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Introduction

In seeking a mode in which to speak of the moment of the fin de siècle, one is immediately confronted by a history of conflicting narratives and trajectories. The term itself, of course, carries its own chronological presuppositions boldly before it, allowing barely the whisper of a continuity beyond the 'fin' to be heard. That lack of continuity is particularly emphasised in Oscar Wilde's employment of the term in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891):

> 'Fin de siècle', murmured Lord Henry.
> 'Fin du globe', answered his hostess.
> 'I wish it were fin du globe', said Dorian with a sigh. 'Life is a great disappointment.'[1]

This well-known moment occurs at Lady Narborough's house, in the midst of a particularly tedious evening, brought about by the sudden arrival of the hostess's daughter, who, 'to make matters worse, had actually brought her husband with her' (p. 201). The scene works by typically Wildean paradox and humour to ensnare readers into confronting their own prejudices and limitations, and to confound expectations. In particular, in a scene which immediately follows upon Dorian's murder of the painter Basil Hallward and the disposal of the body by Dorian's one time friend Alan Campbell, the expectation of endings, and the assumption of ennui, are confounded. Dorian's desire for a definitive ending, for sterility, a lack of continuity, his refutation of his life so far, the languor of his expressed desire, belie the extent of his visceral engagement with the sensational life which is the counterpart of his role as decadent icon. The extent of his languor testifies precisely to the extent of Dorian's awareness of his inextricable involvement with life, its continuities and complications.

The assumption of the desire for an absolute ending, rather than achieving that ending, actually signals the undeniable continuity of vitality, and is acted out in the scene itself, which provides the basis for a number of paradoxes and characters which achieve a further posthumous life in Wilde's

plays: Mrs Erlynne, with her 'Venetian-red hair' would later surface in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Madame de Ferrol's hair, which turned 'quite gold from grief' after the death of her third husband would provide the model for Lady Harbury, the subject of Lady Bracknell's suspicions and speculation in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, and Lord Henry's aperçus find their way into Wilde's dramatic dandies. The richness of the scene works spectacularly against its obsession with endings, and acts synecdochically to proclaim the energy which emerges from confronting the possibility of ending. But this is not the final assertion of life in one doomed, or an anticipation of Dylan Thomas's raging against the dying of the light. In confronting the end of the century, and arguably the ending of the narratives which had been engendered in the mid-nineteenth-century period, a creative energy is unleashed which, in its vitality and multiplicity, becomes the most effective statement against our understanding of this period as the end of anything.

And yet, that understanding of the period has had a critical persistence, perhaps generated by W. B. Yeats's elegy for what he termed 'The Tragic Generation' of writers of the period. In his *Autobiographies* (published posthumously in 1955), Yeats cites a catalogue of men doomed to early death, disgrace and an aesthetic of exhaustion and dissatisfaction. Holbrook Jackson's equally influential study, *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), seems to concur in its litanies for the lost dead, which anticipate the roll-calls of the dead which would be generated by the war just about to begin. Jackson writes of the poets of the period:

> Most of them died young, several were scarcely more than youths . . . It would seem as if these restless and tragic figures thirsted so much for life, and for the life of the hour, that they put the cup to their lips and drained it in one deep draught: perhaps all that was mortal of them felt so essential to the Nineties that life beyond the decade might have been unbearable. Oscar Wilde died in 1900 at the age of forty-four; Aubrey Beardsley died in 1898, aged twenty-six; Ernest Dowson in 1900, aged thirty-three; Charles Conder, in 1909, aged forty-one; Lionel Johnson, in 1902, aged thirty-five; Hubert Crackanthorpe, in 1896, aged thirty-one; Henry Harland, in 1905, aged forty-four; Francis Thompson, in 1907, aged forty-eight, and John Davidson, in 1909, aged fifty-two.[2]

Such a list confirms Jackson's assessment, in the preface to his work's second edition, that the 1890s was a period, 'extraordinarily self-contained, although its origins go back to the eighties and even to the seventies of last century, and its reverberations are still heard in the twenty-seventh year of a new century which is so different as to be, in our necessarily short perspective, a new era' (p. 12).

There is arguably, of course, a tension here as there is in Yeats. This is a period ending in early deaths, but which is still heard, a period which saw the

denigration of the art of Beardsley – an art described by Yeats as having been 'created out of a spirit of mockery', 'a form of beauty where his powerful logical intellect eliminated every outline that suggested meditation or even satisfied passion' – but which generated in his supporters the animated realisation that 'we knew we must face an infuriated Press and public, but being all young we delighted in enemies and in everything that had an heroic air'.[3] Yeats creates out of a narrative of despair and rejection, ending in the early death to which he and Jackson both accord a form of iconic status, a response which is heroic and vital, suggestive of positive engagement, a response which is as much a part of the 1890s as the tragedy to which both bear witness.

This tension is essentially of the period itself, and exposes the extent to which it is impossible securely to pronounce on the historical contingency of the fin de siècle. Such end-stopped, tragic readings of the period as Jackson and Yeats present are arguably enabled by their concentration on a particular sub-set of the myriad writers publishing at the time. The poets named by Jackson and of whom Yeats gives brief portraits are, however, just one branch of the industry that writing and publishing were becoming at this period. To concentrate on them is to enable a firm categorisation of the period, but once that group has to share critical attention with the journalists, dramatists, novelists of realism and fantasy, short story writers, women writers of the 'new' and 'old' varieties, and polemicists of the 1890s, to say nothing of the period's artists and musicians, the issue of definition is impossibly muddied.

Some categories of culture were almost brand new in the 1890s, as markets expanded to capitalise on the appetite for print culture of a newly literate population, often in the form of popular papers, such as *Tit-Bits*, which was founded in 1881, and which spawned a number of copy-cat successors. The birth of the 'New Journalism' of the late-Victorian period saw the emergence of such newspapers as the *Daily Mail* in 1896. That category of journalism was filled with celebrity gossip and sensation: it pioneered the celebrity interview alongside burgeoning correspondence columns which jointly acknowledged the new journalism's professed basis in a form of democracy which promised in the words of W. T. Stead to 'interpret the knowledge of the few to the understanding of the many'.[4] Such journalists and editors exploited the newly commercial opportunities for the proliferation of the written word in the period, opportunities enabled by increased literacy and technological developments in printing, marketing and transportation, and created a form of journalism which continues in the mass market dailies in Britain today, with all the attendant anxieties as to the probity and legitimacy of the personalisation of political issues which such techniques as the

interview entail. Born out of the nineteenth century's increasingly democratic constitution, the journalism of the 1890s nonetheless managed to construct a new form which looked to the future for its apotheosis.

Other 'New' forms emerged in the period too, most prominent amongst which were the 'New Woman' and the 'New Drama'. The latter began effectively in 1889, with the first British production of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, produced by Charles Charrington, and starring his wife, Janet Achurch, in the role of Nora, who slammed the door on husband, children and home in a definitive gesture which still resonates controversially with theatre audiences today, but which at the time, as William Greenslade points out in his chapter, seemed a rallying cry for a new form of life (p. 80). In *A Doll's House*, a number of forms of cultural as well as political newness co-existed which would establish a new context for the drama of the next decade. It was resolutely not a spectacular play, but rather one in which attention was concentrated on its language, rather than on its sets. It was politically engaged, and demanded a politicised, as well as an aesthetic, response from its audiences. Within this matrix of effects was the actress, the central transmitter of the newness of Ibsen, freed from the imperative to please, to dress in splendid outfits and to conform.

In Ibsen, the economic imperatives of the commercial theatre gave way to subsidised performances, new to Britain, which paved the way for the subsidised companies of the next century. Ibsen also foregrounded a censored theatre. Many of his plays, including *Ghosts*, produced in 1891, were censored by the Lord Chamberlain's office. G. B. Shaw, too, fell foul of the censors with *Mrs Warren's Profession*, and following his downfall in 1895, Wilde met with the more unofficial, but equally decisive, judgement of his West End managers that his plays too had become unsuitable. In its controversy and politicisation, the theatre of the late-1880s and 1890s made a decisive break with its earlier Victorian character. Wilde might still use aspects of that earlier theatre in his plays, but in combination with his paradoxes and wit, the elements of melodrama and the well-made play were being fundamentally challenged even as they were propagated.

The New Woman owed much to Ibsen and Wilde in allowing some of her dilemmas to be performed – indeed the performing of femininity itself is central to the work of both playwrights – and like them, she too emerged as a new phenomenon of the period. Owing some of her character to the fallen woman of the mid-Victorian period, and some to the campaigners on women's rights, and issues such as the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts, nonetheless the New Woman was very much a creation of the age, dependent on her being for the paraphernalia of publicity. Indeed, there is

some debate as to the extent to which the New Woman existed beyond the pages of the novels, short stories and newspapers of which she was an integral part. As Sally Ledger shows in chapter 8, the New Woman's genealogy might extend back to the earlier Victorian period, but the range and extent of her political awareness was unprecedented, as was the collective self-consciousness which was the determining characteristic of New Women's work. Finally, unlike the aesthete poets, the New Women often lived long and active lives. Mona Caird died in 1932, aged seventy-four; Menie Muriel Dowie in 1945, aged seventy-eight; George Egerton in 1945, aged eighty-six; Sarah Grand in 1943, aged eighty-nine; and Vernon Lee in 1935, aged seventy-nine. Though the New Woman novel had arguably hit its peak in 1894–5, the political impact of the New Women themselves continued to be felt as they re-invented themselves and their talents in the service of the suffrage movement or local government.

This, then, is an age conscious of itself as an era of new beginnings, but also one whose movements are defined by the extent to which they developed away from their Victorian roots, and transformed them in the light of the cultural and political possibilities of the period. It is, however, far from the definition Raymond Williams suggested for it, of a rather tired period, defined by a 'working-out ... of unfinished lines; a tentative redirection'.[5] Rather, as the chapters in this Companion demonstrate very vividly, it is a period of tremendous vitality, in which debate and controversy are central. It is a period in which the arts are used viscerally to debate contemporary concerns, and in which art itself becomes matter for controversy.

This Companion addresses some of the central concerns and aesthetic practices of the period. Its first essays foreground some of the primary political, scientific, cultural and intellectual contexts of the period, but, as immediately becomes clear, contexts and texts are rarely easily separable at this time. As Jenny Bourne Taylor demonstrates in chapter 1, 'Psychology at the fin de siècle', not only did creative writers respond enthusiastically to the representational possibilities opened up by the new mind sciences and the readily available discourse of experimentation and case history, but the language of those sciences was also adopted by the self-proclaimed 'Philistines', the opponents of the 'New', to denigrate the aesthete, the New Woman and indeed any person or movement which threatened to disrupt their conservative outlook. Most famously, and infamously, adopted by Max Nordau in *Degeneration* (1892; translated into English in 1895), a term based in science came to operate metaphorically to condemn artists such as Wilde, Ibsen and the Impressionists to the realms of the insane, atavistic and criminal. As Bourne Taylor suggests, 'Its power and popularity lay precisely in its vagueness – its ability to be pressed into the service of very

different social and political agendas' (p. 16), and as such was far removed from the specificities of the new psychological sciences' investigations into childhood, dreams and psychical research.

The danger of the expanding use of the term 'degeneration' is exposed by the writer, art historian and political commentator Vernon Lee (whose birth name was Violet Paget), who wrote of enthusiastic responses to Nordau's wholesale condemnation of the 'New', that it created a 'community of persecution', one in which

> the highest and the lowest are always thrust together; the purest patriot and reformer is apt to find himself the associate of fanatics and criminals, rick-burners and bomb-throwers, for the mere reason that the powers that be, finding all disturbance equally distressing, have set their face against subversive ideas, as well as against deeds of violence.[6]

As Dennis Denisoff notes in chapter 2, a similar collapse of meaning is visible in the application of the term 'decadence'. Hubert Crackanthorpe writes in the *Yellow Book*, 'Decadence, decadence, you are all decadent nowadays. Ibsen, Degas, and the New English Art Club; Zola, Oscar Wilde, and the Second Mrs Tanqueray',[7] thus neatly exposing the extended coverage of the term, and the extent to which conservative criticism had created a homogenised target which misrepresented the multiplicity of the 'New' movements it sought to vilify. Like degeneration, 'Decadence' too achieved a new life in the hands of commentators who sought to condemn, rather than to celebrate. In his careful historical analysis of the development of the term out of a French tradition, Denisoff reveals how it achieved meaning through its relationship with 'Aestheticism' to produce art and effects which influenced popular culture, home decoration and fashion, as well as the realms of 'high' art. This relationship achieved its necessarily controversial apotheosis in the short-lived *Yellow Book*, perhaps the persistent symbol of Decadence, but one which was far from unequivocal in its writers' contributions. The writers and artists were, as Denisoff notes, a mixed bunch, many of whom could not be described as Decadent at all. Their inclusion seems rather to signal a confident inclusiveness about a Decadent/Aestheticist agenda which might perhaps gain in definition by the side of oppositional writings and art. The *Yellow Book* provided a challenge to modes of literary and artistic practice and criticism which long outlived its own brevity, in an age where that very brevity became celebrated as an icon, even perhaps as a guarantee of a Decadent mode.

Decadence was also a part of the sexual aesthetic of the period too, as Richard Kaye's chapter (chapter 3) on sexuality and sexual identity at the fin de siècle shows. In it he identifies the emergence of the burgeoning science of

sexology and the contribution it made to the 'sexual anarchy' of a period in which same-sex attraction was spoken of as never before, when legislation stepped in to regularise relations between men, and when women were sexually articulate as never before. Examining mythic figures, such as Salome, alongside late-Victorian men and women, Kaye shows a period intensely involved in questions of sex and its articulation, its political realisation, and its communal implications.

Campaigners for reform in sexual and political practices often overlapped, as William Greenslade's chapter (chapter 4) demonstrates in its outline of the progress of socialism and radical politics at the fin de siècle. Indeed, in very immediate ways, as the lives and works of Eleanor Marx and Olive Schreiner show, the personal was realised as intensely political at this period. Advanced communities sought new ways of living and working at this period which would enhance not only their lives, but those of the industrialised workers too, whose plight was brought to the attention of the nation at large in a series of strikes and rallies in the 1880s. The economic depression of the early to mid-1880s was the impetus behind the development of the socialist movement in Britain at the time, a movement which, though internally conflicted, nonetheless acted as a focus for the expression of a collective dissatisfaction and consciousness which sat provocatively alongside the period's cultural emphasis on the individual. Greenslade argues persuasively that, riven though it was by internal conflict, in this period may be seen the roots of British socialism in the parliamentary labour party of the twentieth century.

In chapter 5, Ross G. Forman shows in a wide-ranging account which covers cinema, pornography, adventure fiction and early sociological observation, that representations of Empire at the end of the century were similarly riven, representing, 'on the one hand, the promise of continued expansion, new "spheres of influence", and the success of the "civilising mission" and, on the other, the fear of collapse, degeneration and reverse colonisation' (p. 91). Taking in China as well as the more familiar sites of British imperial interests in Africa and India, Forman establishes the importance for Britain of its Empire, whilst outlining the fragility of Empire in the long aftermath of the Berlin Conference. At a time of retrospection about Empire, we see the rise of the adventure narrative as a means of articulating the threat of Empire, and the diminution of possibilities for adventure in the 'civilised' world. Degeneration theory emerges within the discourse of Empire too, as it acts to give a name and reason to the savagery of Empire, and a justification for the need to control that space and its 'child-like' inhabitants. Forman ends, however, by showing the extent to which, even then, the Empire was writing back to England, and offering one of the counter-voices typical of this period,

in his assessment of Wo Chang's *England Through Chinese Spectacles* (1897), which exhorted the English to look to their own sins and responsibilities, and not just to concentrate on the faults of their Empire.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine two of the cultural contexts of literature in the 1890s: the publishing industry and the practice of the visual arts at the time. In chapter 6, Margaret D. Stetz examines the ways in which publishing at the end of the nineteenth century became an industrialised form, but in so doing draws our attention to the ways and terms in which this shift to industrialisation was actually perceived by the Victorians themselves. She examines the gendered configurations of power and influence within publishing; the dilemma of socialist writers whose desire for success was predicated upon the subjection of workers in the increasingly mechanised printing industry; and the ways in which print culture in the 1890s was reaching, and bringing together in unexpected alliances, an unprecedented variety of both readers and writers. Her findings denote a period in which publishing practices changed dramatically. The three-volume novel was displaced as the primary form of publishing fiction, and novels were no longer sourced primarily through circulating libraries, but were advertised through newspapers and periodicals. Aesthetes, decadents and philistines alike had to be aware of the market that might engulf or support them. That market was highly responsive to demand, able to create luxury editions or the cheapest form available to the mass market. We are left, however, with the insight that, for all its mechanisation and technological advances, the industry of publishing was not fundamentally organised along profit-only lines, but rather maintained a firmly ideological set of practices which were less radical than the authors it sometimes had to accommodate.

Stetz looks back at the rest of the nineteenth century to gain the most acute sense of the difference of the 1890s, as does Shearer West in chapter 7, 'The visual arts', in which she offers a series of illuminating genealogies, finding for instance for Aubrey Beardsley and other avant-garde artists of the period, a predecessor in Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Such artists were implicitly set against the empiricist and didactic practice of mid-Victorian art, concentrating instead rather on emulating Whistler's Aestheticism and on finding expression for the Paterian sense of the abandonment of morality in the search for beauty. One example of such an approach would be Sickert's *Old Bedford*, which is not a social documentary, but rather a disconcerting combination of a formal kind of beauty and a subject matter that was usually considered crude. Artists' activities extended beyond the conventional subject matter of the Royal Academy too in an increasing interest in crafts such as furniture-making which promised significantly to democratise the artistic innovations of the period in line with many artists' commitments to a

socialist system. Beauty for both Wilde and William Morris, as West demonstrates, operated, though in different ways for both men, to counter the impact of the modern industrial age. In many ways, the visual arts of the period are marked by a lack of situatedness in the period itself, an anxiety – whether manifested in the neo-Classicism of Leighton or Watts, or in the temporal dissatisfactions of Symbolism – which gave those arts an almost necessarily transgressive potential.

West argues finally that the legacies of eccentricity and internationalism permeate well into the twentieth century. However, as she notes, visual artists felt the shock of Oscar Wilde's fall in 1895, as did other avant-garde figures. In a debate about chronological definitions, we have to examine the possibility that, as many commentators suggest, the 1890s actually ended in 1895. Holbrook Jackson introduces his study of the 1890s with this anecdote: 'In the year 1895 Max Beerbohm announced, how whimsically and how ironically it is not necessary to consider, that he felt himself a trifle out-moded. "I belong to the Beardsley period", he said'.[8] New Woman writers too found their period of greatest productivity and effectiveness, as Sally Ledger demonstrates, before 1895. 1894 was the year which saw the naming of the New Woman, along with the publication of a wealth of fiction and journalism by some of the most significant figures in the New Woman movement, such as Sarah Grand, George Egerton, Mona Caird, Ella Hepworth Dixon, Edith Arnold and 'Iota'. In retrospect, it seems that the New Woman was caught by a critical sleight of hand which saw her condemned along with Wilde and the Aesthetic movement, despite the fact that the New Woman movement itself was highly diverse, and that its proponents were far from being unequivocally in favour of Wilde. They were, however, whether as social purity campaigners, or as more militantly disturbing advocates of women's sexual freedoms, partakers in the spirit of the 'New', which in its amorphousness enabled the wholesale condemnation of its participants. That said, the New Woman's zenith also coincided, as Ledger points out, with the birth of the *Yellow Book*, a publication in which they participated to dispute women's objectification in works such as Arthur Symons's 'Stella Maris'.

The New Woman's status in the 1890s was profundly disputatious and contended, and the extent of the controversy that they raised was in itself a measure of success in signalling how far they had made the function and nature of women a matter for public debate and controversy. They exposed the ideological silences which enabled Victorian women's oppression in journalism, poetry and drama, but principally through the form of fiction. They used both fantastic and realist fictions, but it was perhaps the development of the latter as a form of autobiographical, politically motivated prose which interpellated its female readers to participate in a form of radical collective

self-consciousness, which was their most effective weapon. To this extent, they were also significant participants in the collapse of the reading consensus which had foregrounded the rise and popularity of mid-century realism. By the 1880s, as Stephen Arata shows in chapter 9, fiction was the subject of debate in the British House of Commons which deplored the spread of demoralising literature in the country, some of which was surely condemned all the more readily by virtue of its foreign, specifically French, derivation. The prosecution of Henry Vizetelly, Zola's English translator and publisher, demonstrates the centrality of realist fiction to English cultural beliefs, and prefaces a decade in which the novel firmly left behind its idealism, and the morality of George Eliot's realism, and looked instead to a form which could explore difference, which did not scruple to offend, and with sexual content which provoked vitriolic debate. Arata identifies in the realist fiction of the 1890s a definitive turning away from sympathy and comedy, and the assumption instead of a responsibility to recognise the tragic, the fractured, the dark.

Wilde's anti-mimeticism places the issue of realist representation firmly at the centre of the fin de siècle, as he parodies its practices and beliefs. Alongside the developing practice of realism, as Nicholas Ruddick points out in chapter 10, the form of fantastic fiction was burgeoning, with the creation of such notable texts as *The Time Machine*, *Dracula* and *The Turn of the Screw*, all pre-eminent in their field. Seeking an explanation for the explosion of fantastic fiction at this period, Ruddick suggests that it might lie in the experience of powerful, culturally taboo desires and fears, which might only be expressed through the medium of the fantastic. In his reading, the fantastic emerges as a form of encryption which could accommodate both fears and fantasies, as in the sub-genre of adventure fiction such as Rider Haggard's *She*, in which the fears of women and the unleashed power of Africa are jointly subdued by Haggard's band of doughty travellers. Contemporary interest in the fantastic was also manifested in the scholarly attempts of Andrew Lang to excavate the fairy tale, and by the attention paid to that form by mainstream writers such as Oscar Wilde, who adopted it for socially progressive ends. However, arguably the leading figure of the fantastic at this period is H. G. Wells, whose scientific romances explore the ramifications of Darwinism and degeneration in a futurity made safe by its tremendous distance. He both explores and employs the practice of the scientist in a series of texts, which like other fantastic fictions give the concerns of the 1890s a freer scope and articulation than was often possible in realist texts.

The volume ends with two chapters on the development of other literary forms of the period, drama and poetry; forms which underwent a fundamental shift in definitions and practices at this time. I have already