individual expression with duplication.²²²

What is the physical and psychological experience of repetition? If repetition is a breakdown of the progressive cycle, how do we endure a state of constant return, each revolution emphasizing only the incessant cycle of the loop, rather than disclosing meaning? For Dowson, perpetual despondency is the only possible response to these conditions. James G. Nelson characterizes "Cynara" as sustaining this despair by evoking a "desolate mood" that is "most exquisitely realized" and extended through formal choices that "create a hovering sense, a savoring of the bitter mood of loss and despair."²²³ Mario Praz connects this commitment to the formal realization of bleak affective states to Decadence and its "unlimited licence to deal with subjects of vice and cruelty, which was introduced into literature together with Romanticism, [and] created an atmosphere favorable to the expression of individual feeling, which, under different circumstances, would have remained latent and repressed."²²⁴ For Praz, Decadence makes good on the impulses of Romanticism that preceded it by a century. But rather than involving the earnest longing that announces the recesses of "individual feeling," "Cynara" actually explores the existential experience of the modern self as an essentially circular

²²² Krauss's observation that the Avant-garde's claim to originality is false is explored by Vincent B. Sherry, who examines the connections between the 1890s and the modernist twentieth-century as "a likeness at once claimed and disclaimed; the identification is occasionally affirmed directly but more often, and more revealingly, affirmed when it is resisted." Vincent B. Sherry, "On the Question of Modernism and the 'Authentic'," *Modernism/modernity* 14, no. 3 (2007): 485.

²²³ Nelson, "The Nature of Aesthetic Experience in the Poetry of the Nineties: Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, and John Gray," 228.

²²⁴ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1951). 380-81.

experience in which there is no expression and closure, only compression and perpetuation. Like Symons, Dowson emphasizes the experience of the modern world as essentially shattered, but instead of cutting together these fragments in order to emphasize the surfeit and chaos of radically juxtaposed pieces, Dowson reveals the way in which they return without offering anything new. The cloud of intoxication, the spell of “wine,” as often as it is invoked, loses any celebratory tone or poetic novelty.

In “Cynara” this obsessive return occupies multiple zones. It is present in Dowson’s romantic history, emblemized as a dead classical figure that signifies the end of innovation. There are no new tragic-romantic figures here: even the present tragedy is signified by the recycling of the classical past. Repetition also dominates the physical present, manifest in the trope of intoxication that constantly returns to obliterate (rather than enhance) experience. It also appears in the cyclical form of language, in which every return converts initially expressive lines into abstractions that resist meaning. Dowson’s mode of Decadence does not involve the Romantic desire to announce individual preoccupations, but constantly confronts the limits of expression. Dowson’s verse enacts these cycles of repetition as isolating and stultifying: even though there is an appearance of motion, it is an unregenerate, static form. As a result, the longing depicted in Dowson is a destructive one, the desire for a final obliteration of these forms of repetition.²²⁵ Dowson’s recurrences represent a type of Decadence that is the very manifestation of separateness that Nietzsche diagnoses as its central condition:

What is the characteristic of all *literary decadence*? It is that the life no longer resides in the whole. The word gets the upper hand and jumps out of the sentence, the

²²⁵ I’d revise Praz’s thesis that the Decadent anti-hero descends from the two towering figures of Romanticism—Byron’s Satan and Sade’s punisher—to “pave the way from the imitation of Byron to the less exalted part of Baudelaire’s work and to the literature of the Decadence.” Ibid., 81. Instead, the personae of Decadence more closely resemble Severin von Kusiemski from Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s *Venus in Furs*, from which masochism takes its name.

sentence stretches too far and obscures the meaning of the page, the page acquires life at the expense of the whole—the whole is no longer a whole. But that is the simile for every style of *décadence*: always anarchy of the atoms disgregation of will, in the language of morality, “liberty of the individual,”—widened to a political theory, “*equal* rights for all.” Life, *equal* vitality, vibration and exuberance of life pushed back into the most minute structures, the others *poor* in life. Everywhere paralysis, distress, and torpor, *or* hostility and chaos, always becoming more striking as one ascends to ever higher forms of organisation. The whole has ceased to live altogether; it is composite, summed up, artificial, an unnatural product.²²⁶

Besides the obvious similarity of Nietzsche’s argument to the analogies of disintegration that Paul Bourget uses in his essay on Decadence, most compelling about Nietzsche’s diagnostic is that he understands that the result of stagnation is not merely stasis, but destruction. Dowson’s recurrences, which repeatedly deny development and connection (what Nietzsche understands as the individual resistance to the health of the whole society), signify a move into chaos.²²⁷

In “Cynara” this chaos is figured as a state of intoxication. The poem is not just about romantic loss, but also about the loss of the self as an ongoing, changing project. The stagnant cycle stifles the ability to adapt and be productive within the present social conditions. In a cursory reading, the poem rhapsodizes lost love on melodramatic terms, some of the very terms that surely turn Imagist T.E. Hulme away from the “damp” poetry of romanticism and back to

²²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy, and The Case of Wagner* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 25.

²²⁷ Charles Bernheimer recognizes the extent to which Nietzsche himself enacts a philosophical Decadence that shares the same schisms as his definitions of *literary decadence*. According to Bernheimer, Nietzsche condemns “decadence as fragmentation” and insists that it remain a “critical term of condemnation,” while ignoring the central fact that “his own instincts are those of an exception and a solitary habituated to suffering, of a decadent, that is.” Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*: 12, 12, 14-15.

the “dry hardness” of the classics.²²⁸ There is enough in “Cynara” that corresponds to Hulme’s indictment of the “awful result of romanticism”: once “accustomed to this strange light, you can never live without it. Its effect on you is that of a drug.”

Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt, her lips and mine

There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed

Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;

And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,

Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:

I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion. (27)

A closer read reveals sentiment overwhelmed by the monotony of the speaker’s “fashion” of faithfulness. In these lines, even new experiences follow the old pattern as the memory of Cynara is superimposed over a prostitute’s “bought red mouth.” His language emphasizes the circularity of language, stumbling between modern phrases (“last night”) and archaic terms (“yesternight”). Persistent longing creates the continuity in the poem (rather than the figure of Cynara or the terms of faithfulness) as repetitive insistence elevates the circular thinking of mania over content. Cynara is emblemized as a succession of disorienting effects. Here, faithfulness is not a pledge between lovers, but fixation that persists, despite the concession of the most famous lines of the poem, that “I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind.”

Of course, it is difficult to recover the immediacy of the metaphor “gone with the wind” from the collective force of Margaret Mitchell’s saga and Victor Fleming’s Golden Hollywood Technicolor melodrama. In those hands “gone with wind” transformed into an idiomatic expression of romanticized longing for antebellum America South. But in Dowson’s poem, the

²²⁸ T.E. Hulme, “From Romanticism and Classicism,” in *A Modernist Reader: Modernism in England 1910-1930*, ed. Peter Faulkner (London: B.T. Batsford, 1986), 49-50. Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

longing is much more complicated, wherein the loss of memory is accompanied by an unflagging cycle. This is less a poem about the grief over a fading recollection than it is a plea to be released from compulsion, which is embodied in the image of Cynara as a revenant, making her nightly return: “Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! The night is thine; / And I am desolate and sick of an old passion, / Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire” (28).

As much as the past is figured here as connection and memory, it is also figured as disease and desolation. Both the present and future belong to the mix of sensations and encounters so transient that any recollection is, at best, patchy. There is no closure; there is no sense that the poem is cathartic. Instead, we end with the final exclamation: “I cried for madder music and for stronger wine” (28). Despite the fact that this is often read as a moment of Dionysian frenzy, a pursuit of pleasure amidst the repeated declaration of desolation, it only continues the repetitive cycle by returning to the beginning, in which no sensation can halt the insistence of memory. The subject of the troubadour who escapes the banal disappointments of the world through insobriety, the subject for which “Cynara” is predominantly known, is actually overthrown by the circular pattern of the poem, which converts escape into yet another part of a fixed rotation.

This investigation of the disordering effects of intoxication also weaves through Dowson’s final book of poems before his death, 1899’s *Decorations*. “Carthusians” explores the difference between a life of monastic austerity—the community of those who “come together for more loneliness”—and the preoccupations of the drunken reveler (125). The monks represent the only zone in which unity and wholeness can prevail, a space definitively outside the center of modern life and its cultural and social transformations. But this maintenance of pre-modern unity demands that all physical pleasure be extinguished. In the final two stanza’s, Dowson presents an

axiomatic portrait in which those who seize the pleasures of the moment are married to death and those who deny those very pleasures of life are destined for longevity. In the penultimate stanza, the twinned image of roses and wine reappears:

We fling up flowers and laugh, we laugh across the wine;
 With wine we dull our souls and careful strains of art;
 Our cups are polished skulls round which the roses twine:
 None dares to look at Death who leers and lurks apart. (126)

Here, life and sensual pleasure are allied to impermanence, the effects of wine conflated with unrefined aesthetics, and the goblet from which all of this is drunk, stamped with the death-head. This could easily be an ekphrastic representation of “The Drunkards” from Hans Holbein’s *Dance of Death*. Holbein’s etchings create a similar caveat to Dowson’s poetry. In order to ignore the destructive, inevitable forces of the body’s death and destruction, a commensurate measure of damage—the obliteration of sense with intoxication, for instance—is required. The final stanza demonstrates the consequences of both those who would push mortality’s dissevering energy and those who would secede from the world in order to keep mindful of that power:

Move on, white company, whom that has not sufficed!
 Our viols cease, our wine is death, our roses fail:
 Pray for our heedlessness, O dwellers with the Christ!
 Though the world fall apart, surely ye shall prevail. (126)

What prevails, in Dowson’s universe, is not commensurate with life and pleasure, but altered states—in this case, drunkenness that displaces, temporarily, the misery of obsessive consciousness. “Rondeau” expresses an equivalent point, rhetorically asking to “Expound, I

pray, the mystery” of why, exactly, the “wine-stained lip and languid eye,” and the “most unsaintly Maenad air” should be more affecting than the pleasures one ultimately recoups in a long game that commits to virtue, piety, and sobriety (158). Dowson’s habitual use of wine, especially in the context of Catholic images that might also bring to mind the sacrament, reaffirms intemperance as a part of the unchristian body. Wine becomes synonymous with pagan ceremony, the loss of self-control, and, most importantly, the rejection of the mechanisms of external control—whether romantic or religious love.

This choice or, in the more desperate and penitent of Dowson’s verses, weakness, renders the subject wholly subsumed in the current of instantaneous, yet irretrievable, sensations. If the thrill of inebriation marks one end of the emotional spectrum, rage and spleen represent another order of destruction. The interwoven urges towards piety, destruction, and desecration reveals the depth of Dowson’s indebtedness to the French anti-tradition of Decadence and Symbolism. He was not only “intensely interested in every kind of that Symbolism,” but studied the works of Baudelaire and Huysmans, whose *À Rebours* he recommended as a “marvelous novel” that is required reading for any writer who would “deal with a reconciliation to Catholicism.”²²⁹ Dowson’s investment in the subjects, symbolisms, and conflicts of continental Decadence constitutes the very core of his poetic economy.

The most acute testament of intoxication as in conceptual lockstep with an *idée fixe* that increasingly moves Dowson’s poetry from sense to nonsense emerges when he divests his poetic personae of their mock revelry. In “Dregs” Dowson strips away the associations that accompany the drunken troubadour pose, to reveal that those cycles of “wine, women, and song” are actually tied to modern confrontations with meaninglessness rather than traditions of revelry. The illusion

²²⁹ Ernest Dowson, *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*. (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1968), 304, 327.

of pleasure and connectivity is dispelled and the confrontation with repetition and abstraction persists. Only disjunctive memories barely strong enough to retain any trace of emotional resonance, least of all any of the vibrancy and immediacy, remain: “The fire is out, / and spent the warmth thereof” opens the poem and proceeds to admit to the settling in of deadly indifference (148). The collapse of joy and desire rules both the shifting images of the poem, as well as the emotional tenor. After “[t]he golden wine is drunk, the dregs remain,” but these accumulations do not resemble any entire memory or experience (148). Rather the “drear oblivion of lost things” absorbs health, hope, and love, rendering the once specific and personal a de-energized and damaged remnant.

Recognition of those remains is vague at best. People are only faintly identifiable as the narrator speculates that “This was a mistress, this, perhaps, a friend.” The connection between people becomes shared isolation, a sort of purgatory where with “pale indifferent eyes, we sit and wait / For the dropt curtain and the closing gate.” The distress of “Dregs,” which sees the world and its inhabitants at ends without escape—a sort of interminable death in life—finds no reprieve. If the second line of the poem admits a frenzied parenthetical aside to testify to panic at diminishment—“This is the end of every song man sings!”—the final line repeats the same phrases absent of urgency. Rather, detached and observing, the narrator divests his incantation of subjectivity, as it becomes remote and all encompassing: “This is the end of all songs man sings.”

Reverberations: Again & Again

If we understand Dowson's handling of intoxication and obsession as unresolvable states of consciousness, the sense that experience is cyclic is reinforced by the material commitment of Dowson's poetry to reprise. Much of the texture of Dowson's poetry relies upon the repetition of syntactical units that create something akin to audio sampling.²³⁰ Dowson's employment of traditional forms fails to emphasize adherence to aesthetic rules; instead it underscores redundancy and reuse of language in any single portion of a line or phalanx of central images. Like Oscar Wilde, Dowson appropriates the French villanelle across the two volumes of his nineties poetry, *Verses* and *Decorations*, helping to establish it as a central form of English Decadence. The villanelle functions here as a cultural found object that, while ostensibly indicating the reverence of English Decadent artists for French literary forms, actually demonstrates the acuity with which the British convert a minor French form into one of the major signifiers of Franco-Bohemianism. Ronald E. McFarland contends that nineteenth-century Anglophone experiments with the villanelle are instances of savvy appropriation as, at the end of the nineteenth century, "no significant body of villanelles existed in French poetry and no major French poetry had written one."²³¹ Ellis Hanson also recognizes the aesthetic sleight of hand at work in Decadence through the "notorious" appropriations of Catholic literature, which reflect a "a decadent conception of fragments, of scholarly quotation and artistic criticism, [that] is also akin to the postmodern conception of appropriation and pastiche."²³² Not only does Dowson's

²³⁰ Dowson's predilection for sampling other's work is long established. As early as 1923, Wheatley observed that the second stanza Dowson's "Extreme Unction" simply translates and versifies a passage of *Madame Bovary* in which Emma Bovary is offered the sacrament of extreme unction. Katherine Wheatley, "Ernest Dowson's Extreme Unction," *Modern Language Notes* 38, no. 5 (1923): 315.

²³¹ Ronald E. McFarland, "Victorian Villanelle," *Victorian Poetry* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 327.

²³² Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 371.

work reflect an alliance with new formal tactics, but his approaches also suggest a decidedly modern grounding in the theme of redundancy. Rather than using the villanelle to indicate sophistication dependent upon a precise interweaving of sound and rhythm, Dowson uses the villanelle to convey a wasteland in which no new iterations can emerge and no fresh ideas enter. Dowson's echoes preempt modernism's own varied practices with linguistic redundancy as the formal counterpoint to internalized fixation. For Dowson, the villanelle formalizes the conceptual loop into linguistic design, and his multiple incarnations of the form capitalize on this effect in different ways, using the refrain to reinforce an indefatigable automation that affects everything from syntactical patterns to the rhythm, its largely end-stopped lines resonating with a steady martial thump. In Dowson's villanelles formally complex repetition continually defies development, creating a closed circuit wherein movement is only a retracing of prior actions.

In the "Villanelle of Acheron" continuous return manifests in the repeated visitation in the first refrain to the desaturated landscape of "pale marge of Acheron" that resides, we are reminded in the second refrain, "beyond the scope of any sun" (131). This sense of a washed-out after-life is married to the fourth stanza's description of the underworld as silent: "No busy voices there shall stun / Our ears: the stream flows silently / By the pale marge of Acheron." These lines present the only enjambments in the villanelle, as if the silence is so encompassing that it bleeds out beyond the perimeter of the line, further reinforcing the sense of the sequence as bound by eternal return. The disjointed tempo of this passage pushes against the stultifying masculine rhymes and end-stopped sentences that pervade not only "Acheron," but also much of Dowson's verse. The effect is a poetic style that renders the verse staccato, as if just at the point of fracture or abruption, a round of recycled pieces supplants an original language act.

Stephanie Kuduk Weiner argues that Dowson's verse represents "printedness" in opposition to orality and that any sounds "lie in a shadowland of their own, coming most perfectly to life in an act of silent reading in which pauses are precisely graduate and syntactic strain fully registered, but in which all sounds, including the meaningful silences between words, are only imagined."²³³ For Weiner, the virtuosity of Dowson's works is not that the lines aspire to the condition of music "but because they are so far away from it." However, the aural possibility of Dowson's poetry is not between song and silence, but noise and dissonance. Instead of reverting to a sound pattern that is consistent with stereotypes of the poetry of Decadence as flowery lyric, crowded with Byzantine images, and conveyed in language full of assonance and sinuous rhythms, Dowson's sound contradicts these assumptions with its austere and obsessive tempo.

"Villanelle of Marguerites" compounds this sense of language as an exhausted category of expression through a compulsive recycling of conversation. Beginning with an overheard and out of context excerpt—"A little, *passionately*, *not at all*?"—"Villanelle of Marguerites" capitalizes on the vagaries of this opening line, which offers no information as to the speaker or its function, by continually reinforcing the extent to which even attempts at communication occlude meaning (17). "Marguerites" suggests the permanence of unsatisfied desire: the only clear entities are the men that "pass and go" and the woman who "shall not recall / What men we were, nor all she made us bear" (18). As the poem moves forward, both the repetition of the dangling question ("A little, *passionately*, *not at all*?") and carefree declaration ("And what care we how many petals fall!") encircle one another to erase the significance of either statement.

²³³ Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, "Sight and Sound in the Poetic World of Ernest Dowson," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 60, no. 4 (March 2006): 507.

In contrast to the blithe inscrutability of “Villanelle of Marguerites,” “Villanelle of the Poet’s Road” engages a cycle of despondency, a loss of pleasure that resembles disassociation. For all the promise of “wine and woman and song” that comprises the first refrain of “Villanelle of the Poet’s Road,” the later lines are increasingly dirge-like. The ostensible attractions of the bohemian life become mere signposts, expectations to live up to, and a predictable lapse into distracted pleasure for “Us bitter and gay” (129). Karin Alkalay-Gut argues that “[l]inear and progressive as a road is, its perception is enclosed in the cyclical, obsessive and repetitive form of the villanelle. In this context, the two like purposes in life—pleasure and advancement—cancel each other out, leaving the individual with only the weariness of frustration.”²³⁴ Even Dowson’s incorporation of Robert Herrick’s “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may” falls victim to rhythmic patterns governed by fatigue and frustration, as the Herrick lines become shortened to the somewhat terse “Gather them while we may” (129). These lines, which work to eradicate any hint of mirth that comes before, culminate in a disaffected vacancy, wherein the poem employs individual lines that progressively counteract the prior statement, creating a recurrent emptying of the poetic page. Each obligatory repetition vacates words that might usually signify Dionysian pleasure and freedom to increasingly take on the appearance of degraded amusements that dot the linguistic terrain.

Alkalay-Gut points out that Dowson’s intertextuality anticipates modernism in the sense that it “is very much like the contemporary practices of pastiche and sampling—using well-known references as a statement on the sad persistence of well-known themes and the impossibility of developing these themes” (102). Dowson’s inclusions work towards effacing the author as an original voice, revealing the poetic tract as a sequence that has the motifs of desire,

²³⁴ Karen Alkalay-Gut. “Overcoming Time and Despair: Ernest Dowson’s Villanelle,” *Victorian Poetry* 34, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 102. Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

frustration, and despondency on continuous replay. The insistence of formal redundancy reinforces Dowson's themes of suffering and dissatisfaction, resulting in a text that refutes the power of language to reveal and communicate, insisting, instead, upon its failure to transmit meaning. This implementation of form as destructive, unyielding mechanism that forces its rigid infrastructure upon the more protean ideas of the poem is characteristic of Decadence. John Reed distinguishes between Symbolist formlessness, and the Decadents employment of "rhythm, repetition, and form to imply a world in which no such escape was possible except in delirium, oblivion, or death."²³⁵

Dowson's poetry emphasizes that a fundamental brokenness extends from the experience of the material world to emotional experience and, finally, into poetic territory. Dowson pursues the excessive sensuality characteristic of many Decadent works, as well as the ascetic distance from those objects of desire through a redundancy that extracts vitality from image or phrase. Theodor Adorno understands this facet of Decadence, which distances its subjects from the contemporaneous world as the subversive power of the movement: "In the world of violence and oppressive life, this decadence is the refuge of a better potentiality by virtue of the fact that it refuses obedience to this life, its culture, its rawness and sublimity [...] That which stands against the decline of the West is not the surviving culture but the Utopia that is silently embodied in the image of decline."²³⁶ For Matei Calinescu, Adorno's definition of Decadence as a "culture of negation" very closely mirrors theorizations of modernism and the avant-garde.²³⁷ It also suggests that a reconsideration of Decadence along Marxist lines would allow Decadence to be theorized against material and historical conditions wherein "decadence no longer appears as

²³⁵ Reed, *Decadent Style*: 17.

²³⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 2 (1941): 325.

²³⁷ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*: 210-11. Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

a poisonous manifestation of ‘bourgeois ideology’ but, on the contrary, as a reaction against it and, moreover, as a deep and authentic awareness of a crisis to which no easy (or even difficult) solutions can be prescribed” (310-311). The paradox of Decadence—which encourages cultural disruption through non-normative methods that employ essentially inactive strategies, like ennui and impotence—refuses the emerging priorities of a market economy that values efficiency and production.

If Decadence employs aesthetics to defy a social landscape increasingly dominated by use value and productivity, Alkalay-Gut identifies the particular subversive propensities on display in “Villanelle of His Lady’s Treasure.” Dowson’s tendency “to artificialize the real in order to control it—to lessen despair and diminish the power of the lady’s ‘treasures’” is emphasized here (206). The villanelle “works as a kind of incantation, a voodoo experience, and the more synthetic the form, the more power over the pains of existence” (206). It is possible to extend a figurative use of “voodoo experience” as the ruling tenor of the poem and its formal operations. The use of refrain and rhyme can be understood as the ritual elements of spellcraft.

I took her dainty eyes, as well

As silken tendrils of her hair:

And so I made a Villanelle!

I took her voice, a silver bell,

As clear as song, as soft as prayer;

I took her dainty eyes as well.

It may be, said I, who can tell,
 These things shall be my less despair?
 And so I made a Villanelle!

I took her whiteness virginal
 And from her cheek two roses rare:
 I took her dainty eyes as well.

I said: "It may be possible
 Her image from my heart to tear!"
 And so I made a Villanelle.

I stole her laugh, most musical:
 I wrought it in with artful care;
 I took her dainty eyes as well;
 And so I made a Villanelle. (52-53)

Not only does the poetic persona reckon on total control, but also that the will to control is presented as a lyrical dispersal in which the reiteration of "I took" becomes a violent claim, exacting in its decisiveness. The momentum of the villanelle, which fragments and recycles, requisitions the parts of the body, converting lyrical praise of beauty that generally focuses on unity into a parceled round. Dowson imagines the kind of desiccated subjects commensurate

with the desolate poetic landscape he erects in other poems. He converts the erotic into necrotics, the living body of a woman becoming an inanimate echo chamber of the villanelle, reverberating with “I took her dainty eyes, as well.”

As in Symons’s poetry, the female body that recurs throughout Dowson’s work is comprised of amputated pieces. Dowson’s violence positions the female body not only as a historical or social artifact, but also as a found (and destroyed) object in the terrain of modernity. The female body’s fragment represents a tension between individual violence—the violence of fantasy, of submission—and socio-historical violence. The separation of female subjectivity from her objectified body has long been a favorite theme. But Dowson’s imagery is altogether more violent, incorporating fantasies that project erotic proclivities and internal anxieties upon the ruptured female. Additionally, the frequency of the dehumanized female body only amplifies the violence—in its methodical repetitions, the female body becomes so much grist for Dowson’s syntactical and conceptual obsessions.

Just as the villanelle’s formal power resides in syntactical reduplication, the relentless apportioning of female bodies establishes a visual syntax of repetitive violence. In this sense, I want to consider Dowson’s recurring images of women’s body parts in relation to repetition of full lines.²³⁸ Cecile Chu-chin Sun calls this repetition of meaning, “the covert mode of repetition”: “Though inseparable from overt repetition, it is in every way distinct. Unlike overt repetition, it conceals its own act of iteration. It is repetition in disguise.”²³⁹ Both Dowson’s overt and covert repetitions expand through the brute force in language marked by stylistically

²³⁸ For a reading of Dowson’s women that addresses the thematic issues present in his depiction of “chaste female ideals,” see Christine Roth’s work on the cult of the little girl. Like the Houston and Reed works mentioned earlier, Roth situates Dowson’s work (and his life) in a series of binaries. Roth reads the “eyes, mouths, hands, feet, and hair of budding female bodies literally half way between child and woman, hold mystical power, whether religious or pagan, for the speakers in Dowson’s texts.” Christine Roth, “Ernest Dowson and the Duality of Late-Victorian Girlhood: ‘Her Double Perversity,’” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 45, no. 2 (2010): 171.

²³⁹ Cecile Chu-chin Sun, *The Poetics of Repetition in English and Chinese Lyric Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). 95.

aggressive desolation. Dowson exploits the awkward caesuras, inserts startling punctuation in the middle of a line, or closes his lines with a thudding end-stopped rhyme that juxtaposes lush ornamentation with inelegant austerity. This might just balance, creating a sort of conceptual parataxis in which the two modes might seem like they are fighting it out on equal terms, if it wasn't for the fact that Dowson's abrupt insertions are often much more unexpected than his invocation of ornament and excess. After all, his constant return to "wine, women, and song," ultimately becomes subordinated to the weight of its repetition—ornament and indulgence become banal fodder for Dowson's many returns. The exceptional image or phrase (or, if we extend poetry into the domain of real life—the exceptional experience) takes on meaning not in its first occurrence, but by the way it is transformed through its subsequent inclusions. The subject of the image or phrase becomes alienated, while language and ideas become their own objects, resisting the representations that the initial occurrence may have attempted. Repetition allows us to witness the break down of representational aesthetics. There is certain violence to that destruction—when language fails to represent anything but language. That violence is especially acute when the subjects that fall away are women upon whose objectified bodies the processes of syntactical destruction are enacted.

In "Ad Manus Puella," dedicated to publisher and pornographer Leonard Smithers, the persona participates in the erotics of the segmented body. The poem's opening salvo—"I was always a lover of hands!"—signals the fetishization of the part detached from the whole, severed and rendered inanimate (23). They are "carved white," shaped "like a *fleur-de-lys*," "the pallor of ivories," and "like a curled sea-shell" (23-24). Dowson's "Flos Lunae" matches the marriage of form and content on display in his villanelles, using repetition as an impediment to development and favoring, instead, an unremitting fascination with extracted pieces: "I would not alter thy

cold eyes” repeats each first and last line of the four stanzas (25). Dowson converts mythological imagery that connects lunar cycles and female hysteria into a depiction of unearthly, dispassionate impenetrability. Here, the origins of feminine power are alien, and its mesmeric effects reaches its apex as the onlooker is overcome to the extent that repetition becomes the only available mode of speech, as if returning to a central deep impulse.

Dowson’s more violent images of women fetishize the body, breaking it into pieces and making individual, segmented objects out of the whole. The source of power in “Flos Lunae,” however, arrives less from a subjective female force than from the inanimate object of the moon. The female obtains male submission as if she has an unconscious gravitational force rather than individual will. As Bram Dijkstra writes, “Woman, as the moon, was characterized by her distance from man. Inevitable disappointment awaited the male who sought to approach her. It was as if the sun, the active principle, must forever struggle with the passive inertia of primal being.”²⁴⁰ This is not the *femme fatale* of Salome, with her brazen machinations and ulterior motives, and she doesn’t fit George Ross Ridge’s dictum that “Decadent women are psychopathic”; instead, she’s a remote figure.²⁴¹ Her power—the hypnotic eye—is not an inversion of the male gaze of passion and desire, but of a paralyzing, chilling neutrality that reflects only male submission: “Within their glance my spirit lies, / A frozen thing, alone, apart” (25). Dowson’s depiction of female power as clinical—almost synthetic—begs the question of whether the moon is feminized because it remains impossible to imagine an object with such diffuse power as masculine.

²⁴⁰ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Turn-of-the-Century Culture*: 127.

²⁴¹ George Ross Ridge, *The Hero in French Decadent Literature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1961). 39.

“Epigram” provides something of a model for the way in which Dowson systematically and repetitively deconstructs the female body. First, there is the confession of the guiding male subject as postlapsarian and already corrupted. “Because I am idolatrous and have besought,” announces the poetic voice at the beginning of the poem (73). An example of that idolatry follows (as if confession requires a set of procedural proofs), as the narrator admits that the aim of “supplication and consuming prayer” is base idolization of the female body (73). These dreams divide the female self through synecdoche of “her swan’s neck and her dark abundant hair,” a choice that ultimately raises questions about the politics of synecdoche in which female body parts represent not a whole living woman, but an object subject to the will of the poetic narrator, as well as the transformations issued by the “[t]he jealous gods, who brook no worship save their own/ Turned my live idol marble and her heart to stone” (73). The speaker’s sense of self-hatred suggests that he is not only the victim of an increasingly violent society, but also a perpetrator of that violence. The continued dissection of women mortifies the sensual body, and the sexual body is transformed into place where violence is performed. This is contrary to Dowson’s depiction of the purity of little girls who are, Chris Snodgrass argues, “positioned precariously outside the ravages of decay and lust even if constantly threatened by them.”²⁴² Poetic images of a segmented adult female thus reflects “Dowson’s anxiety about change and decay, his obsessive awareness that time brings to young girls an inevitable growth out of innocence” (30). For Dowson, existence is comprised of a savage energy, less a cycle of renewal than one of continual, ravenous desire, its destructions, and its ultimate dissatisfaction.

²⁴² Chris Snodgrass, “Aesthetic Memory’s Cul-de-Sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson,” in *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 35, no. 1 (1992): 29. Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

For Dowson's Aestheticist predecessor, Algernon Charles Swinburne, continual breakdown and the dispersal of energy engenders what Jerome McGann discerns as "the diffusion of poetic subjectivity into the energy field of the poem."²⁴³ According to McGann, this has a spatial constituent, in which the Swinburnian ego is first established in the poetic narrator and then slowly disembodied, dispersed from the center of the lyrical "I" through an engagement with pure sound and an increasingly inhuman point of view. The individuated self constantly breaks down and releases into "a more engulfing poetic space in which the three possible forms of poetic consciousness—authorial, readerly, and fictive—would gain their identities, paradoxically, by a process of regular loss and transformation" (xxiii). In this sense, Swinburne's motion evacuates the physical self through centrifugal force. Dowson's technique transposes Swinburne's momentum, mobilizing destructive energy as a centripetal force that collapses into itself, its velocity turned into torque. Dowson's poetic vision eliminates progress and momentum from both the poetic line and image: repetition replaces renewal. If Dowson's subject witnesses and experiences ever-diminishing passion and ever-increasing incomprehensibility about the world that surrounds him, the objectified women—her breaking apart, her frigidity, barrenness, the replacement of fecundity and overpowering desire with icy stillness—is converted into the material site upon which we can witness the cyclical destructions of the cohesive world.

These thematic and conceptual reverberations are only reinforced by the sonic qualities of Dowson's verse. Instead of privileging euphony and rhythm, it works towards what Weiner describes as a fractious amalgam of sound and image to comprise a terrain of desaturated remains: "Strained and univocal rather than harmonious, Dowson's poems depict a world of gray shadows in which bright colors belong to a fleeting, lost existence" (481). Weiner understands

²⁴³ Jerome McGann, Introduction in *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Major Poems and Selected Prose* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), xxiv. Hereafter pages cited in the text are within parentheses.

Dowson's goal as the desire "to divorce poetry from any act of observation" and, as such, his formal method functions as a "techniques of subtraction" in which "imagery and sound would be comparable in their autonomy and anti-representational potential to paint or notes of music" (483, 484, 483). Richard Benvenuto interprets the contrasting subjects of sound and silence in Dowson's poetry as a study of the self divided between "two contrasting states: one which has renounced speech or transcended its need, and another which has not yet attained an effective use of words."²⁴⁴ Both Kuduk and Benvenuto identify the sound quality of Dowson's verse as involved in an aesthetic practice of language as failed and the invention of techniques of estrangement that focalize that failure—techniques that are more commonly associated with twentieth-century Modernist projects. Dowson's repetitions defamiliarize the ideas that they present rather than reinforce them, becoming part of the ongoing process of the destruction of sense and the destabilizing of language.

Is there any escape from this kind of poetic nihilism that converts its own initial utterances into the language of unproductive stutter? Perhaps it rests in what Ian Fletcher as Dowson's "rhetoric of silence."²⁴⁵ For Dowson, silence lies on the other side of the ever-increasing pitch incurred through refrain. "Beata Solitudo," for instance, offers silence as an escape from modern destructions, proposing that in this "world forsaken," the "land of silence" is a metaphysical refuge located in dreams, contemplation, and death (46). But the ballad-like structure of the poem, with its nursery-rhyme musicality and dreamy sentiments, strike an inauthentic—almost sarcastic—note against the largely existential weight of Dowson's body of work in which the modern landscape relentlessly barrels towards destruction. Chris Snodgrass argues that in the "Nuns of Perpetual Adoration" a monastery represents the only escape from

²⁴⁴ Richard Benvenuto, "The Function of Language in the Poetry of Ernest Dowson," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 21, no. 3 (1978): 160.

²⁴⁵ Ian Fletcher, "Review of Mark Longaker's *The Poems of Ernest Dowson*," *Listener*, no. 9 (16 May 1963): 840.

the modern world in which “the ‘natural’ processes of life are merely a guise for depraved appropriation, where growth is perforce corruption.”²⁴⁶ Dowson’s more common vision of contemporary society is of devastation so virulent that it reaches Elysium, contaminating it with the very problems that wrack modernity.

In “Amor Profanus,” the poetic narrator endeavors to cross from the wasteland of modern life into the abyss of afterlife, but finds torture has followed, as “Over our pallid lips had run / The waters of oblivion” (15). “Oblivion” is not only silence, but also refers to language never completed, rendered as fits of starts and stops, the recurrence of sound to no ending grammatical logic: “In vain we stammered: from afar / Our old desire shone cold and dead” (15-16). In “A Requiem,” Dowson updates Horace’s suicidal heroine, Neobule, to represent retreat from the desolation of the modern world to the silent “hollow lands” of the afterlife (43). For Neobule exhaustion is the primary experience of modernity— she is “too tired to laugh or weep,” “tired to death,” “too tired / Of the dreams and days above” (43). The poem functions as a still life of modern life’s emptiness where death, which offers permanent rest, is preferable (43). T.S. Eliot expands Dowson’s conceit of the modern city and its depressive inhabitants in *The Waste Land*,²⁴⁷ but the dominant characteristic of Eliot’s poem is clamorous noise—sound bites so

²⁴⁶ Chris Snodgrass, “Aesthetic Memory’s Cul-de-sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 35, no. 1 (2010): 32. Elsewhere Snodgrass reads Dowson through the poet’s own interest in Schopenhauer, allying his poetic vision with the craving and desire that functions as the will to live in the philosopher’s work and which will “invariably contaminate all innocents exposed to it.” Chris Snodgrass, “Ernest Dowson’s Aesthetics of Contamination,” *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 26, no. 3 (2010): 163. For Snodgrass, Dowson echoes Schopenhauer’s revision of the Augustinian definition of evil as absent of good into good defined by negation, as the absence of suffering and carnality. Dowson’s “constant attempts to join aestheticism and renunciation” are an attempt to “show that the aestheticizing process denied vulgar selfish desire and so restored value and human harmony to life” (170).

²⁴⁷ For a brief examination of Dowson’s influence on Eliot, see Joseph Maddrey, *The Making of T.S. Eliot: A Study of the Literary Influences* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2009). 119. Though the phrase “hollow land” seems like the most obvious reference to Dowson by Eliot, the later poet denied this in a letter to *Times Literary Supplement*: “In the interesting review of Ernest Dowson’s Poems in your last issue, your reviewer suggest that I caught the phrase ‘Falls the shadow’ [*The Hollow Men*] from Dowson’s ‘Cynara.’ This derivation had not occurred to my mind, but I believe it to be correct, because the lines he quotes have always run in my head, and because I regard Dowson as a poet whose technical innovations have been underestimated. But I do not think that I got the

interwoven that they create a cacophony out of the chatter in bars, in flats, in the street, the babble of Sufis and madmen. Dowson's soundscape, on the other hand, is the silence that comes from the core of noise; it is the individual response to mounting racket—exhaustion, overload, and the singular desire for rest. Neobule's response to chatter is silence, a silence that can be read in conflicting terms as both a forced silence and the refusal to respond to the poetic persona, preferring instead, to move silently among the crowds where “the poor, dead people stray / Ghostly, pitiful and gray” (44). The desire to belong to another time and another place, the myriad fantasies of escape, only intensify the continual references to insatiate desires and thwarted ambitions. Despite these efforts, the process of reclamation is continually denied; there is no closure that makes restoration possible.

It is apt that what remains of Dowson's poetic corpus in our larger cultural consciousness is not whole portions of poems and unadulterated references, but miscellaneous samples that have been recycled and remixed. Dowson's repetitions are enmeshed in their own sort of eternal return. The poet's tendency towards the perceptual and syntactical loop is matched by the recycling of his poetry in other works. Perhaps no other minor author has had their lines appropriated, recast, borrowed, and referenced across such a wide terrain of cultural zones.²⁴⁸ From Margaret Mitchell's sampling of the metaphor “gone with the wind” for her epic historical romance, to the multitude of appropriations and corruptions of “the days of wine and roses”

title ‘The Hollow Men’ from Dowson. There is a romance of William Morris called ‘The Hollow Land.’ There is also a poem of Mr. Kipling called ‘The Broken Men.’ I combined the two.” T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1996). 395.

²⁴⁸ Though it seemed possible, when W.B. Yeats included nine pages of Dowson's poem in the 1936 edition of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, that Dowson would become more directly associated with his most famous lines. But perhaps the stigma of the nineties—more infamous for its the biographical tales of excess than its widespread poetic success—was too much to overcome. Yeats, despite considering Dowson representative of one of the “good poets” still places him in the domain of Victoriana: “Then in 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody committed suicide; nobody joined the Catholic church; or if they did I have forgotten. Victorianism had been defeated.” William Butler Yeats, *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892-1935* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936), v, xi.

(perhaps the catchiest line to ever come out of a poem with such an abstruse title), including the 1967 Jack Lemmon and Blake Edwards' film, Industrial Metal band My Life With The Thrill Kill Kult's 1993 track "Days of Swine and Roses," and the Muppets' *Days of Swine and Roses*, just to name a few. Choice Dowson phrases persist despite the poet's relative containment within specialized studies of Decadence. The afterlife of Dowson's work aligns with the central preoccupation of his poetry, wherein experience or meaning frays and ethical maxims hollow out through endless returns.

CHAPTER 6

THE TREATMENT OF CANONICAL THINGS:

AUBREY BEARDSLEY AND THE MODERNIST PALIMPSEST

Even in the 1890s, Aubrey Beardsley's prints defined British Decadence, his visually iconic style causing people to refer to the nineties as the "Beardsley Period" well before his death in March of 1898.²⁴⁹ Now, well over a century later, Beardsley's work remains emblematic of the movement. Whether it be the graphic blocks of black and white that form his *Le Morte Darthur* series, the undulating lines that dominate his illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, or the brazen figures that leer out from the cover of *The Yellow Book*, Beardsley's drawings provide an instantly recognizable index of British Decadence.

Yet the distinctiveness of Beardsley's work belies the fact that his characteristic style is essentially a composite of vastly differing aesthetic schools. As an example, consider



Figure 1 Aubrey Beardsley, *Tannhäuser*. 1891, india ink and wash. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., U.S. Available from: ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org>

the relatively early illustration *Tannhäuser* (fig. 1), which embeds a fragment of a Pre-Raphaelite

²⁴⁹ Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998). 10.

style figure—the androgynous Tannhäuser with his delicately rendered features amidst a sylvan scene—beneath a foreground and border of geometrically aggressive flowers. Look further and find that the triptych of flowers, despite exhibiting some sense of unity through a tonal match with the charcoal, is the product of three distinct styles: the Symbolist swirls of the sunflower in the top section (think of the floating flowers in Odilon Redon’s velvety *noirs*) about the post-Impressionist aggression of the vines and thorns engulfing Tannhäuser in the center, while the bottom border emblems bear the decorative stamp of Art Nouveau decoration. Beardsley both incorporates and overwrites the styles of his predecessors and contemporaries, erecting something entirely new from borrowed forms. Beardsley’s drawings are innovative not because the basic elements are original, but because they co-opt old sources and recombine them in unconventional ways. His work surpasses basic homage, embracing processes of assemblage, pastiche, and sampling that will come to dominate modernist aesthetic procedures a couple of decades later.

Beardsley’s literary work, of which there remains little, mirrors these very processes of appropriation as a means to innovation. His single surviving long work, a prose version of the Tannhäuser myth, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, reinscribes spiritual journey with a journey through an erotic dream world. In the novel’s parodic dedication to Prince Giulio Poldo Pezzoli, Beardsley impishly appeals to his fictional patron to look past the book’s “mere vengery, inasmuch as it treats of the great contrition of its chiefest character and of canonical things in its chapters.”²⁵⁰ Beardsley *mea culpa* is, of course, anything but. The principal character of Tannhäuser is anything but contrite, and the manner in which Beardsley deals with established

²⁵⁰ Aubrey Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser, in which is set forth an exact account of the manner of state held by Madam Venus, goddess and meretrix, under the famous Hörselberg, and containing the adventures of Tannhäuser in that place, his repentance, his journeying to Rome and return to the loving mountain. A romantic novel.* (London: For Private Circulation, 1907). 13. Hereafter citations are given in the text within parentheses.

themes and figures reflects the sort of audacious and pointed irreverence of his most challenging visual artwork. In his address to Pezzoli, Beardsley seems to have anticipated and ridiculed the later extreme reactions, on the part of art and literary critics, to the unmitigated eroticism of *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*. One of Beardsley's earliest champions, Haldane Macfall, had trouble defending both the perceived obscenity of the unexpurgated version, which revealed an "orgy of eroticism," and the censored version, *Under The Hill* (originally published in *The Savoy*), which he finds a "futile mutilated thing" of "bowdlerised inanity."²⁵¹ More recently, during the resurgence of interest in Beardsley during the 1970s and 80s, Ian Fletcher began to correct earlier dismissals of *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*. Fletcher acknowledged the complexities inherent in Beardsley's refusal of binaries, such as morality and immorality or art and nature, to create a "dialectic between Nature and Art synthesized by the amoral—'Beyond Good and Evil'—climate of the Venusberg."²⁵² Still, Fletcher prefers the sanitized version of the *The Savoy*, declaring it the better literary work, while dismissing the longer, unfinished *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* as merely pornographic. Stanley Weintraub also prefers *Under the Hill*, calling it a "triumph of excess" exceeding the "literarily undisciplined and Rabelaisian original," and considers it on par with the literary works of Wilde and Beerbohm, even surpassing those in its "pictorial glamor [that] only a painter's eye could conceive."²⁵³ There are, however, defenders of the "undisciplined" *Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*. Linda Zatlin chooses

²⁵¹ Haldane Macfall, *Aubrey Beardsley, The Clown, The Harlequin, The Pierrot of His Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1927). 178.

²⁵² Ian Fletcher, "Inventions for the Left Hand: Beardsley in Verse and Prose," in *Reconsidering Aubrey Beardsley*, ed. Robert Langenfeld and Simon Wilson, *Nineteenth-Century Studies* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 238. Hereafter citations are given in the text within parentheses.

²⁵³ Stanley Weintraub, *Aubrey Beardsley, Imp of the Perverse* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976). 171, 74-75, 70. Hereafter citations are given in the text within parentheses.

the longer work specifically because of its explicit erotic content, which allows her to address Beardsley's resistance to depicting the traditionally hierarchical structure of sexual relations by subverting "the verbal and the visual conventions of pornographers."²⁵⁴

While as early as 1933 Mario Praz declared Beardsley's *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* the "essence of the English Decadent school," the conversation surrounding the work has more often been hermetic, analyzing it as an exceptional, singular piece rather than, as Praz intimates, a distillation of some of the broader aesthetic ambitions of British Decadence.²⁵⁵ This chapter considers Beardsley's *Tannhäuser* as an exemplum of Decadence that participates in the construction of a modernist palimpsest, which invents new literary objects from old textual materials. I argue that Beardsley's palimpsest works to subvert the moral tale of the original text, overlaying it with a story that reveals the primacy of experience and subconscious desire. In this sense, Beardsley's story works with ideas of transformation and fluidity, revealing the lack of boundaries between everything from ideas to bodies, rather than underscoring those boundaries. From its textual history of various editions to the protean characters and swiftly transforming scenes, multiple levels of instability mark *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, making it as ripe an example of decentralized modern literature as anything from the twentieth-century. Beardsley's *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* writes over the prior versions of the legend in order to create a text that troubles concepts of stability on both the formal and thematic level, a modernist palimpsest that does not merely erase the preexisting material, but incorporates and reimagines it.

²⁵⁴ Linda G. Zatlin, "Beardsley Redresses Venus," *Victorian Poetry* 28, no. 3-4 (1990): 111. Kim Marra argues that Beardsley and Wilde's depictions of Salomé similarly invert codes of gender and sexuality. For instance, Beardsley depicts Salomé with an Adam's apple that "registers her butchness," while the roses that bloom from her stomach and feet invert the symbol of fecundity, referencing, instead, "the blooms of syphilis" which make contagion visible. Kim Marra, "Lesbian Scholar/Gay Subject: Turn-of-the-Century Inversions," *Theatre Topics* 13, no. 2 (2003).

²⁵⁵ Praz, *The Romantic Agony*: 356.

This formal choice of both including and erasing older versions of the Tannhäuser myth grounds Beardsley's version in tradition in order to continuously play with convention. Beardsley draws out motifs—from protean sexuality to morphing objects—that thematically mirror the formal commitment to instability. Just as the material and literary processes guiding Beardsley's book subvert stability, the scenes and characters within the story constantly transform to erode any sense of autonomous identity or individual desire. Although one of the primary criticisms of Beardsley's *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* is its descent into the unflagging sexual engagement which Steven Marcus calls “pornotopia,” I take a different approach, exploring the primary setting as dreamscape or dream vision akin to the surrealist landscapes that will erupt a quarter century later.²⁵⁶ Beardsley's *Tannhäuser* is evidence of a formally and theoretically audacious Decadence that explores sex not merely as a continual fulfillment of desire, but as an emblem of transformation. Beardsley modifies an archetypal spiritual journey into a text that focuses on *fin de siècle* obsessions with subconscious and unconscious processes, such as desire and dream life, that foreshadow the investigations of

²⁵⁶ For the extended definition of pornotopia, see Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*, Studies in Sex and Society (New York: Basic Books, 1966). 268-79. A particular lightening rod in the controversy is Helen/Venus's scene with her pet unicorn, Adolphe. *The Savoy's* version of *Under the Hill* ends with a fairly tame morning visit to see Adolphe. However, in the unexpurgated *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, Venus takes Tannhäuser to watch her feed and masturbate her Unicorn: “The Queen bared her left arm to the elbow, and with the soft underneath of it made amazing movements horizontally upon the tightly-strung instrument. When the melody began to flow, the unicorn offered up an astonishing vocal accompaniment. Tannhäuser was amused to learn that the etiquette of the Venusberg compelled everybody to await the outburst of these venereal sounds before they could sit down to dejeuner.” Ian Fletcher argues that the site of the Venusberg becomes a pornotopia, “a theatre of continuous sexuality in all its possible forms, where consummation should never end and exhaustion be unknown.” Fletcher, “Inventions for the Left Hand,” 240. I'm disinclined to agree with the slightly moralistic tone of Fletcher's argument, which turns its nose up at the endless excess in the Venusberg. Instead, I would argue that Beardsley's works descend—not into increasingly staged theatrics—but into complex layers of subconscious urges and desires. Consummation is endless and exhaustion foreign—not because of a descent into pornographic fantasy—but because of the emergence of the desiring mind and sensing body as continuously transforming entities. For a reading that is entirely different than mine, but refuses to condemn the sexual “theatre” of Beardsley's *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, see Weintraub's analysis of this scene as a appropriation of medieval interpretations of the unicorn as symbolic of Christ and the legend of the unicorn as only able to be caught between the legs of a virgin in order to turn religious iconography into erotic images as a comment on the corruption of Christianity. Weintraub, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 176.

expressionism and surrealism. Beardsley's *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* embodies the modern palimpsest by focusing on the very instabilities that erupt in the transformation of models and ideas from one author to the next.

These unstable transformations manifest in both material and conceptual ways. In order to consider how Beardsley's assimilation of older aesthetic forms functions as both an artistic practice and as a theoretical engagement, I move from the literal aspects of Beardsley's appropriations to the more abstract questions that such methods provoke. First, I explore how the prevalent recycling in Beardsley's visual medium offers a precedent for the pastiche of influences that erupt in his written text. Then, I look at how the publishing history of Beardsley's unfinished novel offers an added layer of textual instability: the suppression, expurgation, and reissuing of the novel results in a slippery work which any critical claim must necessarily take into account. Beardsley's own competing versions are exponentially complicated by the remaining traces of the source texts. For Beardsley, these editions become the found objects that he transforms and reassembles to represent his own vision of a modern hero who, without guilt, succumbs to the sensations of the world rather than resisting them. Finally, I explore how *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* represents what Philippe Lejeune and Gérard Genette have described as "palimpsestuous," a term meant to distinguish between the physical palimpsest and the abstract consciousness that is formed from the strata of memory and experience, with all of its erasures, impressions, and contradictions.²⁵⁷

²⁵⁷ Philippe Lejeune originates the term and it becomes more frequent following its employment in Gérard Genette's wide-ranging study of the palimpsest. Philippe Lejeune, *Moi Aussi*, Collection Poétique (Paris: Seuil, 1986). 33; Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Stages (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). 399.

Beardsley and the Visual Palimpsest

The formal and procedural principles of the modern palimpsest that guide Beardsley's prose find an analogical precedent in his visual art. His entrance into the London art scene began in 1891 and was quickly bolstered by a series of commissioned works that famously illustrate historical and mythological figures. From his drawings for J. M. Dent's 1892 version of *Le Morte Darthur* of Sir Thomas Malory and his plates for Oscar Wilde's 1893 *Salomé* to his work on *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, Beardsley's illustrations reinterpret his subjects with the same artistic license as the writers whose work he accompanies. The visual style synonymous with Beardsley engages a palimpsestic mode that converts the old into new. It is possible to read this style in the visual field of Beardsley's page, which demonstrate the fine draughtsmanship found in court painters or popular newspaper illustrators—positions that, as opposed as they are in terms of their social position, demand artists participate in established idioms.

Chris Snodgrass reads the wide array of images in Beardsley's work as a parody of the "Classical, Gothic, and Japanese 'revivals'" that inform the cultural context of the nineteenth century; for Snodgrass, parody capitalizes on a community "unusually conscious of the cultural and canonical foundations on which it rested" by "the welding of poetic imagination to an already well-conditioned taste."²⁵⁸ For Matthew Sturgis the "obviousness" of Beardsley's employment of previous styles, from the Pre-Raphaelites and the Italians, to Japanese woodblock and *Belle Époque* advertisements, actually "proclaimed the strength and originality of his vision."²⁵⁹ It is the transformation of the old material into something innovative that is "the mark

²⁵⁸ Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). 243.

²⁵⁹ Matthew Sturgis, "The Death of Aubrey Beardsley," *Princeton University Library Chronicle* 60, no. 1 (1998):

of his genius” (10). While Beardsley synoptically cites fine art history in his expressions of established codes of decorative drawing and artistic subjects that are instantly recognizable, we can also identify Beardsley’s effacement of these traditional styles and images with his insidious, wandering lines, the shallow and oppressive foreground, and the underdevelopment of certain figures juxtaposed with minutely detailed others. Beardsley’s innovations distinctly align with a palimpsestic drive that incorporates and effaces older sources, prefiguring the “incongruous elements characteristic to some of the most notable exemplars of twentieth-century modernist art.”²⁶⁰ Linda Dowling reads Beardsley’s *Tannhäuser* as an exemplum of the self-parody found throughout Decadent literature “that anticipates the characteristic attitude of twentieth-century modernism.”²⁶¹ For Dowling, Beardsley’s employment of pornography “with its powerful urge towards leveling and reductionism—by which all classes and conditions of creatures are made equal and by which heterogeneous experience is simplified to become exclusively sexual experience—only pornography could best satirize the equation of categories—good and evil, serious and trivial, beautiful and ugly—that avant-garde aesthetic theory had sought to bring about” (38).

Take, for instance, one of Beardsley’s lesser-known projects, the illustration of Ernest Dowson’s *The Pierrot of the Minute*.²⁶² These plates represent what is essentially the dissonant subtext of the verse play—Beardsley creates a mirror text that is able to draw out the fragmented figure of the Pierrot. In his illustrations, Beardsley makes the unsettledness of *Pierrot of the Minute* explicit. While Dowson’s text version explores the relationship between love and

67. Hereafter citations are given in the text within parentheses.

²⁶⁰ Robert Schweik, “Congruous Incongruities: The Wilde-Beardsley ‘Collaboration’,” *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 37, no. 1 (1994): 1.

²⁶¹ Linda C. Dowling, “‘Venus and Tannhäuser’: Beardsley’s Satire of Decadence,” *The Journal of Narrative Technique* 8, no. 1 (1978): 27. Hereafter citations are given in the text within parentheses.

²⁶² Five years after its initial performance, Leonard Smithers published *Pierrot of the Minute* in a limited edition with Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrative plates; however, *Pierrot* only gained wide readership upon its inclusion in the first posthumous volume of Dowson’s work, edited by Symons.

impermanence, Beardsley's plates survey the broader implications of changing identity through stock figures so compromised that they are no longer able to hold onto the core markers that make them prototypes. In each of the illustrations, a radically different rendition of Pierrot stands isolated and alone. A tendency to magnify the discontinuities of a text rather than illustrate continuity of narrative was one of Beardsley's earliest established idiosyncrasies.

J. M. Dent became increasingly concerned with the drawings he commissioned for *Le Morte Darthur*, which, over the course of serial publication, began to dramatically deviate both thematically and stylistically from earlier plates. Some of these shifts are attributable to Beardsley's growing boredom with large projects.²⁶³ Even so, that boredom manifested, not in a reduction of originality and embellishment, but increasingly inventive images that alter the source text. Beardsley reinvents the role of illustrator, as Ian Fletcher claims, from facilitator to challenger, "not conducting word into image, but bringing to light rather what is implicit, forbidden or subversive elements of a text."²⁶⁴ But Beardsley's power does not merely expose uncomfortable or dissident textual undercurrents. Fletcher argues that he "discomfits the viewer further: even if the viewer recognizes parody or irony, his superiority is soon threatened; he senses himself as an intruder in a dangerous space. Familiar objects are first defamiliarized and no sooner responded to, than defamiliarized again."²⁶⁵ Fletcher diagnoses the central drive of Beardsley's work as a constant turn between opposites, the familiar and the strange, that can never settle. The dynamism of this drive results in the accrual of aesthetic experiences that

²⁶³ Barbara Tapa Lupack and Alan Lupack, *Illustrating Camelot*, Arthurian Studies (Woodbridge; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2008). 79-80.

²⁶⁴ Fletcher, "Inventions for the Left Hand: Beardsley in Verse and Prose," 143.

²⁶⁵ Ian Fletcher, *Aubrey Beardsley*, Twayne's English Authors Series (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987). 24.

obliterate the one that came just before. While we may instantly recognize the traits of the Pierrot—the voluminous blouse with buttons and frilled collar, the clown hat—or the name of Tannhäuser, Beardsley’s imprint forces these trace remains into strange new territory.

Tannhäuser and the Palimpsest

Rife with uncertainty, the material history of *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* reflects the thematic and formal changeability of Beardsley’s work. While it is the single prose work of Beardsley’s that exists beyond the scope of archival notes and tentative planning, it remained unfinished at the time of his death and editions (as well as titles) abound. *The Savoy*—the great organ of British Decadence following the demise of *The Yellow Book*—and of which Beardsley was co-editor, published the first six chapters in a censored form as *Under the Hill*.²⁶⁶ Even the title of the bowdlerized version contributes to the work’s shape-shifting properties by embedding multiple references: it functions as a pun on *mons veneris* (literally: the hill of Venus), as a private joke referring to queer critic More Adley’s family estate of Under-the-Hill, and a subversive homage to Kate Greenaway’s popular Victorian children book, *Under the Window*.²⁶⁷ While the majority of criticism deals with the more highly circulated *Under the Hill*, unless otherwise noted, I will refer to the more extensive, unexpurgated edition, *The Story of Venus and*

²⁶⁶ If the success of *The Savoy* was largely due to Beardsley, he was also blamed for its collapse (Sturgis 274-275.) Beardsley was so conspicuously linked with Decadence as to become a direct target of its backlash. In turn, Beardsley’s failure—both in reputation and in health—was laid at the feet of Wilde, particularly by Beardsley’s mother, who traces her son’s quick demise to the Wilde trial: “The unfortunate trial of Oscar Wilde caused the suppression of Aubrey’s fine pictures, the beautiful “Atalanta” amongst them for the April number. Aubrey was bitterly humiliated. He left London perfectly well, he had had no hemorrhages for years, apparently had lost all traces of consumption, and he went abroad, lived less simply and regularly, and at home—went out late, caught a chill, and immediately all the symptoms recurred.” Ellen A. Beardsley, “Aubrey Beardsley” (“The chief thing that I remember about Aubrey as a child....”) biographical sketch of AB, AMs, 8 pp. in slipcase, undated). Aubrey Beardsley Collection, Box 5 and Folder 4; Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. v.

²⁶⁷ Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque*: 65-67.

Tannhäuser, as published by Leonard Smithers in 1907. Smithers printed 250 copies for private circulation, culled from Beardsley's own manuscripts.²⁶⁸ Not only does it provide a fuller vision of Beardsley's Venusberg and its effects, but its mere existence represents yet another layer of the ongoing processes of erasure and imprint that exemplify the palimpsest.

The anxiety surrounding the extant text of *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* reflects an apprehension about the parameters of literary work. Not only does the material history of Beardsley's novel—its many editions and incompleteness—emphasize the textual cycle of erasure and recovery, but the formal processes that surround the story compound this sense. *Venus and Tannhäuser* takes the continually revived and amended Tannhäuser myth, appropriating not only the bones of the fabula, but all of the accumulated associations that the story holds. Reports of Beardsley's dedication to the project reinforce the sense that this process was a lengthy and sustained one. Though Beardsley was reputed to have a short attention span, moving from one project to the next at whim, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* was a long-term venture.²⁶⁹ By the time Beardsley was seen in Dieppe, the French outpost of British Decadence, in August 1895, he had been working on it for well over a year.²⁷⁰ That work would continue for the next three years and remain incomplete at his death in March of 1898.

In Arthur Symons's obsequious introduction to *The Art of Aubrey Beardsley*, the most disapproving note surrounds Beardsley's literary endeavors, particularly his version of Venus and Tannhäuser. Symons recalls Beardsley working on the project—in his view, “hardly more than a piece of nonsense”—with “pathetic tenacity” towards the endless labor of parodic

²⁶⁸ Nelson and Mendes, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson*: 352.

²⁶⁹ Matthew Sturgis, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, 1999). 143.

²⁷⁰ Dowling, “‘Venus and Tannhäuser’: Beardsley's Satire of Decadence,” 26.

appropriation.²⁷¹ The opprobrious tone Symons takes with Beardsley's text echoes the conflict between the two while they worked on *The Savoy*, during which time Symons, as the literary editor, reviewed Beardsley's proposed literary contributions with disdain.²⁷² Despite Symons's criticism of Beardsley's literary endeavors, he later canonizes the late artist in a move typical of what Chris Snodgrass calls the "mythologizing imperative" of Symons's "subtle critical and poetic recreations," which try to sustain the "redemptive possibilities of that Decadent-Symbolist vision."²⁷³ Symons memorializes Beardsley in order to solidify his aesthetic processes and artistic legacy rather than leaving him a volatile figure commensurate with the powerful aesthetic destructions of Decadence.²⁷⁴ Despite Symons's attempt to place Beardsley within a field of historically important figures and his ambivalence towards the *Tannhäuser* project as an essentially unstable project, he does hit upon the endless and playful experiment within Beardsley's novella.

Though Beardsley's death prevented the completion of his *Tannhäuser*, Symons surmises that Beardsley's literary process, "those brilliant, disconnected, fantastic pages, in which every sentence was meditated over, written for its own sake, and left to find its way in its own

²⁷¹ Arthur Symons, "Aubrey Beardsley," in *The Art of Aubrey Beardsley, The Modern Library of the World's Best Books* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1918), 19, 16. Hereafter citations are given in the text within parentheses.

²⁷² Nelson and Mendes, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde, Dowson*: 81. In particular, Symons was displeased with Beardsley's poem, "Ballad of a Barber," which he wanted to include in *The Savoy's* second installment of *Under the Hill*. Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s*: 264. Evidently, Symons's dislike of "Ballad of a Barber" was not universal: "I hear George Moore enthuses over my poem," writes Beardsley to Smithers in a postscript. Aubrey Beardsley et al., *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1970). 145. When Beardsley learned of Symons's disregard for the piece, he wrote Smithers that he was "horrified" and that had "no idea it was 'poor'" (122). Beardsley somewhat relents, suggesting that the poem be published apart from *Under the Hill* under a pseudonym (though Beardsley does get in the barb, "What do you think of 'Symons' as a nom de plume?"). Ultimately, the poem is published—apart from *Under the Hill* but under Beardsley's name—in the third issue of *The Savoy*. While Symons's ideas of aesthetic taste and quality literature guided the literary content of *The Savoy*, he let Beardsley have full reign in the art department.

²⁷³ Chris Snodgrass, "Decadent Mythmaking: Arthur Symons on Aubrey Beardsley and Salome," *Victorian Poetry* 28, no. 3-4 (1990): 61.

²⁷⁴ While Beardsley was one of the few Decadent figures that Symons did not, later in his life, cease to value, Snodgrass argues that his analysis of Beardsley was integrally flawed, that it "[d]enies some of the most significant elements in Beardsley's works, particularly their tendency to throw into question, rather than affirm, the very dualistic oppositions and traditional logocentric Victorian paradigms Symons found in them." *Ibid.*, 62.

paragraph,” defies the conventions of a closed text.²⁷⁵ For Symons, *Under the Hill* “could never have been finished for it had never really been begun.”²⁷⁶ In the sense that Beardsley’s *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* lacks what Symons identifies as a beginning and ending signifying a completed project, Beardsley’s work exemplifies a modernist tendency towards open works. The formal resistance to a set narrative is distilled into a philosophy embodied by Tannhäuser, who represents what Geoffrey Harpham argues is a purely aesthetic emblem of the suspended and incomplete struggle between the pagan Venus and Christ.²⁷⁷ Even if the plot, as some have argued, was leading towards penitence, the formal language of the novel “was manifesting a kind of aesthetic hedonism much closer in spirit to the Venusberg.”²⁷⁸ If Beardsley’s visual artwork provides an early model of disjunctive modernism wherein borrowed parts bump into each other to form a disconcerting aggregate, his written work follows a similar principle of accretion that results in exponentially increased incongruity.

Jennifer Higgins argues that Beardsley’s limited body of writing creates a dynamic grotesque that uses France as its background. According to Higgins, these allusions to France are embedded within a “simultaneously known and unknown world, forming an ostensibly familiar backdrop that is constantly questioned and undermined as the recognizable gives way to the alien, the ornamental to the obscene, and the amusing to the grotesque.”²⁷⁹ This constant metamorphosis is a feature of *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, in which Beardsley takes the known—at his moment in time, the cultural behemoth of Wagner’s operatic rendition—and

²⁷⁵ Symons, “Aubrey Beardsley,” 16.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Geoffrey Harpham, “The Incompleteness of Beardsley’s Venus and Tannhäuser,” *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 18, no. 1 (1975): 24.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 27.

²⁷⁹ Jennifer Higgins, “Unfamiliar Places: France and the Grotesque in Aubrey Beardsley’s Poetry and Prose,” *Modern Language Review* 106, no. 1 (2011): 63.

overlays it with progressively more *outré* images and acts, “the interplay of one set of references juxtaposed over another, and yet another” becoming “collage of narrative genres and cultural references” that destabilizes both the text and the relationship of the reader to it.²⁸⁰

Transforming the Source Texts

Of the many literary exhumations that take place in the nineteenth century, from Sappho’s fragments to the Renaissance figures resurrected by the Pre-Raphaelites and Aesthetes, perhaps no single figure is resuscitated as often—and across such wide literary terrain—as Tannhäuser. Just as Beardsley’s illustrations erase aspects of their source texts, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* involves the process of eradicating and reinventing the multiple versions of the story and its stylized telling, from the Teutonic folktale to Wagner’s opera. Beardsley’s updating of the myth is part of a wider Decadent appropriation, with versions by Swinburne, Huysmans, and Baudelaire. Tannhäuser mythology can be included in what Matthew Potolsky identifies as the “restricted cannon of classically ‘decadent’ works”—such as the writings of Sade and Poe or the stories of Salomé, Narcissus, and Pygmalion—that Decadent writers use to construct an oppositional counterpublic through textual production and circulation.²⁸¹ For Potolsky, Beardsley’s version of Tannhäuser participates in the textual recirculation that happens in the Decadent counterpublic that constitutes a cipher for an entire culture, the sort of “mimetic canonization [that] occurs when a writer announces his or her belonging to a movement by praising and imitating the tastes, obsessions, or works of a ‘master.’ It is among the chief means by which writers affiliated themselves with the decadent counterpublic.” (par.10). Beardsley,

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 79, 81.

²⁸¹ Potolsky, “The Decadent Counterpublic,” par. 3. Hereafter citations are given in the text within parentheses.

along with other Decadent writers who appropriate the myth, transforms Tannhäuser for the decentralized, international rubric of Decadence to become an “avatar of decadent cosmopolitanism” (par. 11).

But despite the embrace and modernization of Tannhäuser during Decadence, its refashioning has a long history predating the nineteenth century. In fact, the many incarnations of Tannhäuser reveal him to be something of a shape shifter, a sort of embodied palimpsest, his core identity able to be reconfigured for any age. The original tale, in and of itself, provides a case study of continual reinvention upon which Beardsley inscribes his own version. The figure of Tannhäuser was a German *Minnesänger* (poet and lyricist) who lived in the thirteenth century and whom is depicted, in the fourteenth-century medieval songbook *Codex Manesse*, as a religious crusader of the Teutonic Order. Many versions of the legend that grew up around Tannhäuser began around the fifteenth century, and it becomes an increasingly proliferate folktale in German culture.²⁸² Each author who subsequently takes on Tannhäuser imposes their own version of his journey to the mound of Venus on the preceding interpretations. Adding to the persistence of Tannhäuser’s material changes is a core theme that derives from a palimpsestic urge to impose an ideal of Christian penitence (through Tannhäuser’s renunciation of the Venusberg and request for forgiveness) over the pleasures equated with paganism. More than anything, the persistent revisionary urge that engulfs Tannhäuser exposes the relentless drive to amend and adapt the cultural materials of previous eras to the present moment.

When Beardsley began to work on his version “he had a number of models to mock and some hints as to the manner in which that mockery might be conducted: the romantic Tannhäuser, the guilty medieval Tannhäuser (already reacted against in the *Morte Darthur*

²⁸² J. M. Clifton-Everest, *The Tragedy of Knighthood: Origins of the Tannhäuser Legend*, Medium Aevum monographs (Oxford: Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature, 1979). v-vi.

illustrations), and the generalized fantasies that literary ideals as well as pornography generate.”²⁸³ Beardsley’s version incorporates these influences and, at the same time, throws off the burden of representative fidelity by relocating the German *Minnesänger*’s story to France. Redressed as a French Chevalier, Tannhäuser searches for extreme experience. Beardsley represents this exploration by taking the narrative element of Tannhäuser most often set off-stage—the Hörselberg scene only obliquely referred to in the German texts and, in the Wagner rendition, only evoked in the rapturous overture—and making it the central episode. No longer a misguided pilgrim who errantly enters into the clutch of pagan Venus, the Chevalier enters a Venusberg that is an erotic, imaginative dream space encoded with the Decadent symbols of artificiality and the triumph of the aesthetic over the natural, its portal “waved drowsily with strange flowers, heavy with perfume, dripping with odours” (20).

Beardsley erases the moral component of the Tannhäuser legend and superimposes a compendium of the most sensuous and salient images of Decadence onto the journey. Here are the familiar curios of Decadence, their elaborateness increased through analogical description to ally unlikely subjects and objects for disorienting—yet illuminating—effect. There are pillars made from pale stone that ascend “like hymns in the praise of Venus,” upon which rest enormous moths with kaleidoscopic wings so opulent “they must have banqueted upon tapestries and royal stuffs” (20). The moths hold an unceasingly wild-eyed gaze, and in an image that exemplifies the stuff of nightmares, Tannhäuser sees that “the eyes of all the moths remained

²⁸³ Fletcher, “Inventions for the Left Hand: Beardsley in Verse and Prose,” 232. Fletcher writes that “[s]taying in Venus’s palace begins suspiciously to resemble a long weekend at a country house” (243). Which is to say that Fletcher, despite his rigorous tracking of the Tannhäuser source texts from the medieval German *Minnesänger* poems to the 1890s proliferation of variations, reads the juxtapositions in Beardsley’s text against formal predecessors like drawing room farces such as *The Importance of Being Earnest* or pastoral comedies.

open and were burning and bursting with a mesh of veins” (20). Beardsley’s updating of the myth reclaims the pagan vestiges of animism and imagines it as the unabashed worship of things, of bodies, and of experiences.

The plates meant to accompany the prose of *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* reflect



Figure 2 Aubrey Beardsley, *Venus between Terminal Gods*. 1895, india ink with white, 8 7/8 x 7. University of California, San Diego. Available from: ARTstor,

the recombinatory principles of the palimpsest by transforming old motifs into radically new styles. Regardless of the area that Beardsley worked in, whether literature, the illustration of posters and bookplates, or interior design, he drew from both historically rich and geographically wide terrain. Admixture is evident in the title page and the illustration of Venus intended for *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*. In the title page (fig. 2),

the architectural designs and the Roman font typography reveal the influence of Renaissance book design, specifically the *Hypnerotomachia*

Poliphili, while a portrait of Venus “reuses” the clothing of Renaissance portraiture.²⁸⁴ Beardsley himself emphasized the accretive process of both the illustrations and text of *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, an emphasis that manifests in the prominently contradicting layers and discontinuous shifts that resist a consistent narrative. As Calloway points out, the work was in constant flux, as “varying lists of pictures were invented and discarded.”²⁸⁵ Beardsley’s oeuvre announces its influences by making them visible and transformed. While Beardsley’s take on

²⁸⁴ Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley*: 33, 134.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 148.

Tannhäuser overlays a base of centuries of variations on the story, he most clearly responds to Richard Wagner's monumental opera, *Tannhäuser und der Sängerkrieg auf Wartburg*. In fact, in Beardsley's purple version, Tannhäuser reads the score of *Das Rheingold* in his bed, as if the outsized influence of Wagner can be summoned merely by looking at his sheet music. Wagner's rendition of *Tannhäuser* finds its inspiration, among other places, in Heinrich Heine's "Elementargeister," an 1837 essay published in *Der Salon III* that describes the Venus and the pagan gods in exile, driven out by Christianity but still in power in remote corners of the earth.²⁸⁶ In 1854, excerpts from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* opera became the first public performances of the composer's work in England.²⁸⁷ The enthusiasm for Wagner represented something of a schism in the musical world. There were a range of British critics who vacillated between resisting Wagner's "music of the future" and admiring its beauty.²⁸⁸ But equally vocal were the strident Wagnerites who felt a visceral connection to Wagner's project, as in the case of a rabid fan who

²⁸⁶ Dieter Borchmeyer, *Drama and the World of Richard Wagner* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003). 102.

²⁸⁷ Though it wasn't until 1870 that an entire Wagner opera—*Der fliegende Holländer*, in Italian, no less—was performed in London. Charles Osborne, *The Complete Operas of Richard Wagner*, 1st Da Capo Press ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993). 67.

²⁸⁸ Anne Dzamba Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1979). 19-37.

broke the nose of a Berlin critic who deigned to criticize *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.²⁸⁹ While Decadence seems to cultivate withdrawal and ennui rather than violent machismo (in this case, nineteenth-century Wagnerites might find their counterparts in the especially virile Futurists), we can see certain continuity in the ways in which the subculture of Wagner and the subculture of Decadence represent polarizing stances in social and cultural circles. Beardsley's depiction of Wagner's fan base in *The Wagnerites* picks up on the fervency of subculture, representing the devotees as a zealous bunch, their bodies and faces depicted almost entirely in black (fig. 3).



Figure 3 Aubrey Beardsley, *The Wagnerites*. 1894, india ink touched with white, 20.7 x 17.8 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

But if Beardsley and Wagner seem members of proportionately dangerous and provocative subcultures, they appear to be at the very opposite ends of ideas of artistic production, with Wagner's dedication to art as a powerful constituent of public life offering a very different vision than Beardsley's subversive play. Wagner's theorization of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* forwards an ideal of art that is aesthetically all encompassing and socially dynamic. For Wagner, opera offered an opportunity to recreate this "total work of art" in ways that Greek tragedy once managed, with its blend of dance, poetry, music and its position as a vital element of community. Wagner's work is committed to revitalizing the links between types of art, as well as spheres of public and private life. But

²⁸⁹ Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). 103.

despite the civic aims of the total work (a prospect that makes Wagner ripe for inculcation into the Nazi aesthetic program), the possibility that this sublime fusion is potentially addictive guided Nietzsche's diagnosis of Wagner as Decadent.²⁹⁰ The only way to avoid being pulled in was to approach the work through a combination of intellectual distance and visceral involvement, an "admixture of estrangement and empathy, of critical distance and an identificatory loss of self," as Juliet Koss reasons, which "has been central to the discourse of modern spectatorship."²⁹¹ While any observer of Beardsley's parodies certainly engages this modern mixture of distance and involvement, Beardsley himself seems to relish the divisive possibilities entailed in the subversions of Decadence, exploring the seams between aesthetic modes rather than aiming for totality. Although Beardsley's visual idiom might explore the formal disjunction, for example, between the ornate detailing of Pre-Raphaelite medievalism and the stark black and white blocking of Japanese prints, the subject of his paintings is often equally observant of the tension between politics and aesthetics. For instance, when Beardsley was asked to replace the Pierrot that was initially the cover image of *The Savoy* with something more serious (less French) for an English readership, he delivered a cover with the exact symbol of the English public—John Bull—with a tiny erect penis.²⁹² Beardsley's art aims to skewer and expose the public sphere rather than become a part of its reach. Instead of a total work of art, Beardsley offers a model for modern art that revolts against aesthetic unity and troubles the possibility of an easy symbiosis between politics and aesthetics.

²⁹⁰ Juliet Koss, *Modernism After Wagner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). 245.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

²⁹² Emily Allen, *Theater Figures: The Production of the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003). 199.

During Beardsley's lifetime Wagner was no longer considered a subversive figure, the majority of the listening public had accepted his work.²⁹³ As a result, Beardsley's reaction to Wagner—as both guiding force of the nineteenth-century obsession with Tannhäuser, as well as his own Chevalier's reading of *Das Rheingold*—simultaneously pays homage to the composer, pokes fun at his freshly mainstreamed subculture, and reclaims the figure of Tannhäuser for the underground. At the end of the nineteenth century George Bernard Shaw, himself working through the legacy of Wagner, remarked upon his enormous influence as “the literary musician par excellence” who formed a fervent discipleship in which “the musical future [seemed] destined to be an exclusively Wagnerian one.”²⁹⁴ In the first edition of *The Perfect Wagnerite* Shaw singles out *Tannhäuser* as “comparatively gawky” alongside Wagner's other work.²⁹⁵ In later editions he amended his description of the opera to a work from a “straining artificer.”²⁹⁶ Despite the relative unevenness in comparison to his magnum opus, the four opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Tannhäuser* still reveals Wagner's revolutionary ideas about the type of art necessary in modernity; in *Tannhäuser* he updates historical archetypes as to answer not only to the past, but offer an exemplum for the future.

Where Wagner transforms the folk legend of Tannhäuser into a Romantic hero, Beardsley further abstracts the figure. Where Wagner takes a regional figure and turns him into an international emblem, Beardsley turns him into a French *flâneur* who promenades through the dream world of subconscious desire. Beardsley's treatment not only takes Tannhäuser into the proto-surrealist dreamscape, but he also relishes the scatological and sexual confusion that is at

²⁹³ Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English*: 37.

²⁹⁴ Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring*, Time-Life Records Special Edition (New York: Time Incorporated, 1972). 103, 05.

²⁹⁵ Bernard Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite* (Chicago, New York: Herbert S. Stone & Company, 1898). 158.

²⁹⁶ Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite: A Commentary on the Nibelung's Ring*: 104.

the very core of the Venus and Tannhäuser theme. Instead of reinforcing the allegory of the fall of spiritual man into carnal pleasure and his eventual absolution, Beardsley turns the story of Tannhäuser into a palimpsest upon which he inscribes a guilt-free polysexual universe.

To be clear, Beardsley's erotic and seemingly parodic version of the Tannhäuser myth is in no way a debasement of Wagner's work. By many accounts, Beardsley was obsessed with Wagner.²⁹⁷ Not only does *The Wagnerites* represent one of his finest uses of black, but Beardsley displayed an interest in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* that extended beyond his own reinterpretation, writing Smithers from Paris, four months before his death, to suggest that their next collaboration should be an illustrated version of either Wagner's libretto or a translation of the German folk ballad of *Tannhäuser* into English.²⁹⁸ But despite Beardsley's reverence for Wagner, his treatment of the Tannhäuser figure shifts both moral and humanistic codes from a stable, hierarchical order to a decentralized field. As Shaw observed, "In the old fashioned orders of creation, the supernatural personages are invariably conceived as greater than man, for good or evil. In the modern humanitarian order as adopted by Wagner, Man is the highest."²⁹⁹ While Wagner's vision offers a version of modernity that is guided by a terrifying (and serious) clarity, Beardsley views modernity as playful uncertainty. Beardsley's *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* converts the Wagnerian dynamics of the super-human figure, where characters become archetypes, into an exploration through which the elements that comprise identity—from our names to our sexuality to our aesthetic preference—become adaptable, defying the romantic ideal of the monolithic hero or heroine.

²⁹⁷ Chris Snodgrass considers that "[i]t is quite possible that Beardsley idolized Wagner, in part, for the very quality for which Nietzsche castigated him in *The Case against Wagner* (1888)—a romantic yearning for salvation. Like Wagner, Beardsley perceived the world as a stage for guilt, punishment, and potential—but by no means certain—redemption. Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque*, 259.

²⁹⁸ Beardsley et al., *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*: 385.

²⁹⁹ Shaw, *The Perfect Wagnerite*: 21.

For Emma Sutton, Beardsley's transformation of *Tannhäuser* "undercuts the scale and metaphysical scope of the opera, transports Wagner's Romantic conflict between sacred and profane love into an amoral 'pornotopia,' supplants Wagner's Teutonic medieval setting with the neo-classical and rococo, and transforms his dramatic spectacle into a diminutive, boudoir novella."³⁰⁰ Sutton points out that while the utopian Venusberg lies outside of economic transaction, Beardsley's depiction is rife with the excessive dandified consumption of luxury goods (133-134). By reading Beardsley's treatment as outright parody of Wagner's opera, Sutton interprets the Chevalier as "a distinctly *fin de siècle* domestic consumer" (141). Beardsley at once critiques and participates in the drive of capitalism, his depiction of the Venusberg both "a fantastic, anti realist environment" and "punctuated with references to the details of *fin de siècle* international consumerism, acknowledging the industrial, economic, and gendered factors informing his fantasy of limitless consumption" (141). Ultimately, Sutton's analysis points to the "crucial distinctions between consumerism and connoisseurship, exposing the commercial socio-economic factors on which aestheticism was predicated" (142).

But, to my mind, Beardsley focuses less on the commercial aspect of objects, than the possibility that those objects have subjective identities that we normally attribute solely to humans. Beardsley not only disengages from the exploration of the link between heroism and renunciation that informs prior renditions of *Tannhäuser*, but does away with the idea that *Tannhäuser* is an exclusively human story. What might initially be construed as the traditional elements of setting are given a mercurial subjectivity, and the surfeit of luxury goods that may typically serve as props begin to reproduce and fill space, as if they were subjects that could populate and observe. The life of objects takes on an essential function in Beardsley's work: they

³⁰⁰ Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s*: 132. Hereafter citations are given in the text within parentheses.

are given eyes, hooves, and a sort of sentience that makes them both desirable and dangerous. They function as the ultimate surveillance with their mutant sensory organs. The older versions of the story, which are grounded by a human-centered trajectory, are crucially erased by a subjectivity that is both interspecial and inter-object. Beardsley introduces a myriad of shifty identities and continually adjusting focal points that unseat Tannhäuser as the primary figure of transformation: everything and everyone is constantly changing in Beardsley's Hörselberg. When we first see Venus at her toilette, in the second chapter, she is surrounded by a coterie of attendants and admirers in stages of flux. Doves walk about the room serving Venus like a human cadre of attendants (25-26). Mischievous dwarves and "doubtful creatures" misbehave in the corner (26). The revolting Mrs. Marsuple—obese and ornately bedecked, with a voice "full of salacious unction" and "a corrupt skin, large horny eyes, a parrot's nose, a small loose mouth, great flaccid cheeks, and chin after chin"—is known by over a hundred names, of which the following only forms a partial list: "Dar Toad, Pretty Poll, Cock Robin, Dearest Lip, Touchstone, Little Cough Drop, Bijou, Buttons, Dear Heart, Dick-Dock, Mrs. Manly, Little Nipper, Cochonde-lait, Naughty-naughty, Blessed Thing, and Trump" (80). Mrs. Marsuple's surfeit of names and changeable gender identity renders her/him a protean figure of the dream, who shifts characteristics and critical identifiers, reintroducing her/him consistently anew.

The introduction to Mrs. Marsuple, thought to be modeled after Oscar Wilde and known as Priapusa in the expurgated *Under the Hill* of *The Yellow Book*, inaugurates the play of interconnectedness and excess that allies the Decadent dream to its surrealist inheritors. This is not just dream life as an alternative or corollary, but one that augments the excess of capital materialism and its insistence on copies and reproductions with a corresponding enthusiasm for superfluity that embraces the possibilities of mutation and difference over mere duplication. The

static objects of the commercial landscape are claimed by the subterranean and subconscious world of the Hörselberg, which allows them to become sites of transfigured consciousness. *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* introduces changeable objects as mercurial as human subjects. Beardsley employs the structuring narrative of the Tannhäuser myth, but does so in order to warp its tenets. No rules govern Beardsley's Venusberg. The categorical boundaries we put up to specify species individuation, discrete geographic space, and historical progression give way to fluctuating categories, radically transforming the archetypal physical and spiritual journey of the *Tannhäuser* mythology into an unmapped territory that inverts conventions.

Palimpsest & Dream

The previous two sections have grappled with the procedures that Beardsley employs to modernize the palimpsest. But how do we understand the workings of the metaphorical palimpsest? For Thomas De Quincey, the human brain is a palimpsest, continually tracing the "reiterated successions" of impressions as we move through the world: "What else than a natural and mighty palimpsest is the human brain? Such a palimpsest, oh reader! Is yours. Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before."³⁰¹ De Quincey implicitly makes the arrival of new experiences contingent upon the amendment of prior ones. For Sarah Dillon, De Quincey's work on the palimpsest is the inauguration of the conceptual palimpsest representing "the mind as a textual structure actively haunted by its encrypted traces."³⁰² De Quincey, writes Dillon,

³⁰¹ Thomas De Quincey, "Suspiria De Profundis: Being a Sequel to the Confessions of an English Opium-Eater," in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Grevel Lindop, *Oxford world's classics* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 144.

³⁰² Sarah Dillon, "Reinscribing De Quincey's Palimpsest: The Significance of the Palimpsest in Contemporary

understands the theoretical palimpsest as a fantasy involved in the resurrection of these traces.³⁰³ If De Quincey conceives of the palimpsest as part of the ongoing process of loss and retrieval—or, perhaps more accurately, a partial recovery of the embedded meaning that initially appears lost or overwritten—the “machinery for dreaming” provokes an equivalent process that “throws dark reflections from eternities below all life upon the mirrors of the sleeping mind.”³⁰⁴ For De Quincey, loss and recovery are articulated in mirrored figurations of the palimpsest and dream. As the nineteenth century ends, the conceptual palimpsest articulated by De Quincey and implicitly connected to the dream is made explicit in James Sully’s 1893 “The Dream as Revelation” (which Sigmund Freud will later cite in *The Interpretation of Dreams*): “like some palimpsest, the dream discloses beneath its worthless surface-characters traces of an old and precious communication.”³⁰⁵ In aesthetic terms, we could say that those most aggressive miners of modern dream life, the surrealists, move between these two figures of the subconscious and unconscious mind, the palimpsest and the dream.

Beardsley’s *Tannhäuser* parallels this conceptual model of the mind as palimpsestuous, in which new sensation is constantly haunted by the dueling drives of the palimpsest: to both erase the “layers” and reveal their traces. Beardsley’s representation of the Hörselberg as dream space projects the conceptual palimpsest, with its processes of erasure and recovery, onto the whole of the novel. The palimpsestuous drive of dream logic, with its juxtapositions between revelation and obfuscation, reveals the dueling drives of the mind, in which meaning is simultaneously

Literary and Cultural Studies," *Textual Practice* 19, no. 3 (2005): 248.

³⁰³ Ibid., 252.

³⁰⁴ In André Breton’s collection of essays, *Free Rein: La clé des champs*, he locates the root of surrealism’s investigations into dreaming within De Quincey’s essay. André Breton, Michel Parmentier, and Jacqueline d’Amboise, *Free Rein: La clé des champs*, French Modernist Library (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). 83. Breton exhorts his readers to follow De Quincey’s advice to remove themselves from the “too intense life of the social instincts” and recover the “power of Dreaming.” De Quincey, “Suspiria De Profundis: Being a Sequel to the Confessions of an English Opium-Eater,” 88.

³⁰⁵ James Sully, “The Dream as Revelation,” *The Fortnightly Review* 59, no. 315 (1893): 364.

made and unmade, buried and recovered. These palimpsestuous procedures are present in the very setting of the Hörselberg. While the bodies that inhabit the Hill of Venus, like its living objects, constantly shift, there is the increasing sense that the breakdown between categories is a part of an alternative world ruled by anarchical dream logic. Just as the individual transformations that occur in Beardsley's *Tannhäuser* tweak normalized categories so that they become extravagant aberrations, the larger social upheavals are revealed as taking place in familiar scenarios. The temporal construct of Beardsley's world is "taper-time." If previous incarnations of Tannhäuser are bound to the idea of time as progression to which the moral journey of Tannhäuser is bound, taper-time takes us out of this progressive mode. Taper-time is an emblem of experience detached from progression, "when the tired earth puts on its cloaks of mists and shadows, when the enchanted woods are stirred with light footfalls and slender voices of the fairies, when all the air is full of delicate influences, and even the beaux, seated at their dressing tables, dream a little" (75). There could hardly be a more insistent cue that Beardsley's text commences with the entrance into dream space. Nighttime and dreams are not an escape from existence, but the confrontation with it. In this sense, the Decadent invocation of dream is not unlike the surrealist one that will emerge decades later.

The figure of Tannhäuser comes to represent the conceptual palimpsest in which the eruption of new experiences constantly overwrites prior ones. Prior to Beardsley's rendition, paramount to the Tannhäuser mythology was the hero's embrace of stable moral life over the disorienting pleasures of the body. After all, even Wagner's version concludes with Tannhäuser renouncing Venus to a chorus of hallelujahs. Tannhäuser, in other words, returns to the world of rules and consequences, swapping the intoxicating promises of Venusian pleasure for the sobering pardon of the papal court. These versions ultimately reject the unstable continuum that

Beardsley's Tannhäuser exemplifies. For Chevalier Tannhäuser, the work of self discovery actually happens while plumbing the same murky terrain De Quincey describes in his image of the palimpsestuous brain and the exploration of dream life: it is not stability that provokes revelation, but rather the "buried" layers of experience that we attempt to recover or the embrace of the "dark reflections" of eternities in the dreaming mind. Rather than upholding conventions that surround categories such as past and present or conscious action and subconscious desire, Beardsley represents Tannhäuser as a site where all of these categories collide and mix in fantastically disorienting fashion. Instead of renouncing the destructive propensities of unobstructed pleasure, Beardsley embraces those destructions. Beardsley's palimpsest razes the Christian Tannhäuser's fundamental anxieties surrounding the physical body, replacing him with a pagan figure who embraces the desiring body and its protean physical and psychological state rather than condemning them as emotionally and ethically unstable. The penitent body becomes a palimpsest overwritten with profane curiosity.³⁰⁶

The dream space of the Hörselberg allows the internal concept of the palimpsestuous mind to be realized in the shifting bodies of Tannhäuser and the citizens of the Hörselberg. The abilities of their bodies constantly go beyond the realm of normal human function. Beardsley synoptically illustrates this in his description of a clamorous party at Venus's, where the "fire of raillery" of dinnertime gossip disintegrates into increasingly nonsensical utterance and, finally, into an interspecial orgy (41). At Venus's table, the gossip serves as a prelude (or substitute) to

³⁰⁶ The amendments that *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* undergoes in Beardsley's lifetime, as well as the continued preference for the more contained and less-explicit *Under the Hill*, reflects the apprehension about what literature can depict as well as incite. Allison Pease points out that the "temptation" of masturbation was certainly the "feared outcome" of pornography, but even more dangerous was the actual artistic representation of it. Allison Pease, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and The Aesthetics of Obscenity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). 100. Beardsley represents both the text as physical stimulation while also depicting masturbation on the page (100). To this extent, not only does Beardsley's work actively destroy the serious religious quest of Tannhäuser and reinscribe it with a parodic Decadence, but *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* becomes, itself, an A-text which needs to be categorized through genre classification (the literature of "pornotopia") or erased by editorial and censorial means.

more primal engagements, as the “bustling and more personal” conversation moves to “harsh and shrill and clamant” primal yelps that become “blurred and inarticulate” (41-42). As language fails, “[b]ad sentences were helped out by worse gestures.” Language erodes as communication is replaced with clamor and gesture. When linguistic communication becomes indecipherable noise, bodies take over:

Basalissa and Lysistrata tried to pronounce each other’s names, and became very affectionate in the attempt; and Tala, the tragedian, robed in roomy purple and wearing plume and buskin, rose to his feet and with swaying gestures began to recite one of his favourite parts. He got no further than the first line, but repeated it again and again, with fresh accents and intonations each time, and was only silenced by the approach of the asparagus that was being served by satyrs dressed in white muslin. (42)

Copulation and satiation are configured as alternative forms of communication—physical communion as the replacement for addressing each other by proper names. The reversion to the physical occurs throughout the meal, as members of the dinner party move from partner to partner, from object to object, in pursuit of pleasure:

Sophie became very intimate with an empty champagne bottle, swore it had made her enceinte, and ended by having a mock accouchement on the top of the table; and Belamour pretended to be a dog, and pranced from couch to couch on all fours, biting and barking and licking. Mellefont crept about dropping love philtres into glasses. Juventus and Ruella stripped and put on each other’s things, Spelto offered a prize for who ever should come first, and Spelto won it! Tannhäuser, just a little grisé, lay down on the cushions and let Julia do whatever she liked.

This series of jumps from masturbation and bestial fantasy to drugging and cross-dressing, and, finally, Tannhäuser's absolute submission to the scene, emphasizes the dream state ruling Venusberg's underground that not only dictates the action, but also enacts the obliteration of rational narrative progression. Beardsley swaps the kernel of the Tannhäuser narrative as a journey to faith—a progressive structure—for an accretive style that disorients.³⁰⁷

Instead of simply inverting the standard treatment of the Tannhäuser myth—the reaction of the prosaic world to the unseen, yet threatening intimations of a vital pagan underworld—and exempting the Hörselberg from references to the social and political issues of the material world, Beardsley incorporates contemporaneous society into the dreamlike world of the mound of Venus. When Venus and her cohort attend a ballet, the conductor of the orchestra, Titurel de Schentefleur, is imbricated with characteristics of Wagner and Beardsley, himself, while the name seems to be a reference to *Parsifal*.³⁰⁸ Titurel's Wagnerian appetite makes him an “insidious” figure as he works to arouse the subconscious mind; his ballet effectually serves as a dream within a dream, and we leave the Venusian underworld to enter “a scene of rare beauty, a remote Arcadian valley, a delicious scrap of Tempe” (48). Even the subjects of the ballet duplicate the play between sleeping and waking as the dance begins with an image of the rising sun figured “like the prince in Sleeping Beauty, [who] woke all the earth with his lips.” This ballet interlude serves to only reinforce the ever-increasing levels of dream logic that erases the moment before.

³⁰⁷ What remains, however, is Beardsley's narrative awareness and his provocation to the censors. Just as the orgiastic scene seems apt to descend into even stranger territory: “I wish I could be allowed to tell you what occurred round table 15 just at this moment. It would amuse you very much, and would give you a capital idea of the habits of Venus's retinue. Indeed, for deplorable reasons, by far the greater part of what was said and done at this supper must remain unrecorded and even unsuggested” (42-43).

³⁰⁸ Sessa, *Richard Wagner and the English*: 101. Beardsley occasionally referred to himself as “the solitaire,” the nickname he gave a virginal character, the orchestra conductor Titurel de Schentefleur, in *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*. Sturgis, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography*: 217.

The principle that presides over Beardsley's Venusberg, allowing the conversion of object to subjects, and the conversion of the single subject into multiple identities, is the flexible limits of the dream. Beardsley reclaims Tannhäuser from versions of the story that insist on the end of the erotic dream and his rejection of the unpredictable Hörselberg. For Beardsley, Tannhäuser's heroism lies in his acceptance of the palimpsestuous state of dreams and its inconsistencies as a part of embodied experience, rather than only an incorporeal manifestation of the subconscious. The alogism of Tannhäuser's dream is not mere fantasy but, in the spirit of De Quincey's figurations of the dream and palimpsest as central to the processes of knowledge, a constant working through the strata of unexpected experiences and perception.³⁰⁹ Beardsley densely layers levels of dream space by including dreaming and waking within the controlling dream of the Hörselberg, continuously erasing or amending prior scenes. For instance, when Tannhäuser appraises Venus's bedroom late in the evening, the room is so filled with inanimate decorations that somehow appear animate, that the space seems filled with hostile onlookers surveilling the scene. But when he wakes from his night's dreams into the dream of Venus's bedroom he sees with new eyes, and the details of the room, not quite grasped the prior night, "are revealed with all the charm of surprise when we open our eyes the next morning" (63). Beardsley's contribution to the myth of Tannhäuser is to move its trajectory from the journey of moral awakening towards an odyssey that travels into increasing depths of subconscious and unconscious desires. Whether this is realized by the wandering eye, the wandering mind, or the wandering text—it results in a contiguous mind that uncovers the layers of connection rather

³⁰⁹ Beardsley compares the complexity of the Hörselberg's Venus to the museum's counterpart: "Those who have only seen Venus at the Louvre or the British Museum, at Florence, at Naples, or at Rome, can not have the faintest idea how sweet and enticing and gracious, how really exquisitely she looked lying with Tannhäuser upon rose silk in that pretty boudoir" (58). The stable art object cannot quite compete with changeable fields of the perception and imagination.

than the depiction of discrete entities.³¹⁰ Beardsley is not only interested in text as a material object, but as conveyer of hidden and secreted meaning. To work with a source text is not only to amend its most visible elements, but to also uncover the subtext. This type of double production—both covering and exposing—is present in all of Beardsley’s work, but to different degrees. For Jane Desmarais, the expurgated version of *Under the Hill* functions akin to the “concealment of genitalia in the pattern and ornamentation of his drawings—accessible only to those who possessed the means to decode it,” but *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* allows for a more involved process of uncovering in which the “expert reader, familiar with Delvau’s glossary of porn, the *Dictionnaire érotique moderne* (1864)—could engage in an extensive unveiling of meaning and exposing of metaphor.”³¹¹ Desmarais delineates between the visual coding of a single subversive image and the matrix of references that, once uncovered, reveals an extensive subtext. Beardsley’s fantasies consider the results of aesthetic and social destruction in commensurate ways to Decadent poets, and comes to terms with the fact that chaos makes a ruse out of order as *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* works to uncover subconscious and unconscious responses, processes that will later become the primary investigations of expressionism and surrealism.

In Beardsley’s palimpsestic mode, traces of the original myth that remain emphasize the extent of their transformations into unstable physical and psychological entities. In order to counter critical appraisals of Beardsley’s *Tannhäuser* as a pornotopia that is, at best, one of his most minor works far inferior to his greatest illustrations, one can argue that *The Story of Venus*

³¹⁰ In a section present in *Under the Hill*, but absent from *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, Tannhäuser reads *Das Rheingold* in bed and particularly admires the cacophony of sound and image in the third tableau that “make it the least reposeful, most troubled and confusing thing in the whole range of opera.” The Chevalier embraces the “the extravagant monstrous poetry, the heated melodrama, and the splendid agitation of it all,” preferring a disclosure of unsettled layers to a single stable field.

³¹¹ Jane Desmarais, *The Beardsley Industry: The Critical Reception in England and France, 1893-1914* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 1998). 47.

and *Tannhäuser*'s claim to greatness is its playfully subversion of desires and bodies. But *Tannhäuser*'s seditious sensibility is not merely isolated textual play—it participates in the proto-modernist engagement of Decadence with art as involved in processes of destruction. In *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, the palimpsest involves a continual process of erasure and revelation. Though this thematically and formally reveals itself through the unsettling of stable boundaries and logical progression, materially it plays out in the erasure of earlier forms of the story. While the old text is overlaid with new conceptions of the archetypal spiritual path of Tannhäuser, those new concepts do not just reorient the boundaries or the path of the journey by articulating a progressive number of stages; instead, Beardsley's text is dependent on the multiple levels of indeterminacy that are realized by the text proper and the publication history surrounding it. While our own archive fever may push us to search for proof of an authoritative ending, it suffices to go back to Symons's judgment that the conceptual function of *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* sustains itself on permutation and the impossibility of finishing.

The Chevalier Tannhäuser embodies the human palimpsest upon which subconscious observations and desires are constantly revised. In the penultimate chapter, Tannhäuser drives out to the borderlands of the Venusberg and begins to daydream: "The Chevalier fell into a strange mood, as he looked at the lake. It seemed to him that the thing would speak, reveal some curious secret, say some beautiful word, if he should dare wrinkle its pale face with a pebble" (78). The lake becomes yet another waypoint, an entrance to a different level of consciousness and the continual variations on the self and experience as Tannhäuser wonders, "what might be upon the other side; other gardens, other gods?" While Tannhäuser considers the possibility of forms that the lake might hold, the water rises and he imagines it as an overpowering force with the potential to flood and engulf all that surrounds it. But then, he considers, "Perhaps the lake

was only painted, after all. He had seen things like it at the theatre. Anyway, it was a wonderful lake, a beautiful lake, and he would love to bathe in it, but he was sure he would be drowned if he did” (79). Tannhäuser identifies the continually changing world not only with rich variation, but also with an accompanying destruction that is envisioned as a submerging force. In this sense, Tannhäuser both participates in and reflects the anxieties surrounding the erasure of the delimited world and the emergence of multiplicity, echoing De Quincey’s lament over the continual processes of burial and attempted retrieval of the palimpsestuous mind and anticipating the surfeit of possibilities in modernism.

Through Beardsley’s formal and thematic erasure of the source text, to the expurgations of the more erotic material, to the multiple editions that contend for primacy, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* offers us a compacted example of how the processes of erasure work via aesthetic, social, and historical forces. As an ideological project, Beardsley’s liberation of Tannhäuser from objective reality in order to explore desire and the fluidity of self looks very much like the aims that Andre Breton sets out in his first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924): “Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the absolute power of the dream, in the disinterested play of thought.”³¹² Tannhäuser’s true path, in other words, is not the conscious world of papal blessings and pure materiality, but the unconscious world, free of constraint, in which both desire and knowledge transform individuals without ever offering stability (or clarity). The true text is not the authoritative masterpiece, but the unstable text that constantly undergoes the processes of accretion and breakdown and reemergence—that is, in fact, a living text.

³¹² André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972). 26.

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