Introduction
The Fighting Nineties: The Age of the Critical Function

In December 1928, the Leicester Galleries hosted an exhibition of the works of Max Beerbohm titled "Ghosts." The exhibition included caricatures of Oscar Wilde, Lord Queensberry, John Lane, Walter Pater, Henry Harland, and Aubrey Beardsley. In the exhibition catalog, Beerbohm characteristically apologizes for his own anachronism, feigning embarrassment at the irrelevance of his work to the modern moment. He lives in Italy now, he notes, and it's very hard to keep up: "So very many people with faces and figures unknown to me have meanwhile become famous that I have abandoned all hope of being 'topical.'"[1] Nevertheless, he suggests that perhaps the visitors to the gallery won't mind "looking at some people who flourished in past days."[2] He first addresses his fellow specters from the Victorian era: "Those of you who are as old as – or almost (and even that is saying much) as old as I – will perhaps like to have the chords of memory struck by the drawings on these walls."[3] But he continues to suggest that "even the young . . . may conceivably feel a slight thrill" while contemplating the "ghosts" in the gallery.[4] "I have noticed," he writes, "that the young in this era have what those in my own era hadn't: a not unfriendly interest in the more or less immediate past."[5]

This "not unfriendly interest" in the late-Victorian period had been on the rise since the publication of Holbrook Jackson's well-received *The Eighteen-Nineties* in 1913. In fact, Beerbohm's caricature of a few years earlier, his well-known *Some Persons of "the Nineties,"* speaks directly to this revival of interest in the literary figures of the fin de siècle (Figure I.1). While we often turn to this image now out of interest in the figures represented, the topic of this work is not the 1890s per se but the attraction they held for the critics of the 1910s and 1920s. The full caption reads, "Some Persons of 'the Nineties' Little imagining, despite their Proper Pride and their Ornamental Aspect, how much they will interest Mr. Holbrook Jackson and Mr. Osbert Burdett."[6] Burdett's *The Beardsley*

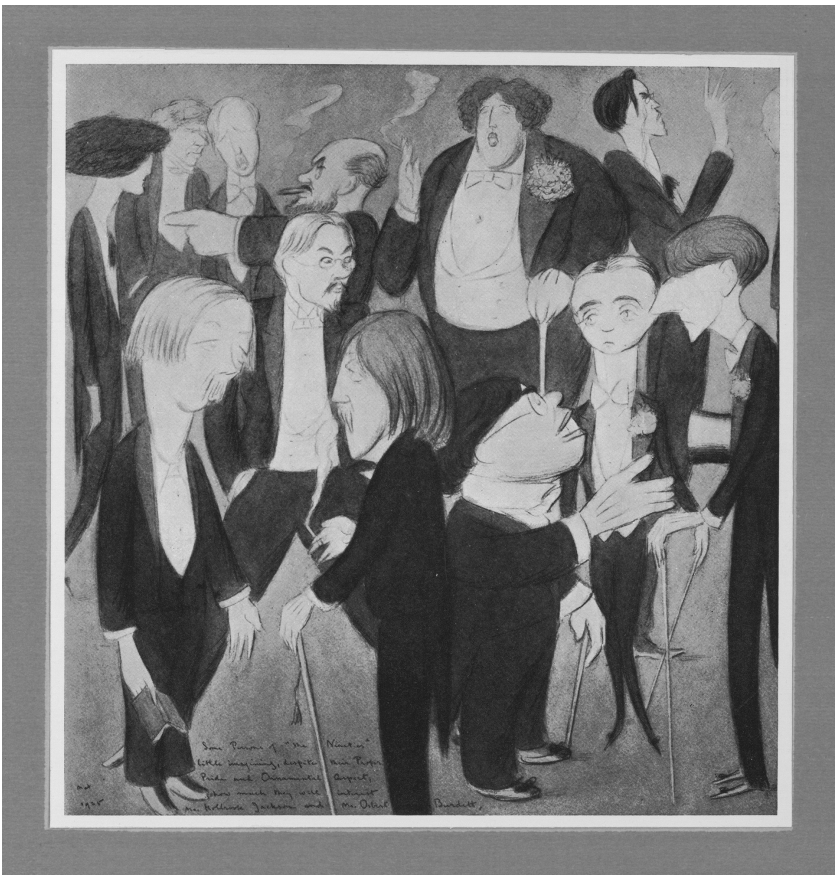

Figure I.1. Max Beerbohm, *Some Persons of "the Nineties,"* from *Observations*, 1925. Left to right: Richard Le Gallienne, Walter Sickert, Arthur Symons, George Moore, Henry Harland, John Davidson, Charles Conder, Oscar Wilde, Will Rothenstein, Max Beerbohm, W. B. Yeats, Aubrey Beardsley, and Enoch Soames. © Estate of Max Beerbohm. Reproduced courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

Period, which appeared in 1925, and Jackson's *The Eighteen-Nineties* presumably stand in here for a whole host of critical texts on the fin de siècle that appeared in the 1910s and 1920s, such as W. G. Blaikie-Murdock's *The Renaissance of the Nineties* (1911), Arthur Ransome's *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (1913), Elizabeth Pennell's *Nights: Rome and Venice in the Aesthetic Eighties, London and Paris in the Fighting Nineties* (1916), Bernard Muddiman's *The Men of the Nineties* (1920), Bohun Lynch's *Max Beerbohm*

in Perspective (1921), Joseph Pennell's *Aubrey Beardsley and the Other Men of the Nineties* (1924), and Richard Le Gallienne's *The Romantic Nineties* (1925), to name a few. Even the excessively proud dandies of the fin de siècle might have been surprised, Beerbohm suggests, by the alacrity with which future generations set about canonizing their set.

As the title of Beerbohm's exhibition suggests, the specter of the 1890s truly haunted the early twentieth century. In this book, I investigate what it was about the fin de siècle that seemed so appealing and so useful during the early twentieth century, and I focus in particular on the turn to late-Victorian Decadence in the literature and art of the period. In his *Men of the Nineties*, Bernard Muddiman refers to the decade as the "age of the critical function."[7] Many of the authors and artists on whom I focus were drawn to the "critical function" of Decadence. The rebellious spirit of critique associated with this movement operated as a model of enthusiasm that remained at the same time skeptical and apart, which, in its immunity to unthinking loyalties or allegiances, retained the capacity for clear perception. Practicing Decadence at a historical distance compounded its detachment and its capacity for critique. For many practitioners of post-Victorian Decadence, reinvigorating a past aesthetic operated as a method for subtly communicating distaste for the methods and values of the present. During the early decades of the twentieth century, surviving members of the late-Victorian Decadent Movement highlighted their connections to the fin de siècle, and younger men and women revived late-Victorian aesthetic practices or organized communities around the appreciation of late-Victorian figures. Affiliating themselves with the fin de siècle seemed to promise refined insight into the politics and problems besetting the initial decades of the twentieth century. Meditating on the late-Victorian period, bringing the period's practices to bear on the present, yielded insulation from the modern moment, an illuminating point of comparison, and critical detachment from the contemporary. The critical function of Decadence was, it seems, multiplied and reinforced in the twentieth century.

Attending to the presence of post-Victorian Decadence in what we consider to be the modernist period allows us to see yesterday's avant-garde in the process of becoming an old guard, an aesthetic in its twilight coming to an understanding of the peculiar kinds of cultural critique that this temporally marginal position enables. The authors and artists on whom this study focuses posited themselves as out of place and of the past, as marginal or outsider figures for whom twentieth-century modernity was tremendously disappointing. However, they did not turn entirely from the present. They relied on aestheticist and Decadent strategies to respond

to the political problems of the period. Post-Victorian Decadents wrote, thought, and drew alongside the modernists, but they carefully positioned themselves as separate from the energies and appetites of the twentieth century. They stubbornly insisted on their own disconnectedness from the era, representing themselves as late-Victorian time travelers, while continuing to play a vital and important role in the intellectual and political culture of the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s.

Although I have chosen to use the term *Decadent* to describe the set of authors and artists with whom I am dealing, I do so with an acute sense of the limitations associated with that term. Early-twentieth-century critics interested in the 1890s were extremely hesitant to use the term because of its negative connotations, and the majority of the figures under discussion here are slippery, skeptical individuals who would have hesitated to identify themselves with any one movement in particular. In addition, the term *Decadence* has proven itself notoriously difficult to define. The "fuzziness" of the term, as Jonathan Freedman has argued, "exceeds that of even 'aestheticism' itself."[8] As Matthew Potolsky notes, Decadence "never adumbrated a single, unified doctrine," and the figures and practices we have come to identify with Decadence are incredibly diverse.[9] This project, in fact, foregrounds the political and aesthetic diversity of Decadence, acknowledging that it offered progressive models of cosmopolitanism and sexual dissidence while at the same time often reinforcing an aristocratic ethos or disseminating troubling ideas about self-sacrifice. Furthermore, as I emphasize, Decadence could look very different when practiced with an Irish inflection or at a South African remove. It would perhaps be more appropriate to refer to Decadence as a loosely connected set of aesthetic practices and political postures rather than as a wholly unified or clearly demarcated movement.

Nevertheless, I have chosen to deploy the term to designate the later phase of aestheticism, the aestheticism of the 1890s, and the individuals and practices associated with that later phase of aestheticism, such as Max Beerbohm, Vernon Lee, Oscar Wilde, Baron Corvo, the Yeats of the fin de siècle, Aubrey Beardsley, the Yellow Book circle, dandyism, camp aesthetics, and detachment. I find the term useful to describe figures who were linked in the cultural imagination to the fin de siècle and who, moreover, advertised and reinforced that sense of association between themselves and the aestheticism of the Yellow Nineties. Their work extended beyond the boundaries of the late-Victorian period while constantly recalling and referencing their connections with that period. I am using the term strategically to unite a set of figures associated with a particular, late-nineteenth-century

moment in the history of aestheticism while at the same time calling attention to the fact that these figures continued to play a prominent role in the cultural landscape of the early twentieth century. My reliance on the term to reference a distinct period in the history of aestheticism might in that sense seem contradictory. However, I wish to make the point that the aestheticism of the 1890s performed a specific set of functions in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. It was the aestheticism of the fin de siècle, what we might refer to as "Decadent aestheticism," that seemed at once exotic and within reach during the early twentieth century, close enough that it might still be contacted or that its spirits might still walk the earth. With this in mind, I use the term to at once make note of and undo Decadence's association with a specific moment in time, and, while I deploy the term, I do so with an awareness of its murkiness and with the desire to further diversify the range of practices and figures we might refer to as Decadent.

Post-Victorian writers and painters often turned to Decadence in the hopes of finding an antidote to the chauvinism of wartime and the despair of the interwar period. Decadent satire and cosmopolitan aestheticism presented artists with appealing alternatives to jingoistic enthusiasms, enthusiasms lacking the critical function altogether. Many post-Victorian Decadents foregrounded their connections to the previous century to signal their dissatisfaction with the escalating militarism and aggression of the period, and they used anachronistic, "outmoded" late-Victorian aesthetic strategies to fashion a peculiar political voice that was at once highly engaged and purposefully marginal. Vernon Lee's Paterian critique of jingoistic biosociology in the years following World War I and Max Beerbohm's dandyish radio broadcasts during World War II relied on a sense of connectedness to the late-Victorian past to theorize a way out of early-twentieth-century violence. However, although post-Victorian Decadence was certainly useful in revising conceptions of international conflict and national identity, this was only one of the many ways in which late-Victorian aesthetics and ideas were implemented during the early twentieth century. The revival of the 1890s facilitated responses to most of the highly vexed issues of the period, allowing authors and artists to intervene in debates about war, jingoism, and pacifism as well as conversations concerning the rise of Labour, the question of women's sexual freedom, and changing conceptions of sexual and gender identities. Post-Victorian Decadents brought to these debates a uniquely anachronistic yet distinctly modern perspective, drawing on the thinking of their fin-de-siècle peers and precursors to craft a peculiarly late-Victorian set of responses to a distinctly non-Victorian set of historical conditions.

I. The Boom in Yellow: The Fin de Siècle at the Debut de Siècle

Conventional visions of periodization along with modernist dismissals of the fin de siècle have obscured from view the persistence of Decadence in the twentieth century. By 1914, Wyndham Lewis was insisting that Decadence had been *BLAST*ed into the past and rendered passé by the emergence of new avant-gardes. Archival evidence tells a different story, revealing that Decadence remained vibrant and visible throughout the modernist moment. The specters of the Yellow Nineties haunted the theaters, the galleries, the bookstalls, the cinemas, and the airwaves, operating as a divergent strain of modernism that exercised a remarkable draw on the twentieth-century cultural imagination.

Wilde in particular seemed like he might reappear at any second. The *Los Angeles Times* devoted a full page to sightings of Wilde on the West Coast in 1908, and in 1913, Arthur Cravan, Wilde's nephew, published a posthumous interview with his uncle in his Surrealist magazine *Maintenant*.[10] In 1913, a *New York Times* correspondent investigated the rumors that Wilde was still alive and determined that "no one is now in Paris who saw Wilde dead."[11] In 1918, the "Cult of the Clitoris" trial demonstrated clearly Wilde's continuing capacity to cause a stir from beyond the grave. The dancer Maud Allan had contracted to appear in private performances of *Salome* (1891) at J. T. Grein's Independent Theatre, and news of the performances attracted the ire of the conservative politician Noel Pemberton Billing. Billing believed that Germans, wishing to "[exterminate] the race" by introducing homosexual practices, were blackmailing forty-seven thousand "British perverts" and exerting dangerous influence over England in wartime. He accused Allan of being an associate of the conspirators and a member of the "Cult of the Clitoris," "implying that she was a lesbian and that her performance in Wilde's play would promote sexual perversion among its vulnerable wartime audience, thereby opening 'fruitful fields for espionage.'"[12] Allan in turn sued Billing for libel. The case attracted a great deal of publicity and even drew Lord Alfred Douglas to the stand to testify in support of Billing. Jodie Medd refers to the case as "perhaps the most sensational scandal in Britain during World War I."[13] One of the period's most alarming and salacious scandals centered around a play from the fin de siècle, a piece of Decadent drama that seemed capable of endangering national security, demonstrating how much Wilde maintained his ability to disrupt and scandalize in the early twentieth century.

While in the eyes of Billing, Wilde's ghost posed a threat to national security, he was also a source of cultural capital for the burgeoning film

industry. Numerous prestige productions of Wilde's work appeared in the 1910s as part of the film industry's efforts to legitimize cinema by linking it to literature and theatre. Philips Smalley's 1913 production of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), for example, was written by Lois Weber, a woman film pioneer who went on to play a significant role in Universal's prestige productions. The "aesthetic" qualities of Wilde's work could apparently endow the emergent realm of cinema with high-art aura. More high-profile and heavily marketed adaptations of Wilde's plays premiered in the 1920s. Ernst Lubitsch's 1925 adaptation of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893) was greeted with tremendous enthusiasm. This reception was certainly a reflection of Lubitsch's bankable reputation, as indicated by the *New York Sun*'s description of the work as a "directorial triumph."[14] However, Wilde's reputation also played a significant role in the warm reception of the film. The *New York American* described the film as "brilliant with little darting shafts of wit, almost as piercing as the words of Oscar Wilde."[15] A review in the *Los Angeles Times* noted that Wilde's "epigrams have retained their magnetic sparkle even today, though the plays were written before the close of the Victorian era."[16] This is not to say that Hollywood disregarded Wilde's sexual dissidence and his capacity to generate scandal. Nazimova's production of *Salomé* with its Beardsleyesque costumes and set design appeared in 1923, and United Artists marketed the film as "an orgy of sex and sin," while *Photoplay* warned audiences that the movie was "bizarre."[17] Wilde's recently rehabilitated reputation as a significant literary figure made his work attractive to a medium in pursuit of legitimacy, but his capacity to shock had just as much to do with his appeal to Hollywood directors and producers.

It was not only Wilde's ghost that continued to walk the earth. In addition to Max Beerbohm's series of well-received exhibits at the Leicester Galleries in the 1920s, which either satisfied or provoked the escalating desire for late Victoriana, and Vernon Lee's persistent presence in public intellectual discourse into the 1930s, Ada Leverson continued to publish novels populated with male and female dandies and peppered with Wildean aphorisms during the 1900s and 1910s. Leverson had first made a name for herself in the 1890s publishing short fiction, sketches, and parodies of aestheticism in periodicals such as *Punch* and the *Yellow Book*.[18] She was close friends with Beerbohm and was a particularly loyal friend to Wilde, and the work that brought her recognition during the late nineteenth century is very much in conversation with theirs. However, while Leverson's aesthetic is definitively fin de siècle, she reached the height of her popularity with a series of novels that appeared in the early twentieth century. Leverson's

novels advertise themselves clearly as poised between two periods, inflected by Decadent style while well aware of more recent aesthetic developments. The characters themselves seem to hover between the Victorian and the modern. Edith Ottley, who appears in *Love's Shadow* (1908), *Tenterhooks* (1912), and *Love at Second Sight* (1916), is said by some people to be "like a Sargent, others called her a post-impressionist type."[19] While Edith's close friend Vincy Wenham Vincy is clearly a dandy or "what used to be called an exquisite," he has "in art an extraordinary taste for brutality and violence, and his rooms were covered with pictures by Futurists and Cubists, wild studies by wild men from Tahiti and a curious collection of savage ornaments and weapons."[20] Vincy was inspired by a close friend of Wilde's and Leverson's, Reggie Turner, and he reads as a remnant of the 1890s, yet he greets the coming of the modern with enthusiasm, lending Edith copies of *Rhythm* to "convert her to Post-Impressionism."[21] Leverson's novels reveal Decadent figures thriving in the post-Victorian period, able and willing to engage with modernism, while at the same time exhibiting a continued preference for the refinement and wit of the previous age. In discussing the Futurists, Aylmer Ross, Edith's beloved, notes, "I prefer the pose of depression and pessimism to that of bullying and high spirits. When the affected young poet pretended to be used up and worn out, one knew there was vitality under it all. But when I see a cheerful young man shrieking about how full of life he is, banging on a drum, and blowing on a tin trumpet, and speaking of his good spirits, it depresses me."[22] He concludes that "the modern poseurs aren't so good as the old ones. Odle is not so clever as Beardsley."[23] Leverson's novels as well as the characters within them take pains to indicate their awareness of contemporary artistic trends while continuing to pay tribute to the recent, fin-de-siècle past. Her works of the early twentieth century reveal a world in which Decadence and modernism thrive simultaneously as equally vital and viable aesthetic choices.

The artist and book designer Charles Ricketts, who had illustrated Wilde's works in the 1890s, similarly kept Decadence before the twentieth-century public eye in his designs for the stage. Although Kenneth Clark referred to him as the "quintessence of the nineties," and he considered himself a "post-Raphaelite," Ricketts had a vibrant and successful career as a stage designer for three decades after the century turned.[24] Ricketts's costume designs, with their exaggerated silhouettes and intricate patterns, resemble Beardsley illustrations decorated with a Decadent palette of rich and highly symbolic color. In 1906, the Literary Theatre Society staged

Wilde's *Salome* along with *A Florentine Tragedy*, and the synopsis of dresses Ricketts designed for *Salome* reads like a piece of Decadent verse:

> Salome, dressed in a mist rising by moonlight, with a train of blue and black moths.
> Herodias, in a peacock train of Dahlias and a horned tiara.
> Herod, is robed in silver and blue lined with flame decorated with griffons, sphinxes and angels.
> The scene is all blue on blue.[25]

Roger Fry's response to the production indicates that Ricketts's designs spoke successfully across the Victorian/modern divide: "C. Ricketts did the staging with ideas of colour that surpassed belief. I've never seen anything so beautiful on the stage."[26] Into the 1910s and 1920s, Ricketts continued to inflect his costume and set designs with Decadent imagery, peacock feathers and jewels, exposed flesh and elaborate headdresses, and he worked with some of the most innovative twentieth-century playwrights, designing for Yeats and Synge and Shaw, bringing to his productions of the "new" drama of the twentieth century an opulent, fin-de-siècle sensibility.

Figures such as Leverson and Ricketts ensured that Decadence remained a vital part of the cultural conversation in the early twentieth century, but for those who could no longer speak for themselves, a new generation of post-Victorian dandies operated as advocates and representatives, reanimating the aesthetic of the Yellow Nineties for the 1920s. Harold Acton and Brian Howard drew on the Decadence of the fin de siècle as they developed their own modernist mode of dandyism, first at Eton, and then at Oxford. At Eton, they established the Cremorne Club and drew up a manifesto stating, "Life is an Art, and is to be encountered with a buttonhole of flowers. Members of the Cremorne Club must believe in the interpretation and appreciation of life as evolved in 1890."[27] Honorary members of the club included Beardsley, Wilde, Symons, and Beerbohm. Although, as Martin Green notes, Acton and Howard often made scornful remarks about the dandies of the fin de siècle, whom they felt had been defeated, they also "knew that they were the children of the 90s."[28] Their very public performances of dandyism and Decadence at Oxford, at events organized by the Sitwells, and in the pages of the new "little magazines" ensured that the 1890s remained a part of avant-garde conversation during the 1920s.

Of all the post-Victorian dandies, however, Ronald Firbank was the most excessive in his performance of a Decadent persona. As Martin Green notes,

Osbert Sitwell first began to notice Firbank in 1912 at ballets, concerts, and exhibits, "a very odd-looking man . . . who giggled and hid his painted face behind his hand, talked in a high-pitched voice, and tripped along as if hoping to disappear."[29] Like Acton and Howard, Firbank announced and advertised his affiliation with the Yellow Nineties at Oxford and at the Sitwells' parties, and he sought out surviving remnants of the 1890s, corresponding with Lord Alfred Douglas, befriending Wilde's son Vyvyan Holland at Oxford, and requesting from Holland in turn an introduction to Ada Leverson. (This first engagement did not go well. Leverson did not answer the doorbell when they arrived for the appointment, and Firbank decided she must have seen through the window and disliked the mauve pants he put on for her. He consequently cut the pants into pieces and threw them into the fire.[30]) His fascination with the fin de siècle registers clearly in the unique and challenging style of his works, in which modernist obscurity and innovation are integrated with the purple prose of aestheticism. As Brigid Brophy states, "Firbank's writings are studded with images from Wilde's: frequent wayside shrines, at which Firbank's genuflections in passing continually placed him again under the protection of his literary saint."[31] This practice of returning to, rethinking, and revising Wilde is evident, as Brophy argues, in one of his earliest, posthumously published works, *The Artificial Princess* (1934), which reworks the Salome theme; in the title of *Inclinations* (1916), which mischievously modifies the title of Wilde's *Intentions*; and, as Joseph Bristow has asserted, in the Wildean figure of Reggie Quintus in *The Princess Zoubaroff* (1926).[32] The echo of Wilde's voice is heard in the weary aphorisms articulated by the jaded women who inhabit his novels and, as Richard Canning notes, in Charlie Mouth's declaration of butterflies, much as Wilde had declared only his genius, on passing through customs in *Sorrow in Sunlight* (1924).[33] E. M. Forster characterized Firbank's backward-glancing aesthetic as a form of "literary conservatism," arguing that "there is nothing up-to-date in him. He is *fin de siècle*, as it used to be called; he belongs to the 'nineties and the *Yellow Book*; his mind inherits the furniture and his prose the cadences of Aubrey Beardsley's *Under the Hill.*" [34] However, rather than simply operating as a retreat from the modern moment, Decadence is so exaggerated and amplified in Firbank's novels that it becomes a type of modernism. He also exaggerated the sexual dissidence of the 1890s, as Bristow argues, "modernizing Wilde, making works such as *Salomé* much queerer than they had ever been before."[35] Firbank's works throw all notions of stable gender identities, normative desire, and conventional domesticity into chaos. Marriages are quickly and easily dissolved, infants are sent away to school, women are