Introduction: Landscapes of Decadence: Reading the Sermons in Stone

In November 1893 Arthur Symons went to stay with Henry Havelock Ellis and his wife Edith at Carbis Bay in Cornwall. Edith, prior to their nuptials in November 1891, had secured a cottage at Carbis and the couple would spend the early years of their marriage wintering in Cornwall. In the history of the Decadent movement in Britain and America, November 1893 is notable for another event, the publication of Symons's infamous celebration of the new writing of France, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*.[1] It is surprising, and perhaps ironic, that at the moment he was celebrating the urbane, cosmopolitan and transgressive in print, Symons was undertaking a walking tour 'at the very edge of England'. As he and Ellis walked along the dramatic coast of the Penwith peninsula, how far from his mind was the 'barbaric', 'violent' and 'wearying' prose of Huysmans, or the excessive and 'furiously sensual' poetry of Paul Verlaine?[2] How did the writer, who appeared to W.B. Yeats 'fresh from Paris', respond to the bracing breeze of West Cornwall?[3]

Symons's time at Carbis Bay was inspiring and he wrote to Katherine Willard that he found the landscape 'impossible to describe, for the effect is so big, so terrifying, really, that words become ridiculous, when they put on emphasis enough to come near rendering it'.[4] Having just elevated the Goncourts in print for their ability to 'subtilize language to the point of rendering every detail in just the form and color of the actual expression', Symons seemed lost for words.[5] This inability to commit landscape to language was only temporary, and his next volume of poetry, *London Nights* (1895), included a poem that attempted to transcribe the experience in verse:

> Out of the night of the sea,
> Out of the turbulent night,
> A sharp and hurrying wind
> Scourges the waters white:
> The terror by night.

Out of the doubtful dark,
  Out of the night of the land,
What is it breathes and broods,
  Hoveringly at hand?
  The menace of land.

Out of the night of heaven,
  Out of the delicate sky,
Pale and serene the stars
  In their silence reply:
  The peace of the sky.[6]

'At Carbis Bay' is, in many respects, representative of Symons's poetry of the mid-1890s. The forced rhyme, excessive alliteration, the play of light and dark and the tension between sound and silence are found in much of his impressionist urban verse (as will be explored in Chapter 2). Only the title marks out the location; otherwise it is free from concrete description, an attempt to retrospectively capture the integral elements of the experience as they lodged in the memory, which was Symons's own understanding of impressionism.[7] Symons had responded to the coast of Cornwall as he would respond to London or Paris, his Decadent form adaptable for different landscapes.

It was not the first or last time that Symons travelled with Havelock Ellis. In September 1889, four years earlier, they had made a whistle-stop tour of Paris, taking in the sights and seeking out Decadent and Symbolist literary haunts. They would return in spring the following year and spend much longer – three months – gaining introductions to Huysmans, Mallarmé, Verlaine and others. It was a trip Ellis described in his autobiography as 'the climax of the whole early part of my life'.[8] Over the next few years they would also make extensive tours of Spain and Italy, finding in each other the ideal travelling companion. These tours to the Continent fit far more easily into our understanding of Decadence as a cosmopolitan, transnational literary phenomenon than does the walking tour of West Cornwall. Yet Cornwall should be thought of as just as Decadent as London, Paris or Naples. Symons's walking partner, Havelock Ellis, maintained a lifelong love of West Cornwall. For ten years he had a small studio at Hawkes Point where he was at his most productive, including translating Zola's *Germinal*.[9] In 1920 he returned to Cornwall, but this time to Padstow, which had for him a different aspect, 'a Cornwall with various new shades of difference. Here the rock is slate, so that Nature plays at being a Cubist.'[10] His Cubist Cornwall suggests the extent to which aesthetics always over-laid landscape.

Arthur Symons was to return to Cornwall throughout his life, and from roughly 1900 to his nervous breakdown in 1908 and beyond, he wrote about its landscapes with some regularity. The hamlet of St Ruan on the Lizard was the setting for one of his forgettable verse dramas, *The Harvesters* (1916); various parts of Cornwall were the locale for some of the stories in *Spiritual Adventures* (1905) in which one character would declare that the 'divine Cornish air, half salt, half honey, will have done something for me, in helping to cure me of a too narrow London philosophy'.[11] The series of travel sketches that Symons published on Cornwall around this time, later collected in *Cities and Sea Coasts and Islands* (1918), show Symons transforming the landscapes around the Lizard and Land's End into an impressionist's fantasia. Symons declares that '[T]he temperament of Cornish landscape has many moods and will fit into no formula', before going on to colour it using an identifiable palate of literary Decadence: sea and sky are 'like opals, with something in them the colour of absinthe'; over the cliffs and moorlands there is 'a bloom like the bloom on grapes'; the air is 'like incense', the 'sun like fire' and the whole atmosphere 'seemed to pass into a kind of happy ecstasy'.[12] Symons may have declared Cornwall antithetical to London, but it was certainly not antithetical to Decadent style, Symons using those common Decadent tropes and symbols (absinthe, incense, ecstasy) that we will encounter again and again in this book.

Cornwall recurs surprisingly often as a location of literary Decadence: it was the site of Decadent tragedy – John Davidson's body washing up on the beach at Mount's Bay following his suspected suicide in 1908 – as well as Decadent poetry. A great many Decadent and Aestheticist writers visited Cornwall during the *fin de siècle*, taking advantage of what Wolfgang Schivelbusch would dub 'the annihilation of space and time' precipitated by the rise of the railway.[13] On 2 May 1859, Prince Albert opened Brunel's Iron Bridge across the Tamar River, providing vital connections between Cornwall and the rest of England, and in 1867 the Great Western Railway was connected to Penzance. The trip between Paddington and Penzance had become, by the 1890s, iconic, signifying simultaneously the triumph of technological modernity and the invasion of that modernity into an imagined primitive Celtic periphery. Visitors like Arthur Symons would see the Tamar river as a threshold, beyond which lay 'a kind of savagery, a luxuriance, a strangeness; something utterly unlike any part of England'.[14] The opening up of Cornwall by rail allowed Arthur Symons, Havelock Ellis and his wife to commute easily from London in a day. It seemed, as Wilkie Collins had feared in *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851),

that the county had lost its 'pleasant primitive' qualities and become opened up to the modern world.[15] The county's connectedness to the rest of the country, and the rest of the world – symbolised with the opening of the Porthcurno telegraph station in 1870 – is reflected in its surprising susceptibility for Decadent inscription.

The Decadent writers who travelled to Cornwall found in it the aesthetic and cultural expression for which they went searching. If Symons saw in Cornwall a landscape of indefinable impressionism and therefore modernity, his fellow member of the Rhymers' Club, Lionel Johnson, saw something very different. For Johnson a landscape was always to be read historically and textually: 'In Falmouth Harbour', penned in 1887, conjured up John Henry Newman's departure from the same port in December 1832 as he made his first dramatic journey to Italy. Falmouth was the port for many early nineteenth-century visitors to the Continent, being the designated Royal Mail Packet Station until 1850.[16] Byron, amongst others, had set off for his Grand Tour from the port, but by the time Johnson visited in the late 1880s the days of Falmouth's being a major seaport were long gone. Yet for Lionel Johnson place was always to be found vibrating with historical significance. Even though he had not yet converted to Roman Catholicism when the poem was written, he was already developing his own peculiar genealogy of place, excavating its significance for his emerging religious and conservative interests. Looking down on the 'Long terraced lines of circling light' emanating from 'many a lanterned mast' in the harbour, the speaker's thoughts turn to he 'Who cried: Lead, kindly Light!' This well-known hymn was set from Newman's poem 'The Pillar of Cloud', which he wrote while on a ship returning to England following his grave illness in Sicily in 1833. The speaker in Newman's poem, 'far from home' implores the light of the Lord: 'Lead Thou me on!'[17] The return home to what Johnson would describe as 'these northern waves, these island airs' was also a return to religious fervour and upheaval. As Newman explained in *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864), it was only a few days after his return from this trip that Keble gave the assize Sermon at the University of Oxford on 'National Apostasy' that would set in chain the Tractarian movement.[18] Johnson could see in the departure from Falmouth and return to England the beginnings of the crisis of faith that would end with Newman's dramatic conversion to Catholicism in 1845.[19] As will be explored in Chapter 3, Johnson would always seek the Roman Catholic history of the places he visited, always alive to their often-neglected spiritual and cultural past.

Locating Decadence

Arthur Symons and Lionel Johnson represent opposite ends of what Murray Pittock has called the spectrum of Decadence: Symons the transgressive ultra-modern, Johnson the conservative nostalgic.[20] The gulf between the two, yet their proximity in terms of literary coteries, publishing outlets and personal friendship, underscore the challenges involved in determining and defining literary Decadence. Identifying its practitioners is notoriously difficult; it is near on impossible to find a self-described Decadent writer, and those who were labelled as such usually denied the charge. But what exactly did it meant to be a Decadent? The first attempt in modern literary criticism to define the term in depth – Richard Gilman's *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (1979) – self-consciously floundered in semantic slipperiness and the tortures of terminology. Gilman's interest in the term as a 'relic and drifting sign' reflected his own period's concerns, as an emerging vocabulary of post-structuralist signifiers and signifieds began to animate modern literary criticism.[21] In the 1980s as an emerging historicism tried to grasp the term in the context of the *fin de siècle*, it became apparent that its slipperiness was intrinsic to its power, but also required a precision of definition to simultaneously demarcate a literary practice from a cultural disposition, while allowing them to circulate together. It is for this reason that Decadence as a set of literary practices and a critical position needs to be clearly demarcated from the pejorative term 'decadence' with its conservative connotations of cultural decline and the mild hysteria directed towards transgression – specifically sexual – that circulated in the late-Victorian period. In *Decadent Style* (1985), John R. Reed counselled against using the word in its lower case, as to avoid confusion with 'all those carelessly defined manifestations of change that inspired anxiety and depression in the second half of the last century'.[22] In following Reed there is a danger in suggesting that Decadence is a monolithic cultural institution, but it is necessary in order to sharply define the aesthetic practices of the writers whom I am investigating here from the cultural climate they were critiquing. Since the concern in *Landscapes of Decadence* is with the aesthetic modes of representing place, to use decadence in the lower case would be to foreground the naughty, the taboo, the gaudy or the decaying.

Decadence, as I use the term here, is first and foremost a stylistic and aesthetic practice, as is for that matter 'landscape'. In foregrounding style I am following a number of critics who, since the 1980s, have developed a model of reading Decadence that has attempted to catalogue and

interpret a series of formal literary devices that characterise Decadent literature. In *Decadent Style*, John R. Reed undertook an exhaustive inventory of Decadent stylistic practices across the arts. Reed's study crossed national boundaries (German, French, Italian, British) and extended Decadence from Gautier and Baudelaire through to Thomas Mann. Reed defines Decadent style as the practice of pushing 'an existing form to the point of apparent dissolution'; 'the Decadent work of art does not boldly assert a new form against a presiding standard; it elaborates an existing tradition to the point of apparent dissolution.'[23] Reed offers studies of Decadent style in fiction, poetry, art and music, all of which offer their own challenges. Reed's chapter on fiction limits itself to studies of the novel, with some concluding remarks on the short story, outlining Decadent style as 'a conscious violation of traditional fictional plotting, a fragmentation of story into separable set pieces that, when knowingly reassembled, constitute a new and disturbing form'.[24] In regards to poetry he argues that 'Decadent style is a verifiable technique in which a dissolution of parts emphasized by unusual diction and syntax seem to threaten the integrity of the whole only to reconstruct a new unity requiring an act of intellection'.[25] While I take Reed's definitions here as the starting point for my own study of Decadent style, I hope to have expanded his definition – here and elsewhere[26] – by paying more attention to prose style and the essay form, as well as broadening his geographical coverage to include America. Perhaps most importantly, my insistence on style as the key to identifying literary Decadence is not an end in itself. Decadent stylistic practices as I identify them here are tactics, style in the service of politics, in this case a politics centred on the competing understandings of how we read, experience and inhabit specific places. Ultimately Decadent style can only be grasped through close reading, and by reading the relationship between context and form closely. A taxonomy of Decadent stylistic features threatens to impose a Decadent formalism, reducing Decadence to an abstract, formal exercise. The series of located readings of Decadence I offer here provide a new perspective on the relationship between Decadent style and Decadent politics.

Central to any attempt to understand Decadence as a tactical and potentially political literary style is to understand its position in relation to Victorian nationalisms. One of the most significant anxieties of the Victorian period that Decadence sought to exploit and exacerbate was the suggestion that English as a written language was now dead, having lost its vitality and verve. Linda Dowling's *Language and Decadence at the Victorian* Fin de Siècle (1986) demonstrated the extent to which linguistic

science had begun to alter understandings of the relationship between language and speech. After the Neogrammarians, speech was seen as autonomous and living, in opposition to a written literary tradition that, ossified and exhausted, could no longer be anything other than a reminder of the great heights from which the language had now fallen. If the Victorians were to turn to Shakespeare, Milton and the King James Bible as the repository of the English language in its Classical form, Decadence was to turn to 'literary advantage' the 'idea that written language, the literary tongue of the great English writers, was simply another dead language in relation to living speech'.[27] But Decadent writers turned this insight into more than a 'literary' advantage, developing a literary form that attempted to render unworkable some of the ideological structures of the nineteenth century. It is at the nexus between language, identity and the politics of place that this study locates a hitherto under-examined site of the challenge literary Decadence offered to *fin-de-siècle* culture. In the wake of the Wilde trials, a histrionic press reaction drew repeatedly on the language of health and vitality to suggest that Decadence was anathema to the nation. One of the most vociferous (if not hysterical) responses to Decadence was published in the staunchly conservative *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. Written by the lawyer and adventurer Hugh E. M. Stutfield, 'Tommyrotics' declared that 'Decadentism is an exotic growth unsuited to British soil and it may be hoped that it will never take permanent root here'. [28] Yet Decadent writers, Wilde included, had already developed a mode of literary representation that would ensure that every location was always already Decadent.

If Decadence was a challenge to national literary forms, as Dowling argues, then it begs the question of why place has been so relatively neglected in studies of Aestheticist and Decadent writing. One of the most important factors in the critical neglect of place and location in the study of Decadence is the seeming centrality of temporality to the term, and to its deployment at the *fin de siècle*. The etymology of the word from the Latin *decadēre*, a 'falling down' or 'falling away', and in current usage gives the following definition: 'The process of falling away or declining (from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.); decay; impaired or deteriorated condition.'[29] The term then always comes with a temporal designation, and in the context of the *fin de siècle* it is inevitable that this sense of falling from a once vital and healthy condition would be exacerbated. Yet temporality was a pre-condition of Decadence rather than intrinsic to its literary expression. Decadence needed the reactionary, conservative accusations of a cultural fall, a decline. The majority of the

writers studied here accepted that they inhabited a culture that was in the throes of exhausted decay, but they saw themselves as both products of that culture and as prophets for a new mode of aesthetic living that would emerge from the wreck of the nineteenth century. It is perhaps for these reasons that the most famous examination and discussion of British Decadence from the period – Arthur Symons's 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' – makes no direct mention of decline, decay or time. This literature may have 'all the qualities that mark the end of great periods', but the essay is an examination of stylistic features that it shares with other great periods, rather than their moral condition. Vincent Sherry has recently offered a striking reassessment of the 'late' style of Decadence, and its centrality in the development of a modernist aesthetic. Sherry's focus is on the 'temporal imaginary' of Decadence, on its tendency to deny futurity, to resist 'temporal progressiveness', the 'experience of historical time in a sort of posterior sense'.[30] It is undoubtedly true that Decadent literature often foregrounds these categories, and Sherry's work has offered a much-needed revision of the modernist distancing of Decadent literature, finding within both a shared temporal underpinning. However, the focus on temporality opens up only one of the multiple modes of critique that underpin Decadence.

Decadence, as a literary form, was an attempt to challenge and antagonise a 'decadent' literary culture; to use Regenia Gagnier's phrase it was an 'engaged protest'.[31] That protest was multifarious, attacking institutions and values as various as: popular journalism; sexual conservatism; 'high Victorian' literary forms (the triple-decker novel and the epic poem); middle-class thrift; nationalism; new media forms; provincialism. In order to understand Decadence as a response to a whole range of Victorian values, then, we need to see it as, primarily, a rejection of the all too easy forms of moral judgement that the very term 'decadent' conveyed. In a public lecture given in 1908, Robert Ross, Wilde's close friend and literary executor, claimed that 'We must remember that Decadence and Decay have now different meanings, though originally they meant the same sort of thing'.[32] The literary movement known as Decadence had, for Ross, transformed the meaning of the term. Now no longer filled with the moralising connotations of decay, it represented a literary style that precisely sought to revalue language, to arrest the moralising force that words such as 'decadence' conveyed.

In order to understand just how 'engaged' the 'protest' of Decadence was, it is necessary to try to reconstruct the contexts in which these protests were made. One means by which the Victorians sought to

articulate and defend the forms of identity – national and regional – that sustained their 'limited imaginings' was the plotting of a cultural cartography.[33] The Victorian desire to assert the cultural value of particular places over others is well documented. As we will see below, certain places (Naples, Paris) had the potential to corrupt and contaminate and were to be avoided at all costs, while others (Oxford, rural Wales) were held up for their ability to preserve and purify the values of those who dwelt there. *Landscapes of Decadence* then explores the way in which a number of writers during the *fin de siècle* represented these places and others so as to challenge any easy means of mapping morality onto place. It is then not so much about places themselves, but about the ways in which writers mined and undermined the geographically specific literary and cultural context of particular places as they wrote about them. This book is not about the 'real' landscapes of London, Cornwall or New York, but about the textual politics of writing about place at the *fin de siècle*. Writers of the period were sensitive to literary and cultural history and consistently drew on it, and contested it in their poetry, travel writing, essays and novels. As outlined in the chapters below, these cultural and literary cartographies were very often performed to interrogate and challenge contemporary attempts to instil stable values in place. These challenges often involved developing alternative histories of place or undermining any attempt to develop equivalence between morality and location. Whether in a buzzing metropolis, an ancient university town or a quiet country lane, the rewriting and revisioning of landscapes examined here was never neutral; rather it was an engaged dialogue between literature and place. It is these dialogues that this book seeks to resurrect and reconstruct.

Why Landscape?

This study examines the politics of representing place at the *fin de siècle* through the lens of landscape. It is conventional to think of a landscape as either the view, or artistic representation, of an inland rural, or semi-rural, locale. Yet in this book I deploy the term much more broadly as a means of theorising and historicising Decadent methods of representing all places, including those three iconic sites of urban modernity: London, Paris and New York. In doing so I am following a not uncommon practice in urban studies, cultural and physical geography, as well as contemporary art and photography where the study and depiction of 'urban landscapes' is common. One of the flagship books of twentieth-century urban design, Geoffrey Jellicoe and Susan Jellicoe's *The Landscape of Man* (1975), made

the study of past built environments key to thinking about the future of planning urban spaces.

The imbrication of landscapes and urban settings would be hardly foreign to the nineteenth-century citizens of London, Paris and New York, all three of which were regularly described as possessing or being 'landscapes'. In 1820 the society wit Henry Luttrell conceded in *Letters to Julia* that 'Hyde-Park is not the Highlands', but asked: 'Why should our landscape blush for shame? / Tis fresh and gay if flat and tame.'[34] At the height of the fashion for picaresque it was clear that London wasn't without charm to those searching out landscapes, even if those landscapes lacked sublimity. Some fifty years later, the novelist and journalist William Wilthew Fenn would make a spirited case for London as the ideal place for landscape artists to paint: 'The landscape owes . . . not a little of its impressiveness to the fact that it is to a great extent artificial – the work of man's hand. The sky and river are of God's making; but all else is the result of human labour.'[35] As Fenn goes on to note, London landscapes, particularly the Thames, had become a not uncommon subject for some of the most important artists of the 1870s, including James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Arthur Severn, George Price Boyce, James Holland, David Roberts and Charles Napier Hemy. Articles extolling the virtues of London landscapes as a subject for painters proliferate towards the end of the century: to take one example, M.H. Dziewicki, the horror writer and Polish translator, wrote an article in *The Nineteenth Century* in praise of London fog. Dziewicki, taking aim at the dominance of a facile picturesque in art and literature, declared:

> Dead Nature, landscape nature, attracts us by far too much. Real as its charms indubitably are, they belong to the superficial rather than to the internal order of things. And hence it comes that their study is so frequently carried to excess, and that their descriptions are so hackneyed as to become ridiculously trite; so much so that a writer who seeks to be original and graphic in his delineation of scenery is almost forced to be unintelligible at times.[36]

In order to save landscape painting and writing it was necessary to embrace the urban landscapes of London and other cities, with their striking juxtapositions between natural and the man-made, their ever-changing scenery and the drama of the human life unfolding in them making them the only possible subject if landscape painting and writing were to remain modern. Yet by the time Dziewicki made this call for a new urban landscape writing (1889), a new Decadent landscape writing had