Decadent survival

Kate Hext
Modens and the mood

How decadence in literature survived the fall of Wilde and the disfavour of the TLS

Oscar Wilde’s arrest on April 6, 1895 for “Acts of Gross Indecency” sparked a violent conservative backlash against the “movement” in which he had put himself centre stage: Decadence. A mob attacked the office of the Bodley Head, the publisher of Wilde’s Salome and of The Yellow Book, the Decadent periodical he was erroneously reported to be carrying when the police officers arrived. In the next few years, The Yellow Book ceased publication; its illustrator and co-editor, the boy wonder Aubrey Beardsley, succumbed to tuberculosis; and Arthur Symons, who had enthusiastically defined “The Decadent Movement” in 1893, dismissed its aesthetic innovations as a mere “mood”. By the time of Wilde’s death in a Paris hotel in 1900, the Decadent Movement had popularized was dead, too.

Or was it? For various reasons – not least more posturing and homophobia – it suited early Modernists and the literary critics who promoted them through the twentieth century to believe that Decadence ceased on or around April 6, 1895. Important new studies by Vincent Sherry and Kristin Mahoney tell a different story. Mahoney focuses on self-styled Decadent writers and artists who long out-lived Wilde, arguing that their continued engagement with 1890s Decadence shaped their critiques of early-twentieth-century culture and politics. Sherry traces how Decadent poetics and aesthetics became integral to the canonical Modernism of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, with shorter framing sections on how it influenced Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, Rebecca West, Djuna Barnes, Samuel Beckett and others. On these readings, Decadence re-emerges as a movement without which Modernism as we know it would have been impossible; a movement which in fact shaped literary Modernism on the quiet, while its own distinct aesthetics continued to evolve in Modernism’s shadow until at least the 1940s.

The consignment of Decadence to what F. Scott Fitzgerald called “the misty side streets of literature” is largely due to the very Modernists on whom Sherry focuses. The early years of the twentieth century saw the Decadent Movement of the 1890s widely memorialized, mummified and vilified – and it is the villifiers who have written literary history. In 1915, Wyndham Lewis’s short-lived magazine Blast denigrated just about everything Victorian, from Robert Bridges to codliver oil. Amid this tsunami of scorn, a special space was reserved for the “Aesthete” or Decadent: THE BRITANNIC AESTHETE CREAM OF THE SNOBBISH EARTH ROSE OF SHARON GOD-PRG FOR SIMIAN VANITY SNEAK AND SWOT OF THE SCHOOL-ROOM IMBERB (or Berbed when in Belsize) – PEDANT PRACTICAL JOKER

KATE HEXT

Vincent Sherry
MODERNISM AND THE REINVENTION OF DECADENCE
333pp. Cambridge University Press. £30. 978 1 10707 932 8

Kristin Mahoney
LITERATURE AND THE POLITICS OF POST-VICTORIAN DECADENCE
259pp. Cambridge University Press. $99. 978 1 10710974 2

DANDY CURATE.
Lewis’s friend Pound needed no capital letters to convey his outrage when he felt that the public had failed to appreciate the genius of James Joyce’s Ulysses enough and that the Decadent Movement was to blame. “The decayed-lily verbiage which the Wilde school scattered over the decadence is much more to the popular taste”, he complained, “Vomit, carefully labelled ‘Beauty’, is still in the literary market and much sought after in the provinces.” Meanwhile, a gentler Max Beerbohm endlessly replayed his own youthful dalliance with Decadence in drawings of its main figures. His caricatures of Wilde – bloated, overdressed, aloof, limp-wristed – seemed to testify to the Decadent Movement’s obsOLEscence in the thrusting new century.

The presentation of Decadence as passé and provincial put Lewis, Pound and “the Incomparable Max” in good company. Founded in 1902, the TLS underscored its mission to modernize literary criticism with high-minded rejections of fin-de-siècle Decadence, if a little too frequent and zealous to be fully believed. Thus a review of De Profundis in 1905 concluded that Wilde’s only genius was for “lawless irresponsibility”, and in 1906 readers were cautioned that Symons’s survey of the Seven Arts trod the “perilous path of aestheticism”. Eight years later, following many more similar remarks in these pages, a relieved reviewer was able to reassure readers that Decadence was but a “billabong”: a stagnant pond set apart, thank goodness, from the living rivers of literary progress.

Sherry and Mahoney beg to differ, and rightly so. Decadence lived on into the twentieth century in a multitude of ways. Few of these were as simplistic as the føy pursuit of the beautiful, fragranced with hedonistic excess, to which the movement was too often reduced by conservative critics. Most noticeably it evolved into camp: Alan Sinfield’s The Wilde Century (1994) laid the foundations for compelling research in this area over the past twenty years. Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence takes a different tack, seeing the imaginative sense of time – the relationship between past, present and future – as the main legacy of the Decadent Movement for Modernist literature.

At the outset, time seems a surprising link. After all, High Modernism still resonates in the cultural memory with Pound’s famous call to arms: “Make it new!” What Sherry shows so successfully is that those Modernists who would “Make it new!” have much in common with Decadents who believed they had no tomorrow. The Decadent inhabits an intensely felt now, the “veterigious thrill” of which is defined both by a nostalgia for the past and a sense that the future is impossible or at least undesirable. Think of Dorian Gray’s obsession with beautiful objects lost in history – Nero’s velarium over the Colosseum, the mortuary cloth of King Chilperic – as he sinks into a life lived only for sensuous objects, or Symons’s early poetry, in which every moment of sexual pleasure contains a premonition of its soon becoming a painful memory. Thus does the present become “queer” and inorganic.

Analogies soon emerge between this Decadent vision of time and that woven into the early works of the poets who would become Modernists. Ezra Pound’s derivative verse of the early 1910s sets him firmly in the Decadent tradition. With its archaic language, affected exclamations, Latinate titles and one poem dedicated to Rhymer’s Club poet Ernest Dowson, it is underpinned by a quintessentially Decadent nostalgia. Even the fearless Futurist emblazoned on the opening pages of Blast is a little misleading: a flick through its pages reveals many Decadence-tinged pieces within. In his own Blast poems, “Preludes” and “Rhapsody of a Windy Night”, the young Eliot breathes the same night air as Symons; alone and pâle lytering in the backstreets, a filimen held rapt between memory and desire:

“The burnt-out ends of smoky days. And now a gusty shower wraps The grimy scraps Of withered leaves about your feet Like a Decadent, Eliot looks backward, extricating himself from the forward movement of progress in a sublime nostalgia that, as Sherry tells us, “envisions the condition of existence as aftermath”.

Around the same time, Des Imagistes grounded their poetry in a musicality and Helle-
nism learnt from Decadence. If they seemed to flaunt their Decadent influences at a time when this was highly impolitic, they did so with a new directness and intensity that resisted comparison. Eliot would have to tread more carefully. In July 1914 he sent some of his recent poems to Conrad Aiken along with an apologetic letter. “[I] wonder whether I had better knock it off a while - you will tell me what you think. Do you think that the Love Song of St Sebastian part is morbid or forced. . . There is nothing homosexual about this.”

His anxiety was not misplaced: Decadence was practically a byword for homosexuality, with St Sebastian one of its pin-up boys, and this impression would only intensify as the decade wore on. As Eliot walked from his day job in the Colonial and Foreign Department of Lloyds Bank to his little flat in Marylebone in the summer of 1918, the placards he passed told of a scandal unfolding at the Old Bailey: the Billing libel trial. Noel Pemberton Billing MP had sensationally claimed that 47,000 British men and women had been drawn into a homosexual “police trap,” and furthermore that 3,000 men and women had been drawn into a homosexual “police trap,” and furthermore that 3,000

The concept and word “Decadence” recur throughout the book. As Sherry reconceives the place of the Decadent in the modernist canon, the word “Decadent” itself becomes central in Sherry’s study as “an inner horizon of Post-Victorian Decadence.”

Kristin Mahoney’s Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence must be placed alongside Sherry’s Modernism and the Reinvention of Modernism as a turning point in how critics conceive the place of the Decadent Movement in literary history. Not only does Mahoney illustrate that Decadent forms continued to evolve well into the twentieth century alongside Modernism, but she demonstrates that its evolutions are diverse and critically engaged with the politics of their present. It is an absorbing and revelatory study, not least because critical neglect of post-Victorian Decadence means that most of Mahoney’s subjects are today indistinguishable, as elusive as they are captivating. Max Beerbohm, Vernon Lee, Baron Corvo, Althea Gyles and Beresford Egan among them. Eliot himself has long been regarded as an outsider, until now.

Max Beerbohm was another outsider in the twentieth century. Was he a Decadent? Well, he wasn’t always in love with them, but he was open to persuasion. He “oscillated between reverence and satire” of Wilde before going on to affect the Decadent poses Wilde progressively created. Despite a voluminous output and high profile during his lifetime, Beerbohm is another who now occupies a ghastly place in literary history. He is a critic whose subjects were often too ephemeral to resonate for long. He was, as Ernst Dowson, lionel Johnson and Pound’s friend Victor Farr – are woven into the text to foreshadow the massacre that would, which Pound himself would feel so deeply after the deaths of Henri Gaudier and T. E. Hulme in the trenches. 1920 was also the year in which T. S. Eliot published Poems, a collection often overlooked between Prufrock and Other Observations (1917) and The Waste Land (1922). Poems expands Eliot’s poetic rendering of Decadent time from the condition of one jaded individual to the condition of the age, as his heightened – if reactionary, indeed racist – interest in the political realities of Empire come to the fore. The opening section of “Sweeney amongst the Nightingales” is one of Sherry’s examples:

Apepence Sweeney spreads his knees Letting his arms hang down to laugh. The zebra stripes along his jaw Swelling to maculate graspe.

With the Easter Rising fresh in the memory, Sweeney’s Irish name gestures to the fragility of Empire, while the human degeneration suggested by Eliot’s animal imagery denies any possibility of progress. The brisk, mechanical rhythms here – such a jarring contrast with the vers libre of Prufrock – draw on Gautier’s style to versifier the marionettes that populate Simenon’s early poetry, as inorganic or uncanny likenesses of our human selves. So it is that the individual’s sense of time as a “declining after- ward” without any possibility of a future expands to a far broader picture of the historical present on the precipice of its own dissolution.

Sweeney, of course, makes a cameo appearance in The Waste Land. Eliot’s “mock-epic? not epic” vision of Imperial decline and fall, set by critics at the heart of Modernism’s annus mirabilis, 1922, is formed through his early immersion in Decadent writing. It should not be forgotten that parts of its first drafts were written alongside those verses Eliot sent so hesitatingly to Conrad Aiken. Eliot together with Pound, il miglior fabbro, edited ostentatious proofs to the fin de siècle out of The Waste Land, excising for example the original epigraph taken from Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (“The horror! The horror!”). When recovered by Sherry, such references emerge as the scaffolding of The Waste Land’s awful apprehension of Western civilization as a repetition and devolution. Reconstructions of this kind become central in Sherry’s study as “an inner history of textual memory which, once recovered, may reveal the coherence and power of the decadent sensibility in this landmark of literary modernism”.

Kristin Mahoney’s Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence must be placed alongside Sherry’s Modernism and the Reinvention of Modernism as a turning point in how critics conceive the place of the Decadent Movement in literary history. Not only does Mahoney illustrate that Decadent forms continued to evolve well into the twentieth century alongside Modernism, but she demonstrates that its evolutions are diverse and critically engaged with the politics of their present. It is an absorbing and revelatory study, not least because critical neglect of post-Victorian Decadence means that most of Mahoney’s subjects are today indistinguishable, as elusive as they are captivating. Max Beerbohm, Vernon Lee, Baron Corvo, Althea Gyles and Beresford Egan among them. Eliot, a novelist and illustrator in the mould of Beardsley, whose heyday was in the 1920s and 30s, is now so little read that his books are consigned to the British Library’s and the Boston Public Library’s Boston Spa holdings. His illustrations harness the exoticism and wit of Beardsley’s distinctive style to parody the sexual conservatism of the interwar period. The Sink of Solitude (1928), a verse satire of the controversy around Radcliffe Hall’s The Well of Loneliness (1928), is one such example.

An illustration by Beresford Egan for an edition of Charles Baudelaire’s Fleurs du Mal translated by C. Bower Alcock (1929)
Homesick blues

My Katherine Mansfield Project is a book to be treasured by anyone who has left home and moved away. Sometimes people return to what they once called “home”, only to find “home” is now, effectively, somewhere else. Others, like the New Zealand modernist short story writer Katherine Mansfield, whose life was cut short by tuberculosis at the age of thirty-four, never return, but instead recreate a memory of home in their writing that is more powerful, more alive, more profoundly real – down to the memory of a squeaking laundry basket – than the original.

In this personal meditation on the significance of home, another New Zealand emigrant, Kirsty Gunn, gently entices the reader to consider what “home” means to them, while offering innovative and moving biographies of both herself and Mansfield. The structure is so delicately constructed, and so cleverly does Gunn weave together fact and fiction, real life and fantasy, introspection and scholarship, that after reading the book in one sitting, the reader emerges as if from a cocoon; their world, their sense of home, as Mansfield put it, “has been dished back into the dark blue sea during the night only to rise again at beam of day, all hung with bright spangles and glittering drops.”

In 2009, Gunn was the recipient of the Ran
dell Cottage Writer’s Residency in Wellington, New Zealand, the city where she was born and raised before she moved to London. For six months the little nineteenth-century wooden settler’s cottage, now beautifully restored, was home to Gunn and her two young daughters, then aged eight and ten. Its position in the suburb of Thorndon, just off the Tinakori Road, afforded her an unrivalled opportunity to immerse herself in the life and work of Wellington’s most celebrated literary offspring – Katherine Mansfield – who had walked the same streets as a young girl, just over a hundred years before her. Indeed, Gunn’s essay is a tribute to the author who seems to have haunted her earliest memories; when she was a little girl, her mother read her “The Doll’s House”, and she discovered “Prelude” for herself, and fell in love with Mansfield’s writing, at the age of twelve.

The premiss of the essay is printed in red on the cover under the title: “One has left a version of oneself at the place of departure and it waits for us at the point of return – but she is not me when I get there”. There can be no true return home, since “self-consciousness has leapt up in the space between one shore and another and created another person for ourselves in the gap”. Nevertheless:

as we sense the tension of the gap between then and now, here and there, so the roaring, constructing power of the intellect and the imagination fills the space with another reality . . . making cities and worlds of the places we have left.

Both Mansfield and Gunn departed New Zealand for England as young writers, initially thinking little of the land left behind, only to find in later life that their best work was influ-
enced by memories of their birth country. Mansfield had been educated in England at Queen’s College in Harley Street from 1903–06 with her two older sisters. She was eighteen when the family returned to Wellington, then a small colonial capital of barely 59,000 people. Having lived in London for three exhilarating years, she determined to return as soon as possible; after eighteen months, her father reluctantly allowed her to move back to the other side of the world in 1908, with an allowance of £100 per annum. For several years, she was barely conscious of her homeland, but by 1915, with the death of her beloved younger brother Leslie in Flegg-
stein’s Ypres, she felt “the world had been herself. She had her son in the sand of her land, and yet over the course of six months in Wellington, reading and rereading Mansfield’s stories, letters and diaries, holding and touching original manuscript material held in the Alexander Turnbull Library, visiting Mansfield’s birthplace house a short walk away at the other end of the Tinakori Road, her immersion in the life of her favourite author reaches a point where both authors’ work becomes interchangeable: among the meditations on the notion of “home”, “belonging” and heimweh, are pieces of fiction, short extracts by Mansfield intertwine with polished little stories by Gunn herself.

My Katherine Mansfield Project is an enchanting – and at times haunting – essay, as well as a moving tribute to Mansfield. The pub-
lisher, Notting Hill Editions, specializes in “reinigorating the essay as a literary form”, and Kirsty Gunn’s offering is a triumph of the genre. The book is also a lovely object, stitched with red ribbon, and with a dove-grey cloth cover stamped with striking white and red print. Inside, the page numbers are red and chapter titles have red embellishments. It is a tribute to the book as art form; for once, one really can judge a book by its beautifully produced cover.