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The Setting Sun of British Decadence: Material and Formal Aspects of the Term

Abstract: The metaphor linking the idea of decadence with the image of a sunset captures an ambivalence typical of the term: it is uncertain whether this image emphasizes the sun's sinking movement or its radiance, the sadness evoked by the sun's decline at the end of the day or the uplifting of mood caused by the intensely coloured sky the moment the evening is about to begin. Starting from this metaphor, this essay proposes to consider contradictions entailed in the term "decadence," looking at its material and formal aspects. The material aspect is viewed as manifest through thematic motifs — of individual malady, social pathology, the sensational thrill and scholarly interests — and visible in what this essay terms three "comforts": the relish of an aesthetic moment, a fascination with decay, and a passion for collecting. However, by noting that these material attitudes (or "comforts") have their aesthetic or "formal" consequences (such as impressionism, gothicism, and infra-realism), this essay changes its focus to the formal aspects of decadence, considered both in terms of their limitations and benefits. The faults of decadence are understood as Nietzsche would have it: as typical of an epoch overwhelmed with forms it could not absorb. The benefits, in turn, are seen through an analogy between decadent literature and the art of painting. In fact, this essay stresses a likeness that emerges when decadence is compared to Italian mannerism: both can be viewed as reservoirs of mature, if over-sophisticated, forms. So eventually, while discredited for its material decline, decadence is presented as deserving appreciation for its formal aspect: as a summation of aesthetic forms and the transition to the aesthetically new — to modernism.

In the fictitious diary written by Marie-Marguerite Pater, a semi-historical figure in Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, there appears an image of an impressive park — the gardens of "the Palace of the Luxembourg" bathing in the light of the setting sun. The gardens are described as Marie-Marguerite imagines them to be. Huge trees offer their cooling shade. They are generous, "stately and broad-foliaged" (Pater 1929: 7), and emblematic of the dignified and ritualized world of royalty — "each" of them "a great courtier." Yet, they also belong to the natural world of the "open and unbuilt country beyond, over which the sun is sinking" (Pater 1929: 8). At home, both in the gracefully trimmed garden and in the open field, the trees sift a few sun rays through the foliage to the ground and create there

a painterly chiaroscuro. The same sun, which is sinking over eighteenth-century Paris, illuminates also Marie-Marguerite's world and throws metaphorical light on her sinking ego. Its descent symbolizes also the life of Marie-Marguerite's childhood friend, Antony Watteau. The painter, succumbing to consumption, is working on his ephemeral *trois crayons* drawings and his pastel *fêtes galantes*, which, for all their charm, strike Marie-Marguerite as impermanent. To Marguerite, their overall effect "loses something of longevity, of durability — the colours fading or changing" (Pater 1929: 39).

In fact, Pater's "sinking sun" is a twin image to Charles Baudelaire's *soleil agonisant* — the dying sun — which, as in Wolfdietrich Rasch's interpretation, "is … a metaphor for decay and death as the central theme of decadent literature," or, as in Baudelaire's original phrasing, is an allegory for a soul weighed down with life: "la merveilleuse állegorie d'une âme chargée de vie, qui descend derrière l'horizon avec une magnifique provision de pensées et de rèves" (qtd. in Rasch 1982: 208).[1] The sun setting over the eighteenth-century France of Pater's prose, and over his aesthetic heroes, is evocative of the self which at the end of the day is weary and loses itself in imagination, and of art, which at the fin-de-siècle produces over-refined and ephemeral works. Pater's picture is all decadence: it involves allusions to the waning of ego and to the inflating of painful self-consciousness, negative associations with physical decline and the positive overtones linked with Watteau and his art (with heroism in the artist consumptive but consummate), and finally, references to a cyclical return of dusks and dawns and to the historical specificity captured in the quasi-historical figures of Marie-Marguerite and Antony Watteau. Decadence is full of such contradictions, culminating in the discrepancy between Baudelaire's (and Paul Valery's) eulogies of it, and in Max Nordau's unrestrained condemnation of all that it represents.

When striving to resolve these contradictory (derogative and acclamatory) tendencies in approaching decadence, it will be helpful to use Herta Pauly's twofold philosophical framework. Pauly, having tacitly assumed that the phenomenon is cyclical and not necessarily tied to a fin-de-siècle, considers decadence in the 1970s and examines it within the context of three activities discussed by Friedrich Schiller in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. In her understanding, decadence stretches in equal measure from play, to art, to life. The middle domain, that of art, shows signs of decadence if it is afflicted by a lack of balance between two impulses taken from Schiller's *Letters* — the formal and the material. So decadent art can be characterized in two ways: as art wherein the formal significantly outweighs the material, or, on the contrary, art in which the material drastically dominates over the formal. In short, art is decadent through "*in*adequate coordination" (Pauly 1973: 366). But even if lacking balance and faulty, decadent art casts its spell. So, while

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[1] In 1857, using allegory, Baudelaire defended literary decadence against Désiré Nisard's denunciation of the decadent style as rendered in his *Poètes de Latins de la Décadence* of 1834.

considering the formal and material aspects as they appear in British decadence, this essay will emphasize the positive impact of decadence, or, in other words, seek to explain why decadence should be enjoyed rather than decried.

1. The material

The two maladjustments, the material and the formal, allow us to isolate two foci in the theories with which decadence is classified: the social and individual malady and the mannerist malaise of style. The social dimension of decadence was noted in 1863 by a French novelist and critic, Paul Bourget, when he explained that by the "word 'decadence' one usually understands the state of society which produces too great a number of individuals unable to work for the common good" (qtd. in Buchen 1972: 19). Excessive individualism, or, as thirty years later Max Nordau would have it, "egomania," is a striking feature in decadent literary personae. It also characterizes their creators: the author-as-rebel, apparently a revolutionary without a clear cause, but indeed, a radical with a cause which was an all-embracing discontent.[2] In the words of Irving Buchen, "the decadent artist would insist that 'Whatever Is, Is Disgusting'" (22). If regarded in the light of such rebelliousness, British decadence has its beginnings in the scandals caused by Lord Byron and its culmination in Oscar Wilde's and Aubrey Beardsley's notoriety. In turn, within the realm of fiction, decadent rebellion is represented by Pater's Denys l'Auxerrois — a medieval outcast creating a commune of artisans on the margin of a local community — or by Wilde's Dorian — an aesthete descending into opium dens, the British counterpart of Huysman's effete Des Esseintes, who finds the idea of the reconnecting with Parisian society only a little better than death (cf. Huysmans 1987: 218–220).

Social and individual pathologies were seen as complementary. A society in a state of decadence is a society which lacks inner glue. Such is the view of Benedetto Croce and of his follower, the Marxist critic Antonio Gramsci. Croce saw decline in art as paralleled by degeneration in social norms, or as epitomized by the collapse from "Christian brotherhood" to "the competition of Greed" (Croce qtd. in Drake 1982: 81). Croce would not disagree with Leo Tolstoy's belief that art should be "one of the means of intercourse between man and man," that its power should be measured by its "*infectiousness*" (Tolstoy 1896), or that art should foster fraternity. Perhaps paradoxically, Tolstoy — who deplored art for art's sake as a reflection of a social malady — was described by Nordau as himself afflicted with deviation. An intransigent enemy of decadence, the German psychiatrist and culture critic Nordau accused Tolstoy of excessive and harmful "emotionalism"

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[2] The concepts of ill-adaptation and of internal migration as the symptoms of decadence are stressed by Herbert Marcuse (1974) and José Ortega y Gasset (1956). See Winthrop (1971: 513–515, 518–521).

(Nordau 1993: 167). For this most reactionary critic of decadence, it was a disease to cure, rather than (as for Symons) a "beautiful" disease to cultivate. Decadence and its authors were responsible for all forms of pathology. For example, according to Nordau, the *spiritus movens* of the Pre-Raphaelites, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, suffered from echolalia (Nordau, 93). Baudelaire's aesthete was described in a long condemning sentence as

> physically, ill and feeble; morally, an arrogant scoundrel; intellectually, an unspeakable idiot who passes his whole time in choosing the colours of stuffs which are to drape his room artistically, in observing the movements of mechanical fishes, in sniffing perfumes and sipping liqueurs. (Nordau, 309)

Of Baudelaire, Nordau said that "he love[d] disease, ugliness and crime …" (Nordau, 294), that he relished the sensational merely for the thrill of it.

Indeed, the sensational constitutes a prominent element of the triad which critics associate with decadence: the sensational, the scholarly and the scientific, or, to use Pauly's phrases, the "crudely sensuous" and the "cold and detached" (Pauly, 369). These features (which Pauly finds in the art of the 1970s) are notable in nineteenth-century British Decadent Aestheticism and visible in Pater and Wilde, Wilkie Collins and Arthur Machen. British decadence, as argued by Christine Ferguson, brings together the man of the laboratory and the cruel aesthete (though this liaison is not restricted to British soil). Both figures are driven by a peculiar disinterestedness: the aesthete defends art for art's sake and the scientist pursues his cruel experiments for the sake of sheer curiosity (Ferguson 2002: 472–477). The mixture of curiosity and cruelty prominently features in Lord Wotton's mental vivisectionism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. An even cruder symbiosis of the scientist and the aesthete is captured in the scene of Dorian's blackmailing Alan Campbell, a scientist and accomplished musician, into grotesquely disposing of Basil's body: all that is left of Basil is "a horrible smell of nitric acid in the room" (Wilde 1999: 127).

In turn, a mixture of the sensational and the scholarly is striking in Pater, an arch-aesthete and the father of impressionism in British criticism. Pater combined sensationalism — as Wilde preferred to call it, "the strange sensuousness of expression" (Wilde 1887: 164) — with scholarly care and stylistic fastidiousness. The quiet don of Brasenose would produce passages in which his eponymous Denys l'Auxerrois devours raw meat, "tearing the hot, red morsels" (Pater 1929: 73), and himself is finally "torn … limb from limb" (Pater 1929: 87). Yet another of Pater's figures, his imaginary monk Apollyon, has "ravaged" the doves bred in the monastery, "destroyed the bright creatures in a single night — broken backs, rent away limbs, pierced the wings" (Pater 1910: 160). And yet these shocking excerpts are rendered with a scholarly attention to style. As recorded by one of his earliest biographers, Pater would write on alternate lines, adding attributive phrases in the blanks, copy it all, and then repeat the whole process (Benson 2002: 202).

The aim of this nineteenth-century euphuism was to safeguard language from the seemingly inevitable decline which Max Müller predicted in his lectures. Pater, who heard Müller lecture on the decadence of the written language, would see the artist's task as that of preserving literary language from degeneration which, from the philological point of view, seemed inevitable.[3] In his attempt to preserve the health of English, Pater followed the teachings of an ancient rhetorician, Cornelius Fronto (c. 100–175 A.D.). That Fronto, in turn — with his pedantic retrieval of archaisms — was seen as emblematic of the decadence of Latin will be clear if we refer to *A History of Roman Literature* published in 1909. As stated by its author, Harold North Fowler, just the fact that "such a writer as Fronto was highly respected and exerted a powerful influence upon his contemporaries [was] a sign of the depth to which Roman literature had sunk" (Fowler 1909: 236). While yielding to the decadent tendency of shocking the senses, Pater followed Fronto with both his scholarly and stylistic animus.

The "sinking" of Roman literature, the erosion of the empire, and the degeneration of Latin due to the influx of the vernacular[4] provided ready analogies for Victorian decadence; they fed the fear of the loss of standards in English (see Dowling 1986: 84–87) and the dissolution of known civilization, the fear that both the empire and the language of its rulers would start to crack. With his learned euphuism, the decadent aesthete could hope to forestall the decay of language, but not the decline of his whole world. But, if the decline of civilization — the wreckage wrought by time — could not be averted, there were at least three kinds of consolation at hand: first, a philosophy of living for the sake of the moment, second, comfort taken from a realization that *all* (including inorganic) things decay, and, third, the hope of preservation of the past legacy in the form of vast collections — the western world was turning into a museum (cf. Nietzsche qtd. in Weineck 1994: 41).

In Britain the philosophy of living for the sake of the moment had its important proponents, but their propositions were not unambiguous. It was famously recommended by Pater's Conclusion in 1873; in the 1890s, however, it was paradoxically both inflated and mocked by Wilde. It must be noted that Pater's decadent rendering of this apparently epicurean *modus vivendi* differed significantly from the serene Horatian *carpe diem*. Pater's advice to put all hope in a fleeting experience had unprecedented urgency. The Oxford undergraduates whose minds would be "poisoned" with his famous Conclusion learnt that the aim in life was "[t]o burn always with his hard, gemlike flame" (Pater 1998: 152). Such was also the aim of the new Hedonism as described by Wilde's imaginary Wotton: to relish "experience

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[3] See Dowling (1986: 61–77, 117–119, 119–140) for Müller's view of language as decaying, his influence on Pater, and Pater's scholarly euphuism.

[4] The theme, introduced by Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), finds its famous reflection in Thomas Couture's painting *The Romans of the Decadence* (1847), whereas Pater includes in his *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) his own rendering of Apuleius's story of *Eros and Psyche*.

itself, and not the fruit of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be" (Wilde 1999: 99). Thus, decadence ended up in a tautology: the object of experience was an experience, or an experience whose object had been missed out. But treating Wotton, in matters of philosophy of life, as a mouthpiece for Wilde would be simplistic. The decadent new Hedonism (like Pater's decadent adaptation of *carpe diem*) was a distorted version of its classic model: with emphasis on heightened pleasure, it deviated from original Epicureanism, that is, from the belief that a happy life is a life free from pain. Wilde, the master of non-commitment, apparently advertised the new Hedonism in *Dorian Gray*, but he also mocked "'The Tired Hedonists' who 'wore faded roses in their buttonholes' and 'had a sort of cult for Domitian'" (qtd. in Ellmann 1989: 4). Pater, in turn, would not face squarely the realization of his early philosophy as presented in a crassly sensuous form in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.[5]

Despite Wilde's and Pater's mixed approval and criticism of the new Hedonism, an analogy emerges between, on the one hand, the new Hedonism in British Decadent Aestheticism at the end of the 19th century and, on the other hand, the hedonism of cyclically returning decadence as it was perceived by two of its most reactionary critics, C.E.M. Joad and Pitrim Sorokin, in the 20th century. Pater's insistence on the intensity and impermanence of experience lends itself to description in terms of Joad's philosophy. In Joad's phraseology, Pater's idea of aesthetic life would involve "the dropping of an object" of the lived experience.[6] Such experience, in Winthrop's summary, has lost its significance and become disjointed from value systems, and is appreciated for the amount of, and in proportion to, the pleasure it delivers, as well as for the diversity of pleasures it brings (Winthrop 1971: 515–518). An unusual emphasis put on pleasure, as typical of cultural decadence, is highlighted also by Pitrim Sorokin and captured in the concept with which he criticizes decadent art as "sensate" art. From a moralist point of view, Sorokin rejects decadence as corruption because to him it is characterized by crass materialism and excessive individualism, and it is devoid of a transcendental perspective. Its art — its sensate art — aims at a glaring, stupendous and bombastic effect, or at the teasing of the senses. So if Sorokin, filled with moralistic fervour, sees "hedonism and Epicureanism … as the dominant life styles of the culture" (Winthrop, 522), then he makes the same mistake of collapsing hedonism and over-indulgence as Wilde's characters did.

Decadent pleasure is not confined to hedonistic moments[7] but resides also in the gothic thrill: the pleasure incited by the gamy smell of decay and by the

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[5] This problem is presented in more detail in Budziak (2008: 274–275).

[6] An analogous philosophy of life is attributed by Walter Benjamin to the *flâneur*. The *flâneur* lives for a fleeting impression (*Erlebnis*), and not for *Erfahrung*, or the impression that can change him and last (Benjamin 1992: 159).

[7] For an explanation of the semantics of sado-masochistic pleasure in decadence, see Buchen (1972: 19–20).

contemplation of the crumbling last vestiges of things. British decadence, with its very successful gothic revival, provides plenty of examples where aestheticism and Gothicism mingle. Reflected in the fascination with relics — such as a "countryman's wagon" revealed on the seashore by a low tide and deemed to be "sepulchral," the "dropping crape and cobwebs" and the "coroneted coffins" — gothic and the aestheticist interests overlap in Pater's "Sebastian van Storck" and in "Duke Carl of Rosenmold" (1929: 107, 159, 161). But why should the decadent find comfort and pleasure in the things which are scarred by the passage of time? Wolfdietrich Rasch gives an answer to this question by referring to Nietzsche and to a renowned nineteenth-century Austrian art historian, Alois Riegl. From Nietzsche's perspective, decay is inevitable, so we should spare ourselves the frustration of fighting it in vain and instead anticipate and accept it (Rasch, 1982: 210). In turn, Riegl explains the allure of decaying monuments as resulting from human attraction to inorganic things which bear the signs of the ravages of time. They serve as a comforting reminder that "[a]ll things are transient …" (Rasch, 212–213), or that we are not alone in our transitoriness.

Lost in the moment of an intense experience or contemplating material decay, a decadent finds yet another (third) comfort which is both aesthetic and material: the collector's passion. Decadence is characterized by its magpie interest in glittering detail. Des Esseintes's vast collections, including the disturbing drawings of Odilon Redon, Dorian's collection incongruously comprising gems and religious vestments,[8] an array of items, garments and accessories described by Beardsley in his chapter on "the manner in which Venus was coiffed and prepared for supper"[9] — these are just a few examples which attest to a decadent celebration of a multitude of details. Significantly, the attention focused on a detail — the item which proliferates in decadent literary catalogues — penetrated down to modernism, to Eliot and Joyce, and is reflected both in *The Waste Land*, this "heap of broken images" (Eliot 1977: 61, v. 22), and in Joyce's *Ulysses*. The fascination with detail also became theorized. At the beginning of the 20th century the decadent focus on minutiae became transformed into the type of art which José Ortega y Gasset termed as infra-realism, a technique with which it is possible to "overcome realism by merely putting too fine a point on it and discovering, lens in hand, the microstructure of life" (qtd. in Winthrop, 520). However, in decadence and in modernism, minutiae were not treated in the same way. For instance, in Joyce a detail (such as a bar of soap in Leopold Bloom's pocket) is sent on a narrative journey modelled on *Odyssey*. Thus a microstructure is set within a larger structure, that of myth. In the decadent authors, however, minutiae did not have such a structurally reassuring aesthetic domicile: they were set within a museum-like, inhuman and incomprehensible collection of bits.

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[8] See Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ch. 11.
[9] Cf. the title of Chapter 2 of Aubrey Beardsley's "Under the Hill."

2. The formal

The anxieties of decadence and the respective consolations have their equivalents in aesthetics. Indeed, they eventually produce aesthetic attitudes which would find their fruition in modernism: (1) impressionism, which grows out of Pater's admonition to relish the moment, (2) "sensate" art, the twentieth-century embodiment of decadent hedonism, and (3) infra-realism, the consequence of the fascination with minutiae. In this context, it is only natural to accept Neville Morley's treatment of decadence as a "transitional period" when "the future begins to come within reach" (Morley 2004: 574). Actually, decadence in the meaning of British Decadent Aestheticism is hardly equivalent to a decline.[10]

However, with its insistence on the preservation of cultural legacy — as in the allegories of those vast but incongruous collections — decadence is a period which holds onto the past too much. Silke Maria Weineck describes decadence as an epoch afflicted with the Laios complex: it is like an ageing man tenaciously holding onto his precious inheritance, driven to murder by the fear that his dominion might be taken over by his son (Weineck 1994: 42). This aesthetic possessiveness — an accumulation of past forms — combined with an inability to select, or, as Nietzsche had it, a deplorable inability to forget,[11] was the reason why the idea of the decline determined our view of decadence. The over-burdened cultural memory was the cause of its sinking movement. The problem was the surplus of forms which prevented decadent art — otherwise noted for its eclecticism — from working out an integrated style (Weineck, 40–41, 43–45).

Thus, decadent art is the art of distorted proportions. Disproportionate forms are visible in Beardsley's dwarfed and over-stocky Cupids and Pierrots and in his giraffe-like female figures. A lack of proportion manifests itself in Beardsley's extended catalogues and in Pater's fragmented narrative style. Pater's style, indeed, provides an apt illustration of this kind of rhetoric which Paul Bourget (extensively quoted by Havelock Ellis, a pioneer sexuologist who, like Nordau, would represent a medical point of view) called a style of decomposition. Bourget described it as a "style [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" (qtd. in Ellis 1970: 52). Such is the narrative manner of Pater: involving long sentences which challenge the reader's attention with the use of prolepsis, which are packed with detailed descriptions, broken with innumerable digressions, and

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[10] Morley explains that "decadence" belongs to the language of aesthetics, whereas "decline" — as in the decline of "the Roman Empire, Roman Britain, Roman towns, the Hapsburg Empire, medieval Sicily, …" — is a term of historiography (Morley, 574).

[11] Nietzsche's ideal man must know how to discard from memory the things that cannot be absorbed and creatively adapted. In his words, "[t]hat which such a nature [the nature of an ideal man] cannot subdue it knows how to forget …" (Nietzsche 1997: 62–63).

suddenly halted with an archaic word. This style constitutes a perfect illustration of what Pauly described as the decadence of form: a situation in which the formal significantly prevails over the material, with the overall result of fragmentation, discontinuity, and chaos. An amusing mockery of this style is included in Arthur Machen's *The Hill of Dreams*, where tortuous sentences describe the self-inflicted physical torture of the decadent artist-as-a-martyr-of-style. In Machen's parody, decadent writer Lucian Taylor

> lay himself down on the bed of thorns and spines. Lying on his face, with the candle and the book before him, he would softly and tenderly repeat the praises of his dear, dear Annie, and as he turned over page after page, and saw the raised gold of the majuscules glow and flame in the candle-light, he pressed the thorns into his flesh. (Machen 1907: 30)

Travestied by Machen, this style was defended by Arthur Symons, who earnestly believed that genius had to be tainted with abnormality. In his "The decadent movement in literature," he famously described decadence as "a new and beautiful and interesting disease" (Symons 1893: 858). Moreover, Symons was anything but decadent in his life: his decadence was totally devoid of its sensational and scandalizing element — it was purely aesthetic, or formalistic. As humorously rendered by Arnold B. Sklare, Symons "was a hopeless puritan who sipped *vin rouge* with the guilt of one sinning against his Methodist upbringing in Cornwall" (Sklare 1951: 318). Unlike Beardsley and Wilde, who took from Pater whatever suited them in their extravagant lives, Symons remained faithful to Pater exclusively in the realm of aesthetics. He learnt from Pater the rules of impressionistic criticism — empiricism and reliance on personal judgement — an appreciation of fine style, and, as Sklare laconically but suggestively puts it, "no more" (Sklare, 318–319). Symons distilled from decadence the Decadent Movement. For him, it was a style of writing, a certain mannerism.

At this point, the distinctions outlined by Richard Drake are useful: referring to the work of Walter Binni, a twentieth-century Italian critic of decadence, Drake untangles "the confusion of decadence, decadentism, and decadent romanticism" (70) (precise as Binni's distinction is, the fourth element is still missing: this is the conceptualization of decadence as decadent classicism, or post-classicism).[12]

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[12] Consideration of the romantic and classical ancestry of decadence in Britain remains beyond the scope of this paper. However, to indicate the difficulty of the problem, a few approaches should be mentioned. In 1931, in his "Coole Park and Ballylee," Yeats would want to see the poets of his generation, that is, of decadence, as "the last romantics" (Yeats 1982: 275, v. 41). The association of decadence with romanticism was reinforced by Octavio Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (published in 1933). Also a contemporary critic, Jan B. Gordon calls decadence "the other face of romanticism" (Gordon 1979: 33). However, Beardsley (an illustrator of Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*) fits the description of a post-classicist, whereas Max Beerbohm would rather be described as "a classic." Further, on account of their fastidiousness about literary form, the poets of The Rhymers' Club (first labelled by Symons as decadents, and then as symbolists) would also be classicists. The problem of classical and romantic traditions in decadence is certainly complex, and it involves the consideration of two significant issues: the idea of nature and the concept of the self. For emphasis on the romantic

If we bracket off the reference to romanticism, Binni provides us with wording which is not common in English, and which allows us to keep distinctions clear in Polish and Italian, as "dekadencja" vs. "dekadentyzm" and "la decadenca" vs. "il decadentismo," of which the first indicates a cyclical decline and the latter refers to a movement in culture and aesthetics and introduces associations with pre-modernism.

The focus on the formal aspect, or on decadentism, allows us to emphasize an important feature typical of British Decadent Aestheticism: its alliance with painting, and not with music as might be suggested by the poetry of The Rhymers' Club, Pater's art theory and (on French and Italian ground) by Binni.[13] The poets of The Rhymers' Club (among them, Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson and Yeats) would import the French musical forms of *rondels* and *villanelles*. But they never liberated poetry from the regularity of metronome; that was the achievement of modernism. In their musicality they sought to realize the principle which Pater laid down in *The Renaissance*: that all art should "aspire towards the condition of music" (Pater 1998: 86). However, despite this assertion, literary decadence in its narrative forms practised by Pater and Wilde aligned itself not with music, but with painting. As indicated by the titles of their works — Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* and *The Sphinx Without the Secret: An Etching* — Pater and Wilde created literary pictures, portraits, and etchings. Indeed, Pater provided psychological sketches. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in turn, belongs to the late Victorian genre of the magic picture story (see Powell 1983). In both authors, the plots are feeble, so the reader is enmeshed in psychological states, moods and lengthy descriptions. The emphasis falls on a character: the narrative progresses through states of mind (or *Stimmungen*) rather than by logically connected events. Interestingly, this nineteenth-century portraiture — decadent and mannerist — prompts associations with the art of portraiture developed by the sixteenth-century Italian painters — mannerist and decadent. Indeed, portrait and self-portrait were the two genres in which Italian painters after Raphael, that is, after 1520, excelled themselves. Then perhaps it is not inappropriate to take advice on how to appreciate the formal aspects of decadence (whether in visual or narrative forms) from an art critic.

In his article on "[h]ow to enjoy [the] decadence" of the Italian mannerists, David F. Martin looks at the development of Italian painting to 1600 through the prism of an organic metaphor: it has a history which has gone through the archaic, classic and the mannerist (or decadent) stages, reflecting the phases of conception and growth, maturity, and decline. He sees Italian "[m]annerism [as] post-classic." In a phrase both echoing and reversing the metaphor of the Laios complex and

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feature of decadence, see Graham (1961). For criticism leaning towards emphasizing the decadent re-working of the classicist influence, see Buchen (1972).

[13] Binni saw "the Petrarch of Decadentism" in Mallarmé (qtd. in Drake, 73) whose poetry, a powerful influence on D'Annunzio, strived to emulate music.

echoing Nietzsche's criticism of the over-burdened memory of nineteenth-century decadence, he states that Italian decadence in painting is "a child of the classic which never forgets its parentage" (Martin 1959: 442). Mannerism is the fruition of the classical with the utmost emphasis put on the formal, as in the example discussed by Martin — in Pontormo's *Deposition*, a picture defying the classical rules of perspective, painted with gaudy colours, crowded with contorted figures, and accosting the viewer with theatrical expressions on the faces of the painted personae (Martin, 443). But Martin claims that, for all its faults, the picture has an aesthetic beauty, perhaps not on its own, but through a relationship to past tradition. This relationship is crucial. A proper enjoyment of a decadent picture requires viewing it in relation to its classical predecessors. In other words, the enjoyment of the mannerist picture depends on the viewer's ability to see it in the perspective of the classical: "the classic enriches Pontormo's form by providing depth, by giving it a context" (Martin, 445).

The very same pleasure — the pleasure of seeing the picture in its context — comes to a discerning admirer of Beardsley's drawings or Pater's narratives. Beardsley's seven-feet women with their swan-like necks can be seen as parodic versions of Edward Burne-Jones's willowy ladies. Pater's *portraits*, in turn, are a bric-a-brac of literary and philosophical motifs. His characters, like Pontormo's figures, are posed, unreal, strained to the point of grotesque. But it is not psychological realism (which is *not* the same as psychological truth) that we should seek in them. They rarely develop; rather, they sink deeper and deeper into their obsessions. In that sense, they are flat. They verge on allegories of the ideas they pursue. But if they are as flat as the figures in stained glass windows, they are also just as colourful. They are fanciful combinations of forms which have their classic predecessors. Such is, for instance, Pater's Duke Carl of Rosenmold: the figure is put together from the scraps of myths of Apollo and Balder, references to the Arthurian legends and to the biographies of Rubens, Winckelmann, mad Ludwig II and Goethe — all set in the perspective of the Hegelian triadic form of history.

Thus, decadence in its formal aspect — approaching the meaning of *il decadentismo* (or *dekadentyzm*) — embodies the history and drama of forms. Hence its mannerism, and hence its eclecticism. Admittedly, this bulk of incongruous formal inheritance would be deplorable if viewed from Nietzsche's philosophical position. But if we assume the analogy between Decadent Aestheticism and Italian decadence in painting, then the lesson gleaned from Martin's essay on "how to enjoy decadence" presents its benefits. British Decadence is appreciated despite its material aspect and for its dazzling variety of forms which it handed over to modernism. From this perspective, Pater's scene — the one opening this sketch, of the setting sun at the end of the day — discloses its full metaphorical potential (though obviously beyond Pater's intention): namely, in a metaphorical analogy, at the end of the 19th century in Britain, the fading glow of romanticism and the long radiance of classicism produced a chiaroscuro of elongated, grotesque or parodied forms.

Those shadows were long enough to reach into modernism, to touch upon the classicism of Hulme and to affect Eliot's literary theories and Joyce's infra-realism, thus defying the opinion that decadence is an epoch of decline and fortifying the view that, in a formal sense, it is a transition to the radically new.

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