

*Introduction*  
*Thoughts at Imbolc 2021*

On a cool autumn evening about eight years back, I found myself scanning the sky in search of the forecasted Blood Moon. A couple of friends – decadence scholars like myself – had invited me to dinner and, having never experienced a Blood Moon before, I was imagining offering an animated description of the gleaming copper disc that I would have seen on my walk over to their place. “It hung like a giant, glittering prop from Farr’s English production of Wilde’s *Salome*,” I would wax. “It seemed to swing lightly in the evening breeze, as ragged, chiffon clouds rushed past.” I surrendered myself to my musings and the night air, the occasional rattle of leaves in the trees making it seem colder than it was. A tattered plastic bag skittered across St. Cross Road and into Holywell Cemetery. I followed.

I had visited the old graveyard just a few days earlier to see whether Walter Pater’s and Kenneth Grahame’s tombstones held any pagan elements. It was the graveyard’s various denizens, I now realize as I finish up this monograph, that made me first sense the idea of a decadent ecology in Britain that encompassed both Pater’s and Grahame’s lives and careers. The sky over Oxford turned out to be too overcast for me to see the moon, but Holywell Cemetery at night, with its deep purple shadows and musty smell of fermentation and flowering, exuded its own mysterious aura. The burial ground’s roots go further back than recorded history, the site deriving its name from the Anglo-Saxon toponym *haeligewielle*, a term that’s been used to refer to various springs and water sources that pagans, Christians, and often both identified as spiritual.<sup>1</sup> The earliest known reference to Holywell’s location in Oxford is in the 1086 Domesday Book, where it is described as a meadow. In 1847, Merton College donated the land for a burial site. In the later twentieth century, it became, in many ways, a meadow again, a wildlife refuge for which the Friends of Holywell Cemetery adapted an ecologically sensitive approach that minimizes human impact on the homes and lives of the

resident and visiting birds, reptiles, insects, foxes, and other creatures. The cemetery's trees, grasses, and flowers flourish basically untended except for, at least when I last visited, the occasional mowing of a few paths and the lopping of some limbs. The moss is thick and pungent, many of the tombstones almost inaccessible among the overgrown tendrils of ivy.

Holywell's fusion of nature, spirituality, ancient history, and overlapping functions as meadow and cemetery seems especially appropriate in light of the layers of ecological and pagan interests of so many of those whose bodies are decaying there. With over 1,000 graves,<sup>2</sup> corporeal contributors to the cemetery's ecosystem include natural scientists, such as George Claridge Druce, a botanist and Royal Society fellow who helped found the Ashmolean Natural History Society of Oxfordshire; and George Rolleston, a zoologist friend of Thomas Henry Huxley, and the author of *Forms of Animal Life: A Manual of Comparative Anatomy* (1870). The decomposed bodies of scholars of pagan culture are also here, including those of John Rhys, the first professor of Celtic studies at Oxford, and famed Egyptologist Francis Llewellyn Griffith, who endowed Egyptology studies at Oxford and served as a professor of the subject. Griffith's extensive knowledge of Egyptian paganism can be found in his *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis* (1900) and the three-volume *The Demotic Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden* (1904–1921), among others. We also find a marker for Max Müller, the influential specialist in comparative philology and mythology who focused much of his work on arguing that Sanskrit documents could demonstrate the influence of Vedic nature worship on European paganisms. While Gifford Lecturer at the University of Glasgow, Müller gave a series of talks on the development of spirituality from nature worship,<sup>3</sup> leading some to accuse him of being anti-Christian, while Theosophist Helena Blavatsky and others saw him as someone sympathetic to their own interests in paganism, occultism, and the traces of universal spirit within diverse regional beliefs and practices.

The verbal arts are also well represented at Holywell. There is Kenneth Grahame, whose love and veneration of nature can be found in many works, including *Pagan Papers* (1893) and *The Wind in the Willows* (1908). The American James Blish is also part of this sepulchral community. His writings include *A Case of Conscience* (1958) – a reworking of his 1953 novella *If* – in which a Jesuit priest has his faith shaken when he and his team visit the planet Lithia and encounter alien reptiles who have, without the aid of the Judeo-Christian God, attained a perfect moral

state. Of all the individuals who have enhanced the soil of Holywell Cemetery, the most relevant to an understanding of what I call British decadent ecology is Walter Pater. He and Algernon Charles Swinburne were key catalysts of the flourishing of decadent culture and the pagan revival in Britain. Pater's own ideas were influenced by the work of Müller, and the two were well acquainted as Oxford dons living across the street from each other.<sup>4</sup> Pater died in 1894 and Müller six years later. Even in Holywell, Pater's rather conventional grave marker stands just across from the Celtic cross on Müller's burial plot.

When I speak of Holywell's denizens, I am thinking of the specialists in diverse fields who contributed to these changing ecological visions, as well as the creatures, plants, and other forces that contributed to their enquiries, engaged their imaginations, and flourished on their graves. Their physical intermingling is a helpful model for envisioning the decadents' own mix of ideas about ecology, decadence, and pagan spiritualities. A number of scholars have conducted research on ways in which British decadent authors and artists turned to paganism for exotic and erotic metaphors and motifs. Others have addressed how the decadents used paganism's spiritual, aesthetic, and philosophical discourses as cultural coding through which to engage nonnormative desires or to foster community. My study builds on this valuable work, although paganism's symbolic and mediatory functions are not my main focus. Rather, in this study I address paganism as a force in itself – one that made a vital contribution to the decadent ecological models articulated by authors, artists, and scientists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Decadent Ecology*, I address literary and visual works of decadence as they engaged with discourses that also operated through modern science, politics, and spirituality. The decadents, I argue, found sustenance from and gave nourishment to their ecology, with paganism a particularly vital component of their thinking, writing, performances, and art.

Despite its image in the press, British decadence, even from the 1860s to the 1910s when it was most popular, was not a monolithic movement. Rather, it engaged with and changed in response to diverse developments in science, philosophy, aesthetics, politics, and ethics. Within this familiar time period, there remain today under-acknowledged works that propound temporal, spatial, and conceptual expansions of what the British understood as decadence. In the chapters that follow, I explore less recognized aspects of decadence, such as animal empathy, the intimacy of the peripatetic, and the feminist potency of occult ritual. While not assuming lines of influence, *Decadent Ecology* also notes

conceptual overlaps with recent inquiries into issues such as queer ecology, pagan civic responsibility, and ecosophical articulations of animal–vegetal communication. In *Through Vegetal Being* (2018), Luce Irigaray ponders, “How can we speak of the vegetal world? Is not one of its teachings to show without saying, or to say without words? I imagine that we will try to display and signify on this side or beyond any discourse.”<sup>5</sup> How to think less like a human? How to allow others to perceive and process on one’s behalf? How to break open the logic of familiar discourses? Such queries underlie British decadence as a creative force of cultural disturbance and the eco-paganism through which so many of these radical interests and methodologies were experienced.

There are two main reasons why the eco-morphological aspect of British decadence has, to date, not garnered greater scholarly attention. First, from the start of the cultural phenomenon, decadence has been associated with the urban, the cultured, the artificial, and, not infrequently, the insincere. Second, the popular press canonized decadence largely by parodying or condemning the persona of the dandy-aesthete, the penchant for bons mots, the celebration of gender and sexual liberties, and certain Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics in fashion and home décor that became markers of middle-class pretension. Swinburne, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Pater, Ouida, Wilde, James McNeill Whistler, Aubrey Beardsley – these prominent authors and artists were refashioned into the comic embodiments of the decadent type at the expense of other contributors to the movement who did not fit so readily into the popular vision and were, therefore, arguably also less influential. To help avoid losing those subject threads of British decadence that, to date, have been underappreciated, I conceive of decadence as multidisciplinary, interweaving strands of interests whose interactions fostered a conceptual elasticity and suppleness. Each of my chapters is designed around one of these strands. Some strands are temporally longer and others are not as tightly interwoven with the rest, so I have organized the chapters as chronologically as possible in order to signpost more easily notable influences, redirections, and integrations.

### Following the Strands

Because Swinburne and Pater were the main catalysts for a British culture of eco-pagan decadence, they are my starting points in Chapters 1 and 2. My first chapter defines, historically positions, and captures the intersections among decadence, ecology, and the pagan revival in literature and art. I establish the ecological aspects of decadence as articulated

by such influential writers as Charles Baudelaire, Paul Bourget, and Max Nordau, while, in the process, offering close analyses of works by Swinburne and the Pre-Raphaelite artist Frederick Sandys that help demonstrate the complex interplay across these concepts. In Chapter 2, I explore Pater's turn to Classical paganism to formulate his vision of the individual subject as dissipated through a range of spatiotemporal landscapes. Situating Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) within the context of scientific claims by Charles Darwin, Ernst Haeckel, and Antonio Stoppani, I demonstrate the way in which Pater's paganism melds the Classical with recent scientific developments to present an ecological fusion of humans, other animals, plants, cultures, and even architecture. Of equal importance, I note that people such as Stoppani turned to metaphors rooted in Classical mythology in order to formulate, in his case, a pseudo-scientific, Christian conception of the rise of the Anthropocene.

My discussion of the term "new paganism" in Chapter 1 notes the homophobic intimations present in some critics' responses to Swinburne's and Pater's decadent works. However, as Swinburne's poem "The Leper" (1866) and Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* make apparent, the intimacies that construct ecological communities are often far more amorphous or unprecedented than homophobic innuendos suggest. My third chapter addresses decadent desires as complicated modes of perspectival code-switching accomplished through trans-species intimacies. Focusing on the strategic paganism in works by painter Simeon Solomon and poets Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, known together as Michael Field, I offer two queer models of what Henry Salt theorized, in *Animals' Rights Considered in Relation to Social Progress* (1892), as imaginative sympathy.

Decadence turned to paganism to grasp not only animal intimacies but also engagements with the environment more generally. Building on the queer trans-species intimacies articulated by Swinburne, Pater, Solomon, and Field, in Chapter 4 I address Robert Louis Stevenson's and Vernon Lee's renderings of the environment as *genius loci*. As I argue, for Stevenson and Lee the *genii locorum* are not fixed locations in nature but ecological entanglements among animal and vegetal species, geographic formations, and climate. Stevenson and Lee extend Pater's ecological correspondences by presenting the immersive experience of the peripatetic as sensual and psychological engagements with nature that result in a more vital identification outside the self. And in situating their analysis within the growing cultural practice of the nature walk, their writings

redefine the *genius loci* as a dynamic engagement suggestive of early environmentalism.

In her writings, Lee at times formulates the spirit of place as a transhistorical, gynocentric paganism, but a number of her contemporaries took on a more explicit consideration of the pagan as a site of feminist self-realization. Chapter 5 turns from literature about the spirit of moving through place to works addressing another form of spiritual movement: actual pagan ritual. Enmeshed within both the London decadent community and New Woman politics, Moira Mathers and Florence Farr were among the most influential occultists of the pagan revival. These two leaders of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn developed ecological models in which human-centered measures of space and time are replaced by an understanding of the self as an evanescent engagement within an occult ecology. Taking a lesson from Sandys, this chapter is not about searching for occult symbols in decadent art or literature. Rather, it addresses the decadent spirit within occult works aimed, in part, at destabilizing modern gender inequality.

While my discussion of occult feminism in Chapter 5 shifts the foundations of my study to a reality beyond the veil, in Chapter 6 I return to the turf on which I began with my ruminations on Holywell Cemetery. The last chapter examines works by George Egerton, Arthur Machen, and William Sharp, each of whom introduces a different form of paganism to their earthy decadent ecologies. The authors find in paganism scalar distortions and other forms of eco-excess that problematize distinctions between the spiritual, secular, and scientific. At the same time, while all are, today, recognized as part of the cosmopolitan, fin-de-siècle culture of Wilde and Beardsley, each, in fact, turns to the local and the rural as the site of their decadent intimacies. We hear in their often conflicted renderings of the pagan landscape voices for sexual, eco-spiritual, and regionalist politics.

As I sit at my desk now, discouraged by a global plague from travel and socializing, I look out at the new raised garden beds in our backyard on this bright Oklahoma February day. Morgan, the cats, and I keep hypothetically safe in our bubble, while the virus and international politics rage on. And I am left in awe, inspired at least, by the idea that the ecological remains so inescapable and that the regional and the earth-centered have become so much a defining element of my life.

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