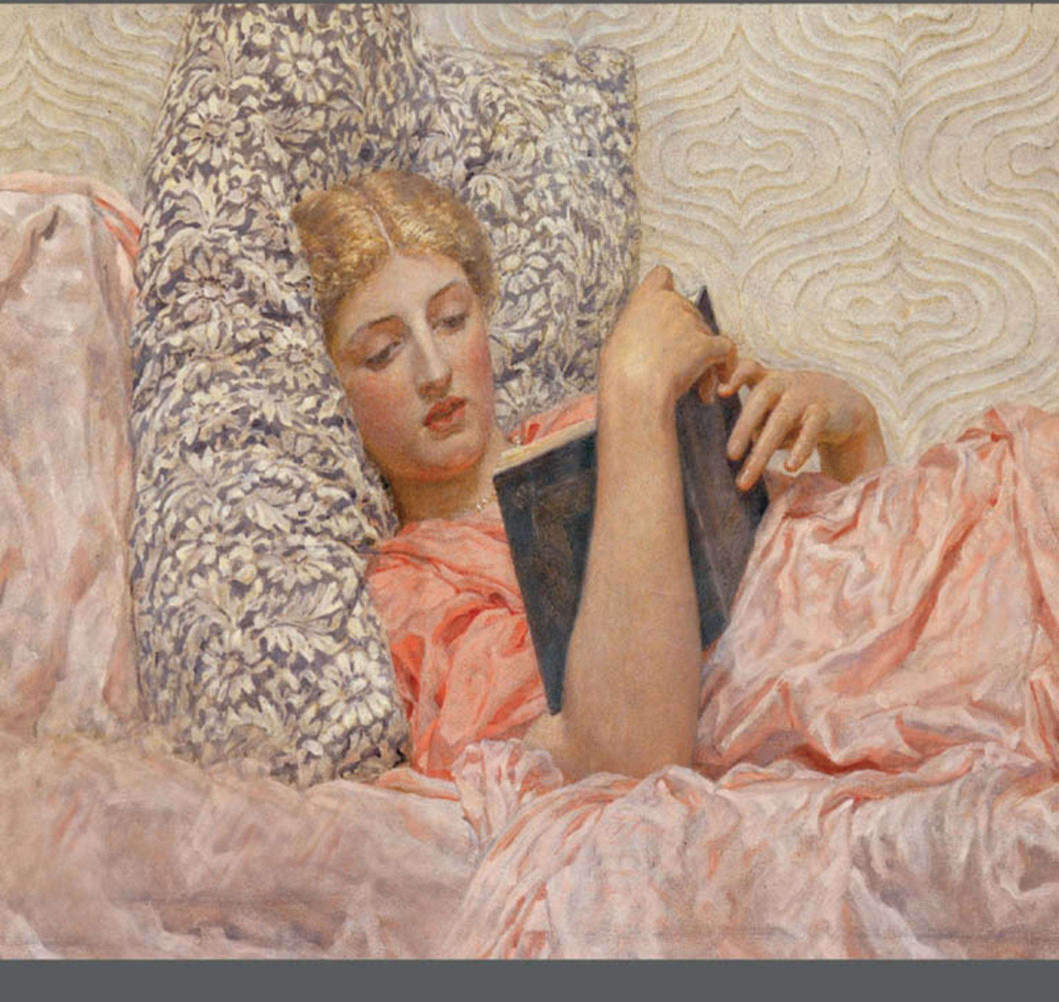
Decadent Poetics

Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle

Edited by Jason David Hall and Alex Murray



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Edited by

Jason David Hall
Lecturer in English, University of Exeter, UK

and

Alex Murray
Lecturer in English, University of Exeter, UK

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Acknowledgments

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Preface

The authors whose work is collected in *Decadent Poetics*—leading scholars working in the field of Victorian studies—share an interest in matters of form: whether it be poetic or narrative form, rhetorical or oratorical form, the (dis)embodied forms of representation, or the cultural and material forms with whose tincture decadence is readily (and redolently) associated. Invigorated by shifts in Victorian studies over the past ten years, this collection interrogates previously held assumptions about the nature of decadent form. The term 'poetics' as it is used here conveys not just attention to prosody and metre, though it certainly does not neglect these topics, but also the multiplicity of forms of cultural production that exert a significant pressure at the *fin de siècle*. From perfume to the post-human, theatre to attenuated textualities, these essays explore the ways in which the literary intersects with its cognates and others in the period. The range of writers studied here moves from those who now constitute a decadent canon—Oscar Wilde, Michael Field, Charles Baudelaire, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Ernest Dowson—to those whose work still inhabits the margins of scholarly treatments of decadence: A. E. Housman, Arthur Machen, Hubert Crackanthorpe, Graham R. Tomson (Rosamund Marriott Watson). In mapping an expanded definition of both decadence and its poetics, the chapters below showcase some of the most important methodological shifts in literary studies in recent years, including historical poetics, gender and sexuality studies, material cultures and post-humanism. Through these lenses a 'decadence' emerges that—in contradistinction to the nineteenth-century models of decline and atomization—seeks revitalized poetic and cultural forms in its challenge to the over-blown narratives, both literary and social, of the Victorian period.

Joseph Bristow, whose scholarship has been instrumental in defining the poetics of the *fin de siècle*, not to mention mapping the field of Victorian poetry and poetics more generally, opens the volume and sets its tone with his chapter 'How Decadent Poems Die'. Taking us right back to the classical inheritance of decadence, Bristow acknowledges the importance of work such as Linda Dowling's on decadence and philology, offering to advance the 'dialogue' between poets of the *fin de siècle* and their Greco-Roman interlocutors. By teasing out fresh associations among late-century lyric poets and between them and the classical world, Bristow brings to view a more diverse collection of decadent poets, as well as their modes of 'passionate insubordination' and their perspectives on mortality. The focus of Chapter 1 is the poetry of 'Michael Field', Ernest Dowson and A. E. Housman, that decadent outlier. Their engagements with Horace and Sappho, among others, informs particular (and particularly decadent) renderings of 'powerful lyric deaths'. Among the more poignant lyrical expressions of death is Housman's 1896 collection *A Shropshire Lad*, which exhibits both thematic and topical connections to the ostensibly more politically (and sexually) dissident 'decadent' culture of the 1890s.

Chapter 2, by Meredith Martin, asks 'Did a Decadent Metre Exist at the *Fin de Siècle*?' Like Bristow, Martin reminds us how important the philological contexts for reading decadent poetry are. Since Dowling's *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* came out in 1986, however, the nature and methodological treatment of linguistic and prosodic matters has been refocused and augmented by the emergence of a flourishing field of inquiry—historical prosody—that Martin herself has been instrumental in helping to consolidate. Her chapter takes as its focus the 'cross-channel circulation of poetic forms', specifically the alexandrine line, and the role they play in relation to the definition of a national 'English metre' at the end of the century. Assessing the syllable and foot components of the long line—a poetics of partial and depleted lines is not the only mode of literary decadence—Martin provides not only detailed poetic anatomies that will delight and provoke close readers but also a historically aware intervention in the body of decadent politics that situates poets such as Arthur Symons, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Lionel Johnson, and Ernest Dowson in relation to some of the orthodox prosodical debates of the late Victorian period. The assertion of a decadent poetics, as readers will see, does not stand aloof from the intersections of metre and nationalism that Martin explicates so compellingly in her recent book *The Rise and Fall of Meter* (2012).

Poetic form remains the focus of Chapter 3. Marion Thain, whose work on the poetic collaborations of Michael Field has enriched the field in the past decade, also looks to Anglo-French connections in her examination of English 'Parnassian' poetry. In another scrutinizing of the decadent lyric—this time in relation to the manufactures and commodities of Victorian modernity—Thain's chapter complicates readings that would set up Parnassianism 'as a retreat to a domain of formal order in a chaotic world'. In a re-assessment of the Parnassian forms of the 1870s and 80s, she reads an 'energising' give-and-take in which poetic form becomes a site for the tension between a 'gem-like' aestheticism and a 'burgeoning materialism'. So-called strict forms—rondeaux, ballades, villanelles, and others—and the collections in which they are found (the focus is Gleeson White's 1887 *Ballads and Rondeaus, Chants Royal, Sestinas, Villanelles, &c*) can be assessed productively, Thain argues, by acknowledging and pursuing the poetics of objects and technologies that proliferated in a 'period of mass commodification'. The shape of goods and their circulation, the rhythms and repetitions of machines—these form part of the late-century lyric's history that critics of decadence are only just beginning to explore in detail.

Nick Freeman, in Chapter 4, offers a complement to Thain's interrogation of the precious object in a world of consumer excess: in this case, the carefully selected sound-image becomes a counterpoint to the familiar equation of decadent poetics with luxury, ornamentation, and protracted 'eloquence'. Setting out the contours of a poetics of attenuation—whose hallmarks are 'limitation, restriction, and repetition'—Freeman, whose own scholarship on the year 1895 has demonstrated how fruitful a refinement of focus can be for the subject of decadence and its *fin-de-siècle* affiliates, brings his keen eye for detail to the lexical peculiarities of Arthur Symons and Ernest Dowson. Encompassing the more and less stylistically artificial and 'bizarre' effects of aestheticism and its decadent derivations, this chapter cuts across poems to reveal, in cross-section, some of the working habits and self-parodies of poets who frequently broadcast their idiosyncrasies loudest in their writing's (and annotating's) subtlest strokes. Freeman's good-humoured and semantically sensitive chapter—not to mention his great good fortune in second-hand bookshops—provides us with a new take on Paul Bourget's well-known formulation of decadence as a subordination of the whole to the part. This chapter rounds out the collection's scrutiny of the decadent lyric.

In Chapter 5, by Matthew Potolsky, *Decadent Poetics* shifts gears, moving from 'poetics' in the strict sense to the wider field of linguistic form, narrative fiction, and drama. Examining the epideictic mode—the rhetorical form devoted to 'praise and blame'—in decadent writing, Potolsky outlines a decadent poetics that does not confine itself to negation but rather delights and excels at affirmation. Looking first at Baudelaire and Swinburne, who 'together set the pattern for the decadent rhetoric of appreciation', the chapter shows how expressions of admiration and affiliation go beyond the strictly personal and towards the communal and civic. Here we find another reconsideration of the part/whole relationship that other chapters in the collection work to complicate. Reading epideictic exchanges across poetry, fiction, and drama, Potolsky identifies a number of discrete topoi for this mode of praise and examines the 'educational and formative' imperative that characterizes much of this writing. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Wilde's 1893 play *Salomé*, in which epideictic figures not as an incidental device but as a 'prime mover' of 'plot'. Here, again, the focus on modes of expression is indicative of a means of engaging with—and critiquing—notions of community.

Ana Parejo Vadillo, in Chapter 6, extends the collection's treatment of dramatic poetics with an examination of the historical poetic dramas of Algernon Charles Swinburne and Michael Field. Looking to the English Renaissance, these exponents of the verse drama—that controversial form that would frustrate a later generation of writers and critics, including T. S. Eliot, and, consequently, suffer from neglect—'found an English heroine and a *femme fatale*' in Mary Stuart. Charting this largely forgotten, yet truly vibrant, 'aesthetic genre', Parejo Vadillo, whose writing on *fin-de-siècle* women poets and collaborations with Marion Thain on the poetry of Michael Field have helped to shape the field, fills in an important lacuna in scholarship on decadence. At the centre of the chapter are detailed analyses of Swinburne's dramatic trilogy—*Chasterlard* (1857), *Bothwell* (1874), and *Mary Stuart* (1881)—and Michael Field's *The Tragic Mary* (1890), plays that not only presented critiques of Victorian gender ideology but also invigorated nineteenth-century poetics with an infusion of continental aesthetic theory. Behind the verse dramas of Swinburne and Michael Field, as Parejo Vadillo shows, is the opera criticism of Richard Wagner. His declaration, in his 1849 *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Art-Work of the Future*), that drama was the fulfillment of lyric—'its later, more conscious, loftiest completion'—is an important catalyst for English poetics in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In the seventh chapter, Ellis Hanson extends the collection's scrutiny of decadent drama. This detailed and formally challenging reading of Wilde's tragedy *Salomé* builds on the author's important contribution, in his 1997 book *Decadence and Catholicism*, to our understanding of 'art, eroticism, and religion' as decadent 'discourses'—in terms that are at once ideological, rhetorical, and symbolic. Complementing Parejo Vadillo's examination of closet drama and Potolsky's assessment of the rhetoric of Wilde's play, as well as extending the book's interrogation of the minute forms and figures of speech that constitute decadent praxis, Hanson's chapter thinks through the heuristic dynamics of the symbol and 'related tropes, such as metaphor, simile, metonymy, and synecdoche, as well as denotation or literalism', to elaborate a poetics of decadent and symbolist drama through the lens of Lacan's psychoanalytic structuralism. Attending closely to the form of simile—'the ideal trope for erotic displacement and deferral'—and its relationship with metaphor in *Salomé*, Hanson identifies, among other things, an 'intimacy between a word and its substitute' that figures in the representational matrix of the play's treatment of the body. As illuminating as the insights into Wilde's text is Hanson's methodological formulation for exploring it: what he terms a 'queer formalism, or an erotics of style'. This chapter provides an intervention in scholarship on literary decadence not least because it is productively engaged at once with the big picture of sexual politics and the local functions of figurative language. Hanson's ability to draw both aspects of decadence into dialogue has the potential to provoke a refocusing of scholarly practice in the field.

In Chapter 8 William Greenslade, whose *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880–1940* (1994) remains a standard work in the field, brings the collection back to fiction—short fiction in particular—with an examination of a lesser-known author, Hubert Crackanthorpe. Taking as his starting point the linkages and overlaps, in both literary works and critiques of them, between decadence and naturalism, both of which are renowned (and, for some contemporary readers, notorious) for their treatment of detail, Greenslade reads the late-century inheritors of 'Zolaism', where putatively 'scientific procedures' of observation and description teased out the longstanding preoccupation with the exchange between the literatures of fact and imagination. With its interest in depicting spaces familiar to the 'new' journalist or the medical practitioner, the 'small field' of naturalistic detail presented a limit-case for fiction that some, though not all, writers associated with literary decadence embraced, but not without reservations. Among the 'most interesting' writers to experiment with 'disagreeable details' was Crackanthorpe, whose 1893 collection of short stories, *Wreckage*, is characterized by bleakness and abjection, but whose 'qualified naturalism' is mediated by an aestheticized colouring. Turning to Crackanthorpe's later collection, *Vignettes* from 1896, Greenslade urges us to see a careful and idiosyncratic 'navigation' between decadent and naturalist styles that is bound up with the specificities of the short story as literary form.

Dennis Denisoff's chapter, the ninth and penultimate in the collection, brings the investigation of decadent form—as a cultural as well as a literary phenomenon—into contact with the boundaries of the human. Starting with Arthur Symons's longing for a 'disembodied voice' as the ultimate refinement of decadent subjectivity, Denisoff asks what a poetics of disembodiment means for decadent prose. The answer, he suggests, involves 'exploring the boundaries of the self, the human, and the other-worldly' in the context of other, late-Victorian interrogations of the human and selfhood—namely those obtaining to the occult science of spiritualism. In the writing of Marie Corelli, George Du Maurier, and Arthur Machen, we can see affiliations between decadent aesthetics and more widespread practices and ideas associated with a burgeoning popular interest in ghosts and related spectral subjects. In the rich exchanges between these interweaving yet distinct discursive economies, there are 'non-normative modes of communication'—from the automatic to the astral—that do not necessarily take 'fixed, conventional conceptions of being' as a given. Decadent form, as Denisoff demonstrates, owes much to this *fin-de-siècle* intertext.

Decadent Poetics concludes with a heady examination of material form—a real *tour de force* of olfactory decadence that urges us to be mindful of the extent to which a 'poetics' of the period's cultural phenomenology has been neglected in existing critical accounts. Not only ghosts left a material residue that complicated their otherwise disembodied state. The culture of mid- and late-Victorian perfume, as well, was a mixing of refined essences and materially distinctive substances. Opening a fresh (or at least aromatically uncharted) vial in the stock of decadent materialities, Cathering Maxwell, well known to readers for her analyses of visual culture and the poetics of Swinburne, makes a subtle and evocative case for reading decadent scents not only as apt metaphors and sensory ornaments for the writing of Wilde, Symons, and their contemporaries but also an operative trope in the decadent repertoire; attending to the nuances of decadent aromas as a true *olfactif* reveals much about how decadent writers imagine modernity, the past, and memories of intimacy. From Peau d'Espagne and White Heliotrope to the organic and synthetic concoctions that merge science and art, Maxwell's chapter provides an assiduously researched and lively route into some of the forgotten material histories whose admixture gives potency to some of the more poignant exhibitions of decadent sexual identity, spirituality, and style.

Sometimes overpowering but just as often understated, decadent poetics—the essence of what the essays in this volume attempt to detect and, for the briefest of moments, appreciate, if never finally describe or chemically analyse—hangs in the air, a fugitive fragrance whose *sillage* draws us in for a second reading. We hope readers will be so enticed by the chapters below.

Notes on Contributors

Joseph Bristow is Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles, USA. His most recent book is *Wilde Discoveries: Traditions, Histories, Archives* (2013).

Dennis Denisoff is Professor of English and Co-Director of the Centre for Digital Humanities at Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. He is the author of *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody: 1840–1940* (2001), *Sexual Visuality from Literature to Film: 1850–1950* (2004), and the decadent novel *The Winter Gardeners* (2003). He is also the co-editor, with Liz Constable and Matthew Potolsky, of *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (1999).

Nick Freeman is a Senior Lecturer in English at Loughborough University, UK. He has published widely on the literature and culture of the *fin de siècle*, and is the author of *Conceiving the City: London, Literature and Art* (2007) and *1895: Drama, Disaster and Disgrace in Late Victorian Britain* (2011). He has a longstanding interest in literary decadence and shares his birthday, though little else, with Ernest Dowson.

William Greenslade is Professor of English at the University of the West of England, UK. He is the author of *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880–1940* (1994; 2010) and has edited *Thomas Hardy's 'Facts' Notebook* (2004) and (with Terence Rodgers) *Grant Allen: Literature and Cultural Politics at the* Fin de Siècle (2005). He has published widely on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century British literature and culture, including essays on 'Thomas Hardy's Notebooks', 'Reading Matter and the Matter of Reading in Gissing's Fiction', 'Shakespeare and Politics', 'Provincial Fiction and the Decline of Puritan England' and 'Radicalism and the Ecological Imagination 1880–1940'.

Jason David Hall is a Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Exeter, UK. He is the editor of *Meter Matters: Verse Cultures of the Long Nineteenth Century* (2011) and, with Ashby Bland Crowder, *Seamus Heaney: Poet, Critic, Translator* (2007). His first monograph, *Seamus Heaney's Rhythmic Contract*, was published in 2009. He is at present completing a monograph titled 'The Machines of Meter'.

Ellis Hanson is Professor of English at Cornell University, Ithaca, USA. He is the author of *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997) and the editor of *Out Takes: Essays on Queer Theory and Film* (1999).

Meredith Martin is Associate Professor of English at Princeton University, Princeton, USA. She has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry and prosody and is the author of *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860–1930* (2012).

Catherine Maxwell is Professor of Victorian Literature at Queen Mary, University of London, UK, and author of *The Female Sublime from Milton to Swinburne: Bearing Blindness* (2001), *Swinburne* (2006), and *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (2008). She has edited Swinburne's poetry (1997), and 'Victorian Literature and Classical Myth', *Victorian Review* 34 (2008), and co-edited Vernon Lee's *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales* (2006), *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics* (2006), 'The Arts in Victorian Literature', *The Yearbook of English Studies* (2010), and *Algernon Charles Swinburne: Unofficial Laureate* (2013).

Alex Murray is Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Exeter, UK. He has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literatures, as well as critical theory. He is the author of *Recalling London* (2007), *Giorgio Agamben* (2010) and is currently completing a monograph entitled 'Landscapes of Decadence'.

Matthew Potolsky is Associate Professor of English at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City, USA. He is the author of *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (2012), and *Mimesis* (2006), and co-editor of *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (1999).

Marion Thain is Reader in English at the University of Sheffield, UK. She is the author of *'Michael Field': Poetry, Aestheticism and the* Fin de Siècle (2007) and editor, with Ana Parejo Vadillo, of *Michael Field, The Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials* (2009). She is currently completing a book on the lyric in modernity.

Ana Parejo Vadillo is a Senior Lecturer in Victorian Literature and Culture at Birkbeck College, University of London, UK. Her publications include *Women Poets and Urban Aestheticism: Passengers of Modernity* (2005), *Michael Field, The Poet: Published and Manuscript Materials* (2009) (with Marion Thain) and *Victorian Literature: A Sourcebook* (2011) (with John Plunkett, Regenia Gagnier, Angelique Richardson, Rick Rylance and Paul Young). She is currently working on a book titled 'Cosmopolitan Aestheticism' and on an edition of Michael Field's verse play, *The World at Auction*.

Introduction: Decadent Poetics

Alex Murray and Jason David Hall

The term *decadence*—designating variously a literary form, a movement, and a period of literary history—is notoriously hard to pin down. It derives from the Latin *decadēre*, a 'falling down' or 'falling away', and the *OED* gives the following definition: 'The process of falling away or declining (from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.); decay; impaired or deteriorated condition.'[1] In *Decadent Style* (1985) John R. Reed suggests that we need to avoid using the term in the lower case, referring as it does to 'all those carelessly defined manifestations of change that inspired anxiety and depression in the second half of the last century'.[2] Yet the proximity to ideas of decline and falling away is, in many ways, what gives *decadence* its semantic force, being both a term of opprobrium (connoting linguistic and moral decay) *and* the 'transvaluation' (to use Nietzsche's term) of the moral framework that allows for simplistic ideas of decay to circulate. The poetic is an integral part of this transvaluation, the literary text performing the deconstruction of meaning and value. It was this point that Oscar Wilde's literary executor, Robert Ross, made in his lecture 'There Is No Decay', which he gave to the Bluecoat School, Liverpool, in February 1908. Ross declares that 'what is commonly called decay is merely stylistic development'.[3] He goes on to explain of decadence that 'even if we accept Mr Balfour's definition of its symptom—"the employment of an over-wrought technique"—we must remember that Decadence and Decay have now different meanings, though originally they meant the same sort of thing'.[4] This 'over-wrought' technique is, for Ross, a sign of 'realised perfection', with *decadence* now naming a radical literary aesthetic. A similar sentiment is found in one of the most incisive pieces of literary criticism produced in the period—Havelock Ellis's essay on Joris-Karl Huysmans: 'We have to recognise that Decadence is an aesthetic and not a moral conception. . . . We are not called upon to air our moral indignation over the bass end of the musical clef.'[5]

Decadence, then, as a literary practice, amounts to a critique of the nineteenth-century idea of 'decadence' (designated here and immediately below by the use of inverted commas), a challenge to the materialism of modernity, a counterpointing to its deadening conformity and complacency. W. B. Yeats, like Ross, attempted to frame the new literary forms of the *fin de siècle* against 'decadence' in his review of Symons's *Amoris Victima* (1897). For Yeats, Symons was

> in no accurate sense of the word a 'decadent', but a writer who has carried further than most of his contemporaries that revolt against the manifold, the impersonal, the luxuriant, and the external, which is perhaps the greatest movement of our time, and of more even than literary importance. Popular criticism, which prolongs the ideals and standards of a school of literature, which has finished its great work for this epoch of the world, is, on the other hand, in the most accurate sense of the word, 'decadent'.[6]

As ever with Yeats's reviews, there is an attempt to contort the work of others to make it fit with his own literary vision (in this case, the anti-materialist and spiritual rejection of Victorian conformism), yet his is a sentiment that we hear echoed in so many works and reviews of the period. Decadence as literary form and social critique was a rejection rather than a symptom of 'decadence'. 'Decadence' belonged, for Yeats, to the over-blown forms and conventional morality of the popular press and sentimental verse and the new art of Symons and others was an attempt at its overcoming. As Richard Le Galliene put it in his memoir *The Romantic '90s* (1926), the last ten years of the nineteenth century should be read as belonging to the twentieth and, 'far from being "decadent", except in certain limited manifestations, they were years of an immense and multifarious renaissance'.[7] Similar statements abound in memoirs published in the 1910s and 1920s—for example, Bernard Muddimen's *The Men of the Nineties* (1920) and Elizabeth Robins Pennell's *Nights: Rome and Venice in the Aesthetic Eighties; London and Paris in the Fighting Nineties* (1916)—as those who lived through the decade sought to recover what they saw as its revolutionary vitality from the image of the languid 'naughty' nineties that had developed in the years following the trials of Oscar Wilde.

Seeing decadence as a productive, even affirmative, challenge to Victorian stringencies and styles is complicated by the very metaphors and analogies we have inherited from the nineteenth century for understanding it. One of the dominant analogies for framing a 'decadent poetics' is the part/whole relationship. The analogy was first made, in wholly moralizing terms, by Désiré Nisard in *Etudes de moeurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence* (1834), a study of late Roman poetry that functioned as a veiled attack on contemporary poetic practices, but it was given its most comprehensive (and probably most memorable) formulation in Paul Bourget's essay 'Essai de psychologie contemporaine: Charles Baudelaire', first published in *La Nouvelle Revue* in 1881: 'A decadent style is one in which the unity of the book falls apart, replaced by the independence of the page, where the page decomposes to make way for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence makes way for the word.'[8] This now well-known definition has been taken up variously by Friedrich Nietzsche, Arthur Symons, and Havelock Ellis; more recently it has been used by Regenia Gagnier to frame the relationship between decadence and globalization. For Gagnier the social and political dimensions of the movement offer a reanimated understanding of decadence that moves away from a perceived solipsism and towards an ethical idea of community—that is, of individuals belonging together.[9] Yet if we are to understand decadence as a literary-formal category the part/whole framework raises a series of challenges in any attempt to outline a decadent poetics.

If we understand decadence to involve a movement from narrative unity to syntactic or lexical dissolution, then how do we read a novel such as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890/1)?[10] Arguably, its 'decadence' is located at the level of thematic or narrative ambiguity and not prose style: while we may associate 'corruption' with the text's *monde*, its characters, and their motivations, can we rightly say that it extends to individual sentences or specific words? As Reed points out, it is a thematically decadent novel, but in form it 'approximates an allegory or philosophical tract'.[11] While a few pages later Reed seems to suggest the novel has all the hallmarks of decadent style, he is ultimately unconvincing. Compared to the syntactical torture of Huysmans's *À Rebours* (1884), which Léon Bloy famously described as '[c]ontinually dragging Mother Image by the hair or the feet down the worm-eaten staircase of terrified Syntax', Wilde's novel is far from grammatically decadent.[12] It is, however, undoubtedly purple. If there is a trace of stylistic decadence in the novel, we find it most on display in the excessive catalogues of Dorian's vestments and *objets d'art*. It is this section of the novel that most closely approximates Huysmans's predilection for gratuitous taxonomy. But if we are prepared to acknowledge that Wilde's prose subordinates decadent style to decadent subject matter, then we might have to rethink his place at the centre of the English-language decadent canon, particularly given that his, arguably, most stylistically decadent work, *Salomé* (1891), is in French.

The need to develop an understanding of decadent poetics is also precipitated by the problems associated with the use of the term to identify a group of writers, as Arthur Symons noted in his 1897 essay on George Meredith. It is, as many scholars have noticed, not particularly useful to group writers as diverse in style as Lionel Johnson, Arthur Machen, and Oscar Wilde. Even when writers themselves sought some form of group identification or affiliation—in the case of the Rhymer's Club, for example—it was hardly an indication of formal cohesiveness. As Symons observes:

> The word Decadent has been narrowed, in France and in England, to a mere label upon a particular school of very recent writers. What Decadence, in literature, really means is that learned corruption of language by which style ceases to be organic, and becomes the pursuit of some new expressiveness or beauty, deliberately abnormal.[13]

There are, of course, different ways of achieving the inorganic linguistic style that Symons identifies. Further, Symons's definition (here and elsewhere) borrows rather liberally from Gautier's infamous 'Preface' to the third edition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1868), too liberally to provide a definition of decadent poetics that can accurately and minutely account for the stylistically idiosyncracies of writers whose works are dealt with in this collection. The disease metaphor—'that learned corruption of language'—that Symons chooses to use when describing decadent form, like Bourget's part/whole analogy, suggests an idea of language as a 'healthy' organism that has undergone corruption, a principle that is difficult to reconcile with many models of language in decadent writing, such as Arthur Machen, for whom the origin of language is the enigma of the hieroglyphic. The natural metaphors of contagion and collapse that Symons and Bourget deploy play in to the narrative of decline in such a way that presents decadence as a triumphal, nihilistic swan-song, rather than an energetic and creative attempt to imagine different futures and to challenge the excesses of modern capitalist society. The part/whole and health/disease metaphors for understanding decadence are, then, at once suggestive and misleading, and as such they underscore the importance of returning to the texts of the period in an attempt to provide a more nuanced and formally responsive evaluation of decadent literature.

Interstitial decadence

It is common practice to read—and, in particular, to teach—decadence as an interstitial moment in literary history, the initial 'falling away' from high Victorian literary values and forms before the *bona fide* novelty of modernism asserted itself. This is a narrative that, arguably, began in 1899, when Arthur Symons famously declared that decadence had been 'half a mock-interlude' that 'diverted the attention of critics' while Symbolism, 'something more serious', was being prepared. Yet in the same introduction to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Symons provides a retrospective definition of the term 'vaguely called Decadence' that concentrates on its formal qualities: 'the term is in its place only when applied to style; to that ingenious deformation of the language, in Mallarmé, for instance, which can be compared with what we are accustomed to call the Greek and Latin of the Decadence.'[14] The formal innovation of decadent writing was to see the birth of a leaner, sharper poetics (aspects of which are brought into focus in the chapters below). Writing in 1893, John Davidson speculated that the prolix poetic styles dominant during the Victorian period were on the verge of making way for a less longwinded lyricism: 'the long luxurious idylls, the long discursive dramatic monologues, the long garrulous story of old, and the long rhapsodies where thought and emotion are lost in a revel of colour and sound, are probably about to give place to a shorter flight and a compacted form.'[15] Decadence, it is true, cannot claim too many protracted poetic works (is there truly an 'epic' poet of decadence?); the work of Arthur Symons and others is much closer to the early imagist Ezra Pound, for instance, than it is to Tennyson.[16] As Joseph Bristow notes, Symons's desire was to 'redefine the locations, the forms, and the language in which his art might make sense of modern culture at the century's end'.[17]

The narrative of transition—with decadence positioned as an intermediary to modernist innovation—is not without its problems; for too long it has resulted in the framing of decadence as unabashedly radical and modern, neglecting the central role of nostalgia and a general retrogressive tendency that can be seen in so many decadent writers. Dwelling on the role of the past can complicate the politics of decadence, framing it as less transgressive and modern that we may assume, but it also helps us to understand the ways in which a decadent poetics developed in dialogue with literary history. It is worth bearing in mind that almost all of the major Romantics were the subject of critical inquiry by decadent writers. Arthur Symons, writing about De Quincey, could easily be writing about Huysmans: 'the whole of his work is a tangled attempt to communicate the incommunicable. He has a morbid kind of conscience, an abstract almost literary conscience, which drives him to the very edge and last gulf of language, in his endeavour to express every fine shade of fact and sensation.' Elsewhere, Symons will tell us that 'Keats is a Decadent before Baudelaire'.[18] William Blake was the subject of an important book co-written by W. B. Yeats and Edwin John Ellis (1893). In his review of this book, Johnson makes a claim for Blake's centrality to Johnson's own idiosyncratic literary pantheon: 'assuredly here is the essence of poetry: the perception of spiritual resemblances. Blake chose to take those resemblances and personify them.'[19] Other writers, such as Arthur Machen, were deeply influenced by Coleridge's Kantian model of critical idealism, and as Jonathan Loesberg and Julia Prewitt Brown have argued, Wilde, too, was indebted to Kant's aesthetics.[20] The influence of Romantic literary and philosophical traditions on the development of aestheticism and decadence has been explored elsewhere and provides us with a model for the complexity of influence and inheritance.

There are other important inheritances to consider. The poets of the seventeenth century have long been acknowledged as an influence on high modernism. T. S. Eliot's essays on Elizabethan drama—discussing such things as Marlowe's blank verse—are part of the fabric of modernist formal innovations; *vers libre* does indeed lurk behind the arras. For decadent writers, too, there was often an attempt to highlight themselves or their predecessors as bearing the traces of the Elizabethans. In his (rather strange) essay on George Meredith as a decadent, Arthur Symons suggests that 'not since the Elizabethans have we had a so flame-like a life possessing the wanton body of a style'.[21] In Machen's *Hill of Dreams* (written in the 1890s but not published until 1907), Lucian Taylor reads the Restoration poets and attempts 'the effect of the classic meters in English verse, trying his hand at a masque, a restoration comedy', before abandoning them.[22] This sense of the 1880s and 1890s recapturing something like an Elizabethan 'spirit' also motivated Gerard Manley Hopkins's defence of R. L. Stevenson's fiction in a letter to Robert Bridges: 'In my judgment the amount of gift and genius which goes into novels in the English literature of this generation is perhaps not much inferior to what made the Elizabethan drama, and unhappily it is in great part wasted.'[23] The myriad references to the poetry of the seventeenth century have been highlighted by Murray G. H. Pittock, who, in his analysis of the 'spectrum of decadence', suggests that they need to be read alongside the much more well-known Celtic twilight and the neo-Jacobitism that flourished briefly in the 1890s with groups like The Order of the

White Rose.[24] We should also recall the many homages to the period in the two books of the Rhymers' club, and their Marlowe night.[25] As Bristow reminds us, the members of the Rhymers' Club 'felt obliged to work within, rather than militate against, inherited lyric forms'.[26] The patterned lyricism associated with English Parnassianism, as we will see below, is an example of this dialogue with a poetics of the past.

If decadent writers looked to the forms of the past, they were certainly selective in their choice of models. The poet Alice Meynell, one of the 'forgotten female aesthetes' whose work Talia Schaffer and others have begun to resurrect,[27] wrote that 'The change from the sixteenth century to the seventeenth is a process, while that from the seventeenth to the eighteenth is a catastrophe.'[28] It is a view of the eighteenth century not dissimilar from that of A. E. Housman, another poet whose associations with *fin-de-siècle* decadence are being reconsidered. In 'The Name and Nature of Poetry', Housman declared the century to be marked by 'sham poetry'.[29]

These decadent literary genealogies, tracing decadent responses to canonical literary figures, should be sensitive not to give the impression that decadent writers avoided the literary by-ways in their professions of literary taste. On the contrary, decadent readings of poetries past at times transmuted obscurity into a mark of good taste. Ever the contrarian, Lionel Johnson rather pompously dismissed the taste for novelty and innovation of the *fin de siècle* by praising the more and especially less well-known poets of the seventeenth century:

> But what of Vaughan, most solemn and beautiful of mystics? Of Crashaw, most polite of devout poets? Of Cotton, that charming poet of genial enjoyment and dainty passion? Or Habington's *Castrata*, or Donne's 'Anniversaries', or Marvell's perfect work? One might go on to a dozen names: Cleveland, Denham, Flatman, Campion, Wither, Lovelace, Carew and all the inspired company. Are you so intent upon the latest eccentricity of Paris, that you have no ears for these singers?[30]

Just as Johnson's seventeenth century was not that of Milton, so his present was not that cosmopolitan world of Frenchified verse. Looking to the minor poets of English literary history, Johnson could reject the very narrative of innovation that drove modernity. Of the *fin-de-siècle* respect for the status of being 'minor', Linda Dowling argues that 'decadent'

> was adopted as an epithet of honor, not least because it expressed the distaste of the aesthetes for the moral ambitiousness and high

> seriousness of mainstream Victorian poetry even as it modestly aligned their own work with the exquisite achievements of the minor poets among the Elizabethans, Jacobeans and Cavaliers.[31]

But these statements of wishful affiliation can only tell us so much. In Johnson's catalogue of minor poets, one discerns comparatively little in the way of a clear declaration of formal inheritance. It is only through a close examination of the poetic practices of the writers of the *fin de siècle* that we can begin to measure the extent to which they actively sought to recreate or rehabilitate the forms of the past. For this reason, *Decadent Poetics* prioritizes decadent texts themselves over the various assertions about influence obtaining to them.

Decadent media

Many of the complications of establishing genealogies and patterns of inheritance for modern literary decadence extend also to efforts to map the history of decadence in other media. In painting, for example, we can see *decadence* being used as a term of opprobrium from the 1850s onwards. A representative diagnosis of decadence in contemporary French art was made by Charles Blanc in his *Grammaire des arts du dessin* (1867): 'As literature tends to its decadence, when images are elevated above ideas, so art grows material and inevitably declines when the mind that draws is conquered by the sensation that colors, when, in a word, the orchestra, instead of accompanying the song, becomes the whole poem.'[32] The loss of balance, of the detail or supporting structure ('colors') dominating overall coherence and design ('mind'), is a definitional attribute strikingly similar to those associated with decadent literary style. Yet it appears to be far more difficult to find a coherent list of formal features that would provide a working definition of *decadence* in the visual field. European decadent art is most notably associated with figures such as Gustave Moreau, Gustav Klimt, or Félicien Rops. In all these cases, the identification is posited via a link with a well-established work of decadent literature (Des Esseintes's obsession with Moreau in Huysmans novel, Klimt's Judith bearing so many similarities to Wilde's Salome, Rops's illustration for the frontispiece for Baudelaire's *Les Épaves*) and is complicated by the artists' affiliation with other artistic movements (Symbolism, Secessionism, Art Nouveau). Further, so often it is the alleged 'decadent' nature of the subject matter—quite apart from any specific stylistic or formal characteristics—that gives a work of visual art the air of sensuality, eroticism, and violence that can so easily (and loosely) signify an atmosphere of decline. In England the black-and-white prints and illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley and those who followed him (such as Edward J. Sullivan, Harry Clarke, and W. T. Horton) have become a byword for decadent art, yet this sort of visuality, with its lack of detail and monochromatic blocks, does not always translate, formally, into the purported excess and archaism of its literature.

Arguably more difficult to define than decadent visuality is decadent music. While Walter Pater would infamously insist that 'the arts may be represented as continually struggling after the law or principle of music, to a condition which music alone completely realises', he was hardly forthcoming in his analysis of music itself.[33] Music represented an ideal for many decadent artists, who putatively adhered to Pater's pronouncement, though it is hard to say precisely how or to what extent they were 'decadent' in their musical tastes. John R. Reed is unequivocal on the pointlessness of attempting to identify decadence features in music: 'There is no firm ground for asserting that any form of music is Decadent. Unlike the other arts, music can never be conceptual in the sense that its elements will convey specific intellectual meanings. . . . The language of music does not allow the same kind of analysis I have applied to literature and the pictorial arts.'[34] It may be that assessing decadence, as Reed suggests, demands a scrupulously media-specific mode of analysis, which appeals to a pan-media 'decadence' cannot helpfully register. We are often left in the position of a kind of musical 'decadence-spotting', looking for decadence *in* music rather than music *as* decadence: for instance, Claude Debussy scoring the poetry of Verlaine and Baudelaire. If decadence has a concrete link to music, then it most often critically asserted in relation to the operas of Richard Wagner and Richard Strauss, the former composer casting a particularly long shadow. As Emma Sutton has argued, it is impossible to understand the culture of the 1880s and '90s without paying attention to the centrality of Wagner.[35] All of the decadent writers, without exception, were Wagnerians, and many of them—including Havelock Ellis and Arthur Symons—made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth to hear the operas performed and also wrote essays on the composer. Yet Wagner's operas have a way of becoming decadent by association, as the objects of decadent obsession rather than forerunners of or direct influences on decadent style; Strauss's 1905 *Salome*, more of a decadent adaptation, was not even not performed in Britain until 1910. Moreover, if several decadent writers can be seen to exhibit a move, as some of the contributors below will argue, towards a sparer poetics—the novel without a narrative, the vignette, the attenuated lyric—then the excess