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978-1-107-07932-8 - Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence

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Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

*The Codes of Decadence:
Modernism and Its Discontents*

On the first of January 1914, for the first number of *The Egoist*, which is arguably the first journal of a nascent literary modernism in England, Ezra Pound takes up the theme of *firstness* in introducing his group to London literary society. He is presenting these modernists of the 1910s, however, to a readership that still holds the memory of a preceding generation, the so-called decade of decadence, the 1890s. The rhetorical energy of the piece goes to differences. The oppositions are forcefully drawn:

“A generation came down to London resolved to speak as they wrote.” For all that disastrous decade men spoke with the balanced sentence. There was great awe in the world.

And then there came to London a generation that tries to write as it speaks – and these young men are termed petulant – a praise by faint condemnation?¹

The difference Pound is claiming is a truism of literary history now. He is emphasizing the poetics of vital voice in his own decade against the artifice of written literature among Nineties poets. Those were writers, following the conceit that Max Beerbohm used to describe the style of Walter Pater, who are supposed to have wrapped their every sentence in a shroud; they interred their words in the stylized ritual of their written English. That was a manner characterized by Latinate syntax and vocabulary, not by idiomatic directness. Pound’s assertion of his poets’ difference from the writerly Nineties, however, comes through a fragment of syntactical parallelism – “a generation came down to London,” “there came to London a generation” – that adapts the grammar of the generation who “spoke with the balanced sentence.” Is this a heckling echo? Or involuntary homage? Or both?

This ambiguity shows again in the next sentence, where he asserts the convention-dismaying freshness of his generation: “And in the face of this [the writerly Nineties] are we in the heat of our declining youth expected to

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stretch the one word *merde* over eighteen elaborate paragraphs?”² Once again, Pound sets his fellow revelers cavorting in a poetics of live speech, kicking their heels up against the artifice of the paragraphs written in the English fin de siècle. His protest carries an exemplary version of the literary temperament to which he is objecting, however: this sentence rises perfectly to its own rhetorical question and period. His complicity with the sensibility of the writerly Nineties appears to be as unshakeable as his challenge to it is voluble.

Another harmonic chord is struck in that last sentence: “the heat of our declining youth.” This figure recalls a signature conceit of the English Nineties. That was the generation Yeats would frame in his famous phrase as the “Tragic Generation,” whose tragic figure, imaged in the persons of Aubrey Beardsley and Ernest Dowson and Lionel Johnson, featured an artistic youth consumed in its first flush. This figure of genius dying young was of course not invented by Yeats. It is the signal image of memory, which catches this figure of ruined youth as the emblem of the time. There was indeed something about that decade, the last decade of the last century before the last century of the millennium, that framed a feeling of late or last days or, even, aftermath. This sense of an ending is registered most intensely where it touched the young: they are growing into their maturity as the century is winding down and, in that temporal imaginary, are being force-ripened into this early consummation. The strongest measure of the ongoing power of this figure shows as its poetry endures, even – or especially – as Pound ostensibly rejects the legacy of the decade that generated it.

For it is his legacy. And he demonstrates this prepossession as he reiterates that signature figure. He repeats and expands its theme in an adjacent phrase, where he turns the Nineties conceit of autumnal spring into one of energetic decline: “We have attained to a weariness more highly energised than the weariness of the glorious nineties, or at least more obviously volcanic.”³ Anticipating the explosive spirit of *Blast*, the journal of vorticist modernism whose first issue would come several months later, Pound may be trying to outrun the riddle of the Nineties generation, ramping up the vitalist side of the decadent poetics of enervating strengths. In doing so, however, he puts his formulation into a piece of periodic prose – “we have attained to a weariness more highly energised than the weariness of the glorious nineties, or at least . . .” – that is at least as elegantly and even languorously sustained as any period featured in the writerly art of the Nineties. Beyond a jejune vaunt, something more than the boast of a young modernism sowing its vocal oats in poetry, the polemic reads as a ritual of

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succession in which the identity of the predecessor, in being so heavily contested, is more intensely confirmed.

No less intensely, however, than obliquely. While Pound is obviously suppressing the legacy of the Nineties as a constitutive element in the art of his decade, the underlying connection emerges in his critical prose as a subtler music. This includes the semantics of syntax and a set of images as enigmatic as their now distant vintage, which is the two-decade-old crypt he is working in. These are the signals of a code. The “decadence” of the Nineties joins the modernism of the Teens, that is, but in cipher. This decadence is not just a contested predecessor, however. On the evidence of Pound’s exceptional efforts at deflection, it is obviously proscribed. Just so, it is re-inscribed into a set of alternative counters, where, if it is recognizable under certain signs, it has also been removed from the admitted view of direct sight.

This suppression extends into the scholarship of modernism in much of the subsequent century. The attitude and practice may be taken back to an even earlier moment in the history of literary modernism, which reads as one of the original instances of the encryption that is occurring so fluently in 1914. It is a story that reveals a motive action, in the understanding of modernist aesthetics in subsequent critical formulations, for writing decadence so forcibly out of the critical account. This is a history of critical misprision that I will be following in this introductory chapter. Although much of this chapter engages with questions of nomenclature, and builds an understanding of the otherwise elusive counter of “decadence” through its range of associations and attributed significances, this review is necessary for the work of an alternate literary history. In addition to providing a good deal more than nominal content to the word, it makes evident the threat which “decadence” presents to established understandings of modernity as well as developing conceptions of modernism. This is a threat that comprises but also exceeds the queerness which, in the conspicuous instance of Oscar Wilde, was attached to decadence as its most infamous condition and which, in our consideration, may be recovered in the greater complexity of its presence in the sensibility that decadence and modernism will be seen to share.

The process of evolving an identity and a set of institutional values for modernism in the history of twentieth-century literary criticism reveals a great deal at stake aesthetically and politically. The innovations with which modernism is customarily identified bring it into line equally and severally with revolutionary and progressive political temperaments. At various key points in the story, which I will be pinpointing, the partisan motives of

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particular critics exert extraordinary influence in developing its ideological affiliations. These forces join to produce a construction of modernism against which the sensibility of “decadence” sets an equally elementary opposition, right – or wrong – from the start. Those understandings may have been modified over the last several decades, but the absence that decadence occupies in the formative story has never been filled in with the import it originally owns. This is sufficiently significant to have warranted all the proscription it undergoes in this longer story, beginning already at the turn of the twentieth century.

1. Displacements

This event is the publication, in 1899, of Arthur Symons’s *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which presents the first compendium in English literary criticism of the major writing of the European fin de siècle. Under this title, Symons’s book will be hailed for more than a century as the hallmark volume for the inception as well as the understanding of modernist poetics. Some later readers may be unaware, and others may have forgotten, that this book represents an expansion and re-titling of Symons’s 1893 essay, “The Decadent Movement in Literature.” This precedent text reveals an internal history to Symons’s conception and representation of “the symbolist movement,” one that is fraught with second thoughts and the super-scriptions they entail. It exposes a set of tensions in the developing conceptions of the origins of modernist poetry, and it points to a legacy of avoidance and deflection in the critical tradition stemming from it. The import of these developments may be framed through an understanding of the character and significance of this change in nomenclature.

“The Decadent Movement in Literature” takes decadence as the comprehensive identity for the most important work in the fin-de-siècle period. It acknowledges the reality of Impressionism and Symbolism as configurations of interest, but it makes these “isms” subsequent to decadence in development and subsidiary in significance. In this array, “decadence” serves equally as a term for an historical period and an imaginative attitude, which emerge jointly from a sense of the lateness of contemporary time. Thus decadence demonstrates “all the qualities that mark the end of great periods, the qualities that we find in the Greek, the Latin, decadence: an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity.” In literary expression, this “*maladie fin de siècle*” eventuates in a style which Symons represents in critical metaphors of decay that are strongly turned: here a

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verbal texture “high-flavoured and spotted with corruption,” there a “disease of form,” everywhere the signs of “a civilization grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid, for relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or in conduct.” He traces these characteristics through a range of famous and not so famous authors, culminating in verse in Paul Verlaine’s poetry and in fiction in J. K. Huysmans’ novel *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*, 1884), which, as Symons is intent to demonstrate, is the “one exceptional achievement” of both its author and the sensibility of decadence that it exemplifies.⁴

Without specific reference to this essay in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Symons presents the epochal phenomena of his earlier construction as “something which is vaguely called Decadence.” He now faults this term as being “rarely used with any precise meaning”; accordingly, he is now replacing it with “Symbolism.” He adds several figures to the census of writers he has included in “The Decadent Movement,” most notably Arthur Rimbaud and Jules Laforgue, but the crucial point to mark is the new and indeed antithetical emphases that the change in nomenclature is bringing to the same figures. Among these, Verlaine and Huysmans have been most remarkably transformed. Where Verlaine once evidenced the “exquisite depravity” that provides the establishing category of interest in decadent writing, he has now been put on a course of purgatorial suffering and spiritual improvement, where all his work is seen as a constant “struggling towards at least an ideal of spiritual consolation”; the fact that the French poet died little more than two years after “The Decadent Movement” was published seems to prescribe a very steep learning curve for this major reorientation. The same change shows in the chapter “The Later Huysmans” in *The Symbolist Movement*, which removes *À Rebours* from significant account. Huysmans’ later conversion to Roman Catholicism is now posited by Symons as the defining endpoint of his career, subjoining all the earlier fiction into a developmental narrative to that event and focusing attention on novels which, in no uncertain terms in the earlier essay, he has relegated to insignificance (where they mostly remain). This critical emphasis on spirituality picks up one aspect in the sensibility of decadence, where, in Symons’s earlier account, the feeling of reprobation works in consort and contrast with some notion of the potential – usually just a potential – for redemption. In 1899, however, this spirituality becomes the whole story: in his “Conclusion,” Symons rigidifies it into a “doctrine of Mysticism” and presents it as nothing less than an imperative of absolute value for his chosen authors. And where the term “Symbolism” involves an invocatory concept of some “unseen world” that

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“is no longer a dream,” which will replace “a visible world that is no longer a reality,” this term configures a good deal less “precise meaning” than the now disapproved “decadence,” which once owned the assurance at least of his own emphatic tropes.⁵ With this change of names, however, Symons’s critical account has taken the character of major value in his chosen authors and changed it, utterly.

W. B. Yeats, it may be readily discerned, provided the impetus for this renaming. The dedication of the book to Symons’s new poetic mentor suggests an allegiance as intense and comprehensive as the homage is (still uncomfortably) sycophantic.⁶ The local motives and profounder consequences of this change in nomenclature have yet to be explored. The motivating circumstances will be engaged at length in my first chapter, where Yeats’s growing interest in Irish poetic nationalism and his concomitant involvement with the creative doctrines of the symbolic will be seen to be displacing the clichéd elements of an older decadence, its stylized deliquescence most obviously. The influence of this development on Symons’s critical book will show most strikingly in the parallel narrative of his own poetic development, which includes some fairly bad imitations of the Irish poet. Ruefully humorous as it may be, this secondhand verse proves to be worth reading for assurance of where the power actually lay in this relationship. The important part of this story is not Symons’s bringing *Symbolisme* to Yeats, as the Irish poet occasionally claimed.⁷ It was the Irish poet who brought his emergent concern with national activism in literature to Symons’s original interest in the French material – and so occasioned the renaming of the literary movement that, under the revised title of the book, would provide the main reference in subsequent literary histories for an original identity of modernist poetics.⁸

In order to put this construction of subsequent literary history into perspective, it needs to be recognized that Symons was polarizing *symbolisme* and *décadence* for reasons that are identifiably and polemically his (and Yeats’s) own. Each of these terms corresponds with distinct literary values, and it will be the work of this Introduction to spell out what is at stake critically with their difference, but the poetic coteries originally associated with *décadence* and *symbolisme* in fin-de-siècle Paris actually overlapped. As Patrick McGuinness has documented, the two terms were conferred, in turn and even simultaneously, on the same authors. These appellations were brandished equally as weapons and blazons in the heady contests for dominance among individual talents seeking the greater strength of a group, even as their members routinely changed sides. In the longer run, and largely because of greater aptitudes in self-promotion, the writers

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identified as symbolists claimed that greater strength, and took on the mantle of advanced guard philosophers of artistic novelty.

This process is recalled by one of the primary players in the scene of the Parisian fin de siècle, Remy de Gourmont, in a journalistic series of 1910–1911, *Souvenirs du Symbolisme*. In one of these pieces, he characterizes the philosophical warrant of the *symbolistes* as self-conferred and somewhat pretentious and dubious. He opposes it to the stronger sentiment of *décadence* in the earlier days of this period, when, if this feeling was both compelled and limited by the youthful inexperience of self-identified *décadents*, the presentiment of decay remained in place as the more enduring undercurrent at its time.⁹ Accordingly, in another one of these pieces, he confesses his regret at the brief lifespan of the journal *Le Décadent* and explains it as the relative lack of savoir-faire in literary commerce when compared to the more seasoned *symbolistes*.¹⁰ Nonetheless, both as a reason and a result of this history, in “the Symbolist version of events” that become the dominant story, “Symbolism attains the status of a theory,” as McGuinness correctly puts it, “whereas Decadence is perceived as a mood.”¹¹

Further to these characterizations: as a “philosophy” or “theory,” symbolism tends to live somewhat independently of the actual poems associated with it, and so encodes a sense of creative possibility for a new literature, which, in existing literary histories, becomes a formative force for the modernism of the subsequent century. Contrarily, in the certain and concrete terms of Symons’s own critical tropes, decadence centers a declaratively emphatic “mood,” one that captures a sense of endings rather than beginnings, and so needs to be separated from those legends of potentiality that attend the understandings of modernism. As an overview of the Parisian fin de siècle suggests, however, decadence and symbolism need to be understood as categories of literary polemic rather than adversarial characters in the actual practice of writing. This is to say: there was an intense sense of possibility and novelty in the air, but it was not detachable from the feeling of current civilization being at its end and a concomitant sense of dissolution in norms ranging from the literary to the moral. And if, underwriting a theory of novelty, the sensibility identified with the term *symbolisme* has dominated the origin story of modernism, an alternate story comes with an emphasis on the equally important mood of decadence. This needs to be seen as an equal contributor to the inventiveness of modernism, but it has been written out of our account of these developments by the victory symbolism enjoyed in that original local struggle. Recovering the substantial force and enduring importance of this mood in literary modernism is the project of this book, which, to begin with, needs to acknowledge

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and account for the extraordinary power that the term “symbolism” has been given in the literary history of modernism following Symons.

This power comes out of certain readings of the term “symbol,” which, from the beginning, provided a capacious indicator indeed. As the artists originally associated with symbolism usually insisted, the operative sense of “symbol” veered away from and even defied the idea of a restrictive sense in the act of symbolization. Verlaine’s famous saying – *De la musique avant toute chose*, “Music first and foremost!”¹² – takes the action of poetic language to be not the representation of some prior reference, but the direct presentation of the poem’s own sensations and impressions. The poet handles the verbal counters as centers of immediate sensory experience, as material of musical plastic, where the acoustic token prompts those imaginative associations which encompass the multiplicity of possible meanings that “symbol” claims as namesake for the school. A different and in fact contrary quality is posited for the symbol by Symons. Following Yeats’s own developing interest in occultism, Symons elaborates an imaginative understanding out of a Swedenborgian system of *correspondances*, where natural details are perceived as a mirror or echo of a supernal metaphysical order. This is no system of misty indeterminateness for Symons. Incorporating this quotation from Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, Symons demands “some embodiment and revelation of the Infinite; the Infinite is made to blend itself with the Finite, to stand visible, and as it were, attainable there.”¹³ Symons goes on to invoke this “doctrine” of symbolic embodiment of spiritual essences for a number of his authors, most notably for Baudelaire (included in a 1919 edition) and Gérard de Nerval and Verlaine.¹⁴ As any focused reading of this literature will reveal, however, and as Walter Benjamin pointed out in his writings on Baudelaire, a Swedenborgian scheme reads in practice more like a system *manqué*.¹⁵ It affords a rhetorical opportunity most often for the representation of the *loss* of symbolic meaning in the poetic imaginary, where the barrenness of natural fact is all the more poignantly lyricized.

Given such an open range of application, the term “symbolism” acquires a remarkably adaptive power in the subsequent history of literary criticism. As we will see in a number of key instances, symbolism becomes a marker of possibility, an invocatory concept, all in all, an explanatory paradigm for nothing less than the immense inventiveness of modernism itself. It is assisted in this wise by the mystic significance Symons has imputed to it, which is unhindered by the doctrine he tries otherwise to turn it into. So, where *décadence* once enjoyed an equal share with *symbolisme* in the making of the inventiveness of fin-de-siècle literature, subsequent constructions

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tend to disaggregate the pair. They attach the inventiveness of modernism to the theory of novelty in symbolism and detach it from the mood of decadence as the more powerful undercurrent of that time. For reasons that range from the political to the moral, as we will see, they elaborate and in fact radicalize the difference, turning *symbolisme* into the better angel of its erstwhile twin, its increasingly disapproved double.

The token power of *symbolisme* may be accounted for in good part, moreover, by the pressure of the term it is attempting to suppress. An advance indicator of this threat, and an early example of the process of subverting it by renaming it, comes in the first years of the decade ending with the first publication of Symons's book. It appears already in the set of revisions that Oscar Wilde performed on the first published edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891). Wittily, certainly cynically, Wilde is already manipulating the sensitivities that attend the term *decadence*, which owned a signal role in the first version. He is responding to reviews, which turned their dislike of his particular story into a more explicit and intense contempt for the general sensibility of decadence, of which the novel was designated a most objectionable representative. Thus, in referencing the literary convention that lies behind the infamous "yellow book" that Lord Henry has given Dorian (as guide to his downfall), he changes "the French school of *Décadents*" to "the French school of *Symbolistes*." In descriptive details that make this fatal book indistinguishable from Huysmans' *À Rebours*, the work Symons would call "the breviary of the Decadence,"¹⁶ the language is otherwise substantially unaltered across a long paragraph of rich depiction. Wilde then complements this shift from "*Décadents*" to "*Symbolistes*" with another winking change, which alters a "dangerous novel" in 1890 to a "wonderful novel" in 1891.¹⁷ The change of the keyword alone makes for an absolute difference in the attributed value and assigned character of its referent.

In his uniquely guileful way, however, Wilde takes back more than he gives away in this exchange. The chapters he adds for the later version surround that now missing word with an array of evidence as readily assignable to "decadence" as that word itself remains persistently unsaid. In doing so, he reveals the subsidiary power and heavier menace of the "decadence" that "symbolism" nominally, but only nominally, overrules. And so Wilde establishes in advance the character of the enemy and threat which Symons – and later critics – will be suppressing in that term.

In the first of those added chapters (III in the 1891 edition), Wilde offers "the story of Dorian Gray's parentage," which features a mother of aristocratic lineage fallen into a marriage of low and mean degree (*PDG*, 31–34).

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This genealogy provides a genetic determination for the narrative fiction of the book, specifically, for the *decadence* (the middle syllable preserves the Latin etymology for “fall”) Dorian will have fallen into (and through) by the end. Thus the story becomes one of those determinist fictions that subsequent critics will take as the evidence of the undue pessimism of decadence, which marks its own special extremity to the literary school and behavioral laboratory of naturalism.

In these added chapters there are also extensive references to the melodrama and music hall venues of Dorian’s one-time romantic interest, Sybil Vane. Here is the living theater of English “decadence” in the conventional sense of behavioral practices and scandalous characters (Symons will have furthered these associations considerably in his personal life). This is a turn for the worse that Wilde stages in this scene, where the sentimental connection we expect between the musical heroine Sybil and her faithful brother James suggests something rather different, as forbidden indeed as incestuous love: “In Sybil’s own room they parted. There was jealousy in the lad’s heart, and a fierce murderous hatred of the stranger who, as it seemed to him, had come between them. Yet, when her arms were flung round his neck, and her fingers strayed through his hair, he softened, and kissed her with real affection” (*PDG*, 61). The usually coyly moralizing voice of Wilde’s narrator dissolves ultimately into an indulgence of this underworld. Its density of presence in the revised text is significant. Its supposedly subsidiary place in the moral economy of the culture Wilde is representing in this supposedly cleaned-up version becomes something more of a majority power through the added volume it occupies.

Then, in the third of the four chapters added in 1891, a conversation between Lord Henry and the Duchess of Monmouth on the condition of England demonstrates the evidence of the “decadence” which, as a word, appears in a form as truncated as the reference is abrupt:

She shook her head. “I believe in the race,” she cried.

“It represents the survival of the pushing.”

“It has development.”

“Decay fascinates me more.”

“What of Art?” she asked.

“It is a malady.”

(*PDG*, 162)

Parodying the now familiar language of the “survival of the fittest,” Henry objects to the ethic of social Darwinism in a fashion characteristic of decadents, who, in all accounts, would opt out of that none-too-artful struggle. Thus the conversation moves toward its signal word and