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Unsatisfied Appeal of Sense:
The Decadent Image in the Poetry and Poetics of Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, and Ernest Dowson

Konstantinos Boyiopoulos

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

to the Department of English Studies

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Abstract

This thesis explores the Decadent poetry of the English *fin de siècle* by highlighting the function in it of the "Decadent image". This term is used to suggest the way in which the linguistic texture of Decadent poetry displays a powerful if frustrated desire to be the vessel of intense sensory experience, especially subversive and heterodox sexual experience. The thesis builds on the work of Frank Kermode, who expounds the Symbolist liberation of the "Image" in the nineties, a liberation which he rightly grounds in Romanticism but fails fully to relate his account to Decadent poetry. Linda Dowling focuses on the "linguistic autonomy" of Decadent poetry, but not on the would-be literalness with which sensory experience is textualised in it. Developing the work of these and other critics, and following a formalist and intertextual approach, the thesis examines the function of imagery found in three poets: Wilde, Symons, and Dowson. These poets are chosen because of their centrality in Decadence, representing coherently the different phases of the Decadent poetic. Situating the Decadent image in the broader context of the Romantic tradition and French influences, the thesis offers close analysis of a large number of poems previously under-investigated.

The first chapter establishes the theoretical background of the Decadent image, its fragmentation into "details" reflecting a propensity to concretize poetic language, and exhibiting an ancestry in Romantic poetry. Chapter two concentrates on Wilde's *Intentions* exploring ideas of decorativeness, self-referentiality, mythopoeia and atemporality. Chapter three illustrates how Wilde's *Poems* and *The Sphinx* demonstrate a particularly Decadent quality as they deal with the futility of sexual collisions.

Chapter four shifts to Symons's Impressionist criticism, tracing his understanding of the Decadent image through his attempts to articulate ideas about "strangeness". Chapters five and six discuss Symons's *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*, examining Benjamin's *flâneur*, the eroticized metropolis, and the artificial interactions between the erotic body and the city. The seventh and eighth chapters explore Dowson's *Verses* and *Decorations in Verse and Prose*. Looking at Dowson's Catholicism and Schopenhauerian poetics of expiration and suspension, the discussion suggests that, in this poet's hands, the Decadent image reaches a crisis and a cul-de-sac in the poet's image of the dead girl. The last chapter offers a coda to the thesis, exploring ways in which the Decadent image (emerging from Romanticism) persists in Modern and Modernist writing.

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Notes to Texts

Arthur Symons's poems are quoted from the first three volumes of The *Collected Works of Arthur Symons* (London: Secker, 1924), an incomplete set of nine out of sixteen projected volumes. His poetic works are distributed in the volumes as follows: Volume I: *Days and Nights*, *Silhouettes*, *London Nights* and *Amoris Victima*. Volume II: *Images of Good and Evil*, *The Loom of Dreams*, *The Fool of the World and Other Poems* and *Love's Cruelty*. The rest is in Volume III. For Oscar Wilde's poetry *Poems and Poems in Prose* edited by Bobby Fong and Karl Beckson, and for Ernest Dowson *The Poetical Works* edited by Desmond Flower are used as the most complete, authoritative and annotated editions to date.

Regarding poetry quotations (for all the primary and secondary sources), when the edition used features line-numbering, this is parenthetically stated along with the quotations. In case of absence of line-numbering, quotations are left as they are. Also unless stated otherwise, the information for a poetic quotation is to be traced in the corresponding source cited elsewhere in the thesis. For the poetry of Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Verlaine, bilingual, parallel-text editions are used: Line numbers are used for Mallarmé's French, pagination for the French of the other two and for translations of all three.

Most of the primary sources and some important secondary ones are abbreviated (Wilde's, Symons's and Dowson's primary editions of poetry are not abbreviated or referenced at all). The bibliographical information for the abbreviated sources is not cited in the thesis. All references occur in footnote form and – for the sake of convenience – when used more than once are subsequently shortened. Prose by Romantic poets (e.g. Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry*) is referenced by the surname parenthetically in the body of the thesis.

Abbreviations

App	"Style", "Aesthetic Poetry", "Postscript" in Walter Pater, *Appreciations with an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1889).
CBS	Arthur Symons, *Charles Baudelaire: A Study* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1920).
CSP	Arthur Symons, *Colour Studies in Paris* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1918).
DG	Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray: The 1890 and 1891 Texts*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: OUP, 2005), vol. 3 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Russell Jackson and Ian Small, 4 vols. to date, 2000 –.
D-*Letters*	Ernest Dowson, *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, eds. Desmond Flower and Henry Maas (London: Cassell, 1967).
DM	Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (1893): 858-67.
DS	John R. Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1985).
ERA	Oscar Wilde, "The English Renaissance of Art" in Oscar Wilde, *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea: The Rare Oscar Wilde*, ed. and introd., John Wyse Jackson (London: Fourth Estate, 1991).
Int	Oscar Wilde, *Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: OUP, 2007), vol. 4 of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Russell Jackson and Ian Small, 4 vols. to date, 2000 –.
LaD	Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986).
Memoirs	Arthur Symons, *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s*, ed. Karl Beckson (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1977).
PN	Arthur Symons, *Parisian Nights* (Westminster: Beaumont, 1926).
Ren	Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry, the 1893 Text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (Berkeley: U of California P, 1980).
RI	Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 1957 (London: Collins-Fontana,

1971).

RM — Arthur Symons, *The Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (London: Constable, 1909).

SED — Ernest Dowson, *The Stories of Ernest Dowson*, ed. Mark Longaker (New York: Perpetua, 1960).

S-*Letters* — Arthur Symons, *Selected Letters, 1880 – 1935*, eds. Karl Beckson and John Munro (London: Macmillan, 1989).

SML — Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1899).

SML-r — Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, 1908, rev. ed. (New York: Haskell, 1971).

WB — Arthur Symons, *William Blake* (London: Constable, 1907).

W-*Letters* — Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000).

Introduction

IN his key essay "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893) in *Harper's New Monthly* Arthur Symons upholds from the onset that Decadence "is certainly not classic, nor has it any relation with that old antithesis of the Classic, the Romantic" (DM, 858). Nonetheless, for Symons, "both Impressionism and Symbolism convey some notion of that new kind of literature which is perhaps more broadly characterized by the word Decadence" (DM, 858). Symons's concern could be initiated by his master, Paul Verlaine, for whom the Poètes Maudits are "like bronzes from decadent Rome – but what does "decadent" really mean? – [...] So down with false romanticism!"[1] Scholars and commentators cannot adequately pigeonhole the late nineteenth-century literary movement of Decadence in English because it serves as the crossroads, fusion, distillation, development, or quasi-negation of other Schools such as Romanticism, Impressionism, Aestheticism and Symbolism.[2] If all these artistic and cultural forces are registered in Decadence, the movement becomes distinct by virtue of its attention to sensory textures, the basis of its dissident nature.

Decadence combines an Impressionism associated with morbid hallucination and the evocativeness and suggestion belonging to Symbolism.[3] Yet, Symbolism was also a label that thinly disguised Decadence. In Chapter 8 of the *Lippincott*'s edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) Oscar Wilde refers to the school of "*Décadents*" whilst in Chapter 10 of the expanded version (1891) the same school is termed "*Symbolistes*" (*DG*, 103, 274). And in a tactical editorial manoeuvre Symons renamed his article as *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). Similarly, in the latter work, for instance, he approves a quotation by Stéphane Mallarmé: "Symbolist, Decadent, or Mystic" schools arrive at an "Idealism which [...] rejects the 'natural' materials" (*SML*, 134). Apart from Symons's attempt at theorizing, though, predominantly Decadence, or decadentism, shares many aspects with the Aestheticism of Swinburne, Rossetti, Pater and Wilde;[4] the correspondence of the two movements is quite complicated to map out. Decadence springs from and is defined

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[1] Paul Verlaine, *The Cursed Poets*, trans. Chase Madar (København: Green Integer, 2003), 11.
[2] See also John R. Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 1985), 12-5.
[3] See also Murray G. H. Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1890s* (London: Routledge, 1993), 10. For a discussion on Decadence and Symbolism see 1-14.
[4] The *OED* records the *Westminster Gazette* in 1895: "The ego-mania of decadentism, its love of the artificial [...] have found their English representative among the Æsthetes."

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by its relationship with the middle classes; the French Decadents' slogan was *épater la bourgeoisie* ("to shock the middle-classes").

The *amoral* Aesthetic image of artificial beauty which exists in the Tennysonian "palace of art" becomes *immoral* as it evolves into the artist's nonconformist challenge of society.[5] The life-as-art Aesthetic paradox converts to the art-as-life Decadent paradox: according to Wilde "Life imitates Art" (*Int*, 90) and for Symons, in the "Author's Note" to *Plays, Acting and Music* (1928), "Life, too, is a form of art".[6] Critics have also touched upon the relationship of the two forces. When Karl Beckson concludes that "the English Aesthetes and Decadents [...] transform their lives into works of art"[7], he hints at the interaction between art and its enacting. Louis Marvick perceives this paradox as the two-faced mask of the Roman god Janus: it is "a fair approximation of the decadent's mask, which permits the wearer to enter the world while remaining apart from it."[8] And for Marion Thain this predicament is a replacement: the "beautiful experience for the sake of art" gives way to "the cultivation of any experience for aesthetic impact."[9] Ultimately the boundaries of the two movements irrevocably blur.[10] This confusion is recorded in the evolution of poetic images; their Aesthetic detachment and traditionalism turns, to various degrees, into a solipsist, contemporary vision of artistic enacting. Keatsian dreaminess modulates into the Baudelairian quest of antinomian sensations triggering a new artistic attitude based on materiality and individualism.

By the word "image", the central topic of this thesis, I mean to suggest a poetics deriving from sensory obsession. The Decadent image's characteristic trait is the artist's matter-bound pursuit of perfection, a pursuit that is foredoomed to futility, dissatisfaction and unrest; the unsatisfied sexual encounter is its dominant manifestation. R. K. R. Thornton sees this tension as the "decadent dilemma". For Thornton "the Decadent is a man caught between two opposite and apparently

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[5] For this disparity between the Aesthete and the Decadent see Edward S. Lauterbach and W. Eugene Davis, *The Transitional Age: British Literature 1880-1920* (New York: Whitston, 1973), 30. See also the "higher morality" of Decadence in Chris Snodgrass, "The Poetry of the 1890s," *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, eds. Richard Cronin et al. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 325.

[6] Arthur Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music: A Book of Theory* (London: Travellers' Library, 1928), 7.

[7] Karl Beckson, ed., *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose*, 1981, rev. ed. (Chicago: Academy of Chicago, 1993), xliv.

[8] Louis W. Marvick, "Aspects of the Fin-de-Siècle Decadent Paradox," *Clio* 22 (1992), 10.

[9] Marion Thain, "Poetry," *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 225.

[10] See also Ian Small, ed. and introd., *The Aesthetes: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1979), xii.

incompatible pulls: [...] the world [...and its] attractive impressions [...and a yearning] towards the eternal, the ideal [...]. The play between these two poles forms the typical Decadent subject matter".[11] At the first pole of Thornton's equation could be Symons with his sexual cravings and at the other Dowson with his death yearnings. Pondering "Decadence", Symons states that "the term is in its place only when applied to style; to that ingenious deformation of language" and "perversity of form and perversity of matter are often found together" (*SML*, 8). As it shall be seen, Decadent themes are conditioned to be part of the image as much as the poetic technique.

As I will demonstrate the Decadent image involves a sophistication and self-consciousness that marks an unnatural tendency to concretize language;[12] it is an image that emerges as language about language. Critics such as Linda Dowling have discussed the literature of Decadence as linguistic deviation. Yet there is another twist, in the way Decadence springs from Romanticism and yet is dissociated from it: the fluid and ever-transforming Romantic *imagination* comes to a halt; it freezes, by way of *l'art pour l'art*, into the stagnant and self-referential *image*. Romantic creativity ceases to be about depth of imagination and feeling and clusters on a surface of sensations.[13]

Already in the "Appendix on Poetic Diction" (1802) that complements the "Preface" to *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth speaks disdainfully of diction which "with the progress of refinement [...] became daily more and more corrupt, thrusting out of sight the plain humanities of nature by a motley masquerade of tricks, quaintnesses, hieroglyphics, and enigmas."[14] With the censure which always accompanies it, Wordsworth's comment sums up the overindulgent style of Algernon Swinburne and the nineties Decadents. The Romantics break off from artifice whereas the Decadents revel in artifice. Riffaterre argues that "the difference between Romanticism and decadence is to be found [...] in its tropological nature [...]: paradox."[15] Indeed

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[11] R. K. R. Thornton, "Decadence' in Later Nineteenth-century England" in Ian Fletcher, ed., *Decadence and the 1890s*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 17 (New York: Holmes, 1980), 26.
[12] See Ian Fletcher, ed., *Decadence and the 1890s*, 10. See also Russell M. Goldfarb "Late Victorian Decadence," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20.4 (1962), 373.
[13] For remarks on Decadence and Romanticism see Reed, *DS*, 9, 11-12, 16.
[14] William Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: A Critical Edition of the Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill, The Oxford Authors (Oxford: OUP, 1984), 617.
[15] Michael Riffaterre, "Decadent Paradoxes," trans. Liz Constable and Matthew Potolsky, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, eds. Liz Constable et al. (Philadelphia: U of Philadelphia P, 1999), 65-6.

paradox becomes the primary vehicle of artifice in Wilde. The Romantics probe the expression of transcendental deep feeling and the sublimity of nature. The Decadents reject Nature and adhere obsessively to the artificial detail; they reject feeling at the expense of sensation. In dialogue with Wordsworth, Charles Baudelaire's sonnet "Le Coucher du soleil romantique" from *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857) serves as a counterpoint:

> Je me souviens! J'ai vu tout, fleur, source, sillon,
> Se pâmer sous son œil comme un cœur qui palpite...
> – Courons vers l'horizon, il est tard, courons vite,
> Pour attraper au moins un oblique rayon![16]

Baudelaire signals a sort of transmutation of Romanticism. He bids farewell to an era of art symbolized by the "setting sun" in order to focus on and arrest the "ray", the fleeting detail, a principle advocated both by the French Decadents and those writing in English. With the novel and labyrinthine explorations of poets like P. B. Shelley and John Keats, Romanticism gathered momentum and the processes of imagination condensed and congealed to the state of the image as pre-existent of thought and signifier of itself. And yet self-signification goes a step further with the Decadents. Linda Dowling in her approach to Decadence as a linguistic phenomenon demonstrates the looming autonomy of language that is brought about through a self-conscious intensification of style achieved as, for example, Pater's "ascetic Euphuism".[17] However, with the Decadents, the linguistic medium almost seems to have reinvented itself; its tangibility has rendered it an alternative to sensory experience. But this aesthetic of transmutation carries an inherent predicament: for writers such as Pater, Wilde, Symons, Dowson and Johnson, the Decadent image involves a paradox in which language and sense-experience are mediums of each other.

The findings of this study differentiate themselves from three major critical works, namely Frank Kermode's *Romantic Image* (1957), Linda Dowling's *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siécle* (1986), and John Reed's *Decadent Style* (1985). Kermode discusses a number of authors from Blake to Pater, Wilde, Symons,

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[16] "I have seen all: the flower, furrow, spring / Swoon in his beaming like a throbbing heart… / – Now it is late, run westward, let us start, / To trap one ray, at least one fading thing." Charles Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. James McGowan (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 296, 297.

[17] See Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), 121-5.

Verlaine and T. E. Hulme to showcase Yeats's achievement as the exemplar and continuation of the long Romantic tradition which evolves into the late nineteenth-century Symbolism. He argues that the "Image" is a fusion of the Symbolist and the Romanticist trends developed by Yeats "in whose work Romantic isolation achieves its full quality as a theme for poetry [...] and his treatment of it is very closely related to his belief in what Pater called 'vision' and the French called Symbol."[18] Kermode's "Image" is represented in the Yeatsian emblems of "The Dancer" and "The Tree". As Kemode observes, "the icon of the Dancer [...] is one of Yeats's great reconciling images, containing life in death, death in life, movement and stillness, action and contemplation, body and soul." (*RI*, 61). The "Tree" is naturally static but it is organic, an alive picture with the same particularities of the Dancer but from an inside-out standpoint. The Aesthetes and the Decadents who especially favoured the dancer emblem as in Wilde's Salomé or Symons's La Mélinite of course share these contradictory properties in the image. However, Kermode plays down the morbid, artificial and neurotic possibilities of his "Image". Fusion in the Romantic Image for Kermode comes down to that between "action" and "contemplation" and symbolizes the artist's Self.[19] The Romantic quest for self, however, in the backdrop of the late nineteenth century, reaches a stalemate; it turns into a surface of sensations or masks of selves thus changing the "Image", as this study will partly show.

Kermode perceives Decadence as a pathology, yet he acknowledges that the Yeatsian Dancer also stems from Decadent sources. He locates "her ancestry in Flaubert, and her function as a symbol of the pathological aspect of decadence" (*RI*, 82).[20] At the opening of his chapter "The Image", Kermode applies to the artwork elements from Aestheticism, stating that it is "analogous not to a machine, but to an organism; coextensive in matter and form; resistant to explication; largely independent of intention, and of any form of ethical utility" (*RI*, 57) and this is reflected in the Dancer. So Kermode integrates the Aestheticist amorality and autonomy of art in his Dancer emblem. These linkages to Decadence and Aestheticism only serve him in supporting the Symbolist attributes of the Romantic Image. This study, on the contrary, investigates the poetics of pathology as central and

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[18] Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 1957 (London: Collins-Fontana, 1971), 42.
[19] Gregory "reconciles the opposites of action and contemplation; and this reconciliation of opposites, very properly in a Romantic poet, is the purpose of the Yeatsian symbol, which is the flowering of what I call the Romantic Image" (*RI*, 56).
[20] See also *RI*, 74, 84, 86.

catalytic in the assortment of images found in Wilde, Symons and Dowson. Kermode's catchwords "machine" and "organic" can take an updated meaning as in its artifice and self-reference the organic aspect of the Decadent image interchanges with the mechanical: Wordsworthian "feeling" turns into Paterian "sensation" whose saturated version is ultimately reached in the poetry of Dowson.

The key difference developed in this thesis is that with the Decadents the concreteness of the image is perverse, an implied protestation against late Victorian morality and normality. Kermode's "Image" defeats abstraction with its definiteness; it is anti-intellectual: The Dancer "has 'outdanced thought'; concretely visualized, her body silences the mind" (*RI*, 72). For Kermode, besides Yeats, "Verlaine was the one who most happily defeated abstraction, whose poetry was most clearly a physical presence without separable intellectual content" (*RI*, 63). Ideas are evoked mystically through the image as in Ezra Pound's idea of the "vortex". With the mask-like face of the moving Dancer and, reversely, the animated features of the static Tree, Kermode captures the trappings of this paradoxical aspect of his "Image" successfully. In Decadence, the image evokes but it does so neurotically and morbidly, ultimately resorting to the complex poetic of self-symbolization.

Kermode discusses Symons's idea of the symbol as "absolute revelation (it is the concrete embodiment of a supernatural entity)" and "arcane concealment (it is in no sense representational)" (*RI*, 124), also tracing this notion in Pater's "form and matter" and Wilde's "soul and body" fusions, and Hulme's "intuitive image". These ideas point to a solidification of language into image to convey the suggestion of the Symbolist aesthetic. On the contrary, this thesis focuses on the unnaturalness of this conversion in conveying the intensified morbid pleasures that form the Decadent aesthetic. And the different approach is not just an issue of nomenclature: the sets of imageries featured in the poetry of Decadence along with their behaviour and mechanisms originate in the Decadent image in a similar manner to the way that Kermode roots the dancer in the "Romantic Image".

In a study of a completely diverse sort, Linda Dowling examines Decadence from a purely philological perspective. She insists on the "autonomy" of language, a useful concept because it points up the narcissistic self-referentiality of the nineties

poetry. Julian North also tackles this idea later.[21] Dowling argues that "Decadence emerges, in short, as a counterpoetics of disruption and parody and stylistic derangement" (*LaD*, x). For her this disintegration of language is a longstanding phenomenon, from Wordsworth's "linguistic counterspirit" and Coleridge's "*lingua communis*" to Pater's "profane 'soul in style'"[22]. Dowling speaks of the "static" state of language realized in Pater's prose which is "too restlessly intent upon displaying itself as a verbal arabesque" (*LaD*, 131). However Dowling recognizes Pater's emphasis on the detail in terming his style "atomic, fractionary" (*LaD*, 135). Like Kermode, Dowling sees the Decadent Movement as the extreme phase of a linguistic decomposition which commences with the Romantics.[23] Throughout her book, she baptizes Decadent literature the "post-philological moment". The point at which this thesis stands apart from Dowling's approach is that the movement goes beyond the realm of linguistics, looking at the transmutation of language through *synaesthetic* agencies. Dowling's linguistic autonomy, which could equally apply to Modernism, does not sufficiently characterize Decadent poetry. The Decadent image marks the tendency to perceive or simulate language through the senses.

For John Reed Decadent style involves "dissolution" and "reconstitution" of the artwork that simulates "the multiplication and reordering of selves in the artist" (*DS*, 218-9). This idea is on a par with the image as a fractured entity like Pater's spectrum of impressions and Symons's fragmented London. A dominant idea this study postulates is the tragic attraction to impossibility. And so Reed's most accurate observation concerns the "Romantic artist's hungry desire for impossibilities. Romantic yearning called for a less complete closure, but Decadent style consciously exploits unfulfilled anticipations" (*DS*, 9). The Decadent image is that of neurotic-erotic *un*-fulfilment and Reed correctly roots this element of his "Decadent style" in Romanticism. For Reed the English poets of the nineties exhibit Decadent traits but they do not fit the label because Decadent "style is most suited to poems long enough to make use of the atomizing and reassembling techniques" (*DS*, 127). This is an exaggerated claim: both atomization and indulgence in the image – as it will be demonstrated – occur in the short lyric and the sonnet which are trademarks of the

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[21] Julian North, "Defining Decadence in Nineteenth-century French and British Criticism," in *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture*, ed. Michael St John, Studies in European Cultural Transition 3 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 83-94.

[22] See *LaD*, 20-24.

[23] "Literary Decadence, one might say, is Romanticism demoralized by philology" (*LaD*, 176).

group. Additionally, according to Reed, the nineties do not achieve Decadence proper because the latter constructs an extreme standard that leaves everyone out. Of Symons Reed says that "he was more obsessed and commanded by his themes than he was master of them" (*DS*, 120). But this is precisely the point as Symons's themes are inseparable from the images that reflect his obsessions.

In this thesis I explore the Decadent poetry of Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons, and Ernest Dowson along with the critical prose of the first two. I argue that the rhetoric the nineties poets employ does not aim at mere inscription of sensory experience in language but at language as the *de facto* terrain of savouring experience. The text is savoured, not linguistically and playfully as in Swinburne, but sensually and painfully. Swinburne's orgasmic flow with the Decadent poets turns to arrestment. Thus, the Decadent image emerges as the *literality* of the senses, an embodiment of the Decadent poets' fascinating and perverse impulse. In trying to be a textual performance of sexual behaviour, language undergoes a crisis; it can never escape its syntactic condition and often conveys the poet's heightened sense of unsatisfied yearnings. I stress the importance and uniqueness of the Decadent image, demonstrating how risqué and morbid subjects and moods are tightly linked with the way the image behaves.[24] In brief, I attempt to solve the problem posed by Lisa Rodensky in her introduction to her anthology *Decadent Poetry: From Wilde to Naidu* (2006), the reconciliation of the "decadent" "concern [...] with lurid subject matter", and the "aesthetic" concern "with questions of form and style."[25]

My approach is not biographical, psycho-cultural or moralistic; the cultural and critical investigation and mapping of the movement have been conducted brilliantly and minutely by R. K. R. Thornton's *The Decadent Dilemma* (1983) and Murray Pittock's *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1890s* (1993).[26] Neither is this thesis interested in cataloguing and grouping the sets of morbid and perverse icons and imageries that comprise the movement as this has been famously achieved by Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (1933).[27] My study will rather

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[24] This is partly contrary to Fletcher and Bradbury who claim in Fletcher, ed., *Decadence and the 1890s*, 12, that English Decadence is defined by theme rather than language.
[25] Lisa Rodensky, ed. and introd., *Decadent Poetry: From Wilde to Naidu* (London: Penguin, 2006), xxv-xxvi.
[26] See also Barbara Charleworth's *Dark Passages* (1965). For a more memoir-like discussion see Matthew Sturgis's *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (1995) and William Gaunt's *The Aesthetic Adventure* (1957).
[27] See also Bram Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity* (1986) and Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae* (1990).

emphasize and develop what is overlooked in Kermode and Dowling. Taking equally into account both British and French influences[28] my approach will be intertextual and formalist (with the application of selective theorists such as Walter Benjamin, Georges Bataille, Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan), in order to comprehend in depth and put for the first time consciously in context the poetic workings of what this thesis calls the Decadent image in the English *fin de siècle*.

The choice of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson is made for a number of reasons. One reason is their centrality for the Decadent movement: Wilde was identified as its high priest by the press, Symons was its chief spokesman and practitioner, and Dowson was its model poet later mythologized. More importantly, by looking at these diverse, yet similar poets in the aforementioned order, I do not just expound on the Decadent image in its different manifestations, but also demonstrate the pattern of its development. With Wilde, poetry develops from Aestheticism into the Decadence that envelops the nineties. Symons takes Wilde's poetics and immerses it fully in the modernity and anti-Classicism that mark the peak of Decadence proper. With Dowson, the image reaches a deeper level; it serves to elegize the Decadent movement, signifying its saturation, futility, and ultimate self-destruction. The poetics of dissatisfaction and doomed desire is begotten in Wilde's Aesthetic landscape, reaches its frenzied peak in Symons's obsessive sexual escapades, and freezes in Dowson's eroticism in death. My discussion excludes Lionel Johnson because his sternly Classical poetry is often resistant to, even as it is fascinated by, Decadent ways. Other poets are brought in where relevant in order to situate the argument in the broader poetic view. The images and poetics of these other poets are eventually reflected in the three phases of the Decadent image represented by Wilde, Symons, and Dowson.

This thesis is not merely a close reading of these poets, something which, at any rate, is accomplished on a large scale in criticism for the first time. It proposes something other than Kermode's idea, offering a fresh insight into Decadence, mapping its workings not only as a continuation of Romanticism into Modernism but also in its own right. As the first chapter attests, the micro-behaviour of the image in the British Romantics (Keats), French Parnassians (Gautier) and Post-Romantics (Baudelaire, Swinburne) up until the British Aesthetes (Pater) is crucial for the

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[28] For Snodgrass the British Decadents were not influenced by the French ("The Poetry of the 1890s", 324), a biased argument and altogether half-true.

genesis of the nineties poetic formulated by Wilde and Symons. This is a background chapter of the behavioural elements of the image. By bringing out various key sources, I showcase the isolation of the "detail", its deviant hypertrophy at the expense of unity and accordingly the tendency to perceive language materialistically. Also in a further connection with Romanticism I suggest that the emergence of this poetic is also boosted by the Romantic "fancy".

In Chapter Two I chiefly survey Oscar Wilde's essays and dialogues in *Intentions* (1891). Wilde's uniqueness lies in the fact that he becomes the mouthpiece of Aestheticism in the eighteen-eighties and then the emissary of Decadence in the nineties (both with his writing and flagrant lifestyles). I demonstrate how his prose is revealing about the Aesthetic basis of the Decadent image; his radical Aestheticism exhibits features that betray the strong Decadent inclinations which bloom in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The image-behaviour of the dialogue form is examined, as well as the Decadent beginnings of the sensual aspect of decorativeness. The notions of orientalism, hedonism and contemplation, atemporality and mythopoeia are also brought out in the tracing and crystallization of the image. In addition I argue that Wilde's Decadent aesthetic systematises the "jewelled style" found in heightened form in the "purple passage", addressing also the paradox of the pictoriality of the linguistic medium.

In Chapter Three I inspect how Wilde puts some of his ideas into practice in his poetry. The extra significance of this chapter is not only that it pays close attention to the largely neglected poetic opus of Wilde but also that it looks at it afresh, from the perspective of the Decadent movement. Wilde communicates an eroticized image, one which is carefully arranged and savoured. I showcase the reinvention of tradition on artificial, sterile surfaces in the light of his intetextuality. I study the narrative poem "Charmides" as pre-Decadent and Wilde's inclination to turn morbidly textuality into sexuality or vice versa. The poem looks straight forward into Symons's poems which are its modernized and compressed version. His Impressionist poems represent the meeting point of the "jewelled" texture and metropolitan artifice. Finally in the *Sphinx*, the Wildean style of display, excess, and the poisonous force of the monstrous icon culminates.

In the fourth Chapter I investigate a miscellany of Arthur Symons's mostly critical prose, such as *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), and attempt to elicit his ideas about the image. The discussion extends to Symons's prose beyond the

nineties because his style and ideas largely remain the same until his death. Symons is a leading spokesman of Decadence who engages fully with the physicality of vision. I pay attention to the term "strangeness"; a quality by which two discordant elements come together to produce the artifice that fuels Symons's prose. I explore how his views of the British Romantics and other French authors are revealing about his own contemporary ideas. I show that the poetics of "strangeness" lie behind Symons's Impressionism, a modified term which accommodates the formation of the Decadent image. The "impression", which for Symons has a Paterian foundation, is a prism that reflects and deflects the shifting mental states of the individual, specifically the author. Decomposition, selectivity, "atmosphere" and novel angles of vision assist the mapping of the workings of Symons's aesthetic. Throughout, I explore the fine line between concreteness and suggestion, a paradoxical condition of Symons's version of Decadence.

Chapters five and six analyse Symons's poems, mainly *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* and are sub-sectioned thematically. The image of the Dancer in Symons has been exhausted, predominantly by Kermode. Even though I discuss the Dancer motif, I focus more on the imagery of the city and how it signifies the poetics of fragmentation in the Impressionistic technique of fashioning the image. By applying Benjamin's theory of the *flâneur*, Chapter five investigates the interaction/identification of the female body with the cityscape as well as with interior spaces, where fragmentation is sustained further. Chapter six delves even deeper into Symons's vision by drawing a parallel of the city with the female body as artificial mask and soulless object. The last section concentrates on the "Bianca" sequence of poems to explore the idea of Symons as the *flâneur* of the flesh and anatomist of sexuality. Symons's eroticism incorporates the female body and the cityscape as sites of each other. The showcasing of the artist's neurosis and the notion of the Symonsian "nerves" as the agent of Decadent (dis)satisfaction are also discussed.

In Chapters seven and eight I study Ernest Dowson's poetic oeuvre *Verses* (1896) and *Decorations in Verse and Prose* (1899), making occasional references to his short stories and his playlet *The Pierrot of the Minute* (1897). In Chapter seven I argue that the image construed by Dowson is that of constantly delayed expiration. The Decadent image here reaches maturation. First, I examine the aesthetics of Roman Catholicism; the strong sense of sin and the cycle of confession are registered in the image as ritual. It ultimately finds its complete utterance in the manifesto-poem

of Cynara; the epitome of the Decadent image which permeates Dowson's *oeuvre*. Discussing also Schopenhauer's influence, the chapter puts stress on Dowson's obsession with death and dying and the artificiality of deferring the ideal moment. Dowson is a tragic example of a sort of Decadent utopian impulse. The elements of weariness, exasperation, autumnal imagery and self-isolation are also highlighted in sketching the deadlock of Dowson's Decadent journey. The shorter eighth chapter spotlights Dowson's artificial and desperate act of fixing the little girl in death. The Decadent image is perversely iconized by morbidly locking the beauty of innocence in its confines. Dowson's little girl symbolizes the entombment of the Aesthetic and Decadent movements, or their ultimate realization in poetry.

Finally, in the coda, I suggest that, given the fact of the impact of the nineties poets on the Modernists, the idea of the Modernist image is a progression and modification of the Decadent one. I attempt to explore the main avenues by which the movement of Imagism is indebted to the aforementioned *fin-de-siècle* poetic. I also look at some of the early lyrics of W. B. Yeats, lesser known early poems of T. S. Eliot, as well as poetry by Richard Aldington to inspect how the morbid nineties modulate and evolve. By looking at the Modernists' poetics of dialogue with the literary past, a practice which peaks with Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), I address the paradox by which their distancing from the limitations of the nineties also involves a return to the nineties, in the interests of a new pitch of poetic creativity.

1. Tracing the Background and Characteristics of the Decadent Image

THE visual and sensory aspect of language inevitably leads to the breaking down of the artistic whole at the expense of the detail.[29] This mechanism is vital: the showcasing of the detail generates the artist's neurosis, isolation and narcissistic refraction of the self. Antinomian and transgressive themes such as Baudelaire's and Symons's prostitutes, Wilde's necrophiliac characters like Salomé and Charmides, or Dowson's dead girls, are ultimately scaled down to the defiant stylistic stance of the artist's relationship with the projected concrete detail. Over-focusing on the fragment is the basis for mutating language and deliberately misperceiving its function as that of referring to a series of concrete objects. This is the point at which the language and subject-matter of Decadence compose one image. Richard le Gallienne strives to define Decadence in his review of John Gray's *Silverpoints* (1893). He avers that it is both a combination of the "self-conscious arrangement of 'coloured' vowels" and "themes of disease and forbidden things", rooted ultimately in the confinement of the "outlook of life to the colour-sense."[30] This solipsistic connection of the artist and the network of "details" consciously commences with the French and reaches its apex in Pater's "impressions" and the *mot juste*.

1.1 "The Whole Is Subordinated to the Parts"

The first conscious articulation of a theory of Decadence was the result of a tension in French Romanticism. Literature was veering towards an intensity of style in which the physical detail was singled out. On weighing Romantics like Victor Hugo against the Classics, the critic Désiré Nisard in 1834 discerns the "morceau choisi" and "intempérance de détails."[31] Théophile Gautier locates the "style of decadence" in Baudelaire. In his famous definition, this style is "full of nuances and refinement, forever pushing back the boundaries of language, borrowing specialist vocabularies

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[29] See also Reed, *DS*, 10-11.
[30] Richard Le Gallienne, *Retrospective Reviews : A Literary Log*, vol. 1 (London: Lane, 1896), 229, 230.
[31] The "selected fragment" and "intemperance of details." Désiré Nisard, *Études de moeurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence*, 5th ed. (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1888), 368, 388.

from everywhere, and taking colour from every palette, chords from every piano."[32] This aesthetic survives and integrates in the *fin-de-siècle* Decadence in English; Symons comments on Huysmans's *Là-Bas* about "l'image peinte, the exactitude of colour, the forcible precision of epithet, wherever words, images, or epithets are to be found [...] it is – especially in regard to things seen – extraordinarily expressive, with all the shades of a painter's palette" (DM, 866). In his preference for hard outlines, Gautier perceives language as the apparatus of clear-cut compositional ingredients. As in the case of Nisard, he directs his attention to the concentrated powers of the pictorial unit: "This decadent style is the last word ["*Verbe*"] in a catechism summoned to express everything and pushed to its very limits."[33]

Baudelaire advances a step closer to glorifying attention to detail in relation to the subjective states of the artist. In "Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne" (1863), he argues that initially the artist struggles between "the will to see all" and the "faculty of memory." Hitherto, he clarifies that

> an artist [...] will find himself at the mercy of a riot of details all clamouring for justice with the fury of a mob in love with absolute equality. All justice is trampled under foot; all harmony sacrificed and destroyed; many a trifle assumes vast proportions; many a triviality usurps the attention. The more our artist turns an impartial eye on detail, the greater is the state of anarchy. [34]

The autonomy of the sensory detail at the expense of the whole implies not just dissolution, but the artist's highly acute, penetrative state of mind. Baudelaire, like Poe and De Quincey before him, becomes the practitioner of this conduct by engaging in the avant-garde subject-matter of the city, anticipating the Impressionists and even the subjectivity and fragmentation of the Modernists. Unlike the detached appreciation of the Aesthetes, the Decadents communicate with the image by way of experience. In Baudelaire, it is rather vague whether the details anarchically stand out because this is how the artist perceives them, or whether the artist's mental vision is distorted because the unity of the work is broken down into autonomous details. The involvement of the artist's vision is evidently designated in Anatole Baju's magazine *Le Décadent* (1886-1889), the promotion of Decadence as a programmatic movement

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[32] Martin Travers, ed. *European Literature from Romanticism to Postmodernism: A Reader in Aesthetic Practice* (London: Continuum, 2001), 140.
[33] Travers, ed., *European Literature*, 140.
[34] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne, 1995, 2nd ed., (London: Phaidon, 2006), 16.

in France. In an article titled "Les Décadents & la Vie" Baju states: "What differentiates Decadentism from other literary schools is not only the name; it is also the style and especially the manner of seeing."[35] This assertion, as in the case of Baudelaire, presupposes that the artist's idiosyncratic vision as a receptive instrument informs the style of the work's breakdown.

Both Paul Bourget in his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (1883-6) and Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Case of Wagner* (1888) define the style of *décadence* as linguistic decomposition. Already Shelley avers in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) that "the parts of a composition may be poetical [...] a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought."[36] Bourget seems to have inherited Shelley's view; in his most quoted passage he avers that "A style of decadence is that where the unity of the book decomposes to give its place to the independence of the page, the page decomposes to give its place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give its place to the independence of the word."[37] But this idea is not limited to linguistics: Bourget tends to associate this disintegration with the subjective perception of the artist. In his discussion of Baudelaire, Bourget contends that "the mystique, like libertinism, is codified in expressions in the brain which breaks down its sensations, with the precision by which a prism breaks down light."[38] And on a more unfavourable note, Nietzsche constructs a theory of *décadence* by attributing the sovereignty of the chaotic detail to life and the passivity of the artist.[39] Along these lines, Max Nordau in his *Degeneration* (1892) attacks the writing style of such authors as Baudelaire, Huysmans and Wilde as symptoms of "ego-mania", the adverse version of Paterian "individualism". Nordau's diagnosis is a misreading of Bourget; for the latter Decadence is linguistic decomposition reflecting society but for Nordau it is total "anarchy", yet his argument represents the caustic viewpoint of philistinism.[40]

The psychologist Havelock Ellis, a central figure in various 1890s coteries, provides a lucid picture of a style of Decadence in an essay on J.-K. Huysmans, an

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[35] Anatole Baju, "Les Décadents & la Vie," *Le Décadent* 5 (1888), 1. My translation.
[36] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, Authoritative Texts: Criticism (New York: Norton, 1977), 485-6.
[37] Paul Bourget, *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine*, Études Littéraires (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 14. My translation. See also Dowling, *LaD*, 132-3.
[38] Bourget, *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine*, 5. My translation.
[39] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random, 1967), 170-1.
[40] Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. George Mosse, 1968 (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1993), 302.

insight that even Baju's magazine *Le Décadent* failed to assert.[41] The issue of the primacy of the detail is brought up when Ellis differentiates Decadence from Classicism:

> Technically, a decadent style is only such in relation to a classic style. It is simply a further development of a classic style, a further specialization, the homogenous, in Spenserian phraseology, having become heterogeneous. The first is beautiful because the parts are subordinated to the whole; the second is beautiful because the whole is subordinated to the parts.[42]

This definition is not far from that of Bourget. Yet for Ellis the "detail" does not confine itself to language but it extends to the plastic arts as well. In proposing a model of art in the dichotomy of "classicism"/"decadence", Ellis smoothly introduces the notions of "utility" and "individualism".[43] In classical art the "details" are *utilized* in the service of the whole. On the other hand, the Decadent image as bound up with the independence and intensity of "detail" reflects the strong "individualism" of the artist, an idea ultimately articulated in Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1873) and Wilde's *Intentions* (1891). Ellis's argument is an advancement on Bourget's idea of linguistic disintegration as an analogue of social disorder: the detached "detail" reflects the isolated individualistic artist who maintains an antinomian stance towards society and its moral codes. The disbanding vision of the Decadent which necessitates a denouncement of social utility overturns the Platonic identification of beauty with moral purpose.

Ellis's insight evolves into the sensuous explorations of Pater whose influence on *fin-de-siècle* poets from Wilde to Yeats was decisive.[44] His highly artificial, cadenced and calculated prose rejuvenated English criticism by seeking painstakingly the jewelled phrase. In his prose the fashioning of the Decadent image is observed *in situ*.[45] In the preface to his influential *Renaissance* he consciously speaks of a "subtle and delicate sweetness which belongs to a refined and comely decadence" (*Ren*,

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[41] *Le Décadent* was largely at pains to defend the Decadents against the moralists and establish their artistic superiority against other schools.
[42] Havelock Ellis, *Affirmations* (London: Walter Scott, 1898), 175.
[43] See Ellis, *Affirmations*, 175-7.
[44] For a direct delineation of Pater with Decadence see Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, 15-53. See also Barbara Charlesworth, *Dark Passages: The Decadent Consciousness in Victorian Literature* (Madison: U of Winsconsin P, 1965), 36-52.
[45] See Dowling, *LaD*, 5.

xxiii).[46] His textual surface is overwhelmed by the physicality of its details and it is in this respect that Ellis, in his essay on Huysmans, classifies Pater as "decadent". Pater radicalizes the theory of the structural unit; his "impressions" do not consist of the chaotic "details" that rise above the unity of the work. In his essay "Style" he refers to the "architectural conception of work" where "every part is conscious of all the rest, till the last sentence" (*App*, 18). This evokes Ellis's distinction of Naturalism and Decadence when he compares Emile Zola and Huysmans. Ellis contrasts "Zola's cyclopean architecture" with Huysmans's "expressiveness of the page, the sentence, the word."[47] Zola's "cyclopean architecture" is made of a "mass of trivial or technical things – to build a single elaborate effect out of manifold details"[48] Pater's "architectural conception of the work" is of course very different to Zola's. For Pater unity of art is more like a harmony of its parts that *inform* the whole. Pater is the author who illustrates Marvick's contention that the "details" are "at once individual and associated."[49] Pater favours the sentence over the paragraph;[50] the particular organically reflects the general: "To give the phrase, the sentence, the structural member, the entire composition, song, or essay, a similar unity with its subject and with itself" (*App*, 19). The amassed details of a Naturalist novel for Pater would be total "*surplusage*", yet in the latter's pen they are aesthetically aligned in a polished and compact surface where the whole and the unit mirror each other. The fragmentation that the text undergoes and then reconstitutes itself (similarly to Reed's argument about Decadent style) in the mind of the observer is a mechanism perfected to a total image: Pater speaks "of a single, almost visual, image, vigorously informing an entire, perhaps very intricate, composition, which shall be austere, ornate, argumentative, fanciful, yet true from first to last to that vision within" (*App*, 20).[51]

The essay "Style" is a prelude to "The Conclusion" to the *Renaissance*. A vital reason why the *Renaissance* and especially the "Conclusion" became a gospel for the nineties Decadents is that it showcased an interaction with the faculty of perception. The Aesthetic image which since Kant and Schiller has been developed by theorists such as Coleridge, becomes fully-fledged here, even rising above empiricism and

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[46] For Holbrook Jackson the *Renaissance* is the starting point of Decadence proper in Britain. Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, 1913 (Middlesex: Penguin, 1950), 58-9.
[47] Ellis, *Affirmations*, 204.
[48] From the chapter titled "Zola". Ellis, *Affirmations*, 134-5. See also 134-6, 139-42.
[49] Marvick, "Aspects," 8.
[50] See also Dowling, *LaD*, 127.
[51] See also Dowling, *LaD*, 114.

cognition. Pater firmly establishes the crucial link of his web of "impressions" with experience and personality.[52] Dowling astutely roots Pater's "ascetic Euphuism" as well as Wilde's "beautiful style" in "the intense personality of the artist" which manifests itself in "the petrifactions of written language."[53] Hence Pater looks back at the Baudelairian aesthetic and anticipates Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and the theory of the constitution of the object through consciousness.[54] The Naturalist premise of a "sharp reality" being imposed via "a flood of external objects" is reversed:

> when reflexion begins to play upon these objects they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like some trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions – colour, odour, texture – in the mind of the observer. And if we continue to dwell in thought on this world, not of objects in the solidity with which language invests them, but of impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them, it contracts still further: the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind. Experience, already reduced to a group of impressions, is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced on its way to us, or from us to that which we can only conjecture to be without. Every one of those impressions is the impression of the individual in his isolation, each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of a world. (*Ren*, 187-8)

Wilde's statement that it is "the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings" (*Int*, 157) synopsizes Pater's rich passage. Pater's aesthetic model in the "Conclusion" follows the refinement, or purification, of experience. The process is described through a quasi-liturgical formalism whilst the ideas submerge into brain imagery that signifies the total solipsism of the artist and anticipates the neurotic states of poets like Symons. The construction of the Paterian image involves both scientific precision and ritual, both aspects of Decadent style. Flirting with such notions as the "theatre of the mind", Pater's process of decomposition is regulated by and interferes with the observer's perceptivity; personality shapes and is shaped by experience simultaneously leading to the artificial remaking of the self. This reciprocal interconnection between the self and the work is professed early by Wilde who underscores "an individuality remote from that of ordinary men, and coming near

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[52] Robbins recognizes the centrality of "personality" in Decadence, yet fails to situate it adequately in the linguistic domain. Catherine Ruth Robbins, "Decadence and Sexual Politics in Three Fin-de-Siecle Writers: Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons and Vernon Lee", PhD thesis, U of Warwick, 1996.
[53] Dowling, *LaD*, 188. See also Reed on Baudelaire, *DS*, 80.
[54] For a philosophical and psychological discussion of the "impression" and Pater see Small, *The Aesthetes*, xiv-xvi.

to us [...] through channels whose very strangeness makes us more ready to give them welcome" (ERA, 9). The creativity of the artist bounces back as "experience". With the rigorous backlash of "impressions" Pater holds a *reactive* attitude towards life and art as opposed to the *proactive* attitude employed by the power of Romantic Imagination. [55] The passage suggests that the loosening of impressions is a transformative course in which language loses its textual character and is "experienced" by way of the senses. With this misappropriation of textuality, Pater initiates the sort of artificiality which lies at the core of the Decadent image.

Hubert Crackanthrope's essay "Reticence in Literature" (1894) in *The Yellow Book* also propounds the embedding of intense subjectivity in the image by way of the senses. Crackanthrope contends that Realism and Idealism should be moderated and balanced in the individual: "A work of art can never be more than a corner of Nature, seen through the temperament of a single man. Thus, all literature is, must be, essentially subjective; for style is but the power of individual expression."[56] As with Pater, style is identified with the self. However the self for the Decadents is not like the Romantic Self; it functions more like an aspectual element of the Decadent image. For Yeats the self is a conscious recreation, yet for the Decadents, it is one more material to play with.[57] The sonnet "Poétique Nouvelle" from *Le Décadent* beautifully arrests the individualism-detail synergy: "Or, le Poète s'est armé du froid scalpel; / A l'art du disséqueur sombre il a fait appel; / Puis, sur le marbre, il a couché son âme nue."[58] In a medical and calculated Paterian gesture, the artist is the dissector of his soul which is made up of "impressions."

The Paterian object undergoes continuous partition and dissolution. It does not only break down into its sensory constituents "colour, odour, texture". It also separates into "fleeting moments", the transient impressions that are so central in the poetry of Verlaine, Symons, and Dowson: "Analysis goes a step farther still, and [each of] those impressions [...] is limited by time, and that as time is infinitely

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[55] Shelley writes for instance that "poetry defeats the curse which binds us to be subjected to the accident of surrounding impressions" (Shelley, 505).
[56] Hubert Crackanthorpe, "Reticence in Literature: Some Roundabout Remarks," *The Yellow Book* July 1894, 261.
[57] For the self as endlessly mirrored on the surface of artifice see Jan B. Gordon, "'Decadent Spaces': Notes for a Phenomenology of the *Fin de Siècle*" in Fletcher, ed., *Decadence and the 1890s*, 31-58.
[58] "Now, the Poet himself armed with a cold scalpel; / To the art of the sombre dissector he appealed / Then on marble he laid his naked soul." Martial Besson, "Poétique Nouvelle," *Le Décadent* 13 (1888), 12. My Translation.

divisible, each of them is infinitely divisible also" (*Ren*, 188). The word "analysis" ingeniously embodies the Decadent aesthetic: it means "dissolution" (in Greek *ἀνάλυσις*). But it also denotes the process of comprehension, yet ironically, the "moment" is "gone while we try to apprehend it" (*Ren*, 188). Pater creates the poetics of frustration and deferral by dwelling on the fine line between pinning down the endlessly vanishing image and its impossibility. The fragmented experience is registered in the Herakleitian flux: "It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off – that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves" (*Ren*, 188). For Pater, the self is ever-construed, ever-shifting in its reflection on a wave-line of refined and fragile impressions with the work in continuous fracture being the mirror of the self. This idea is related with temporality which becomes resonant both in Symons's futile excursions for satisfaction and Dowson's suspending acceleration towards death in his search for the ideal.

1.2 "In the Most Concrete Terms Possible"

When Aestheticism collides with life, interaction with morality sets in, and it turns to Decadence. Detached appreciation converts into relishing experience. Pater's "Conclusion" with its illustrious urge "to burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy" (*Ren*, 189) is pivotal. Amidst bourgeois philistinism Pater offers his counter-morality; like a Jesus figure he presents his disciples with a guide to how to lead a hedonistic and dandiacal lifestyle. The Aesthetic dictum "art for art's sake" becomes experience for its own sake since "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end" (*Ren*, 188). His principle is not the basic *carpe diem* urge of the seventeenth century, but elitist exercise of the "finest senses" (*Ren*, 188). Pater's aesthetic of utmost pleasures was already systematised in Søren Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843) and paraphrased by Wilde in "The English Renaissance of Art" which focuses on men "who seek for experience itself and not for the fruits of experience, who must burn always with one of the passions of this fiery-coloured world" (ERA, 26). In the same essay Wilde repeats the last sentence of "The Conclusion": "For art comes to one professing primarily to give nothing but the highest quality to one's moments, and for those moments' sake" (ERA, 26). Again the

Decadent image consumes language, not just with its sensory immediacy, but also as the *crème-de-la-crème* of experience checked by temporality. Pater's and Wilde's propositions could be guidelines for Symons on how to write the poetry one encounters in *London Nights* (1895). This is the inscription of life's concrete patterns onto the text. Pater celebrates a modern-day Cyrenaicism advocated in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) which indicates the consciously corrupting potential of art and is discussed by Linda Dowling as the "fatal book" (*LaD*, 104-74). This also recalls, according to societal standards, the corrupting philosophy of Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, though unlike Aestheticism, it does it perversely, within the contingency of morality. Yet, by doing so, it persistently conjures the Aesthetic paradox of the art/life interchange and encasement.

Pater's principle of "impressions" and craftsmanship which is informed by the personality of the artist influenced Symons who sanctified it and officially labelled it "Decadence" in his famous 1893 essay. In the *Symbolist Movement* Verlaine – in the words of Verhaeren – "fused his personality" in the self-consciousness of the "moment of flight" (*SML*, 92). In his 1893 essay Symons put some of Pater's ideas into context: he pronounced that Decadence is "an intense self-consciousness, a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement, a spiritual and moral perversity" (DM, 858-9). Evidently, for Symons the intense individualism that informs the detail holds also a clear antinomian dimension. His enthusiasm for immorality and perversity is a self-confessed attitude against the social milieu of English philistinism; it reinforces the correspondence between the autonomous visual detail and Decadent subject-matter. In championing the French Decadents, Symons locates in the brothers de Goncourt the idea of a style inundate "with the diseased sharpness of over-excited nerves" (DM, 860): "this morbid intensity in seeing and seizing things that has helped to form that marvellous style" (DM, 860).

His article also puts stress on French catchphrases such as "*la vérité vraie*", "l'image peinte" and "l'épithète rare" (DM, 860) echoing Pater's aesthetics of omission, selectivity, precision and contraction. He hails Paul Verlaine as the poet who most faithfully fulfils this style of Decadence, quoting from his manifesto-poem "Art Poétique": "Car nous voulons la Nuance encor, / Pas la Couleur, rien que la

Nuance!"[59] (DM, 860). The preference for "nuance" over "couleur" accounts for the detail over broadness and for the refinement synonymous to a kind of airy concreteness. Symons explicates: "Music first of all and before all, he insists; and then, not colour, but la nuance, the last fine shade. Poetry is to be something vague, intangible, evanescent, a winged soul in flight" (DM, 860). [60] Under Pater's discipleship Symons holds music as the exemplar of the image as the perfect, unified compound of Symbolism and Aestheticism. Over-refined form, achieved in the artistic medium of music, is the extreme case in which matter is totally assimilated. In "The School of Giorgione" Pater writes that in music "the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter, the subject from the expression; they inhere in and completely saturate each other" (*Ren*, 109). The visual detail of the Parnassians and the Naturalists has evolved via Pater into the intense, fleeting image of the Decadence; the text has been converted into a piece of music, a surface of pure form, artificially fixed. In the process of refinement, "colour" has been freed and purified into "shade" that floats in a Paterian timescape. In the most quoted passage of the article Symons articulates the crux of the movement: "To fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul: that is the ideal of Decadence, and it is what Paul Verlaine has achieved" (DM, 862). Of course, Frank Kermode minutely explores the movement-stillness correlation from a Romantic perspective in the Yeatsian dancer. It is the great stylistic paradox of fixed flight, of extreme condensation yet with the lightness of escape. This implies an art which is perceived as an endless quest after sensation and the Paterian *moment passant*; an art in which the "disembodied voice" and that of a "human soul", or the independent image and the self, are utterly saturated in each other.

The machinery of language is employed in such a way as to flaunt the words in a concrete manner. The Decadent poet, with Paterian selectivity, aims at creating moods by amassing words by means of compositions of painting. In its definition of Decadence, *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* expounds:

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[59] "No, what we must have is more Nuance. / Colour's forbidden, only Nuance!" Paul Verlaine, *Selected Poems*, Oxford World's Classics, trans. and introd. Martin Sorrell (Oxford: OUP, 1999), 125.
[60] See also *SML*, 88-90.

> Unlike the symbolist [...] the decadent aims to aesthetisize or refine the object, rather than transform it. And his style is equally materialist; it collects words like aesthetic objects, like possessions [...] and sets them, like jewels, in a finely wrought syntax designed to show them off.[61]

This fundamental difference between the Symbolist and the Decadent is well put here. Language stops being a transcendental medium of concepts; it converts into a set of empty signifiers in the pursuit of Aesthetic beauty. For the Aesthete the image is its own symbol. The poem frames its choice word-objects like a museum, a panel for display as in Wilde's *The Sphinx* (1894). And yet, Pater's and Verlaine's idea of suggestiveness, which is so central in the Symbolist School, cannot be ignored. In *The Symbolist Movement* Symons reflects that in Mallarmé's poetry "words [...] must be employed with an extreme care, in their choice and adjustment [...] for what they can never, except by suggestion, express" (*SML*, 130-1). It is because Symons treats words as finely chosen materials that suggestiveness takes effect.

Pater attempts to reconcile the Symbolist hidden idea beneath the image with the Aestheticist sensory experience it represents by introducing the concept of "imaginative reason". *The Renaissance* sharply explicates:

> [...] the material or subject no longer strikes the intellect only; nor the form, the eye or the ear only; but form and matter, in their union or identity, present one single effect to the "imaginative reason," that complex faculty for which every thought and feeling is twin-born with its sensible analogue or symbol. (*Ren*, 109)

The oxymoronic phrase "imaginative reason" defines a response to an image which transcends the parallel dual existence of form and matter. The incessant triggering of associations that characterizes Symbolism is here regulated and controlled. In Wildean terms, it is body and soul at once. In one of his apophthegms Wilde says: "*Greek dress was in its essence inartistic. Nothing should reveal the body but the body.*"[62] The dress is dismissed because what it veils is the veil itself. The picture of the naked body is its own soul. Nudity becomes the last layer, the absolute eye-teaser, the symbol and the symbolized, the *naked* poetic truth, *la vérité vraie*. To add a Keatsian spin, Pater's "imaginative reason" refers to the truth/beauty pairing but as a sort of connoisseurship. The "imaginative reason" regulates the cognizance of the

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[61] Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993), 276.
[62] Oscar Wilde, "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young," *The Chameleon*, facsimile ed., Makers of the Nineties, 1894 (London: Eighteen Nineties Society, 1978), 3.

image: it gives credit to the subjectivity of taste as the image and the specific feeling it correspondingly stirs is *a priori* and automatic ("twin-born").

The Decadent image is manifested in the way language solidifies and perversely coagulates in self-referential modes. This is rooted in the Aestheticist precept that lies at the heart of the cult of Beauty. Both Pater in the "Preface" to the *Renaissance* and Wilde in "The English Renaissance of Art" profess that art's aim is "to define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible" (*Ren*, xix). Wilde celebrates John Keats as the harbinger of the new aesthetic. Keats mainly differs from the other Romantics because he manages to remove the metaphysical dimension of language. The physical transmutation of language is promulgated by Baudelaire who writes in *Paradis Artificiels* (1860) that "words resuscitated clothe themselves in flesh and bones, [e.g.:] the adjective, a transparent vestment that colours it like the glazing on a painting [...]."[63] Pater also perceives language corporeally: "A lover of words for their own sake, to whom nothing about them is unimportant, a minute and constant observer of their physiognomy" (*App*, 17). And Havelock Ellis strikes a more morbid note when he dwells on the rendering of language in a pictorial medium in Huysmans: "the tortured elaboration of his style is chiefly due to this perpetual effort to squeeze tones and colours out of this medium."[64] The Decadents did not just try to *project* language onto a sterile surface; they attempted to *morph* it into this surface.

The conscious rendering of language into a sensory surface conforms to the principle of synaesthesia, the alchemical inter-translation of incompatible mediums. This technique, which is cultivated luxuriously by the French, influences the style of the Decadents in English such as Wilde, Symons, John Gray, Theodore Wratislaw and Rosamund Marriott Watson, to name a few. Of course, Huysmans's *À Rebours* (1884) takes synaesthesia to an extreme level. As Havelock Ellis notes, in Huysmans there is "a general hyperæsthesia, an intense alertness to the inrush of sensations."[65] The Decadent dandy's goal to experience new sensations, "a restless curiosity in research, an over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement" as Symons holds, follows the poetic of synaesthesia and the simple principle of extracting a new sensation by synthesizing

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[63] Arthur Symons, trans., *Charles Baudelaire : Les Fleurs du Mal, Petits Poèmes en Prose, Les Paradis Artificiels* (London : The Casanova Society, 1925), 276.
[64] Ellis, *Affirmations*, 189.
[65] Ellis, *Affirmations*, 189.

two old ones. In his exceptional study, Professor Jean Pierrot captures the minutiae of synaesthesia by introducing the idea of "elemental reverie", where the Decadent artist's dream-world ultimately comes down to "that play of the imagination upon a number of natural elements."[66] This consists of the alchemical possibilities of natural elements such as "water", "precious stones", "minerals and metals", and "the vegetable kingdom". The fluidity of water, for instance, becomes fixed in the precious stone.[67] According to Pierrot this is achieved by means of "metamorphosis", in which "imagination was able to move from one element to another, or to merge them in one imaginary complex."[68] Turns of phrase such as Shelley's "icy flame" (*Epipsychidion*, 283) show a Romantic experimentalism with "elemental reverie". The idea is consistent with Pater's "imaginative reason" by which art is perceived as a single, unified effect and is consistent with Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondances", where "Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons répondent" "Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens."[69]

Synaesthesia, or Baudelairian "correspondence", as a sign of artifice starts from the misperception of the text and evolves into Paterian controlled evocation. Arthur Rimbaud's famous sonnet "Voyelles" ingeniously draws the synaesthetic primal correspondence between language and the evoked image, offering insight into the artificiality of the self-conscious transmutation of language into a plastic medium. "A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu: voyelles,"[70] pronounces Rimbaud. The vowels evoke colours that grow into definite and elaborate vignettes. Swinburne pays attention to the text-image synaesthesia by commenting on Baudelaire's poems that "the sound of his metres suggests colour and perfume."[71] Pater makes strong synaesthetic allusions between painting and music in "The School of Giorgione" where he asserts the universality of beauty in the inter-borrowing of the arts (*Ren*, 105). This is also the central aesthetic of James McNeill Whistler. His hazy paintings with titles such as *Thames – Nocturne in Blue and Silver* (1872-8) blend painting and music by proxy of language. His modern metropolitan subjects are completely

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[66] Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination: 1880-1900*, trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981), 147.
[67] Pierrot, *Decadent Imagination*, 208, 214.
[68] Pierrot, *Decadent Imagination*, 232.
[69] Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 18. "So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond" "Singing the senses' rupture, and the soul's." 19.
[70] "Black A, White E, red I, Green U, Blue O:" See Verlaine, *The Cursed Poets*, 30-32.
[71] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Prose Works: Vol. VI*, eds. Sir Edmund Gosse et al. (London: Heinemann, 1926), 419. See also 422.

saturated in the form. Similarly, Claude Debussy renders Stéphane Mallarmé's *L'après-midi d'un faune* (1876) into music. As with the senses, the inter-translation of mediums is the form of rhetoric that gives the Decadent image a quality of luxurious unnaturalness.

The idea of synaesthesia entails the condensation of the image, the artificial solidification of language. R. V. in *Le Décadent* states: "Language is synthetic. It locks up all means of expression in word, form of sentence."[72] This is consistent with Pater's style of "analysis" and "removal of *surplusage*", Verlaine's "nuance" and Symons's "refinement upon refinement". It is an alchemical process of distillation – in the fashion of Pierrot's "elemental reverie" – by which the image becomes quintessence. Its density implies the intensification of experience. Chapter 14 of *À Rebours* where Huysmans discusses Des Esseintes's collection of literary works is a case in point. He discerns the "essential oil of art" in Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Poe where this expression is further "distilled yet again to give off new savours, new intoxications."[73] Aubrey Beardsley's art nouveau illustrations that shape the look of Decadence in English encapsulate the quintessence of the image: his flowing, curvy and sensual lines with their trifling elegance give the impression of a perpetual refinement. And John Gray's super-slim and chic volume *Silverpoints* is the exemplar of condensed elegance in the nineties' art of publishing.

The condensed image also symbolizes the shift from the long narrative poem of the Romantics and the Victorians to the sonnet and short lyric of the eighties and nineties practised by Symons, Yeats, Dowson, Douglas and others. This distillation originates in the Arnoldian "touchstone" which is not far from Des Esseintes's "quintessence" of literary works. Yeats in his essay "The Autumn of the Body" (1898) writes of a poetry which is "contracting its limits", "a poetry of essences, separated one from another in little and intense poems."[74] Much earlier Poe in his "Poetic Principle" signals the contraction of the poem's limits as an essential measure for its aesthetic appreciation.[75] Even poems like *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1820) and *Adonais* (1821) from a Decadent perspective can be read as compartmentalized: every stanza independent, each close to the short lyric of the Decadents. The poetic form of

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[72] R. V., "Un Article Sur les Décadents," *Le Décadent* 25 (1888), 15. My translation.
[73] J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1959), 200.
[74] W. B. Yeats, *Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 234, 238.
[75] Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays, and Miscellanies*, (New York: AMS P, 1965), vol. 14 of *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison, 17 vols, 266-92.

brevity not only imitates the autonomous detail but also indicates that a range of forces are forced back into it.

1.3 Romantic Imagination and Decadent Fancy

> Oh, sweet Fancy ! let her loose ;
> Everything is spoilt by use:
>
> John Keats, "Fancy", 67-8.[76]

Although the Decadents are children of Romanticism, they maintain a love-hate relationship with it. While Holbrook Jackson rules out the Romantics as major influence – favouring the Pre-Raphaelites and the French instead – he acknowledges the ancestry of Decadence in Romanticism.[77] The character of the aesthetic common to Wilde, Symons, Dowson, Johnson and Gray is further fleshed out when compared with images pertained in poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley. In the *Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth declares that poetry is "the science of feelings" which is connected to the great Romantic image of nature: "Low and rustic life was generally chosen [. . .] because in that situation our elementary feelings exist in a state of greater simplicity [...]" (Wordsworth, 594, 597).[78] Nature and the "science" of feeling turn into the artifice of the city and the science of impressions. Principally, the Romantic imagination and the workings of the mind indicate that the poet is an *active* creator as opposed to the *passive* attitude subsumed by the Decadent with his self-indulgence and receptivity. In the *Romantic Movement in English Poetry* (1909) Symons states: "Imagination, if there is any such thing, is sight, not wonder; a thing seen, not an opening of the eyes to see it" (*RM*, 17). The unbridled creativity of the Romantics is exhausted in their post-Romantic phase. But passivity is also traced in the Romantics, such as in Keats's "negative capability" or Byron's *Don Juan*. For the Decadent poet, the Shelleyan transmuting power of imagination rebounds as the curse of Midas turning the poetic texture into gold.

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[76] John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978).
[77] Jackson, *Eighteen Nineties*, 55-7. See also Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitch* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977), 157 and Clyde de L. Ryals, "Toward a Definition of Decadent as Applied to British Literature of the Nineteenth Century," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 17.1 (1958), 85-92.
[78] See also North, "Defining Decadence," 88-90.

Wordsworth illustrates how the imagination works things into one new thing. In his "Preface" to *Poems* (1815) he asserts that the imagination works by "conferring" upon an object, or "abstracting" from it, properties, "thus enabling it to react upon the mind which hath performed the process, like a new existence" (Wordsworth, 632). The imagination obliterates the natural world, images become mindscape; they have nothing to do with the object but with the mind's working. Similarly, *A Defence of Poetry* propounds the power of imagination by linking it with the "mind" and "thought" (Shelley, 480). For Shelley poetry is "the expression of the imagination", yet "language is arbitrarily produced by the imagination" (Shelley, 480, 483). Poetry "awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought" (Shelley, 487). Opposing the scientific outlook of Classicism, the Romantics put stress on the creative and liberating force of the mind which can even consume and destroy the poet. The sublimity of nature serves the spiritual quest of the self. On the other hand, the Decadent image which sports artifice and weariness marks the restraint and neurotic ennui of the mind. Where the Romantic mind endlessly generates, the Decadent one obsessively elaborates; where the Romantic transmutes matter with his mind, the mind of the Decadent seems to be transmuted by matter.

Poems such as Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" and Shelley's "To a Skylark" register the mechanism of the imagination and show how nature is transformed into pure imagination. The Romantic poem is about inspiration whilst the Decadent poem is about the refinement of the finished product and the process of experience. The former is about *transcending* and the latter about *amassing* or *stagnating*. For the Romantics, if the "image" of the external world is not impregnated by the mind, it is a "fancy". Lord Byron writes:

> 'Tis to create, and in creating live
> A being more intense, that we endow
> With form our fancy, gaining as we give
> The life we image, even as I do now. (II, 6, 46-9)[79]

Byron, here, conveys that intensity is achieved via the transformative power of the imagination, the act of creativity. But with the Decadents this creative power appears

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[79] Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, ed. Jerome J. McGann, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 78.

to be incapacitated and "fancy" is the product of exhaustion and the mind is a receptor: intensity in life is not achieved via the creative transformation of the natural image, but with absorption through the senses.

What the Romantics called "Fancy" could be an early approximation of the Decadent image. Coleridge, famously, distinguishes "imagination" from "fancy". The imagination "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create [...] it struggles to idealize and unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead."[80] Coleridge's imagination is a pure creative force, an electric current that jolts the inanimate poetic material. However "fancy" is about

> fixities and definites. The Fancy is indeed no other than a mode of Memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the Fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association. (*Biographia Literaria*, I. 305)

What is described here is the Decadent formula Arthur Symons defines after he has read Verlaine, as well as the one implied by Pater's writings. The "fixities" and "definites" recall Symons's urge to "fix the last fine shade [...] fleetingly"; the term "fancy" itself connotes the fleeting impression. "Memory" which is "emancipated" from time and space is an analogue of Symons's "disembodied voice" of the same definition of "Decadence". The element of memory and "the empirical phenomenon of the will" that are "blended" look forward to Pater's idea of the personality of the artist interacting with the image (with what he *wishes* to see, the impression). Coleridge emphasizes "choice", a term which stands at odds with the infinity of the Imagination. "Choice" characterizes also the Paterian policy of selectivity and the discarding of *surplusage*. Finally, the materials of Fancy are "ready made"; this means they acquire an artificial feel rather than transcendence and spirituality when processed by the Romantic Imagination. Leigh Hunt develops the idea of "Fancy" in similar lines. For Hunt "Fancy" is not the "natures of things" but "their resemblance"; it is "a combination of images", not unified by "feeling" but "by the will and pleasure".[81] Hunt's formula also anticipates the poetics of deceitfulness in Wilde and Pater's pleasure-centred image.

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[80] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria I*, 1817 (London: Routledge, 1983), vol. 7 (2 parts) of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, eds. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, I. 304.
[81] Leigh Hunt, *Literary Writings*, ed. Charles Mahoney (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), 20, 21.

According to Wordsworth, imagination "is the faculty which produces impressive effects out of simple elements. But they are utterly destitute of fancy – the power by which pleasure and surprise are excited by sudden varieties of situation and by accumulated imagery" (Wordsworth, 593). Keats, in an apostate manner, embraces the sensuality of fancy. He opens his poem "Fancy": "Ever let the Fancy roam, / Pleasure never is at home" (1-2). For Shelley the mind is a place of infinite possibilities but for Keats is a prison: "Open wide the mind's cage-door, / She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar" (7-8). The infinite possibilities for Keats are situated in external perception. Whilst Wordsworth turns nature into feeling, Keats's "Fancy" eroticizes it.[82] Fancy, which stresses the immediacy of the image to the senses, via the Pre-Raphaelites and the Aesthetes, impregnates the hedonistic image of the *fin de siècle*.

But what is the fundamental disparity between the image of the poetic imagination and the "fancy" rediscovered in the nineties? In his *Defence* Shelley contends that

> language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts. (Shelley, 482)

Through overreaching rhetoric, the web of word-objects dematerializes and transmutes into pure thought, moving away from the self-referential image. On the other hand, returning to the *Princeton Encyclopaedia*'s definition of Decadent style, the word-objects of the nineties return to the Keatsian truth/beauty and its sensual appeal. What is more, they are paratactic and synaesthetic, creating effects by way of Impressionistic omission and Symbolist intensification; Shelley's metaphor is replaced by nineties synaesthesia.[83] Even Wilde's display of rhetoric, although tuned in the Romantic tradition, is of Paterian organization. The constant surpassing and deepening structures of, say, *Epipsychidion*, freeze in the fragmentation, restraint and languor of pieces by any nineties poet.

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[82] Fancy is also "erotisization of language." Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Unfettering Poetry: Fancy in British Romanticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 21.
[83] Decadence exhibits "that loss of metaphor and metonymy which leads to the painful tautology [...]" Fletcher, ed., *Decadence and the 1890s*, 12.

The Decadent image is not only defined in opposition to Romantic poetics, it is also its continuation. Apart from the Wordsworthian "feeling" and the Shelleyan "mind" stands the schismatic Keatsian "sensation". Both Pater and Wilde assiduously celebrate Keats as the forefather of the "religion of Beauty". In a letter to Benjamin Bailey Keats reveals in a nutshell the ideas that dominate the work of D.G. Rossetti, Swinburne, Pater and culminate in Wilde:

> What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth [...] Passions [...] are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty [...] O for a life of sensation rather than of thoughts! [...] we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated – And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth.[84]

The locating of "truth" in the "sensation" and not in "thought" prefigures both the Aesthetic eighties and the Symbolism of Yeats. But this sensation "repeated in a finer tone" also demarcates that strain of dark Romanticism which solidifies in the images sought after by Marius the Epicurean, the Wilde of "The Decay of Lying", and even Aubrey Beardsley's characters in *Under the Hill* (1896). Keats favours thinking in images; a poetry which has sensual appeal rather than plainness and abstraction. The idea of the embodiment of "truth" through "beauty" also foreshadows the Wildean paradox of the "truth of masks" and the artifice of illusion.

Keats was fully aware of the predicament and fragility of Beauty.[85] All the traits of Decadence involving praise for an artificial illusionary Beauty, which is vulnerable and ephemeral against social forces, are already presaged and arrested in *Lamia* (1819). The snake-like Lamia is the ancestress of Wilde's beast-like and hermaphroditic Sphinx; her strangeness and mystery anticipates Symons's women like Nora and Bianca; and with her dreamy innocence and susceptibility to Apollonius's "philosophy" she looks forward to Dowson's girl-lovers. The characters of the poem can be seen from the perspective of the Decadent nineties. Hence, Lycius, Lamia, and Apollonius stand for the artist, the illusionary beauty, and the prosaic philistine respectively. Lamia's mysteriousness parallels that of Pater's Gioconda. As such, she reflects Lycius's individuality; she represents his *impression*. Apollonius, like a fanatic Max Nordau, with his "cold philosophy" (230) will "Conquer all

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[84] John Keats, Letter to Benjamin Bailey, November 22nd, 1817. John Keats, *Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings, rev. ed. (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 36.
[85] See also Kermode, *RI*, 20.

mysteries by rule and line" (235); he demystifies and so destroys the image of artificial sexuality. Although the poem is a statement of Aesthetic beauty, it proves that Keats is pre-Decadent. Gautier's and Tennyson's poetry may be a statement of pleasure as art's only aim but Keats's *Lamia* is concerned with *life* as aesthetic as well as the provider of pleasure. Keats writes on Hermes's moment of rupture:

> Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass
> Their pleasures in a long immortal dream.
> One warm, flush'd moment, hovering, it might seem (127-9)

The perpetuated, lingering moment which holds pleasures foreshadows the artificially sustained fleeting moment theorised by Pater and Wilde. It also contains the Decadent paradox of the moment which is artificially fixed, like Symons who prolongs it by recreating it in the excess of his erotic metropolitan excursions and Dowson who captures it in the images of dying and the lifeless little girl.

It should be noted that Keats also instigates the idea of "strangeness", that ambiguity in the image which denotes fusion of incompatibles and which Symons fiddles with in his prose. Apart from Lamia there is an abundance of Romantic iconic figures of strangeness such as Coleridge's Geraldine in *Christabel* (1797, 1800) and Shelley's Medusa. In *Biographia Literaria* (1817) Coleridge writes of "the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities" but while judgement "blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature; the manner to the matter."[86] This "reconciliation" of opposites for the Romantics does not cling to artifice; it is part of the natural processes. Nonetheless, with Keats it culminates at a level closer to proper Decadent territory. At the opening of *The Romantic Agony* (1933) Professor Mario Praz refers to "the conception of Beauty peculiar to the Romantics."[87] For Praz, this is fully represented in Shelley's "Medusa": "'Tis the tempestuous loveliness of terror…' In these lines pleasure and pain are combined in one single impression." [88] In "Ode to Melancholy" Keats finely captures the pleasure/pain compound. "Melancholy", itself a twilight, ambiguous – and quite Dowsonian – term, "dwells with […] Beauty that must die; / […] / and aching

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[86] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*. II, 17.
[87] Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, 1933, trans. Angus Davidson, foreword Frank Kermode, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1970), 25.
[88] Praz, *Romantic Agony*, 26. Pain and Beauty are also discussed in Decadence as algolagnia in Jerry Palmer, "Fierce Midnights: Algolagniac Fantasy and the Literature of the Decadence" in Fletcher, ed., *Decadence and the 1890s*, 100-106.

Pleasure nigh, / Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips" (21, 23-4). Keats's diction of alchemical fluidity prompts an amalgamation in which the two fused elements are almost indistinguishable and with the Decadents this evolves into the artist's subjective perception. The different aspects of the "strange" image strive to overwhelm each other in the eyes of the observer rendering it fluidly suggestive; they foreshadow Pater's "strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves." Strangeness is consistent with the aesthetic of synaesthesia. It is also indicative of the artist's neurotic gaze as he endeavours to pin down the outlook of the shifting image by employing impressionistic techniques.

Between Romanticism and Decadence stands the unique case of Algernon Swinburne. [89] In *Poems and Ballads* (1866) Swinburne follows Shelley in *Epipsychidion* in developing a poetic of endless transgression and violent eroticism. He appropriates and enhances the Shelleyan method of consuming and transcending poetic boundaries with the use of elaborate rhetoric but in a morbidly orgasmic manner. Such example is "Anactoria". Sappho's overwhelming passion for Anactoria tragically backlashes. Swinburne shares the futility and exasperation of the poetry of the Decadents. The poem's character is reflected in lines like "Ah, ah, thy beauty! Like a beast it bites, / Stings like an adder, like an arrow smites. / Ah sweet, and sweet again, and seven times sweet".[90] The poem looks forward to the violent bursts of sexuality in Wilde's *Salomé* (1894) and "Charmides" as well as Symons's futile erotic journeys in *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*. In Swinburne images literally suffer, they get mixed up in orgasmic dissolution of the poet and poetry. The Romantic creativity comes back to haunt the artist's self as it proves unsatisfying in the endless reciprocity summed up in the line "memories should mix in metaphors of me" ("Anactoria"). The Decadent artist is a sort of martyr, yet without the propensity to transmute like Swinburne. Although the artist and his work do mix in the nineties, it is a painful process; Swinburne weaves fusions of the self and the poetic substance with the ease of a juggler. The Decadent is no magician like Swinburne; he is more modest as the subdued Paterian image dictates;[91] he is an extremely sensitive instrument, the one who experiences. Swinburne goes on and on spinning erotic, tormenting journeys

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[89] For Swinburne as a Decadent see Chris Snodgrass, "Swinburne's Circle of Desire: A Decadent Theme" in Ian Fletcher, ed., *Decadence and the 1890s*, 61-87.
[90] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Poems and Ballads: First Series*, 1866 (London: Heinemann, 1917), vol.1 of *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne*, 6 vols, 1917.
[91] See Dowling, *LaD*, 126.

where Dowson expresses it only once, in the finished product, the *fin-de-siècle* short lyric. Nonetheless "Anactoria" is the progenitor of the futile striving for contentment by proxy of physicality, which characterizes the Decadents' sense of morbid ordeal. The workings of the imagination evolve (or devolve) from Coleridge through Poe through Baudelaire and Swinburne, down to the Nineties Decadents.

2. "The World Is Made by the Singer for the Dreamer": Oscar Wilde's *Intentions* and the Decorative Image.

> In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.
> – *The Importance of Being Ernest* –[92]

IN one of his elaborate, climactic views on issues about art, Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" asserts that "the body is the soul. In every sphere of life Form is the beginning of things" (*Int*, 195) and in the same passage contends: "Form is everything" (*Int*, 196). In the same essay, Gilbert completely divorces art from life by avowing: "All art is immoral" (*Int*, 174). These ideas consistently dominate Wilde's *oeuvre*, yet, as it will be examined, his major thrust of critical writing, the essay quartet *Intentions* is not a mere elaboration of the then maturing Aesthetic Movement but the latter's extreme utterance and a preparation for the *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon of English Decadence.[93] The mapping of Wilde's Decadent image in *Intentions* is essential to determine the degree and ways in which this proposition applies to his poetry.

In the formulation of his own aesthetic of the autonomy of art Wilde is over-alerted to the long tradition on the subject that precedes him. In his formulation of his aesthetic he rejects the Platonic *mimesis* of *noumena*, the notion of moral art, as well as the Aristotelian *mimesis* of action. The attachment of morality to art evolves in Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin who, although they emphasize the importance of form and style, are traditionalists, attaching a function of moral reform to art. Wilde was drawn to Ruskin's teachings but he discards his ideas and advances on the already fermented at the time dictum "art for art's sake".[94]

Immanuel Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), first wrote of the "disinterestedness of art" and along these lines the French philosopher Victor Cousin coined the phrase "l'art pour l'art" in his *Du Vrai, du Beau, et du Bien* (1818).[95] Cousin's ideas were first explored and systematized by Théophile Gautier, whose seminal "Preface" to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835-6) became the manifesto of

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[92] Oscar Wilde, *Oscar Wilde*, ed. Isobel Murray, The Oxford Authors (Oxford: OUP, 1989), 526.
[93] See Stephen Calloway, "Wilde and the Dandyism of the Senses" in Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 40.
[94] For a comprehensive account of Aestheticism see William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Cleanth Brooks, *Literary Criticism: A Short History*, 1957 (London: Routledge, 1970), 475-98.
[95] Victor Cousin, *Du Vrai, du Beau, et du Bien* (Paris: Librairie Académique, 1926). See esp. 172-205.

Aestheticism with its outright rejection of any kind of *utilité* in art.[96] Wilde's theories of the autonomous art and the concept of beauty were decidedly influenced by Gautier and Ruskin. Of course, the deepest influence, and one that added a strong Decadent flavour to the Ruskinian aesthetic, was Pater. The latter's celebrated "Conclusion" radically brought mid-Victorian Aestheticism a step closer to the morbidity of the nineties: as Yeats recalls, for Wilde it was "the very flower of decadence."[97] It was an invitation to the experience of "new sensations."[98] Pater linked the "gem-like flame" and the rejection of philosophical abstractions to the notion of the suggestive and morbid. Following this line of thought and at the same time departing from it Wilde early in his essay "The English Renaissance of Art" adopted a theory which fused the individualism of Romanticism and the timeless hedonism of Hellenism (see ERA, 3-4). This essay constituted the preamble that would lead to the personal vision of decorativeness in *Intentions*.

2.1 The Dialogue Form and the Sensuousness of Language

Wilde's system of aesthetics is not facile; although his former masters stress the subordination of content to form, Wilde is not merely reiterative: Decadence and Aestheticism are embroiled by way of a premeditated and multiform stylization as a conscious negation of abstract statement in the most complex manner. His pluralistic style, playful tone, sensuous language and paradox exhibited in *Intentions* involve a characteristic method of conveying an idea by dismantling and fictionalizing it. The style of the essays proves instrumental in promoting a new Aestheticism, extremer than that promoted by Gautier and Pater.

In his famous "Preface", Gautier addresses society personally, asserting the uselessness of art and the distorting role of the journalists in a direct, almost fanatical manner. He writes: "No, imbeciles, no, morons and goitres that you are, a book does

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[96] Théophile Gautier, *La Préface de Mademoiselle de Maupin*, ed. Georges Matoré, Textes Littéraires Français (Paris: Librairie Droz, 1946), 29-33.
[97] W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1956), 130.
[98] Brown, interestingly, argues that the "new sensations" is a point of difference between Pater and Wilde: in Pater's pursuit of sensations the latter "has collapsed the distinction between 'art' and 'life'." See Julia Prewitt Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1999), 2-4.

not make the soup in jelly."[99] This evokes gospel writing, Jesus's verbal attacks on the Pharisees. Gautier professes art's freedom from doctrines in a somewhat doctrinal manner. Pater, whose criticism is more Impressionistic, espouses an animated, energetic style, regulated by economy of expression. The "Conclusion", which is a tremendously concentrated text whose brainstorming style is rapid like "the moments as they pass", is a point of reference. It paves the way, or triggers the creation, of other sensational acts. Its definite tone renders it homiletic. Pater's Aestheticism has a tendency to instruct, to deliver a clear-cut message. *Intentions* refuse to succumb to a finalized meaning. In his employment of the dialogue form Wilde does not just launch a safely defensive attack on the Victorian Philistia. He playfully exposes the pretensions of philistine morality by theatrical, yet subtle uses of camouflage.[100] He achieves a total dissociative freeplay of ideas through style. In his study of Wilde, Arthur Symons called *Intentions* "a masquerade of disguises."[101] Symons's pleonastic phrase captures the elusiveness of the Wildean dialogue in ultimately returning to itself, the mask.

In exploiting the dynamics of the dialogue form artifice is most perfectly realized with the effective evacuation of subject matter. In the middle of "The Critic as Artist" part II there is an illuminating passage in which Gilbert contends that

> Dialogue, certainly, that wonderful literary form which, from Plato to Lucian [...] the creative critics of the world have always employed, can never lose for the thinker its attraction as a mode of expression. By its means he can both reveal and conceal himself, and give form to every fancy, and reality to every mood. By its means he can exhibit the object from each point of view, and show it to us in the round, as a sculptor shows us things [...] and really illumine the idea more completely, or from those felicitous after-thoughts that give a fuller completeness to the central scheme, and yet convey something of the delicate charm of chance.
>
> *Ernest*. By its means too, he can invent an imaginary antagonist, and convert him when he chooses by some absurdly sophistical argument. (*Int*, 186-7)

This passage offers in miniature a demonstration of the mechanics of Wildean dialogue. The so-called philosophical discourse is annihilated. What exists is the apparatus of style, not in the sense that it clothes a "central scheme" since the latter could be an extension of form. The rationalistic and focused line of argument is diffused through employment of pluralistic techniques that "give form to every

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[99] Théophile Gautier, *Préface*, 27-8. My translation.
[100] See also Herbert Sussman, "Criticism as Art: Form in Oscar Wilde's Critical Writings," *Studies in Philology* 70 (1973), 109-10.
[101] Arthur Symons, *A Study of Oscar Wilde* (London: Sawyer, 1930), 22.

fancy," a phrase which echoes Byron's intensity "that we endow / With form our fancy" in *Childe Harold* (quoted in Ch. 1). The Romantic dreamer's "fancy" here is the product of interlocution. "Completeness" is undermined by "the delicate charm of chance." The "chance thoughts", as opposed to a logically coherent argument in prose, consistute Wilde's version of Impressionistic criticism. The literariness of the dialogue is further assisted by the levity reinforced by patterns of irony. Ernest, in a way, acknowledges himself as the gullible character who is converted by "absurdly sophistical argument." This comment simultaneously challenges the authority of Gilbert's speech. This is the manner in which Wilde subverts the Platonic dialogue: Socrates and his disciples work methodically to reach absolute truth through a chain of *syllogisms*, whilst Wilde reverses this process, obscuring any notions of truth with pseudo-arguments or *sophisms*, to paraphrase James Joyce.[102] The essays resist logic by being harnessed with devices of elusiveness against philistine readers: this is how Wilde's language of abstraction becomes "sculpted".

The dialogues cultivate the method of self-undercutting subtly and lightly to produce a stylistic *effect* of slippery meanings. In "The Decay of Lying", although "the doctrines of the new æsthetics" are clearly summarized at the closure of the essay, it is the flippant stylistics of the dialogue that destabilizes them. Vivian, who is the advocate of "lying" as absolute form, creates paradox and self-referential forces by contradiction almost from the start:

> *Cyril*. Writing an article! That is not very consistent after what you have just said.
> *Vivian*. Who wants to be consistent? The dullard and the doctrinaire, the tedious people who carry out their principles to the bitter end of action, to the *reductio ad absurdum* of practice. (*Int*, 74)

Unlike the other authors who engage directly in a conflict with society, Wilde creates intrinsic social commentary by subscribing his social attack in his literary milieu.[103] He implies that his writing is *not* "consistent", a notion allied with the "charm of chance"; in Wilde's criticism the chaotic logic of a colourful and tangy literary style threatens the order and "monotony" of conventional, rational, journalistic writing. In

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[102] Richard Ellmann, ed., *Oscar Wilde: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Twentieth Century Views (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969), 60.
[103] Danson argues that "the crucial insistence on art's self-referentiality is intended to create a separate, privileged zone where artists are free from moralizing censorship. In fact however, aesthetics can be as rigidly policed as ethics". Lawrence Danson, *Wilde's Intentions: The Artist in His Criticism*, 1997 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 55.

the "Critic as Artist" Gilbert exclaims: "Ah! don't say that you agree with me. When people agree with me I always feel I must be wrong" (*Int*, 199). And after Ernest disregards him as a "dreamer", Gilbert adds a final touch of baffling effect: "Yes: I am a dreamer. For a dreamer is one who can only find his way by moonlight, and his punishment is that he sees the dawn before the rest of the world" (*Int*, 206). Wilde is an intellectual terrorist who tantalizes the utilitarian mentalities of the middle-classes. His essays become a signifier without a signified, constantly referring back to themselves with readers and author functioning as a bouncing mirror that augments the demarcation of personality.[104] Their exposition of Aestheticism is a massive illustration of an emergent Decadent image through highly stylized and paradoxical prose. They are elaborate metaphors of the qualities and functions of form. They have clarity and yet they mutate and elude like Baudelaire's disorientating eye when he discusses paintings in the Salon. Whilst the other theorists, like Pater, methodically urge and refer to an artistic beauty based extraneously on their text, Wilde's prose self-consciously teases the readers by narcissistically being self-referential.

The narcissistic text becomes manifest in the term "lying" which for Ellmann it substitutes for the Romantic "outpouring of the self".[105] Wilde replaces the terms "truth" and "style" with the terms "fact" and "lying." In doing this, he draws attention to the unreality of art for its own sake: "The only form of lying that is absolutely beyond reproach is Lying for its own sake" which is "Lying in Art" (*Int*, 101). By actively normalizing deception at the expense of consensual truths, Wilde dramatizes the self-indulgence and inward-looking aspect of art, and indeed of his own writings. Vivian says: "Society sooner or later must return to its lost leader, the cultivated and fascinating liar [...] he certainly was the true founder of social intercourse. For the aim of the liar is simply to charm, to delight, to give pleasure" (*Int*, 88). Umberto Eco, in his lecture "Wilde: Paradox and Aphorism", elucidates that what Wilde "exhibits is a *furor sententialis* (which is a pleasurable rhetorical incontinence), not a passion for philosophy."[106] Lying is Wilde's concept of the conscious style whose power is almost hedonistic, developed from Pater's epicurean ideas. Wilde implies that the

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[104] For the significance of the spectator see Allison Pease, "Aestheticism and Aesthetic Theory" in Frederick S. Roden, ed., *Palgrave Advances in Oscar Wilde Studies* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 108-9.
[105] Richard Ellmann, ed. and introd., *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, 1968 (London: Allen, 1970), xx.
[106] Umberto Eco, *On Literature*, trans. Martin McLaughlin (London: Vintage, 2006), 83.

attaining of insight is achievable through the lightness of a multiplicity of façades: "To know the truth one must imagine myriads of falsehoods. For what is Truth? In matters of religion, it is simply the opinion that has survived. In matters of science, it is the ultimate sensation. In matters of art, it is one's last mood" (*Int*, 187). The flippancy of this statement informs the dialogues as self-referential apophthegmatic sophisms at large. By fiddling with the self-annihilation of logical argument, Wilde cunningly appropriates bourgeois materialism as a linguistic pleasure. In Umberto Eco's denotation, this tactic is buried under infinite layers of exploding rhetoric or "lying" in a process where the subtle self-defeats of his prose are self-multiplied.

The artificial, decorative image emerges as the fusion of wordiness and sensuousness. Criticism "is more delightful than philosophy, as its subject is concrete and not abstract, real and not vague" (*Int*, 154). Yet, conversely, the Impressionists "can do etchings that have the brilliancy of epigrams, pastels that are as fascinating as paradoxes, and as for their portraits [...] they possess that unique and wonderful charm which belongs to works of pure fiction" (*Int*, 194). Substantiating the paradoxes of the concreteness and synaesthetic reach of language, Wilde's eloquence re-echoes itself indicating the acoustic pleasure of its Aesthetic value. Gilbert contends that

> words have not merely music as sweet as that of viol and lute, colour as rich and vivid as any that makes lovely for us the canvas of the Venetian or the Spaniard, and plastic form no less sure and certain than that which reveals itself in marble or in bronze. (*Int*, 141)

Wilde does not just limit words to their onomatopoeic effects but assigns to them a concreteness which negates language as a mediator of meanings. He writes about the "sustaining consciousness of the musical value of each word [...as] opposed to that value which is merely intellectual" (ERA, 10-1). The Aesthetic value of language expands to the artifice of autonomy, the Wildean condition of "lying":

> Lying and poetry are – arts, as Plato saw, not unconnected with each other [...] Indeed, they have their technique [...] As one knows the poet by his fine music, so one can recognise the liar by his rich rhythmic utterance [...] (*Int*, 76)

Here Wilde arguably refers to Plato's rhythmic patterns in the *Symposium* or *The Republic*, an idea detected consistently in his own use of the dialogue form. Indeed, the interruptions of Cyril in "The Decay of Lying" and Ernest in "The Critic as Artist"

are equivalent to pauses, caesurae, or *ricochets* in a poetic space which determines the rhythm of the essays.[107] The stylistic potential of the dialogue form is pointed out by Shelley in his *A Defence of Poetry* in which he says of Plato's work:

> Plato was essentially a poet – the truth and splendour of his imagery, and the melody of his language, are the most intense that it is possible to conceive [...] His language has a sweet and majestic rhythm, which satisfies the sense, no less than the almost superhuman wisdom of his philosophy satisfies the intellect. (Shelley, 484, 485)

Wilde has flipped the Platonic dialogue over and evacuated it of its fixed, tight logic. Advancing on Shelley's lines, the style of the dialogue form exists as self-referential arabesque. Wilde clearly advocates extremity of style as a departure from his mentor, Pater: "Art never expresses anything but itself. This is the principle of my new aesthetics; and it is this, more than that vital connection between form and substance, on which Mr. Pater dwells, that makes music the type of all the arts" (*Int*, 96). Music is pure form because it does not create meanings but "moods". Style is hypertrophied eliminating any possibility of fixed meanings as Wilde constantly expresses the tendency to shift from musicality to music, that is, to absolute sensuousness. In Wilde, style is not fused with substance as in Pater; it stands on its own.

Wilde advocates rhetorical physicality that appeals to the senses. He enters the sphere of Decadent artifice by striving to present language as an end in itself. He is like Huysmans, whose *À Rebours* becomes self-indulgent in its extravagant style. His aim is sensual pleasure and his relationship with his text is that of pygmalionic eroticism. The titillating encounter with the text is a phenomenon explored by Roland Barthes in *Le Plaisir du Texte* (*The Pleasure of the Text*, 1973). Barthes puts forward the idea that language produces meaning by way of its hedonistic, sensuous textures. He coins the phrase "*écriture à haute voix*" ("writing aloud") describing it as "an erotic mixture of timbre and language [...] along with diction, the substance of an art: the art of guiding one's body."[108] Barthes argues that the aim of *écriture à haute voix*

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[107] This is an example from "The Critic as Artist": "*Ernest*. The true critic will be rational, at any rate, will he not? *Gilbert*. Rational? There are two ways of disliking art, Ernest. One is to dislike it. The other, to like it rationally [...] *Ernest*. Well, at least, the critic will be sincere. *Gilbert*. A little sincerity is a dangerous thing [...]" (*Int*, 188, 189). Interruptions with alternate repetitions of phrases produce the effect of a rocking back and forth and the staged agreeableness between the two speakers renders them as two different utterances of the same voice.

[108] Roland Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, ed. and introd. Susan Sontag (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982), 413.

> is not the clarity of messages [...but] the pulsional incidents, the language lined with flesh, a text where we can hear the grain of the throat, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels, a whole carnal stereophony: the articulation of the body, of the tongue [...][109]

Wilde validates Barthes when he asserts that "writing has done much harm to writers. We must return to the voice" (*Int*, 138).[110] From this perspective, the dialogue form acts as a metaphor for Wilde's tendency to animate and actualize oral textures. This accounts also for the fact that Wilde was an excellent conversationalist. Indeed, what interests Wilde is the theatrics and rhythms mediated through speech, the fleshiness of language with its orgasmic phonological effects corresponding to tracheal anatomy. "Language requires to be tuned, like a violin" he writes in *De Profundis*.[111]

The sensuousness of language does not lie solely in the erotic and musical properties of words; these are coupled with their propensity to escape their verbal function and to become concrete pictures. In "Pen, Pencil, Poison" Wilde notes the unnatural incident of converting "impressions" to the medium of language. He avers that Wainewright "tries to translate those impressions into words, to give, as it were, the literary equivalent for the imaginative and mental effect" (*Int*, 111). Of Wainewright's description of Giulio Romano's "Cephalus and Procris" he contends: "The conception of making a prose poem out of paint is excellent" (*Int*, 113). His comment brings to mind Pater's Mona Lisa passage printed as a poem in Yeats's anthology *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936). Both rhythm and diction are devices of style used intricately to produce the Decadent feeling of absolute sensuousness through language, which Wilde considers an end in itself in its identification with the concrete, and not a means or representation of the concrete.

2.2 The Making of the Decorative Image

Decorativeness lies at the heart of Wilde's writings. The art of lying and the self-referential form are part of what Wilde calls "abstract decoration". Life is not imitated but inscribed as an ingredient of form. Vivian reads that

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[109] Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, 413.
[110] Wilde develops his opinion about spoken language fully in 137-8. See also Dowling, *LaD*, 184-7.
[111] Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), 770.

> Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent [...] then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted in the new charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms [...] (*Int*, 84)

This is exactly what happens in *Dorian Gray*. Wilde writes to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*: "My story is an essay on decorative art. It reacts against the crude brutality of plain realism" (W-*Letters*, 436). From the view of Roland Barthes's textual pleasure, the purpose of the decorative is to be "pleasurable". Art's "charmed circle" indicates its self-referential circularity; in a way, the work of art is a circle which points inwardly, cut off from any external associations, like the dark and secretive loft where Dorian's portrait is located. Wilde deliberately misappropriates the term "decoration" to denote the surface which, however, has occupied the centre replacing the unmovable moral truths that feature beneath philistine literature. Barthes illuminates the poetics of pleasure in the decorative, as opposed to the imitative: "The site of textual pleasure is not the relation of mimic and model (imitative relation) but solely that of dupe and mimic (relation of desire, of production)."[112] Barthes theorizes Wilde's erotic of décor; the framing of life in decorative terms points to its pleasures mediated through the text in the reversal of the mimetic function. Barthes also elaborates his argument by distinguishing "between *figuration* and *representation*."[113] The former is any translation of the "erotic body" into text; the latter has to do with the text representing meanings that are non-erotic.[114] The pleasure of the text in Wilde's art is annulled by mimesis and achieved by self-reflexive decorativeness.

Wilde constantly enhances the meaning of decorativeness by juxtaposing it with art as imitation. By using imagery of veils and mirrors he professes art's state of independency and self-reflexivity: "'Art finds her own perfection within, and not outside of, herself. She is not to be judged by any external standard of resemblance. She is a veil, rather than a mirror'" (*Int*, 89-90). Aligned with Gautier he marks art as a timeless *shrine* in the fashion of a Keatsian Grecian Urn which exists outside any reality. Art is not an interacting agent of life ("mirror") but an end in itself ("veil"). What is more, Wilde stretches his aesthetic credo to extremes when he reverses the conventional order by having the artifice of art, rather, as the recipient of

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[112] Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, 409-10.
[113] Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, 410.
[114] See Barthes, *A Barthes Reader*, 410-11.

imitation. In this manner he hypothesizes Huysmans's celebrations of artifice. Hence, in "The Decay of Lying" "Life imitates Art [...] Life is in fact the mirror, and Art the reality" (*Int*, 90).[115] and "Life holds the mirror up to Art, and either reproduces some strange type imagined by painter or sculptor, or realises in fact what has been dreamed in fiction" (*Int*, 94). Vivian in "The Decay of Lying" refers to Hamlet's maxim of "art holding the mirror up to Nature" (*Int*, 89). And in the same essay the famous passage of London fogs resembling painting styles (see *Int*, 95) corroborates his conception of mirroring. [116] The Symbolist notion of the Aesthetic-Decadent image as a referent that leads to another reality is disregarded. By returning to itself the art-object attains the opaqueness of the "veil" rather than being a reflecting window ("mirror").

Decorativeness as art's principle designates activity on the surface by Aesthetic relativity and association rather than by signification and this is best propounded by orientalism. [117] Orientalism is manifested as the excessive enhancement of overlapping and intricate styles. Kermode writes of "a Byzantine revival" and "oriental literature" that characterize the "Image".[118] Wilde states in *Dorian Gray* that "form and colour tell us of form and colour – that is all" (*DG*, 265). This is the core principle of ornamental and, specifically, oriental art. Wilde defines it as the opposite pole of mimesis when he says that

> What is true about the drama and the novel is no less true about those arts that we call the decorative arts. The whole history of these arts in Europe is the record of the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation, its love of artistic convention, its dislike to the actual representation of any object in Nature, and our own imitative spirit. (*Int*, 86)

The Orient as part of the colonial *other* is a self-contained universe that sparkles in its otherworldliness and absolute detachment from reality. Its dynamics do not extend outside of it but dwell in it. Its highly sophisticated intricacies render it un-natural as opposed to the familiar patterns of nature. The oriental work boosts the opaqueness and playfulness of its form so that the subject-matter is not dominating. Wilde exalts

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[115] Also "it is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors" writes Wilde to the editor of the *Scots Observer* (W-*Letters*, 441).
[116] On the life-imitating-art idea see R. V. Johnson, *Aestheticism* (London: Methuen, 1969), 79-81.
[117] For an insightful discussion of decorativeness and orientalism see San Juan Epifanio Jr., *The Art of Oscar Wilde* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1967), 80-2.
[118] Kermode, *RI*, 69.

Wainewright's oriental style. Wainewright "was the pioneer of Asiatic prose, and delighted in pictorial epithets and pompous exaggerations. To have a style so gorgeous that it conceals the subject is one of the highest achievements" (*Int*, 114). This is a comment on Wilde himself and his highly sensual prose flaunted in the pages of *Intentions*. One could see how the ornateness of oriental art with its multi-sensuous layers pervades both the writings of Huysmans and consequently of *Dorian Gray*. Orientalism does not imitate life but it recasts and refashions it. Hence, "through form and colour he [Wainewright] re-created a world" (*Int*, 133). The exotics of orientalism regulate life by sensuously reorganizing it via a vocabulary of visual motifs.

The Decadent character of decorativeness is developed by means of an aesthetic of pleasure which rejects action and favours stasis and contemplation; "The Critic as Artist" is subtitled "*With some remarks upon the importance of doing nothing*." And in one of his aphorisms Wilde writes: "The condition of perfection is idleness."[119] This is the Wildean version of Hellenism. Although Wilde largely bases his hedonistic aesthetic on Pater's and Gautier's "jouissance",[120] idleness is a pretext for further elaboration. Contemplation versus action is better understood in examining his point of departure from Pater in terms of time. Pater anticipates and relishes the moment; his hedonism realizes itself in defined moments. Conversely, Wilde's hedonism is atemporal and outside the stream of action. It is self-reflexive and contemplative, locked in an icy, everlasting state of dissatisfaction. Pater subtitles "The Conclusion" with Herakleitus's quote: "*Λέγει που 'Ηράκλειτος ὅτι πάντα χωρεί καὶ οὐδὲν μένει*" (*Ren*, 186),[121] setting the tone of his piece as time-related. He speaks of "moments gone by [...]" (*Ren*, 188). "The Conclusion" promotes a hedonism exemplified by the premise of time triggered by action; Pater's prose is demarcated by a sense of transience and an anxiety of a fugitive mood. On the other hand, Gilbert in "The Critic as Artist" muses: "There is nothing left for me now but the divine *μονόχρονος ἡδονή* of another cigarette. Cigarettes have at least the charm of leaving one unsatisfied" (*Int*, 142). The Greek phrase means "continuous pleasure" and it was the catch-phrase of Aristippus and the Cyrenaic School which advocated pure

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[119] Wilde, "Phrases," *Chameleon*, 3. He also writes in the same collection of maxims: "Dullness is the coming of age of seriousness", 2.
[120] See Gautier, *Préface*, 33.
[121] "Heracleitus says that all things give away and nothing remains." My translation.

hedonism as the aim of life. It seems that Wilde's hedonism is closer to the Hellenic ideal than the one explicated in Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. For Wilde the work of art is a sacrament, a ceremony, an object of relish; but for Pater the object of relish is the moment.

Pleasure stems from the annihilation of action by contemplation. It is simple, yet highly sophisticated and refined. Vivian in "The Decay of Lying" declares to Ernest that he belongs to the club of "The Tired Hedonists": "We are supposed to wear faded roses in our button-holes when we meet, and to have a sort of cult for Domitian. I am afraid you are not eligible. You are too fond of simple pleasures" (*Int*, 75). Vivian exhibits the luxurious elitism expressed by Huysmans's Des Esseintes and Lord Henry's "New Hedonism" (*DG*, 187). "Be always searching for new sensations" (*DG*, 187) says Lord Henry to Dorian Gray echoing Pater's "Conclusion". It is this process of erotic and unsatisfied sensations that Wilde the author goes through in self-indulgence when he creates his text. His style constantly refines itself on the artificial, exerting techniques in a range of pluralistic rhetoric to its purpose. At the close of Chapter 10 of *Dorian Gray* Dorian ponders that *À Rebours* is "a novel without a plot" (*DG*, 274). Plot is the typical device of action and the state of ennui is its negation. The language of *À Rebours* seems to slow down through its hypnotizing musical effects which include "the mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced [...] a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming" (*DG*, 274-5). This is a simulation of the lace-patterns of decorativeness. Plot is non-existent and as a result time stands still. And this state is a "malady". In his indulgence in the contemplative mode Wilde strikes a note of morbidity, linking inaction directly with Decadence.

Contemplation and ennui cultivate the static art of description as opposed to lack of "action" which is associated with Realism. Art "annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile" (*DG*, 352), declares Wilde. Images are enhanced not by being realised through spatiotemporal frames and plot devices but through relative connections, through figuration and description. "When man acts he is a puppet. When he describes he is a poet. The whole secret lies in that" (*Int*, 149) says Gilbert. For Wilde description entails the act of transforming and remodelling through the

power of observation[122] whereas "action" entraps the individual into its void. Gilbert moves on to describe Iliadic scenes lusciously illustrating his action-description point, concluding:

> They [the Homeric characters] are real. Action! What is action? It dies at the moment of its energy. It is a base concession to fact. The world is made by the singer for the dreamer.
> ERNEST. While you talk it seems to me to be so. (*Int*, 150-1)

The "world" is conceived by the "singer", or the artist, for the "dreamer", that is, the contemplator who is propelled by inaction or ennui. One can detect here the Darwinian property of the Wildean image as the one that has survived as myth that has defeated spatiotemporal frames. Also, the "singer" *is* the "dreamer" in the same way the "artist" is the "critic". In Wildean aphoristic reversal, Gilbert intimates that Homeric characters are real because they are enduring and because they have been elaborated upon. Ernest's comment "while you talk it seems to me to be so" indicates an epiphany. It enhances the contemplative experience, drawing attention to the preceding description by Gilbert. It is the manifestation of the narcissistic self-referentiality of art as a solely aesthetic experience. With reflection and introspection, language is folded on itself. Gilbert asserts that "It is to do nothing that the elect exist. Action is limited and relative. Unlimited and absolute is the vision of him who sits at ease and watches, who walks in loneliness and dreams" (*Int*, 175). Not only the role of the image is endorsed via the power of the contemplative gaze but it is also an activity of a reposing, yet isolated elite. It contains the seeds that model the epicurean Decadent dandy as the cherisher of the senses.

The image is not only intensified in the icy stasis of the artist's or critic's contemplation but also in its power of limitation; the limitation which is realized in the hinted concealments of the "veil", the opposite of journalistic statement. Limitation could be the precondition of tropes of mysticism, a mysticism of dark import and obscure meanings. [123] In "The English Renaissance" Wilde speaks of "this clearness of vision, this artistic sense of limit" (ERA, 6). The limitation of style brings

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[122] This is related to Wilde's idea of "becoming": "Yes, Ernest: the contemplative life, the life that has for its aim not *doing* but *being*, and not *being* merely, but *becoming*" (*Int*, 178). See also Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, 97-8.
[123] Wilde asserts in *De Profundis*: "I have grown tired of the articulate utterances of men and things. The Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature – this is what I am looking for" (W-*Letters*, 777).

also to mind Wilde's idea of "abstract decoration". Gilbert maintains that "beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world" (*Int*, 158). In a semantic twist, the "symbol of symbols" is tautological: beauty in its narcissistic conduct is its own ultimate "symbol", referring back to itself because it does not produce statement. The image then, via perception, serves as a portal to a multiplicity of interpretations, "works that possess the subtle quality of suggestion, and seem to tell one that even from them there is an escape into a wider world" (*Int*, 160). Wilde dallies with Symbolist ideas fermenting at the time in the continent. Yet, his suggestive image is not exactly the Symbol but the "limit"; arguably the Wildean idea of stylistic limitation is the predecessor of Ezra Pound's idea of the vortex as a concrete unit through which meanings constantly rush. Vivian reads that "'limitation, the very condition of any art is style'" (*Int*, 85). And Gilbert, echoing Pater, finds these Aesthetic properties maximized in music, the "perfect type": "Music can never reveal its ultimate secret. This, also, is the explanation of the value of limitations in art" (*Int*, 160). What is activated is the palpable element that is concentrated in the image: "To the aesthetic temperament the vague is always repellent [...] we desire the concrete and nothing but the concrete can satisfy us" (*Int*, 176). The image is a cryptogram mystified by its own tactility which stands against the obviousness of direct statement. As such it also evokes Wilde's concept of "thought in colour" (W-*Letters*, 52)[124] which expresses the tendency to annihilate textual contingency.

As a conjuror of sensory experiences, Wilde is faithful to traditional forms and themes contrary to the Modernist experiments made by Yeats and Symons. This is evident in his poetry. In his subversive logic, he rejects modernity as something transient; his sense of modernity is the mythopoeic permanence of literary tradition. Vivian explains in "The Decay of Lying":

> Modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter are entirely and absolutely wrong. We have mistaken the common livery of the age for the vesture of the Muses, and spend our days in the sordid streets and hideous suburbs of our vile cities when we should be out on the hillside with Apollo. (*Int*, 82-3)

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[124] See also Gide's "In Memoriam", in Ellmann, ed., *Wilde*, 31.

Somewhat in opposition to Symons's outright fascination with the city and the "beauty in ugliness" and the "commonplace" espoused by James Whistler,[125] Wilde stresses a kind of art whose character is that of icy detachment of pastoral and Arcadian settings.[126] R. V. Johnson observes that "antique, exotic, or pastoral fantasy" is the imagery of Aestheticism.[127] Hence, Wilde vigorously aligns himself with the French Parnassians and the sensuous mythic world of Pierre Louÿs as this is exemplified in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (1894). The reason for his hostility to the city is that the latter is in interaction with life and thus unfit as an artistic subject of detached beauty (see *Int*, 82).[128]

The stasis of decorativeness suggests that imageries become atemporal and anachronistic when coalesced. "The ages live in history through their anachronisms" says Wilde.[129] The seeds of this idea are in the "English Renaissance": "The poet is the spectator of all time and of all existence. For him no form is obsolete, no subject out of date; […] all lies before him like an open scroll, all is still instinct with beautiful life" (ERA, 13).[130] These imageries are enshrined inside the bisecting "veil" of the isolated beauty; they have attained a mythopoeic identity. Gilbert remarks on poetry that "the great artists, from Homer and Æschylus, down to Shakespeare and Keats, did not go directly to life for their subject-matter, but sought for it in myth, and legend, and ancient tale" (*Int*, 154). Also, "dramatic art", before "she enlisted Life in her service" was "abstract, decorative, and mythological" (*Int*, 84). As his reinventions and re-combinations of diverse literary traditions dance before us in *Intentions*, Wilde transforms his materials and drives them to a status of mythopoeia tuned with his own Aestheticism. He constructs an intertextual concoction by yoking and synthesizing elements from the collective recorded literary history. Intertextuality for Wilde turns into a sphere of artifice. As Vivian states, art "is not symbolic of any age. It is the ages that are her symbols" (*Int*, 97). Wilde promotes a theory of the simultaneity of the different ages and times, the collapsing of all periods into one single locus, shattering the notion of time. Gilbert declares that "for he to whom the

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[125] See Wilde's reviews "Mr. Whistler's Ten O'Clock" and "The Relation of Dress to Art. A Note in Black and White on Mr. Whistler's Lecture." *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea*, 47-54.
[126] See also ERA, 20.
[127] Johnson, *Aestheticism*, 24.
[128] See also Johnson, *Aestheticism*, 20.
[129] "Phrases," *Chameleon*, 3. Epifanio notes Wilde's "antihistorical and ahistorical orientation" and the omnipresence of the poet. See Epifanio, *The Art of Oscar Wilde*, 79, 102-3.
[130] See also ERA, 14.

present is the only thing that is present, knows nothing of the age in which he lives. To realize the nineteenth century, one must realize every century that has preceded it and that has contributed to its making" (*Int*, 176). This is how Wilde de-contextualizes the concept of modernity. In his view modernity is not that which is in vogue but that which registers the collective tradition. Novelty is achieved not by introducing new elements, but by shuffling and reinventing old ones. In a Darwinian twist Wilde contends: "the imagination is the result of heredity. It is simply concentrated race-experience" (*Int*, 178). And by evacuating "moral responsibility, the scientific principle of Heredity has become [...] the warrant for the contemplative life" (*Int*, 177). The imagination here also evokes a notion of the Romantic palimpsest ("heredity"). The atemporal and a-spatial image has entered the domain of mythopoeia. His mythopoeic image retains the universality of that of the Symbolists' without, though, referring to an inner reality. Opaque units that work by association, as a still-life composition, replace the workings of Symbolism. Wilde coins the phrase "aesthetic eclecticism" – already fermenting in the "English Renaissance" (ERA, 13) – to describe "the true harmony of all really beautiful things irrespective of age or place, of school or manner" (*Int*, 108). "Aesthetic eclecticism" partly stems from Pater's discarding of "*surplusage*". Anachronisms and coincidental *topoi* generate Decadent possibilities by incapacitating the contingency of orthodox allusion. Poetic *allusion* becomes *dynamic* in the sense of the plastic arts. Wilde perverts language by assigning it to its literary products, by mythologizing it in a permanent realm outside spatiotemporal reality.

The dialogues of *Intentions* exist through the dialectic set-up between their discourse and Victorian reality. They advertise a textual factory which draws material from the chaotic framework of life and refines it. The realization of the contraposition of the mimesis dictum (life-imitating-art) augments the aesthetic of neutralized morality and atemporality. In order for life to mirror art, it first has to be used to art's purpose and sterilized. Vivian explains in "The Decay of Lying" that "literature always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose" (*Int*, 92). And Ernest stresses in "The Critic as Artist"

> that it is the function of Literature to create, from the rough material of actual existence, a new world that will be more marvellous, more enduring, and more true than the world that common eyes look upon, and through which common natures seek to realise their perfection. (*Int*, 152; see also *Int*, 73)

"Actual existence" is "rough material" because it is chaotic and painful since it is not aesthetically distanced. But Wilde's phrasing points to life as a lower mode of art and the process of a constant perfecting of life which agrees with Symons's "refinement upon refinement" principle. The Wildean art/life interaction foreshadows its audacious version endorsed in Symons's output. A decadent potential emerges when Wilde underscores the emotional sterility attached to art disentangled from reality. Gilbert says that "art does not hurt us. The tears that we shed at a play are a type of the exquisite sterile emotions that it is the function of Art to awaken" (*Int*, 173). Life is disarmed of its emotional disturbances and ethical functions become theatrical.[131] The artificial, icy emotions of art reflect the decorativeness of life when it is inscribed on the artistic surface. Wilde's creative urge to transform life into art and the result of sterile perfection is a paradox which hints at the collapse between the two, a collapse which lies at the heart of the Decadent mode.

In Wilde's decorativeness Aestheticism bleeds into Decadence by way as well of the application of Darwinism which was fashionable discourse in the *fin de siècle*. The eroticization of the text to the point of sensory concreteness, as Barthes's *Le Plaisir du Texte* explores, is actively coupled with the sense of immorality and manifests itself in Wilde's thought. Wilde justifies his vision of beauty with the use of sexual selection. The "antinomian" Gilbert, who claims that "aesthetics are higher than ethics" (*Int*, 204), elucidates:

> Aesthetics, in fact, are to Ethics in the sphere of conscious civilisation, what, in the sphere of the external world, sexual is to natural selection. Ethics, like natural selection, make existence possible. Aesthetics, like sexual selection, make life lovely and wonderful, fill it with new forms, and give it progress, and variety and change. (*Int*, 204)

Considering Wilde's highly dense sensual passages in his prose and poetry, the idea of "sexual selection" helps us understand the genesis of his version of the Decadent image.[132] From his point of view Wilde is not a degenerate as Max Nordau perceives

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[131] Wilde writes to the editor of the *Scots Observer*: "An artist, sir, has no ethical sympathies at all. Virtue and wickedness are to him simply what the colours on his palette are to the painter" (W-*Letters*, 439).

[132] Woodcock is right to observe about the passage of "sexual selection" that "here we have the doctrine of the decadents declared fully and eloquently." George Woodcock, *The Paradox of Oscar Wilde* (London: Broadman, 1949), 130.

him to be, but a promoter of progress. The subordination of "ethics" to "aesthetics" forms an early credo of the nineties' Decadence.[133] In his acute Darwinian analogy, the cult of beauty is the essential ingredient of evolution, and not the sphere of ethics. Darwin informs us in *The Descent of Man* (1871) that "the lower animals, like man, are "capricious" in their "sense of beauty." "They love novelty for its own sake."[134] And "in civilized life man is [...] exclusively influenced in the choice of his wife by external appearance."[135] Wilde blends the Aestheticist concept of the supremacy of the beautiful style with sexuality which in itself is a tool of subversion against the ethical sensibilities of the philistine world. Art evolves according to the laws of "sexual selection", or in other words, it follows a continuous over-refinement of the eroticized beauty. This eroticism is linked with the sensual relishing of experiences and so of art, as Barthes's pleasure of the text, and ultimately Wilde's own erotically musical style, point out. The Darwinian process of automatic and constant refinement is also discerned in Wilde's concept of "aesthetic eclecticism" expressed in "Pen, Pencil, Poison". His theory that themes and imageries from art or literature of past periods are imprinted and accumulated in the artwork renders "aesthetic eclecticism" with Darwinian overtones.

Wilde takes the Darwinian discourse onto another level when he introduces the element of "Sin" as an essential ingredient of progress. Wilde capitalizes the word "Sin": this may include the implication of Original Sin, a concept much celebrated by the Decadents. Sin also entails violation of ethics by means of sexuality.

> What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type. In its rejection of the current notions about morality, it is one with the higher ethics. (*Int*, 148)

Sin, which is almost a synonym of dandyism and *fin-de-siécle* morbidity, is intimated by Wilde as an instrument of style.[136] Variety by means of the image, recalling decorativeness, is contrasted with words such as "colourless" and "monotony".

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[133] For the relationship between "ethics" and "aesthetics" see Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, 51-7.
[134] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: Murray, 1909), 142.
[135] Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 873.
[136] Wilde's fascination with the morbid is a follow-up of the essentiality of sin in *The Soul of Man*. He writes: "To call an artist morbid because he deals with morbidity as his subject matter is as silly as if one called Shakespeare mad because he wrote 'King Lear'." (*Int*, 252-3) See also Gautier, *Préface*, 25-6.

"Monotony" is a word also applied by Vivian in his characterizations of nature, and runs contrary to the notion of decorativeness. Monotony is broken by art which in *The Soul of Man* is characterized as individualism and is a "disintegrating force" (*Int*, 250), a phrase akin to "Sin" both by means of fracturing and falling away from conventional codes. "Sin" then is the force that makes up the Wildean décor; it determines variability in Decadent style as an integral part of its apparatus. The statement "by its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race" is highly suggestive of the anachronistic accumulation of images that make up the Wildean palimpsest. Wilde's choice of vocabulary is evocative; the art of sinning is coupled with "curiosity" which encapsulates the idea of the forbidden, over-refined and rare pleasures pursued by the Dandy-Aesthete. The numerous sets of imageries that feature in Wilde's *oeuvre* involve a sense of breaching moral boundaries, the active feeling of sinning.[137] Wilde's so-called "jewelled style" indicates the tendency to achieve novelty through an uncommon style triggered by "curiosity". The *mot juste* in the manner of "aesthetic eclecticism", when fused with sin transforms into *l' image juste*. Wilde also normalizes "Sin" as a higher ethic and an "intensified assertion of individualism". Here he brings together the idea of uniqueness achieved through the novelty of reshuffling materials which in its turn is part of the technique and the dominance of the artist's personality; as Wilde underscores, "technique is really personality" (*Int*, 199). He writes of Wainewright that his style is "subtle and suggestive. One can fancy an intense personality created out of sin" (*Int*, 120). The idea of hinted sins, already elaborated in Dorian Gray's secret morbid activities, points to the subversive power of the "limitation" of the fixed image.

2.3 The Purple Passage

The texture of *Intentions* – as all Wilde's prose works from short articles to *Dorian Gray* – joins purple patch and aphoristic writing; it is a bizarre and extravagant amalgam of verbal and sensuous modes. This duality of styles is not a "confusion of

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[137] In a reply to the editor of *St. James Gazette* regarding *Dorian Gray* Wilde writes: "Bad people are, from the point of view of art, fascinating studies. They represent colour, variety and strangeness" (W-*Letters*, 430).

outlook" as Brown claims.[138] Abstract passages are often followed by "purple patches" as Wilde's near contemporary, Holbrook Jackson, labels them in his Nineties' memoir.[139] These passages consist of dense and luxurious descriptions that in a narcissistic act mirror all the traits theorized in the rest of the book. They are exemplars of the so-called "jewelled style". Wilde consciously takes up from his French influences "that curious, jewelled style vivid and obscure at once, full of argot and of archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases, that characterizes the work of some of the finest artists of the French school of *Symbolistes*" (*DG*, 274) and Arthur Symons locates in Mallarmé the jewelled significance of words (see *SML*, 130-8). This is the style celebrated in Beardsley's *Under the Hill*, which in a sense is a textual translation of his own elegant drawings. Richly sensuous language was defined as quintessentially Decadent by Gautier – who himself was its premier master – in his Preface to the third edition of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. As already seen in the first chapter, for Gautier the author should borrow "specialist vocabularies from everywhere" and "colour from every palette". In his boundary-breaching strategy "the style of decadence" pushes the "*Verbe*" "to its very limits." Wilde's bejewelled style which nourishes the dazzling stylistics of the nineties lyric accords closely with Gautier's aesthetic. Its basic formula consists of exhibited word-images exemplified by decorativeness, stasis, musicality, concreteness, simultaneity, and foreign phrases.[140]

Wilde freezes dramatic action and renders it into static narrative; he turns it into description and empties it of its essential function. A felicitous instance is the passage in Part I of "The Critic as Artist" whose bulk consists of scenes related to the *Iliad*. It is the excerpt in which Gilbert argues against action which "dies at the moment of its energy" (*Int*, 151). Action is here rearranged and reconceived in the manner of parataxis at the expense of causality.

> In the courtyard below, the son of Priam is buckling on his brazen cuirass. The white arms of Andromache are around his neck. He sets his helmet on the ground, lest their babe should be frightened. Behind the embroidered curtains of his pavilion sits Achilles, in perfumed raiment, while in harness of gilt and silver the friend of his soul arrays himself to go forth to the fight. [...] On the mouldering citadel of Troy lies the lizard like a thing of green bronze. The owl has built her nest in the palace of

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[138] Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, 52.
[139] See Chapter IX, "Purple Patches and Fine Phrases," Jackson, *Eighteen Nineties*, 134-46. See also Johnson, *Aestheticism*, 24.
[140] Wilde's style is what Reed discusses as "ornament" and "mannerism" (Reed, *DS*, 222-3).

> Priam. Over the empty plain wander shepherd and goatherd with their flocks, and where, on the wine-surfaced, oily sea [...] (*Int*, 150-1)[141]

The Homeric epic is a poem of intense, agonizing action, yet, under Wilde's pen, it is an assortment of tapestry-like vignettes whose anti-action feel is enhanced through sensuous epithets. These vignettes run together. The famous domestic scene of Hector, Andromache, and their baby son Astyanax is displayed as a vignette alongside the image of the withdrawn Achilles in the company of the arming Patroclos. Space and time collapse in placing together in adjacency and simultaneity two scenes whose relation is only paratactic and thematic. The Iliadic scenery is also emblematically portrayed in a state of iciness; Wilde captures the topography of Troy in *fin-de-siècle* nature-imitating-art artifice with the "lizard" which is "like a thing of green bronze" subtly evoking the apparatuses of bronze that permeate the period and the text. Wilde recasts the materials that encompass the Homeric poem by way of *ēkphrasis*. The ekphrastic, or descriptive, text is exemplified in the *Iliad* itself in the passage of the Shield of Achilles (*Iliad* 18.468-607).[142] The varied vignettes depicted in the Shield's homocentric rings defy the spatiotemporal action of the epic's corpus by being arrayed in dense decoration, similar to the arabesque patterns of the orientalism which Wilde fervently celebrates. There is also another, strong connection between Wildean description and Homeric convention, that of the catalogue motif which chiefly occupies most of Book 2 of the *Iliad*. The catalogue or enlistment technique is most evident in *À Rebours* with "its long, meticulously researched, but ultimately overwhelming, lists of rare and curious things."[143] In Wilde's mythopoeic handling of imageries, the hierarchy of action and style has been reversed: the Shield's decorations have taken over, submitting the narrative of action to their design.

Wilde pushes the limits of language, moving from the textual to the pictorial in his extremely polished use of the "jewelled style". He is not just a collector of technical terms and archaisms; the curious vocabulary he employs mutates into a network of sensory effects by evocation and association, eliminating the traditional function of language as organized carrier of meaning. It is not accidental that the *épithète rare* he tends to use is a natural signifier without a signified; its meaning is

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[141] To perceive the full impact of the extract see it in its entirety: *Int*, 149-51.
[142] Homer, *Iliad*, ed. and trans. Richmond Lattimore, 1951 (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1961), 387-91.
[143] Stephen Calloway, in Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 47.

either obscured or naturally evacuated. Towards the end of "The Decay of Lying" Vivian argues about the "art of Lying":

> Dragons will wander about the waste places, and the phoenix will soar from her nest of fire into the air. We shall lay our hands upon the basilisk, and see the jewel in the toad's head. Champing his gilded oats, the Hippogriff will stand in our stalls, and over our heads will float the Blue Bird singing of beautiful and impossible things. (*Int*, 101)

All these exotic mythical beings form the stock-imagery that ties the sentences together. Wilde has established an atemporal textual zone in which fantastic and bizarre diction becomes the factor with which sentences interact on the level of Aesthetic harmony like items in a collection. The "Critic as Artist" swarms with passages in the "jewelled style". A notable example is when Ernest recreates the artistic world of Hellenism (*Int*, 131-4). The writing consists of sensuously pictographic blocks of text whose paragraphs run for over one page long: the breathless ekphrastic language is, in a sense, a monotonous continuum which typifies the tapestry-like continuity of decorative art. The interrelation of the sentences follows the rules of painting rather than those of language: this is achieved by bringing together variations of the same thematic image, "the sculptor". Thus, in the same paratactic pattern we read:

> The sculptor hewed from the marble block the great white-limbed Hermes that slept within it. The waxers and gilders of images gave tone and texture to the statue [...] He drew with silver-point and charcoal upon parchment and prepared cedar. Upon ivory and rose-coloured terracotta he painted with wax, making the wax fluid with juice of olives [...] (*Int*, 131)

The Decadent text breaks the logical and conventional association of sentences into relationships of colour or sound. Wilde's lush, hypnotically poetic expression draws attention to itself. Its paratactic vividness cancels out the notion of temporality which is linked with the act of the conventional *reading* of the text and encourages its *viewing* as its images stand independently. Ironically, the entire "purple" passage is employed to support the point of the lack of art critics in art's best periods. Yet, Wilde is not interested in the consistency of the arguments posed in the dialogue but playfully uses them as springboards for the flaunting of his "jewelled" prose.

Wilde's self-reflexivity and atemporality is based on and simultaneously departs from Pater's which is rather characterized by economy, linear argumentation,

and emphasized temporality. Their differences can be observed by a parallel comparison of passages that are recreations of other artworks. Here is an extract from Pater's *Renaissance*, the chapter titled "Sandro Botticelli", where he describes a typical Madonna scene by the painter:

> The white light on it is cast up hard and cheerless from below, as when snow lies upon the ground, and the children look up with surprise at the strange whiteness of the ceiling. [...] startled animals – gipsy children, such as those who, in Apennine villages, still hold out their long brown arms to beg of you, but on Sundays become enfants du choeur, with their thick black hair nicely combed, and fair white linen on their sunburnt throats. (*Ren*, 44, 45)

And an example from "The Critic as Artist", an extract from Wilde's retelling of Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

> We break the withered branches from the tree in the grove of the Harpies, and each dull-hued poisonous twig bleeds with red blood before us, and cries aloud with bitter cries. Out of a horn of fire Odysseus speaks to us [...] Through the dim purple air fly those who have stained the world with the beauty of their sin [...] (*Int*, 168)

Although the styles of the two men are in many respects similar, the artificiality and *décor* of Wilde's text are much more prominent.[144] Pater's Impressionistic criticism is balanced with ascetic perfection: it follows a methodical line of thought or argument, with almost a scholarly precision and the employment of the *mot juste*. Commas and conjunctive words such as "and", "but", and "as" align the sentences with a linear train of thought. Wilde's prose, on the other hand, features pure decorative effect via the parataxis of complete sentences. There is no movement that carries the thought forwards but independent sentences whose stasis is highlighted by the eloquently pictorial diction. Also, economy of expression is absent in Wilde; hyperbolic exaggeration ("bleeds with red blood") enhances the text's unnatural abstract concreteness. Wilde's writing, in some sense, contains the *surplusage* rejected by Pater in his essay "Style". In his review of Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* which appeared in the *Pall Mall Gazette* Wilde gives away their stylistic differences when he comments that "asceticism is the keynote of Mr. Pater's prose; at times it is almost

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[144] See Woodcock, *Paradox of Oscar Wilde*, 42-56, esp. 48. Woodcock discusses the differences between Wilde and Pater; his views are biased, though, because he considers Wilde's style inferior to Pater due to its characteristic exaggeration.

too severe in its self-control and makes us long for a little more freedom."[145] The fact that this review was published in 1887, before the authoritative compilation of the essays in *Intentions* (1891), shows that the disciple had already challenged his master, moving away to the set of theories that would signalize the Decadent nineties.

The Mona Lisa passage in the *Renaissance* is one of the few examples that approximate the extreme and subversive Aesthetic criticism of Wilde (see *Int*, 156, 157). The process in which the portrait triggers a series of period allusions in Pater's mind marks the palimpsest-like "concentrated race experience" and the mythopoeic faculty of the "critic as artist", the prevalent model of rampant individualism in Wilde's own prose. Gioconda "is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times [...] as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary" (*Ren*, 99). The artist exercises his transformational gaze bringing into play the accumulative heritage of past ages. Yet, the enrichment of Gioconda's image is achieved in a linearly systematic and austere manner, lacking in adjectival, ornate expressions.[146] Analogously, in the case of Wilde, Gilbert the critic as artist reorients Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*:

> Close to your hand lies a little volume, bound in some Nile-green skin that has been powdered with gilded nenuphars and smoothed with hard ivory. [...] and your soul [...] will feed upon poisonous honey, and seek to repent of strange crimes of which it is guiltless, and to make atonement for terrible pleasures that it has never known. And then, when you are tired of these flowers of evil, turn to the flowers that grow in the garden of Perdita, and in their dew-drenched chalices cool your fevered brow [...] (*Int*, 171-2)

Wilde dwells on book-binding imagery to convey a foretaste of the exotics of Baudelaire. Contrary to Pater, he enriches his sentence with the unusual epithetical compound "Nile-green", which, coupled with the rare and graceful "nenuphars" suggests a sense of artificial greenness: the element of "abstract decoration" is in dominance. A close inspection will show that almost all the parts of speech of Wilde's "purple patches" are visual and specific. The audiovisual sensuality that lingers about Wilde's prose points to a relishing for its own sake. In addition, the comparison of the

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[145] Oscar Wilde, "Mr. Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*," *Pall Mall Gazette*, June 11, 1887 in Wilde, *Aristotle at Afternoon Tea*, 142. It should also be noted here that in the review "Mr. Pater's Last Volume" Wilde deliberately exhibits an ambiguous attitude to Pater's style where he discerns weakness but he refrains from adverse criticism.

[146] In Johnson's reading, the difference between Pater and Wilde lies in the fact that the former, in the Mona Lisa passage, links art with all periods ("historicism") and the latter professes that art is totally independent from history. See Johnson, *Aestheticism*, 74-5.

above passages shows how Wilde triumphs as the destroyer of argumentative logic, favouring the evocative power of the image. It is known that the Mona Lisa passage is the exemplar of Impressionist criticism where writing is dictated by impulsiveness, following the unpredictable domino effect of contemplation. Hence, while dwelling on Baudelaire's "flowers of evil", Gilbert's thought is transported to "flowers" from "the garden of Perdita" and over-luxurious floral imagery from mythical scenes. What is striking is that the word "flowers" in the title of the French book of poetry is metaphorical: Gilbert twists it when he shifts to actual flower imagery, revealing the light treatment of topics and their subjection to "abstract decoration". The language of Pater's Mona Lisa is sensuous but logically and linearly constructed whereas in Wilde the apparatus of logical prose is utterly shattered and images emerge in an ambience of self-referential artificiality.

In "Pen, Pencil, Poison" Wilde ponders that "none of us can ever quite free ourselves from the influence of custom and the influence of novelty" (*Int*, 109). In his prose and poetry Wilde recycles the entire western tradition, and it is in this frame of "custom" and convention that he develops novelty of style. He follows Pater's belief in "Aesthetic Poetry" that "in handling a subject of Greek legend, anything in the way of an actual revival must always be impossible [...] We cannot truly conceive the age: we can conceive the element it has contributed to our culture" (*App*, 223, 224). Drawing upon similar sets of themes explored by the Pre-Raphaelites, he manages to push the boundaries of the Aesthetic School to the limits and rises above Swinburne's experiments. His "jewelled style" involves the bold absorption of thematic imageries to an all-engaging form. This is most evident in his enthralment in names. Names of people, fictional characters, places, and artworks dominate his prose heavily. "Names fascinate me terribly" he writes to Aubrey Richardson (W-*Letters*, 418). "Pen, Pencil, Poison" is crowded with stretches such as this: "He has his trays of Tassie's gems, his tiny Louis-Quatorze *bonbonnière* with a miniature by Petitot, his highly prized 'brown-biscuit teapots, filagree-worked,' his citron morocco letter-case, and his 'pomona-green' chair" (*Int*, 109). The words "tiny", "miniature", and "Petitot" work in the same key. They highlight a delicate refinement by indicating smallness. The name "Petitot" with its French flavour shares its sensory faculty in harmony with its textual surroundings, obtaining the status of a pure image. Elsewhere this phenomenon occurs in the blurring or fusion of alliteration and onomatopoeia. In "The Critic as Artist" we come across phraseology such as: "Persephone [...] putting

poppies in her hair" (*Int*, 133), or this one: "the cold crystal of Cocytus" (*Int*, 169). Wilde is not just exhibiting musicality by playing respectively with the sounds "p" and "c". The names "Persephone" and "Cocytus" have become anti-*topoi* in the sense that they have been evacuated of their conventional meaning and have been ingrained as rare entries in the lexicon, taking and giving colour to and from the adjacent words. When analyzing the "purple" passages of *Intentions* the names have transformed into specific sensory signifiers, universalized and integrated in the vocabulary. In other words, they have undergone a semantic change similar to Wilde's own process of mythopoeia.

Elaborating further on Wilde's novelty, working within the outlines of tradition he brings into the English language a completely new, sensational eloquence.[147] The "new sensations" that Lord Henry urges Dorian Gray to be in search for can be ultimately read as a Wildean self-referential comment on the new sensual possibilities of language.[148] Wilde traverses the limits of expressivity by creating a formula in which language transforms into a multi-sensual spectacle. Even in such a late text as *De Profundis*, he expresses a penchant for novelty by way of finding new keys for embellishment: "something must come into my work, of fuller harmony of words perhaps, of richer cadences, of more curious colour-effects" (W-*Letters*, 755). More or less, this formula consists of an interactive combination of a kind of the Homeric stock epithet, the specialized noun, the name, and the choice, sensory verb. Often tuned to a standard key, these elements come together to produce a highly hedonistic syntax that reinvents textuality. In Ernest's luxurious speech we come across sentences such as this: "he pictured one who trod with tired feet the purple white-starred fields of asphodel" (*Int*, 132). The synthetic adjective "white-starred" which is peculiar in itself is coupled with "purple" densely creating a visual curiosity. "Trod" is also aligned alliteratively with "tired" and is a choicer substitute for "walk". In the same passage we encounter "across the veined sardonyx sped Artemis with her hounds" (*Int*, 133). The bizarre geological term "sardonyx" is enhanced by a word from bodily anatomy ("veined"). The mythological name

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[147] See Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties*, 137.

[148] In *De Profundis* Wilde confesses himself an abider of "new sensations": "Tired of being on the heights I deliberately went to the depths in the search for new sensations. What the paradox was to me in the sphere of thought, perversity became to me in the sphere of passion" (W-*Letters*, 730).

becomes attuned in the sentence as part of its mineral feel; on the level of motif the sense of movement resonates in the proximity of "veined" and "sped".

In his Homeric passage, Gilbert relates that Achilles "spills the thick grape-blood upon the ground" (*Int*, 150). Wilde literally invents here a new part of speech by converting the stock or compound epithet with the characteristic hyphen into the hybrid noun "grape-blood". The result is an exclusive image in which Decadent nuances are registered in its definition. And this is another instance, taken from the same passage, repeating the Wildean formula: "Euphorbus, whose love-locks were looped with gold" (*Int*, 150). The verb "looped" is a choice one, substituting for "circled", and chosen for its musical compatibility with the rest of the clause. The mythological name is present and the suggestive, hybrid, compound noun is at its extreme ("love-locks"). Variants of the jewelled formula permeate the corpus of Wilde's work, as this description of Sybil Vane in *Dorian Gray*: "she wore a moss-coloured velvet jerkin with cinnamon sleeves [...]" (*DG*, 233). Colours, organic materials, and attire are woven into a thick decorative pattern. Opaque decorativeness is manifested in phrases like "wine-surfaced, oily sea [...] copper-prowed and streaked with vermillion" (*Int*, 151), and even a Modernist poetic is exhibited in the manner of Pound in lines such as: "the flame-like crocus sprang from the grass to look at her" (*Int*, 172). The Decadent image is fashioned out of Wilde's bending and squeezing of language as a substitute for fulfilling sensual needs. It could be argued that, from a Freudian viewpoint, Barthes's formula of textual orgasmic explosions applies to Wilde as the latter's retribution against the sexual repression imposed by philistine society. Wilde's "jewelled style" draws massively from minerals and flowers, influenced by the stylish extravagance of Huysmans, simultaneously serving as a counterpoint to the austerity of Pater.

Wilde's purple passage, which confects refined and rare elemental or organic articles and *bric-a-brac*, or simple sensory experiences, is a force of lightness and sterility that comments on the seriousness of life. According to Wilde, life depends on "a chance tone of colour in a room or a morning sky, a particular perfume that you had once loved and that brings subtle memories with it, a line from a forgotten poem that you had come across again, a cadence from a piece of music that you had ceased to play" (*DG*, 351). This is the creed of the Decadent dandy. The small sensuous delights that create moods and impressions purge life of its complex and chaotic dramas. It is the potpourri of these diverse delights that creates complexity. Jorge Luis

Borges insightfully contends that "in verse or in prose Wilde's syntax is always very simple [...] Wilde's technical insignificance can be an argument in favour of his intrinsic greatness."[149] By keeping his syntax simplified and with the use of paratactic patterns Wilde indulges in the dynamics of association created by his visuals; his complexity is shifted from the frame to the materials that fill it. Symons too writes that "he is conscious of the charm of graceful echoes."[150] Thus, his prose is a sort of infertile logos which tends to transcend the textual condition.

Wilde's propensity to collect and arrange words and sentences like concrete images or jewels could be his ultimate paradox. Wordsworth wrote that the "eye" is "The most despotic of our senses" (*The Prelude*, XI, 171-6) but in the end, language is Wilde's artistic medium and he is a gatherer of words.[151] His sensuous image comes down to mere words. Dorian reflects in *Dorian Gray*: "Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them" (*DG*, 184). This image is the embodiment of narcissistic logos and self-referentiality; it is superbly sterile because it turns out to be verbal. In a way, the Decadent image is crystallized in its futile effort to emerge from language; Wilde endeavours to move to a pictorial condition of language but he ultimately returns to Gautier's lexicomania which he primarily adheres to. It is tempting to say that Wilde and the Decadents are high priests in a Tennysonian Palace of Art which is bound to collapse in its own vanity; yet, this is also their artistic strength. This paradox of style is illustrated by the mechanics of the dialogues in *Intentions*. The Wildean dialogue in its narcissistic function is a staged verbal performance. In their alternate speeches, Ernest is Gilbert's audience and the other way round. They are spectators, contemplators, and speakers of each other and their argument is plasmatic. Like the narcissistic image which is ultimately artificial as the trace or illusion of an image, the dialogue in its decorativeness is a dream of art; a self-referential game of staging the process of staging with Wilde indulging as the master illusionist.[152] The playfulness he employs to avoid logical argument, like the sensuous image which is exposed as the mask of the word, turns out to be the disguise of an articulated voice.

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[149] Ellmann, ed., *Wilde*, 172-3.
[150] Symons, *Oscar Wilde*, 23.
[151] Calloway observes: "Wilde's splendour, it seems clear, was a splendour of phrases not of visual effects; a richness of word-pictures rather than of objects." Raby, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 50.
[152] See also Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, 70.

3. "We Shall Inform Ourselves into All Sensuous Life": Eroticizing Form and Artifice in Wilde's *Poems* and *The Sphinx*

Give me artificial flowers – porcelain and metal glories – neither
fading nor decaying, forms unaging.
Flowers of the splendid gardens of another place,
where Forms and Styles and Knowledge dwell.
C. P. Cavafy, "Artificial Flowers" (1903)[153]

AN unsigned review of Wilde's *Poems* in the *Spectator* (13 August 1881) stated that the pieces of the volume were "constituted entirely out of sensuous images and pictures strung together often with so little true art that they remind one more of a number of totally different species of blossoms accumulated on the same stem, than of any cluster of natural flowers".[154] The review accurately summarizes the mechanics of the Wildean style which leads to the Decadent mode with its emphasis on the accumulation of sensuous visuals.[155] Yet, it fails to see – on the ground of philistinism – the championing of a pioneering and unique aesthetic which took to an extreme the practice of his English and French predecessors.

Wilde wrote in "The English Renaissance of Art" that "this restless modern intellectual spirit of ours is not receptive enough of the sensuous element of art" (ERA, 15). From this early stage the image was the forging factor of the imminent *fin-de-siècle* Decadent movement. His artificiality which develops from the first edition of *Poems* (1881) to *The Sphinx* (1894) is complex, sophisticated and multifarious.[156] He blends the Roman Catholic, the Hellenic, and the Oriental traditions respectively, with the pagan element being dominant.[157] Through these hybrid settings Wilde has managed to fashion an intensified, proto-Decadent image which is often more concentrated and intense than even Swinburne's morbidity. Pierrot's "elemental reverie" thrives in Wilde, from the fluidity of "water" of the Impresionist group to the

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[153] C. P. Cavafy, *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, trans. Rae Dalven, 1948 (San Diego: Harvest, 1976), 210.
[154] Karl Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970), 42.
[155] For Wilde as key promoter of the Decadent style see Pierrot, *Decadent Imagination*, 16-24.
[156] For an all-embracing and engaging discussion of Wilde's poetry with attention to technique and the element of sensuousness see Epifanio, *The Art of Oscar Wilde*, 19-48.
[157] For a discussion of *Poems* with an emphasis on the forces of Christianity and Hellenism see Rodney Shewan, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 7-18.

jewelled hardness of *The Sphinx*.[158] Wilde's poetry amplifies the senses in an attempt to push language to its limits.[159] However, the persistence of the *word* is the force which adds to the *sense* a layer of convoluted artifice by way of their synaesthetic association.

3.1 Materializing Intertextuality: *Poems*

Wilde deftly makes use of the scores of literary echoes in *Poems* as a basis for his aesthetic of artifice.[160] The journals of the time largely dismissed Wilde's poetry as derivative and insincere[161] and even some contemporary scholars have been hostile for the same reasons. Beckson and Fong contend that "Wilde had endeavoured unsuccessfully to develop a distinctive personal voice."[162] Yet the frequent echoes from the Romantics and the Pre-Raphaelites as well as the many instances of self-quotation substantiate Wilde's Aestheticist axiom that the arts borrow not from nature but from each other. In fact, Wilde could be praised for the way he inserts echoes and allusions in his poems. He does not merely evoke Romantic themes but he artificially conditions them by accentuating their dark aspect and exotic possibilities.

Two stark examples from *Poems* are the sonnets "The Grave of Keats" and "The Grave of Shelley". Despite their titles these poems are not simply elegies for the Romantic poets; Wilde has converted the elegiac into a polymorphous Aesthetic pose. In "The Grave of Keats" "the youngest of the Martyrs here is lain, / Fair as Sebastian, and as early slain" (4-5). The feminized and eroticized depiction of St. Sebastian by Guido Reni has established the latter as a figure favoured in the Decadent imagery of subversive Catholicism. Wilde transforms Keats into a Catholic icon with sensual, homoerotic connotations. He offers a new twist to the Romantic theme of the tortured,

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[158] See Pierrot, *Decadent Imagination*, 208, 214.
[159] Aatos Ojala has even minutely taxonomically catalogues Wilde's "vocabulary of the senses" in *Aestheticism and Oscar Wilde: Part II: Literary Style* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen, 1955).
[160] For a defence of Wilde's intertextuality in the light of Barthes's "From Work to Text" see Julie Ann-Robson, "'Taken Bodily': Oscar Wilde and Intertextuality," *Irish Studies Review* 13.3 (2005), 353-8.
[161] See indicatively the *Athenaeum* (23 July 1881), the *Saturday Review* (23 July 1881), and the *Spectator* (13 Aug. 1881). Collected in Karl Beckson, ed. *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1970).
[162] See Karl Beckson and Bobby Fong, "Wilde as Poet" in Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 64. Other instances include Averil Gardner, "Literary Petty Larceny: Plagiarism in Oscar Wilde's Early Poetry," *English Studies in Canada* 8 (1982), 52-4, and particularly in the context of late Victorian Decadence see Charlesworth, *Dark Passages*, 59-61.

martyr-artist. Wilde's Keats is not the same one as in Shelley's *Adonais*. In one of his letters, Wilde writes that Keats's grave "is to me the holiest place in Rome" (W-*Letters*, 247). Mediated through religious imagery, the poet's grave is the Aesthete's "shrine of beauty". Wilde also aligns Keats with paganism and particularly with Sappho, who is a figure celebrated by the French Parnassians and Swinburne: "O sweetest lips since those of Mitylene!" (10). Wilde ties paganism with Catholicism and dwells on a powerful Aesthetic image of beauty in the guise of a Romantic poet. In applying the corpse imagery of *Isabella* to the poet himself, Wilde exhibits a macabre fascination with death as "gentle violets weeping with the dew / Weave on his bones an ever-blossoming chain" and "tears like mine shall keep thy memory green, / As Isabella did her Basil-tree" (7-8, 13-4). The poet and his art are mixed together in a self-obsessed, circular manner. The Keatsian image of flowers nourished by the human carcass is perpetuated, marking Wilde's beautification of death and focusing on the mutation of the body to its elements. Wilde sees Keats here with Baudelairean eyes.

A similar treatment is found in "The Grave of Shelley". Wilde aestheticises death, attributing to it a decorative orientalism: "the slight lizard show his jewelled head", "the chaliced poppies flame to red", and the "pyramid" in which the "old-Sphinx lurks darkly hid" (4-7). Death is also sexualized and smoothed out by phallic and vaginal imagery: "cypress-trees", "pyramid", "chaliced poppies", "womb", "cavern". This is combined with the employment of the Shelleyan motif and phrasing of stillness and movement that Wilde utilizes to inscribe and frame Romantic drama in Aesthetic terms. The image of the trees that "stand round" and the Sphinx's "still chamber" are juxtaposed with the ocean's "restless tomb" (11), a Shelleyan phrase through which Wilde transforms the rebellious spirit of Shelley, having in mind the Romantic poet's early death by drowning. Wilde echoes *Alastor* (1815):

> A restless impulse urged him to embark
> And meet lone Death on the drear ocean's waste;
> For well he knew that mighty Shadow loves
> The slimy caverns of the populous deep. (*Alastor*, 304-7)

And here are the lines reworked in "The Grave of Shelley":

> But sweeter far for thee a restless tomb
> In the blue cavern of an echoing deep, (11-2)

The plunging into the "ocean's waste" and the "slimy caverns" indicate a quintessentially Romantic, tragic and heroic act of defiance. Wilde presents this image as "sweeter," prefiguring the theme of the dissolution and return of human life to the elements which he fully develops in poems like "Panthea". In *Alastor* the image of the "deep" is a variation on the idea of the sublime. In Wilde's sonnet it almost signifies the longing for the Lacanian "Real", the inward movement to the maternal womb rather than towards subliminal Romantic landscapes.

Wilde's intertextual fascinations in *Poems* are less a stagnant recycling than an assertion of a new aesthetic of artifice via the use of poetic convention. In "La Bella Donna Della Mia Mente" the medieval, Renaissance, and afterwards Pre-Raphaelite theme of courtly love[163] – which Wilde here traditionally channels in the ballad form – turns out to be a celebration of the corporeality of the body. While we read traditional lines such as "O Lark sing louder for love's sake, / My gentle Lady passeth by" (7-8), Wilde cheats his readers by focusing on the lady's flesh: "O twining hands! O delicate / White body made for love and pain! / O House of love!" (29-31). Not only does the sadomasochistic feel of these lines evoke Swinburne's *Dolores*, but it also anticipates Arthur Symons's neurotic responses to the female body. The fetishist carnality to which the poem aspires is an early signal of Wilde's tendency to sexualize the text; the phrase "House of love" arguably refers to body indulgence as well as to the edifice of the poetic entity itself.

These early lyrics from *Poems* are not mere echoes but showcase Wilde's commitment to artifice and the self-referentiality of art. Literary tradition is recycled given the twist of the Aesthetic innovation[164] of the echo for the sake of the echo. Wilde turns Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite works into Aesthetic monuments by filtering them through his jewelled style. The work of the past becomes an image of icy beauty, an empty record of immense but hollow tactility. Wilde's Aestheticism is captured in Shelley's depiction of Adonais's "memory" which "doth stand / Like flame transformed to marble" (*Adonais*, 446-7). The "flame" of life movement is framed in the "marble" of Aesthetic stillness. Wilde is not a copyist; he enshrines the dramas of Romanticism in an atemporal space of artifice. His practice invites parallels

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[163] See commentary Wilde, *Poems and Poems in Prose*, 224.
[164] For the imitation-innovation aesthetic see James M. Smith, "Concepts of Decadence in 19th-Century French Literature," *Studies in Philology* 50 (1953), 650.

with Stéphane Mallarmé and particularly the latter's sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui" which is the epitome of icy beauty.[165] Mallarmé dwells on the artificiality and therefore sterility of action, which is manufactured by language, "Le transparent glacier des vols qui n'ont pas fui!" (4)[166] He symbolizes his idea in the image of the Swan:

> Un cygne d'autrefois se souvient que c'est lui
> Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre
> Pour n'avoir pas chanté la région où vivre
> Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l'ennui. (5-8)[167]

The fact that the swan is of the past ("d'autrefois") insinuates the idea of literary tradition. It is pinned down in the frozen landscape of art; it is "magnifique", yet it is perpetually arrested in the act of freeing itself hopelessly ("sans espoir"). Artifice is anticipated in the negation of the inhabitable country ("la région où vivre") and reinforced by the sterile winter ("stérile hiver"). The flights of the swan emblematically remain unrealized because the swan is ultimately frozen in language. Mallarmé contemplates the fact that the image of the swan and its unrealized movement is barren and artificial because it is textual. In the last tercet the final touch is added with the swan immobilized in the cold dream of contempt ("immobilise au songe froid de mépris") of the factual world. The poem is a dense elegy for Romanticism and a celebration of a pre-Decadent Aesthetic beauty captured in the mood of iciness and stillness. The poet engages in a linguistic game in which opposites coexist; the sterility of the transfixed swan denotes perfection through imperfection as at the beginning of the sestet the word "blanche", for instance, with its sound and semantic effect refers both to emptiness and flawlessness. The swan's limitation symbolizes the poet's imagination itself which struggles to free itself in the poetic space.

The formation of the literary tradition into a sterile, perfectly beautiful artistic experience is what Wilde does with intertextuality; in doing so he intensifies the

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[165] Interestingly, on the contrary, Remy de Gourmont calls Mallarmé a Decadent because of his innovation, and not imitation as in Wilde. Remy de Gourmont, *Decadence and Other Essays on the Culture of Ideas*, trans. William Bradley, 1922 (London: Allen, 1930), 145.
[166] "by clear ice-flights that never flew away!" Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E. H. and A. M. Blackmore (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 67.
[167] "A swan of old remembers it is he / superb but strives to break free woebegone / for having left unsung the territory / to live when sterile winter's tedium shone", 67.

sensuous textures of his sources; he is a showy craftsman, a jack-of-trades instead of a creator.[168] This is the same as the depiction of various myths and literary works in "The Decay of Lying" and "The Critic as Artist". By drawing attention not to the reality portrayed in the text but to the indulgence in the language which forms this reality, and demonstrating the frozen perfection and sterility of this reality *per se*, Wilde aligns himself with Mallarmé. As Richard Ellmann notes, "both Mallarmé and Wilde saw literature as the supreme art, and one that could transform a painting into words, a life into an artifice."[169] Hence, although the Decadent image intensifies by conforming to stillness, it simultaneously becomes immensely unstable as it is (ab)normally assembled by language. For Mallarmé this is a supporting idea of Symbolism, whereas Wilde's jewelled style signifies the futile propensity to transform language into a carnal body.

Striving to differentiate himself from Pater's time-bound pleasures, Wilde sustains his idea of decorativeness by introducing the motif of the tapestry. The long pieces in *Poems* such as "The Burden of Itys", "Humanitad", "The Garden of Eros", "Charmides", "Panthea", and "Athanasia" testify to Wilde's preoccupation with the "purple patch", the densely descriptive stretch which is the literary equivalent of pure décor. In almost all of the above poems Wilde accommodates the style of arrangement with the use of the iambic pentameter in the modified version of two extra stresses in the sixth line. The rhyme scheme *ababcc* offers a smooth rhythm fitting to the property of decoration as a repeating pattern. The stanza's prolonged last line produces the effect of excess, a feeling of breathlessness and suspension linked with the continuous outburst of imageries.

In "The Burden of Itys"[170] Wilde composes a panel of Arcadian, pastoral and mythical images, discharged by the use of intensely dramatic exclamations such as: "Sing on! sing on!" (169, *passim*). Arcady – which is sharply juxtaposed with Catholic Christianity – becomes a poetic region for displaying his parading imageries of sensual Hellenic bucolic: "Here is no cruel Lord with murderous blade, / […] But mossy dells for roving comrades made" (307, 309). The rustic space dominates the Wildean poetic in the same manner the metropolitan space dominates Arthur

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[168] See also Jerome H. Buckley, "Echo and Artifice: The Poetry of Oscar Wilde," *Victorian Poetry* 28 (1991), 19-23.
[169] Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1988), 320.
[170] For a discussion of the poem in the light of Decadence see Reed, *DS*, 104-7.

Symons's art. In this framework Wilde asserts the poem's tapestry-like feel. Lines 102-140 for example summarize myths related to Danae, Arachne, Salmacis, Ariadne and Theseus, the *Iliad*, Perseus and others; these successive vignettes breathlessly follow one another through stanzaic enjambment. Referring to this string of images the poet recapitulates his style: "And all those tales imperishably stored / In little Grecian urns" (141-2). Inventively recalling Keats's Urn, the "foster-child of silence and slow time" (2), Wilde's pictorial narrative has slowed down time because it consists of an embellishing panel in which the mythical plotline is frozen, converted into a static image. Indeed, these images are handled like ornamental, patterned illustrations of an urn. The succeeding references of various stories are glimpsed at and captured in Beardsleyan japonisms, artificial phrasings of colourful and synthetic adjectives, the use of uncommon diction, or a dense metaphor, as in "red-lipped boy", "amber pard" and "The tangle of the forest in his hair" (135, 131, 117) respectively.

The poetic of lush tapestry is presented through chiaroscuro contrast: Aesthetic pleasures are juxtaposed with universal humanity and individualism in "Humanitad". The poem is a mixture of philosophy and descriptively Swinburnian passages. Against philosophical musings, Wilde contrasts passages of vivid, sensuous imagery. The poet reflects: "the Muse of Time / Unrolls her gorgeous-coloured tapestry" (183-4). As with "The Burden of Itys" the stanzas unroll with mythological scenes depicted in antiquated diction as in lines 184-210 with the use of enjambment suggesting the flow one finds in an interlaced arabesque. Adjectival compounds linked with colour and archaic words characteristically comprise the texture of refined imagery as for instance: "In gilded mail with jewelled scimetar, / White-shielded, purple-crested, rode the Mede" (189-190). Attention to minute detail makes the lines accumulate like the layers of the arming attire described in the above lines.

Often Wilde's poetry is streaked with strata of gems and minerals, a perceptible influence from the styles of Gautier, Mallarmé, and especially Keats. This is the poetic technique of excess which inundates the Wildean stanza and culminates with the *Sphinx*. Jewel imagery in Wilde plays a meta-poetic role: it symbolizes the artificialization of the poetic text. "Impression de Voyage" reads, "The sea was sapphire coloured, and the sky / Burned like a heated opal through the air" (1-2). Images of jewellery are used here as a means of artificializing the landscape. Minerals with their properties of timelessness and stasis recall the Mallarméan glittering, icy beauty and the ingredients of Gautier's carefully chiselled phrasings. In his

artificiality of jewels Wilde often strongly echoes the Keatsian decorations as these lines from "Charmides" attest:

> And at our feet the water-snakes will curl
> In all their amethystine panoply
> Of diamonded mail [...] (375-7)
>
> Vermilion-finned with eyes of bossy gold
> Like flakes of crimson light, and the great deep
> His glassy-portaled chamber will unfold,
> And we will see the painted dolphins sleep (379-82)

And in *The Eve of St. Agnes* Keats weaves ornamental passages such as this:

> A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,
> All garlanded with carven imag'ries
> Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
> And diamonded with panes of quaint device,
> Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
> As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings; (208-13)

Wilde has the propensity to un-naturalize nature and crystallize it, to convert it into a series of jewelled artefacts.[171] Even the odd neologism "diamonded", used by both poets, with its hardness is an artificial verb which cannot escape the static condition of the noun. What is striking is that nature is inlaid and registered in the space of the tapestry whether this is a "glassy-portaled chamber" as in Wilde, or a "casement high" as in Keats. The intertextual echo appears as a *relief* of rich tactility and visuality, which challenges, or rather transforms the intangibility of language into the building substance of poetry; indeed, the jewelled descriptions have the feel of Parthenon's *metopes*. Thus, when Wilde the child of Hellenism in "The English Renaissance of Art" speaks of "the immense influence the decorative work of Greece and Italy had on its artists" (ERA, 25), he hints at the rendering of sculpture and relief into his own oeuvre.

Accumulation of unusual flowers functions like the use of jewellery, and the effect of artifice is multiplied when mineral imagery is coupled with catalogues of flora unconventional in poetry and outlandishly jewel-like[172] as in "Humanitad":

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[171] See also Susanne Shulof, "Glittering Forms: The Art Nouveau Jewellery," *Art Journal* 20.2 (1960-1): 84-86.

[172] In "The English Renaissance of Art" Wilde expounds on the perfection of design of the two flowers of aestheticism, the lily and the sunflower (ERA, 27).

> And pansies closed their purple-lidded eyes,
> Chrysanthemums from gilded argosy
> Unload their gaudy scentless merchandise (62-4)

Or elsewhere, fauna and the artifice of the gem motif are combined to produce impressionist colour explosions, as when the sensuality of Magdalen is projected on the landscape in "Magdalen Walks":

> And the rosebud breaks into pink on the climbing briar,
> And the crocus-bed is a quivering moon of fire
> Girdled round with the belt of an amethyst ring. (10-2)

Apart from the stylish diction, Wilde employs and combines a number of poetic devices to produce the maximum effect of how language can artificially burst into images within a dense poetic space. In this case flower and gem imageries clash in a sophisticated composition of alliteration and personification. Wilde's power of amassing detail proves him to be an anatomist of matter as in the case of a rose which is described as an aesthetic artefact: "Burst from its sheathed emerald and disclose / The little quivering disk of golden fire" ("Humanitad", 45-6).

Creating a catalogue, a register of outlandish words and phrases fulfils the principle of excess by definition. Unusual flower nomenclature comprises a baroque pastoral which draws attention to the aesthetic possibilities of language. "The Garden of Eros" is an exhibition garden in which flowers are taxonomically, yet sumptuously displayed, where "oxlips weave their brightest tapestry" (70). This is achieved with the use of the opaque stanza featuring the fanciful analogy, the colour-oriented word and tautology, all in the same package: "The trumpet-mouths of red convolvulus" are "creamy meadow-sweet / Whiter than Juno's throat" (43-5); "Yon curving spray of purple clematis / Whose gorgeous dye outflames the Tyrian King" (55-6). Also in these instances, Wilde highlights excess by reversing the Petrarchan hyperbole. Such purple lines figuring flora anticipate Des Esseintes's colourful catalogues of exotic plants in *À Rebours*. Wilde's excess by density though is not to be confused with the economy by compactness of the Symbolist technique. Phrases in "Charmides", "amethystine panoply of diamonded mail" (376-7) and "honey-coloured amber" (390) create a syntax of tautology which suggests overflowing excess.

In a sense, the technique of the tapestry signifies the funereal and Wilde becomes the elegist of Victorian culture. He is conscious of the notion of the legacy of

Romanticism: his Aesthetic disarming and rendering of the Romantic into a series of barren and icy images reveal the complex nature of his response to literary tradition and his way of being schismatic or critical towards it. Thus, through his envisioning of Arcady he promotes the Decadence of the barren image. In "Silentium Amoris" he speaks of nursing "the barren memory / Of unkissed kisses, and songs never sung" (17-8). The concept of "memory" is of key importance in *Poems*. The memory of Romanticism, for instance, has elegiac connotations. Wilde's continuous evocation of the "Spirit of Beauty" in "The Garden of Eros" to "tarry still a-while" (103) makes the visual and languid style of the poem a record of Romanticism's emptiness. The repeated verb "tarry" is a deliberately chosen archaism indicating that "beauty" is antiquated, mediated through barren description; and thus it invites "beauty" to linger more in the progression of the poem's lines.

The poem becomes a frozen elegy of Romantic art; it muses on Keats: "melody / Still mourns her sweetest lyre, none can play / The lute of Adonais, with his lips Song passed away" (124-6). Successively, the poet pays tribute to Swinburne who has "seen white Atalanta fleet of foot / In passionless and fierce virginity" (140-1) and "hath kissed the lips of Proserpine, / And sung the Galilæan's requiem" (145-6). And references to Morris follow, the poet who "Has brought fair flowers meet to make an earthly paradise" (162). These are not, respectively, mere allusions to "Ode to Psyche", *Atalanta in Calydon*, "Hymn to Proserpine", and the *Earthly Paradise*.[173] As the quotations show, Wilde has the poets interact with, and indeed form a part of, their own works. He mythologizes and poeticizes the poets, fusing them with their art to create a sophisticated record of a Romanticism that has turned into pure decoration. The initial key to the décor in "The Garden of Eros" is flower imagery, before the poem switches to intertextual allusions; the poem turns into a garden of echoes. Interestingly, Wilde aligns himself with the other poets as their last successor, exclaiming: "Shall I, the last Endymion, lose all hope / Because rude eyes peer at my mistress through a telescope!" (227-8). The reason for making the space of the poem a sort of poetic cemetery of frozen beauty is that art is demystified by the mundane industrialism of "this scientific age" (229). He talks about "Natural Warfare and insensate Chance" (242) evoking social Darwinism and the law of laissez-faire. Wilde's reaction towards the vulgarity of the industrial age confirms him at the very

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[173] See also the relevant commentary in *Poems*, 283.

least as an arbiter of Aestheticism and a devotee of the Parnassians. Wilde's early poetry of exotic Arcadian images opposes the artifice of capitalism or offers an alternative. This alternative takes the form of the individualism of the artist, manifesting Decadence by seclusion from modernity rather than by immersion in it as in the case of poets like Henley.

Wilde also reworks Romanticism in his aesthetic in "Panthea", a poem which is a celebration of matter and its erotic faculties. Wilde entertains the Romantic concept of God pervading all things by introducing discourses of science as the poem's diction attests: "With beat of systole and of diastole / One grand great life throbs through earth's giant heart" (97-8). The poem challenges Victorian values of morality and calls for a Paterian Epicureanism in which sexual pleasure is an enormous corporeal force: "Nay, let us walk from fire unto fire, / From passionate pain to deadlier delight" (1-2); "For, sweet, to feel is better than to know" (7). These remarks reveal the sexual tendency of Wilde's sensory visuals to pass from art to experience, from inscription to actualization, from Aestheticism to Decadence. And indeed the decorative description moves with languorous sensuality in phrasings such as "the murmuring nightingale / Like water bubbling from a silver jar" (13-4) and "White lilies, in whose cups the gold bees dream, / The fallen snow of petals" (19-20). Wilde rejects Platonic Christianity and the traditional notion of death ("The tomb is sealed; the soldiers watch; the dead rise not again" (90)) in favour of Darwinist materialism as the "waves of single Being roll / From nerve-less germ to man" (99-100). The idea of afterlife exists only as recycling of matter, as universal entropy:

> We are resolved into the supreme air,
> We are made one with what we touch and see,
> With our heart's blood each crimson sun is fair,
> With our young lives each spring-impassioned tree
> Flames into green, the wildest beasts that range
> The moor our kinsmen are, all life is one, and all is change. (91-7)

A circular temporality is implied in which life is in constant flux and the Decadent idea of physical decay is the means to immortality.[174] This is his rejection of any Christian constitution; Wilde is rather akin here to the Buddhist concept of reincarnation. He overturns Romantic pantheism: the notion that the human mind and

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[174] "Even the poem's conceptual resolution is appropriate to the Decadent technique of dissolution and transformation." Reed, *DS*, 107.

feeling imbued the untamed nature and its elements, an idea cultivated by Shelley in "Ode to the West Wind" (1819) or in Wordsworth's "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" (1798). Whereas for the Romantics physical beauty is a mediator of the soul, for Wilde the Aesthete it is a manifestation of eroticism. Wilde attributes to the Romantic pantheism the erotic drive. The sensuous is grossly portrayed as participating in the reprocessing of the elements in the entropic metamorphosis:

> Ay! and those argent breasts of thine will turn
> To water-lilies [...] (111-2)
>
> The yellow buttercups that shake for mirth
> At daybreak know a pleasure not less real
> Than we do, [...] (123-5)

And also the stamp of Pater's "Conclusion" remains discernible in inspiriting Wilde's pastoral imagery with the force of carnality:

> This hot hard flame with which our bodies burn
> Will make some meadow blaze with daffodil. (109-10)

The poet uses the body-flower correlation to address the universality of *eros*, an important element of *fin-de-siècle* agenda. The fact that the sensuality of human flesh is translated into nature suggests that the baroque rusticity of the Wildean poetic universe in its totality has erotic connotations. "We shall be notes in that great Symphony / Whose cadence circles through the rhythmic spheres" (175-6) says the poem, indicating the "musical arrangement of themes"[175] according to which the overall structure of *Poems* is laid out. Wilde's perversion of Romantic pantheism is most underscored with the lines: "O think of it! We shall inform ourselves / Into all sensuous life" (145-6). The verb "inform" here signifies to experience and – when transcribed as "in-form" – to turn something into form. The poet, in a Paterian gesture, invites the reader to the pantheism dictated by matter. A plunging into "all sensuous life" involves the post-obit sensuous amalgamation of the human body with the elements; this ultimately invites erotic integration with the poetic text, communion with poetry through the sense.

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[175] Isobel Murray, Introduction, *Complete Poetry*, by Oscar Wilde, 1997 (Oxford: OUP, 1998), xiii.

3.2 Turning the Text into Sex: "Charmides"

Wilde's tendency to "(in)form" himself "into all sensuous life" is marked from the start with the poetics of pleasure evoked in the proem to *Poems* "Hélas!" The first two lines show a pleasure-seeking dandy paying homage to Pater's Aestheticism: "To drift with every passion till my soul / Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play" (1-2). As Ellmann notes, the exclamation "Hélas!" stresses an anxious dichotomy in Wilde's ideas: that between "every passion" and "austere control" (1, 4).[176] Yet, the introduction of "life's dissonance" (10) into the melodiousness of artifice makes the poet's "life" "a twice-written scroll" (5) in which the "secret of the whole" is marred (8). The poem endeavours to detach itself from art's previous devotion to life by raising questions that are of a subtle self-critical nature. The "twice-written scroll", the Wildean palimpsest, could prefigure the dynamics between Decadent experience and its textualization.

The mechanics of the Wildean Decadent image become most fully manifest in "Charmides", the centrepiece and the longest of *Poems*. With the use of sensual excess "Charmides" denatures text into sex. This is a narrative poem where the concepts of plot and storytelling are diluted and ultimately shattered by the forcefulness of the decorative image. The poem, which echoes plotlines from Byron's *Don Juan* (1819-24), features Charmides, a young Greek sailor who sexually violates goddess Athena's statue in her temple. After Athena has her revenge by having Charmides drowned, his body is cast ashore and found by a virgin dryad who grows amorous of his body and dies as a result of her sexual frustration. Venus then arranges that they sexually unite in Hades. The meaninglessness and absurdity of the plot render it completely decorative and show Wilde's overturning of the poetics of narration. Morality is completely abolished; even early in "Ravenna" the poet refers to "all the petty miseries which mar / Man's nobler nature with the sense of wrong" (96-7). Charmides, Athena, and the nymph have little depth; their characterization is substituted by the visualizing depiction of their sexual moods. The illogicality of storytelling reaches its apex in travestying the mythological space, that of Hades at the

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[176] The two last lines read: "I did but touch the honey of romance – / And must I lose a soul's inheritance?" Wilde dramatizes the shift in ideas and as Ellmann argues "to be torn [...] between cadence and decadence, austerity and laissez-faire, has its flamboyance." Ellmann, *Wilde*, 133.

end of the poem. Charmides and the nymph oxymoronically consummate after death "across dread Charon's icy ford" (606). Wilde transforms Dante's story of Paolo and Francesca da Rimini and thereby he enacts the dark fantasy of the damned lovers by transcending death through the act of copulation:

> [...] they seemed one perfect rose of flame,
> And longing arms around her neck he cast,
> And felt her throbbing bosom, and his breath came hot and fast, (628-30)

Against the background of the Classical cold hell the poet superimposes images of heat and so with the persistence of sex he sensualises the post-mortal space converting it into pure décor. Through spatial digression Wilde exercises subtle mockery of plot-based narratives, showcasing in this way the decorative aspect of the entire plot.

The Decadent image of perverted sex and unnatural unions in "Charmides" is all-pervasive. Ellmann avers that the poem has "the imagery of psychosexual transgression."[177] The acts of copulation with a statue (Charmides-Athena) and that of necrophilia (dryad-dead Charmides) herald Wilde's exploration of body fetishism. The perception of the body as an inorganic artefact incorporates it into the apparatus of décor and stylistic artifice; its eroticization demarcates Wilde's predisposition to turn the text into a sensory, and specifically coital, act of pleasure. "Charmides" is a poem in which sexual perversion becomes textual perversion: the poem's importance lies in the fact that it captures the fermenting process of Aestheticism into Decadence. For Dowling, the seductive power of the text turns "linguistic autonomy" into Decadence (*LaD*, 164-5). Thereby Charmides "with hands violate / Undid the cuirass, and the crocus gown, / And bared the breasts of polished ivory" (102-4) and "The grand cool flanks, the crescent thighs, the bossy hills of snow" (108). Imagery of iciness and whiteness is not only indicative of the gem-like, inorganic aspect of the statue as an artificial body, but also of Athena's "terrible maidenhood" and "pitiless chastity" (93, 94). The story of "Charmides" is based upon Lucian's *Essays in Portraiture* in which the violated statue is Aphrodite's.[178] By substituting Aphrodite with Athena Wilde enters the territory of Decadence. In "Charmides", already several years before the nineties, Wilde introduces the image of the cruel virgin which he fully develops in *Salomé*. Apart from the vengeful character of the goddess, her

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[177] Ellmann, *Wilde*, 135.
[178] See explanatory notes to Wilde, *Poems*, 261.

chastity is "pitiless" because she herself is a barren ornament, like the Wildean descriptive text itself that cannot quench sexual cravings. The violation scene is intense and revealing:

> A little space he let his greedy eyes
> Rest on the burnished image, till mere sight
> Half swooned for surfeit of such luxuries,
> And then his lips in hungering delight
> Fed on her lips, and round the towered neck
> He flung his arms, nor cared at all his passion's will to check.
>
> Never I ween did lover hold such tryst,
> For all night long he murmured honeyed word,
> And saw her sweet unravished limbs, and kissed
> Her pale and argent body undisturbed,
> And paddled with the polished throat, and pressed
> His hot and beating heart upon her chill and icy breast. (109-20)

It should be noted that the naturalness by which Wilde conveys the sexual act renders "transgression" – also a term used by Ellmann – somewhat limited. The transgressive and perverse have been canonized; they are romantically beautiful and Wildean sexuality is polymorphous. The passage suggests that the poem is sophisticated high-class pornography in disguise, glossed over and smoothed out by embellishment.[179] This brings to mind Camille Paglia's theory that pornography and art coexist; they are in symbiosis.[180] Charmides's desire is vampiric and this is manifested in the words "greedy", "hungering" and "fed", words denoting a Swinburnian struggle for satisfaction. Athena's body is referred to as "pale", "argent", "chill" and "icy"; these words emphasize the unfeasibility of the act. In this context the phrase "unravished limbs" means perpetually chaste; the word "undisturbed" gains a double meaning: Charmides in the moment of violation is not interrupted but also Athena's body is impossible to violate. However, this scene comes across as largely provocative in the eyes of a philistine readership; Wilde in his forceful antinomianism tosses in a Decadent image of unsatisfied fetishist sexuality which captures the impossibility of materializing or eroticizing the linguistic tissue. Keats always had an inclination to materialize and eroticize the text and it is not surprising that the languorous stripping and copulation scene in "Charmides" is a twisted fetish version of the corresponding

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[179] The poem is reprinted in such books as T. R. Smith, ed., *Poetica Erotica: A Collection of Rare and Curious Amatory Verse*, 3 vols (New York: Boni, 1921).
[180] See Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Yale UP, 1990), 24-5.

scene between Porphyro and Madeleine in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Charmides's elopement with the statue is autoerotic and masturbatory; it is what Patricia Behrendt calls "self-centered sexuality of Blind Eros".[181] In the Wildean erotic fantasy of fetishizing art, the statue is a cold body which is sensually stripped, yet enhanced, just like the poetic tissue itself. The narrator parodically hints at a consummation when he comments: "Never I ween did lover hold such tryst" (115). Wilde describes a subversive and, at the very least, impossible act, and in doing so he addresses the paradox of the Decadent image as the futile attempt (depending on the perspective) to convert the poetic space into pure copulation.

This reading of the Charmides-Athena encounter in the temple is further highlighted in the light of Richard le Gallienne's *The Worshipper of the Image* (1900). This is a parable of the erotic attraction of the artist to the *objet d'art*, where Antony is infatuated with the "white plaster" mask of Silencieux, the "Image". Wilde's episode also meets its compact version in Olive Custance's lyric "The White Statue". The opening line reads: "I love you silent statue!"[182] The statue's silence renders it a fixed icon which eliminates the property of words. The poem's persona longs for a sexual union with it: "I yearn / To press warm lips against your cold white mouth."[183] This is a direct paraphrase from the lines in "Charmides": "and pressed / His hot and beating heart upon her chill and icy breast" (120). The Mallarméan iciness is at play in the antinomian process of treating the artistic object as if it was flesh. Charmides's carnal attitude towards the statue symbolizes Wilde's Pygmalionism.[184] The Aesthetic *distance* between person and art has been dangerously bridged and turned into unilateral Decadent *intimacy*.

The other vignette of sexual transgression occupying the poem's second half is aligned with the first one as a variant, forming the decorative pattern of the repetitive motif in which the sense of plot is seconded. Here, Charmides's corpse, a male Sleeping Beauty, is made an object of desire for the sexually frustrated nymph who, with Swinburnian violence, is "crushing her breasts in amorous tyranny" (345). She

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[181] Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1991), 49; see also 43, 50. For a reading of "Charmides" see 48-57.
[182] Olive Custance, *Opals* (London: Lane, 1897), 67
[183] Custance, *Opals*, 67
[184] The *OED* records Ellis who in 1905 defined the term as "a rare form of erotomania founded on the sense of vision and closely related to the allurement of beauty."

exhibits ferocious sexual hunger to which Wilde puts emphasis as "with hot lips" she "made havoc of his mouth" (352) and she

> Returned to fresh assault, and all day long
> Sat at his side, and laughed at her new toy,
> And held his hand, and sang her sweetest song,
> Then frowned to see how froward was the boy
> Who would not with her maidenhood entwine, (355-9)

Like Athena, the nymph is chaste and so her sexual misdemeanour classifies her in the Decadent cult of the lustful virgin. Her insatiability and hysteric necrophilia show her to be an early and underdeveloped model of Salomé. In a reversal of roles, Charmides is now exhibiting the inanimate frigidity of Athena as he is the nymph's "new toy". Wilde dramatizes the futility of the sexual collision of the lustful body with the inanimate body: the nymph's massive unchannelled energy is withheld by the stanza's iambic regularity and flatness. The union of Charmides with the nymph in Hades is rather a Wildean fantasy, the illusion of the image whose status, however, is fragile, constantly threatened by textuality.

This mood culminates when the nymph muses that she waited for Charmides "To rid me of this pallid chastity; / Thou fairest flower of the flowerless foam" (447-8). In the light of these lines her monologue about love reveals its artificial and decorative nature. Charmides's body is framed by sexual innuendoes such as "foam", which is suggestive of the spermatic fluid which is "flowerless", an adjective suggesting the impotence of the union. It is as if Charmides's dead body is jettisoned from the sea as the result of sexual climax. Barthes's idea of the pleasure of the text is fully manifested in Wilde's florid and sensual poetics. The dryad's virginal body is anatomized in terms of tree imagery; this rhetorical fusion could represent the pleasure of the text:

> Through my young leaves a sensuous ecstasy
> Crept like new wine, and every mossy vein
> Throbbed with the fitful pulse of amorous blood,
> And the wild winds of passion shook my slim stem's maidenhood. (459-62)

These lines recall "Panthea" in exhibiting the erotic longing of the body as it transmutes into the Arcadian nature it venerates. Wilde defines the state of "maidenhood" by means of the language of orgasm: "ecstasy", "amorous blood" and "passion". In doing so, he reinstates the futility of an infertile, insatiable sexuality that

in Barthian terms could stand for the orgasmic, though vain, experiencing of poetry as sensual pleasure.

Wilde's language in *Poems* strives for overreaching, for a state of absolute sensuousness to the point of death. The exemplar of this is Salomé, who is fascinated with Jokanaan because he is an unattainable object of desire, especially when he becomes an image of death. Her orgasmic ecstasy is intensified at the sight of Jokanaan's gored head; sexuality and violence are embroiled together as Salomé exclaims in her final speech: "I have kissed thy mouth. There was a bitter taste on thy lips. Was it the taste of blood…? But perchance it is the taste of love…"[185] The idea that sexual climax in identified with the experience of death is amply theorised by George Bataille in his work *L'Erotisme* (1957). Bataille expounds:

> The violence of death and sexual violence, when they are linked together, have this dual significance. On the one hand the convulsions of the flesh are more acute when they are near to a black-out, and on the other a black-out, as long as there is enough time, makes physical pleasure more exquisite. Mortal anguish does not necessarily make for sensual pleasure, but that pleasure is more deeply felt during mortal anguish.[186]

The Aesthetic imagery of Wilde's early poetry melts into Decadence with the subtle interchanges of death and sex. It is a progression from poets like Keats, Shelley, and Baudelaire. Shelley writes in *Epipsychidion*: "Love's very pain is sweet, / But its reward is in the world divine / Which, if not here, it builds beyond the grave" (596-8). It is also a prelude, not only to the fully developed Decadence of *Salomé*, but also to the neurasthenic urban responses to sexuality by nineties poets, namely Symons and Dowson. Orgasm as pain or near-death experience features in "Charmides" as the ultimate point of materializing the poetic space. Rhetoric of violent pain accompanies Charmides's sexual encounter with the statue of Athena:

> It was as if Numidian javelins
> Pierced through and through his wild and whirling brain,
> And his nerves thrilled like throbbing violins
> In exquisite pulsation, and the pain
> Was such sweet anguish that he never drew
> His lips from hers till overhead the lark of warning flew (121-6)

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[185] Wilde, *Wilde*, ed. Murray, 329.
[186] George Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Penguin, 2001), 104-5.

Here we have a clear example of Bataille's *petit mort*. The intensity of pleasure is measured in terms derived from the anatomization of pain. The image of javelins piercing the brain repeatedly and violently almost works as a metaphor of the senses penetrating the mind, the space in which the sexual fantasy is enacted. Or in other words, it is suggestive of the senses invading textuality and vice versa. In this episode the pain of death concurs as an immediate after-effect of the sexual intercourse. In the other episode the nymph's death comes as a substitute for her sexual frustration, a substitute of sexual climax. Yet, the pain comes from piercing as in the previous case. Some alien agent

> Pierced and struck deep in horrid chambering,
> And plowed a bloody furrow with its dart,
> And dug a long red road, and cleft with winged death her heart. (520-2)
>
> [...] Sobbing for incomplete virginity,
> And raptures unenjoyed, and pleasures dead,
> And all the pain of things unsatisfied,
> And the bright drops of crimson youth crept down her throbbing side. (525-8)

The grand melodramatic death of the nymph has not tragic depth; it is a Wildean artificial gesture of the same kind as Captain Narraboth theatrically takes his own life when disregarded by Salomé. The nymph's "incomplete virginity" is symbolically consummated by her mortal "pain". As an early icon of the Decadent female, the "long red road" and "the bright drops of crimson youth" that run down her body could be, contradictorily, her menstrual blood which signifies both death as her ultimate orgasm and the sterility of a perpetuated virginal state.

The two single lines that most fully explore the link of death to sex occur at the moment of the nymph's expiration: "Ah! pitiful it was to hear her moan, / And very pitiful to see her die" (529-30). The verb "moan" suggests both the experience of pain and sexual orgasm. The poem's final stanza universalizes the convergence of orgasm and death when in Hades Charmides's and the nymph's "lips could meet–"

> In that wild throb when all existences
> Seem narrowed to one single ecstasy
> Which dies through its own sweetness and the stress
> Of too much pleasure (649-52)

This is a development of the body's cosmic recycling in "Panthea" with Wilde taking the merging of death and sex to infinity. Death is the result of intense pleasure; the

"ecstasy" dying "through its own sweetness" indicates the self-destructive force of eroticizing the text. The condition of absolute sensual imagery can never be achieved because it *dies* at the moment of its ecstasy; the condition of textuality defers it perpetually. The reading of the first forty-eight lines of the poem, which is a *tour de force* of a monstrous elongated enjambment, is a simulation of the breathlessness which precedes orgasm and death. The completion of desire is postponed until the full-stop which is suggestive of death. Wilde anatomizes eroticism to convey the sensory intensity of his poetry; his Aestheticism lingers into Decadent terrain because he activates and engages with the senses rather than being a mere observer of beauty.

3.3 The Jewelled Image: The Impressionist Group and *The Sphinx*

The Impressionist pieces are largely independent of echoes,[187] where the city has replaced Arcadia. Though for Wilde city poetry is not of the gutter; it constitutes itself out of materials for new colour compositions. It is inspired by French Impressionism and especially Whistler whom Wilde venerated at the period of *Poems*. Wilde's musical titles include "In the Gold Room: A Harmony" and "Symphony in Yellow", recalling the painter's synaesthetic titles such as *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room* (1861) and *Symphony in White No. 1 (The White Girl)* (1862) respectively. Along with Whistler Wilde echoes also William Ernest Henley's "London Voluntaries" (1892-3) in which, with musical subtitles like "*Andante con moto*",[188] the city is like a painting that runs in musical rhythms. The first stanza of "Impression du Matin" is a reproduction of Whistler's *Nocturne: Blue and Gold – Old Battersea Bridge* (c.1872-5) in words:

> The Thames nocturne of blue and gold
> Changed to a Harmony in grey:
> A barge with ochre-coloured hay
> Dropt from the wharf: and chill and cold (1-4)

Wilde stresses synaesthetically soft tonalities of colour in terms of music to depict the London sunrise. In doing so, he adheres to Whistler's Aesthetic theory in his "Ten

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[187] See Beckson and Fong, "Wilde as Poet," 65.
[188] See W. H. Henley, *The Song of the Sword and Other Verses* (London: Nutt, 1892).

O'Clock Lecture" (1885) that artistic subjects serve only as vehicles to accommodate arrangement of colour. The artist looks at the flower not as a "botanist" would but as "choice selection of brilliant tones [...]".[189] This idea entails the appropriation of the sense of colour as a primary textual material, opening new possibilities of the Decadent image as linguistic catachresis, the expression of meaning through sense. For example Wilde's composition is smoothed out by a stratum of luminous haziness of "yellow fog" (5), hinting at secret sins harboured by nocturnal London. This is embodied in the last stanza as the lonely "pale woman" who "Loitered beneath the gas lamps' flare, / With lips of flame and heart of stone" (13, 15-6).

Wilde's Impressionism derives from Gautier and especially the latter's *Emaux et Camées* (1852) and its celebration of colour as fixed and gemlike. In Chapter 14 of *Dorian Gray* Wilde embeds stanzas from Gautier's "La Carnaval: II. Sur les Lagunes", commenting that "the mere lines looked to him like those straight lines of turquoise-blue that follow one as one pushes out to the Lido" (*DG*, 305). Not only are words turned into colour, but this colour has a lapidary nature:

> 'Sur une gamme chromatique,
> Le sein de perles ruisselant,
> La Vénus de l'Adriatique
> Sort de l'eau son corps rose et blanc
>
> 'Les domes, sur l'azur des ondes
> Suivant la phrase au pur contour,
> S'enflent comme des gorges rondes
> Que soulève un soupir d'amour. (*DG*, 304)

Colour ("gamme chromatique") is conveyed in a stationary, gemlike fashion with Venus's breasts as pearls and the azure waves as a dome with Gautier promoting the phrase of pure contour ("pur contour"). In "Symphony in Yellow" the three stanzas describing the Whistlerian London are again scenic variants of the colour yellow. They are expanded similes whose poetic character serves as an enhancement of a monochrome in yellow. The last two lines read: "And at my feet the pale green Thames / Lies like a rod of rippled jade" (11-2). Epifanio sees these impressions as "symbolic representations"[190] but the streaking of yellow with green reduces the city to the heraldic impression typical of Decadence (yellow and green are the customary

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[189] James NcNeill Whistler, *Mr. Whistler's "Ten O'Clock"* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1888), 15. See also "Impression. Le Reveillon", esp. the first stanza.
[190] Epifanio, *Art of Oscar Wilde*, 36.

colours of the movement). The depiction of the cityscape by means of gemstone imagery, an adherence to Gautier's poetics, suggests that the fluidity of Wilde's Impressionism is undercut by a crystallized, unnatural artifice, an elegant japonism that further defies the conventional role of poetic language. Thesing observes that "by linking London with exotic Oriental gems, the poet makes the more disquieting aspects of the city magically disappear."[191] This process is repeated in "La Dame Jaune" ("The Yellow Lady"), a poem whose only difference from "Symphony in Yellow" is that the latter employs the city to describe yellow, whereas the former employs the female body for the same purpose. The poem is about the stripping of a girl but the process of tackling her accessories and hair is the quintessence of perverting the poetic subject and method in the service of a single colour in a Whistlerian manner. The "curious amber charms", the "jonquil-coloured gown", the "lemon-satin stays", the "candle's rays", and her hair which is "like yellow foam", "a mass / Of honey" and "Gold thread within a Venice glass" are diverse objects grouped together because they are variants of yellow. The unusual combinations of phrases signal a transcending of Impressionism and a realization of Decadent artifice. The collection of images as objects that share the same colour recalls *À Rebours*, the chapter in which Des Esseintes organizes a luscious supper whose gustatory activity is enhanced by the fact that the collected foods, tableware, and surroundings are all black.[192]

The compositional layout of colours is perfectly entwined with sinful sexuality in "In the Gold Room: A Harmony". The poem is made of three stanzas; each stanza elaborates on a colour in the sequence white, yellow, and red, corresponding to a girl's skin, hair, and lips.[193] Each stanza is embellished with similes existing only as rephrasing of one dominant colour, strung together with the prepositions "like" and "or." Hence, whiteness is constructed by "ivory keys", "silver gleam", pale leaves", "the sea's "foam", and the waves' "teeth" (1-6). The sense of yellow or gold of the second stanza is given by the "gold hair", "marigold", "sun-flower" and "sun" (7-12) and the final stanza is a flood of redness: "red lips," "ruby fire," "crimson lips," "bleeding," "pomegranate," "lotus" and "blood of the rose-red wine" (13-8). Objects

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[191] William B. Thesing, *London Muse: Victorian Poetic Responses to the City* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1982), 172. Thesing consistently argues that Wilde's city poetry is glossed over by this unreality. See 169-73.
[192] Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 27.
[193] See also Anne Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde* (London: Longman, 1998), 79-80.

and similes are the primal ingredients and the colour is the product, and not the other way round. The decorativeness that distinguishes Wilde's long pieces in *Poems* gives way here to an excess of colour variants. Interestingly, the poem is a more compressed version of Salomé's over-elaborate, sectional description of Jokanaan: his white body, black hair, and red mouth.[194] In the play, the inside-out colour composition of the lyrics falls automatically in a context of Decadence. According to Symons's "Decadent Movement" Henley is the exponent of the movement in England. His "London Voluntaries" prioritize synaesthetic impression and its Byzantine goldenness is evoked by Wilde's yellowness in his city lyrics. The poem's colours generate deviant sexualities since a kiss takes place under "the singing lamp of a crimson shrine" (15).[195]

Wilde's imaginative catachresis goes so far as to capture the barrenness of nature by artificializing it as if it was an exhibited tableau of stationary beauty, as in "Impressions. I. Le Jardin" and "II. La Mer". In the first part "The lily's withered chalice falls / Around its rod of dusty gold" (1-2) and "The roses lie upon the grass / Like little shreds of crimson silk" (11-2). This "impression" of decay is proto-Surrealist, and Parnassian as it coagulates in "rod" of "gold" and "shreds" of "silk". Wilde's poetical sketches, unlike the Impressionist purism of Verlaine or Symons, nod to Henley who amalgamates Gautierian gem-like clearness and Verlainian diffusion. In the pair of poems "Fantaisies Décoratives" Wilde weaves a tapestry in which action or setting is unimportant and what matters is look of texture. In particular, in "I. Le Panneau" the childish action of the "little ivory girl" (2, 31) is of Parnassian hardness; the poem's Impressionism transforms into a frozen "panel" of jewelled nature, like an arabesque by Debussy who also influenced Wilde. For instance the girl is "pulling the leaves of pink and pearl / With pale green nails of polished jade" (3-4). The shuffled repetition of the first and last stanzas along with the *abba* rhyme scheme creates an arabesque circularity.[196] In "II. Les Ballons", the poem's subject, the balloons, are artificial articles by definition. Through the way

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[194] Wilde, *Works*, 559.
[195] Varty also observes that "a kiss" turns "into something exotically dangerous and exquisitely threatening. Stylistic aestheticism tilts into moral decadence." Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, 80.
[196] Referring to "Impression: Le Reveillon" Anne Varty states that "the rhyme scheme, a b b a, compounds the sense that artifice can check flight: the two adjacently rhyming lines hurry the centre of each stanza along, but the last rhyme of the stanza sends us back to the start and seems to block the progress of the subject." Varty, *A Preface to Oscar Wilde*, 82.

their movement is registered, the poem transforms into a frozen arabesque. Against "turquoise skies" the balloons "Float like strange transparent pearls" (1, 7), or

> Like thin globes of amethyst,
> Wandering opals keeping tryst
> With the rubies of the lime. (14-6)

The precious stones are gathered and jammed in irrational, or rather overtly fantastic, syntax. Wilde disbands language and coherence of poetic thought to favour a composition as a collection of words-jewels by way of adjacency or concurrence. These hard components of the poem clash sexually, in a "tryst", and with their rhythm they prefigure the sterile linguistic artifice of the *Sphinx*.

The piece called "Remorse (A Study in Saffron)" is a lover's praise; her "beautiful fierce chastity!" which is coupled with a "languid listless air" (12, 7) renders her another variant of the lustful virgin like Salomé and the dryad in "Charmides". The artifice of gemstone imagery applied to the female body is a commentary on her sterile, aesthetisized sexuality:

> I love your topaz-coloured eyes
> That light with blame these midnight streets;
> I love your body when it lies
> Like amber on the silken sheets. (1-4)

This reads almost like a stanza from Symons's *London Nights*. Here Wilde yokes the unrealities of gems and of the alienated domesticity of the city. Yet, whilst Symons's obsession is with the female flesh in the city, Wilde's obsession lies with the apparatus of artifice itself. Symons's lyric "Hands" whose prosody is identical with Wilde's lyric, reads:

> Dear soft white little morbid hands,
> Mine all one night, with what delight
> Shall I recall in other lands,
> Dear hands, that you were mine one night!

The obsessive focus on the hands renders them a fetish. Symons recalls the ephemeral moment of pleasure in a staccato-like rhythm and diction which contributes towards disuniting and isolating the female body part. However Wilde loves the woman's body only *when* it looks "like amber on the silken sheets". He too fetishizes the body,

not as the object of desire as with Symons, but as the conveyer of the artificial jewelled image. In both poets flesh is treated artificially: in Symons by the act of fragmenting and interacting with it, in Wilde by morphing it into or layering it with decoration.

Wilde has altogether diffused the flamboyance of gemstone imagery in "The Harlot's House", a poem of ghastly subject matter fashioned out of the tradition of the medieval *danse macabre*, Baudelaire, Symons in his "La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge" and particularly the playful morbidity of Maurice Rollinat in his poem "Mademoiselle Skelette" from *Les Névroses* (1883).[197] Tackling the favoured Decadent theme of metropolitan prostitution, Wilde has replaced visuality with abstract phrases, the inertia of decorativeness with movement and sound. Exploiting the dance motif as suggesting the automation of sex he produces a state of barrenness, enhanced by the waltzing circularity of the three-line stanzas. Wilde parades a strain of expressions that reduce sexuality to a deathlike repetitive movement, redundant and tautological. The figures in the harlot's house are "strange mechanical grotesques / Making fantastic arabesques," (7-8) "ghostly dancers," "wire-pulled automatons / Slim silhouetted skeletons" (10, 13-4) and "Sometimes a clock-work puppet pressed / A phantom lover to her breast" (19-20) or

> Sometimes a horrible Marionette
> Came out, and smoked its cigarette
> Upon the steps like a live thing. (22-4)

This hyperbolic diction of grotesquery forms an imagery of Decadence through anti-pictorial terms. The dancers are cadaverous, worn out of their flesh, "ghostly", just like the style in which they are described. They are locked in a vacuum of sex; they possess *traces* of flesh instead of flesh itself. They do not strike the senses but the nerves. Hence, against the intensely visual poetry of *Poems*, the phraseology describing the dancers is airy, anti-visual and indicative of a puppet-like routine. Nevertheless, the poem is a site where these epithets are collected in the manner of decoration as solid objects. The line "'The dead are dancing with the dead" (26) is flat and circular, indicative of the sterility of the figures' action mediated via the brainstorming of the hyperbolic adjectival compounds.

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[197] For an interesting discussion of the making of "The Harlot's House" see J. D. Thomas, "The Composition of Wilde's 'The Harlot's House'," *Modern Language Notes* 65.7 (1950), 485-8.

This is a metropolitan poem that expresses the nocturnal activity of the "moonlit street" (2). In the last stanza "the dawn" which "crept like a frightened girl" (36) constitutes an exodus from a frenzied hallucination. This line does not point to an "obvious morality" and a failure to hold on to *l'art pour l'art* as Fong and Beckson assert.[198] Wilde contrasts the morbidity of the metropolitan underworld with the innocence of daylight insinuating the invading faculties of the Decadent image as the Other, a version of the threatening orientalism of *The Sphinx*. This Other is the dehumanizing industrialism to which Wilde maintains an ambivalent attitude. Like the Decadents at large, Wilde is both fascinated and revolted by industrialism and he demonstrates this by turning the visuality of his image inside-out. Baudelaire and other artists had an ambivalent attitude towards modernity and industrialism. They mourned the loss of the uniqueness of art and pastoral pleasures but at the same time they were fascinated by the possibilities of artifice in technology.

In *The Sphinx*, the Decadent image achieves its fullest and most idiosyncratic manifestation.[199] The jewelled style reaches its culmination in the imagery of exotic artifice, perfectly acknowledging Gautier's dictum "l'art pour l'art": The poem is a celebration of the sheer materiality of the word, the pure signifier. Its content is incongruous and nonsensical;[200] it works only on a stylistic level. Here, the magnitude of the Decadent image depends on a jewelled orientalism where the sexually voracious Sphinx clashes with the contrived surroundings. By collecting and amassing curious and outlandish word-objects in a rococo, oriental manner, the poem like a painting by Gustave Moreau weaves together the impeccable artifice of the Sphinx and the eternal, chameleonic *femme fatale*, as Mario Praz demonstrates.[201]

The poem is a collage of mythic traditions and influences but the keynote is the cult of Egyptomania.[202] The fascination with Egypt seems appropriate because it is characterized by the grand mysticism of a long and ancient tradition: Wilde's vision

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[198] See also Beckson and Fong, "Wilde as Poet," 66.
[199] See discussion of the poem in Reed, *DS*, 107-9.
[200] The poem is ridden by moral contradictions: "Only one God has ever died. / Only one God has let his side be wounded by a soldier's spear." (129-30) and "Or if you are grown sick of dead divinities" (140).
[201] Praz enumerates all the different embodiments of the Sphinx, simultaneously identifying the literary style: a cat from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Swinburne's *Cleopatra*, and *Dolores*, Pater's Gioconda, and Poe's *The Raven*. Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, 256-8.
[202] For a minute exploration of the sources that comprise *The Sphinx*, in short, works by Baudelaire, Rossetti, Gautier, and Flaubert, see Isobel Murray, "Some Problems of Editing Wilde's Poem *The Sphinx*," *The Durham University Journal* 73 (1990), 73-9. See also Philippe Julian, *Oscar Wilde*, trans. Violet Wyndham (London: Constable, 1969), 250-2.

has a tendency to mythologize, monumentalize, and universalize, unlike the intense subjectivities of personal, ephemeral experience found in Symons, Dowson, or John Gray. Wilde favours the single word at the expense of content, exemplifying the obsession with the "detail":

> But you can read the Hieroglyphs on the great sandstone obelisks,
> And you have talked with Basilisks, and you have looked on Hippogriffs. (19-20)
>
> And did you mark the Cyprian kiss white Adon on his catafalque?
> And did you follow Amenalk, the God of Heliopolis? (25-6)
>
> And the great torpid Crocodile within the tank shed slimy tears,
> And tare the jewels from his ears and staggered back into the Nile, (41-2)

The use of obsolete words is the same as in his intertextual pieces of *Poems*; he borrows from the Gautierian dictionary in the same manner he borrows from the Romantic tradition.[203] The diction is stylized; Egyptian words such as "obelisks", "Basilisks", "catafalque" and "Amenalk" among a plethora of others produce a self-referential, jewelled texture because their meanings are obscure or non-existent. With their esoteric faculties the words themselves become hieroglyphs. Their otherworldliness renders the poem a site of artifice as a complete take-over by the colonial *other*. Furthermore, the unique versification with the use of chiasmus *(ab)(ba)* in couplets of eight stresses contributes to the unfolding and accumulation of the images like a slow, baroque tapestry. In exhibiting its fantastic material in this manner, the poem moves like a narcotic-induced trip. Indeed, this hypnotic, incantatory rhythm in which extraordinary Egyptian images parade is like an opium experience by De Quincey:

> I came suddenly upon Isis and Osiris: I had done a deed, they said, which the ibis and the crocodile trembled at. I was buried, for a thousand years, in stone coffins, with mummies and sphinxes, in narrow chambers at the heart of eternal pyramids. I was kissed, with cancerous kisses, by crocodiles; and laid, confounded with all unutterable slimy things, amongst reeds and Nilotic mud.[204]

The way in which this passage compares with *The Sphinx* sheds light on Wilde's Decadent style as the artifice of the exotic image. De Quincey's dream is the

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[203] In the context of Gautier's *Emaux et Camées* Wilde reproduces this tissue of Egyptian imageries in Chapter 14 of *Dorian Gray* (*DG*, 305).
[204] Thomas De Quincey, *Confesions of an English Opium-Eater and Other Writings*, ed. Barry Milligan (London: Penguin, 2003), 82.

transcendental projection of consciousness; the Romantic concept of the acute and infinite subjectivity of the self. Egyptian imagery is a tool for the overreaching of the imagination, marked by the subjective "I". The same imageries for Wilde are handled in a way that flaunts the words as collected, material curiosities. Wilde writes that "the various spiritual forms of the imagination have a natural affinity with certain sensuous forms of art" (ERA, 20). The acute and assertive sentences of De Quincey become layers of theatricality in Wilde's poem with the use of incantatory devices throughout denoting invitation ("Come forth"), question ("And did you [...]?") and command ("Go", "Away"). For the Romantics oriental imagery manifests the infinite landscapes of the Romantic imagination and the overreaching of the imagination; in the *Sphinx* this imagination is flattened and showcased like a vivid Moreau painting.

Wilde experiments with a Decadent poetics that investigates territories of language formerly unexplored. These territories are projected on the image of the Sphinx itself. Wilde applies Pater's Mona Lisa to the Sphinx, aligning her with the Aesthetes: "And with your curved archaic smile" (86). In this context the Sphinx's countenance succeeds Dorian's indecipherable secret vices. In a cancelled stanza for lines 21-24 the poet asks: "what analysis / Can draw the secret forth which is / Concealed within those caverned orbs?" This also evokes the undressing scene of Athena's statue in "Charmides". Wilde's *femme fatale* is an image of iconic fixity that transcends the flux of time: "Inviolate and immobile she does not rise she does not stir" (3, see also 3-7). The Sphinx exists in a state of timelessness and ancientness. The speaker of the poem, who is a student, ponders: "A thousand weary centuries are thine while I have hardly seen / Some twenty summers cast their green for autumn's gaudy liveries" (17-8). This involves another glance towards Pater's famous Mona Lisa passage in which the sitter is "older than the rocks among which she sits", yet, it is also a model closer to the Egyptian Princess Hermonthis of Gautier's "Le Pied de Momie" ("The Mummy's Foot") (1840).

Arguably then, the Sphinx, who is "so somnolent, so statuesque" (11), is the personification of the crystalline, decorative style of the poem. She is the symbolic product of this style, or in other words the artificial image is promoted into an icon of *kenosis*. The interconnection between her and jewelled language is addressed through her multifarious sexuality: bestiality, zoophilia, lesbianism and necrophilia. By having the poem's speaker ask: "Which was the vessel of your lust?" (46), Wilde fetishizes sexuality giving it a material aspect; the word "vessel" indicates sterility in the form

of hollowness and emptiness or *kenosis*. What follows is a catalogue of strange couplings with a score of monsters in lines 46-52. The arrangement of the monsters' names, "Lizards", "Gryphons", "Hippopotami", "Dragons" and "Chimaera" form a pattern of exotic nomenclature which reduces the names into mere signifiers and Aesthetic objects. There is a strong implication that sexual interaction is transposed from what the names stand for to the stylistic effect they produce upon the process of reading. In two striking instances of these far-fetched unions, lesbianism is added as another curiosity:

> Or had you shameful secret quests and did you harry to your home
> Some Nereid coiled in amber foam with curious rock-crystal breasts? (53-4)
>
> Or did you love [...] Pasht, who had green beryls for her eyes? (65, 66)

The Nereid and Pasht are not just female deities but "vessels", flesh turned into gemstones, "amber", "rock-crystal", and "beryls". The deviant sexuality hinted in the Sphinx's "shameful secret quests" is actually engineered by gems, literally the constituents of a frozen and barren artifice, and the expression *par excellence* of Jean Pierrot's fixed liquidity in his "elemental reverie". Wilde's Sphinx evokes the sterility of Baudelaire's "sphinx antique" which is made out of "lumière et diamants" in his sonnet "Avec ses vêtements ondoyants et nacres".[205] The curious sexual encounters elegantly dramatize the impossibility of language to accommodate them as in the case of exotic necrophilia: "And slink into the vault and make the pyramid your Lúnapar / Till from each black sarcophagus rose up the painted swathed dead?" (62-3). The arcane term "Lúnapar" which means brothel in Latin[206], sexualizes the Egyptian vault but through lexical catachresis the result is grotesque. The Sphinx's union with men and other gods amount to similar effect. For instance the "swarthy Ethiop whose body was of polished jet" (58) or Assur ("the God of the Assyrian" (68)),

> Whose wings, like strange transparent talc, rose high above his hawk-faced head,
> Painted with silver and with red and ribbed with rods of oreichalch? (69-70)

This is the apotheosis of the jewelled style. The body of the god, as of any other being in the poem, is phantasmagorical; it is chiselled and statuesque; the uncommon

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[205] Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 56, 57.
[206] See endnote to Wilde, *Poems*, 308.

minerals "transparent talc" and "rods of oreichalch" are not attached to it but comprise it. Style itself is sexualized; it is not the sexualizing factor. Wilde follows his formula of finessed descriptive writing by combining the sense of colour, the outlandish name and the adjectival gemlike phrase in one or more polished metaphors or similes. His Decadent image emerges not only from the overreaching of poetic language but also from corrupting Englishness as in "oreichalch". In this rarefied diction lexical meaning is obscured and mystified rendering the linguistic unit a solid object whose only function is to be cryptically displayed, an idea purported after publication by *Pall Mall Budget*.[207] Clearly the Sphinx copulates with the poem's artifice rather than with the personae, with the catalogued names and gemstones rather than with what these names and gemstones represent.

Dazzling exhibition intensifies in the middle section of the *Sphinx*, where the jewelled style is constricted on a single figure. The poet focuses his gaze on the jewelled body of the Sphinx's principal lover, the god Ammon who is "mailed in beauty" (78). Ammon is a bundle of decoration; his sexual union with the Sphinx (73-86) is not that between Athena and Charmides, which unfolds with penetrative Keatsian sensuality; it is rather a collation of a series of emotionless fanciful mementos. His body and its surrounding space is a spectacular display of gems and minerals with Wilde literally chiselling the oriental setting out of these ingredients of artifice. For Wilde the overreaching of lyrical language entails enhancement of rhetoric:

> His marble limps made pale the moon and lent the day a larger light.
>
> His long hair was nine cubits' span and coloured like that yellow gem
> Which hidden in their garment's hem the merchants bring from Kurdistan. (88-90)
>
> The seas could not insapphirine the perfect azure of his eyes. (92)

There is a feeling that literary technique, simile, hyperbole and conceit, is used to accommodate the elevation (or reduction) of colour into the artifice of stones and jewels. The ideal beauty of natural colour, "pale", "yellow", "azure" is found in the gem, "marble", "gem [...] from Kurdistan", "insapphirine" respectively. The phrase "seas [...] insapphirine" seems to be modelled upon Shakespeare's "multitudinous

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[207] "How many of us, I wonder, know the nature of 'rods of oreichalch'? – but the phrase serves none the less, but doubtless all the more, to give that sense of mysterious luxury at which Mr. Wilde is aiming." *Pall Mall Budget* (11 June 1894). Beckson, ed., *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage*, 164.

seas incarnadine" (*Macbeth*, II. ii. 61). Wilde pushes language to a jewel-like self-exhibition by employing a modified intertextual neologism. The body of "limbs", "hair" and "eyes" is aestheticized as dazzling artifice, which nature, the "moon" and the "seas" seek to imitate as tonal inferiors. With the displaced language of Aestheticism Wilde asserts the reversal of imitation and the saturation of colours not as pure impressions, but as concrete objects, constituents of the surface of embellishment.

Wilde employs effectively the poetics of accumulation to *reveal* an image which encapsulates Decadence as materialist acquisitiveness, as artificial beauty which is stiff, distant and frozen as the jewels themselves:

> On pearl and porphyry pedestalled he was too bright to look upon:
> For on his ivory breast there shone the wondrous ocean-emerald,
>
> That mystic, moonlight jewel which some diver of the Colchian caves
> Had found beneath the blackening waves and carried to the Colchian witch. (95-8)
>
> The merchants brought him steatite from Sidon in their painted ships:
> The meanest cup that touched his lips was fashioned from a chrysolite. (103-4)

Minerals like "steatite" and "chrysolite" are part of the unique vocabulary Wilde uses as he espouses Gautier's strategy of obsolete words. They are aligned with "beryls", "talc", "oreichalch" and the "cream-blue" "turkis-stone" (turquoise) featured in a cancelled stanza after lines 67-8. On a par with these curiosities is the "ocean-emerald" of Medea ("Colchian witch") which, as well as the gem from Kurdistan (90), upgrades the poem's artifice to higher levels because it is an article of unique identity in which the rare becomes *sui generis*. These flaunted gems are specialized sealed-off signifiers, nonce words (for special occasions) that squeeze poetic language into a skeletal monument. With long and block-like iambic lines, uninterrupted by caesuras, Wilde layers his word-gems in an empty but spectacular array.

Wilde's heightened eclectic artifice in the *Sphinx* follows Huysmans's in Chapter Four of *À Rebours*. At first, Des Esseintes is entranced at the sight of precious stones such as diamonds and amethysts but shortly after he is wearied of their familiarity, he seeks more unconventional ones: "They were all too civilized, too familiar. Instead he turned his attention to more startling and unusual gems."[208] Des Esseintes composes a bouquet of flowers out of gems: "the leaves were set with gems

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[208] Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 55.

of a strong and definite green – asparagus-green chrysoberyls, leek-green peridots, olive green olivines – and these sprang from twigs of almandine and uvarovite of a purplish red [...]".[209] The figure of Ammon is composed out of strange minerals in the same manner a bouquet of flowers in *À Rebours* is. This excess is the Parnassian version of Impressionism. Like Huysmans before him, he outdoes himself not in overreaching language but artifice itself, by masquerading artifice in the natural, or nonce words in conventional expression. Excess designated by accumulation is found in the hypnotic cadences of *Salomé*: Herod's speech in which he endeavours to divert Salomé from Iokanaan's head with a catalogue of enticing and curious jewels as "chrysolites and beryls, and chrysophrases and rubies," "sardonyx and hyacinth stones, and stones of chalcedony"[210] is a *tour de force* of sheer materiality. Yet, the layers of inexhaustible jewellery possess iciness which is equal to Salomé's masturbatory and sterile attitude towards Iokanaan, an analogy heralding the Sphinx's futile union with the cluster of jewels that constitute Ammon.

The visual splendour of Ammon gives place to a falling movement of decay recalling the dismantling of the jewelled statue in "The Happy Prince". This is the realization of anxiety at the inevitable futility to substitute textuality with the jewelled image. The Sphinx outlasts this jewelled image which proves to be susceptible by the passage of time: "The god is scattered here and there: deep hidden in the windy sand / I saw his giant granite hand still clenched in impotent despair" (115-6). This echo from Shelley's "Ozymandias" has transformed the Romantic poet's political overtones, making it an emblem of the "impotent despair" of overt artifice. The stagnant circularity of artifice, also omnipresent in the poem's chiastic stanzas, is hinted in Ammon's "barren loins" (128). Wilde, as in "Charmides" and *Salomé*, delves once more into fetishist sexuality and by doing so he utters a dramatic, yet ambiguous, outcry about the impossibility of artifice: "Go, seek them where they lie alone and from their broken pieces make / Thy bruisèd bedfellow! And wake mad passions in the senseless stone!" (123-4) Like the sexuality of "Charmides", the Sphinx's sexual activity is self-reflexive and masturbatory; it is a twisted version of the Pygmalion myth. The "fragments" of the Egyptian god are consistent with princess Hermonthis's mummified foot in Gautier's short story "Le Pied de Momie":

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[209] Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 55.
[210] Wilde, *Works*, 572.

The fetishized foot is a fragment-fetish and it becomes a portal through which the narrator's sexual fantasy is realized with the reconstruction of the tantalizing princess and the recreation of an Egyptian spectacle inside his quarters.[211] Ammon's body is a soulless object, a jigsaw of "fragments" (121) and "pieces". The phrase "mad passions in the senseless stone" is a recapitulation of the Wildean tragic pathos in the futile endeavours to eroticize the text. A question concerning a paradox emerges here: does the Sphinx's coital attitude towards Ammon's "fragments" apologetically stress the trappings of futility of excessive artifice or is it a celebration of it? The sexual obsession with the constituents of Ammon's body marks it as a soulless automaton of pure matter that can be reconstructed as the object of desire.

The apex of the excessiveness of style occurs as a manifestation of futile sexuality in the Sphinx's bestial unions with wild animals. Georges Bataille's embroilment of sex and violence pertains again when the image of the Sphinx interacts with a lion:

> Couch by his side upon the grass and set your white teeth in his throat
> And when you hear his dying note lash your long flanks of polished brass (143-4)

and a tiger:

> And toy with him in amorous jests, and when he turns, and snarls, and gnaws,
> O smite him with your jasper claws! and bruise him with your agate breasts! (147-8)

The Sphinx is a *vagina dentata* whose vampiric, voracious sexuality is expressed with a series of sharp verbs: "lash", "smite" and "bruise". She is the icon which embodies the poem's artificial style with her body; like Ammon's, her body is made out of jewels and inorganic matter, "polished brass", "jasper" and "agate". In the coital moment, her sterile, hard and icy body clashes violently with the tiger's organic body. The sharp violence coming from the collision of jewels expresses the poem's climactic discharge and backlash from the endless piling-up of artifice and decoration. The eroticization of the text turns out to appear a failure manifested in grotesque terms. The Sphinx's deadliness accounts for the impossibility of converting the text into matter and sex and the hazards of overindulgence and excess; it is not exactly

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[211] Patricia Roseberry, ed. and trans., *Tales of the Fantastic*, Broadwater House Poets in Prose Series ([London]: Broadwater, 2000), 99-118.

balanced with the jewelled style as Epifanio argues.[212] The tiger symbolizes power and dominance yet it is unable to defeat the "inviolate" (3) Sphinx; the stratum of artifice is impenetrable.

Possessing the Paterian ambiguities of Mona Lisa, the Sphinx is both "beautiful and silent" (2) and "exquisite grotesque! half woman and half animal!" (12). Picking on this line, Bram Dijkstra portrays her as the Victorian mother figure who turns out to be feral.[213] She is a creature that constantly eludes the attribution of stereotypes: Wilde's fascination with her is the fusion of beauty and monstrosity, her "somnolent magnificence" (150) and her "horrible and heavy breath" (151). The poem is a hallucination turned nightmare with the Sphinx revealed as a venomous, contaminating force (see 153-5). The morbidity and grotesquery of the Sphinx in the poem's final section is the corollary of excess; the Decadent image shows its own overindulgence and so the Sphinx symbolizes the satiety of style, the superfluity of signifiers and the dramatization of the image in self-collapse. The image of sterile circularity mediated through stanza-scale chiasmus, on the large scale also comes full circle by returning to the speaker: "you wake foul dreams of sensual life" (169) and "Get hence, you loathsome Mystery! Hideous animal, get hence! / You wake in me each bestial sense, you make me what I would not be" (167-8). The Sphinx is a "loathsome Mystery" because via her iconic fixity a score of opaque signifiers in the form of jewels and jewelled vignettes parade; the excess of the decorative style is imprinted on the speaker's reaction who treats the Sphinx's exotic qualities as a threatening invasion. In colonial terms, the Sphinx with her oriental exotics invades and haunts the "student's cell". The "student" is the voice of reason and intellectualism of the Briton with his "cell" the centre of the British Empire. The counterattack of the Sphinx's oriental bestiality is transmitted to the student like a disease.[214] Decadence is paradoxically heightened as a state of tragedy requiring the necessary suppression of pleasure. The readings of the ending are many; Fong's and Beckson's comment that "the rejection of the Sphinx appears to be merely

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[212] Epifanio asserts that "the technical beauty of aesthetic surface controls the violent impulses latent in the subject." Epifanio, *The Art of Oscar Wilde*, 32. However, arguably, the reverse happens: the poem's violent drives manifest the futility and stiffness of its overtly artificial style.

[213] See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: OUP, 1986), 331.

[214] See also Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, 1978 (London: Penguin, 1995), 232-3.

conventional to assure Victorian readers of his moral probity"[215] is only partially valid. It could also be read as Wilde's subtle allegory for the tragic futility of the text's attempt to replace experience. The student's reaction could be the coping with the impossibility of materializing dreams, of converting the text into sex, with the gem language being the most succinct metaphor of this impossibility. It seems that Wilde playfully exhibits a fascination with the jewelled image as both the materialization of the text and its self-destruction.

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[215] Beckson and Fong, "Wilde as Poet," 66.

4. "Full of a Strange, Glittering Beauty": The Aesthetics of Strangeness in Arthur Symons's Criticism

> What have you seen, eyes of strange fire! What have you seen,
> .....
> To fill you with this jewel flame, this frozen glow:
>
> Lionel Johnson, "Quisque Suos Manes" [216]

The Johnsonian "eyes" lend "strange fire" to the image, that is, the deployment of heterodox and novel rhetoric: the "jewel flame" and the "frozen glow" are of a Shelleyan "elemental reverie" at the heart of Symons's system of impressions. Symons's prose, from his literary criticism, to art criticism, to travel writing, is Impressionist.[217] Famously, T. S. Eliot, in his essay "The Perfect Critic" (1920) names Symons the "impressionistic critic".[218] His criticism, as Wilde consistently maintains in *Intentions*, has a generic presence and is ultimately about, not its subject, but the critic himself. Eliot avers that "Mr. Symons' prose is much more like Swinburne's poetry"[219] attributing to it the aspect of morbid, physical lyricism. Pater had already urged Symons in an 1888 letter: the "qualities of your verse are those also of imaginative prose [...] make prose your principal *metier* [*sic*]".[220] Eliot underlines in Symons a synthesis of private experience and the object of criticism:

> For in an artist these suggestions made by a work of art, which are purely personal, become fused with a multitude of other suggestions from multitudinous experience, and result in the production of a new object which is no longer purely personal, because it is a work of art itself.[221]

Symons filters the perception of the object through the lens of his experiences to produce a new art form that directs the attention, from the object to itself and inevitably to Symons with a Paterian effect of mirroring personality. His Decadent

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[216] Lionel Johnson, *Poetical Works of Lionel Johnson*, 1915 (London: Whitefriars, 1926).
[217] For a discussion of Symons and Impressionism see David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry: From the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode*, 1976 (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1977), 52-9.
[218] T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London, Methuen, 1960), 3.
[219] Eliot, *Sacred Wood*, 6. Yeats perceives Pater similarly with the famous rendering of the Mona Lisa passage in free verse. W. B. Yeats, ed., *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1936), 1.
[220] Walter Pater, *Letters of Walter Pater*, ed. Lawrence Evans (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970), 80.
[221] Eliot, *Sacred Wood*, 7.

image involves an amalgam of incompatible elements that produces a distinct morbid artifice.

The tendency to amalgamate is evident in Symons's definition of Decadence as a hybrid of the other schools. He declares in "The Decadent Movement in Literature":

> Taking the word Decadence [...] we find that the terms Impressionism and Symbolism define correctly enough the two main branches of that movement [...] What both seek is not general truth merely, but *la vérité vraie*, the very essence of truth – the truth of appearances to the senses, of the visible world to the senses, of the visible world to the eyes that see it; and the truth of spiritual things to the spiritual vision. (DM, 859)

The sensory truth of Impressionism and the suggestive truth of Symbolism seem to be the two sides of the same coin. The Decadent image comes forth in the act of perceiving with the eyes. The *vérité vraie* which Symons inherits from Pater's essay "Style"[222] fuses both schools and accentuates the correspondence between the senses and the spectacle. It is a compound of differing viewpoints, a symbol and at the same time the artifact for the eyes of the spectator. When Symons says it is "not general truth", he points to the particular, the concrete detail marked by the turn of phrase. In his *vérité vraie* style and subject matter are identified. The highlighting of morbid or atypical features in such authors as Shelley, Verlaine, or Huysmans, reveals his subjective method, as when he remarks about Flaubert that his "rhythm" of prose is "perfectly appropriate to its subject-matter" (*SML*-r, 111).

4.1 "Curiosities of Beauty": Strangeness

> We – are we not formed, as notes of music are,
> For one another, though dissimilar;
> Such difference without discord, as can make
> Those sweetest sounds [...] P. B. Shelley, *Epipsychidion*, 142-5.

The merging of schools and techniques is closely linked with hybrid images of morbid beauties, referred to, by Linda Dowling, as "catachrestical compounds" (*LaD*, 147). This idea is in the centre of the phenomenon of "strangeness". The Decadent

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[222] Pater: "truth there as accuracy, truth here as expression, that finest and most intimate form of truth, the *vraie vérité*" (*App*, 32).

image can be an exhibited object (Aestheticism) and a signifier (Symbolism) simultaneously. As a result, it is a fusion of antithetical concepts such as form and content, flux and immobility. With his materialist attitude, Symons transcends the morals of what is considered sane art in an attempt to isolate himself from the conventional and establish a new voice. Symons the critic reproduces the morbid beauty of the works for which he is the reader by consciously offsetting irreconcilable elements. He implicitly appropriates his Decadent beliefs into his critical discussion by utilizing Decadent language in order to portray it. In the "Decadent Movement" he characterizes Decadence as a "beautiful and interesting disease" (DM, 859). The word "beautiful" and the word "disease" are wedded together to produce a new artistic formula. The aestheticized "disease" consolidates into the "beautiful disease", an essentially subjective phrase which becomes the register of the self. In Symons's textual discourse the appreciating Aesthete transforms into the involved Decadent.

The "beautiful disease" is the quintessence of "strangeness" and a redefinition of beauty. Symons traces it in his reading of Romanticism. He focuses on "that imaginative atmosphere which is the very breath of poetry, and adds strangeness to beauty" (*RM*, 16). His argument and phrasing are massively influenced by Pater's "Postscript" to the *Renaissance*. For Pater "the romantic character in art" is the result of "strangeness to beauty" and by this "strangeness" Pater means "curiosity" (*App*, 248). [223] For him "the romantic movement" is "a reawakening to a sense of beauty and strangeness in natural things" (*RM*, 17). Symons's "strangeness" could also descend from Baudelaire's idea of "*l'étrangeté*" in "Notes nouvelles sur E. Poe" (1857): "L'*étrangeté*, qui est le condiment indispensable de toute beauté."[224] The writers and schools filtered through Symons's pen fall into different variations of the concept of strange beauty. The Decadent image finds archetypal analogues in Coleridge. Symons comments on *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1797-9) that it is "full of simple, daily emotion, transported, by an awful power of sight [...] it presents to us the utmost physical and spiritual horror, not only without disgust, but with an alluring beauty" (*RM*, 142). When Symons writes these comments, he could have in mind lines like these:

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[223] Dowling discusses the words "curious" and "strange" as Paterian. See *LaD*, 156-7.
[224] Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Marcel A. Ruff (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 353. "The strangeness, which is the essential flavour of all beauty." My translation.

> Her lips were red, *her* looks were free,
> Her locks were yellow as gold:
> Her skin was as white as leprosy,
> The Night-mare Life-in-death was she,
> Who thicks man's blood with cold. (*Ancient Mariner*, 190-4)[225]

Symons sees Coleridgean "horror" as an amalgam of "disgust" and "beauty". Coleridge describes the female figure called Life-in-death with the colours of womanly attractiveness (or angelic countenance) and adds to her the appalling effects of death. He constructs a vampire, an image that affirms the notion of strange beauty and its dubiety finds its exemplar in *Christabel* (1797, 1800). In *Biographia Literaria* Coleridge sets forth his poetical theory in which incompatible elements are blended through the imagination. The poet

> *fuses* each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination. This power [...] reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness with difference, of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects.[226]

The fusion of discordant elements for the Romantics manifests the workings of the Imagination. Symons acknowledges this in his *Romantic Movement*[227], yet, he rechristens the Romantic Imagination as "strangeness". Coleridge's synthesis of "idea" and "image" of course opens new avenues for exploding rhetoric but it also evolves to the sensuous misreading of the text preoccupying the nineties. Symons argues that in Romanticism "nature was accepted, yet strangeness was sought rather than refused" (*RM*, 20). The essence of strange beauty is that it defies conventionality and Symons demonstrates that as Romanticism progresses into Victorian Decadence, the phenomenon becomes more self-conscious.[228]

Symons finds prototypic analogues of the poetic formula of strangeness and beauty also in Shelley. He is struck that Shelley "should so persistently seek his beauty in such blackness" (*RM*, 272), a conviction that is confirmed in Shelley's "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci" for instance. Symons suggests that in the Shelleyan world a new morality is dictated. Shelley "could conceive of incest without

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[225] In Coleridge, vol. 16 of *The Collected Works*.
[226] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria II*, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works*, 16-7.
[227] See *RM*, 14.
[228] In "Toward a Definition" Ryals argues that "strangeness" comes from Romanticism and in Decadence turns into "grotesqueness" as in *Salome*, a biased position. See 86-7.



repugnance, and so innocently attracted by so many things which, to one more normally sexual, would have indicated perversity" (*RM*, 271).[229] The delirious Beatrice in the *Cenci* (1819) says that "Prodigious mixtures, and confusions strange / Of good and ill; and worse have been conceived" (III.i). The image of incest becomes a transgressor of morals, passing in the sphere of pure aesthetics. In *Epipsychidion*, the incestuous love between brother and sister is idealized and elaborated with imagery of such erotic charge, that it could compare with the *Song of Songs*:

> And from her lips, as from a hyacinth full
> Of honey-dew, a liquid murmur drops,
> Killing the sense with passion; sweet [...] (83-5)

Sensual images such as these are undercut by the theme of unnatural love. The idealization of love covers or integrates the morbid overtones of incest. Symons argues that "'Epipsychidion' celebrates love with an icy ecstasy" (*RM*, 273), another variant of the motto "strangeness in beauty". And Shelley has "a nerve sensitive to light, colour, music, and perfume" (*RM*, 281). These sensory attributes interchange in Shelley's poetry in constant fluidity and restlessness producing Symons's "strange" mixtures at large. Kermode's Dancer is emblematic of this phenomenon; and one has just to look at *The Triumph of Life* (1822) for an example. In an unfolding vision there is a chariot with a procession of dancing souls that "follow in the dance with limbs decayed" (167). Dance here is a metaphor of relentlessly blending diverse elements. It is movement – and particularly here morbid movement – and the pattern of three-line stanzas are actually the three-beat of a waltz of verbal imagery. The figures

> Mix with each other in tempestuous measure
> To savage music...wilder as it grows,
>
> They, tortured by their agonizing pleasure, (141-3)

The "agonizing pleasure" is a phrasal compound which aligns with Symons's formula. With his filtering eye, Symons resumes for Shelley that "horror puts on all the daintiness of beauty, losing none of its own essence" (*RM*, 284). By knitting "horror" with "beauty", Symons echoes the aesthetic allure of gothic horror from Baudelaire's

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[229] In the *Cenci*, Count Cenci with his rich speech about the pursuit of pleasure in the first act of the play could easily be a libertine type of the *fin de siècle* era such as Des Esseintes although lacking elegant refinement.

graphic imagery of *Les Fleurs du Mal* to Wilde's aestheticized murder in *Dorian Gray*.

Keatsian imagery is excessive and intoxicating and in this respect pre-Decadent. Symons notes that Keats is "like Baudelaire [...] in his insistence on the physical symptoms of his lovers, the bodily translations of emotion" (*RM*, 305). He is quick to discern the tendency of physicality to overtake the linguistic texture; as he states, Keats "saw words as things" (*RM*, 311). Symons insinuates a morbid attitude in the over-manifestation of materiality: "Meditation brings to him no inner vision, no rupture of the soul; but it seems to germinate upon the page in actual flowers and corn and fruit" (*RM*, 313). The morbidity with which Symons perceives Keats shows itself in the use of the verb "germinate," a word which along with "flowers" forms an incompatible pair. It is as if the "flowers" are fungi instead, as if they have a parasitic existence like aesthetic objects. Symons's metaphor parallels Keats's in *The Eve of St. Agnes* (1819): "Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose, / Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart / Made purple riot [...]" (XVI, 1-3). The flora-text synaesthesia carries the poetic of strangeness to the ambiguity of Porphyro both as cunning seducer and as courteous medieval lover. Symons brings out Keats's uncanny elements of strangeness by attributing to him the aspect of femininity:

> [...] there is another quality, made up out of unearthly nerves and something feminine and twisted in the mind, which is almost precisely what it is now the fashion to call decadent. Keats was more than a decadent. (*RM*, 305)

Suggestively, Symons hints at the morbid mental intensity shared or induced by such female figures as La Belle Dame, Lamia, or Isabella. The deadly aspects of the first, the serpentine transformations of the second, and the necrophilic acts of the third connote what Symons identifies as "decadent". He transmits the notion that femininity pervades the poet's style and has already conformed and established itself as an emblem of combined opposites. The female body is the visual expression of integrated beauty and fatality. Symons's perplexing comment on Keats as *more* than a "decadent" suggests that the feminine perverse ambiguity of poetry accrues in the poet's self.

Romanticism for Symons contains model Decadent instances which he marks out also in his interpretation of Blake. He states in *William Blake* (1907) that Blake "weaves a new creation of worlds and of spirits, monstrous and angelical" (*WB*, 123).

He accentuates the Blakean combination of incompatible ingredients. Indeed, the "monstrous" and "angelical" unite in such works as *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790-3), as the very title implies. This is a work with aphorisms in the style of Wilde; the union of these ill-assorted elements is transmitted in the form of philosophical statement: "Without Contraries is no progression, Attraction and Repulsion [...] Evil is the active springing from Energy [and as The Voice of the Devil says] Energy is Eternal Delight."[230] The "strangeness" of Blake's poetic scenery is best represented in *Songs of Experience* (1794). Symons argues that in Blake's art "pure beauty and pure terror creep and flicker in and out of all his pictures, with a child's innocence" (*WB*, 211). This assertion speaks eloquently of the effect of poems such as "My Pretty Rose Tree". The Rose as the image of the female is fixed as the inflictor of masochistic suffering: "And her thorns were my only delight." The poem "A Poison Tree" epitomizes Blake's dominant composite image, that of Christianity with a tinge of what from a Decadent perspective looks like morbidity. The poisonous and fatal "apple bright" (10) refers both to the prelapsarian state of Adam and Eve and to sensuality. The tree is nursed with "soft deceitful wiles" (8), a phrase which is indicative of the mysterious countenance of Pater's Gioconda. The "bright apple" suggests artificiality; Symons comments that "all natural things are artificial and yet expressive" (*WB*, 214). In this paradoxical statement Symons enhances the bizarreness of Blake's symbolic world. Blake's artifice is impersonal and emphatic. In Blake's painted figures "the faces are wrung into masks or moods" (*WB*, 214). The variation of Decadence traced in Blake is the re-contextualization of his images in his special poetic system. With the example of "animal or vegetable", the latter acquire "consciousness of [their...] own lovely or evil shape" (*WB*, 214). Symons summarizes thus:

> the foundation of Blake's philosophy: that birth into the world, Christ's or ours, is a fall from eternal realities into the material affections of the senses, which are deceptions. (*WB*, 168)

This understanding puts forward two conclusions; first, that there is a fall from abstract states of being to material ones ("senses"), and second, that artifice permeates all matter ("deceptions").

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[230] William Blake, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. David Fuller (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 127, 128.

The formulation of the aesthetic of strangeness becomes more self-conscious in Symons's most influential work, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, which T. S. Eliot terms "an introduction to wholly new feelings" and "a revelation".[231] Patricia Clements calls it "a melodramatic hangover from an indulgent and over-wrought decadence."[232] Symons here subjectifies even the crude, photographic techniques of the Naturalists. Hence, Balzac is not a Naturalist since his work "is humanity seen in a mirror" (*SML*-r, 22); that is, it is distorted through the subjective eye of the artist. In Balzac, "there is something more than nature, a divine excess" (*SML*-r, 22). This is Symons the Decadent taking Naturalism one level further. Discussing *Séraphita* (1835) he avers that it is "a prose poem" (*SML*-r, 19) as it is "full of a strange, glittering beauty" (*SML*-r, 18), referring to the detailed descriptions accompanied by sensual touches. For Symons the overt vividness of the image is a positive sign of Decadence. Ultimately the vivid vision hits back the senses: Gérard de Nerval "has gazed at light till it has blinded him" (*SML*, 32). Acute and over-persistent imagery relates to the artificial spurring of the senses: "over-true sight of things is gained by the artificial stimulation of haschisch" (*SML*, 35). This alludes to the opium addiction of De Quincey and his visions in which the hyper-sensitive senses perceive the "strangeness" of reality.

Symons aestheticizes Nerval's Symbolism. He writes that "it is by symbol alone that the flower can take visible form" (*SML*, 36). He prompts us to look at the sonnet "Artémis" from *Les Chimerès* (1854) where "the jewelled significance of the words are like Mallarmé at his finest" (*SML*, 36). His statements clash in contradiction. The last tercet of "Artémis" reads: "Roses blanches, tombez! vous insultez nos Dieux, / Tombez, fantômes blancs, de votre ciel qui brûle: / —La sainte de l'abîme est plus sainte à mes yeux!"[233] The "Roses blanches" interchange with "fantômes blancs" in a manner where the mismatched symbol and aesthetic unit fuse in uncertainty. In Symons, beauty comes down to the palpability of the image. He notes:

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[231] Eliot, *Sacred Wood*, 5.
[232] Patricia Clements, *Baudelaire and the English Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1985), 190.
[233] "White roses, fall! You insult our gods: / Fall, white phantoms, from your burning skies: / – The saint of the pit is holier in my eyes!" Gérard de Nerval, *The Chimeras*, trans. Peter Jay (London: Anvil, 1984), 24, 25.

> Gérard de Nerval, then, had divined, before all the world, that poetry should be a miracle, not a hymn to beauty, nor the description of beauty, nor beauty's mirror; but beauty itself, the colour, fragrance, and form of the imagined flower, as it blossoms again out of the page. (*SML*, 36)

The flower gains all the Decadent qualities of the image as it becomes a standard emblem of synaesthesia. The fact that "it blossoms [...] out of the page" is consistent with his motif of poetry as floral growth. It dramatizes the peculiar tendency of Decadent language to literally materialize as in the case of Wilde.

The sharply and vividly conveyed image of Naturalism acquires the strangeness of Decadence in the early work of Huysmans. In the revised version of his book, Symons translates a "purple" extract from Huysmans's prose piece "Claudine" from *Le Drageoir à Epices* (1874) with its vibrant image of the carcass of the cow hanging on the hook (see *SML*-r, 236).[234] This is a practice demonstrated by Baudelaire; his carcass poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* exemplify the union of the decaying with the erotic. The "vividly exact picture" (*SML*-r, 236) of the animal's gore is displayed as a colourful painting, turning an ordinary place, such as the meat market, into a dazzling exhibition room. Here, the two incompatible components of the Decadent formula in the appalling picture are lyrically yet violently brought out, composing a splash painting of saturated tints. Huysmans "could describe the inside of a cow hanging in a butcher's shop as beautifully as if it were a casket of jewels" (*SML*, 147),[235] Symons remarks. In Symons's reading Huysmans's style is the "excess of exactitude" (*SML*, 149). The hybridism of strangeness is achieved in a sort of Aesthetic Naturalism. "Claudine" represents not only the beautification of the unordinary and revolting, but also the fusion of Impressionist abstraction and Aesthetic precision ("exactitude") which becomes a major source of paradox in Symons's Decadent image, both in his prose and poetry.

Interestingly, Symons's centrepiece in his analysis of Huysmans, in a work about Symbolism is *À Rebours*, "the quintessence of contemporary Decadence" (*SML*-r, 235).[236] Symbolism and Aestheticism merge: *À Rebours* is a work of "exquisite artificiality" (*SML*-r, 243) but Des Esseintes is "type and symbol" (*SML*-r, 248). Des Esseintes is a collector of objects marked by "strangeness". He selects

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[234] See J.-K. Huysmans, *A Dish of Spices*, trans. Paul Oldfield ([Oxford]: Caryatid, 2005), 34.
[235] In the 1899 edition the chapter is titled "Huysmans as a Symbolist" and in the revised edition "The Later Huysmans". It is the only altered chapter by Symons.
[236] See also G. A. Cevasco, *The Breviary of the Decadence: J.-K. Huysmans's À Rebours and English Literature* (New York: AMS, 2001), 92-107.

books "for the somewhat diseased, or the somewhat artificial beauty" (*SML*-r, 247). The Goncourts' novel appeals to him "in its exquisitely perverse charm" (*SML*-r, 248). This phrasal compound reveals Des Esseintes and Symons's Decadent aesthetic. In the novel incompatible elements form a new and unusual linguistic combination, a breakthrough in artificiality. And in Symons's criticism such a pairing attains the normality of a stock critical comment. His expression of Des Esseintes's artifice is illuminating: "[…] a bouquet of jewels, a concert of flowers, an orchestra of liqueurs, an orchestra of perfumes" (*SML*-r, 249). This is another act of self-projection where Symons reproduces and accentuates the style of *À Rebours* not just as a critic but as a poet. He multiplies the poetics of mixing into intricate textures of synaesthesia; he conveys "strangeness" by imitating the method on which he comments. At any rate, he clearly highlights the "strange" concoctions of the Decadent image:

> […] morbid horrors of vegetation, chosen, not for their beauty, but for their strangeness […] And above all [Des Esseintes…] has his few, carefully chosen pictures, with their diverse notes of strange beauty and strange terror – the two Salomes of Gustave Moreau, the "Religious Persecutions" of Jan Luyken, the opium dreams of Odilon Redon. (*SML*-r, 250)

The passage shows how in Symons's tactic of Impressionist logic the words "strange" and "beauty" are dissociated as well as yoked. Their meaning changes opportunistically to fit the sentence. Des Esseintes's house is a museum of curiosities and this is mirrored in Symons's criticism which is also a museum reproducing and summarizing the literary works under discussion. "Strangeness" then, a term that resists clarity and sharpness, is the natural result of this critical practice.

Moving to *Là-Bas*, Symons points out that the "tableau of the Black Mass" is "so marvelously, so revoltingly described" (*SML*-r, 257). The revolting is at the same time marvelous. Symons puts emphasis on the verbal picture of *Là-Bas*: "words – chosen always for their colour and their vividly expressive quality" (*SML*-r, 260). The tools of the *littérateur* become the tools of the painter. The word in the Decadent context is chosen for its sensory effects. Symons points out that Des Esseintes combines the senses with music and compares this synaesthetic style with Baudelaire's (see *SML*-r , 250). Hence, for Symons, Huysmans's hero is an artist, just as Wilde's Lord Henry is the artist of Dorian's dandiacal lifestyle. This idea offers insight into the critic's total subjectivity, the interactive element of the Decadent image between text and author. Symons highlights in Huysmans "the attraction of

what is perverse in the unusual beauty of art" (*SML*-r, 266). This statement not only fulfils the doctrine of strangeness in beauty but also implicitly shatters the logical structures of abstract thought as the "unusual beauty" suggests the *illogical* workings of the language of the image.

Symons detects the combination of Aestheticism and Symbolism in Mallarmé's poetical theory. In Mallarmé the fusion of these two tropes is achieved by means of "ecstasy": "This ecstasy [...] is a mental transposition of emotion or sensation, veiled with atmosphere and becoming [...] pure beauty" (*SML*, 125). Mallarmé allows Symons to undercut Symbolism with the word-image as an aesthetic unit of poetry.[237] Although Symons refers to the French poet's famous apophthegm "to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create" (*SML*, 132) he says that "words [...] must be employed with an extreme care, in their choice and adjustment, in setting them to reflect and chime upon one another" (*SML*, 130-1). Symons's duplicative criticism exhibits self-reflexivity and elements of self-importance by paraphrasing Mallarmé's famous sentence in "Crise de Vers" that words "pass like a trail of fire over precious stones."[238] Seemingly, the suggestiveness of the symbol stands against the role of the image as a teaser of the senses, insinuated here by the musical term "chime". But this is not a contradiction. Symons illustrates that dimension of the image which evokes the notion of *vérité vraie*; the poetic image as a composite of symbol and aesthesis. He reiterates Mallarmé:

> The word, treated indeed with a kind of "adoration," as he says, is so regarded in a magnificent sense, in which it is apprehended as a living thing, itself the vision rather than the reality. (*SML*, 131)

The "word" has been iconified. The word becomes a "vision", an object to look upon. The term "vision" though has a double meaning. It refers to the eyesight and it has a depth which transcends "reality"; it blends the Symbolist and Aestheticist. It is a "living thing" in the manner of the Kermodian "Tree". It is also a new image whose power goes beyond suggestiveness; it becomes infinite as it returns to itself. It is an object which is reflected infinitely on opposite mirrors. For Symons, this new image is not just the object but its multiple reflections. Symons speaks of "suggestion" (*SML*,

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[237] See *SML*, 130-6. Symons reproduces Mallarmé's poetic theory, endeavouring to define the role of the image.
[238] T. G. West, ed. and trans., *Symbolism: An Anthology* (London: Methuen, 1980), 8.

134) but he also describes Mallarmé as a refiner of pictures: "A new image occurs to him, rarer, subtler than the one he has used" (*SML*, 133). In *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1876) Symons could see a full-fledged theatre of pictorial sensuality, reminiscent of the titillating pastoral pieces of Pierre Louÿs's *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (1894).[239]

In a similar manner to Mallarmé, Verlaine's "physical sight and spiritual vision, by some strange alchemical operation of the brain, were one" (*SML*, 82). The terms "sight" and "vision" signify gazing *at* the image and *through* it respectively. The "strange alchemical operation" is an expression with sexual undertones which implies the unnatural interfusions of the elements that postulate the aesthetic of strangeness as a cognitive process. Symons endorses the materialization of language in Verlaine, the transformation of language into sensory play. Thus words "transform themselves for him into music, colour, and shadow" (*SML*, 90). But it is Symons's own commentary on Verlaine's poetic which posits synaesthesia as the essence of new fusion. Synaesthesia is used cannibalistically to describe itself: "With Verlaine the sense of hearing and the sense of sight are almost interchangeable: he paints with sound, and his line and atmosphere becomes music" (*SML*, 90). No doubt in his focus on synaesthesia Symons has in mind poems like "A Clymène" from *Fêtes Galantes* (1869):

> Puisque ta voix, étrange
> Vision qui dérange
> Et trouble l'horizon
> De ma raison,
>
> Puisque l'arome insigne
> De ta pâleur de cygne,
> Et puisque la candeur
> De ton odeur [...][240]

The richness with which the senses are mixed is here fragmented by the Impressionistic, rapid rhythms of Verlaine, whose impact on Symons's own poetic development was enormous. Verlaine's "étrange vision" equates with that strangeness deriving from the subjectivity of the gaze, Symons's model of strangeness. Symons's

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[239] For Symons's Decadent "reconfiguration" of Symbolist features through Mallarmé see Petra Dierkes-Thrun, "Arthur Symons' Decadent Aesthetics: Stéphane Mallarmé and the Dancer Revisited," *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature*, ed. Paul Fox (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2006), 33-65.

[240] "Your voice, unsettling / And strange vision / Clouding my reason's / Horizon", "Your scent unique / And pale as swans, / The fresh candour / Of your smell [...]" Verlaine, *Poems*, 46-50.

reading is selective; he isolates in Verlaine the elements that are symptomatic in his own prose and especially his poetry. The Symonsian aesthetic evolves to the Yeatsian version of synaesthetic fusion. Yeats writes that when "sound, and colour, and form are in a musical relation [...] they become, as it were, one sound, one colour, one form, and evoke an emotion that is made out of their distinct evocations and yet is one emotion."[241]

In *Charles Baudelaire: A Study* (1920) Symons exhausts the possibilities of subjective criticism; this is the phase where according to Patricia Clements he focuses on Baudelaire's morbidity; he becomes for him "a kind of patron devil".[242] Symons perceives the Baudelairian figures in a Swinburnian manner. He writes that "their bodies are eager and faint with wantonness; they desire fiercer and more exquisite pains" (*CBS*, 4). In typically using an oxymoronic phrasal composite, he arrives at the viewpoint of pain as refined and beautified. Symons inherits this viewpoint from the Romantics; it heavily permeates the strain of Dark Romanticism studied by Praz. At a time when Baudelaire is reappraised through the lens of Modernism, Symons mirrors in him a morbid force. The image surfaces when Symons has perception translated as the gaze of the reader/spectator. He sums up:

> For [Baudelaire and Pater] all works of art, all forms of human life, were as powers and forces producing pleasurable sensations. One can find in them a gem, a wine, a spoken word, a sudden gesture, in anything, indeed, that strikes vividly or fundamentally the senses, that acts instantaneously on one's perceptive passions. (*CBS*, 13)

The key phrase is "perceptive passions". Art and life equally produce pleasures and Decadent art intensifies this phenomenon. The image "which strikes vividly [...] the senses" becomes completely functional when the receptor is tuned to its transmission, when the gaze is adjusted to the reader/spectator's "perceptive passions". Symons as a reader of Baudelaire's rich tapestries activates the visual and sensual force of the image by interacting with it in his criticism. Similarly, Baudelaire states in his sonnet "La Beauté" in *Les Fleurs du Mal* : "De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles : / Mes yeux, mes larges yeux" (13-4).[243] Symons's eyes are "perceptive" and reflect or filter "toutes choses plus belles", an expression which insinuates that morbid

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[241] Yeats, *Essays*, 193.
[242] Clements, *Baudelaire*, 190. See generally 184-217.
[243] "Pure mirrors, which transform to beauty all things – / My eyes, my wide eyes..." Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 39.

things are *seen* as beautiful. Hence, the strangeness of the image stems from the spectator or the reader of art and, in parallel, from the observer, the *auteur* himself, the reader of life, in this case Baudelaire and so Symons. The latter anatomizes not only the work but the poet's imagination. He contends that

> Baudelaire's genius is satanical; he has the vision of Satan. He sees in the past the lusts of the Borgias, the sins and vices of the Renaissance; the rare virtues that flourish like flowers and weeds, in brothels and in garrets. He sees the vanity of the world with finer modern tastes than Solomon; for his imagination is abnormal, and divinely normal. (*CBS*, 29)

The poet "sees", a verb that here resonates with the notion of the "seer". The seer-poet filters aesthetically reality and history through his gaze. With the morbid perspective he becomes a catalyst for the "strange beauty" of arresting and surprising pairs: "vices" and "Renaissance", "virtues"/"flowers" and "brothels"/"garrets", "vanity" is perceived with "finer tastes", "abnormal" and "normal". Baudelaire's poetry becomes the mirror of Symons's artistic anxieties. Baudelaire is the most conspicuous and versatile instance in which the Decadent critic's selective gaze authenticates the morbid composite image.

The way in which Symons's prose illuminates the notion of mixing opposites is a reproduction of his subject and so an index of his personalised readings. Two side-by-side quotations offer further insight: "The body, in the arms of death, the soul, in the arms of the naked body: these are the strangest symbolical images of Life and Death" (*CBS*, 4) and "[...] tribute of cavern verse, in lines of chiselled ivory with rhymes of ringing gold" (*CBS*, 10). The erotic entangling of the "body", the "soul", "Life" and "Death" brings binary opposites together and hence the produced image, as Symons purports, is strange, with the emphasis being on the symbol. In the other instance he weds the linguistic with the tactile producing a Coleridgean complex in which "verse", "lines" and "rhymes" are visualized as a work of sculpture, with the emphasis put on the aesthetic object. The transmutation of the poetic texture into gemstones recalls his leitmotif of the flower which blossoms out of the page as in his discussion of Keats. The immaterial or abstract unites with the sensory to produce a sort of a transcendental image. The first quatrain of "La Beauté" serves as a theoretical paradigm:

> Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre,

> Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour,
> Est fait pour inspirer au poëte un amour
> Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière. (1-4)[244]

The abstract term "beauty" is personified into something solid and visual as "un rêve de pierre", and likewise the impersonal "amour" interacts with the "matière ainsi". The poem is a guide which facilitates Symons the critic-wordsmith to indulge in his own kaleidoscope. Within the same sentences the symbolic and the ornamental mix with a quasi-critical self-consciousness by employing the same pictorial devices they refer to. When Symons says that Baudelaire as a critic in his *Le Salon de 1846* is "essentially aesthetical" and "reveals the mysteries of colour, of form, of design, of technique" (*CBS*, 9-10), he actually comments on his own method.

The third chapter of *Charles Baudelaire: A Study* (*CBS*, 29-40) is the centrepiece of the book and it is an Impressionistic discussion of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The notion of the image as a mixture of "strange beauty" is densely realized in this chapter. Symons's fluid prose serves to comment on the nineties where the work mirrors the artist, or Symons's criticism mirrors Symons, for instance in his discussion of Mallarmé[245]:

> The work, as the man, is subtle, strange, complex, morbid, enigmatical, refined, paradoxical, spiritual, animal. To him a scent means more than a sunset, a perfume more than a flower, the tempting demons more than the unseductive angels. He loves luxury as he loves wine; a picture of Manet's as a woman's fan. (*CBS*, 30-1)

The passage underscores the Decadent's attention to "detail". The string of adjectives, which is characteristic of Symons (see for instance his poem "Hands"), has a hyperbolic and accumulative effect of artifice which showcases the words (details). This is the precondition of strangeness. Baudelaire is "fascinated by sin" and "he sees sin as the Original Sin" (*CBS*, 31). Symons accentuates this clearly: "he finds in horror a kind of attractiveness" (*CBS*, 31). One has only to look at Baudelaire's corpse-erotic poems to verify that the gaze interacts with the image to produce strangeness. In "Une Charogne" the corpse is immediately perceived as a spectacle. The repellent "object" is a sight similar to that of a flower, which the speaker shares

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[244] "I am lovely, o mortals, a stone-fashioned dream, / And my breast, where you bruise yourselves all in your turn, / Is made so that love will be born in the poet – / Eternal, and silent as matter is timeless." Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 39.
[245] See also *SML* 196-7.

with his love. Its use is normalized: "Et le ciel regardait la carcase superbe / comme une fleur s'épanouir" (13-4).[246] Blossoming is combined with decay, life with death, to produce an intense and "strange" poetic vision. In the *Symbolist Movement* Baudelaire "brings every complication of taste, the exasperation of perfumes, the irritant of cruelty, the very odours and colours of corruption" (*SML*, 96). Symons's reflections on Baudelaire constitute a eulogy on Decadent imagery:

> Baudelaire paints vice and degradation [...] where the cult of the corpse is the sensuality of asceticism, or the asceticism of sensuality: the mania of fakirs; material by passion, Christian by perversity. (*CBS*, 31)

He elevates carnality and decay on a religious level, not only by intermixing Christian with carnal elements but, along with Baudelaire, catachrestically normalizing morbidity. By swapping "sensuality" with "asceticism" around the possessive preposition "of", Symons brings the discordant counterparts of strangeness to a totality of free association. In the same book, Symons's gaze reconciles religious and carnal ecstasies when he discusses Villiers de I'Isle Adam commenting that *Contes Cruels* (1883) are "delicate perversities" (*CBS*, 58). Moreover, in the collection's "Les Demoiselles de Bienfilâtre" there is "a faint and sweet perfume as of a perverted odour of sanctity" (*CBS*, 59). The carnal eroticism of smell mingles with that of the religious, solemnized space. The imagery of Catholicism and its mystically versatile characteristic plays out also in Symons's phrasing. Essentially Symons brings out the aesthetics of strangeness by immersing himself in its logic. The result is criticism which works as mirror. Wilde's dialogues espouse artifice by playful detachment whilst Symons's critical prose does the same by fierce and serious immersion.

4.2 "One's Senses Perceive Subtle Impressions"

IN "An Artist in Attitudes: Oscar Wilde" (1901) Symons locates the Decadent poetic of "details" in the fracturing effects of Impressionist painting when he writes that Wilde "made for himself many souls, souls of intricate pattern and elaborate colour, webbed into infinite tiny cells, each the home of a strange perfume, perhaps a

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[246] "And the sky cast an eye on this marvellous meat / As over the flowers in bloom." Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 61.

poison".[247] The "cells" as in a beehive are analogous to the sfumatos and brushstrokes of disorientating works by Monet and Pissarro. In *Confessions: A Study in Pathology* (1930) Symons writes: "the colours enchanted me [...] I had a box of paints, which I splashed about with a kind of concentrated fury [...] I had invented colour on colour – never drawing, always colouring."[248] Towards the end of his life, Symons reaffirms the Impressionist inclinations that had resided in him since childhood. The perceptiveness of the Impressionist would ultimately lead to the subject-matter of the modern city. Clive Scott maintains that the prominence of "colours" "coincides with a turn towards those contemporary subjects which are pretexts of fashionable display."[249] Symons consciously echoes the Impressionists not only in his method but also in the wide use of terminology from painting. His idea of "strangeness" lends to as well as borrows from Impressionism.

In "The Decadent Movement" Symons implicitly stresses an incongruous condition. He says that the poetry of Impressionism "is the poetry of sensation, of evocation; poetry which paints as well as it sings" (DM, 861). The stationary is combined with the fleeting: the Impressionist painting is a static artifact broken down into elemental units, experienced at once; the Impressionist musical piece is made of unpredicted fleeting sound-phrases, thus experienced through time in a Herakleitian manner.[250] Debussy has frequently been labeled a Symbolist and Impressionist composer. His work *Les Images* (1905-7) with subtitles such as "Reflets dans l'Eau" synaesthetically reconciles the suggestion with the impression. With synaesthetic association, in *Plays, Acting and Music* Symons quotes from Verlaine's "Langueur" as the nutshell of Debussy's music.[251] Symons's connective criticism dictates that the abstractness of Debussy's music freezes into a concrete image. In the most quoted passage of his "Decadent Movement" he declares: "To fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly; to be a disembodied voice, and yet the voice of a human soul: that is the ideal of Decadence, and it is what Paul Verlaine has achieved" (DM, 862). Verlaine's *nuance*, the polished impression, is in constant

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[247] Arthur Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse*, 1904 (London: Dent, 1922), 127.
[248] Arthur Symons, *Confessions: A Study in Pathology* (New York: Fountain, 1930), 54.
[249] Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism: 1890 – 1930* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 219. For Impressionism in literature see 218-26.
[250] Dowling illuminates: "The tendency of Decadence, Nietzsche wrote, is ever towards an 'anarchy of atoms.' Pater's prose style never quite yields itself to this last release from the linear. But so often atomic, fractionary, it registers the allure of the Heraclitian flux" (*LaD*, 135).
[251] See Symons, *Plays, Acting and Music*, 136-7.

escape as in music; however, its sensory effects suggest concreteness. Symons's Decadence strives to reconcile the fixed with the fleeting, or aestheticize the "impressions, unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them" (*Ren*, 187), which Pater speaks of in the "Conclusion".[252] As Kermode argues, this Symonsian paradox culminates in Yeats's "dancer" image.

Despite the fact that Impressionism in painting does not share identical features with literature, it provides a strong theoretical background to the nineties Aesthetic theorists and poets. Symons, who was already familiar with Parisian circles, articulated the image via the *impression* or *aesthesis*. He accommodates Decadence when he rejects traditional views of artistic unity by redirecting the focus on the artistic tools instead; the means of the creative process becomes the end. In his "Decadent Movement" he elucidates this idea as

> a style [...] which has brought light and shadow into the colour, which has softened outline in the magic of atmosphere. With them words are not merely colour and sound, they live. That search after "l'image peinte," "l'épithète rare," [... is not] a search after harmony of phrase for its own sake; it is a desperate endeavour to give sensation, to flash the impression of the moment, to preserve the very heat and motion of life. (DM, 860)

The outlined objects melt; their contour dissolves. While Dowling defines Decadence as a textual decomposition, for Symons, language is a device which serves and transcends "sensation". The "image peinte" transforms the linguistic unit into the turn of phrase which, in a Paterian manner, textualizes experience, the "motion of life." These opportunistic textual units amount to the "magic of atmosphere", Symons's Impressionist version of unity. In Pissarro's painting *Dulwich College* (1870), the autumnal landscape gains an artificial, oneiric look due to its decomposition consisting of bright-coloured brushstrokes. The Impressionist process is akin to quantum mechanics: the smaller the scale of particles one observes the more confusing and uncontrollable their movements. Hence, the shift of focus from the unified depicted subject to the elemental ingredients it is made of indicates a fundamentally chaotic process as fixity converts into motion, static imagery in flight.

Symons appropriates the concepts of style, rhythm and structure from the workings of painting. As with the case of Wilde, who appears to see language as a group of concrete, sexually interacting objects, Symons apprehends the textual tissue

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[252] See also Thain, "Poetry," 226-7.

with his eyes. Synaesthesia, the principle of fusion, and "art for art's sake" come into play when in "Walter Pater" he renders the rhythm of *Imaginary Portraits* (1877) in terms of painting:

> The style of "Denys l'Auxerrois" has a subdued heat, a veiled richness of colour, which contrasts curiously with the silver-grey coolness of "A Prince of Court Painters," the chill, more leaden grey of "Sebastian van Storck," though it has a certain affinity, perhaps, with the more variously-tinted canvas of "Duke Carl of Rosenmold."[253]

This is what Symons perceives as the "rhythm of prose".[254] By describing these sections from the *Imaginary Portraits* in terms of colour, he makes an *ad hoc* synaesthetic allusion. In painting, the visual texture, (and so the technique), affects the depicted content. The structural unity of the composition is determined by a configuration of tinctures and shades, determined by the texts Symons discusses. The individual colours of the texts are tuned to function in one colour frequency, forming a Paterian "unity". What Symons isolates is what Lionel Johnson detects as the Decadent style in poetry. For Johnson the difference between Wordsworth, Arnold, and the French poets of Decadence and Symbolism lies in the "deliberate *science*", "*poetical* science": "each word is chosen, not for its own beauty or excellence; but, as a painter chooses his scheme of colour, or the musician his key; just so, do these poets choose, what shall be the dominant colour and tone of their poem."[255] And yet one could trace the Paterian "unity" even to Coleridge's "images" that reduce "multitude to unity, or succession to an instant."[256]

The fractured impression propels Decadence by way of disorientation of the eye. The units of the artwork become ever-shifting in a protean way, leading to countless permutations of the outlook of the whole. This could be the explanation behind Symons's Paterian paradox of motion in fixity. It is also at the core of the neurosis that typifies the poetry of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*. In Symons's autobiographical sketches such as those in the collection *Colour Studies in Paris* (1918), the reader comes across sentences like this, from "Gingerbread Fair at Vincennes": "The dancing pinks and reds whirl on the platforms, flash into the

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[253] Arthur Symons, *Studies in Two Literatures* (London: Smithers, 1897), 175.
[254] Symons, *Studies in Two Literatures*, 175.
[255] Lionel Johnson, "A Note Upon the Practice and Theory of Verse at the Present Time Obtaining in France," *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* 6 (1891), 65.
[256] Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, II. 23.

gaslight, disappear for an instant into a solid shadow, against the light, emerge vividly" (*CSP*, 14). The description of dancers is reduced to mere colour. It is not a body that is "dancing" but "pinks and reds". The word "dancing" also indicates the activity of the wandering and playful eye. Baudelaire understands it as a "riot of details all clamouring for justice with the fury of a mob in love with absolute equality" (see chapter 1). Disorientation means that the writhing textures of the image are the result, not of the spectacle, but the onlooker's perception. The image as the projection of the author's self exists here *par excellence* fulfilling Pater's and Wilde's advocacy of "individualism". Pater contends that the "impressions of the individual mind to which, for each one of us, experience dwindles down, are in perpetual flight" (*Ren*, 188). The "individual" strives to project "experience" but this is elusive, precarious, it cannot be properly registered in the work because the latter is shifting; it is in "flight". This idea is located in concentration in an anonymous short tale titled "Sensations" from *The Dial* (1889-97). The tale is an Impressionist exercise: "The room danced. Each repetition of vivid light gave almost the impression of a blow; the eye, puzzled, seemed to see from the back of the head – flash! flash! then other sensations rushed upon me […]"[257] The neurotic alternation of light and its absence or "flashing" makes the room "dance", looking forward to Symons. The "dancing" image is the dancing eye which does not create a sight but *renders* it. In "Gingerbread Fair at Vincennes" Symons writes:

> Outside the Théâtre Cocherie there is a shifting light which turns a dazzling glitter, moment by moment, across the road; it plunges like a sword into one of the trees opposite, casts a glow as of white fire over the transfigured green of leaves and branches, and then falls off, baffled by the impenetrable leafage. (*CSP*, 14)

This is a metaphor of the Impressionist mechanics of Symons's prose by and large. It anatomizes the properties of light and fixated observation of its behaviour from soft-focus to sharpness as if in a painting. The "dazzling glitter" which shifts "moment by moment" is a perfect reflection of Symons's "dancing" eyes. What he describes is what happens in the textual environment of his prose. The multiple variants of light are the phrases that make up his clauses. Symons's Impressionist play of dancing words can be further clarified by Mallarmé's "Crise de Vers": "words animated by the inequality revealed in their collision with one another; they illuminate one another and

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[257] "Sensations," *The Dial* 1 (1889), 34.

pass like a trail of fire over precious stones".[258] Also Huysmans's style "blazes with colour, and arabesques into a thousand fantastic patterns" (*SML*, 275). Symons consistently traces the shifting and flickering quality of language. His criticism defies edificial logic; it is an unstable and amorphous "arabesque" that mirrors the spectator's shifting consciousness.

When Symons talks about the "magic of atmosphere" in the "Decadent Movement" he refers to the impression which involves the fine-tuning of shade or the Paterian "mood"[259]. Manet's *The River of Argenteuil* (1874) which is permeated by soft, greenish sepia shades that evoke lethargic moods is such an example. In the same way, any poem from *London Nights* could be a decomposed subject of visual units in such an arrangement as to create an impression or "atmosphere". The gaze of the spectator-reader is instrumental in the artistic act of decomposition and the emerging unity of "atmosphere" or "mood". Pater illuminates the process starkly in the "Conclusion": "when reflection" plays upon the objects, "they are dissipated under its influence; the cohesive force seems suspended like some trick of magic; each object is loosed into a group of impressions [...] in the mind of the observer" (*Ren*, 187).[260] Over-contemplation results in the decomposition of the "cohesive force". This phenomenon is achieved through continuous reflection of the observer of the text as a sequence of "details".

With Paterian prose as the role model of "aesthetic criticism", Symons detects the mechanism of "atmosphere" in the paratactic adjacency of words, echoing Mallarmé's "trail of fire over precious stones":

> [...] a quiet which seems to exhale an atmosphere heavy with the odour of tropical flowers, broods over these pages: a subdued light shadows them. The most felicitous touches come we know not whence, 'a breath, a flame, in the doorway, a feather in the wind'; here are the simplest words, but they take colour from each other by the cunning accident of their placing in the sentence 'the subtle spiritual fire kindling from word to word.'[261]

It seems that, contrary to Dowling's linguistic examination of Pater as a euphuistic stylist, the text is not a mere exhibition room but a string of objects (words) where the

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[258] West, ed. *Symbolism*, 8.
[259] See Wolfgang Iser, *Walter Pater: The Aesthetic Moment*, trans. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 40-5.
[260] For Pater and Impressionist criticism see Graham Goulden Hough, *The Last Romantics* (London: Duckworth, [1949]), 157-66.
[261] Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse*, 172.

event of togetherness creates an accumulative dynamic which is "atmosphere". The texture of the image-pattern is that of relativity; it is fleshed out in the act of combination. The "breath", the "flame" and the "feather" as minimal visual units lend and borrow Mallarméan "colour" to and from each other to create a larger and subtler sensory whole. Elsewhere on Pater, Symons notes:

> 'The herb, the wine, the gem,' of the Preface to his *Renaissance* tended more and more to become, under less outward symbols of perfection, the discovery of new faculties and more privileged apprehensions by which the imaginative regeneration of the world would come to pass. (*Memoirs*, 49)

This triplet of items quoted here calls to mind various luxurious collections of comparably simple items, from Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát* of Omar Khayyam.[262] The placing together of the "herb, the wine, and the gem" mixes different sensory aspects such as smell, taste, and sight, by way of Symonsian "atmosphere". The new, synthetic image that emerges is versatile and powerful, pointing to complex and artificial sensations; and the artist who arranges these units assumes the archetypal role of Des Esseintes.[263] The herb/wine/gem recurs as a variant in *Charles Baudelaire*. In referring to Baudelaire and Pater, Symons writes that "one can find in them a gem, a wine, a spoken word, a sudden gesture [...] that strikes vividly [...] the senses" (*CBS*, 13). Not only does Symons recycle and rearrange other authors' visual patterns, he re-blends and resifts his material pushing "atmosphere" to a level of contrivance. When he refers to "that seeming artificiality which comes from using words as if they have never been used before" (*SML*, 131), he points to novelty by rearrangement.[264] Wolfgang Iser says that for Pater "as a configurative arrangement [art] freezes the moment, and with its ever-changing imagery it makes itself felt as a longing for the eternally different".[265] Iser's "eternally different" is the Symonsian "strange".

Artifice by "strangeness" is also achieved through the peculiar angles and viewpoints from which the object is looked at, again something that points to the author's gaze. The Decadent image is shaped by the notion of the impression not only

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[262] It recalls, for instance, the famous line: "A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread – and Thou" (XII, 2). Edward Fitzgerald, trans., *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyam* (London: Macmillan, 1898), 33.
[263] Des Esseintes constructs and perceives his world as clusters of synaesthetically arrayed images and *À Rebours* is an enormous synaesthetic edifice.
[264] Here, however, Symons discusses also Mallarmé's ideas of suggestion and evocation, and the "strange" patterning of word-images is linked with the *fin de siècle* Symbolist School.
[265] Iser, *Aesthetic Moment*, 60.

on the level of texture but also by the manner its theme is communicated. Symons is significantly influenced by the unusual angles in Impressionist painting. One can see, for instance, Degas's *Ballerina and Lady with a Fan* (1885) and notice the fragmentary *mise-en-scene* which frames the ballerina. The spectator becomes part of the painting who gazes voyeuristically at the ballerina from behind the lady's fan. Most notably Walter Sickert's music hall paintings, such as *Old Bedford* (1895), initiate a peculiar and artificial angle of vision, hinting at the kaleidoscopic, obsessive way the image is captured by the artist-spectator. The peculiar point of view relates to the idea of the limitation of vision and the focus on the detail. Richard Le Gallienne asserts that "decadence consists in the euphuistic expression of isolated observations." "Any point of view, seriously taken, which ignores the complete view, approaches decadence."[266]

The Impressionist peculiar angle of vision is on a par with Symons's use of language as it has "never been used before". Symons maintains: "the Impressionist, in literature as in painting, would flash upon you an image of what you have just seen, just as you have seen it" (DM, 859). The subjectivity of the image intensifies as it is defined by the author's gaze which functions as a guide for a similar reading by the reader. The fragmentation of the whole into impressions means that the eye contemplates and focuses on the visual component. Symons comprehends the power of the eye with scientific precision in the Goncourts: "the sensation flashed through the brain, the image on the mental retina." (*SML*-r, 129). For Symons, the Goncourts

> find new, fantastic points of view, they discover secrets in things, curiosities of beauty often acute, distressing in the aspects of quite ordinary places. They see things as an artist of the impressionist kind [...] in just that partial selecting, creative way in which an artist looks at things for the purpose of making a picture.
>
> (*SML*-r, 132)

The commonplace "thing" is rediscovered and transmuted into an "acute" curiosity. The artist with his transfiguring gaze penetrates the images of everyday reality, shedding on them a Symonsian "strange" light: the result is that the "ordinary" modifies into "distressing". The gaze becomes transgressive, pathological, and obsessive. The seeds of this gaze can be traced in Poe and his tale "Berenice" (1835).

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[266] Richard Le Gallienne, "Considerations suggested by Mr. Churton Collins's 'Illustrations of Tennyson'," *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* 7 (1892), 81.

The narrator of the story is the Decadent reader of Berenice's body who morbidly isolates and fetishizes her teeth. The force of his obsession is destructive as he is driven to murder in order to possess the desired objects: The peculiar vision dictates that Berenice's beauty *is* the disembodied teeth.[267] Morbidity stems from showcasing the detail. This is the kind of reduction or omission Symons discerns in the Goncourts' "partial selecting" and reproduces in his poetry.

The idea of selectivity and omission in Symons's Impressionist criticism – which he also promulgates in "Impressionistic Writing"[268] – is entrenched in Pater's Aesthetic theories. Pater's essay "Style" is a forceful credo of the manner in which images are invoked and arranged. Pater contends that beauty of style has to do with precision of expression (*App*, 32-3). In "Style", he puts forth an idea which links the strange angle with the contemplated detail:

> As the painter in his picture, so the artist in his book, aims at the production by honourable artifice of a peculiar atmosphere. "The artist," says Schiller, "may be known rather by what he *omits*"; and in literature, too, the true artist may be best recognised by his tact of omission [...] and the ornamental word, the figure, the accessory form or colour or reference, is rarely content to die to thought precisely at the right moment, but will inevitably linger awhile, stirring a long "brainwave" behind it of perhaps alien associations. (*App*, 15)

The "ornamental word" is transformed and transposed. It is re-contextualized and from the marginality of its definition it becomes centralized. It becomes the ingredient of a formation which suggests "omissions". The "peculiar atmosphere" ultimately generates a "brainwave": a process of deferral of understanding. The "brainwave" connotes a rather esoteric and Aesthetic response by way of resisting apprehension. Of course, Pater's system depends upon "honourable artifice". His Impressionist poetic involves controlled, scientific distance and excessive focus whereas Symons's selectivity of the eye connotes submergence marked by spontaneity.

Symons does not fail to recognize the relationship between the unusual perspectives of the impression with the idea of strange beauty. In "Whistler" (1903) he discusses the painter's "twilight aspects", the shifting vision in fine-tuning the amount of light: "Without 'strangeness in its proportion,' he can no longer see beauty [...] If he paints artificial light, it is to add a new strange beauty to natural objects, as

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[267] Poe, *Complete Works* 2, *Tales* 1, 16-26.
[268] See Arthur Symons, *Dramatis Personæ* (London: Faber & Gwyer, 1925), 343.

night and changing lights really add to them".[269] Symons is sensitive to the effect whereby the manipulation of atmosphere turns ordinariness into "magic". He is a fervent aficionado of the theatre and Whistlerian "strange beauty" with its "artificial light" is a stage effect. Symons's descriptive prose of art, people and places is typified by the artifice of the theatricality of props, as opposed to Wilde's conversational theatricality. The Impressionist critic alters the outlook of his subject by playing upon it the Whistlerian light of strangeness.

The Impressionist method is more intricate in literature than in painting. The sophistication of Symons's synaesthetic criticism in discussing various authors with vocabulary from painting adds depth to the dynamic of words and colour. The process of zooming in on the frozen image transforms it into a morbidly acute spectacle. On discussing Gautier and his *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) he underscores that "truth, in him, comes to us almost literally through the eyesight" (*SML*-r, 102) and "It was above all things the human body whose contours and colours he wished to fix for eternity" (*SML*-r, 99). The body as image is segregated by the gaze and fixated from a flux with its "contours" functioning as the tool of the obsessive focus. His Gautier does not refer exactly to the sharp outline but the latter is informed by the spectator's tendency to regulate the image. The consistency of this claim is verified when he says of Huysmans: "the protagonist of every book is not so much a character as a bundle of impressions and sensations – the vague outline of a single consciousness, his own." (*SML*-r, 260). Here the body is utterly the projection of its author but with a "vague outline", a remnant from Gautier.

Symons wavers between the savoured impression and its movement of suggestion and Pater's Mona Lisa is the exemplar, the unchanging woman who is nonetheless undergoing an endless mythico-visual development. Iser clarifies that "what Pater is searching for in the impression is its basic constituent quality, the 'virtue' that takes it out of the 'permanent flux' and enables it to defy time by freezing the transient into a permanent image."[270] Symons the Impressionist critic practises his theories in the very act of criticizing. In the most spontaneous and fluid passage of *Baudelaire*, he imitates Pater's Mona Lisa by describing the Baudelairean "Woman" (70) under the influence of hashish. Likewise his Decadent image is intertextually

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[269] Arthur Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts* (London: Constable, 1906), 137.
[270] Iser, *Aesthetic Moment*, 37.

multilayered, an impression in suspension which goes for three pages (*CBS*, 70-3). The Baudelairean "Woman" is Mephistophela, Medusa, Messalina, the supreme female Decadent icon. She is "rouged and pale as the dead [and] gives one the idea of that eternal minute which must be hell" (*CBS*, 71). She combines artificial beauty with a macabre body, ever-shifting in Symons's winding prose in a protean manner fixed in the "eternal minute", the Impressionistic momentum caught in "fixed flight". Verlaine takes the Mona Lisa effect into a bizarre point; the following quotation could have been to Symons an epiphany for his own prose style:

> I love [...] this word decadence, all shimmering in purple and gold. It suggests the subtle thoughts of ultimate civilization, a high literary culture, a soul capable of intense pleasures. It throws off bursts of fire and the sparkle of precious stones [...][271]

The image-triggering suggestiveness involves here not a woman, but the word "decadence" itself as a primarily abstract entity. "Decadence" modulates into Impression and Symbol; Verlaine fleshes the term out, concretizes it, layers it with imagery. In a sense, the term "decadence" attains contour; and yet it is "shimmering", recalling the artist's shifting, or "dancing" eye. For Symons Verlaine's poetry is "fluid", "magical", "twilight", of "perfumed shadows", "hushed melodies". "It suggests, it gives impressions, with a subtle avoidance of any too definite or precise effect of line or colour" (*CSP*, 171-2). He implies that Verlaine meshes fluidity and definiteness on the utmost level of subtlety. Kermode argues that Symons "was acutely aware of the Symbolist paradox that art is both concrete and obscure" (*RI*, 129; see also 130). Symons's Impressionistic prose is enhanced by an *un-critical* vagueness which is generated by the relation of these two contradictory elements.

The subjectivity of strangeness is exemplarily represented by the motif of narcotics. As in the rich and intense dream-worlds of Coleridge and De Quincey, opium is a metaphor for the hypersensitive gaze of the artist. Symons touches upon this idea in the manner he comments on Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificiels: Opium et Haschisch* (1860). He remarks:

> One sits, as in a theatre, seeing a drama acted on the stage, where one's senses perceive subtle impressions, but vague, unreal, ghost-like [...] With the

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[271] Quoted (and translated) in William Gaunt, *The Aesthetic Adventure*, 1945 ([London]: Pelican, 1957), 145.

> hallucinations all exterior forms take on singular aspects; are deformed and transformed [...] Even music, heard or unheard, can seem voluptuous and sensual (*CBS*, 67, 68).

Symons, here, with his phraseology *paints* an Impressionistic canvas, in the style of Renoir and Monet. The spectator is also the creator – as for Wilde the critic is also the artist – who reproduces what he perceives through a distorting mirror, with his hallucinatory eyesight filtering reality. The stimulant indicates the artificial amplification of the senses and their merging as it "turns sounds into colours, and colours into sounds" (*CBS*, 67). Hallucination symbolizes synaesthesia permeating the poetic matter. In addition, Symons, in Chapter VI of *Charles Baudelaire* writes his most un-critical prose. In a paroxysmal De Quincey-like monologue (*CBS*, 68-70) he simulates the effects of hashish with the sexual act, reflecting that technicalities of language with which contrived images are engineered have a sexual, and so sensorial, basis. The phenomenon of the sound turning into colour suggests a fluidity of a carnal nature. This complex idea strives to crystallize itself when Symons says about the drug: "To Baudelaire, as to me, it has, and had, the divinity of a sorcerous, a dangerous, an insidious mistress" (*CBS*, 67). Symons clearly aligns himself with the French poet, denoting that his role as a creator is the role of the perceiver. He personifies the drug to a divinized *femme fatale* like Baudelaire's idolized Black Venus.[272] By celebrating the poisonous female in *CBS* 70-73, he acknowledges the fact that the artificial stimulant intensifies the Decadent image as a morbidly sexualized fusion of technique. The "Woman – furious, formidable – one calls Mephistophila" (*CBS*, 70) is the polarized morbid female (*CBS*, 71-2) who embodies a fierce synthesis and is close to the fluidity of the Kermodian Dancer.

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[272] Black Venus was "a mulatto named Jeanne Duval, sometime prostitute, with whom Baudelaire lived on and off for most of his adult life." Introd. to Baudelaire, *Flowers*, xx.

5. "Painted Idols" and "London Footlights": Metropolitan Bodies and Spaces in Symons's *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"[273]

IN their compilation of Aesthetic criticism *Strangeness and Beauty*, Warner and Hough point out that the imagery of the city is the arena where the image, or rather the "impression" in Symons, reaches an outlet.[274] Symons's unique, and complexly formulated Decadent image has left its aftertaste in Modernism as T. S. Eliot's "Prufrock" poem, and even *The Waste Land* testify.[275] Symons, as a promoter of a new literary trend in the Nineties, expressed his Decadent vision in the artificial spaces and decaying structures of the city, and the figures of the demimonde. He was a leading figure of a vogue which, as Richard Le Gallienne notes, was related to the "revival of interest in the town and urban things."[276] The numerous lovers and other figures of his verse are either framed by Decadent city geographies or portrayed in unusual terms of city-artifice.

The significant element of Symons's poetry is that his images are organically composed so that the body and its surrounding space often interact and overlap. Decadence realizes itself in the compounded image of the surrounded body: the lover by the autumnal landscape, the dancer by the music-hall, the prostitute by the cheap hotel room, the stroller by the city lights. The metropolis becomes the central tool to the Decadent imagination;[277] Symons creates a London which, to some extent, echoes Baudelaire's morbid vision of Paris. Nevertheless, Symons's metropolitan vision shapes the poetics of the Decadent image that dominates his poetry.

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[273] T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962*, 1936 (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).
[274] Eric Warner and Graham Hough, eds., *Strangeness and Beauty: An Anthology of Aesthetic Criticism 1840-1910*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), 212.
[275] The connection is widely covered. See Tom Gibbons, "Modernism in Poetry: The Debt to Arthur Symons," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 13 (1973), 52-3. R. K. R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Arnold, 1983), 160, 163. Joseph Bristow, "'Sterile Ecstasies': The Perversity of the Decadent Movement," *The Endings of Epochs*, ed. Laurel Brake, Essays and Studies (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995), 82-3. See also Roger Holdsworth, Introduction, *Selected Writings* by Arthur Symons (Cheshire: Carcanet, 1974), 11-4.
[276] Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (London: Putnam, 1951), 122.
[277] See also Snodgrass, "The Poetry of the 1890s", 328.

5.1 The Metropolis: Impressionism and Fragmentation

In the Preface to *Silhouettes* in 1896 Symons makes a boldly self-conscious choice of imagery. He emblematically chooses the city as the key to his verse:

> [...] *I prefer town to country; and in the town we have to find for ourselves, as best we may, the décor which is the town equivalent of the great natural décor of fields and hills. Here it is that artificiality comes in: and if anyone sees no beauty in the effects of artificial light, in all the variable, most human, and yet most factitious town landscape, I can only pity him, and go my way.* (*CW*. I, 97)

Like the hero of *À Rebours*, Symons naturalizes the artificial landscape, transgressing simultaneously Romanticism and its exaltation of nature. The Symonsian "lamplight" of the city is like the flower in the pasture. Rejection of nature is a general principle of the Decadents. Selwyn Image in his poem "Urbanus Loquitur" from *Poems and Carols* (1894) declares:

> These London pavements, low'ring sky,
> Store secrets, on mine eyes that fall,
> More curious far, than earth or air
> By country paths can make appear.[278]

These "secrets" Selwyn Image talks about, and the "Strange, infinite, allurements [that] lurk, / Along these streets, within the walls / Of *cafés*, shops, and music halls"[279] are the ingredients that comprise the aesthetic of modernity. In this vein Linda Dowling draws attention to Symons's "mode [of...] urban pastoral."[280] Artifice, Impressionism and suggestion are qualities that give depth to the Decadent Image in the metropolitan setting.

Symons's city is radically different from that envisioned in Blake's "London" or, say, Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838). In *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895) Symons departs from the Browningesque dramatic monologues of *Days and*

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[278] R. K. R. Thornton and Ian Small, eds., *Selwyn Image: Poems and Carols, Herbert Horne: Diversi Colores*, facs. ed., Poetry of the 1890s: Decadents, Symbolists, Anti-Decadents (Oxford: Woodstock, 1995), 15.
[279] Image, *Poems and Carols*, 16.
[280] "Some of his poetry achieves a *frisson* of Baudelairean "strangeness" by importing anomalously rural elements into urban settings, as in Wilde's "Symphony in Yellow"." Dowling, *LaD*, 221-2.

Nights (1889) to adopt the form of the short, Impressionistic lyric; he has transposed the focus from the relatively long narrative to the condensed, pictographic city vignette. Symons weaves his Decadent tapestries by a method of reductionism from the narrative and descriptive poem of Romanticism and Pre-Raphaelitism to a distilled whole comprised of a series of mainly Impressionist images conveyed through a "disembodied voice", as Dowling also points out, "because it has no history and no story to tell" (*LaD*, 215). Yet, his aesthetic does not entail *décor* through mere parataxis, as in Wilde and the Aesthetes; Muddiman observes that he catches the "impression by limiting it, never cataloguing it" as in the "school of the eighties".[281] His images connect through synaesthesia, circularity, and repetition that lead to partition and refraction with the setting of the metropolis being the perfect vehicle. Symons follows Pater's idea of the removal of *surplusage* and Verlaine's theory of the techniques of *musiqué* and stylistic distillation and refinement with his "Art Poétique" dictum of "pas la Couleur, rien que la nuance" as he quotes in "The Decadent Movement". Even Dowling, whose reading of Decadent literature's disintegration is linguistic, credits this to Symons as the latter's "primitive poetic syntax is [...] the deep structure underlying his characteristic thematic concerns: artifice, light love, vagrant moods" (*LaD*, 217). Symons's poetic minimalism reaches the senses rather than the intellect.[282] The image overpowers his verse and as Warner and Hough point out Symons is the forerunner of Imagism.[283]

Days and Nights contains samples of the suburban lyric such as "The Opium-smoker" which prefigures what follows in the next two volumes. The poem is a prototypical sonnet about the chaotic fusing of the senses extracted from a "garret," a commonplace metropolitan interior:

> Soft music like a perfume, and sweet light
> Golden with audible odours exquisite,
> .....
> Also I have this garret which I rent,
> This bed of straw, and this that was a chair,
> This worn-out body like a tattered tent,

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[281] Bernard Muddiman, *The Men of the Nineties* (London: Danielson, 1920), 49.
[282] O'Neal argues that the Decadents' "goal – what later came to be known in France as *poésie pure* – was a verbal art that could be apprehended with the same immediacy as non-verbal art." Michael J. O'Neal, "English Decadence and the Concept of Visual Perspective," *Journal of Aesthetics* 23 (1983), 241.
[283] Warner and Hough, ed., *Strangeness*, 212.

The elaborate mixing of the senses expressed in this example of pure synaesthesia[284] is hatched in a cheap, miserable, almost minimalist room in the city. Echoing the dismal city imageries of Baudelaire, Symons stresses that the blurring of the senses leading to heightened sensations is generated from an un-poetical environment such as that of low life. The Decadent introduces new reserves of images with the distortion of vision by agents like opium. In his artificial experience the suburban props are organic emaciated bodies reflecting the speaker's, like the "chair, / This worn-out body". "A Winter Night" is indicative of Symons's universe of the figure surrounded by suburban space. In this sonnet there is a movement of observation from the glassy *visage* of the wet city to the "solitary shadow wandering" in the last line. The anonymous figure is the centre of the city; he is the only moving element in an environment in which

> The night was very still; above, below,
> No sound, no breath, no change in anything [...]

The everlastingness of the surrounding space emphasizes the centrality of the moving figure, which marks the solipsism of the Decadent. Symons builds a crystallized image of the city from the perspective of somebody who is plunged in it and this is configured by the playfulness of light on surfaces:

> White windows glittered each a watchful eye.
> The dim wet pavement lit irregularly [...]

The poet observes from inside following a Baudelairean practice, treating the cityscape the way it is manifested in the preface to *Silhouettes*. The city serves as a medium of artifice, mystical and limbo-like, with an air of chastity which heightens its suggestive morbidity: "The pale moon [...] / Lit half the street." This image, captured by Symons in the manner of Renoir and Monet, is one of magic and ambiguity and consequently the roaming "shadow" is an ambiguous figure, an inherent part of a mystified, artificial environment.

In these two poems Symons prefigures not only the compounded, organic image of the body and its environment but also the combination of movement and

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[284] See John M. Munro, *The Decadent Poetry of the Eighteen-Nineties* (Beirut: The American U of Beirut, 1970), 60-1.

stillness. The line "The night was very still" in "A Winter Night" is linked to the phrase "I pause and yet I flee" featured in "The Opium-smoker". The immobile and the moving apply simultaneously both to the figure and the surrounding, stressing a tension between the fleeting moment and its capture. Of course Kermode develops this to the poignant image of the dancer expressing herself in the music-hall. This is a Symonsian time paradox that features throughout Symons's verse; in "To a Gitana Dancing: Seville" from *Images of Good and Evil* (1899) he writes: "the moments seem / Swift as eternity".

Despite the mixing and mingling of bodies and geographies, *Silhouettes* is methodical and consistent in its pictographic formulae. Strollers and prostitutes roam the impressionist, evening cityscape; in other words, artificially labelled bodies move about in artificial spaces. In his seminal reading of *Les Fleurs du Mal* Walter Benjamin reflects on the term *flâneur* and "the act of strolling".[285] Benjamin remarks that "Baudelaire loved solitude, but he wanted it in a crowd."[286] In "A Prelude to Life" Symons "plunged boldly into what Baudelaire calls 'the bath of the multitude'." He roams "through the crowds in those old and narrow streets, in an ecstasy of delight".[287] The gathering of crowds is an artificial phenomenon achieved in the metropolis. It connotes estrangement and so it implies mechanical interactions of bodies that create endless possibilities of artifice. For Gustave Le Bon, when the individual forms "part of a crowd", "he is no longer himself, but has become an automaton".[288] Symons, being faithful to the modus operandi of "strangeness", creates beauty by utilizing and transforming the industrialized spaces and marginal city figures. He conforms perfectly with the Benjaminian *flâneur* when he proclaims himself "a vagabond, a Wanderer, a Bohemian" (*Memoirs*, 72).

Symons writes: "To stroll through the fair […] is to have a sort of 'Private View'" (*CSP*, 6). The first and third lines of "Quest" read: "I chase a shadow through the night / […] / Out of the dark into the light" (137). The poet is the restless *flâneur-voyeur*, the stroller who pursues the stranger designated by the word "shadow". The

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[285] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973), 53. This is a significant chiefly Marxist approach to Baudelaire's poetry. For a general analysis of the *flâneur* see also Richard D. E. Burton, *The Flaneur and his City: Patterns of Daily Life in Paris 1815 - 1851* (Durham: U of Durham P, 1994), esp. 1.
[286] Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 50.
[287] Arthur Symons, S*piritual Adventures*, 1905 (London: Constable, 1928), 45.
[288] "The Mind of Crowds" (1895). Extract in Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst, eds., *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History, c.1880 – 1900* (Oxford: OUP, 2000), 60.

alternation of dark and light suggests the row of street lamplights. The "shadow" is quintessentially a figure of the city, fashioned impressionistically from the play of street lights; this is also the "solitary shadow wandering" from "A Winter Night" as examined earlier. Symons himself writes of the "fatal transfiguration of the footlights, in which reality and the artificial change places with so fantastic a regularity" (*SML*, 22). The play of shadow/light in city vistas points towards Symons's preoccupation with estrangement and clandestine circumstances. Symons resembles De Quincey, the great city-stroller and solipsist who constantly recollects: "and again I pace the terraces of Oxford-street [...] upon moonlight nights".[289] Symons the Benjaminian model of the city-stroller writes to Katherine Willard (20 May 1891):

> Do you know, I have no interest in what is proper, regular, conventionally virtuous. I am attracted by everything that is unusual, Bohemian, eccentric: I like to go to queer places, to know strange people. And I like contrast, variety. [290]

And in an illuminating passage – part of a discussion on Balzac in the *Symbolist Movement* – he says:

> There is a particular kind of excitement inherent in the very aspect of a modern city, of London or Paris; in the mere sensation of being in its midst, in the sight of all those active and fatigued faces which pass so rapidly; [...] Every step in a great city is a step into an unknown world. A new future is possible at every street corner. I never know, when I go out into one of those crowded streets, but that the whole course of my life may be changed before I return to the house I have quitted.
>
> (*SML*-r, 36-7)

Symons is the metropolitan version of Alice in Wonderland; the explorer who is attracted by the lurking "strange" curiosities of the suburban space and appeal to the eyesight.[291] His favourite activity is jaunting in the city in search of unexpected sensations.

The cityscape is not just the topos that characterizes Symons's poetry of the nineties but the ultimate set of artificial imageries whose spatiality is imprinted on the poetry itself. Benjamin in the chapter entitled "Some motifs in Baudelaire" says about "Le Soleil" from *Les Fleurs du Mal*:

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[289] De Quincey, *Confessions*, 41.
[290] Arthur Symons, *Selected Letters, 1880 – 1935*, eds., Karl Beckson and John Munro (London: Macmillan, 1989), 79.
[291] See also Clement's discussion of Symons, Baudelaire and Benjamin, and the concept of the "eye"/"I". Clements, *Baudelaire*, 196-8.

> The *faubourgs* through which the poet of 'Le Soleil' makes his way are deserted. But the meaning of the hidden configuration [...] probably is this: it is the phantom crowd of the words, the fragments, the beginnings of lines from which the poet, in the deserted streets, wrests the poetic booty. [292]

"Le Soleil" is a symbolic manifestation of a momentous interrelation: the city and the text. Benjamin points out that the cityscape with its topographical variety transforms into a linguistic medium. The poem reads: "Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime, / Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés".[293] Symons takes this radical use of imagery by Baudelaire onto another level. He employs the vast artificial space of the city to introduce a new linguistic medium. He looks at the imagery of the city as a textual environment and the other way round. He remarks on Balzac in the *Symbolist Movement* that "to turn over volume after volume is like wandering through the streets of a great city, at that hour of the night when human activity is at its full" (*SML*-r, 36). The disjointed experiences and fragmented spaces of the city are recreated in prosody. Symons achieves the simulation of imagery and text by employing techniques of metre and rhythm that correspond with the city's fragmentary structure. In "April Midnight" from *Silhouettes* for instance, he writes:

> Side by side through the streets at midnight,
> Roaming together,
> Through the tumultuous night of London,
> In the miraculous April weather.

The "roaming" lovers move "through the streets" in the same way the reader moves through *blocks* of metrical patterns. Another device Symons employs to hint at the interaction of poetic textuality and the city is repetition. In "Quest" the wording reverberates in doublings forming an interlaced pattern of words as "night", "shadow", "light". This gives the impression of interchanging conditions of darkness and light, amounting to the act of strolling of the Symonsian *flâneur* inside the likewise patterned nocturnal cityscape: "I follow, follow: is it she?" The poet "follows" the stranger because such an attitude is dictated by the labyrinthine structure of the city. In both cases, semi-irregular metre and repetition assist the assimilation of city

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[292] Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 120.
[293] "Stumbling on words as over paving stones, / sniffing in corners all the risks of rhyme". Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 168-9.

imagery and text pointing to the fact that the metropolitan vision consists of an organic edifice which can be *read* as well as *seen*, as Baudelaire's "Le Soleil" illustrates. Benjamin discerns in Baudelaire: "The incognito was the law of his poetry. His prosody is comparable to the map of a big city in which it is possible to move about inconspicuously, shielded by blocks of houses, gateways, courtyards".[294] In Symons's verse the same mapping between text and metropolis ensues, yet in his case incognito is also achieved with his Impressionist play of light.

Impressionism must be credited to Symons as the dominant element of his creative faculty and the one which separates him from his French predecessor. Although Benjamin pinpoints the Baudelairian *flâneur* as connected with "the cult of the commodity"[295] in a fully exposed metropolis, Symons's *flâneurie* is limited in the eroticized, hyper-artificial space of the city by night, however populated by *lumpen* elements that imply links with Benjamin's notions of commodity. The Symonsian conurbation is full of sexualized bodies such as actresses, lovers, prostitutes, and cabaret dancers; the night is vital in harbouring interactions between them. Symons does not display brutally his subject-matter in full view like *Les Fleurs du Mal*; he conceals and reveals using the juxtaposition of darkness and streetlights.

The composition in Impressionist painting breaks down into its elemental units facilitating style over content and, in Symons's case, artifice over naturalness. The city with its divisions, streets and blocks is a simulation of an Impressionist canvas which has undergone partition and fragmentation. In this sense, Symons's artificial spaces can be regarded as texts also because he employs imageries that enhance, and lay stress upon, the Decadent style and the artist's method itself. Metropolitanism is deployed as a huge emblematic metaphor of this phenomenon at large.[296] Fragmentation, being also the result of an obsessive and morbid focus on detail, is reinforced by the proximity of the gaze on the subject.[297] The city is additionally fragmented because the *flâneur* or spectator is *inside* the metropolis and part of it; the eyesight is limited, partial, confined by street-walls. Symons's nocturnal metropolis,

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[294] Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 98.
[295] Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 166.
[296] Snodgrass proffers: "The city was also used to crystallize modern instability and danger – its fragmentation, its strangeness, its alienation. "The Poetry of the 1890s," 328.
[297] See Benjamin, *Baudelaire* 145-52. In discussing seeing and the gaze Benjamin argues that the things or figures gazed in the lyric poetry are gazing back; the stare transcends distances.

hence, is a device indicating partial absence of light and so concealing and revealing, an utter control of the gaze.[298]

As already suggested, the Symonsian complex multi-divided space is endorsed by the potentiality of *flâneurie* or roaming suggested in the changes brought about by light and dark in the labyrinthine cityscape. In the poem "City Nights: I. In the Train", the "train" is the body which shapes the lighting of the geography with its own lights, or *eyes*, interacting with the streets:

> Through a blackness broken in twain
> By the sudden finger of streets;
> Lights, red, yellow, and brown,
> From curtain and window-pane,
> The flashing eyes of the streets.

The "blackness" is illuminated by the train and in the last line of the stanza it is ambiguous whether "the flashing eyes" belong to the streets or to the train which roams them. This is indicative of the mutual gazing of the body and its surrounding space, the former being signified, defined or "gazed" by the latter. In his Balzac passage, Symons talks "of those long and endless streets, full of houses, each of which is like the body of a multiform soul, looking out through the eyes of many windows" (*SML*-r, 36). The city is not just a spectacle but a personification of the human body which returns the gaze, suggesting the ricocheting selfhood of the artist-gazer. In the poem the metre, strewn with anapaests, simulates the mechanical movement of the train as well as the word "streets" which echoes every three lines in the two stanzas of the poem. Hence, the image of the train which roves "Out into the night, and down / The dazzling vista of streets!" is the body which assumes its artificiality by its disordered movement in the fragmentary chaos of night urbanity. Symons's "In the Train" encapsulates in minimalist terms the aesthetic process of decaying the whole by fragmentation and automating the body by its surrounding space.

"On the Roads" is another noteworthy poem that subtly divulges the *flâneur* inside the tangled urbanity of the "road" which "curves in mazy coils". The city, like the "dazzling vista" of the "Train", is a sort of maze, chaotic in its details, in which the stroller loses himself. The body is consumed by the artifice of the city:

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[298] The city is poetic because it "depends how you look at it. The dominance of viewpoint over material is characteristically Modernist." G. M. Hyde, "The Poetry of the City," *Modernism 1890-1930*, 338.

I leave the lonely city street,
The awful silence of the crowd;
The rhythm of the roads I beat,

The "street" and the "crowd" reflect the "rhythm" of the *flâneur*, a technical meta-poetic term which indicates that the body is text, and its responses show its artificial temperament. Symons's indulgent romanticizing of the city marks the point of departure from Baudelaire's city vision. A comparison with Baudelaire's style reveals how Symons's Decadent aesthetic is differentiated from that formulated by Baudelaire.[299] "Receueillement", from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, is a classic example of pictorial complexity. The poet addresses sorrow as if it is a lover: "ô ma Douleur". He addresses "Douleur": "Tu réclamais le Soir; il descend; le voici:"[300] This idiosyncratic rhythm with the semi-colons suggests that the descent of "Soir" is anticipated, dramatized. The poet who is amidst "des mortels la multitude vile" desires to escape with his feminized "Sorrow". One cannot fail to notice the reverberation of "ville" and "vile" in the first and second quatrain. In the final tercet,

Le Soleil moribond s'endormir sous une arche,
Et, comme un long linceul traînant à l'Orient,
Entends, ma chère, entends la douce Nuit qui marche.[301]

Employing inconspicuous and unusual prosody, Baudelaire builds up a unique compounded image, in this case of the attraction to sorrow which stems from passion inside the "ville". In doing this, he attempts to create an unconventional aesthetic space in which crude and concentrated emotional realities are projected forth. The interrupted rhythms and caesurae of his verse reveal the sheer force of the transmitted emotion. Symons, on the other hand, utilizes conventional poetic diction and repetition to create fantasy settings inside the city. His prosody is more melodious and lucid. Baudelaire's Decadent vision of the city is a complex emotional response to its realities and gradual poetic elaboration whereas Symons's Decadence aestheticises the city by means of Impressionist fragmentation, applying a layer of dreaminess over

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[299] For an extensive analysis of Baudelaire and his relation to the city see John H. Johnston, *The Poet and the City: A Study in Urban Perspectives*, (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1984), esp. 126, 130, 138-9.
[300] "You call for Evening; it descends, is here;" Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 347.
[301] "Under an archway sleeps the dying Sun. / And, like a shroud swept to the Orient, / Listen, my dear, the sweet Night walks along." Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 347.

it to stress artifice. Whilst in Baudelaire artifice is a tool to serve beauty, in Symons it is more obviously beauty. In other instances, Symons flaunts in his verse his emphasis on Impressionist techniques more conspicuously as in "Nocturne". With lines such as

> The long Embankment with its lights,
> The pavement glittering with fallen rain,
> The magic and the mystery that are night's,

he mystifies the city in an aquatic fashion, aestheticizing it like a piece of music, recalling the luminosity and dreaminess of Whistler's series of "*Nocturnes*" and especially *Nocturne in Blue and Gold: Old Battersea Bridge* (c. 1872-5) and of Henley's "London Voluntaries" in which, Trafalgar Square for instance, "Gleams like an angel-market" "in a haze / Shimmering and bland and soft, / A dust of chrysoprase".[302] And for Symons – as it is expressed in the famous 1893 article – Henley is the exponent of the Decadent Movement in Britain.[303] For Henley, the city is a dreamland of melting contours, a "golden" "El Dorado"[304] (compare also with "Emmy at the Eldorado") whose soft-focus glimmer translates to the coating of otherworldly wetness in Symons which is more akin to Verlaine and a demonstration of Jean Pierrot's synaesthetic experiments in his formulation of the "elemental reverie".[305] The "magic" of the composition is the beauty extracted from a fusion of cityscape and night: "The night was all about us" means that the nightscape suggests eroticism by framing "us" whereas Baudelaire's eroticism is generated by the phrase "ma chere" and the impersonation of "Sorrow" in the "ville". Teeming details of the embankment, the pavement, or the river, make up a fragmented geographical whole which generates the Symonsian "strangeness" and designates the surrounded bodies. Baudelaire would never write lines such as "the magic and the mystery that are night's"; his vision of the poetic image consists of sharp and contrasting concoctions rather than being overtly suggestive and hypnotically monotonous with the tendency to smooth out image groupings as in Symons.

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[302] Henley, *Song of the Sword*, 25. For a comparison of Symons and Henley see Bristow, "Sterile Ecstasies," 76-7.
[303] Symons also discusses Henley's newness and experimentalism in "Modernity in Verse". Symons, Studies in Two Literatures, 186-203.
[304] Henley, Song of the Sword, 26.
[305] Nevertheless, for Benjamin Baudelaire's Paris "is a sunken city, and more submarine than subterranean." *Baudelaire*, 171.

The pictorial texture manifested in "Nocturne" is rather more akin to Verlaine. The first strophe of "Kaléidoscope" from *Jadis et Naguère* (1884) reads:

> Dans une rue, au cœur d'une ville de rêve,
> Ce sera comme quand on a déjà vécu:
> Un instant à la fois très vague et très aigu…
> Ô ce soleil parmi la brume qui se lève![306]

Verlaine frames the fleetingness of the impression in the city with a surface of vague dreaminess and precision, the defined moment, exemplifying Pierrot's vacillation between fluidity and solidity. This is the idea of *la nuance* echoed in Symons, the touch of uncertainty. The similarity of "Kaléidoscope" and "Nocturne" is astounding as in the latter "A bright train flashed with all its squares / Of warm light where the bridge lay mistily." The "bright train" like Verlaine's "soleil" is softened over by the mist; yet, it marks the constant escaping of the sensational moment. The speaker of "Nocturne" exclaims dramatically about the moment passé: "It ended: heaven was done."[307] As the exemplar of Whistler's musical, dreamy paintings, "Nocturne" epitomizes the artifice of the layer of aquatic coating that filters the impression.

Returning to the Baudelairian metropolis, differentiation also occurs when it comes to the effect of crowds and the chance encounter. Baudelaire transforms the image by contemplating and dramatizing it whilst Symons maintains a single aesthetic attitude since the focal point of the image consists mainly of the tendency to dissect geographies and bodies. In "A Une Passante" from *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the poet, who is in the middle of "La rue assourdissante," spots a female figure who is "Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse".[308] The poet emphasizes the wry, even tragic feeling that the passing woman is a potential lover, stressing subtly in this way the chaotic possibilities for the occurrence of love in the city:

> Un éclair…puis la nuit! – […]
> Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renâitre,

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[306] "On a street in the heart of a city of dreams / It will be like life already lived: / A moment at once precise and vague… / Oh, that sun inside the rising mist". Verlaine, *Selected Poems*, 118, 119.
[307] In his discussion of "Nocturne", William Thesing argues that the poem can be read according to "two strains – Paterian and Baudelairean": "the glittering artificiality of night [constitutes] the Baudelairean strain. The Paterian strain usually asserts itself as the transient nature of the experience is painfully recognized. The city's pleasures are fleeting." Thesing, *London Muse*, 176-7.
[308] "Tall, slim, in mourning, in majestic grief," Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 189.

> Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité ? [309]

Where Symons would fix the "fugitive beauté" Baudelaire dramatically observes it pass, rather elaborating on its after-effects. On the realization of a non-encounter with a would-be lover Baudelaire says powerfully: "trop tard! jamais peut-être! / Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais".[310] In Baudelaire's city men and women, like particles, call attention to the tragic possibilities of a non-collision but in Symons they collide and deflect, savouring the light sensual moment on the surface. Even in a poem such as "The Destroying Angel" from *Amoris Victima* (1897), a Baudelairian passer-by who does not collide with the poet simply reflects the flâneur's Decadent "desire":

> She wanders through the city like a troubled ghost,
> And where she passes her eyes light the lingering fire
> Of a consuming, void, inexorable desire.

De Quincey, who is the restless London *flâneur*, writes about his quest for Ann of Oxford Street: "we must have been sometimes in search of each other, at the very same moment, through the mighty labyrinths of London, even within a few feet of each other".[311] Undeniably, the compartmentalized and mazy space of the metropolis reinforces the Decadent poetics of the possibility of encounter, realized in De Quincey in the face of the prostitute Ann.

In *Silhouettes* Symons partly initiates the fugitive, artificial cityscape in a sort of fractured jigsaw and then proceeds to envelop bodies that are essential parts of this artifice. The body is loosed in a constellation whose artificial components resemble the city. The prostitute is the exemplar of *lumpen* elements embodying strange beauty, as in the poem "Impression":

> The pink and black of silk and lace,
> Flushed in the rosy-golden glow
> Of lamplight on her lifted face;
> Powder and wig, and pink and lace,
>
> And those pathetic eyes of hers;
> But all the London footlights know

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[309] "One lightning flash…then night! Sweet fugitive / Whose glance has made me suddenly reborn, / Will we not meet again this side of death?" Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 189.
[310] "too late! *never* perhaps! / Neither one knowing where the other goes," Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 189.
[311] De Quincey, *Confessions*, 38.

The little plaintive smile that stirs
The shadow in those eyes of hers.

Outside, the dreary church-bell tolled,
The London Sunday faded slow;
Ah, what is this? What wings unfold
In this miraculous rose of gold?

The scattered pieces of attire, "silk and lace," "powder and wig," make up the body of the nocturnal prostitute who is highlighted by the "lamplight" and the "footlights" of London. The fragments of clothing and of the city signify the body and the speaker is drawn by her artificial outlook. Even Benjamin remarks in what would be termed a Decadent logic: "Fashion [...] prostitutes the living body to the inorganic world. In relation to the living it represents the rights of the corpse. Fetishism, which succumbs to the sex appeal of the inorganic, is its vital nerve".[312]

Symons provides a sort of conversation between the debased body and its surroundings; focusing on the exposé of the body in the artificial light of the urban night. The guise of the prostitute assumes its full meaning when it is illuminated by the lights of London. Her artificial sexuality is mirrored by the enclosing cityscape. The versification is made up of quatrains whose lines share the same rhyme broken though in the second line. This shows how the unity of the body is interrupted to display a fragmentary beauty. The repetition of words is almost delirious and incantatory, contributing to the mechanization of the body's portrayal in the metropolis. Her "pathetic" and "plaintive eyes" stir up compassion that betrays the isolation of her profession, exposing her to the speaker's voyeuristic scrutiny. Baudelaire both craves and mourns for the prostitute or the city female as a sexual being. For Benjamin this is related to coping with isolation; the *flâneur* seems to fill "the hollow space created in him by such isolation, with the borrowed – and fictitious – isolation of strangers."[313] The woman passing by evokes a spectrum of emotions in the isolation of the city. Nonetheless, the suburban isolation in Symons is an emotional barrier which accommodates the Aesthetic representation of the female.

"In an Omnibus" is a downright exaltation of Decadent aesthetics, hinting at Pater's influence on Symons. Again the female body is fragmented; the poetic gaze is obsessively transfixed upon "that fine malice of your smile." Symons makes clear that

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[312] Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 166.
[313] Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 58. Benjamin discusses Engels's view of London in which the people are isolated and alienated from each other. *Baudelaire*, 57-8.

the body is an integral part of the surrounding cityscape. The "Parisian Monna Lisa" rejects the pastoral space in favour of the city's celebrated artifice:

> Of Paris, Paris is your thought,
> Of Paris robes, and when to wear
> The latest bonnet you have bought
> To match the marvel of your hair.

Once again, the body's outfit is in tune with the city. This is the urban body, seductive in its own right, whose suggestiveness of its "smile" as "A treachery adorable" alludes to the pathological cult of "morbid beauty". The rhyme schemes, alternating between *abab* and *cddc*, contribute towards the dubiousness of the female as her "smile" may "hint / of matters mercantile". The phrase suggests prostitution and in Benjamin's terms the framed body is a commodity. Its consideration as a Gioconda renders it an example of artifice. Like his dancers, Symons's metropolitan body is mute. It speaks by flaunting its imagery and negating speech:

> Close lips that keep the secret in,
> Half spoken by the stealthy eyes,

Symons prefers the language of vision; the partially disclosed "secret" is linked to the power of suggestion. This is another Impressionist vehicle that interacts with the confusion of bodies in cities, just like the play of light and shadow in a number of other poems. In this line, a companion piece to "In an Omnibus", in *London Nights* is "Paris". The metropolitan surrounding is established in the first stanza styled in Henley's fluid Impressionistic Byzantinism of "London Voluntaries", enfolding the fragmented women of the second:

> My Paris is a land where twilight days
> Merge into violent nights of black and gold;
> Where, it may be, the flower of dawn is cold:
> Ah, but the gold nights, and the scented ways!
>
> Eyelids of women, little curls of hair,
> A little nose curved softly, like a shell,
> A red mouth like a wound, a mocking veil:
> Phantoms, before the dawn, how phantom-fair!

The possessive pronoun "My" immediately conveys that the "Paris" of the poem is the solipsist projection of the speaker's mind, fulfilling the Decadent premise of

involvement rather than Aestheticist distance. And the exclamation "Ah, but [...]" which is typical of Symons points to the overpowering of experience: the line's syntax is impaired; the lack of verb augments the speaker's perceptiveness. The violent merging of day and night hints at sexuality harboured in the opulent artificial nightscape of "black and gold". This is in keeping with the hinted sexuality of the disembodied, floating body parts of the succeeding stanza. The "red mouth" which is "like a wound" is a Huysmanian simile that also indicates sexual violence, as the clash of day/night. More ties between the cityscape and its observed bodies are established by subtle punning: the "scented ways" connote both city streets trailed by erotic figures and also the activity of libertine jaunting. The suggested figures as "phantoms" are defined by the play of the presence and absence of electric lights. As with "In an Omnibus", they have the *lumpen* outlook of prostitution. In the poem's context, the phrase "phantom-fair" is another pun: "fair" does not only refer to the nocturnal females' beauty, but also to the sex market that encompasses them. And the "mouth" which looks like a "wound" evokes vaginal violation. Mona Lisa-like allusions in the words "curls" and "curved" is consistent with clandestine sinfulness. As with "In an Omnibus", which features "Close lips that keep the secret in," the red mouth in "Paris" is "a mocking veil". The mystique of the city night pervades the nocturnal body interactively. But in "In an Omnibus," the veil of the mysterious impression is about the ever-sustained pleasure which is devoid of satisfaction and so it results in the *flâneur*'s restlessness. The concluding lines read: "Is there in Tantalus' dim cup, / The shadow of water, nought beside?" Like a modern Tantalus, Symons's speaker is constantly *tantalized* by the mask of the city/body.

In *Amoris Victima* which departs from the Decadent aesthetic of the city-dweller's exploration, *flâneurie* involves the element of memory and reflection in a Bergsonian mechanism as in "Amoris Victima. XI":

> Now, as I tread these London streets again,
> There grows up softly, from the night and rain,
> The same old ghostly haunting of your eyes;
> And the old poisonous ghost of memories.

An element of the bohemian stroller of the streets is his enigmatic isolation and contemplation which is partly due to the fact that he is haunted by past liaisons in the *faubourgs*. In the volumes after *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* the ferociously intense

images of impromptu metropolitan experiences are replaced by retrospective memories in the theatre of the mind. Largely, in these volumes, the cavernous surroundings of the city mirror the cavernous structure of the poet's mind. The female body becomes a "ghost", not as a "silhouette" but as a product of memory which could also be contrived: the Decadent experience turns into repercussion.

5.2 Bodies and Interior Spaces

Symons's poetic vision of the city is not limited in its exteriority but concerns the interiors as well. By quoting Symons Patricia Clements puts stress on his two most important modern themes: "'oneself and one's surroundings': 'sensation and nerves' and London."[314] But these do not only coexist; they organically interrelate. Cheap hotel rooms are the sets where the body is sexually framed and defined. These rooms and interiors are subdivided spaces as blocks or *faubourgs*; they are the fundamental cellular components of the city. The hotel is a metropolitan structure in miniature. The pair city–*faubourg* works analogically with the pair block–room. In his essay entitled "Baudelaire or the Streets of Paris" Benjamin writes: "The crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned to the *flâneur*. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room."[315] In Symons, the confrontation with a prostitute is that of a stranger in a room and so the narrator is still the *flâneur* who has stepped inside from outside. In *Parisian Nights*, for instance, the Impressionistic effect produced in the open is repeated by the body in the interior in Guys's paintings: "gas-lamps shine as in those rooms of evil houses they are reflected in the hectic skin of faces, of shoulders and arms. In the mystery of these closed chambers [...] where the silhouettes are shadowy and rapid, one is plunged into a hideously heated nightmare out of which surge strange sensations" (*PN*, 20). "Strangeness" and body fragmentation demarcated by dark and light showcase "one" in "one's surroundings". The cult of artificial beauty is evident in "Pastel: Masks and Faces" from *Silhouettes*:

> The light of our cigarettes
> Went and came in the gloom:
> It was dark in the little room.

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[314] Clements, *Baudelaire*, 188.
[315] Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 170.

Dark, and then, in the dark,
Sudden, a flash, a glow,
And a hand and a ring I know.
And then, through the dark, a flush
Ruddy and vague, the grace
(A rose!) of her lyric face.

In Symons's Impressionist experimentation, the manipulation of light and shadow is intended for space and body fracturing, the narrowing of the focus of the gaze. Here, "light" and "dark", like the streetlights of the exterior poems, are utilized for the partial disclosure of the body, its dissection and fragmentation as the title "Pastel" signifies. The body fragments of a female figure, the "cigarette", "hand", "ring" and "face", make up a composition in the "dark" "room" in a subtractive way. Symons suggests a sexual confrontation in the most minimalist terms, yet he poeticizes certain aspects of low life. Thornton links this asyntactic poem to the Imagists and Ezra Pound's "Petals on a wet, black bough" adding that it consciously aspires towards the condition of music.[316] One cannot regard the whole at once but its individual pieces and the poem is reduced down to alternations of dark and light with Symons literally stripping language of its functional devices (i.e. syntax) to reveal a pictographically disembodied composition.

The shattering of a scene through an anti-verbal approach in Symons often leads to elusive circularities through repetition and synaesthesia. "Music and Memory", as well as "Pastel", is a fine example of how verbosity becomes a primitive shortcut to a cocktail of the senses, mixing music and shadow/light imagery: "Across the tides of music, in the night, / Her magical face". This creates a feeling of contrast such as the "flush" of the "face" in "Pastel". The face is perceived as a fragment in an Impressionist void. The style disintegrates, as O'Neal argues, into the "two-dimensional visual image [...] in a silhouette-like fashion."[317] The poem's third stanza reads:

Her face across the music, in the night,
Her face a refrain,
A light that sings along the waves of light,

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[316] Thornton, *Decadent Dilemma*, 139. For a discussion of Symons and Pound see also John Leigh, "Arthur Symons and the Evolution of Pound's Concepts of Absolute Rhythm and Precision," *Paideuma* 15 (1986), 55-9. See also Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 88-9, and Gibbons, "Modernism in Poetry," 56-8.
[317] O'Neal, "English Decadence," 242. O'Neal also discusses the primitivism of Symons's poetry in terms of Lévi-Strauss and the distinction of "primitive" and "academic art" (243-4).

A memory that returns again,
Music in music, in the night.

The stylistic connection with Verlaine is phenomenal. In a similar fashion, "Soleils Couchants" with the intricate repetitive patterns of the suns that set like "rêves" (dreams), or the languorously fleeting verses of "Chanson d'Automne," both from *Poèmes Saturniens* (1866), produce a feeling of elusiveness. Symons imitates this technique as O'Neal illustrates.[318] Specifically here he carefully duplicates the words creating a haunting circularity. Her "face" as a "refrain" is a meta-poetic synaesthesia which ultimately returns to the poem itself.

Apart from romancing the sex of the street and the cheap hotel, the motto "strangeness in beauty" fulfils itself in the motif of the depraved virgin, or the Salomé figure. In "Emmy" the cabaret girl with the "virginal air" and "innocent voice" is telling "shameless" stories "in the midst of the villainous dancing-hall." Emmy's verbal, sexual deviation is actually enhanced by the surrounding bodies:

There with the women, haggard, painted and old,
One fresh bud in a garland withered and stale,

Benjamin observes that "commodities derive the same effect from the crowd that surges around and intoxicates them".[319] The interactive relationship of the theatrical crowd and the girl in the Impressionist composition of flower imagery is evident. The old *cocottes* visually project a wantonness in Emmy and so create the artificial space in which the polarized aspects of Emmy, innocent childishness and prostitution (she is also linked to "love on hire" in "Emmy at the Eldorado"), mix producing strangeness.

The interior metropolitan imagery of *Silhouettes* is fully realized with supreme mastery in "The Javanese Dancers".[320] The body of the city in the form of a female dancer is dissected in the same way the city itself does. The dancer in Symons is not only a leitmotif but her role is multifaceted. The Javanese dancers are the fullest expression of Symons's vision of artifice hybridized with life in spatiotemporal terms.

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[318] "Symons's [...] isomorphic use of space is atemporal; that is, because the contents of his 'scene' are spatially independent, not referred to a focal point, we do not regard them as part of a temporally bound process." O'Neal, "English Decadence," 247. O'Neal observes the same phenomena in Dowson as well in 246-9.
[319] Benjamin, *Baudelaire*, 56.
[320] See also Thornton, *Decadent Dilemma*, 153. In the same chapter see 153-4 for discussion of "Nora" and 155-6 for "La Mélinite". For both last poems see 158-9.

The dancers are mechanized, full of accessories that are indicative of an industrialized setting. The metallic music underscores an automated figure in movement:

> Twitched strings, the clang of metal, beaten drums,
> Dull, shrill, continuous, disquieting;
> And now the stealthy dancer comes
> Undulantly with cat-like steps that cling;

The dancer produces sounds with the industrial feel of the metropolis. Pittock observes that "she is an animal moving to the music of machinery: so is the man in the city".[321] Yet, the change of rhythm in the last line of the stanza suggests a secretive force that challenges the robotic imagery. The dancer, like a modern Salomé, moves "undulantly" and her immense physical presence strikes the nerves of the onlooker with the "disquieting" music. These dancers are not complete automata; they are hybrids of the robotic and the serpentine, thus feeding Decadent desire.[322] The poem blurs boundaries and so encourages Symbolist readings. It prefigures Yeats's powerful lines in "Among School Children" from *The Tower* (1928):

> Labour is blossoming or dancing where
> The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
> .....
> O body swayed to music, o brightening glance,
> How can we know the dancer from the dance? (57-8, 63-4)[323]

These lines could serve as a guide for reading the "Javanese Dancers". Yeats's dancer-dance merger could be read as a post-Symbolist version of the idea of the artist's experience as self-projection that lies at the heart of the Decadent image. Even Symons himself bends the Symbolist properties of the "dance". In "The World As Ballet" (1898), for instance, the dancers are "offered to our eyes [...] like a bouquet of living flowers [...] which have all the glitter of artificial ones."[324] Symons aestheticizes the artifice of the dance; Yeats, instead, gives it insight in the Symbolist dynamics of his verse. Symons frames decadently its circular and industrial aspect; Yeats, reversely, has "labour" dancing. Symons's identification of the metropolis and

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[321] Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, 75.
[322] In "Dancers and Dancing" (1897) Symons recalls La Goulue's "tireless agility" characterizing her "the Maenad of the Decadence" (*CSP*, 96).
[323] Yeats's poetry is quoted from W. B. Yeats, *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W. B. Yeats*, eds. Peter Allt and Russell K. Alspach, 1940 (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
[324] Symons, *Seven Arts*, 389.

the body, though, share something with Yeats's merging of the "dancer" with the "dance".[325]

The music introduces the readers to dancers-automata that are technically reduced to the state of exhibition objects. Symons breaks down not only static imageries but also movements and rhythms. The line "One, two, three, four glide forth, and, to and fro" shows, in its simplistic formation of the short successive caesurae, that even the movement of the dance is slowed down in time and dissected in fragments. This is perfectly built upon by the last stanza:

> In measure while the gnats of music whirr,
> The little amber-coloured dancers move,
> Like painted idols seen to stir
> By the idolators in a magic grove.

The "gnats of music" are like slots that partition the image of the dance. The female dancing body, which for Symons is highly gazed at, is a sort of map that is both spatial and object-like. Although the dancer moves, she is simultaneously unmoving. Her "smile" "between her painted lids" is "motionless, unintelligible". Her facial fixity is not absolute but a Paterian one, characterized by ambiguity. Symons develops this point:

> Still, with fixed eyes, monotonously still,
> Mysteriously, with smiles inanimate,
> With lingering feet that undulate,
> With sinuous fingers, spectral hands that thrill

Contradictions are apparent: "still", "fixed" - "undulate", "sinuous" - "spectral". The dancers move about in space but also maintain fixity and this is also reflected by the placing together of Latinate polysyllabic words with sharp monosyllables. The Decadent image is both a passive aesthetic spectacle and a moving being that organically interacts with its environment. The intermingling of the body and space is further developed as the dancers' bodies are described as inside-out versions of the intricacy of the city:

> She twines

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[325] See Kermode, *RI*, the chapter on Symons, esp. 129-30. Fletcher discusses "Ballet" in Symons as "the illusion of life" with the dance turning Symbolist with the "'free' dancer". Ian Fletcher, *W. B. Yeats and His Contemporaries* (New York: St. Martins, 1987), 260.

> Her fingers into mazy lines,
> The scarves across her fingers twine the while.
>
> Now interthreading slow and rhythmically.

Terms such as "mazy lines" and "interthreading" indicate that the dancers' bodies are maps and metaphors of the daedal artifice of the city. The irregular metrics of the poem refer to the contracting and expanding rhythms of their dancing. The figures with their "cat-like steps" and "painted lids" are "painted idols", animated mannequins inflicted by the penetrating gaze of the "idolators," or the spectators who are the *flâneurs* of the dance-hall. Symons himself was a *flâneur* of the Alhambra, the Empire, and the Moulin Rouge, the interior spaces that are microcosms of the metropolis itself.[326]

The last poem of *Silhouettes*, "For a Picture of Watteau", changes key as it substitutes the metropolitan imagery with seasonal. The poet addresses his "lovers" in a shift of setting from spring/summer to autumn. The lovers are dancing their way through a spatialized timescape. The dancer becomes a universalized symbol of the moving figure in a space that signifies it. Symons writes poignantly: "How summer glides away! / An autumn pallor blooms […]" This seasonal setting frames the "lovers" and although it is not fragmentary as the cityscape, it enhances the crux of the Decadent image in the paradox of the blooming autumn. This is a conceptual reversal of the imagery of decay, the Symonsian "strangeness". This fusion reflects the state of the "lovers":

> But here, where dead leaves fall
> Upon the grass, what strains,
> Languidly musical,
> Mournfully rise and fall?
>
> Light loves that woke with spring
> This autumn afternoon
> Beholds meandering,
> Still, to the strains of spring.

The "autumn afternoon" beholds (frames) the lovers "meandering"; this is a word associated with dancing. The lovers-dancers are confined to a spatial momentum, and paradoxically, the demise of their love ("your loves are faint") is their very strength.

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[326] Linda Dowling discusses the music-hall in *LaD* 232-8, and Symons and the dancer in 239-43.

The pun "Still" incorporates both perpetuation and immobility. This is a paean to the fleeting moment, the transitoriness of sensation celebrated by Pater in his *Renaissance*.

The visual elements of the dance feature in a more elaborate manner in *London Nights*; the poet in *Silhouettes* is an observer, a passive *flâneur* who in *London Nights* becomes active, sexually engaged with the female figures he encounters. In "To a Dancer" Symons stresses that "intoxicatingly / Her eyes across the footlights gleam," hinting at an interaction between the body and its surroundings. The "rhythms of her poising feet" and "Her body's melody, / In silent waves of wandering sound," suggest that the dancing body wanders as pure sound, totalizing the experience of the surrounding space. The uneven metrical pattern of the poem, in this sense, could be the rhythm of the dancing body itself. The poet's obsessive focus on her with the resounding line "Her that gleam for me!" marks the poet's subjective fixation.

Symons is aware of the prostitute and ballet-girl as vehicles of Decadent sexuality. Michele Sipe contends that because Symons is a connoisseur of the demimonde, he is a "figure of controlled decadence".[327] The prostitute serves as the perfect image of a systematized sexuality which resists emotional bonds, and this is closely linked with the artificial space which frames her. In "Renée" the hauntingly bleak imagery of the city introduces a *femme fatale*:

> Rain, and the night, and the old familiar door,
> And the archway dim, and the roadway desolate;
> Faces that pass, and faces, and more, yet more:
> Renée! come, for I wait.
>
> Pallid out of the darkness, adorably white,
> Pale as the spirit of rain, with the night in her hair,
> Renée undulates, shadow-like, under the light,
> Into the outer air.

Renée emerges into and from the demimonde and her body both juxtaposes the surrounding space and mingles with it. Symons plays with shadow and light to stress the sexual mysteriousness of Renée; the phrases "pallid out of the darkness" and "shadow-like, under the light" indicate a cross shift of luminosity from her body to space. The space fuses with her body as she is "pale" as the "rain" and the "night" is

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[327] Michelle Sipe, "Romancing the City: Arthur Symons and the Spatial Politics of Aesthetics in 1890s London," *Imagined Londons*, ed. Pamela Gilbert ([New York]: Suny P, 2002), 81.

"in her hair". Symons sets up the image of Renée in the city in order to utter his Decadent formula in the third and fourth stanzas as she is referred to "the loveliest, deadliest" and she is also the "Mother of vain desire." He further reduces her impressionistically to an erogenous mood with the line: "Elemental, fashioned of tears and fire". The artificial space interacts with the body it frames as a basis on which Symons pictorially develops Renée's dissolute persona.

Dancing in Symons is a more emphatic variant of the act of strolling in the metropolitan space. In "Nora on the Pavement" the dance-hall is externalized and placed in the *faubourgs* of the city where "Nora dances on the midnight pavement." The elements of the city, roads, blocks, and crowds, are substituted by the "ballet" of prostitutes; thus Symons attributes to the profession an Aesthetic aura:

> There where the ballet circles,
> See her, but ah! Not free her from the race
> Of glittering lines that link and interlace;
> This colour now, now that, may be her,
> In the bright web of those harmonious circles.

Nora is surrounded by other dancers that "link and interlace" in a "bright web". These phrases evoke the labyrinthine structure of the city. The complex of bodies provides an alternative peripheral geography to the gazed female, Nora. The "ballet circles" impose a centralizing perimeter of an artificial space-frame, evident also in the poem's verse pattern with the first and last line of every stanza rhyming cyclically on the same word. Again, as in the case of Renée, Symons depicts Nora visually in such a way that her body is signified as an Impressionist bundle of "dance-measures" in order to characterize her in the final stanzas. The "guileless and most unbeguiled" soul of Nora is "giving forth to the night / Bird-like, the burden of its own delight". This is almost a Blakean transformation from innocence to experience through a symbolic rebirth. Nora's state of childish innocence is self-sacrificed on the "pavement" in the name of "thronging desires". Van Bronswijk argues that the unintended and unconscious seduction of the "child" dancer is her appealing feature, making Symons's poetry a process of self-discovery: the burden "auto-voyeuristic meta-awareness" inevitably ensues in the spectator (Symons) after the girl's

"postlapsarian [...] disenchantment."[328] The Symonsian speaker is attracted to the otherness of "unbeguiled" sexual provocation, but as soon as he *infects* the girl's innocence with his sexual all-knowingness, this is mirrored in her. The partial homophony between "bird-like" and "burden" aligns them, suggesting the inherent sexual deliverance programmed and encrypted in virginal inexperience. The artifice of light and shadow that trails behind the dancing Nora marks this dualistic interaction between innocence and corruption: Her "delight" or de-light[329] of her "soul" signifies pleasure in the absence of light, or the artificial light as the eroticizing factor of the night cityscape.

In representing the erotic feminine via artificial geography, Symons tends to localize the outside scene with his subjective eye and yet alienate it. In the sequence of poems called "Lilian" – in the *Collected Works* the sequence "Lilian" is re-entitled "Violet" – there is a piece called "VIII: At the Stage-Door" which captures the fixation of the *flâneur* with a specific female figure from a crowd of female bodies that represent metropolitanism. In "A Prelude to Life" he speaks about the "religion of the eyes": "I looked into the omnibuses, the cabs, always with the same eager hope of seeing some beautiful or interesting person, some gracious movement [...]".[330] This is the self-portrait of the manic observer and the perfect guide for the poem: the speaker waits "in the crowd," yet, as a *flâneur* he is placed voyeuristically "at the edge of the pavement". With his eye, he shatters the cabaret-like girls as if he is describing an Impressionist painting crossed with Ezra Pound's Imagistic techniques:

> Under the archway sheer,
> Sudden and black as a hole in the placarded wall,
> Faces flicker and veer,
> Wavering out of the darkness into the light,
> Wavering back into night;
> Under the archway, suddenly seen, the curls
> And thin, bright faces of girls,
> Roving eyes, and smiling lips, and the glance
> Seeking, finding perchance,
> Here at the edge of the pavement, there by the wall,
> One face, out of them all.

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[328] R. Van Bronswijk, "The Brilliance of Gas-Lit Eyes: Arthur Symons' Erotic Auto-Voyeurism Observed," *And Never Know the Joy: Sex and the Erotic in English Poetry*, ed. C. C. Barfoot, DQR Studies in Literature 36 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), 300, 299.
[329] See Bronswijk, "The Brilliance of Gas-Lit Eyes," 298.
[330] Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, 53.

The poet sees a crowd in movement, playing with the city's lights and shadows. The bodies blend with the Symonsian fabric of the city by night and in the process the stark contrasts of faces and darkness generate fragmentation. The elements that comprise the female bodies, "curls", "faces", "eyes", "lips", "cheeks", make up the figures in a jigsaw manner like brushstrokes; they add up to the final result: "One face, out of them all." Individuality is eliminated in favour of the Impressionist unity of the image; the technique here brings to mind Reed's idea of "reconstitution". Hence, Symons subtly undermines the lover of the poem as eventually one who emerges from the crowd, like Nora on the pavement: both a private and a public spectacle.

The centrepiece of *London Nights* is "La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge" and it is a poem in which Symons's imageries interweave in layers. Inspired by the time when Symons was a frequenter of the Moulin Rouge in Paris, it pays tribute to Jane Avril, the dancer who was famously celebrated in the posters of Toulouse-Lautrec. The poem is extraordinary for the impressionistic, vibrantly animated depiction of the dance. Dowling notes its "anti-linguistic [...] anti-verbal nature"[331]. In the first two stanzas,

Olivier Metra's Waltz of Roses
 Sheds in a rhythmic shower
 The very petals of the flower;
And all its roses,
The rouge of petals in a shower.

Down the long hall the dance returning
 Rounds the full circle, rounds
 The perfect rose of lights and sounds,
The rose returning
 Into the circle of its rounds.

The red rose is constructed out of the dancers' bodies, an Impressionistic analogy favoured by Symons; regarding a painting by Constantin Guys "the dancing girls, in the petals of their skirts, are grouped like the flowers in a bouquet" (*PN*, 17). The opening and closing movements of the rose insinuate sexuality. The "Waltz of Roses" is reflected in the rondeau-like stanzas; every stanza is like a suspended triple beat that simulates the movement of the Waltz itself with the employment of the rhyme scheme *abbab*. With the utilization of intricate repetitions and resounding, the

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[331] Dowling, *LaD*, 238.

dance/rose image cluster takes on a spiralling movement indicative of restlessness.[332] Also, as Thornton points out, the extreme repetition which is often on the rhyme itself, "reflects the mirroring of the situation [...and] creates its own sense of futility, of circularity, of lack of progression."[333] By making use of *rime riche* Symons maximizes the effect of futile artifice which – with the rhymes rocking back on themselves – achieves a peculiar vain perfection. This theme of vanity taken to the level of universal frustration recurs in "The Dance of the Daughters of Herodias" (*Images of Good and Evil*) which reveals a Symbolist development and expansion of the dance, where Salomé is transformed into the futile, destructive echoing of the artist's self.

The rose of dancers is a backdrop against which La Mélinite stands out "Before the mirror, face to face, / Alone she watches / Her morbid, vague, ambiguous grace." La Mélinite is the exemplum of "strange beauty" as the verbal compound "morbid grace" indicates. Similarly, in one of Symons's recollections, La Mélinite "had about her a depraved virginity" (*CSP*, 93). Her "morbid grace" is realized in terms of the imageries that surround her. La Mélinite is the dancer who gazes narcissistically upon her own dancing; the moment she contemplates herself she becomes the artist, the object of art, and the observer simultaneously.[334] Her "grace" becomes "morbid" in the act of dancing "for her own delight". She is the Salomé of the dance-hall whose dancing manifests an unfulfilled sexuality that runs restlessly back and forth between the mirror and the artist. Beckson links the "divided self" of the poem with Dorian Gray's mirror/portrait.[335] As a symbol for the poet's divided self La Mélinite is a generator of Decadence as in the mirror process the images fruitlessly reflect back on him attaining a distinct character of unsatisfying self-indulgence.[336] This narcissistic circularity is a property of *fin-de-siècle* poetry in general. Theodore Wratislaw's poem "At the Empire" from *Orchids* (1896) reads: "The low and soft luxurious promenade, / Electric-light, pile-carpet, the device / Of

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[332] As Karl Beckson notes, "the poem's verbal echoes and [chiastic] effects reinforce the effect of self-enclosure." Beckson. *Symons: A Life*, 85.
[333] Thornton, *Decadent Dilemma*, 149.
[334] Symons gives an extended and sharp account of La Mélinite dancing before the mirror in *PN*, 4.
[335] Beckson. *Arthur Symons*, 86.
[336] Gordon offers the following relevant view: "The viewer of such a performance, unable to participate in the transcendence, is tortured by the alteration of being emblemised in the successive and impermanent transformation of self." Jan B. Gordon, "The Dance Macabre of Symons's *London Nights*," *Victorian Poetry* 9 (1971), 429.

gilded mirrors that repeat you thrice."[337] The mirror also reflects the outdoors setting as interiorized cityscape surrounding La Mélinite:

> The orange-rosy lamps are trembling
> Between the robes that turn;
> In ruddy flowers of flame that burn
> The lights are trembling:
> The shadows and the dancers turn.

The play of "lamps" and "shadows" provides the Impressionist space in which the city-bodies interact in a structured and artificial way. Yet, in the case of the Decadent artist, there is also the element of chaos evident in the panorama of conurbation. This chaos is coupled with the structured artifice to initiate "strangeness". In his biographical reminiscences *Parisian Nights*, Symons describes his entrance in the Moulin Rouge: "The more I penetrated into the interior the more I felt that I was entering an obscure night" (*PN*, 2). As the interior simulates (or "mirrors") the exterior of the metropolis, the decay of form and fragmentation apply equally to both. La Mélinite's waltzing movement in the dance-hall is extended outside in the poem's last stanza which depicts her "enigmatically smiling, / In the mysterious night" connoting her dark seductiveness.[338] Mystery and ambiguity apply both to the body and to the space. Symons takes the industrial fabric manifest in the texture of the city and infuses it with an atmosphere of suggestiveness; he isolates the artifice of capitalism and turns it into an anti-productive set of geographies and bodies.[339] On this basis, the Symonsian metropolis is never active with commerce, never becoming Dickensian, it is rather enveloped in Impressionist shadows. Symons's counter-domestic interior is inhabited by prostitutes, dancers/actresses, and dandies, antinomian personae that negate functionality and bourgeois constitutions such as that of the family nucleus.

In *Silhouettes* Symons frames bodies in open city vistas roaming erotically in relation to each other. In *London Nights* he enters the metropolitan private interior space, locking the body in the act of sex, perceiving it as a sexual object, a vehicle for the fleeting pleasure. "Leves Amores" part I celebrates in minute sensual tone the act of copulation in the eradicating of emotion. The labyrinthine structure of the city is, in

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[337] Theodore Wratislaw, *Orchids* (London: Smithers, 1896).
[338] Symons comments on the Moulin Rouge dancers that they were "enigmatical creatures; of the inexorable stains and configurations of sin" (*PN*, 3).
[339] See Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1992), xviii.

a sense, miniatured in the erotic interaction of the bodies that are "twining inextricably as twine / The clasping tangles of the vine;" interestingly in part II, the poet changes tone completely; he demystifies sex, depicting a bedroom scene as almost nightmarishly unbearable. The imagery of the room signifies the triviality of the moment:

> The little bedroom papered red,
> The gas's faint malodorous light,
>
> The bed-clothes stifle me, I ache
>
> I hate, until I long to break,
> That clock for its tyrannic tick.

The woman beside the speaker is part of the sinister props as she "chatters" to him. The second part of "Leves Amores" serves as a contrast to the fleeting sensation of the first. Yet, phrases like "profile lift," "tiresome line," and "dark and tumbled drift" connote terminology from painting, indicating that the trivial city moment is also aestheticized through artistic means of representation. But, as Gordon elucidates,[340] the second part of "Leves Amores" denotes the frustration which ultimately springs from the futility of carnal overindulgence. It is a mirror commentary to the first part, a manifestation of the dandy's nerves inscribed fragmentarily on the objects of the stifling urban interior. The inadequacy of pleasure, however intensive it is in part I, in the postcoital moment of part II becomes manifest.

The body in the claustrophobic artificial chamber is more subtly played upon in "White Heliotrope". The poem captures an everyday bedroom scene in which the sexualized female, or rather, prostitute,[341] is broken down to the accessories that make up her artificial persona. The elements that conjure up the sense of a metropolitan over-luxurious self lie about inside the private space:

> The feverish room and that white bed,
> The tumbled skirts upon a chair,
> The novel flung half-open, where

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[340] "Lust has fled, and love, never existed; thus he is left in an emotional void. Love becomes the hate of frustration which longs to manifest itself in overt physical violence." Gordon, "Danse Macabre," 437. For the dual response of the *flâneur* to the prostitute see also Steve Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 1996), 232-3.

[341] For a discussion of Symons, prostitution, the urban aesthetic, and T. S. Eliot, in relation to "White Heliotrope" see Thesing, *The London Muse*, 178-9. For Symons, prostitution and Modernism see Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, 74-5.

Hat, hair-pins, puffs, and paints, are spread;

This state of the boudoir hints at a Pre-Raphaelite narrative. In his adoption of a moralistic attitude, the Victorian philistine stays out of the private space, and this is subtly disparaged, for instance, in Wilde's plays such as *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892). Symons boldly crosses the threshold of privacy to dissect the artificial public persona and capture a trivial moment of low life in his Impressionist mindscape. In the private boudoir, the artificial female is disrobed and analysed to its components. The narcissistic reflection in the "mirror" locks the artificial fugitive impression in the act of self-gazing:

The mirror that has sucked your face
Into its secret deep of deeps,
And there mysteriously keeps
Forgotten memories of grace;

The word "sucked" indicates a consuming and the woman of the poem is like La Mélinite who "dances for her own delight." The act of gazing is manifest in the third stanza with the double reflective stare: "Your slant eyes strangely watching me" and "I, who watch you drowsily". The watching takes place in a hypnotic atmosphere in the private room, simulating the atmosphere of the hazy vistas of the open night suburbia. The "half dressed half awake" female figure densely expresses the momentary, fleeting state of the body pinned down by the poet. In addition, the girl is half-dressed as if half-lit in terms of the externalized cityscape. One can observe that in his Decadent mechanics of aestheticizing everyday life, Symons employs Symbolist techniques. As the poem enhances a post-Paterian moment, all the accessories, fragments of the scrutinized female recall the *momentum ultimum* of Decadent unity in a Bergsonian way in the image of the "White Heliotrope"; the woman in the room "Will rise, a ghost of memory, if / Ever again my handkerchief / Is scented with White Heliotrope." Symons poeticizes the low life of the confined, private chamber.

In "To One in Alienation" the poet spies on his mistress who is hooked by another man. [342] The woman's cheap metropolitan but fanciful outfit bear witness to and even constitute her sex appeal. The "little bonnet", "primrose ribbons", "dark

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[342] For a brief discussion of the poem see Russell M. Goldfarb "Arthur Symons's Decadent Poetry," *Victorian Poetry* 1 (1963), 231-4.

gown" and "folds of lacework" signify her as a sexual being. The poet then, confined in the city interior, isolated, sketches his sexual frustration:

> Your image on the aching wall,
> That would but pang me with the sense
> Of that most sweet accursed violence
> Of lovers' hands that weary to caress
> (Those hands!) your unforbidden loveliness.

The fact that her "loveliness" is "unforbidden" connotes a morbid accessibility. The poet is not lamenting the loss of her but his own state of being. Her "image" on the wall cannot be experienced by the speaker's "sense": this is the most succinct metaphor of the impossibility of poetry to recreate experience. In the second part, he vainly endeavours to cool his excitement down with a prostitute:

> As I lay on the stranger's bed,
> And clasped the stranger-woman I had hired,
> Desiring only memory dead
> Of all that I had once desired [...]

Symons's attraction to prostitution is not pornerastic. The sexual encounter with the prostitute is never fulfilling. It is a metaphor for the Decadent artist's restlessness and search for poetic truth. Although Symons freezes and scrutinizes the escaping impression by distilling it into a pattern of fragments, it is at the same time circumfluent, fidgety and restless; by means of Decadent images, such as the prostitute in the city, the quest for poetic transcendence is paradoxically achieved through its process. Symons's drifting among various mistresses such as Lydia and other music-hall *décolletées* is a sort of projection of the restless, circular manoeuvres of his *Silhouettes*, and *London Nights*.[343] Baudelaire himself a proto-Decadent, in similar fashion to Symons, roamed among his mistresses, the so-called three Venuses-Madonnas from working-class Paris. Symons's manipulation of city artifice symbolizes the futility of enacting his experiences in poetry.

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[343] See also John M. Munro, "Arthur Symons as Poet: Theory and Practice," *English Literature in Transition* 6 (1963), 212-22.

6. "The Fascinations of the Flesh": Symons's Condition of Nerves and the *Flâneur* of the Body in *London Nights*

IN the poem "Idealism" in *London Nights* Symons reduces (or elevates) the female body to "the masterpiece of flesh". The sexualized body is a metaphorical vehicle for depicting the unrest and agitation of the poet's mind. As we have seen, Symons mediates his Decadent aesthetic via the Impressionist spatiality of the metropolis, moving from the hazy external cityscape to the interiority of dance-halls and hotel-rooms. In this movement one can observe the periphery of the gaze closing in on the female body. The transparent "Silhouettes" of the mazy, fragmented city become the highly eroticized bodies or the sex commodities of the private room; as the speaker of "La Mélinite" says: "The rose returning / Into the circle of its rounds." One can read a third stage in Symons's internal journey where the space of artifice is reduced to its minimum around its locus, the female body; that of make-up and bodily accessories that frame and mingle with the body. Symons's eroticism of contrivance is clear: "I had begun to feel an utter lack in any woman who had not something artificial" (*Memoirs*, 72).

Symons is a solipsist with a strong authorial voice whose female figures are speechless, recreated by the poet's gaze. In the same fashion Oscar Wilde is the creator/author of the beauty of Dorian Gray through Basil Hallward and Lord Henry, Symons is the author of the carnal beauty of his poems' women through the poems' speaker. Nonetheless, Symons is a Pygmalion who sexually interacts with and moulds his passive, manikin-like female bodies.[344] One of the paradoxes of the *fin de siècle* is that the Decadents react to the industrialization and mechanization of society, most evident in the metropolis, yet, simultaneously they transform industrialism to their favour, utilizing it as their new aesthetic.[345] This is an example of how art is reversely influenced by progress as Benjamin demonstrates in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936). If the Symonsian woman is an artwork, Symons's

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[344] Thornton discusses this aspect in "'Decadence' in Later Nineteenth-Century England" in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. Ian Fletcher, 29.

[345] Calinescu observes: "A high degree of technological development appears perfectly compatible with an acute sense of decadence. The fact of progress is not denied, but increasingly large numbers of people experience the *results* of progress with an anguished sense of loss or alienation [...] Progress *is* decadence and decadence *is* progress." *Faces of Modernity*, 156.

carnal encounters in *Silhouettes* and especially *London Nights* signify the poet's attempt to textualise erotic experience or pass from Aesthetic appreciation to Decadent interaction.

6.1 The Female Body and the Artifice of Masking

The Paterian moment of sensation for Symons presupposes a muted body whose corporeality is hypertrophied at the expense of the soul. Symons proffers his creed in "Idealism" from *London Nights*:

> I know the woman has no soul, I know
> The woman has no possibilities
> Of soul or mind or heart, but merely is
> The masterpiece of flesh: well, be it so.

Interestingly, Symons's soulless woman is rather consciously problematic. The bold negative statement regarding the woman's soul is undercut by its own boldness. To complicate things, Symons himself gainsays this view of the female as a material body in other poems. In "Stella Maris"[346] the speaker connects the "ineffable delight" with the moment

> When souls turn bodies, and unite
> In the intolerable, the whole
> Rupture of the embodied soul.

Suggestively, the soul for Symons has a special meaning; in a sort of Neo-Platonist fashion, it becomes manifest through the flesh. In a sense the soul is the very essence of selfhood which expresses itself through sex ("rupture"). The sexual union signifies *la vérité vraie*, whose momentary aspect is hinted through the adverb "when". The phrase "embodied soul" is itself a sexual interlocking of two opposites with the implication of a subtle struggle indicated by the adjective "intolerable". Symons is aware of the limitations of the flesh and yet of the flesh as the ultimate agent of *vérité vraie*. In a bizarre and self-undermining logic, the woman as "the masterpiece of flesh" *is* her soul. In "La Fanfarlo" (1847), Baudelaire's alter ego, the dandy Samuel

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[346] See also Bristow, "Sterile Ecstasies," 77-8.

Cramer worships the female body "et ce matérialisme absolu n'était pas loin de l'idéalisme le plus pur".[347] Symons writes about Violet that she was "stupid [...] and not perverse," and then he explains that "when flesh means nothing more than the satisfaction of one's senses, she was nothing more to me than a thing of flesh" (*Memoirs*, 113). If the flesh is not a sophisticated visual conundrum it then is mere soulless meat. As will be shown, this perception of the body chimes with the Paterian-metropolitan aesthetic of suggestion in which the artist subsists in a circular, restless journey in a galaxy of bodies.

Juxtaposed to the case of the unexciting sexuality of Violet who is "a thing of flesh" stands the case found in Symons's biographical piece "My Planets", in which the unnamed girl celebrated is "a masterpiece of flesh" (*Memoirs*, 143-4). Symons gives a detailed sensual account of the girl's "amazing and absolute innocence, her delicious sense of surprise" as if it was a piece of *London Nights* in prose. In his account the "innocent" girl strips slowly with promiscuous theatricality as if she were a dancer performing in the music-hall. This element animates her body into a study "in strange flesh". This preliminary sexual game with all its tensions recreates her as the metropolitan space itself, a space which teases with the promise of revealing regardless what it conceals:

> [...] then one gets the glimpse of those tempting and clinging white drawers which invariably excite one's senses, knowing exactly what they conceal, but not yet aware of the shapeliness of the legs [...] One is reluctant to unveil immediately one of the woman's last disguises. (*Memoirs*, 144)

The mask realizes itself and the flesh it disguises through artificial and ritualistic removal. Symons is the *flâneur* of the eroticized body who, in order to reach her "perfect nakedness", goes through all the layers of her clothing and accessories step by step, in the same manner the wanderer breaks through *faubourgs* and city interiors.

Symons frames flesh in artistic terms. In a letter to Herbert Horne (1893), referring to a music-hall scene, he writes that "on one of the lounges, by the side of the stalls, lay three ladies [...] – Rosie Dean and two others. They were coiled inextricably together, somewhat in the manner of a design by Félicien Rops" (S-*Letters*, 101). Symons, like Des Esseintes, proffers the life-imitating-art idea.

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[347] Charles Baudelaire, *Les Paradis Artificiels, La Fanfarlo* (Paris: Louis Conard, 1928) in *Œuvres Complètes de Charles Baudelaire*, ed. M. Jacques Crépet, 275. "And this absolute materialism was not far from the purest idealism." My translation.

Returning to "Idealism", the female body is framed as an *objet d'art* and all at once it is conceived as an "instrument" of pleasure:

> It is her flesh that I adore; I go
> Thirsting afresh to drain her empty kiss;
> I know she cannot love: 'tis not for this
> I rush to her embraces like a foe.
> Tyrannously I crave, I crave alone,
> Her body, now a silent instrument,
> That at my touch shall wake and make for me
> The strains that I have dreamed of, and not known;
> Her perfect body, Earth's most eloquent
> Music, the divine human harmony.

The solipsistic mind of the poet projects the body as a puppet-like medium of male fantasy. She is both the "masterpiece of flesh" and "a silent instrument" by means of which the speaker indulges his sexual desire. The flesh is "silent" because it speaks through its tactility, that is, as an image. Symons asserts in *Amoris Victima*: "Voice of the Flesh! this is the voice that speaks, / In agony of spirit, or in grief / Because desire dare not desire relief" ("Munda Victima. III"). The poem crops up in Symons's "Unspiritual Adventures" with Baudelaire's mistress, Jeanne Duval, being "the masterpiece of flesh" and reduced to "empty kisses".[348] In "Idealism", a key line is "Thirsting afresh to drain her empty kiss". It implies a repetitive process in which the act of sex remains insatiate and so it triggers off its reoccurrence "afresh". This is also underpinned by the distinct irregular caesurae of the poem, giving the impression of never-ending prolongation of fulfilling desire. The caesurae, in addition, with the abrupt dichotomy of the line denote a violent response to the subject matter; sexual activity intensifies as a result of never achieving fulfilment. This is also reinforced by the line, "I rush to her embraces like a foe." Sex becomes violent and confrontational as the *flâneur* literally collides with the sex-bodies of the city. Contradictory phrases such as "Tyrannously I crave" and "divine human harmony" indicate the female body not only as both a sexual vessel and a distanced *objet d'art* but also as agitating and barely satisfactory as the "intolerable [...] rupture" from "Stella Maris" illustrates. Symons suggests that sex is not merely mechanistically reproduced as a pleasure commodity but also sanctified as an artistic process. It frames the metropolitan alienated body as the ultimate conundrum of artistic expression.

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[348] Arthur Symons, *Wanderings* (London: Dent, 1931), 80.

The idea of the artist recreating mechanically the female body is traced in Villiers de L'Isle Adam's prototypical novel *L'Eve Future* (1886).[349] Redefining the notion of femininity Villiers Adam presents an extraordinary case: Lord Celian Ewald is not spiritually satisfied with Alicia and Edison manufactures the flawless Hadaly who is modelled upon Alicia's body and is the perfect woman for Ewald.[350] Hadaly is the first literary android and could be the predecessor of Symons's automatic Javanese dancers. In Benjaminian terms, the novel's android sums up the industrialization of art and, more specifically, in a reversed order of value, the artificial replica exceeds the original. The reconstruction of the feminine or the copy of a copy process for achievement of perfection is easily detected in Symons. One can read the repeated Symonsian encounters with prostitutes through Derrida's concept of *différance*.[351] The poet is in pursuit of the sensuous moment; however *la vérité vraie* is oddly enough both achieved and deferred. The poet in "Idealism" crafts the perfect female body; the woman's "kiss" is "empty" and the speaker is locked in an infinite circle to "drain" it "afresh." The title "Idealism" ingeniously gains an ironic connotation as it suggests that the ideal state of being will always be escaping, yet, it is also achieved through the process itself. Symons himself poses a question in an almost Derridian manner: "[what is] to shift one's centre? That is, what it is to love a woman" (*RM*, 300). And from a psychoanalytic, slightly oedipal angle that would suggest that the Symonsian prostitute is a maternal substitute, an approximation of Lacan's "Real". The Real is "an impossible wholeness of self, plenitude of desire, satisfaction (*jouissance*), and continuity of signifier and signified or word and object, is never possible."[352] This is the logic of Symons as a Decadent poet; relying solely on the corporeal body he interacts with it in an ambience of metropolitan alienation; the artistic completeness of the body's artifice leaves him always incomplete.

The artificial feminine which is the essential nexus and basic unit of the city space is a constellation of accessories that in the Paterian moment integrate and become body parts. The Symonsian woman is a descendant of Villiers's female

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[349] The *Symbolist Movement* also provides evidence that Symons was acquainted with *L'Eve Future*.
[350] Villiers de l'Isle Adam, *Eve of the Future Eden*, trans. Marilyn Gaddis Rose (Lawrence, KA: Coronado, 1981).
[351] See Jacques Derrida, "Différance," *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, 1998 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 385-407.
[352] Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, "Introduction: 'Strangers to Ourselves: Psychoanalysis'" in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 123.

android Hadaly. *Silhouettes* offers a foretaste of this woman. "Maquillage" is an artificial mix of the senses:

> The charm of rouge on fragile cheeks,
> Pearl-powder, and, about the eyes,
> The dark and lustrous eastern dyes;
> A voice of violets that speaks
> Of perfumed hours of day, and doubtful night
> Of alcoves curtained close against the light.
>
> Gracile and creamy white and rose,
> Complexioned like the flower of dawn,
> Her fleeting colours are as those
> That, from an April sky withdrawn,
> Fade in a fragrant mist of tears away
> When weeping noon leads on the altered day.

As Beckson points out the source of "Maquillage" is Baudelaire's essay "Éloge du Maquillage" (1860).[353] For Baudelaire, white puff, rouge and black dye are the ingredients that accentuate the skin, lips, and eyes of a woman, attributing to her "supernatural and excessive life;" maquillage is itself the carrier of Beauty and not a complement; it elevates woman to the state of art, of a "statue".[354] Symons employs the three colour-components as disembodied fragments to convey the body which is reduced to a mask. Symons here paints an Impressionist portrait of a woman whose make-up and facial features mingle in a meteorological fashion, stressing the transitoriness of the artificial self in the potential moment of the fleeting sensation. The imagery of the poem strongly echoes Keats; the "weeping" April weather of the last two lines resonates with the "Ode on Melancholy": "[…] like a weeping cloud, / That fosters the droop-headed flowers all, / And hides the green hill in an April shroud" (12-4). This Romantic example illustrates how the Decadent poet tackles similar images and displaces the focus. The autumnal fleetingness and fading of the second stanza becomes consciously an allusion to Max Beerbohm's essay "The Pervasion of Rouge" (or "The Defence of Cosmetics") (1894) in which he says that "the painting of the face is, in manner, most like the painting of canvas, in outcome it is rather akin to the art of music – lasting, like music's echo, not for very long".[355]

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[353] Beckson, *Symons: A Life*, 88.
[354] Baudelaire, *Painter of Modern Life*, 34.
[355] Max Beerbohm, *The Works of Max Beerbohm*. (New York: Dodd-Mead, 1922), 128.

Artifice is part of the flesh, accentuating its corporeal force at the circumstantial moment of sensation and constituting Symons's "idealism".[356]

Symons takes the identification of make-up and flesh to an extreme when he introduces woman as an icon of artifice by means of her body alone. The crux of Decadence is distilled in "Morbidezza" a poem inspired by Elizabeth Corbet, Yeats's sister (*Memoirs*, 71), and an inverted or twisted variant of The Song of Songs. The Decadent's gaze subverts the innocence of the celibate girl, marrying innocence to morbid desire. The first stanza reads:

> White girl, your flesh is lilies
> Under a frozen moon,
> So still is
> The rapture of your swoon
> Of whiteness, snow or lilies.

What is interesting here is the diction; the speaker undermines the "lilies", "frozen moon", and "whiteness" with the contaminating "flesh" and "rapture". By referring to the girl's "flesh" (and not body) as "lilies" using the plural of the noun, the speaker destabilizes innocence by using its own substance ("lilies"). The poem continues:

> Virginal in revealment,
> Your bosom's wavering slope,
> Concealment,
> In fainting heliotrope,
> Of whitest white's revealment,
>
> Is like a bed of lilies,
> A jealous-guarded row,
> Whose will is
> Simply chaste dreams: but oh,
> The alluring scent of lilies!

The "virginal" element, also reinforced by the light and whimsical rhythm, is commented upon by counter-diction: "white"–"bosom", "revealment"–"concealment", "lily"–"heliotrope". Here Symons does not merely combine conflicting images to produce a "strange" feeling; he turns the image of chastity on itself to suggest sensuality; the "white girl" is appealing because of her innocence; the "scent" is "alluring" because it is of the lilies. The stanza's symmetrical pattern with

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[356] For the function of the Symonsian mask, and especially the blush, in "Maquillage", "At the Cavour", and "Pastel" see John Stokes, "The Legend of Duse," *Decadence and the 1890s*, 157. See also Thornton, *Decadent Dilemma*, 142-3.

the word-repetition in the first and last lines connotes that sensuality, in a self-referential manner, departs and returns again to the image of purity. The speaker perverts normality on a similar note with Des Esseintes who famously collects real flowers that with their monstrous exoticism imitate artificial flowers. Likewise, Morbidezza is a chameleon; in a twisted logic of inverted artifice, the naturalness of chastity is employed to harbour the artifice of morbidity, of a tainted sensuality which springs from innocence. In "Nora on the Pavement" Nora's "soul" is "the burden of its own delight." But how does the attractiveness of chastity work? The "concealment" in the "whitest white's revealment" is indicative of a fascination with a hidden sensuality which is almost glimpsed at in between the lines. The absolute image of chastity is also the most mysterious. Symons utilizes the image of chastity as make-up, a sort of maquillage to construct the female body. The chaste "whiteness" is at once an accessory of the body and a part of it. In doing this, Symons views the female as a single mood, eliminating familiarity and maximizing the magnetism of what lies beneath. Morbidezza is not a person, not even a persona; she is an inflexible mask and represents the universal female with the characteristics of Salomé. The "frozen moon" does not stand only for the chaste girl but it also depicts the stiffness of her body's expression which designates mystery and suggestion. The exclamatory "but oh" suggests the inevitability by which Symons infects innocence with his morbid vision, like Dowson.

The natural features of the female body can transmute into artifice by reduction to Impressionistic colours as in "Mauve, Black, and Rose". The colours of the title signify that the body is reduced down to abstract hues, like a painting by Renoir:

> Mauve, black, and rose,
> The veils of the jewel, and she, the jewel, a rose.
>
> First, the pallor of mauve,
> A soft flood flowing about the body I love.
>
> Then, the flush of the rose,
> A hedge of roses about the mystical rose.
>
> Last, the black, and at last
> The feet that I love, and the way my love has passed.

This is the Symons who is a predecessor of Imagism, author of highly pictorial verse marked by economy and precision. The body of the speaker's love is a "jewel", an object of beauty, a refracting prism that is dismantled by the artist's gaze into the elemental components of painting and not of human anatomy.[357] The "mauve, black, and rose" refer to the skin, hair and lips/cheeks respectively. Symons clarifies that in his poem "every image used is symbolical of some of the things she wore and of parts of her body."[358] Yet it is this Impressionist, dreamy ambiguity of representation that makes such a body appealing to Symons. Even in its colour fragmentation, the body remains an enigma, exactly like the puzzling fragmentation of the metropolis.

For Max Beerbohm the function of the artifice of the façade is to conceal any clue of character and mystify the woman, in other words reduce her to her physicality. The fixed female, like Morbidezza, in being represented as a mood and the lack of plasticity designates that she never becomes prosaic by revealing herself in conversation in a Victorian drawing-room. Beerbohm elucidates:

> Artifice's first command to them [women] is that they should repose. With bodily activity their powder will fly, their enamel crack. They are butterflies who must not flit, if they love their bloom [...] Too long has the face been degraded from its rank as a thing of beauty to a mere vulgar index of character or emotion [...] the masking of the face will change this. We shall gaze at a woman merely because she is beautiful, not stare into her anxiously, as into the face of the barometer.[359]

"The Defence of Cosmetics" provides the framework of the Decadent poetic concerning body geography. It seems that Symons becomes obsessive with bodies that are reduced to iconographies. Thus the woman of "Idealism" "has no soul" because the latter is redefined and relocated. The soul of the Symonsian woman is traced in the way her body looks, that is, in her artificial iconic fixity. Therefore, returning to the example of Villier's *L'Eve Future*, Hadaly, who is the replica, surpasses the original because for Ewald she is spiritually fulfilling. The body is appealing to Symons because it is an enigma. And at times Symons remarks what happens when the Paterian Mona Lisa moment is gone as in "Emmy at the Eldorado":

> The gleam has faded from your smile;
> This grave and tender air

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[357] See also Symons's view of the representation of the woman in Watteau (*CSP*, 210).
[358] "Mauve, Black, and Rose" along with "Hands" was inspired by Marcelle, a Lesbian from the Moulin Rouge (*Memoirs*, 145).
[359] Beerbohm, *Works*, 115, 117.

Leaves you, for all but one, less fair.

The geography of the city eggs on the chance mistress, persona that is enigmatic because she naturally resist familiarization due to the city's alienating atmosphere. In this light, Symons's fascination with the Mona Lisa smile is enormously prominent throughout his oeuvre. To mention a few examples: in "In an Omnibus" her "smile" is "a treachery adorable", her "fleeting Leonardo face" has "closed lips that keep the secret in". In "Pastel" the "lyric face" is "vague", the Javanese Dancers mesmerize with their "smiles inanimate", in "To a Dancer" "Her body's melody, / In silent waves of wandering sound / Thrills [...]" Renée's mouth is "vaguely ironical" and La Mélinite is portrayed with a "morbid, vague, ambiguous grace." In "At Glan-y-Wern: White and Rose" the woman, like Morbidezza, is "a tiger-lily sheathed in white" and in the same fashion of the cult of the face we encounter "soft white little morbid hands" in "Hands".[360] The silent and ambiguous body becomes powerful because it has the ambience of the unknown (soul) about it, blurring the virginal and the whorish. Perhaps the body as artificially suggestive becomes a metaphor for the imagination and expression. In "Décor de Théâtre: III. At the Foresters" the Decadent quality of the dubious mask is fully fledged:

Divinely rosy rouged, your face
Smiles, with its painted little mouth,
Half tearfully, a quaint grimace;
The charm and pathos of your youth
Mock the mock roses of your face.

And there is something in your look
(Ambiguous, independent Flo!)
As teasing as a half-shut book;
It lures me till I long to know
The many meanings of your look:

The meaning of the word "look" is twofold: It refers both to the stare and the body's appearance. With make-up, through the enigmatic hybrid body of innocent "youth" and artifice, the speaker is perceptive of the body's "look" which gives away clues for its reading like "a half-shut book". What is hinted at behind Impressionist, Imagist patterns of fixed masks or moods constitutes the suggestive force of Symons's poetry.

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[360] For the fetish of hands see also *Amoris Victima*, "II. Amoris Exsul: V. In the Forest of Arques". For Clive Scott these "accumulations of adjectives", in Symons, "suck the sense almost to skin and bone." *Modernism: 1890 – 1930*, 214.

The "half-shut book" is the allure of the prostitute; there is a connection here with D. G. Rossetti's *Jenny* (1869). The speaker is stimulated by the image of the sleeping Jenny:

> Your silk ungirdled and unlac'd
> And warm sweets open to the waist,
> All golden in the lamplight's gleam, –
> You know not what a book you seem,
> Half-read by lightning in a dream! (48-52)[361]

This could easily be a passage by Symons. The suggestiveness of the semi-nude is playful with the simile of the "half-read" book; at the same time it is accentuated by a strong metropolitan interior. The principal element of a mask is its dubiety and mysteriousness. In "Munda Victima. IV" from *Amoris Victima*, Symons affirms, in retrospect, the appeal of inscrutability: "It was your strangeness I was amorous of." The image becomes an end in itself as the woman is reduced to a mood. The speaker of "Munda Victima" in his contemplation is "still wondering / At your unknowable and disquieting / Certainty of a fixed uncertainty." This means that paradoxically the picture speaks through a vacuum. The Decadent is wilfully, and tragically, self-deceived because the object of desire is its own mask and so hollow.

Symons's relish of the artifice of the metropolitan masked body can be grasped more deeply if one looks anthropologically into Victorian prostitution. Ronald Pearsall, in his meticulously informative *The Worm in the Bud* (1969), refers to certain handbook-manuals enumerating the whores' individual graces:

> The Victorian 'swell' looked for qualities in the prostitutes that would be inconceivable nowadays. The handbooks time after time hammered away at the genteel behaviour of such and such a woman, and expressive eyes were highly thought of; everyone went into a tizzy when legs are mentioned [...] lustiness and energy [were also valued commodities].[362]

The Victorian prostitute is made-up or constructed like the contrived Hadaly to meet the masculine gaze. She had character and individuality; the commodity is displaced from her body to the individual parts of her theatrical disguise. Symons modifies this theatricality into "strange" mixtures. His formula consists of the whorish and the

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[361] D. G. Rossetti, *The Poetical Works of Dante Gabriel Rossetti* (London: Ellis and Elvey, 1898), 84.
[362] Ronald Pearsall, *The Worm in the Bud: The World of Victorian Sexuality*, 1969 (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972), 322. See in general 321-4.

innocent; by underplaying the first, as in "Morbidezza" or the second as in "Nora on the Pavement," he augments the dynamics of suggestion. Interestingly, these "whores' directories" mentioned by Pearsall [363] are very similar in style to Symons's Impressionist essays. In his "Lautrec and the Moulin Rouge" from *Parisian Nights*, for example, he depicts portraits in a memoir-like style, of the various figures of Moulin Rouge: La Mélinite, La Goulue (*PN*, 6-9). The former (Jane Avril), who dances like a "modern [...] magical Salome" echoes Sibyl Vane's artificial appeal in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

6.2 The *Flâneurie* of Copulation: The "Bianca" Group

The hazy, languorous, and secretive cityscape is inscribed in the feminine body, a body symptomatic of the Decadent consciousness, and a sexual map that projects the pathology of the Decadent artist's *nerves*, a kind of sexual psychosis, and an ever-present condition of the *flâneur* of the boudoir. Louis Bragman, in *The British Journal of Medical Psychology* in 1932, linked Symons's condition with "escape".[364] In his attack on Decadent art Max Nordau highlighted the condition of the nerves and the city: "la névrose [...] is about even the most apparently vibrant forms of urban experience: the life of the street, pub, music hall".[365] This morbid acuteness of the senses is spotted in Poe, and is passed on in Baudelaire with his "Spleen" poems; Symons himself also detects it in Keats.[366] In his collection *Poems* (1912), Symons has added in *London Nights* the sonnet "Nerves"[367]:

> The modern malady of love is nerves.
> Love, once a simple madness, now observes
> The stages of his passionate disease,
> And is twice sorrowful because he sees,
> Inch by inch entering, the fatal knife.
> O health of simple minds, give me your life,

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[363] Pearsall, *Worm*, 323.
[364] See Louis J. Bragman, "The Case of Arthur Symons: The Psychopathology of a Man of Letters," *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 12 (1932), 346-62. Havelock Ellis, who was a close friend of Symons, thought Bragman somewhat exaggerated but partly he agreed. See S-*Letters*, 266-71.
[365] Nordau, *Degeneration*, 17-9. See also John Lucas, "Hopkins and Symons: Two Views of the City," *Fin de Siècle / Fin du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of Late Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Stokes (London: Macmillan, 1992), 64.
[366] "Keats is a Decadent before Baudelaire: like him he is Neo-Latin in his insistence on the physical symptoms of his lovers, the bodily translations of emotion" (*Memoirs*, 143).
[367] Written in 1897 but first appeared in *The Collected Works*, 1924.

And let me, for one midnight, cease to hear
The clock forever ticking in my ear,
The clock that tells the minutes in my brain.
It is not love, nor love's despair, this pain
That shoots a witless, keener pang across
The simple agony of love and loss.
Nerves, nerves! O folly of a child who dreams
Of heaven, and, waking in the darkness, screams.

The Decadent poet's neurosis is not a disorder in the strict medical sense. It is a "passionate disease," a morbid condition of hypersensitivity; a disease of hyperactive energy, as in the "Opium Smoker",[368] which is caused by the full sensory attack on the nerves.[369] The nerves also connote creativity; their importance in *The Symbolist Movement* is stressed consistently. "Love", stripped of its traditional sentiment, becomes the "modern malady", a penetrative condition that enhances the intolerability of the acute experience in a world that is swarmed by the physicality of the image. The very word "nerves" was given a new twist of meaning in the *fin de siècle*. The *OED* cites an example of 1884 by J. Tait: "The unit of sensation is a nerve-shock." The "passionate disease" is physical intensity which triggers the awareness of transience marked by the "ticking" of the "clock". This evokes the urban neurasthenia of "Leves Amores II": "I hate, until I long to break, / That clock for its tyrannic tick."

In its representation of the Decadent feminine, *London Nights* culminates in the "Bianca" group. Bianca is Lydia, a ballet-girl of the Empire, Symons's mistress with whom the poet was fatally and utterly obsessed. Bianca/Lydia stands for the ultimate *femme fatale*, a version of Franz Von Stuck's *Die Sünde* (*Sin*) (1893). In a powerful, masterly piece of prose that Beckson titles "Lydia" (*Memoirs*, 157-69), Symons attests: "Feverish, fatal, she was the most unholy mixture of complex propensities, of enigmatical surprises and surmises, of infinite perversities, of any girl I have ever known" (*Memoirs*, 162). Bianca/Lydia's "infinite perversities" could apply to her numerous variations as a suggestive glamorous sexual being as the ten poems of the "Bianca" cycle itself indicate. And the condition of the nerves is ever-present as the "Lydia" piece reveals with its vocabulary of "nerves", "feverish", "nervous exasperation".

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[368] See Karen Alkalay-Gut, "Aesthetic and Decadent Poetry," *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 246-7.
[369] Charlesworth, somewhat exaggeratingly, argues that Symons's neurotic, fleeting sensual pleasure was a result of his fear of women. *Dark Passages*, 105.

The name Bianca is the Italian form of the French name Blanche, which means white; a colour used to denote both deathliness and juvenile innocence.[370] In "I. Bianca" "The white girl hardly breathes to-night" with "So faint the pulses". Symons juxtaposes her deathlike image with her "hot" cheeks and also with the fact that her pulses "waken to a smouldering glow / The morbid faintness of her white." Her whiteness is an emitting of a "glow" and so her body is an alternative of the Whistlerian metropolis of lamplights. Her glow is "smouldering"; this means that there is an unnatural vivacity lurking beneath the mask of her pale skin: "The morbid faintness of her white." The paleness of the girl is also the reference of immense sexual energy. Symons is a great anatomist of sexual intercourse and in the second stanza the glowing girl, who is also the reticent, night cityscape, reveals her interior in terms of the sexual act:

> What drowsing heats of sense, desire
> Longing and languorous, the fire
> Of what white ashes, subtly mesh
> The fascinations of the flesh
> Into a breathing web of fire?

The sparse heat of the first stanza breaks loose here and, in an entropic manner, the white body transforms into pure sexual energy. Bianca who "hardly breathes" in the first stanza is revealed to be a "breathing web of fire". The ambiguous and deathly whiteness of the flesh triggers the consuming of the very body itself by physical pleasure like a *spontaneous combustion* ("the fire of what white ashes"). In a letter to Augustus John (1910), Symons refers to the now lost poem "The Lesbians": "Past virginal delights, till all is flame / Before me and around me, and within / This body of mine, a sin desiring sin" (S-*Letters*, 216). For Symons the frigid virginal mask can only activate the overriding immersion in sin from within, by *spontaneous combustion*. What is more, the process of consuming/consummation is portrayed effectively through Symons's use of enjambment. The Decadent paradox emerges: the "fascinations of the flesh", that echo the "masterpiece of flesh" from "Idealism", do not reduce the body to a mere sexual vessel but are celebrated through the act of self-destruction; or, in other words, the body becomes infinitely tactile or of self-

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[370] Gordon also observes that "her name suggests the whiteness of Mallarmé's androgynous Herodias and the phrase "white girl" probably picks up Whistler via Swinburne's poem, both of which have mirror images." Gordon, "Dance Macabre," 440.

consuming corporeality. The flesh has a huge impact on the poet's nerves and its intensity signifies the morbid condition of excessive energy as a disease.[371]

As the poem progresses coital anatomy unfolds, dominating the poem. The body parts that constellate across the verses of "I. Bianca", "mouth", "lips", "hands", "throat" are linked elementally, in terms of "fire", "hotness" and water: "I rain / A flood of kisses". As the poem's structure designates, the focus of the Decadent shifts from the body to the individual parts; the gaze becomes dissecting. This anatomy of copulation is developed partly from Verlaine, who in "A la Princesse Roukhine" from *Parallèlement* (1889) offers stanzas like this:

> Cuisses belles, seins redressants,
> Le dos, les reins, le ventre, fête
> Pour les yeux et les mains en quête
> Et pour la bouche et tous les sens ?[372]

Verlaine fragments the body as he fragments language, striking the "sens" impressionistically, with minimalism and immediacy.[373] Although Symons does the same, he adds the dimension of a sustained futility of the repeated collision of two strangers. In the fifth stanza,

> I set my lips on her; they close
> Into a false and phantom rose;
> Upon her thirsting lips I rain
> A flood of kisses and in vain;
> Her lips inexorably close.

The *rime riche* on the word "close" suggests that while Verlaine shatters, Symons shatters but the fragments orbit around each other. Like the wanderer of the city who aimlessly jaunts without end, the speaker of "I. Bianca" is the *flâneur* of the female body; but the sexual geography of the body, as the city, is a space in which the stroller loses himself, locked in vain wandering. The "false and phantom rose" of the kiss and the fact that "in vain; / Her lips inexorably close" indicate the artificiality of the act and that in the fashion of Derrida's *différance* the fulfilment of pleasure is infinitely

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[371] Bristow also observes: "Throughout [*London Nights*], Symons's speaker locates the intensity of sexual desire in pathological terms: morbid, sterile, shivering, fainting. [...] 'Bianca' provides the best example of how the female body is supposed to figure this perversity". "Sterile Ecstasies," 78.
[372] "Fine thighs, proud breasts, / Back, hips, belly, a feast / For eyes and searching hands, / For mouth, for all the senses." Verlaine, *Selected Poems*, 177.
[373] Stephan analyses Verlaine's "asyndetic" style of "autonomous fragments". Philip Stephan, *Paul Verlaine and the Decadence: 1882 – 90* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1974), 136.

postponed. For the Decadent, vanity serves as a vehicle for the restlessness of the artistic creation. In this sense, Bianca is also a symbol of poetry itself and Symons's restless relationship with her suggests his ambition to achieve *la veritè vraie*.

Bianca's artificial mask of whiteness is double-edged and its employment plays also upon the motif of maidenhood. Recalling Swinburne's intense sexual obsession with virginity in "Fragoletta" and sterile sexual force in "Anactoria", Symons writes in the third and sixth stanzas respectively:

> The desert of virginity
> Aches in the hotness of her mouth.
>
> Her body that abandoned lies,
> Rigid with sterile ecstasies,

The word "sterile" for the Decadent has a special connotation. It can either signify defiance or insinuate a sort of tragic pathos. Sterility itself has a double-edge which is enhanced in the poem; it applies both to the state of virginity and that of prostitution; both states are anti-reproductive, negating the imperialist Victorian model of the progressive nuclear family. Virginity is a projection of the nerves, which is potentially explosive; its sterility signifies its morbid perception. The coexistence of these lines suggests that the possibilities of the celibate and prostituted body are played out. Indisputably Bianca shares something with the iconic Salomé, the mythical cult figure of Decadence, who embodies the morbid blend of virginity and whorishness.

The body of Bianca bears the inscription of the metropolitan landscape not only in terms of her aquatic and dreamy feel and texture that recalls Impressionism, but also of the "glow" of her skin which is an analogue of the night-lit city. Her body is also inscribed as the maziness of London in terms of Symons's imagery of tangle, which alludes to the division or fragmentation of the city in building blocks: the speaker says that the "fascinations of the flesh" "mesh" into a "breathing web". In stanza six Bianca's hands "entwine" and "a shiver knits her flesh" to the speaker's. The labyrinthine interlocking of limbs or flesh, which is starkly an expression of sexual intercourse, relates to the same physical entity: the entwining hands are both Bianca's, the knitting of the flesh results in one body.[374] This subtly suggests the

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[374] On this point Gordon argues that Bianca "is a personification of desire, frozen within an orgasm which is auto-erotic." Gordon, "Dance Macabre," 440.

"sterile ecstasies" that exist in the same way the circularities of the dance are defined in the city.

Inversely, the metropolis can be an inscription of the sexualised body, as in many of Symons's poems like "City Nights: I. In the Train" with the "eyes of the streets." Michelle Sipe discusses Symons's city as "feminized" in terms of the Symonsian persona as a "virile hero": "By figuring the city as feminine vagueness and fragment, he puts a decadent spin on the rather familiar trope of woman as the fictional ground from which to write and affirm a coherent masculine identity."[375] But the eroticized city does not stem only from discourses of Victorian masculinity; it corresponds to the body on the level of the impression and anatomization of sex. Perhaps the best example is Alfred Douglas's "Impression de Nuit" from *The City of the Soul* (1899):

> That's the great town at night: I see her breasts,
> Pricked out with lamps they stand like huge black towers,
> I think they move! I hear her panting breath.
> And that's her head where the tiara rests.
> And in her brain, through lanes as dark as death,
> Men creep like thoughts…The lamps are like pale flowers.[376]

This is a quintessentially Symonsian poem, with the rampant artifice of "lamps" as "pale flowers". The metropolis has undergone hyperbolic dissemination in the form of a woman's body parts. The "great town" is feminized; the gigantic labyrinthine female-city is also her own "brain" – the projection of the mazy consciousness of the Decadent – and its "lanes" that are "as dark as death" represent both the body's mystery of suggestion and the Decadent's restless confusion, and his *flâneurie* in the city and in the woman. The simile of the "brain"/"thoughts", "lanes"/"men" – recalling Monet's *Boulevard des Capucines* (1873) – suggests that men are the *flâneurs* of a mapped eroticized body. In the same manner, Symons is the explorer of Bianca's body parts, her paleness is a series of "lamps" of the city and "thought" is entirely converted to the physical manoeuvres of copulation. In an interesting passage in his essay "Constantin Guys" Symons locates the stroller in a nightscape which "is the *bizarre* and dubious hour when the sky's curtains are closed and the street-lamps are lighted" (*PN*, 15). He eroticizes the nocturnal metropolis with the "curtains" being

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[375] Sipe, *Romancing the City*, 73.
[376] Alfred Douglas, *The City of the Soul* (London: Grant Richards, 1899).

her body's garments highlighting the mystery that lies beneath the façade of "street-lamps".

The implications of the *flâneurie* of the flesh clearly propelled by Douglas's "Impression de Nuit" subsist even more strongly in Symons's own "Ambiguë", a sonnet found in the "Symons Papers" in Princeton University and first published by Karl Beckson in *Memoirs* (81). Symons states that the sonnet is about the Café Royal and is "modernity in poetry" (*Memoirs*, 81). It features the ambiguous Mona Lisa-like woman whom the speaker calls "Sphinx"; and her "mystery" is the source of his fascination. But there is an ingenious twist: the *femme fatale* described is not a woman but Café Royal itself: "Strange eyes, so cold, so mirror-like, whose smile / Lures, but declares not?" and "gaze [with] jewelled brilliance". According to this depiction, the eyes could be the illuminated windows of the building which is unfeasible for them to "declare", only lure. Also the speaker exclaims that the man "holds you by his purse-strings, while he can". This implies that the luxuries of Café Royal are enjoyed as long as the "purse-strings" can reach. The metropolitan space is feminized, eroticised, and prostituted. Here Benjamin's cult of the commodity also rings relevant. In the sestet, the multiple enjambments with colons and commas communicate a sense of confusion and indeed the sonnet itself becomes "ambiguë". The last line is perplexing: to the question of "what lies beneath" the ambiguous smile the answer is "Her if the snake is in your paradise." If "paradise" is the Café Royal, by "Her", is Symons referring to a woman *within* the Café? And is the "snake" biblical Satan or man who seduces or even penetrates? Symons here articulates the poetics of *flâneurie* in a topography inscribed as flesh.

Akin to "I. Bianca" is a short, but dense, piece in the group, "VII. Presages". The poem, whose title is linked to the concept of time, captures, in Baudelairian mood, the very essence of the Decadent's nerves. Bianca embodies Pater's *moment passant* which here is the register of Bataille's pair of eroticism and death. The difference from Wilde's "Charmides" is that in Symons the agony of futility is a heightened personal drama. Here is "VII. Presages" in its entirety:

> The piteousness of passing things
> Haunts her beseeching eyes, the stir
> Of those appealing lips, and stings
> My senses, hungering for her,
> With over-much delight, that brings
> A presage of departing things.

Death in her lilied whiteness lives,
The shadow of Death's eternal lust
After the delicate flesh that gives
The life of lilies to the dust.
Ah, if thy lust my love forgives,
Death, spare this whitest flesh that lives.

The "passing things" are objects of immense tactile pleasure and their "piteousness" "stings" the speaker's "senses". The "senses" are the nerves that react intensely to the attack ("sting") of pleasure and produce a *frisson*. The pleasure of Bianca's body for the speaker's senses is overwhelming, unbearable; the delight is "over-much". Subsequently, the "departing things", because they are departing, become infinitely palpable; the poet is overcome by the Decadent image itself in a perceptible timescape. The object that stimulates the nerves, Bianca, is deathlike as before. She becomes the ultimate metaphor of the transitoriness enhanced in the first stanza. "Death" "lives" is an oxymoron suggesting a morbid reconditioning of Death, and Bianca's "lilied whiteness" is a hyperbole; both poetic figures denote Symons's disorderly and neurotic response to the overwhelming carnal body. Bianca's body is transformed to a poetic juncture of death and sex ("Death's eternal lust"). Symons simulates the consuming force of Death with that of unbridled "lust" and the white female body as Death becomes a comment on the "passing things", simultaneously mirroring the Decadent's pleasure as a morbid or nervous state of mind.

The pale lady, who is an intersection of death and the fleeting craze of sex, features prominently in "Rosa Alba", a sonnet added in *London Nights* later in the collection *Poems* (1902). The speaker asserts that

The beauty of no woman to my flesh
Is intimate spirit if she be not pale;
I love not roses that are dewy fresh
If on a cheek they tell no passionate tale;

Symons's sexuality certainly attains a morbid dimension in the formula of the fused incompatibles paleness and passion. The play between these two elements generates morbid suggestion. Symons confuses the boundaries of death and sexual passion:

And passion is the after-sunset breath
That withers them, wrinkling their petals white;
Also, since love is next of kin to death,
Let love foreshow the colours of that night.

There is a whiteness of thrice mortal fire,
And of this ardency immaculate,
Which is the seal of perfected desire,

White and red as death and life respectively merge in a devastating Paterian temporality. The adjacency of "love" and "death" and dangerous interplay of "whiteness" and "fire" hint again at a *spontaneous combustion* in which the corpse-like female body is converted into pure fire. This is linked with the neurasthenic self and the mechanics of the intensity of the senses; the speaker states: "I would some ardent weariness should speak." The image prevails, conveying a near-pathological fierceness of the senses that threaten to blot out the verbal sign. The speaker responds to the challenging mystery of the woman's "paleness"; the morbidity of the mask and the neurosis of the poet/explorer go hand in hand. Symons also writes in what could be Bataille's ideal definition of sex and death: "the infernal fascination of Sex [...] has been my chief obsession. One's own Vitality: that is a centre of Life and of Death" (*Memoirs*, 138). The comment is also an insight into his imagery of consummation by fire.

The "Bianca" poems anatomize sex in a variation of moods, especially the device of masking the female body, aestheticizing and eroticizing it in Decadent terms. In "II. Benedictine" the mask which animates Bianca is the sense of taste and aroma from the alcoholic intoxicant. Sexual activity is reduced and focused on the fluid nature of the kiss: "My kiss shall be a bee that sips / A fainting roseleaf flushed with rains." The poem is dominated by "moist" "lips" and "kisses" in a hydraulic manner in which the act of kissing is also the act of drinking: Benedictine itself is the languorous woman. Her body is transformed into a pure sensory experience and the exchange of fluids in the kissing process not only stands for the explicitness of sexual intercourse, but also links with the dreamy, hazy filters through which the gaze of the poet views the cityscape. The tendency of Decadence to associate through synaesthesia allows one to read paintings such as Claude Monet's *Waterloo Bridge in Fog* (1899-1901) as the chemical processes of bodies in sexual congress.[377] The foggy texture of the painting displays the orgasmic effects of Symons's feminized Benedictine.

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[377] Pushing the point further: the phallic/vaginal imagery of the painting.

In "IX. Wine of Circe" the mysterious girl of the city interiors is elevated into deity. The Bianca/Lydia of the London dens is perceived as a mythic figure;[378] by doing this, Symons creates curious dynamics of the metropolitan deity. The poem is almost a quasi-pornographic exercise. Imagery suggestive of orgasmic sexuality hints at a Decadent longing, possibly a futile longing, to *integrate* with the object of copulation. So, the speaker in "IX. Wine of Circe" asserts: "I would die exquisitely, of the bliss / Of one intense, intolerable kiss." A few lines later, the propensity of the bodies to incorporate each other is starkly emphatic: "you strain me close, / Pantingly close, against your breast."

Circe's body is conveyed through imagery of climate and landscape; she resembles the hazy and shimmering Impressionist city in which the Symonsian *flâneur* wallows: Symons is a modern Odysseus (wanderer), not just of the city, but also of Circe's body. Here the accessory which refracts and contributes to the artificial appeal of the body is wine. Through the fiery and watery aspect of the intoxicant, Symons represents Circe as a lustful force undergoing a synaesthetic metamorphosis:

> the rose
> Of your lips reddens to a rose of fire,
> That sinks and wavers, odorously, nigher.
> And your breast beats upon me like a sea
> Of warmth and perfume, ah! engulphing me
> Into the softness of its waves that cover
> My drowning senses amorously over.

Utilizing the elemental fluidity of fire and water, Symons magnifies the coital act to a dreamy and submerging experience in a Freudian, womb-like state. It evokes "The Opium Smoker" with its synaesthetic eroticism: "I am engulphed, and drown deliciously / Soft music like a perfume, and sweet light [...]", or even the sensualised landscape of "VIII. Twilight" from *Amoris Victima*. The "engulphing" "sea / Of warmth and perfume" is a hyperbole for the female's rampant sexual appetite and, also evokes the aquatic texture of the Impressionist city that so prominently features in Symons's *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*. Symons writes that the love between him and Lydia (Bianca-Circe) "submerged our bodies and our souls on the storm tossed waves of an infinite sea (*Memoirs*, 160). In the same manner the Symonsian *flâneur* is surrounded by the fluidly foggy streets and dens of nocturnal London, Symons is also

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[378] See Beckson, *Symons*, 117. Moreover, Symons in the "Lydia" piece portrays Lydia as numerous mythic figures: Lilith, Astarte, Artemis, Demeter, Helen of Troy, Circe.

encircled by the cityscape of the feminine form. In a reversal of *flâneurie*, Symons's fantasy of the hyper-erotic woman entails exploration of his body from her part: "your magnetic finger-tips / Race in a maze of circles up my arm". Circe/Bianca is an interpretation of Odysseus/Symons as a secret journeyman of exotic pleasures, devoid of the "nostalgia" for any Penelope.

Yet, both in "I. Bianca" and "II. Benedictine" sex expresses the Symonsian insatiable craving for the flesh. In the penultimate stanza of "II. Benedictine" the speaker says: "Yet still my thirst of you increases, / I thirst beneath your thirsty kisses." These are lines that echo "I. Bianca": "in vain; / Her lips inexorably close." The frivolity of Symons's attempt to unite totally with the flesh manifest in the "sterile ecstasies" ("I. Bianca") is the symptom of his intense nerves. Nerves are the Decadent's morbid driving force; they compel the *flâneur* of the body, like the *flâneur* of the city, to be in constant search for a cryptic pleasure, or *la vérité vraie*, which is infinitely deferred, and yet, it is realized through its own process. The poem reflects on the excessive frivolity of flesh in its final stanza where the speaker exclaims, "tempt me more in vain," "I dare not taste again / Your lips that suck my soul away!" Self-awareness is the agent which here enhances the ultimate nervous collapse. Vampirism, which in Symons's diction is connoted by the verb "suck", is craftily utilized generally in his verse to give a new twist to sexual representation as the intensity of the Decadent's nervous system.

The chameleonic masking of Bianca in the final section of *London Nights* is a projection of a series of solipsistic fantasies. "V. Escalade" is a poem which, again through sexual anatomy, subtly suggests that Bianca is a vampire. The imagery of kissing provides the locale in which, this time, the female is the active invader of the body in a reversal of roles and the speaker/Symons is the feminized, passive receptor. Here, *she* is the "bee that sips." Her lips

> Advance to vanquish my resistance,
> And, in a passionate persistence,
> Clinging closer, fold on fold,
> They suck my lips into their hold.

The vampiric predator is another form of disguise for the Symonsian woman, along with the personae of the virgin and the prostitute. Here Bianca's aggressive transformed role, like Lucy's vampiric transformation as an erotic *femme fatale* in

Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), is clearly defined with the kiss (bite) in the neck. Bianca's lips start

> Hungrily to fasten in
> Upon my neck, as they would gloat
> On the protesting veins that tingle
> As they and your deep kisses mingle,
> Your kisses burning in my throat.

The speaker who addresses the vampire woman is in a state of ritualistic masochism of the kind Swinburne exhibits in *Dolores*: "O lips full of lust and of laughter / Curled snakes that are fed from my breast, / Bite hard [...]". In this reversal of sexual power, the "escalade" represents the peak of copulation, the releasing of spermatic fluids which, here, is encoded in vampiric imagery as his "blood" is "pouring over me and under / Scented billows of soft thunder." The aggressive female vampire is a type sketched by Symons, for instance, in his reminiscence of La Goulue, one of the Moulin Rouge dancers: "La Goulue was a strange and tall girl, with a vampire's face, the profile of a bird of prey, a tortured mouth, and metallic eyes" (*PN*, 4). By employing vampirism the speaker assumes the role of the woman as a carnal vessel in what could be Symons's act of the sterile mirroring of the self.

"X. Liber Amoris" is the climactic poem of *London Nights*, a manifesto of Decadent morality (or amorality) and a recapitulation of all the recurring issues that appear in the bulk of Symons's volumes. In the introductory strophe, the poet taints Victorian morality by posing the question: "What's virtue Bianca?" The image verifies its role as the conveyer of Symons's Decadent aesthetic; the abstract "virtue" gives way to the "diverse imaginings" of the "savour of forbidden things." The materialist poet, who finds *la vérité vraie* in the image of mystified lovemaking, audaciously discloses his perverse fantasy to Bianca, running the risk of demystification by ruminating it:

> Bianca, I tell you, no delights
> Of long, free, unforbidden nights,
> Have richlier filled and satisfied
> The eager moments as they died,
> Than your voluptuous pretence
> Of unacquainted innocence,

The poet breaks idealized love to its Paterian moments of sensation. Love is not abstract emotion but a stringing together of an Impressionist series of vivid sensations. Love, reversely, lasts for a moment but its intensity is infinite; and this is a connection to the Decadent nerves. The paradox of the mask accommodates this phenomenon. Bianca, with her "voluptuous pretence", is enacting the sexual intercourse as a girl of "innocence"; she is an actress of the bedroom in the same way La Mélinite is a performer of the music-hall. This is the point for the poet. Her artifice is her natural condition and this is observed in the paradoxical juxtaposition of the words "pretence" and "unacquainted". Although "innocence" is a visual pose, it is experienced as natural. Artifice and acting, however, by definition lead to a deadlock which is the appeal to Symons. The latter talks about

> That sterile and mysterious bliss,
> Mysterious, and yet to me
> Deeper for that dubiety.

Symons's poetic method develops the dynamics of sterility, masking, and suggestiveness. The "bliss" is "sterile" because it is dubious. The Decadent formula of "dubiety" marks Symons's wilful self-deception, the artifice in the act of perceiving on-the-spot experience as fantasy.

The poem, by means of utilization of the "dubious" female, makes a case for the notion of the image at the expense of abstract emotion. This is evident in Symons's metaphor of love: emotional love represents abstract discourse, whereas carnal sex and the materiality of the flesh stand for the realization of the senses, that is, the Decadent image. In his sardonic and cynical attitude towards conventional love, Symons's "brain found rest / On some unanalytic breast." In such a manner the poet can assert that there are "No sophistries to ravel out", "Only the good firm flesh to hold, / The love well worth its weight in gold." The image as a powerful multi-sensory experience affirms itself by eliminating the anti-image: love as Victorian sentimentalism. This stripped-down directness is further developed:

> Love, sinking from the infinite,
> Now just enough to last one night.
> So the simplicity of flesh

> Held me a moment in its mesh [...][379]

Again the poet asserts that love is reduced from the "infinite", a term clearly used in a mocking context, to a spatial and temporal minimum: "simplicity of flesh" and "moment" respectively. Indeed, the immediacy and "simplicity" of the flesh are qualities observable in the corpus of Symons's poetry itself. Nonetheless, the word "mesh" contradicts "simplicity". Symons's point is that the simple and repetitive patterns of his verse have also a certain intricacy. It is through the intricacy of the labyrinthine geography of the female body that the mystery of suggestion comes into sight for the explorer of the flesh (or the *flâneur* of the city). The morphological adjacency of "flesh" and "mesh" reinforces the connection. The fact that "love" is reduced to "flesh" is a thematic variation from Verlaine, who, in his sonnet "Luxures" from *Jadis et Naguère* talks about "Chair! ô seul fruit mordu des vergers d'ici-bas."[380] In diction consistent with Symons's "mesh" of the "flesh", Verlaine declares: "Et la fileuse c'est la Chair".[381]

Bianca, like La Mélinite or the Javanese Dancers, becomes the ultimate icon in which Symons tends to mix all the workings of his Decadent image: intricacy of body, suggestion of ambiguity, intensity of nerves. The poet of "X. Liber Amoris" professes:

> Only the aching sense of sex
> Wholly controls, and does perplex,
> With dubious drifts scarce understood,
> The shaken currents of your blood;
> It is your ambiguity
> That speaks to me and conquers me,

The diction of the poem reinforces the impact of the senses; the "aching sense of sex" is a *frisson*, a Swinburnian condition which strikes the nerves in the perception of pleasure as pain. The Decadent dandy's coital neurosis is an endeavour to penetrate the artificially perceived mysteriousness of the female, an exploration, a *flâneurie*. The word "perplex" has a double edge: It connotes both mystery of appearance, and copulation as a confusing and intricate structure, an act mapped in timespace

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[379] Compare with *Amoris Victima*, "Mundi Victima. X.": "And the cold purity of pearls enmesh / Your throat that keeps my kisses in its flesh." Here the Impressionism of *LN* attains Wildean, decorative overtones.
[380] "Flesh! The one fruit we bite in this world's orchards". Verlaine, *Poems*, 129.
[381] "And the weaver is the Flesh." Verlaine, *Poems*, 129.

("dubious drifts"). The poet stresses that Bianca's "ambiguity" "speaks", a verb which, despite the fact that it suggests verbalism, is displaced in terms of its use, signifying the language of vision densely contained in the noun "ambiguity". In a torrent of obsessive thoughts the poet sketches the feminine by mixing the incompatible elements of "strangeness":

> And your strange reticences, strange
> Concessions, your elusive change,
> The strangeness of your smile, the faint
> Corruption of your gaze, a saint
> Such as Luini loved to paint.

Bianca as the ultimate Decadent icon is ingeniously substantiated. The root "strange" is thrice repeated showing the poet's obsession with the Mona Lisa-like woman. In mentioning the work of Bernardino Luini, Symons may have had in mind the ambiguous beckoning of *Susanna* (1515) or the *Portrait of a Young Woman* (1525). Sainthood and "corruption" are contained in the word "strange" and are inseparable and indistinguishable. The Impressionist suggestiveness of the icon is the source of its power. The Paterian time of the passing individual moments, also falls into place with Bianca's "elusive change", her protean image is always escaping, hence, always in clash with the nerves of the poet-explorer. The intensity of the nerves in relation to the savoured moment becomes manifest at the end of the poem, where the speaker asserts his Decadent morality which goes beyond notions such as "virtue" and "vice". Subtly criticizing Dantean and Miltonic traditions, he refers to the "soul", stressing that "Paradise" is not "heaven", "nor hell",

> Nay, but a subtlier intense
> Unsatisfied appeal of sense,
> Ever desiring, ever near
> The goal of all its hope and fear,
> Ever a hair's – breadth from the goal.
> So Bianca satisfies my soul.

This "subtlier intense" experience that is constantly deferred is the sensual or artistic neurosis which is infinitesimally close to resolution, yet never reaching an end. The poet of *London Nights* is locked in a restless, inward journey of the nerves into the sexual landscape, as he is also locked in an endless wandering as the Decadent dandy and stroller in the streets of the limbo-like city. Through Bianca-Lydia, Symons

universalizes the craving for the flesh, and this is the artist's ultimate neurosis: "This insensate crying of the flesh of men for women, of women for men; this hatred, born of too much love, of too much isolation" (*Memoirs*, 168). Bianca as the spatial body of Symons's neurosis is the looking glass through which his solipsistic self is magnified. Going back to the "Prologue" of *London Nights*, Symons projects his solipsism by using the familiar imagery of the music-hall. The space of the "music-hall" represents "the impotence of rage", that is, the Decadent artist's nerves. The solipsist poet, watching the performance from the stalls avers that "It is my very self I see / Across the cloudy cigarette." The Impressionist haziness, either of the city nightscape, or of the music hall, or eventually of the female body, hypertrophies the artist's self in an unbearable feat of self-awareness which generates his morbid neurosis. Paradoxically, in "X. Liber Amoris" Bianca's body "satisfies" the speaker's "soul". The word "soul" is finally evacuated of its traditional meaning. Its use connotes that the tactility of the image converts the soul into flesh. The power of the senses nullifies morality and the soul is consumed by and morphed into the Decadent image.

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Symons's later volumes lose the *hic-et-nunc* actuality of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* and become predominantly retrospective. In *Amoris Victima* the impact of the flesh upon the nerves is mediated through memory and contemplation, achieving a new pitch of artifice: "tears and memories" are "fashioning / Your beauty" ("IV. Mundi Victima: X."). [382] The influence of Yeats's mystical treatment of sexuality flavours the volume from the opening sonnet sequence which echoes the lover's journey in *The Wind Among the Reeds*. Later, in "Conclusion: The Choice" (1900), Symons formulates the aesthetic of the post-Paterian moment of sensation: "Art begins when a man wishes to immortalise the most vivid moment he has ever lived. Life has already, to one not an artist, become art in that moment."[383] This could be a succinct articulation of the Decadent image as experience is fixed; it is not without problems though as it is the art of the memoir writer.

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[382] In the passage that ensues Symons contrives a jewel-like beauty which – by the phrase "You shall be" – echoes Wilde and specifically Herod's speech in *Salome*.
[383] Symons, *Studies in Prose and Verse*, 290.

The sonnet sequence "Amoris Victima" is Symons's personal drama. In sonnet XI the speaker treads "these London streets again" where "the old poisonous mist of memories / Rises" again. The "old desire / Quickens along my veins in sharper fire". These poems manifest the revenge of the flesh. Symons's speaker is a Faustian figure and the lover of the previous volumes has turned into a contrived Helen, a "disguise" as in "X. Sleepless Night" and "III. Disguises". The latter, for instance, typifies the condition of the volume:

> O rapture of lost days, all that remains
> Is but this fever aching in my veins.
>
> I do not know you under this disguise:
> I am degraded by my memories.

The speaker is not just haunted by the past experience; he conjures it in order to *relive* it. In Symons the word "veins" has a semantic proximity to "nerves" and here one can detect a touch of punning that indicates "vain". Indeed the theme of retrospection becomes a symbolic comment on the vanity of the collision of the flesh through its sheer impossibility. The spectre of the past lover becomes a projection; it ultimately showcases the artist's self in perpetual dissatisfaction and unrest. The futile cry for sex is expressed with obsession and force in "Amoris Victima: IV", where the lost lover has "grown / Part of my flesh, and nearer than my own". The lines express a nearness and tactility of the flesh but also the reminder of the impossibility of reunion, and the successive, brainstorming multiple repetition of "I want you" stress the tragedy of a Faustian predicament. In "Faustus and Helen" "it is she / Who shows me my own image in her eyes"; Helen: "I in them / Their desire". Poetic language is treated as a sort of erotomanic Pygmalionism. Lionel Johnson wrote that "in English, *décadence*" is about "when thought thinks upon itself, and when emotions become entangled with the consciousness of them."[384] In light of this, the conjured icon of pleasure is registered on the textual surface which only echoes the Self as it exclaims: "And hollow, hollow, hollow can it be / My voice that sounds so strangely in my ears?"[385] ("Amoris Victima: XII"). The futility of these powerful lines is echoed in Tennyson's "The Passing of Arthur" (1869) where Gawain's ghost whispers: "hollow,

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[384] Johnson, *Hobby Horse* 6, 64.
[385] See also Stokes, "The Legend of Duse", *Decadence and the 1890s*, 152. Also "Symons's model of sexual perversity: it leaves the Decadent poet confronted with himself – and not a female dancer – as the object of his desire." Bristow, "Sterile Ecstasies," 81.

hollow, hollow all delight" (37).[386] This self-reflexivity, in which the poetic text itself is aligned with the inanimate sterile flesh, is the final symptom of the quest for images.[387] The poem, as well as the soulless woman, ricochets on the poet. The motif of hollowness and echoing words recalls Wilde's dialogues in their endless self-reflection, pointing to Aesthetic sterility. But when the self is perturbed by this process, the Aesthetic turns into the Decadent.

The tragedy of the Decadent is the inherent flaw of the Paterian moment: transience. The ephemeral pleasure ultimately stands for mortality: this idea is epitomized in the symbolic "Modern Beauty" from *Images of Good and Evil*, where Beauty "is to men the death of their desire." Modern beauty is the collective Decadent image: it possesses the immutability of Aesthetic Beauty; however "modern" stands for "Decadent" because it moves from the appreciatory distance of Aestheticism to interaction: "The world has been my mirror, time has been / My breath upon the glass;" and in Shelleyan fashion Beauty is the "torch" and "what to me / If the moth die of me?" The torch-moth motif captures perfectly the perverse and destructive attraction of the artist to the Image. It opens and closes the poem suggesting futile circularity. The Symonsian speaker himself turns into the automaton he is attracted by in poems like "Javanese Dancers". The elements of fire and sexual consummation that feature profusely in Symons's poetry, with the torch-moth motif, are put into perspective.

Regardless of the fact that Symons's later poetry is painfully aware of the tragic entrapment of the self in the flesh, it is also a celebratory endeavour to return to it. This return entails the annulment of the "soul" or its morphing into body. In the last section of "Mundi Victima" the speaker exclaims: "Finally I commend myself to you, / Multitudinous senses," "And bid my soul from lust to lust to be hurled, / Endlessly, precipitously, on". He is like an antinomian expiring Christ whose only god is the senses. His passive, servile attitude to lust does not belittle the soul but justifies its existence as a counterpoise to the senses reminding one of the painful non-fulfillment that accompanies them. And yet again, the soul clearly mutates to the way of the flesh in defiance as in *The Loom of Dreams* (1901). In "The Ecstasy" the speaker asks,

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[386] Alfred Lord Tennyson, *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (Essex: Longman: 1989), 961.
[387] Compare also with "Unattained Delight" from *Knave of Hearts* (1894-1908) (publ. 1913).

"what is this reverence in extreme delight?" and in "Beata Beatrix" he refers to "our lips that are our souls."

The soul appears to be dismissed; however, the playlet "Faustus and Helen" is a profound exercise on the body-soul paradox and the transience of beauty. In his opening monologue Faustus argues fanatically against the soul so that "I form out of my soul / A bodily Helen, whom these eyes behold". This is an oxymoron that tragically conveys the unreality of Helen's body. The "eyes", the sense of image, are crucial: indeed, as in all of Symons's poetry, Helen is a vision, a textual surface and nothing more. Essentially, she is the projection of Faustus/Symons's desires. Helen is fashioned in perfection and so she is a descendant of Villiers Adam's Hadaly. Symons's painful awareness of his limitation is summed up in "IV. Mundi Victima: III": "Voice of the Flesh! This is the voice that speaks, / In agony of spirit [...] Because desire dare not desire relief." Symons is locked in a wilful Sisyphean journey, his version of the Decadent image.

7. "The Roses Fall, the Pale Roses Expire": The Expiring Image in Ernest Dowson's Poetry

The fairest things in life are Death and Birth,
And of these two the fairer thing is Death.
Francis Thompson, "Ode to the Setting Sun"[388]

ERNEST Dowson writes in one of his numerous letters to Arthur Moore: "I have passed the week, in a consuming ennui, tristesse, spleen, and nostalgia of everything." Later on he concludes: "A sense of perfect desolation about – damp, decay dreariness: incapacity to meet all possible events: one's mind grows as grey as the river!"[389] These sentences encapsulate the themes and moods that permeate Dowson's poetry. Unlike the emphasis on posing and theatricality found in Wilde and Symons, the Decadent quality of Dowson's poetry seeks to communicate a sense of unmediated authenticity. Dowson's images do not dwell on ornamental surfaces as in Wilde or on intense intoxicated moments as in Symons. They are inward, deepening and obsessive, forming a hall of mirrors that endlessly reflect themselves in an attempt to fathom the vanity and tragedy of human existence. They belong to a late nineteenth-century version of Romantic Classicism: the brevity, simplicity and completeness of Classicism, as it is formulated by Matthew Arnold, [390] are combined with the yearning of Romanticism.

The Dowsonian image is autumnal, falling, declining, literally Decadent (one recalls that the etymological root of "decadent", the latin *cadere*, means "to fall"). Dowson's "ennui, tristesse, spleen, and nostalgia" amount to an *ubi sunt* mood and are mapped out in his private poetic imagery of Catholic ritual, youth, dead little girls, pale roses and barren, sad landscapes. His poetic oeuvre is a grand but restrained movement towards the state of premature death. This movement has Romantic origins as in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" where the speaker is "half in love with easeful Death" (52). John Reed's idea of a "Decadent style" is "an autumnal, frustrated

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[388] Francis Thompson, *The Poems of Francis Thompson*, 1937 (London: OUP, 1941), 96.
[389] Ernest Dowson, *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, eds. Desmond Flower and Henry Maas (London: Cassell, 1967), 189-190.
[390] Arnold reasserts the Classical style in the compilation of lectures *On Translating Homer* (1961).

mood" (*DS*, 11).[391] If Symons is an active *flâneur*, Dowson is a passive drifter. For Linda Dowling Dowson's style is shaped by "Pater's *ascêsis* and 'economy'" and typified by "poetic reductionism" (*LaD*, 204, 205-10). And for Reed, the tissue of Dowson's imagery is "the consequence of a painful idealism."[392] Dowson traces this painful idealism chiefly in the child. In "The Cult of the Child" (1889), published in *The Critic*, the acting of the child-actress is "artistic" because "in childhood we are all spontaneously dramatic" and he stresses the value of receiving "from the beauty of childhood, in art as in life, an exquisite pleasure" (D-*Letters*, 433, 434). Dowson accelerates life to a beyond-death utopia represented by childhood and thus Symons in his memoir in the *Savoy* aptly finds "hidden away like a secret, all the fever and turmoil and the unattained dreams of a life which had itself so much of the swift, disastrous, and suicidal impetus of genius."[393]

7.1 "To Crave of Your Viaticum"

Roman Catholicism supplies a dominant strain of imagery especially in *Verses* (1896).[394] On one level, it is a device by which Dowson's poetic personae are allowed to retreat into a monastic, secluded and isolated world; they avert their gaze from the flux of the modernizing Victorian world.[395] The exemplar of this is "The Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration", a poem in which Dowson conjures up the sterilized enclosed space "behind high convent walls" and the "impenetrable gate". The nuns strive to "put away desire" by escaping in a recluse, a "sanctuary" which is like a protecting dream-world as "Mary's sweet Star dispels for them the night, / The proper darkness of humanity".[396] In the symbol of the nuns Dowson sees the endeavour to escape the human condition of ever-persisting and consuming desire. The dominant image of Christ is the Roman Catholic transposition or replacement of desire from the human

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[391] See esp. for Dowson *DS*, 109-13. For a general discussion that outlines Dowson's poetic themes see Pittock, *Spectrum*, 135-42.
[392] John R. Reed, "Bedlamite and Pierrot: Ernest Dowson's Esthetic of Futility," *ELH* 35.1 (1968), 97.
[393] Arthur Symons, "A Literary Causerie: On a Book of Verses," *The Savoy* 4 (1896), 93.
[394] For an in-depth analysis between the connections of Decadence and Catholicism see Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1997).
[395] For a discussion on the tradition of the echoes and allusions of recluse imagery see Reed, "Bedlamite and Pierrot," 95-6.
[396] Here the poem closely alludes to Dowson's story "Apple Blossom in Brittany" in which Campion's and Marie-Ursule's "eyes alike sought instinctively the Convent of the Ursulines, white and sequestered in the valley – a visible symbol of security, of peace, perhaps of happiness" (*SED*, 105).

to the divine: "their prayers and penances / Are fragrant incense to the Sacrificed." Yeats writes in *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922) that Dowson's "poetry shows how sincerely he felt the fascination of religion, but his religion had certainly no dogmatic outline, being but a desire for a condition of virginal ecstasy."[397] For Dowson purity is the most perfect of the dream-states he variously builds.

Yet the Decadent artist is above all human and so earthbound desire haunts him ad infinitum. There is an undertone of irony subtly embedded in the poem. Disjointed by commas, the first words of the poem arouse suspicion: "Calm, sad, secure". The word "secure" carries strong irony by exaggeration and this is enhanced by the word "sad". The nuns' sadness is a sign of vulnerability; their fundamental flaw is knowledge and experience as "They saw the glory of the world displayed" and "They knew the roses of the world should fade". There is an acute self-awareness of the mortality of the self which cannot be discarded. Even though the nuns' "comeliness was vanity" outside the sanctuary, inside they "heed not time; their nights and days they make / Into a long returning rosary". They struggle to defeat time but their ascetic existence is monotonous to the degree of vanity as the "long returning rosary" suggests. Their penances are characterized by a pattern of ritualistic repetition; the "rosary" is a circular Catholic image which represents the circular irresolution of the poem, its stanzas serving as the rosary's beads. In the last stanza,

> Calm, sad, secure; with faces worn and mild:
> Surely their choice of vigil is the best?
> Yea! for our roses fade, the world is wild;
> But there, beside the altar, there is rest.

Oxymoronically the adverb "surely" is undermined by the uncertainty of a question mark. The loud assertion "Yea!" indicates that the security of the nuns' monastic existence could be precarious. If vanity exists without but also inside the religious ground then the "high convent walls" could be an illusion, not unlike the illusionary escape provided for Dowson by absinthe. The nuns are a complex, perhaps self-contradictory image of "virginal ecstasy", as Yeats avers, and also a means for aestheticizing the self-awareness of painful desires; "emotion" becomes "exquisite artefact" instead of "cry of anguish" as Joseph Salemi contends.[398] The imagery of

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[397] Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 311.
[398] Joseph Salemi, "The Religious Poetry of Ernest Dowson," *The Victorian Newsletter* 72 (1987), 44.

Catholicism operates as the Decadent's re-enactment or substitution of desire, a phenomenon conveyed to perfection in the famous poem "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae".

A piece strikingly similar to "The Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration" is "Carthusians" from *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (1899).[399] The "high convent walls" and "impenetrable gate" of the "Nuns" here become "austere walls" where "no voices penetrate". The Carthusian monks, like the nuns, are protected by "the sweet star of [...their] queen". Their "silence and austerity" are set against "Desire and mirth, the world's ephemeral lights". Like the nuns, they are also marked by experience: "each knew at last the vanity of earthly joys". Dowson again creates the artificial world of monasticism in which he can fortify himself against desire.[400] His poetics of enclosure can be glossed by an insight of Gaston Bachelard who sees walls as a way of regulating the imagination which can "build 'walls' of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection – or, just the contrary, tremble behind thick walls, mistrust the staunchest ramparts."[401] Walls then are precarious, both protecting and imprisoning. Therefore, this Catholic image is not to be perceived in a facile manner; Dowson complicates it with the attribution of a double function. Apart from an escape dream-state, Catholicism also involves the fantasy of transposed desire. The monks desert "vanity for the more perfect way, / The sweeter service of the most dolorous Cross." This is certainly an aspiration to the "virginal state" which Yeats points out. Dowson strikes a more Decadent note when he disrupts the whiteness and austerity of the "cloistered company" with a purple penultimate stanza:

> We fling up flowers and laugh, we laugh across the wine;
> With wine we dull our souls and careful strains of art;
> Our cups are polished skulls round which the roses twine:
> None dares to look at Death who leers and lurks apart.

The imagery of flowers and wine from skull-cups is that of a twisted Holy Communion, evoking Catholic satanic rituals from Huysmans's *Là-Bas* (1891) or even Byronic libertine practices. The alliteration on *f* in the stanza's first line is coupled with the anaphorae of "laugh" and "wine" to create not just a feeling of

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[399] Dowson himself had an experience in a Carthusian monastery which he relates in Letter 141 to Moore where he expresses his fascination about monastic enclosures. Dowson, *Letters*, 191.
[400] See also Salemi, "The Religious Poetry of Ernest Dowson," 45.
[401] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (New York: The Orion P, 1964), 5.

satiety, but also of ritualistic perpetuity. The Decadent dandy reflects on the vanity of his own lifestyle which, although outside the Carthusians' religious space, is manifested in terms of a quasi-Catholic ritual. The strong presence of "Death" makes the counteractive monastic ritual flawed and demarcates it as Dowsonian: "Our viols cease, our wine is death, our roses fail". This image of expiration and transience serves as a fantasy space for escape but its effect proves to be tormenting. The speaker in both "The Nuns" and "Carthusians" exists outside their religious enclosure reinforcing the thinning of the boundaries between secular and spiritual spaces, vanity and the process of penance. Dowson's assertion at the end of the poem, "surely ye shall prevail" contains the same undermining irony of exaggeration present in "The Nuns". This doubt only confirms that the predicament of "the world's desire, / Which from the body of this death bring no release" is inescapable.

Monastic inclusion also occurs in "To One in Bedlam", a sonnet in which the isolation of the poet has larger connotations and defines him in juxtaposition to the philistine and prosaic bourgeoisie of his time: "O, how his rapt gaze wars / With their stupidity!" The unnamed persona's "sordid bars" and "strait, cage universe, whereat the dull world stares" is confining; nevertheless, Dowson transforms it into a spiritual recluse; the persona is able to escape in "dreams divine" into a sanctified fantasy world with "reveries like enchaunted wine". The latter is a Pre-Raphaelite phrase that points to the construction of a fairy-tale world in the midst of an aloof Victorian society. It is a subtle attack on the Realists with whom Dowson was well acquainted as reader and translator. What is more, he converts the "scentless wisps of straw" that make up his "caged universe" into "posies". This imagery seems baffling but Dowson explicates it in a letter to Henry Davray: "*posies* – is – à peu près 'bouquets' – and 'scentless wisps of straw' 'des brins de paille – sans odeur' – a rather fantastic image (I imagine the madman (fou) making imaginary bouquets of roses out of the straw which lines his cage" (D-*Letters*, 370). The madman is looked at as such from society's perspective; the act of compiling "posies" out of straws recalls the nuns' "returning rosary" and reflects the artist's despondency manifested in sterile artifice. On one level, "To One in Bedlam" with the dreamer-madman is the realization of Wilde's truism in *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892): "we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."[402] Dowson, though, states that "better than mortal

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[402] Wilde, *Wilde*, ed. Murray, 372.

flowers, / Thy moon-kissed roses seem". This is the voice of a renegade, fantasist poet who flirts with death, and he mediates this concept through ascetic withdrawal.

The binary nature of the sacrosanct interior which is threatened by or contrasted with a blasphemously vulgar exterior occurs in "Benedictio Domini". This is an anti-city poem:

> Without, the sullen noises of the street!
> The voice of London, inarticulate,
> Hoarse and blaspheming, surges in to meet
> The silent blessing of the Immaculate.

Dowson, unlike Arthur Symons, rejects the modern Victorian metropolis as cacophonous, favouring the "silent" ways of the "Immaculate", an epithet which presents the Madonna as a stately being of virginal sacredness. As the poem moves inwards and inside the "Church", the play on the sense of hearing carries out the expiration of the image. Not only does it strive to be inaudible, but it also slows down and lingers like the "incense-laden air" of the second stanza. The frequent use of caesura intensifies the effect, which is maximized in the final stanza:

> Strange silence here: without, the sounding street
> Heralds the world's swift passage to the fire:
> O Benediction, perfect and complete!
> When shall men cease to suffer and desire?

The powerful use of caesura with colons and commas brings the poem to a standstill. Long pauses are generated making the rhythm heavy and with the propensity to cease, physically achieving the Dowsonian religious silence. And yet, the ironic voice of the trapped Decadent artist emerges to disrupt the silence of the holy recluse: the last two lines are a paradox since the "Benediction" cannot be "perfect and complete!" Through a rhetorical question the poet expresses disbelief: "When shall men cease to suffer and desire?" In this tragic line, the Catholic imagery of "Benedictio Domini" is transformed to a space of illusion and futility. In his complex poetic way, Dowson suggests that through this process of creating the dream in order to destroy it again, "Benediction" becomes "perfect". For Dowson, the futility of the act of monastic self-isolation indicates the inability to escape desire. The recurrent motif of silence manifests the negation of the image, the image as absence which returns even more forcefully to haunt the poet. In another instance, the lyric "Vain Resolves"

demonstrates the futile attempt to cancel unconsummated desire; the speaker muses that he will "Forget mine heart's desire; / In solitude and prayer, work out my soul's release". Here Christian ritual is an austere process, not for redemption but for escape. But after two stanzas of intensive negation, "once she passed", "suddenly the old flame did uprise". This proves that the imagery of channelling the self into ritual and *âscesis* is a poetic device of psychological artifice.

Dowson uses the Catholic image as a substitute for desire, as a means to control it by ritualizing it, or as a fantasy state in which he can escape in a graceful act of self-annihilation as in death.[403] Such is the case with the latter as in "Extreme Unction", a poem with striking numinous visual images whose Catholicism verges on deep mysticism. The first stanza reads:

> Upon the eyes, the lips, the feet,
> On all the passages of sense,
> The atoning oil is spread with sweet
> Renewal of lost innocence.

"Extreme unction" is the last sacrament before death; unction specifically is the act of anointing with oil. By sealing the "passages of sense", the oil is terminating the body; the vessel through which desire is experienced and potentially fulfilled. The closing of the body's fissures explicitly foreshadows death also suggesting the state of the womb. The "renewal" the speaker mentions, is similar to the sowing and reaping motif which is so prominent in Dowson's poetry. It is a second baptism and the movement towards the "lost innocence" of childhood. Through Catholic ritual he renews the perception of the image:

> Vials of mercy! Sacring oils!
> I know not where nor when I come,
> Nor through what wanderings and toils,
> To crave of your Viaticum.
>
> Yet, when the walls of flesh grow weak,
> In such an hour, it well may be,
> Through mist and darkness, light will break,
> And each anointed sense will see.

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[403] Hanson writes that the "English Decadents [...] discovered grace in the depths of shame and sainthood in the heart of the sinner. In chastity and the priesthood they found a spiritualization of desire, a rebellion against nature and the instincts, and a polymorphous redistribution of pleasure in the body." Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, 7.

The "hour" when the flesh weakens is the "twilight hour of breath" from the third stanza. It is the suspended time in which retrieval of lost purity will take place in *post-obit* and paradoxically within consciousness. Through the ritual of the unction the image intensifies, as in death all the senses are reduced and concentrated to the sense of sight. In *The Pierrot of the Minute: A Dramatic Fantasy in One Act* (1897), the unction is practised in tackling sexual desire. The Moon Maiden, like a Roman Catholic priestess, orders her maids:

> his weary senses steep
> In soft untroubled and oblivious sleep,
> With mandragore anoint his tired eyes,
> That they may open on mere memories,
> Then shall a vision seem his lost delight,
> With love, his lady for a summer's night. (469-74)

The similarity with "Extreme Unction" is striking. In the light of this passage the connotations of desire and eroticism in the poem are evident. The paradox of unlocking the eyesight by means of blocking it foreshadows the paradox of attaining the pure Cynara by means of debauchery.

In "Non sum qualis" the poetics of abstinence and futility is replaced by the increasing sexual activity of "madder music" and "stronger wine". Although this is a very Symonsian poem in its motif of the sexual gratification of the moment, it exhibits Dowson's apologetic mood and sense of being haunted by the recollection of ideal love. Dowson's sensuous, erotic image differs from Symons's. An example is "Ad Manus Puellae", a quasi-fetishistic poem about female hands: "The tapering fingers, the dainty wrist; / The hands of a girl were what I kissed." The depiction of the hand is sensual and elegant:

> I remember an hand like a *fleur-de-lys*
> When it slid from its silken sheath, her glove;
> With its odours passing ambergris:
> And that was the empty husk of a love.
> Oh, how shall I kiss your hands enough?

The glove that "was the empty husk of a love" suggests coldness and distance on the girl's part. The question at the end of the stanza which is charged with pathos denotes the speaker's sexual frustration: "how shall I kiss your hands enough?" This carries the ironic insinuation that the kissing of hands can never be a sufficient replacement

of the body. Dowson concentrates his lyricism on the hands, on the fantasy that substitutes for the original desire. The "*fleur-de-lys*" shows that Dowson attributes to the hand Aesthetic Beardsleyan daintiness. In the last stanza the speaker pronounces:

> I know not the way from your finger-tips,
> Nor how I shall gain the higher lands,
> The citadel of your sacred lips:
> I am captive still of my pleasant bands,
> The hands of a girl, and most your hands.

The "citadel" of her "sacred lips" is an inaccessible sanctified site which the speaker has fantasies of conquering but he resorts to the aesthetic "hands" instead. The hands replace the lips designating the behavioural politics of futility and frustration; this desire is universally manifested: it is not limited to the specific girl's hands but also to "The hands of a girl," paralleling the everywoman mistress of "Non sum qualis". "Ad Manus Puellae" recalls Keats's "Sonnet to a Lady Seen for a Few Moments at Vauxhall"[404] as Desmond Flower points out in the notes to Dowson's *Poetical Works* (252). The persona of Keats's sonnet is "snared by the ungloving of thine hand" and ineffectually endeavours to conquer the lady's lips by synaesthesia: "But my fond ear, in fancy at thy lips / [...] doth devour / Its sweets in the wrong sense". The eroticism of Dowson's fetishizing of hands, however, is different from Symons's as it is expressed in "Hands" from *London Nights*. The fetish for Dowson exemplifies his unconsumed desire; for Symons it serves as an impressionistic reduction of the female body, substituting for sexual experience: "And delicately about each wrist / Have set a bracelet with my lips". The poem's tone is that of untactful lustfulness:

> Dear soft white little morbid hands,
> Mine all one night, with what delight
> Shall I recall in other lands,
> Dear hands, that you were mine all night!

The hands are boldly personified and their morbidity is a stark contrast to the Dowsonian girl of purity. Whereas Symons immerses himself liberally in carnal activities, "Ad Manus Puellae" reveals Dowson's restraint and reticence. The approaches to sexuality of the two poets run contrary. In "Hands", the "other lands"

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[404] In his edition of Keats's poems Stillinger titles the sonnet "Time's sea hath been five years at its slow ebb".

refer to the wholesome pleasures achieved in the realm of myth ("other"), whilst in "Ad Manus Puellae" the "higher lands" refer to the Aesthetic behaviour that pervades sacred ground. In Symons satisfaction is rigorously amplified, yet in Dowson it is deliberately postponed.[405]

One of the great appeals of Catholicism to the Decadents is not only the full acceptance of sin but the fact of sinning as necessary to redemption. This is realized to an extreme in "Impenitentia Ultima", a poem whose prose rhythms of elongated lines make it an unusually confessional piece. The speaker, as the title indicates, is impenitent because he regards the slight innocent thought of "the last sad sight of her face and the little grace of an hour" as a great unforgivable sin. He is tormented by unrequited love for all his life and in his despair he seeks to fulfil his desire by constructing a fantasy through religion, an image in the mind:

> But once before the sand is run and the silver thread is broken,
> Give me a grace and cast aside the veil of dolorous years,
> Grant me one hour of all mine hours, and let me see for a token
> Her pure and pitiful eyes shine out, and bathe her feet with tears.

He transposes his unsatisfied lovesickness to the spiritual level transforming the lady in question into a Christ figure for whom, as a true sinner, he wishes to "bathe her feet with tears." Indeed, in his death fantasy the object of his desire is not sexualized, but as the fourth stanza shows, is turned into a religious icon of soothing and guidance whose "pitiful hands should calm," "And her eyes should be my light". Dowson aestheticizes desire at the hour of death. The image becomes present in its very absence; the unsatisfied desire is relished in the acute and graceful experience of its expiration. The last stanza renders the poem a celebration of the Decadent's heightened sense of sinfulness: "I will praise Thee, Lord in Hell, while my limbs are racked asunder, / For the last sad sight of her face and the little grace of an hour." This could be the ultimate statement of self-annihilation for the sake of the perfect moment, the grand pathos of transience. Dowson creates a sin and confesses it without having committed it. As Hanson notes, "like libertines, Christians must necessarily spice up their scenes of sin, no less than their flights of spiritual eros [...] there is nothing more

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[405] For a general concise comparison between Symons and Dowson see also Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 89.

decadent than the sensuality of the chaste."[406] The imagery of Catholicism here is not just the destructive substitute and solution of desire, but also a metaphor for the immense force of Decadent obsessions.[407]

The quintessence of Decadence, as has been noticed by Holbrook Jackson and many critics after him, is to be found in Dowson's lyric masterpiece "Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae".[408] The stately Latin title suggests a pagan stoicism in Cynara which is vital in channelling through the poem's design. The poem reinforces the Catholic sense of sinful sexuality. Jad Adams contends that the poem's Decadence is "archetypal" because it is "written from an age which took its pleasures with guilt."[409] In fact, guilt is the defining ingredient of the English Decadent Movement, whilst the equivalent in French Decadence is the sense of breaching rules.

Dowson follows the model of the substitution of desire. His longing for the "pale lost lilies" of Cynara who is the ideal object of love, the unattainable *princesse lointaine* ("remote princess") from medieval romance, is replaced by the "bought red mouth", the prostitute with whom he spends the night. The latter is like the Lady of *The Pierrot of the Minute* when she says "I am to each the face of his desire" (175).[410] And the speaker evokes Pierrot declaring: "Rather would I thine forget, / In some earthly Pierrette!" (300-1). The two women of innocent ideal love and carnal satisfaction compose the binary image of Catholicism imprinted in the landscape: the sacred, isolated space of the church and the outside world as in "The Nuns" and "Carthusians". They also stand for Thornton's "Decadent dilemma" between materiality and idealism; however the two forces are here in symbiosis. The boundaries between the two spheres melt away or one is expressed in terms of the other, more like "Rondeau" where Dowson exhibits a problematic attitude to red and white, vacillating between Manon's "rich red beauty debonnaire" and the maiden's "shy grace and purity", her "wine-stained lip" and the "White roses of virginity". His confusion and martyrdom are registered in the charged phrase: "Ah, Manon, say". Manon, who is the Victorian metropolitan sensual woman, tends to interchange with

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[406] Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, 17.
[407] Salemi argues that Dowson is an "image-maker" for effect and not for religious purpose. "The Religious Poetry of Ernest Dowson," 47.
[408] Jackson, *Eighteen Nineties*, 64-5.
[409] Jad Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent* (London: Tauris, 2000), 47-8.
[410] Similarly, on a De Quinceyan note, Anton in "Souvenirs of an Egoist" is "seeking traces of her [Ninette] in childish faces in the street" (*SED*, 33).

the pure maiden, rather as do the prostitute and Cynara.[411] The imagery of "Non sum qualis" works in a way in which the real desire and the artificial one are constantly merging, yet this fusion is self-elusive; it can never happen:

> Last night, ah, yesternight, betwixt her lips and mine
> There fell thy shadow, Cynara! thy breath was shed
> Upon my soul between the kisses and the wine;
> And I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
> Yea, I was desolate and bowed my head:
> I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

This is not just interruption of imagery, or mere "division" as Thornton puts it,[412] but bold intersection. The image of carnal eroticism is vertically intersected by Cynara's "shadow" in a rich sexual fantasy mapped like a crossroads. This is a rather inverted, almost perverted, erotic fantasy in which the "kisses [...] sweet" of the prostitute are complemented by the likeness of Cynara's "pale, lost lilies" and not the other way round. Cynara's image, though, is so sharp that not only it does not complement the sweet kisses of the anonymous female companion but violently intersects them leaving desire unconsummated.[413] This violent cutting-through is also observed in the antithesis of the spectrality of Cynara and the tactility of the mistress; the line "All night upon mine heart I felt her warm heart beat", in the second stanza, is composed of monosyllables that simulate the rhythm of heart beating. And the unique versification involving the injection of pentameters in hexametrical stanzas subtly imitates the intersection of images. In a sense, the Dowsonian Decadent image monstrously surfaces when the rhythm and the imagery are coupled producing a singular synaesthetic effect.[414]

Desire is intersected; it cannot be satisfied because although the "bought red mouth" is a substitute for ideal sexuality, it is automatically doomed as a vain quest; despite the night of pleasures in the manner of Symons, the speaker "awoke and found

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[411] Nassaar argues that Cynara is not pure, on the contrary, she represents the "ultimate sinful pleasure", discussing her name as "*sin*-ara". Christopher S. Nassaar, "Dowson's Cynara," *Explicator* 54.3 (1996), 168-170.

[412] Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, 93.

[413] Nonetheless, Christine Roth in her insightful approach argues that the two antithetical types of Dowsonian females form a "schism" and "neither side is complete without the other, because if they are isolated, the ideal girl becomes distant and cold, and the "real" or mundane girl becomes fallen, aesthetically flawed, and utterly forgettable." Christine Roth, "Ernest Dowson and the Duality of Late-Victorian Girlhood: "Her Double Perversity"," *English Literature in Transition: 1880-1920* 45:2 (2002), 159.

[414] For Dowson's themes mirrored in his syntax see Michael O'Neal, "Style as Mimesis in the Poetry of Ernest Dowson," *Style* 13 (1979), 365-76.

the dawn was gray".[415] And yet, the dialectic of French Catholic ritual and confession, the Baudelairean pilgrimage of the brothel – Symons names Baudelaire the "hermit of the brothel" (*SML*-r, 115) – in which sinning is the way of divine veneration, turns the *vanitas mundi* of pursuing desire into its own satisfaction, a kind of martyrdom of the artist. The last stanza illuminates this point:

> I cried for madder music and for stronger wine,
> But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,
> Then falls thy shadow, Cynara! the night is thine;
> And I am desolate and sick of an old passion,
> Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire:
> I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

The cry for "madder music" and "stronger wine" highlights the deadlock and futility of the poet's sexual quest and it is emblematic of the defiance that lies at the core of the Decadent movement. Especially for Dowson it is an attempt to blot out the image of the original desire; it confirms that sexual merger is impossible as it is partitioned from the onset. The sharp connectives "But" and "And" are effective in denoting the infiltration of the experience by Cynara's image. The word "Then" stands for the inevitability of the act: the lascivious tryst happens again and again. The inescapable persistence of Cynara's image has an almost Gothic origin, echoing Heathcliff's haunting by Catherine's ghost in *Wuthering Heights* (1847). The poem's air of city artifice verifies this return: the "lamps expire", that is, the illusion of fulfilling desire dies down and Cynara's "shadow" fills the speaker's mind. Nonetheless, the existence of this vain illusion renders desire a complex self-referent. The line "Yea, hungry for the lips of my desire" suggests that by pushing away the image he longs to consummate not with Cynara but with "desire" itself, here half-personified. The aim of this impossible circular longing is its own perpetuation and it lies at the heart of the poem's artifice. These are the inner workings of a poem which is pervaded by a strain of French Catholicism. The poet expresses his desire for purity through the "bought red mouth"; the phrase "faithful to thee" indicates that Cynara is addressed as a religious icon, but he is faithful in his "fashion", a poignant word which postulates the ploy of ritualistic sinning and also hints at Dowson's antinomianism and defiance of social norms. The stanza is the culmination of the preceding stanza:

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[415] "Non sum qualis" is a companion piece to Symons's "To One in Alienation: II": "Awake in such a solitude of shame, / That when I kissed her, for your sake, / My lips were sobbing on your name."

> I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
> Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
> Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind;

The flower pattern shows that the speaker strives to banish the prime desire for the "lost lilies" by distracting himself in the carnal activity of flinging "roses riotously", a phrase whose forcefulness is aligned with his violent but vain craving for "madder music" and "stronger wine", connoting increasing addiction to proxies. He declares that he has "forgot much", yet his forgetfulness speaks volumes about the hauntingly constant returning of Cynara and the futility of his actions.

In Le Gallienne's semi-sardonic poem "The Décadent to His Soul" the poet tries "To stretch the octave 'twixt the dream and deed" (43).[416] The poetic tissue stands for the illusion of relish, for an impossibility that materializes in the locale of the interjection between the dream of Cynara and the deed of a salacious experience. And yet textual illusion *can be* the real thing. In "Non sum qualis" these two elements are in constant overlap. The "passion" and "fashion" with which the poem is laced are rhyme-words that move together and come apart not only phonetically, but semantically too. "Passion" refers to sexual obsession but with its Catholic tinge it has the universality of martyrdom. On the contrary "fashion" is active, personalized, with a clandestine quality. Dowson's fashion is his passion and the reverse. Through the Dowsonian quasi-liturgical poetic scheme they are near synonyms and yet they violently clash and intersect.

7.2 Caught Up in Expiration

The strain of imagery that dominates Dowson's poetry is that of death and dying. The Dowsonian poem tends to roll back or fade forwards into nothingness. Its transparent textures barely subsist due to weariness and ennui. Its image maps out a set of polymorphous and complex relationships between dying, desire and vanity. The poetics of expiration are simulated by Dowson's rhythm, word patterns and diction which are breathed out in a slumberous and enervated manner and create a slowness

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[416] Richard Le Gallienne, *English Poems*, 3rd ed. (London: Matthews; Lane, 1894), 107.

of dying which is aimed at regulating desire by means of aesthetically replacing it with its own prolongation.[417] The expiring image is of binary nature so as to mark the progression from life to death, or from the ideal moment to non-existence.[418]

The two-part image often fuses its components. This idea is crystallized in the iconic "Villanelle of the Poet's Road". Here Dowson proposes his formula of Decadent pleasures as the solution to transience: "Wine and woman and song" which echoes the "madder music", "the kisses and the wine" from "Non sum qualis". As such, it is a formula of vanity and desperation. And as the first triplet states,

> Wine and woman and song,
> Three things garnish our way:
> Yet is day over long.

The double use of the connective word "and" conveys a sense of flatness which is reinforced by the fact that the objects of pleasure are "things". These "things" are not vitally involved; they superficially "garnish" recalling Wilde's Aestheticism. The "over long" "day" indicates that "wine", "woman" and "song" amount to tedium. Indeed the poem's circularity and wearisome repetition of the first line renders these Decadent pleasures monotonous and therefore, pointless. The poet prompts: "Lest we do our youth wrong, / Gather them while we may"; but the *carpe diem* ironically loses its signification as it monstrously multiplies: the lines "Wine and woman and song" and "Yet is day over long" flash alternately like a chant in every stanza. The pleasures in the poet's road become hollow and artificial as satiety replaces satisfaction.[419]

The design of the expiring image can be traced in Arthur Schopenhauer's ideas of extreme pessimism which were influential on Dowson's art.[420] For Dowson, life equals continuous suffering and death is the ultimate resolution. This is summarized, for example, in the image of the tempest; in "In a Breton Cemetery" the speaker exclaims:

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[417] For desire as the affirmation of existence and its aestheticization in Dowson see Karen Alkalay-Gut, "Ernest Dowson and the Strategies of Decadent Desire," *Criticism* 36.2 (1994), 243-63.
[418] Baker conceives this as a dichotomy of imagery. Houston A. Baker, "A Decadent's Nature: The Poetry of Ernest Dowson," *Victorian Poetry* 6 (1968), 24-8.
[419] Alkalay-Gut offers a comprehensive analysis of the poem, tracing its artifice and futile pleasure in its circularity-linearity pattern, also establishing a firm connection with Khayyam's / Fitzgerald's *Rubáiyát*. Alkalay-Gut, "Aesthetic and Decadent Poetry," 240-3.
[420] See also Chris Snodgrass, "Aesthetic Memory's Cul-de-sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson," *English Literature in Transition* 35 (1992): 26-53.

> Me, tempest-tost, and driven from pillar to post,
> A poor worn ghost,
> This quiet pasture calls;

Likewise, Schopenhauer believes that life is bleak and painful and thus, the supreme satisfaction of the "will to live" is death:

> The most perfect manifestation of the will to live represented by the human organism [...] must crumble to dust and its whole essence and all its striving be palpably given over at last to annihilation – this is nature's unambiguous declaration that all the striving of its will is essentially vain.[421]

In the concluding poem to *Decorations*, "A Last Word", the poet declares: "we have only known / Surpassing vanity: vain things alone / Have driven our perverse and aimless band." And in a more visual and anaemic note in "Venite Descendamus", vanity is grasped by contraction to autumnal silence: "Now be the music mute; / Now let the dead, red leaves of autumn cover / A vain lute".[422] The impact of Schopenhauer on Dowson has already been addressed; however, this link is the gist from which the poet's aesthetic is generated, yet mutated into something Decadent. Schopenhauer's vanity of the striving of the will to overcome the misery of life exists *a priori*, whereas Dowson applies this concept artificially by setting up his own entrapment in a state of expiration or an impossible desire as in the dead little girl. Hence, he methodically relishes Schopenhauer's idea that "we take no pleasure in existence except when we are striving after something – in which case distance and difficulties make our goal look as if it would satisfy us (an illusion which fades when we reach it)".[423]

This train of thought informs numerous poems by Dowson who acknowledges it with utter pessimism and proto-Beckettian existentialism in "Awakening", where man with his "pitiful illusions, / Is he not pitiful, grotesque, forlorn? / White with desire for what life cannot proffer."[424] For Schopenhauer annihilation is the best

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[421] Arthur Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1970), 55.
[422] Thornton observes that "almost every poem in *Decorations* ends on a note of disillusion, reaching nothing, silence". Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, 105.
[423] Schopenhauer, *Essays*, 54.
[424] Similarly, Schopenhauer says that "man [...] is a grotesque caricature." *Essays*, 49. Dowson's idea of life as "illusion" accounts for man's grotesqueness and his life as farsical and unreal, as he says in "Awakening": "Drop down the curtain on the play completed, / The farce of life is finished with the breath."

solution to the misery of life because "consciousness is destroyed in death."[425] Likewise Dowson contends in "Awakening" that in death "shall we rest, but shall not ever know it, / Shall not have love nor knowledge, nor delight", a reflection found throughout his work. [426] "Awakening" is perhaps the closest thing to a Schopenhauerian manifesto and yet its tone gives away Dowson's anxiety of an impasse towards death: since death means erasure of consciousness, how is perfection realized in death? These lines from "Awakening" echo the last part of Shelley's poem "The Sensitive-Plant" where garden and lady "In truth have never passed away: / 'Tis we, 'tis ours, are changed; not they" (306-7). Shelley even before Schopenhauer links death with relativity and perspective. This is perhaps the clearest manifestation of the problem of Dowson's artistic expression as tormenting self-awareness and the unfeasibility of its self-erasure. Annihilation is automatically impossible due to language. "Because the land is cold, and however I scheme and plot, / I cannot find a ferry to the land where I am not", says the speaker in "To a Lady Asking Foolish Questions". This is the realization that there is no way the art of writing can end the suspension of dying.

The fixation on dying is an extreme version of Decadent ennui and exasperation dominating Dowson's poetry as in "Requiem" and the "The Dead Child". A clear-cut instance can be found in the sonnet sequence "Of a Little Girl". In the penultimate sonnet the speaker, like a fatigued Des Esseintes, says:

> life is too strong
> For my weak will, it carries me along
> On its fierce current till I fain would creep
> Into some cavern still and fall asleep
> And sleeping die, or melt like a sad song
> Into the winds –

Connective devices generate the clauses as in an effortful protracted breath. The sonnet strongly echoes Hamlet's famous soliloquy:

> – to die: to sleep –
> To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub,
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil

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[425] Schopenhauer, *Essays*, 70.
[426] See for instance the introductory poem to *Verses*; "the weeping and the laughter" are irrelevant "after / We pass the gate."

Must give us pause: (*Hamlet*, 3.1.63-7)[427]

In Seminar XVIII, "Desire, Life and Death", Jacques Lacan discusses *Hamlet* and maintains a quintessentially Dowsonian idea: "All that life is concerned with is seeking repose as much as possible while awaiting death."[428] Hamlet's agony over his predicament impels him to seek death, yet his desire is translated in his ponderings because of his procrastination to act. In the same manner, Dowson's persona fantasizes about being carried along to death but his longing is artificially suspended in the poetic space. The phrase "melt like a sad song" implies a re-enacting of dissolution perpetually repeated in the act of its uttering.[429] The image of annulment becomes illusionary via its paradoxical representation through the artistic medium and hence it attains an Aesthetic feel.

Dowson's poems could be a case study for Lacan's modification of Freud's "death instinct". For Lacan, the Freudian *eros* and *thanatos* are fused in the same drive. In his seminars, Lacan defines the human being as constantly desirous, aspiring towards the filling of a permanent lack: "Desire is a relation of being to lack."[430] The yearning towards self-annihilation is the trajectory towards Symbolic Order, the tendency to achieve the total being of the Real inside the mother's womb. Dowson's orbiting in slow death is what Lacan in *Autres Écrits* calls "tendance psychique à la mort"; *anorexia nervosa* and willed famine are his examples.[431] He interprets this tendency as the return to the maternal womb, which is "morbide". He declares: "dans son abandon à la mort, le sujet cherche à retrouver l'imago de la mere."[432] This psychoanalytic reading is encouraged by Dowson's tendency to obscure and mystify the object of desire and thus locate it in the domain of the Lacanian Real. Desire is "for nothing nameable."[433] The oedipal tendency towards the mother's womb is implicated in Dowson's passion for the little girl which signifies the forbidden object. In "To a Lady Asking Foolish Questions" the speaker states: "The fairest face of all is

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[427] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London: Arden, 2006), 285.
[428] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Norton, 1988), 233.
[429] Compare with "Dregs": "The fire is out, and spent the warmth thereof / (This is the end of every song man sings!)".
[430] Lacan, *Seminar*, 223.
[431] Jacques Lacan, *Autres Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 35.
[432] Lacan, *Autres Écrits*, 35. "In its surrender to death, the subject seeks to find the imago of the mother." My translation.
[433] Lacan, *Seminar*, 223.

the face I have not seen." And in the two unpublished pieces titled "Spleen" the poet says "We are burnt with a fierce desire / For that we know not nor care" and we "seek for the source, / Of the Lethe we desire."[434] Lacan's idea also agrees with Schopenhauer who stresses that "after your death you will be what you were before your birth."[435] These aspirations towards embryonic eroticism are vital in understanding the opaque mystery of the icon of the dead little girl. Dowson's oedipal, suicidal eroticism echoes Swinburne's "The Triumph of Time" where the speaker declares: "I will go back to the great sweet mother, / Mother and lover of men, the sea. / [...] / Save me and hide me with all thy waves".

Dowson captures the expiring image in an artificial realm that exists outside time in an attempt to regulate desire by aesthetisizing it. He perceives life as a flux ravaged by change and time and he depicts this by using the Herakleitian image of the river as in "Spleen" and "Vesperal". He constructs a lethargic space similar to death where he can escape from the Herakleitian river. This space is a paradox: it is also the suspended state of dying or the antechamber of death, marking both the resolution of desire and its perpetuation. This is what the introductory poem to *Verses*, "*Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam*" implies:

> They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
> Out of a misty dream
> Our path emerges for a while, then closes
> Within a dream.

This vignette epitomises Dowson's Romantic Classicism. It is restrained in diction, yet remarkably dense and emblematic of Dowson's ideas.[436] It encapsulates the "brevis vita" of the title; the dandy's "days of wine and roses" may not be long but the line moves slowly; its hypnotic sound pattern has a Coleridgean tint, like a drug hallucination. The verb "closes" also coupled with the identical rhyme of "dream" suggests both finality and circularity. The states of death and life intermingle. On one level death is regarded as dream, nonetheless the phrase "closes / Within a dream" carries also the hint of encasement of states. The piece is evocative of Edgar Allan Poe's "A Dream Within a Dream", also concerned with the transience of life. What is

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[434] Dowson, *Poems*, 135, 136 correspondingly.
[435] Schopenhauer, *Essays*, 67.
[436] See Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, 120. See also Bernard Muddiman, *Men of the Nineties*, 89, and for a general discussion, Rowena Fowler, "Ernest Dowson and the Classics," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 3 (1973): 243-52.

at stake for Poe is the very texture of life whose fleetingness renders it a dream: "All that we see or seem / Is but a dream within a dream."[437] Another reading of Dowson's poem would suggest that the lucid time framed between dreaming is the ideal moment of virginal ecstasy framed by fantasy of longing towards that moment. In this regard, the poem is in dialogue with Schopenhauer's idea that "life can be regarded as a dream and death as the awakening from it."[438]

The complexities of the fading image in connection with the Dowsonian poetic can be amply observed in "Breton Afternoon" from *Decorations*. This poem addresses the confusion of the suspension of dying and the Decadent image as a slow moving, undulated reverie which is on the verge of expiration. The speaker informs us: "I have lain hours long"; lifelessness and ennui, even catatonia, indicate abstinence and this can be viewed as the first step of the Decadent's self-annihilation. The speaker is assimilated in a landscape in which "the breath of the scented-gorse floats" and in which he hears "the faint breeze pass in a whisper like a prayer, / And the river ripple by and the distant call of a bird." This diction is the machinery of the expiring image *par excellence*. The "breath," "faint breeze," "whisper" and "ripple" make the verse vaporous, with the propensity to fade out of existence. The poem dwells on the artificial desire of dying replacing the lost ideal moment.

> On the lone hill-side, in the gold sunshine, I will hush me and repose,
> And the world fades into a dream and a spell is cast on me;
> *And what was all the strife about, for the myrtle or the rose,*
> *And why have I wept for a white girl's paleness passing ivory!*
>
> Out of the tumult of angry tongues, in a land alone, apart,
> In a perfumed dream-land set betwixt the bounds of life and death,
> Here will I lie while the clouds fly by and delve an hole where my heart
> May sleep deep down with the gorse above and red, red earth beneath.

The speaker expresses a longing to retreat in a monastic fashion from the vulgarity of life's "tumult of angry tongues" like the Carthusians in a state similar to death. This is the act of dying represented in geographical terms as the "perfumed dream-land set betwixt the bounds of life and death". This limbo state contains a double property: that of a complete fade-out and, simultaneously, the consciousness of a perpetual expiration. Once in this artificial state the poet can recognize the vanity of the

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[437] Poe, *Poems*, Complete Works 7.
[438] Schopenhauer, *Essays,* 70. Also compare the introductory poem to *Verses* with the unpublished "Transit Gloria".

"*myrtle*" and "*rose*" but he also laments the loss of the ideal moment. The ideal moment is defined by a virginal whiteness associated with the cult of the little girl: "*a white girl's paleness passing ivory*". The desire for the lost moment is replaced by yearning for death which renders the former Aesthetic. The white purity of childhood is identified with death flirting with the Lacanian idea of the return to the womb, as Ronald Pearsall also in this context suggests,[439] and the perpetuation of desire for its own sake; when the speaker says "Sleep and be quiet for an afternoon", he fakes death or satisfaction of desire. As is also evident in the poem's rhythm, the tone of fading established in the first stanza is prolonged and suspended. The slow, long fourteen-syllable lines jadedly trigger one another with the repetition of the coordinating conjunction "and" and the use of commas. "Breton Afternoon" captures the inconsistent poetics of lingering exasperation.

Suspension takes an interesting twist in "Transition" where it is fused with decline. The title designates the binary character of the declining image: it is a shift from the perfect sexual moment to the alienation of death. Each stanza exhibits the basic pattern of harmony and falling in seasonal terms like the "harvest-fields of bending golden corn" followed by "the predestined silence" in the second stanza. The suspension of the ideal moment and the weariness of dying are here blurred as the first stanza reveals:

> A little while to walk with thee, dear child;
> To lean on thee my weak and weary head;
> Then evening comes: the winter sky is wild,
> The leafless trees are black, the leaves long dead.

The phrase "a little while" signifies suspension of the moment with the "dear child" and yet it enhances its transitoriness.[440] The speaker's act of leaning his "weary head" on the child suggests that the movement of expiration has commenced before the parting with the child, seconding (or highlighting) the ideal moment to the tragicalized movement of dying. The image of absolute barrenness and destruction, of black trees and dead leaves, that follows straight after is the aftermath of the suspended ideal moment and echoes Yeats's "The Falling of the Leaves" from

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[439] At the beginning of the chapter "The Cult of the Little Girl" Pearsall links the girl with "regression, the tendency to adhere to a premature state, what psychoanalysis calls the 'law of psychic gravitation'." Pearsall, *Worm*, 430.

[440] Compare with the opening of Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671): "A Little onward lend thy guiding hand / To these dark steps, a little further on" (1-2).

Crossways (1889).[441] But the slumberous alliteration of "the leaves long dead" points to an elongation of death similar to the suspended moment with the child, blurring the two and making them interchangeable. What is suspended here is the image of "transition" from the ideal moment to death; the longing for extinction dominates the bliss of the Dowsonian moment almost to the point of replacement forming a synthetic image that connotes both suspension and falling.

The phrase "a little while" is repeated in three stanzas as an incantation. Dowson puts the emphasis on autumnal decline, intensifying his desire or morbidly and masochistically undoing its fulfilment by stressing its inevitable loss. The momentum of dying has to slow down because desire ceases with death. This is the very death the lovers long for and cannot fully experience whilst alive but can conceive it, as is the case with Swinburne (e. g. "Anactoria"). The ephemeral nature of sexual perfection with existence caught up in expiration is stressed powerfully in the poem's final stanza:

> Short summer-time and then, my heart's desire,
> The winter and the darkness: one by one
> The roses fall, the pale roses expire
> Beneath the slow decadence of the sun.

The imagery and tone of the verse bears striking resemblance to the opening of Francis Thompson's "Ode to the Setting Sun" where the "sweetness of the violin" is synaesthetically exhaled with the sunset:

> In wafts that poignant sweetness drifts, until
> The wounded soul ooze sadness. The red sun,
> A bubble of fire, drops slowly toward the hill,[442]

With his dramatic imagery of bleeding Thompson conveys the painful and melancholy expiration of life and art. But Dowson's "slow decadence of the sun" is about premature dying and is virginally white instead of blood-red; the phrase, like the poem, is tinted with personal sexual tragedy. As Adams notes, the conflict between the sexuality of adulthood and the fascination with the purity of little girls

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[441] "Yellow the leaves of the rowan above us"; "the hour of the waning of love has beset us, / And weary and worn are our sad souls now; / Let us part [...]" Yeats, *Poems*, (3, 6-7).
[442] Thompson, *Poems*, 95.

leads to crisis.[443] The "dear child" is now reinstated as "my heart's desire" hinting at a sense of tragedy in the impossibility of sustaining sexual desire in the domain of childhood. The syntax also adds a degree of indistinctness: the "heart's desire" could also refer to "the winter and the darkness". Dowson's image of dissolution forks out in two directions. The purpose of this is to sustain dying as a means of keeping desire artificially alive. This is also suggested by the expiring roses which are supremely artificial, evoking the urban pastoral of flowers-lampposts that features in Symons and Theodore Wratislaw. The suspension of the ideal moment ("a little while…") clearly converts to the postponement of expiring. As the poem nears the end the prolongation increases and the reading slows down. The line "Beneath the slow decadence of the sun" has become unbearably heavy; the word "decadence" with its Latinate nature becomes a dense symbol of itself indicating never-ending futility in its self-reference. It invites a comparison with Verlaine's "Langueur": "Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence". As Barbarians pass, the personified Roman Empire composes indolent acrostics "D'un style d'or où la langueur du soleil danse".[444] For Verlaine "décadence" carries notions of universal timelessness, but in Dowson it marks a personal state of fixated deferral. Dowson's "sun" is the agent of slow time but Verlaine's "soleil" is the agent of his "style d'or".

The poem "Autumnal" from *Verses* moves like "Transition". Its images descend from Keats's "Ode to Autumn" and "Sleep and Poetry".[445] This is Dowson's most direct, yet multifaceted statement of desire being preferred to experience through imagery of dying. The poem's depiction of a seasonal landscape points to a flimsy and fragile image exhaled forth like the last strenuous breath before expiration as it can be verified by Dowson's diction: "pale amber sunlight", "breeze", and "twilight". Dowson seems to suspend this breath recreating the limbo of "Breton Afternoon". He creates a space where the Decadent image emerges as a faux longing that exists for its own sake. The speaker says to his "dear" that "summer's loss" is little in comparison to the present state of the fluid Verlainian "Pale amber sunlight" which modulates to "reddening October trees". This hyperbole of Shakespearean origin eulogizes dying, artificializing it as the object of desire. The repetition of "twilight" in the second

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[443] See in detail, Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, 29.
[444] "I'm the Empire at the end of decadence," and "Scribed in gold beneath a play of languid light." Verlaine, *Poems*, 131.
[445] See Desmond Flower's extensive note in Dowson, *Poetical Works*, 259.

stanza similarly produces an effect of vagueness in which the transience of the ideal moment and the image of fading are interchangeable:

> Let misty autumn be our part!
> The twilight of the year is sweet:
> Where shadow and the darkness meet
> Our love, a twilight of the heart
> Eludes a little time's deceit.

The "twilight of the heart" which "Eludes a little time's deceit" means that the speaker morbidly prefers the state of fading to relishing the moment. This becomes even more apparent in the last stanza:

> Are we not better and at home
> In dreamful Autumn, we who deem
> No harvest joy is worth a dream?
> A little while and night shall come,
> A little while, then, let us dream.

The loss of the ideal moment *is co-happening* with itself; Dowson perpetually desires the desire itself. The poem stagnates: although the beloved is physically adjacent to the speaker, he prefers to fulfil his desire for her by proxy of daydreaming. As Schopenhauer says, "happiness is no so much as to be thought of".[446] It recalls the way Cynara's shadow and the artificial satisfaction of desire are intersected. Perversely "dreamful Autumn" and the region of "dream" are preferred to "harvest joy". The line "A little while, then, let us dream" is slightly tautological: it insinuates that autumnal reverie is both present and anticipated. The poem is a clear declaration of desire being content in itself rather than in experience and therefore morbidly artificial.

In the poem "Cease smiling, Dear! a little while be sad" the speaker laments the transitory nature of ideal love, fretting about its perishable quality rather than focusing on the enjoyment of it. "Sweet are thine eyes, but how can I be glad, / Knowing they change so soon?" also asking his "Dear" to be sad and silent. The object of desire here coincides with death; the possibility of achieving the ideal moment automatically means the demise of this moment. The beloved is a compound image of consummation and loss as the speaker implores: "Cover me / In the deep darkness of thy falling hair"; hinting at death and an oedipal womb. This doubleness

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[446] Schopenhauer, *Essays*, 52.

informs the speaker's exclamation: "O could this moment be perpetuate!", where the wish to suspend the ideal moment shades into the feeling of imminent loss.

For Dowson sexual experience always remains in the domain of fantasy even when he is in close proximity with his lady. This constitutes a Decadent desire that always returns to itself. The poem features the compound image of consummation and death, or "sowing" and "reaping" in one, to use a Dowsonian motif, when the speaker exclaims: "O red pomegranate of thy perfect mouth! / My lips' life-fruitage, might I taste and die", and this is situated in her "garden" which "chastens agony". Though it could be said that Dowson employs an allegory of the Garden of Eden to capture the sharp point where experience inevitably is its own dying, he evokes the moment when the prelapsarian state coincides or overlaps with the Fall through the tasting of the forbidden fruit. This compound image is further enhanced:

> Reap death from thy live lips in one long kiss,
> And look my last into thine eyes and rest:
> What sweets had life to me sweeter than this
> Swift dying on thy breast?

The "long kiss" and the "swift dying on thy breast" form a contradiction. Experience means its own loss and, conversely, the act of dying contains the sexual ideal moment, the moment of swooning. The "garden" which is "beyond the reach of time" is the space of fantasy, similar to the monastic recluse of the Catholic poems, and is contrasted with the passing of time and old age in the second stanza. Dowson's desire is interchangeably perpetuated and destroyed not in the actual world but in the artificial one:

> Or, if that may not be, for Love's sake, Dear!
> Keep silence still, and dream that we shall lie,
> Red mouth to mouth, entwined, and always hear
> The south wind's melody [...]

Actual sexual engagement is eschewed so that the entwining of mouths is realized in the virtual space of "dream". The speaker's prompting of his "Dear" to silence alludes to a state where desire is locked in a perpetual self-sustenance. "Silence" marks the poem's self-negation and points to a pure image in a mode of fading. The poetic of silence signposts the stage before language, moving from the Symbolic back to the

Real. However the poem itself *is* language and as such it postpones the fulfilment of desire.[447]

The poet's attraction to death is not simple. The image of dying is also to be perceived as death in life. Dark and barren sceneries, as the desolate vistas of "The Three Witches" show, strip life down to a limbo state. "Amor Profanus" features the Dowsonian theme of the spectral lovers,[448] a variant of the suspended moment. What is remarkable is that the poet constructs a fantasy, or rather a re-envisioning of the ideal moment *ex post facto*, enveloped in the shadowy domain of death.

> Beyond the pale of memory,
> In some mysterious dusky grove;
> A place of shadows utterly,
> Where never coos the turtle-dove,
> A world forgotten of the sun:
> I dreamed we met when day was done,
> And marvelled at our ancient love.

The lovers who "marvelled" at their "ancient love" recall lines from Baudelaire's "Une Charogne" ("The Carcass"), "Rappelez-vous l'objet que nous vîmes, mon âme, / Ce beau matin d' été si doux:"[449] In this poem Baudelaire stresses the transience of life by looking at the carcass from the outset. Dowson, however, immerses his lovers in a barren landscape of death looking irreversibly back with world-weariness at the lost moment of the "old desire" "when eyes were bright and lips were red." "Amor Profanus" with its spectral qualities is more like the French poet's "Une Phantôme: I. Les Ténèbres" ("A Phantom: I. The Blackness") with the speaker, as in Dowson's poem, dwelling "Dans le caveaux d'insodable tristesse" "Où, seul avec la Nuit, maussade hôtesse [...]"[450] The lovers are reduced from their former glory to the state of phantoms signifying a movement from the sensuous joys of the ideal moment towards expiration. They are only traces consumed by the spleen produced by time: as the image declines, its texture becomes worn out and emaciated. The speaker addresses ironically the lady Lalage, a name from Horace whose etymology is *to*

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[447] Many critics have analysed the motif of silence in Dowson's poetry. See, for instance, Richard Benvenuto, "The Function of Language in the Poetry of Ernest Dowson," *English Literature in Transition: 1880 – 1920* 21 (1978), 158-167 and Snodgrass, "Aesthetic Memory's Cul-de-sac," 32-5.
[448] See Baker, "A Decadent's Nature," 23-4.
[449] "Remember, my love, the object we saw / That beautiful morning in June". Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 59.
[450] "In vaults of fathomless obscurity" "Where, living with that hostess, Night [...]". Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 77.

prattle in Greek. Despite the *carpe diem* entreat, in the last verse Dowson stresses the inevitability of the mute state of the lovers as "Estranged, sad spectres of the night."

"Amor Profanus" harbours a crucial paradox; it endeavours to recall the past by way of oblivion: "beyond the pale of memory", "forgotten", "waters of oblivion". This paradox is also evident in the futile proximity of the lovers as there is "no delight in being nigh, / Poor shadows more uncomforted." The speaker is locked in the impossibility of life in death, in the spleen of the vanity of remembering. This entrapment between life and death is intensified in "Spleen" where the speaker makes an effort to banish memory but it comes back to him in the last couplet where he is "inclined to weep" "With all my memories that could not sleep." The fading image is arrested again in the spectral lover:

> I was not sorrowful, but only tired
> Of everything that ever I desired.
>
> Her lips, her eyes, all day became to me
> The shadow of a shadow utterly.

The fading, thinning body looks forward to the ceasing of existence; the image is reduced to its own trace, sustained only by its own ripple effect. It reflects a catatonic mood and the weariness of desire. In the vein of "Amor Profanus" and "Spleen" is the sonnet "Gray Nights" where the lovers are trapped in a melancholy landscape ("ever sadlier") which is reminiscent of the Classical Underworld: they "wandered" "Through a long, sandy track of No Man's Land, / Where only poppies grew among the sand". This entrapping space, which is mediated through a "dream", along with the limbos of the previous poems signifies for the lover-speaker a Dantean restlessness that recalls Lacan's *entre-deux-morts* ("between two deaths"); Lacan explains that Sophocles's ostracized Antigone who is buried alive, exists between the symbolic death of being shut out from the world and her actual death by suicide.[451] In Dowson, this is the suspended state between the speaker's (poet's) death by self-isolation and his imminent physical death looming just after the poem's ending. According to Lacan's reading, it could be argued that even the monastic enclosures of Dowson's Catholic poems signify an *entre-deux-morts* situation, aligning them with the poetics of restrained expiration.

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[451] See Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959 – 1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book VII*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992), 270-87.

Expiration mediated through the spectral lovers is clearly played out in "Saint Germaine-en-Laye". The poem laments the loss of the ideal moment by following a declining movement from the "green boughs" to the "sullen trees in sombre lace" that "Stand bare beneath the sinister, sad skies." It alludes to the desolate landscape of "the cold hill's side" (36) that lingers at the end of Keats's "La Belle Dame". Decadence is produced by the binary nature of the lost ideal and the barren, autumnal settings; it almost reads as the aftermath of the story "The Statute of Limitations": the Baudelairean decay of the spectral lovers is evoked when Michael Garth predicts in regard to the object of his desire: "Our marriage will be a ghastly mockery: a marriage of corpses" (*SED*, 89). As in "Amor Profanus", Dowson's fantasy is morbid because it is not interested in capturing the lost moment of ideal love but in lingering on its impossibility through the spectral lovers:

> Across the terrace that is desolate,
> And rang with thy laughter, ghost of thee,
> That holds its shroud up with most delicate,
> Dead fingers, and behind the ghost of me,
>
> Tripping fantastic with a mouth that jeers
> At roseal flowers of youth the turbid streams
> Toss in derision down the barren years
> To death the host of all our golden dreams.

The grotesquery of "laughter", "fantastic", and "jeers" inherits the cynicism of the "The Harlot's House", yet personalizes the theme of the spectral lovers. Death saturates the poem to the point of tautology. The lover spirals down towards death as a "ghost". In this manner Dowson not only displays the inevitability of demise but implies that death is the state that follows automatically the passing of youth. As is shown in "Dregs", the Dowsonian "ghost" is the thinned image of the Decadent indolence and ennui:

> With pale, indifferent eyes, we sit and wait
> For the dropt curtain and the closing gate:
> This is the end of all the songs man sings.

The utter world-weariness and passivity depicted in these lines sketch the Decadent poet's proclivity to pass out of existence. Dowson's stance is a stark contrast, for example, to the robust, life-embracing poetry of Kipling and John Davidson. "Dregs"

could be art's statement on the death of creativity and bankruptcy of imagination at the close of the century.

Weariness and expiration could be a grand apocalyptic metaphor for the *fin de siècle* and the vanities of the Decadent movement as it is articulated in chapter fifteen of *Dorian Gray*. Dorian says "I wish it were *fin du globe*", "life is a great disappointment", to which Lady Narborough replies: "don't tell me that you have exhausted life [...]" (*DG*, 318-9). In the context of Dowson's art, this conversation falls into place. In Dowson's poetry, the poet always looks at life retrospectively; he desires the end because life is both exhausted and exhausting. The poet converts his obsession with death into potent imagery in "The Three Witches", a poem which is symbolic and conscious of the turn of the century. He imagines death physically, in a dark and desolate landscape:

> All the moon-shed nights are over,
> And the days of gray and dun;
> There is neither may nor clover,
> And the day and night are one.
>
> Not an hamlet, not a city
> Meets our strained and tearless eyes;
> In the plain without a pity,
> Where the wan grass droops and dies.

The motif of loss in seasonal language is frequent in his poems, patterning a downward movement of dying. However, Dowson's tendency towards annihilation is also an allegory for the *fin de siècle*; this is an end-of-civilization poem; it is about the end of time capturing Dowson's millennial anxiety and his own cultural predicament. But the moment of death is suspended and here this suspension is geographically realized as a limbo landscape that exists outside time: "And the day and night are one." Yet, Dowson undermines the frozen limbo by employing a rapid and edgy movement generated by the fast iambs of mostly monosyllable words.

The three witches with their "lichened arms" are a powerful animated symbol Dowson uses to depict his longing for destruction, decay and dissolution, like the witches in *Macbeth*. They are "the children of Astarte, / Dear abortions of the moon," their origin symbolizes the poet's ambiguous response to death. Astarte is a Semitic goddess and in myth is portrayed both as lunar demonness and fertile mother. The idea of "return to the womb" is quite clear; Astarte embodies the self-contradiction of fertility in sterility and the witches are "abortions", yet contradictorily "dear". The

phrase "we shall wander" insinuates a moving forward into nothingness. Thus the desire for death has intricate dimensions. It moves forwards but it is suspended and self-restrained simultaneously:

> Burning ramparts, ever burning!
> To the flame which never dies
> We are yearning, yearning, yearning,
> With our gay and tearless eyes.

The "flame which never dies" has Romantic roots as the flame which is a symbol of longing for destruction. It echoes Shelley's *Epipsychidion* where the "one desire" is the "dizzy moth" which is attracted to "A radiant death, a fiery sepulchre, / As if it were a lamp of earthly flame" (219-24).[452] The triple repetition of the word "yearning" suggests elongation; the yearning is perpetuated. Dowson's destructive disposition can be also detected in the witches' yearning "*to* the flame" and not *for* it, confirming the Shelleyan allusion of the edgy attraction of the moth to the flame. The witches' "tearless eyes" indicate a restrained, subdued desire and as such they are paradoxical: they imply, in a mood of falling indicated by the trochees, a fierce desire to cry, pointing to the poetic suspension as a controlled pending of expiration. The "tearless eyes", in addition, mark the predilection to preserve desire from vaporizing; instead it is aesthetically trapped.

This Aesthetic stalemate which somehow freezes the longing for death in "The Three Witches" offers larger symbolic connotations about the art-world Dowson represents, its purpose, and its relation to the late Victorian bourgeois society. The last stanza completes the poem's artifice of restrained circularity:

> In the plain without a pity,
> (Not an hamlet, not a city)
> Where the wan grass droops and dies.

The stanza reshuffles sterilely lines of a poem which is a corrupt version of a villanelle. It expresses a lack of ability to escape; a sort of artistic confinement, also demarcated by the use of parentheses. Its futile circularity is imprinted on the barren, post-apocalyptic vista that dominates the poem and arguably looks forward to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Also the absence of the city indicates restlessness which is

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[452] The "flame which never dies" is also an allusion to the biblical "fire that never shall be quenched". Mark 9:43 (KJV).

better understood in connection with the witches. The witches with their lineage to Astarte are rooted in the long tradition of the *femme fatale* and particularly the Decadent woman depicted by Aubrey Beardsley and Gustave Moreau. Thus the witches could be incarnations of Beardsley's Messalina and Salomé,[453] or Moreau's Sphinx, embodying a Dowsonian fascination and repulsion for the bourgeois city. Suggestively the witches are muses (or anti-muses) who burn down the bourgeois city and the alienating modernity for which it stands, and relate to Dowson's wider obsession with the themes of self-isolation and abstinence from life.

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[453] Bruce S. Harris, ed., *The Collected Drawings of Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: Bounty, 1967), 65, 93.

8. "The Little Girl Face Is White and Cold": Dowson's Sleeping Beauties

IN the essay "The Philosophy of Composition" (1846) Edgar Allan Poe asserts that beauty is to be found in "melancholy" with death as its most supreme example. In particular, he writes that "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."[454] And on closing "Aesthetic Poetry" Pater writes of "the continual suggestion, pensive or passionate, of the shortness of life [...] the sense of death and the desire of beauty: the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death" (*App*, 227). Pater could not describe Dowson's identification of beauty with death more succinctly. By grafting death into the image of the little girl, Dowson furthers this concept more consciously into Decadent territory. He constructs an iconic image owing something of its origin in the Pre-Raphaelite period. She has been portrayed numerous times, for instance, as Millais's *Ophelia* (1852), Burne-Jones's *Sleeping Beauty* (1870-90) and Waterhouse's *St Eulalia* (1885). His inclination to escape life with its relentless passing of time and achieve a state of fixity is embodied in the image of the dead little girl.

The dead girl is the sleeping beauty who withholds death visually in a perpetual frozen, fixed state. She is the Keatsian "unravish'd bride of quietness"; she symbolizes for the *fin-de-siècle* Decadents what the "Grecian urn" did for the Romantic poet. She is also the embodied symbol of Schopenhauer's statement that "sexuality becomes for a man a source of brief pleasure and protracted suffering."[455] Her image holds a predisposition towards a strong Aesthetic stillness, as it is voiced in Yeats's lyric "He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead": "Were you but lying cold and dead, / And lights were paling out of the West, / You would come hither, and bend your head [...]" Yeats's speaker fantasizes the paradoxical situation when the beloved is animated to interact personally with him at the premise that she is a frigid corpse. The wish fulfilment for the dear one's death is morbid yet idealistic. Kermode notices that the "cult of the dead face [...] turns up in Yeats, and in Vorticism." He also contends that Pater "dwells upon the aesthetic satisfaction of dead faces – they are absolutely not 'thinking', they are opposed, in their finite and static forms, their

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[454] Poe, *Complete Works*, vol. 14, 201.
[455] Schopenhauer, *Essays*, 45.

concrete but suggestive presences, to what is fluid and abstract" (*RI*, 77). The image as pure form, the impression, the anti-statement, indicates mystery. "Mystery" is a word associated with "mystic". Pater writes that "the word *mystic* has been usually derived from a Greek word which signifies *to shut*, as if one *shut one's lips*, brooding on what cannot be uttered" (*Ren*, 28). Poetry contains verbal pictures that paradoxically speak as words and are silent as pictures.[456] Where Symons's non-thinking female image is that of the hot flesh, Dowson's is the cold, corpse-like girl. A perplexing aspect of Dowson's sleeping beauty is what Kermode notes as "the life-in-death, death-in-life of the Romantic Image" (*RI*, 78).

The idea of imprisoning virginal youth in death is not limited to its literality but has broader metaphorical dimensions; Dowson's story "The Statute of Limitations" (1893) illustrates the *making* of the frozen little girl in a seminal way. Michael Garth has not seen his betrothed adolescent fiancée in years; her portrait which depicts "the charming, oval face of a young girl, almost a child" (*SED*, 87) visually reminds Garth of her youth. He "lived in a dream of her; and the memory of her eyes and her hair was a perpetual presence with him" (*SED*, 86). On his way to meet her for marriage she has grown into womanhood and Garth tragically changes his mind because "The notion of the woman, which now she was, came between him and the girl whom he had loved" (*SED*, 88). The lovers as chameleonic, shifting beings confirm Dowson's Herakleitian river of time as it is exemplified in "Vesperal": "Strange grows the river on the sunless evenings!"[457] He regards her dead: "I have had a single passion; I have given my life to it; it is there still, consuming me. Only the girl I loved: it's as if she had died. Yes, she is dead [...]" (*SED*, 89).[458]

In Michael Garth's perverse logic, which brings about emotional self-destruction, the girl's portrait becomes the artefact by which her youth and purity are perpetually preserved along with Garth's sexual desire, the Aesthetic substitute for experience. In the context of Catholicism her portrait becomes a religious icon, like a young Madonna, and is venerated by Garth in an ascetic manner of abstinence. She dwells in Garth's margin just like the Peruvian virgin-girl Saint Rose is aesthetically

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[456] Variations of this concept appear in Verlaine's group of poems titled *Romances sans Paroles* (1874).
[457] Garth undergoes Herakleitian change as well as the girl; he ruminates: "Her heart, how can she give it to me? She gave it years ago to the man I was, the man who is dead. We, who are left, are nothing to one another, mere strangers" (*SED*, 89).
[458] In "The Statute of Limitations" Dowson cites Christina Rossetti's the "Prince's Progress" (485-94), aligning the cult of the little girl with the Victorian fairytale pining lady (*SED*, 89).

fixed in the chaste space of a lengthy footnote in Beardsley's frivolous erotic novel *Under the Hill*.[459] Thornton avers that Dowson's "love for children is paradoxically a love for the artificial."[460] Dowson says of Adelaide in a letter to Moore that she "looked precisely like a little child Marquise who had stepped out of a canvass of Watteau" (D-*Letters*, 204-5) and in the "The Eyes of Pride" Rosalind Lingard is described as "a girl with the ambered paleness and the vaguely virginal air of an early Tuscan painting [...]" (*SED*, 110). Ronald Pearsall also contends that "little girls in pen, pencil and water-colour were more amenable than little girls in flesh" because the last ones "grew up".[461] And as Symons put it early in *The Savoy*, the cult of the little girl for Dowson permits "this search after the immature, the ripening graces which time can but spoil in the ripening."[462] "The Statute of Limitations" epitomizes this tendency in Dowson's work. Michael Garth does not exhibit a mere whim but embodies the core mechanism of the psychology of the Decadents.

The idea of the dead girl captures the paradox of gratification in making desire impossible. In the story "Apple Blossom in Brittany", on the last parting from Marie-Ursule, Campion felt "that indefinable sadness which [...] was but the last refinement of pleasure" (*SED*, 107). Debatably, this stance of the Dowsonian lover is rooted in the medieval tradition of courtly love, where the knight mystifies his lady and worships her from afar.[463] The eroticism of such a relationship is platonic, yet ambiguous; it is the progenitor of the Victorian gentry's attitude towards little girls. Garth's ever-absent fiancée in "The Statute of Limitations" is a *princesse lointaine* ("remote princess") like Cynara. The platonic demeanour of medieval courtly love, yet with a sexual hint, evolves into the cult of the little girl; Oxford dons, for example, had their favourites just as Dowson was infatuated with the child-actress Minnie Terry. The child was emblematic of a sealed-off sexuality and yet it was eroticized.

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[459] Aubrey Beardsley, *Under the Hill* (Paris: Olympia P, 1959; London: The New English Library, 1966), 54.
[460] Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma*, 85.
[461] Pearsall, *Worm*, 432. Also, Dowson wrote to Charles Sayle in 1888 that "the little girls grow up, and become those very objectionable animals, women." Ernest Dowson, *New Letters from Ernest Dowson*, ed. Desmond Flower (Andoversford: Whittington P, 1984), 4-5. Moreover, in "Souvenirs of an Egoist" Anton says of Ninette: "I cannot conceive of her as a woman. To me she is always a child" (*SED*, 33).
[462] Symons, "A Literary Causerie," 92.
[463] The courtly love appeal is clearly visible in the prose poem "The Princess of Dreams": "Poor legendary princess! In her enchaunted tower of ivory, the liberator thought that she awaited him." From this opening the aestheticised image of the lady undergoes demystification and collapses; it is invaded by the bleak naturalism of the *fin de siècle*. The autobiographical undertones are obvious.

Dowson's obsession with the dead little girl is exemplarily presented in "A Requiem" from *Verses*. The girl of the poem is Neobule, a name which reveals the genesis of the poem to be Horace's "Ad Neobulen", Ode 3.12 from *Odes* as Desmond Flower points out (Dowson, *Works*, 257). This is important in understanding Dowson's modification of the theme of sexual awakening. Horace captures the moment of sexual awakening and frustration in the adolescent wool-spinner Neobule when she is mesmerized by the youth Hebrus's robust physical exercise:

> tibi qualum cytherae
> puer ales, tibi telas
> operosaeque Minervae studium aufert, Neobule,
> Liparaei nitor Hebri (5-8)[464]

Horace's Neobule is caught in the moment of transition from innocent adolescence to sexual maturity but for Dowson's Neobule adult sexuality is banished in the act of premature death:

> Neobule, being tired,
> Far too tired to laugh or weep,
> From the hours, rosy and gray,
> Hid her golden face away.
> Neobule, fain of sleep,
> Slept at last as she desired!

With this image Dowson endeavours to resolve the problem of the *moment passant* stated by Pater; instead of relishing the moments as they pass like Symons, he imprisons them in death. Instead of assaulting sexually the body of desire he aestheticises it platonically and keeps it at bay in the ascetic manner of his Catholic poetry. Neobule is fatigued of life as if she has experienced it; for Dowson the moment of maturation equals death. Dowson arrests this moment by transforming Neobule to a Sleeping Beauty trapped in the sterile enchanted environment of the poem. This sterile environment is traced in a strain of gaudy flowers that echo Wilde and the Aesthetes. The "dead people" are "Plucking with their spectral hands /

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[464] Horace, *Odes and Carmen Saeculare*, ed. and trans. Guy Lee, Latin and Greek Texts 8 (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1998), 126. "Cytherea's winged youngster / steals your basket, Neobule, / Steals your hand-loom and your interest in the labour of Minerva, / Soon as radiant Liparean." Horace, *Odes*, 127.

Scentless blooms of asphodel." This is an image which evokes beauty in a state of preservation. The sterile flora intensifies with intricate associations:[465]

> Neobule, tired to death
> Of the flowers that I threw
> On her flower-like, fair feet,
> Sighed for blossoms not so sweet,
> Lunar roses pale and blue,
> Lilies of the world beneath.

The throwing of flowers at her feet is a funereal gesture which Dowson repeats in some of his poems: "And on thy quiet breast, / Violets I throw" ("The Dead Child") and "Flung roses, roses, riotously with the throng" ("Non sum qualis"). The repetition of the word "flower" suggests that the image stagnantly returns to itself. With her "flower-like" feet Neobule is framed as an Aesthetic object in death and venerated by the poet in a distanced way. The "lunar roses", "lilies" of the underworld and "asphodel" characterise Neobule as icy beauty preserved in death, like the girl who is "Queen Lily" in "Requiem", echoing the symbolic realism of Pre-Raphaelite painting. The "Lunar roses pale and blue" recall *The Pierrot of the Minute* when Pierrot begs for a kiss and the Lady replies: "How wan and pale do moon-kissed roses grow – / Dost thou not fear my kisses, Pierrot?" (199-200) Whilst in "A Requiem" death and virginity are one and the same, in *The Pierrot of the Minute*, more explicitly, unrequited love makes the Lady's kisses deathlike and at the same time virginal, composing a recipe for the *femme fatale*. The Dowsonian girl, in contrast to the Horatian one, will expire in her virginal adolescence, "too tired / Of the dreams and days above". Weariness is tinted with artifice because it refers to the thought of experiencing life and not to the experience itself.[466] The last stanza largely repeats the first one marking a circularity in which the image is self-fixed. Neobule "Sleeps the sleep which she desired"; this tautological repetition of "sleep" accentuates the rigidity of the Sleeping Beauty.

In "The Dead Child" Dowson's obsession with the expired little girl carries a glimpse of his peculiar sexuality. With stark Schopenhauerian pessimism he commences the poem with the line "Sleep on, dear, now / The last sleep and the best".

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[465] For an extensive argument of Dowson's images of pastoral and nature as highly artificial see Joseph H. Gardner, "Dowson's Pastoral," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 46.3 (1991), 376-95.
[466] Similarly for Perkins, Dowsonian images express "a literary stylization of experience". David Perkins, *History of Modern Poetry*, 40.

Like the casting of flowers on the dead Neobule in "A Requiem", the speaker throws "violets" to her "brow " and "quiet breast" recreating her in a sepulchral manner. The fixed image of prepubescent death or frozen lifeless innocence is embodied when the speaker says

> Lie still, and be
> For evermore a child!
> Not grudgingly,
> Whom life has not defiled,
> I render thee.

These lines indicate how the Decadent image, as seen previously, is also about expiration in reverse. The everlastingness of childhood hints at the Lacanian idea of Dowson's tendency to expire backwards, in a movement towards the womb, not dissimilar from the Catholic sanctuary that features in his *oeuvre*. This is also reinforced in the threatening properties of "life" which "has not defiled" the dead little girl. The verb "render" is quite interesting as it means both *to leave* (transitive) and *to make*. Dowson creates the dead child, a site of innocence and purity just like the ascetic recluse of the Carthusian monks. The eroticization of the dead girl is characterized by paradox and impossibility because it symbolizes his proclivity to consummate his desire, leaving simultaneously the object of his desire intact and virginal. This predicament is subtly depicted:

> Yes, to be dead,
> Dead, here with thee to-day, –
> When all is said
> 'Twere good by thee to lay
> My weary head.
>
> The very best!
> Ah, child so tired of play,
> I stand confessed:
> I want to come thy way,
> And share thy rest.[467]

The weariness of the speaker translates as his sexual leaning to unite with the image of death in contrast to the Decadent's satiation of a "defiled" life. The word "play" is another ambiguous term as it could signify sexual foreplay. The paradoxical nature of Dowson's eroticism is also asserted as the speaker is in an ambience of dying but

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[467] Compare with Swinburne's "The Garden of Proserpine": "I am weary of days and hours, / Blown buds of barren flowers, / Desires and dreams and powers / And everything but sleep."

whilst he is conscious he cannot fully expire and unite with his "dear"; he can only "want" to die. The phrase "I stand confessed" presents his torment over the impossibility of unification with purity in the form of a Catholic ritual, thus bringing out the gist of his Decadent desire. The alternate long and short lines with their symmetrical arrangement point to the irresolution of the reverse movements of life and death, simulating the cadence of breathing, and suggesting a sexual climax that is impossible. Dowson's erotic attraction to the girl's dead body is perverse, though not in the fashion of Wilde's necrophilic eroticism in *Salomé* or the carnal merging with the body as an inanimate object, a statue, in "Charmides". Dowson's perversity lies in the desire to consummate sexually as a means of participating in the girl's "rest". Similarly, Mr. Seefang says to Rosalind Lingard in "The Eyes of Pride": "I wish we were dead together, you and I, lying there quietly, out of the worry of things" (*SED*, 113). The poem's speaker, like Seefang, wishes to die, to fuse with the image of expiration framing his sexuality in a Catholic asceticism rather than in an oriental elaboration as in Wilde.

"Flos Lunae" effectively portrays Dowson's erotic obsession with the aesthetics of enshrinement and preadolescent purity of the dead girl. [468] The title of the poem which means "lunar flower" and recalls Neobule's lunar roses aesthetically exemplifies the unnamed dead girl of the poem. Aesthetic appreciation of the stationary body is the expression of desire. The repeated line "I would not alter thy cold eyes" that doubly bolsters every stanza renders the poem a ritualistic incantation which intensifies the futile desire for purity as the speaker admits, "The heart of thee I cannot reach". The Dowsonian desire is self-negated and is registered in the fixed façade of death which is uncontaminated by the pathos of life as the speaker would not "have thee smile, nor make thee weep". Dowson reinstates the girl as an icon of death to which all desire aspires, caught in a site which could be a variant of Lacan's concept of *entre deux morts*: "Though all my life droops down and dies, / Desiring thee, desiring sleep". These lines state a clear and necessary identification of fixed purity with death, epitomized in the lunar girl:

> I would not alter thy cold eyes;
> I would not change thee if I might,

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[468] For an extensive discussion of the poem as an example of aestheticizing the never-fulfilled desire see Alkalay-Gut, "Ernest Dowson and the Strategies of Decadent Desire," 250-6.

To whom my prayers for incense rise,
Daughter of dreams! my moon of night!
I would not alter thy cold eyes.

I would not alter thy cold eyes,
With trouble of the human heart:
Within their glance my spirit lies,
A frozen thing, alone, apart;
I would not alter thy cold eyes.

The dead girl is the "moon of night"; the moon is a double symbol of both chastity and death. She brings to mind the chilly Moon Maiden from *The Pierrot of the Minute* who is a teasing *femme fatale* like a Keatsian La Belle Dame but keeps her obstinate distance. Her iciness renders her literally corpselike:

PIERROT
Cold are thy lips, more cold than I can tell
Yet would I hang on them, thine icicle!
Cold is thy kiss, more cold than I could dream
Arctus sits, watching the Boreal stream:
But with its frost such sweetness did conspire
That all my veins are filled with running fire; (210-5)

Pierrot's desire is generated by a body which is a simulation of a stiff and cold cadaver. This is the physical manifestation of an impossible union fantasy. Pierrot's response to the Moon Maiden helps us to understand the more extremely restrained sexuality of "Flos Lunae". In the poem, the speaker's "prayers for incense" turn the icy girl into a Catholic object of veneration,[469] suggesting that the intention to consummate desire is replaced by Aesthetic appreciation. Sexual desire is dealt with by the perpetual, suspended pain caused by conjuring up a barrier of Aesthetic idealism: she is the "daughter of dreams", an ethereal, religious and immaculate entity; she is nothing like Symons's "masterpiece of flesh". The ascetic response to desire is highlighted by the isolation of his spirit which is a "frozen thing" and "lies within" the dead girl's "glance". His entrapment in her "glance" shows that he is also aesthetically framed, or tends to be, by the glacial eyes of the girl, invoking thus his longing to be assimilated in the composite image of purity and death. The repeated

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[469] "Little girls were looked on with a reverence that would have been applicable to angels" Pearsall, *Worm*, 431. This religiosity also parallels Dowson's worship of Adelaide which, as Symons notes, was "a sort of virginal devotion, as to a Madonna; and I think had things gone happily [...] he would have felt [...] that his ideal had been spoilt." "Literary Causerie," 93.

line-refrain framing doubly every stanza becomes the girl's eyes that are schematized as eyes within whose "glance my spirit lies". The dead eyes, like the anointed sense of "Extreme Unction", seem to gaze at the speaker/poet ricocheting fruitlessly his desire.

The futile desire for unification with the amalgamated image of adolescence and death is dramatized in "Vanitas", a poem in which the "vanity" of the title may refer to the purposelessness of life or to the impossibility of uniting with the deceased girl. The former is indicated, for example, by the lines "The crown and victor's token: / How are they worth to-day?" This comment entails larger implications questioning the purpose of the artist. The latter is a subtle constant force in the poem with nostalgia for departed childhood; "will she stretch out a hand?" the speaker implores in the last line. His emotional soreness is not generated by his beloved's death as such; her death causes a feeling of bleakness and barrenness, a realization of the transience of life: "she, and Death, together, / Left me the wearier ways: / And now, these tardy bays!", lines justifying Schopenhauer's argument that resolution lies in total escape from life.

Death is situated in the Dowsonian state of limbo with the beloved "quietly sleeping" in "dim nebulous lands" and/or "ulterior land". Interestingly, the adjectives "nebulous" and "ulterior" are the only strong Latinisms in a linguistically Anglo-Saxon poem. These Classical and Roman Catholic echoes hint at an aestheticization of death. The Aesthetic dead body of "Flos Lunae" is here reinstated as landscape. The deliberate suspension of desire in "Flos Lunae" attains another form in "Vanitas". The "long, long winter weather" implies a prolongation of dying which is also inscribed in the rhyming scheme, *ababb*. The last two lines (*bb*) denote a protraction with the trimeters adding edginess. This suspension links with and involves the poetics of articulating a futile desire. The speaker, recalling Dowson's real-life passivity with Adelaide Foltinowicz, reflects on his own reticence and procrastination: "The one word left unspoken, / It were late now to say." Insight into his state of mind culminates when he says:

> For once, ah once, to meet her,
> Drop laurel from tired hands:
> Her cypress were the sweeter,
> In her oblivious lands:
> Haply she understands!

Flower imagery is used here to denote a shift from artistic glory ("laurel") to death ("cypress"), an encoding of Dowson's personal myth. In poems like "Flos Lunae" and "Vanitas", the bond between the lover and the dead girl attains the twist of an almost but never achieved union. It evokes the Tristan and Isolde legend,[470] where the lovers are in physical proximity, and their desire is artificially boosted by the magic potion rendering perfection unachievable. In this case, the potion, the agent of impossibility, is the image of death. In "Non sum qualis", if Isolde is Cynara, the potion is the prostitute and the difference is the strong sense of guilt in the poem which is banished in the legend.

The Aesthetic encasing of childhood purity in death becomes the textual terrain of poetry itself as in the circularity of "Villanelle of Sunset". Here, desire is not perpetuated in the mere iconicity of the sleeping beauty, but in the poet's fixing of the lingering weariness of the "Child" in an ever-going exhalation in the strict formalities of the villanelle form. The dying of the little girl progresses like a ripple effect by alternating the refraining lines "Come hither, Child! and rest" and "Behold, the weary West!" This ripple effect is manifested in Dowson's use of French forms like the villanelle, the rondeau, and the roundel.[471] With the rhythm of monotony and repetitiousness they are the ideal vehicles to carry out the transparent and wearily slow progression of the image. The topography of the Dowsonian limbo of suspension here is not the seasonal landscape but the rhythmic locale of the poem itself:

> My white bird, seek thy nest,
> Thy drooping head down lay:
> Behold the weary West!
>
> Now are the flowers confest
> Of slumber: sleep, as they!
> Come hither, Child! and rest.

Apart from the repetition of the two key lines, the heavy diction of dying and sleeping establishes a rhythm that is drowsy and hypnotic, almost a simulation of Dowson's absinthe-induced trances; a sense of overwhelming fatigue tends to bring the poem to a cessation. Dowson dwells on the shortcut between childhood and death, or the

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[470] Dowson closes a long letter to Samuel Smith: "This letter is like *Tristan and Isolde*, it has nothing but love and death in it" (D-*Letters*, 280).
[471] Edmund Gosse puts emphasis on the stylistic supremacy of these French forms. See Edmund Gosse, "A Plea for Certain Exotic Forms of Verse," *Cornhill Magazine* 36 (1877), 53-71.

"white bird" and the "weary West"; this is almost visualized by the use of rhythm: the short triplets suggest this shortcut and yet their movement is painfully slow. The phrase "Now are the flowers confest / Of slumber" captures the mood of inertia and a sense of inevitability. In the last stanza Dowson confirms that the dead child is aesthetically present as an ornament: "Tired flower! upon my breast, / I would wear thee alway". The repeated word "Behold" in the last, additional line gives the poem a twist of extra suspension and refers to the act of watching, denoting that expiring itself is made into an artificial image.

The Aesthetic potential of the villanelle form is fully exploited in "Villanelle of His Lady's Treasures" where an arrest of the girl's childish innocence is achieved, not in death, but in the glacial, textual environment of Dowson's art. Here the little girl turns into what Snodgrass calls an "aesthetic moment".[472] The poem reaches a point in which the sleeping beauty is inwrought and preserved in verse. But for John Reed Dowson fails because "Words enshrine words alone; the Idea cannot be confined in language."[473] The poem's recycling circularity and economy is built on the lines "I took her dainty eyes as well" "And so I made a Villanelle". The phrase "as well" is introduced to the poem from the start, evoking a collector's insatiability. The "dainty eyes", the "silken tendrils of her hair", "her voice, a silver bell", "her whiteness virginal", the "two roses rare" of her cheeks and "her laugh, most musical" make up the chaste girl's slight body which is reconstituted as the trifling form, or the body, of the "Villanelle". The poem presents the speaker as a lover in a state of obsession, almost a murderous psychotic stepping out of the poems of Browning. Dowson preserves the girl, and her "laugh" which he "wrought" in the domain of art "with artful care", just as Browning's Duke had his "last Duchess painted on the wall, / Looking as if she were alive" (1-2).[474] Inscribing the lady into a poem as a means for freezing her youthful purity reflects Dowson's literary art at large as an Aesthetic space where fantasy is sterilely fixed.[475] Dowson conflates poem and girl. In the preface to *Verses*, he dedicates the volume to Adelaide and writes: "To you, who are

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[472] Snodgrass, "Aesthetic Memory's Cul-de-sac," 30-1.
[473] Reed, "Bedlamite and Pierrot," 107.
[474] Robert Browning, *The Major Works*, ed. Adam Roberts, 1997 (Oxford: OUP, 2005).
[475] For Alkalay-Gut the lady is controlled by being transformed into the pure artifice of the villanelle. Karen Alkalay-Gut, "Overcoming Time and Despair: Ernest Dowson's Villanelle," *Victorian Poetry* 34 (1996), 106.

my verses".[476] Moreover, Dowson writes in a letter to Arthur Moore about his "liaison" that "personally I am quite content to let the affair develop itself in the way – I prefer – on paper" (D-*Letters*, 51). And this is exactly the attitude of Michael Garth in "The Statute of Limitations"; the protagonist of the story is enamoured with the girl's portrait instead of the actual person because the latter has aged whereas the former is a painting which maintains the girl's youth. "Villanelle of His Lady's Treasures" features a key syllogism:

> I said: "It may be possible
> Her image from my heart to tear!"
> And so I made a Villanelle.

Dowson blots out his psychosexual anguish by transforming and relocating the "image" of his desire to the artistic, and so controlled, image of the villanelle. The Dowsonian reticence and passivity which leads to the enshrinement of the little girl signifies also an essential chasm of unfulfilled desire and so the development of the affair "on paper" becomes a form of autoeroticism. Similarly in "Souvenirs of an Egoist", Anton's violin becomes the substitute of his attraction to Ninette. Anton says: "My fiddle is my only mistress" (*SED*, 33-4). Anton and his fiddle could represent Dowson and his poetry; art with its vanity becomes the proxy by which the artist tackles his desire; Ninette, or the object of desire, is channelled and regulated artificially through the medium of art.

The death of the little girl is not always anticipated as in "Villanelle of Sunset", it is also a contrast to the brevity of the ideal moment as in "Ad Domnulam Suam" which is an exertion to suspend child-love. Here death equals with the loss of childhood and the entering of maturity: "Soon thou leavest fairy-land; / Darker grow thy tresses." Dowson's attitude towards little girls resembles that of Lewis Carroll.[477] The poem features the repetitive and slightly varying stanza which pronounces:

> Little lady of my heart!
> Just a little longer,
> Be a child: then, we will part,
> Ere this love grow stronger.

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[476] Alkalay-Gut argues that the preface makes *Verses* "a kind of intentional dead letter and whose value is exclusively expressive and aesthetic." Alkalay-Gut, "Ernest Dowson and the Strategies of Decadent Desire," 248.

[477] Carroll "rejected his girls when they were, as he put it, entering the awkward transitional stage." Pearsall, *Worm*, 434.

In addition to modifying and recycling the "little while" from other pieces, such as "Transition", the poem uses obvious, ordinary diction to convey the frailty and simplicity of the ideal moment. The poem moves with a certain mildness and dispassion, keen to expire at the moment of sexual maturation. The wish for a state of oblivion by way of economy and recycling of diction is apparent in "O Mors! Quam amara est memoria tua homini pacem habenti in substantiis suis". This is a lyric in which Dowson fully presents his poetics of silence and stasis; the middle stanzas read:

Give over playing,
Cast thy viol away:
Merely laying
Thine head my way:
Prithee, give over playing,
Grave or gay.

Be no word spoken;
Weep nothing: let a pale
Silence, unbroken
Silence prevail!
Prithee, be no word spoken,
Lest I fail!

The frequent repetitions, the very short lines and linguistic sparseness give the impression that the poem rolls back into oblivion and nothingness,[478] or the Lacanian Real. The Symbolic Order is unresolved as the speaker, in a feat of psychosis, enshrines the ideal moment in a condition similar to death in order to protect it from its transience. The little girl is forced to an untimely transformation into a sleeping beauty enhanced by the "pale silence". The fading rhythm vacillates between suspension and oblivion, demarcating the mechanics of illogicality that accompany the image of expiration. The atonal and restrained sexuality of "Ad Domnulam Suam" and "A Mors" restates the paradoxical assumption that for the Decadent artist childhood purity frozen in poetry embodies the realization of desiring, not a body, but unconsummated desire.

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[478] Dowling writes about "O Mors": "The short choked phrases, as if gasped out, yearn to return to silence." *LaD*, 210.

In "Yvonne of Brittany" the dead little girl is associated with an *ubi sunt* theme, nostalgia to return to the moment of perfection or innocence.[479] The repeated rhetorical question "Do you ever remember, Yvonne?" lends tragic pathos to the thought of the idyllic lost moment. The lyric utilizes rich seasonal imagery in following the progress of flirting with the girl-lover until her premature death "just a year ago, last spring." Dowson arrests the transition in which the first signs of Yvonne's sexual awakening automatically mark her demise. This is visualized as the "still, soft Breton twilight" in which Yvonne's mother "came out chiding, / For the grass was bright with dew", a symbol of initiation into sexuality and the "first faint flush of love." In the next stanza tagged by the "fullness of midsummer" Yvonne's "surrender" and the speaker's averring "I was glad, so glad, Yvonne! / To have led you home at last" could refer both to sexuality and death. The poem's final stanza brings the image of fixed premature death into line with the Dowsonian longing to return to the stage of absolute purity:

> In your mother's apple-orchard
> It is grown too dark to stray,
> There is none to chide you, Yvonne!
> You are over far away.
> There is dew on your grave grass, Yvonne!
> But your feet it shall not wet:
> No, you never remember, Yvonne!
> And I shall soon forget.

Yvonne's impenetrable grave reinforces her spotless image as enshrined in its own purity and saved by the process of puberty.[480] Yvonne's Aesthetic encasement coincides with her "mother's apple-orchard", a phrase which stands out in the poem and suggests the embryonic world of the womb. Dowson exhibits a penchant to return to the idealism of the Real before it is contaminated by the Symbolic Order. The dead girl-lover does not only symbolize the site of the Real but also the impossibility of its attainment.

The icon Dowson crafts is the solid manifestation of fading before blooming; it is Decadent because in it he tries to preserve purity but with artificial means,

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[479] Pearsall also links the "cult of the girl" with "nostalgia for lost innocence." *Worm*, 441. See also James Kincaid, *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), 228-40.

[480] The poem brings to mind "Apple Blossom in Brittany" where Marie-Ursule's wish is a metaphor of herself as a transient child: "But the blossom is so much prettier [...] there will be apples and apples – always enough apples. But I like the blossom best – and it is so soon over" (*SED*, 104).

preserving it in fantasy and death.[481] These strategies render this icon suspect; and hence Dowson, to borrow the celebrated line of "Non sum qualis", remains faithful to the alienated ideal in his own fashion. The unpublished lyric "It Is Finished" carries teleological connotations; the title alludes to Christ's last words, "Consummatum Est". It echoes Swinburne's "A Ballad of Death" and recalls both Schopenhauer's pessimism and the Naturalism of Emile Zola which was familiar to Dowson. It is reflective of the poet's attitude towards death with lines such as "Ah dream no false or futile dreams, /…/ That death is other than it seems." It is an anti-elegy of the dead girl which conjures up the aforementioned icon in full force:

> The little girl face is white and cold,
> The parted lips give forth no breath,
> The grape-like curls of sun-bleached gold,
> Are clammy with the dews of death.

Here, childhood purity is arrested in death[482] in graphic terms. In agreement with Schopenhauer's ideas, it is devoid of any metaphysical dimension. Peculiarly, it contrasts, or reverses, the redeeming Christian aspect of death regarding, not the pure, but the fallen girl of Thomas Hood's "The Bridge of Sighs" (1844):

> Take her up tenderly
> Lift her with care;
> Fashion'd so slenderly,
> Young, and so fair! (5-8)
>
> Not of the stains of her,
> All that remains of her
> Now is pure womanly. (18-20)[483]

Although in Dowson's poetry the semantics of the whiteness of purity and death coincide, Thomas Hood's girl is *purified* in death. Whilst for the Romantics the beauty that reflects purity ensues in a purgatorial manner in death, for Dowson it is securely *preserved*. The notion of the dead lover in Dowson has a more perverse edge

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[481] Snodgrass argues that although Dowson construes spaces where he can preserve purity, this is undermined by the fact that there is automatically an "intrinsic guilt" that "contaminates" this space. Chris Snodgrass, "Ernest Dowson's Aesthetics of Contamination," *English Literature in Transition: 1880 – 1920* 26:3 (1983), 162.

[482] Adams contends that death in the poem was "a metaphor for the death of childhood." Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, 8.

[483] Thomas Hood, *The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hood*, ed. Walter Jerrold (London: OUP, 1935), 649. Also, the poem bears similarities with Wilde's "lily-like" buried lady of "Requiescat".

than Symons's. On comparing "It is Finished" with Symons's "III. Amor Triumphans: IV. Vain Memory" from *Amoris Victima*, the "mournful veil" of the "pale" "chilled" lover represents Symons's nostalgic cry for the lost moment of pleasure; yet for Dowson, this condition of apartness *is* his pleasure. Despite this disparity, the rooting of the dead maiden in Romanticism is evident. In "Lullaby" sleep/death locks the little girl's "white childhood" from the "unkind life" which is "tumid and full of strife". This evokes the Dickensian girl, a victim of the utilitarian world like Little Nell. Dowson's Decadent image of crystallization and fixity is additionally a cry against or escape from the advances of *fin-de-siècle* industrialism, mechanization of society and alienating urbanization.

9. "Re-made Like a Casket of Gold": Modernist Transmutations of Decadent Poetry

OFTEN in his poems Ezra Pound voices a crisis which looks back to the nineties' sense of artistic exhaustion, of the deadlock of artifice. This is evident in *A Lume Spento* (1908) which features lines like "The hour flows / And joins its hue to mighty hues out-worn / Weaving the perfect Picture, while we torn / Give cry in harmony".[484] This mood of acute self-reflection speaks of and out of an aesthetic entrapment and is itself of clear *fin-de-siècle* origin. The "perfect Picture" is weaved in a Swinburnian manner and in its anachronistic manifestations vacillates between ultimate artifice and the self-questioning of it. This is the note that dominates early Modernism. The endeavour of poets like Pound, W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot to transcend the artifice of post-Romanticism from Swinburne through Pater to the Decadent nineties is threatened by a new level of Aestheticism which is the result of their self-conscious effort to shake it off.[485]

The aim of this concluding chapter, or coda, is to open up suggestions about the chief ways in which the Decadent image persists, albeit in transmuted form, beyond the nineties. The Modernists retained a nostalgia for and fascination with the Decadents. The instrumental role of Symons's influential *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* in communicating the French avant-garde to the Modernists needs no further elucidation.[486] Various key anthologies like Yeats's *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* (1936) where Pater's Mona Lisa passage is rendered in *vers libre*, and Richard Aldington's *The Religion of Beauty: Selections from the Aesthetes* (1950) indicate a longing for and an alliance with the nineties. Pound declares that Symons is one of his "gods"[487] and the link between image and self is addressed in Yeats's "Ego Dominus Tuus". From the early Aestheticism of Yeats, to the stylistic spectacle of Imagism, to the indulgent sensuality of Aldington, to Eliot's metropolitan vision and

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[484] Ezra Pound, *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. and introd. Louis L. Martz, 1967 (New York: New Directions, 1976), 29. See introduction for the influence of Swinburne and the Decadence on early Pound, esp. viii-ix.
[485] For a discussion of "art for art's sake" in Pound and Eliot see C. K. Stead, *The New Poetic: Yeats to Eliot* (London: Hutchinson University Library, 1964), 80, 108-10.
[486] For Symons as a decisive influence on Yeats, Eliot, and Pound see Gibbons, "Modernism in Poetry," 47. See also Fletcher, *Yeats and His Contemporaries*, 252-3.
[487] G. Thomas Tanselle, "Two Early Letters of Ezra Pound," *American Literature* 34.1 (1962), 118.

Pound's artistic predicament in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), the Decadent image is assimilated in, yet shapes, the turbulent early twentieth century poetry. The paradoxes which the nineties are ridden with are not resolved in Modernist poetry; they are assessed and carried to a new intensity.

9.1 Some Adaptations of the Image in Early Modernist Poetry

Yeats, who was friends with Symons, Johnson, Wilde and Dowson but survived the nineties, exhibits signs of a remote Aesthetic isolation from *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889) to the pivotal volume *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899).[488] In a review of the volume Symons contends that Yeats "weaves [...] that elaborate web of atmosphere in which the illusion of love, and the cruelty of pain, and the gross ecstasy of hope, become changed into beauty."[489] Symons could not put it more concisely. The lyrics of *The Wind Among the Reeds* create a Pre-Raphaelite[490] mythical dreamscape where love, pain and hope are aestheticized substituting experience by means of symbols. As the poems' titles designate, the speaker is in the third person and so indicates that the self has assumed Aesthetic distance. The image of escape in the artificial milieu of Morrisian poetic embroidery made of pregnant literary emblems consists of a Decadent *topos*, paralleling the escapism of Symons and Dowson in the fleshly explorations of the former and the death-trances of the latter. Yeats's predilection for the archetypal images of poetic traditionalism such as roses, lilies, moons and hair[491] signals a resistance to the modernity of un-poetic subject matter which was to be embraced by Eliot some years later. In "The Lover Tells of the Rose in His Heart" Yeats highlights his role as a weaver of images:

> The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong too great to be told;
> I hunger to build them anew and sit on a green knoll apart,
> With the earth and the sky and the water, re-made, like a casket of gold
> For my dreams of your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart. (5-8)

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[488] For a suggestion of *The Wind Among the Reeds* as Decadent see A. J. Bate, "Yeats and the Symbolist Aesthetic," *MLN*, 98.5 (1983), 1222. See also 1227-9 for some influences from the French Symbolists and the Decadence of Wilde and Pater.
[489] A. Norman Jeffares, ed., *W. B. Yeats: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1977), 111.
[490] See George Watson, "Yeats, Victorianism, and the 1890s," *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, eds. Marjorie Howes and John Kelly (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), 46.
[491] For the Decadent origins of the Yeatsian hair and roses in *The Wind Among the Reeds* see Bate, "Yeats," 1224.

The "unshapely things" are the rough images of reality which have to be remade and refined in an alchemical process in which the elements must turn into "a casket of gold". Yeats is anxious to transmute the actuality of existence into the realm of "dream", the territory of free-flowing symbols and soft contours that recall Verlaine. This happens by way of an artificial proxy characteristic of Decadence: the dreamed version of the beloved's image is what matters and not the image itself, or to reiterate Symons, "the illusion of love". Ultimately, the images in *The Wind Among the Reeds*, as Paul de Man argues in his discussion of "shells" are echoing and self-reflective suggesting the poet's narcissism.[492]

The Decadent potential or trapping in Yeats's early phase sheds light on his idiosyncratic relationship with modernity. The style of his *Savoy* period has much in common with Wilde's mythopoeia and poetics of anachronism. But whilst Wilde follows a strategy of a deliberate aestheticism by reshuffling the literary tradition, Yeats creates out of tradition an artistic sanctuary with which he can blot out modernity, yet in his later work he becomes stranded. Wilde's images are lexically personalized concrete objects but Yeats's, although they spring from his individual vision, are emblematized and universalized. These emblems are gathered in a tapestry-like manner pointing towards an ever-elusive sense of mystery, vacillating between Aestheticism and Symbolism. By doing so they conform to Edward Larrissy's idea of Yeats's "measured difference" within pairs of persisting contradictions.[493]

In the hypnotizing rhythms of "He Remembers Forgotten Beauty" the speaker stitches together a sequence of dream-images like embroidery: "The love-tales wrought with silken thread / By dreaming ladies upon cloth" (6-7) or "The roses that of old time were / Woven by ladies in their hair" (9-10). The speaker fantasizes a remote idealized lady in a state of Dowsonian lethargy: "For that pale breast and lingering hand / Come from a more dream-heavy land, / A more dream-heavy hour than this" (15-7). The Pre-Raphaelite connotations are obvious. In recalling mythic memory to conjure his fantasy, the speaker goes below successive layers of dream states, reaching deep into his notion of the "great memory" as this is expressed in

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[492] See Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984), 146, 172, 192-3.
[493] Edward Larrissy, *Yeats the Poet: The Measures of Difference* (Hempstead: Wheatsheaf, 1994), see for instance 155.

"Magic" (1901).[494] The "great memory" is an all-encompassing ivory tower of the Yeatsian speaker and the languid eroticism of the lady is construed for his escape by artificializing and eroticizing the tissue of literary tradition.

Yeats's creative anxiety and ambiguous attitude to modernity are manifest in "The Secret Rose" which also features the parading of mythical imageries in an artificial tapestry, knitting biblical and Celtic Irish themes. The majestic slow rhythm with frequent enjambment and long vowels ("inviolate", "hour of hours" (1, 2)) produces a dreamy effect that carries the poem away "beyond the stir / And tumult of defeated dreams; and deep / Among pale eyelids, heavy with the sleep" (4-6)[495] as in "He Remembers Forgotten Beauty". Again the speaker escapes; this time the layers of dream are the folds of the Rose: "enfold me", "Thy great leaves enfold" (2, 7). The poetics of being cooped up in an arcane utopia are reinforced by the repetition of the first and last lines: "Far-off, most secret, and inviolate Rose". This overstated security of the Rose undermines it and along with the question-mark at the end of the poem the speaker voices his uneasiness with Modernist contingency, "The hour of thy great wind of love and hate" (28). In its anachronistic appearance and mystical properties the Rose appears to be the Decadent sign of the artificial paradise of literary tradition. The Rose which is an escape loop ultimately turns, in the poet's phrase, to a "Holy Sepulchre" (3) whose mysteries are aesthetically inscribed, yet funereally preserved.

The *fin-de-siècle* poet, devoted to the short lyric, revolts against what they saw as the endlessly slow-winded rhetoric of the Victorians and this is evidenced both in Symons's Impressionism and Dowson's technique of withdrawal. The Decadent image always involves intensity. This intensity is inherited and updated in the school of Imagism of T. E. Hulme, Richard Aldington, H. D., Ezra Pound, F. S. Flint and others. In *The Egoist* (1914-9) Aldington contends about Dowson that "among English authors Swinburne was his master, but a Swinburne singularly purged of rhetoric."[496] Aldington praises Dowson for his "overworked elegance and refinement", "delicacy and suavity".[497] These traits distinguish Imagist poetry whose principles are laid out in various manifestoes, most notably Pound's three principles in 1912. Pound

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[494] Yeats, *Essays*, 33, 60.
[495] For Yeats, rhythm should "prolong the moment of contemplation, the moment when we are both asleep and awake [...] by hushing us with an alluring monotony" and so that the mind "be unfolded in symbols." Yeats, *Essays*, 195-6.
[496] Richard Aldington, "Some Reflections on Ernest Dowson," *The Egoist* 2.3 (1915), 41.
[497] Aldington, "Some Reflections," 42.

insists on "direct treatment"[498] and Aldington emphasizes "a hardness, as of cut stone."[499] The image in Imagism takes to an extreme the image in Decadence; it involves affirmation of an objective style. Its predecessor is Symons's "impression" but it is devoid of the apparatus that makes up structured language. For Symons the Impressionistic paratactic image is, for himself, personal syntax, an affirmation of selfhood. But for the Imagists the pure image is free-standing, unaffected by the gaze, a sign of an objectified Aestheticism. Among its numerous definitions, May Sinclair's is particularly insightful, yet it raises questions as to its non-convergence with the craft of the pure Aesthete:

> The image is not a substitute; it does not stand for anything but itself. Presentation not Representation is the watchword of the school. The Image, I take it, is Form. But it is not pure form. It is form *and* substance [...] What the Imagists are "out for" is direct naked contact with reality. You must get closer and closer. Imagery must go. Symbolism must go. There must be nothing between you and the object. [...] But there are difficulties. Who is to say where the image ends and imagery begins?[500]

If the Image is not a substitute, a proxy, an illusion which is characteristic of Decadence, then the fact that "it does not stand for anything but itself" is automatically problematic as it suggests "art for art's sake" and self-reflexivity. Perhaps a redeeming feature should be that it is "form *and* substance". But the brutal annulment of any sort of embellishment means that substance is consumed in the form. Ultimately, as Sinclair observes, there is a fine line between "image" and "imagery", that is, between the Imagist formula and absolute décor. Imagism, in effect, is an upturned version of the poetry of Pater's disciples. Pound's famous epigram "In a Station of the Metro" is the apex of Imagism but next to Symons's Impressionism the differences become problematic. Pound speaks of "The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough."[501] And Symons in "La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge" portrays dancers: "Olivier Metra's Waltz of Roses / Sheds in a rhythmic shower / The very petals of the flower". It is not easy to discern where Impressionism ends and Imagism begins. Pound's floral figure which mediates a metropolitan scene could also be the *impression* of this scene. Also Symons's dancers moving like

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[498] Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, [1954]), 3.
[499] Richard Aldington, "Modern Poetry and the Imagists," *The Egoist* 1.11 (1914), 201.
[500] May Sinclair, "Two Notes," *The Egoist* 6.2 (1915), 88-9.
[501] Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems: 1908 – 1969*, 1975 (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 53.

"petals" is a perfect pre-Imagist scene which predates the movement.[502] In the Symonsian "impression" the Image/imagery problem, or confusion, is most apparent.

Indeed, a point of difference between Decadence and Imagism is that of subjectivity in the former and objectivity in the latter. The nineties poet's journey of experiences and sensations is a personal quest in search of selfhood which ends with the tragedy of futility. The manifesto poem "Prologue: In the Stalls" which opens *London Nights* puts it clearly: "My life is like a music-hall [...] in the impotence of rage". The Symonsian speaker watches "the dancers turn; and yet / It is my very self I see / Across the cloudy cigarette." The Imagist poem on the other hand is like an exhibited installation in words, anti-syntactical and impersonal. But this constitutes its artificial quality and intensive Aesthetic appeal. To confuse matters further, Pound says in his first principle: "Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective." And in an assertion, in "A Few Don'ts", which strongly recalls Pater's Herakleitian experience, "an 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time."[503] These notions make it all the more difficult to differentiate between impressionistic technique, as it is practised by Symons, and Imagist aesthetic of distance and precision. Whilst the former is about the artificial construction of the self, the latter involves artifice by replacing the self with its disembodied version. This confusion is akin to that insinuated by May Sinclair, between the "Image" and "imagery".

The objectivity of Imagism springs from the flux of Modernist literary thought; it is close to Eliot's idea of the artist's "depersonalization". Eliot prompts "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality [...] It is in this depersonalization that art may be said to approach the condition of science".[504] Although this idea runs contrary to Pater's emphasis on personality, it illustrates the poetry of concreteness and scientific precision advocated by Pater in his insistence on austerity and the discarding of "*surplusage*". Peter Jones links Eliot's impersonality to the Imagists' "dislike of the moralizing tone of the Victorians".[505] The extreme denseness and cryptic nature of Imagist poetry (and generally the avant-garde style of authors such as Eliot, Pound, James Joyce and Virginia Wolf) are a result of the

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[502] For Symons and the Imagists see Gibbons, "Modernism in Poetry," 56-8. The only difference Gibbons finds between the two sides is free verse (see 56-7).
[503] Pound, *Essays*, 3, 4.
[504] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays: 1917 – 1932*, 1932 (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), 17.
[505] Peter Jones, ed. and introd., *Imagist Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 30.

group's elitism, heterodoxy and reaction against the facile traditionalism and nationalism of the Georgians as C. K. Stead scrupulously illustrates.[506] The socio-cultural battle between Decadents and Philistines, which is reflected in the avant-gardism of the artistic production, changes arena in Modernism. It is not difficult to see the objectivist escapism of H. D, Aldington and Flint as "art for art's sake" in disguise.

The artificiality of Imagism, as its theoreticians expound, lies in the poetics of presentation rather than of substitution. It is characterized by a Classical hardness whose ancestry is found in the French Parnassians. Pound admired Lionel Johnson exactly for these qualities.[507] H. D. writes in "The Garden" (1915): "You are clear, / O rose, cut in rock, / hard as the descent of hail."[508] This hard-like clarity and sharpness of the Image are the result of the technique of analogy, whereby an image is rendered into another, usually discordant, image by means of juxtaposition. Often analogy devolves into simile resulting in a less pure imagistic effect (in this case, the use of the word "as"). H. D.'s lines illustrate an ostentatious Aestheticism: the super-hardness of the rose is unnatural, jewel-like, echoing Wilde and Gautier. It is the aesthetic of association directed to the reader as a stylistic *effect*. The following example from Aldington's "Sunsets" (1916) sheds more light on the Decadent possibilities of Imagism:

> The white body of the evening
> Is torn into scarlet,
> Slashed and gouged and seared
> Into crimson [...][509]

In *Ravenna* (1878) 293-301 Wilde describes the sunset sky as a shield stained in "blood and battle from the dying sun, / And in the west the circling clouds had spun / A royal robe" (297-9). Wilde depicts the sunset in terms of mythic warfare using panel-like elaborate rhetoric; Aldington conveys the same phenomenon by means of sadistic bodily violence which attests for the formidability and intensification of the image in Imagism. The verb "torn" is literally the sharp boundary of juxtaposition and

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[506] See chapters 3 and 4 of *The New Poetic*.
[507] Pound explicates the notion of "hardness" and the Parnassian connection with Gautier in his essay "The Hard and Soft in French Poetry" (1918) and for this reason he exalts Johnson's poetry in the Preface to *Poetical Works of Lionel Johnson* (1915). See Pound, 285 and 362, 367 respectively.
[508] Jones, ed., *Imagist Poetry*, 66.
[509] Jones, ed., *Imagist Poetry*, 55.

yet of total fusion between the "sunset" and the "white body". The hypnotic cadences of the nineties poets have intensified into a striking directness with the *vers libre* adding edge and angularity. As Jones clarifies, it was "line length or word isolation rather than the syntax" that showcased the image.[510] Decadent synaesthesia here is folded on itself: instead of presenting a sense in terms of another sense, the Imagist presents an image in terms of another image.

Metropolitanism and modern life is a dominant ingredient of Imagism inherited from the Decadent nineties. John Gould Fletcher's poetry is a stark case in point; his poems evoke the glittering fragmented artificiality of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* as well as Wilde's Impressionist lyrics. He writes Imagist city poetry like this from *Irradiations: Sand and Spray* (1915):

> Flickering of incessant rain
> On flashing pavements:
> Sudden scurry of umbrellas
> Bending, recurved blossoms of the storm.[511]

The first two lines, featuring also the Impressionist word "flashing", are typically Symonsian, echoing the dreamy, incandescent night-time city of "The pavement glittering with fallen rain" (Symons, "Nocturne"). The artificial feel of this saturated image achieves a true Decadent character with the inventive analogy of "umbrellas" which are "blossoms". It recalls the cult of "urban pastoral" where footlights and lamplights are perceived as flowers in Symons, Wratislaw, Le Gallienne, Douglas and others. Fletcher outdoes the Decadent Image by adding a further morbidity:

> On rainy nights
> It dully gleams
> Like the cold tarnished scales of a snake:
> And over it hang arc-lamps
> Blue-white death-lilies on black stems.[512]

The luminous cityscape assumes the features of the *femme fatale*, recalling Symons's fascination with serpents and Wilde's sphinx, and even going back to Keats's *Lamia*. The "arc-lamps" that are "death-lilies" attribute to the city a vampiric dubiousness, also accentuated by the compound nouns; they point to the corpse-like feminine

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[510] Jones, ed., *Imagist Poetry*, 38.
[511] Jones, ed., *Imagist Poetry*, 72.
[512] From "The Unquiet Street" (S.I.P. 1916). Jones, ed., *Imagist Poetry*, 70

which fascinates Dowson and Symons. The difference in Fletcher is the use of an objectivist manner which could be termed abstract artificiality, not far from the disembodied ecstasy often found in Symons. Again, the Decadent associations of these lines collapse the distinction between Imagism and Impressionist aestheticism.

The impact of the artificiality of city imagery lingers on T. S. Eliot's early lyrics as well as the major poems "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1910-11) and "Rhapsody on a Windy Night" (1917).[513] The subjectivism of the nineties' Baudelairian *flâneurie* in these latter poems is loosened into "stream of consciousness".[514] Eliot's relationship with the British Decadents is ambivalent. Although he acknowledges his debt to Laforgue, Symons's *The Symbolist Movement*, or James Thomson's *The City of Dreadful Night*, it is, to great extent, Symons's poetry informed by Baudelaire that forges him. A comment on Baudelaire is revealing of Eliot's own aesthetic and his liking of Symons: Baudelaire has achieved "fusion between the sordidly realistic and the phantasmagoric"; after this manner Eliot strives to transmute, like Huysmans, "the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic" into poetry.[515]

In a lyric whose title, "Easter: Sensations of April" (in two parts) could be one from *Silhouettes* or *London Nights*, Eliot introduces the otherworldly figure of a "little negro girl" (1) who possesses "Geraniums, geraniums / Withered and dry" (9-10).[516] The poem does not just have the slightness and evanescence of a nineties lyric, it is also in dialogue with the nineties. The Laforgian "geraniums" in their repetition simulate an echo. They are also dead, turned into Aesthetic artefacts, an epitaphic version of the sunflower, lily and green carnation of the Wildean Aesthetes. They look forward to the "paper rose, / That smells of dust and eau de Cologne" (55-6), in "Rhapsody on a Windy Night". They are the remnants of the Decadence as in their artistic deadness they survive "In the sweepings of the memory" (12). In part II, Eliot plays with the yellowness of the nineties: "Daffodils / Long yellow sunlight fills" (1-

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[513] Stanford detects a clear echo by comparing "White Heliotrope" and *The Waste Land*, 224-7. Derek Stanford, *Poets of the Nineties: A Biographical Anthology* (London: Baker, 1965), 33. See also 42. Also Gibbons links Prufrock with the Symonsian nerves and impressions. Gibbons, "Modernism in Poetry," 53.

[514] Clive Scott contends that the "'Stream of consciousness'" technique is as much a result of Impressionism as of advances in psychology." *Modernism: 1890 – 1930*, 222.

[515] From *What Dante Means to Me* (1950) in T. S. Eliot, *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909 – 1917*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 390. For Eliot's sympathetic comment on Symons's poetry and his Baudelairian influence see *Inventions*, 395.

[516] Eliot's poetry is quoted in *Inventions of the March Hare*.

2) the room, a colour-excess reminiscent of Wilde's "Symphony in Yellow". The poem documents the Decadent's method of composing:

> The insistent sweet perfume
> And the impressions it preserves
> Irritate the imagination
> Or the nerves. (7-10)

What triggers the creative faculty is the experience of a sense which corresponds to particular "impressions" indicating Eliot's "objective correlative" in embryo. With the connective word "Or", "imagination" is equated with, or rather reduced to, Symons's "nerves".[517]

The impact of the *fin-de-siècle* lyric on early Eliot can be clearly observed in "Goldfish (Essence of Summer Magazines): I", a largely allusive poem where Wilde's poetry is evoked but not acknowledged by Eliot, yet noted by Christopher Ricks.[518] The poem features a waltz where "The *Chocolate Soldier* assaults / The tired Sphinx of the physical" (10-11). Apart from the musical score, the reference to *The Sphinx* involves the pun of a futile sexual violation. The last stanza pays homage both to "The Harlot's House" and Symons's "Javanese Dancers":

> And the waltzes turn, return,
> Float and fall,
> Like the cigarettes
> Of our marionettes
> Inconsequent, intolerable. (13-7)

Eliot employs the Impressionistic set of words that features in Wilde and Symons in a retrospective manner, in order to showcase the mechanized nature of modern society. The abstract polysyllabic adjectives "Inconsequent" and "intolerable" boost the feeling of futility and nerviness. The Decadent image is employed as a commentary on modern life and is in early Eliot largely rediscovered, with the emphasis put more on the sordidness of Modernity than on incantation or dreaminess.

The poetics of morbidity manifest themselves with formidable rawness in Aldington who is a vigorous inheritor of the subversion of the nineties, favouring pictoriality and concreteness over abstraction. These poetics consist of an

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[517] See Ricks's textual allusions to Symons, *Inventions*, 145-6.
[518] See *Inventions*, 149 and 150 for Wilde's *The Sphinx* and "The Harlot's House" respectively.

amalgamation of the material futility of Symons and Wilde with Aldington's experiences of the war and his Imagist leanings. In "Decadence and Dynamism", an article in *The Egoist*, Aldington suggests similarities between Decadence and modern "dynamism" of style by comparing their traits: "languor, moonlight, dissatisfaction, inertia, ennui, Sapphism and *À Rebours*" on one hand, "energy, electrically illuminated cities, action, frenzy, "the rape of negresses" [etc.]" on the other. The second set signifies violence and the artifice of realism that distinguishes modernity which Aldington blends with the first set of traits featured in his own work. He cites "Pessimisme Atre", a poem from *Le Décadent* by Pierre Vareilles, commenting that "it doesn't seem so very different from modern poets, like, say, Max Jacob."[519]

Impressionist celestial phenomena, suburban imagery and intense sexual encounters partly comprise his poetic palette, allying him with Symons. In poems like "Cinema Exit"[520] he reproduces an extreme version of Impressionist fragmentation: "Swift figures, legs, skirts, white cheeks, hats / Flicker in oblique rays of dark and light." However he is quick to shake off the Symonsian feel of these lines with a negative touch of the mechanized material body of the city: "Millions of human vermin / swarm sweating." Wilde's and Symons's "marionettes" are deprived of their allure. In "Interlude" the "Gay girls dancing / in the frozen street"; they descend from "Ephesus" but are disenchanted by a hint of city sordidness and prostitution resembling the figures of "The Harlot's House". Symons's dreamy, wet cityscape appears fragmented by *vers libre* in a poem like "London" where "At night, the moon, a pregnant woman, / Walks cautiously over the slippery heavens". The poem's speaker, in a classic mode of the Decadent's collision with his nerves eroticizes the city, "Obsessed, / Among all this beauty". Aldington's poetry presents the Decadent image though constantly undercut by the malaise of modernity, hybridizing or manufacturing, in this manner, a poetry in which a fresh if morbid force is grounded in raw realism.

In *Images of Desire* (1919) Aldington intensifies his ultra-sharp techniques when he focuses on sexual activity, which is rendered even with pornographic overtones that recall the "Bianca" group from *London Nights*. He appropriates a vivid violence, informed by his experience in the War, to convey a neurotic, sexual

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[519] Richard Aldington, "Decadence and Dynamism," *The Egoist* 2.4 (1915), 57.
[520] Aldington's poetry is quoted from Richard Aldington, *Collected Poems* (London: Allen, 1929).

intensity, as in the lines, "Her mouth is a crushed flower / That unpetals marvellously / Beneath my lips". In "I. Bianca" Symons writes: "Upon her thirsting lips I rain / A flood of kisses, and in vain; / Her lips inexorably close". Where Symons conveys dissatisfaction and the futility of excess, Aldington turns the kiss into an Imagist violent spectacle. It nonetheless maintains its Decadent quality with the twist in the last stanza: the "memory of her kissing mouth" in the "emptiness of harsh days". Experience is artificial and obsessive because, as in Dowson, it is contemplated, or rather reflected through "memory".

The aesthetics of violence are enhanced in the diction of "Portrait", a poem of a *femme fatale*, a cross between a Keatsian La Belle Dame for whom "Kings have laid down their diadems, / And brave men have shed tears" and a Swinburnian Dolores. Aldington's woman is "laden" with "sharp heat – / Lovely and savage". Her "weary eyes / stabbed the young Roman to despair"; her breasts "felt the quick asp bite" of men. Yet, unexpectedly, "through a mist of lust" the poem discloses her humane longing for "tenderness". Violent sexuality is the perfect vehicle for the ever-recycled futility of desire which in the end becomes disparaging of its Decadent context. Vivid blood imagery, vampirism and Swinburnian sadomasochism typify "Daybreak", a lyric whose decorative rhythms and Imagist precision become indistinguishable. It makes a striking analogy between bloodshed and the erotic visuals of the bedroom:

> Not all the blood of all our dead, the bright, gay blood so gaily shed,
> Shines with so clear a glow as gleams your breast-flower from our candid bed.

Implications of the First World War are here apparent. Aldington appropriates a culturally un-poetic image in the service of Aesthetic beauty. The excess of these lines with their graphic quality is also enhanced by rich alliteration. In his new aesthetic Aldington informs Symonsian sexual cravings with the shocking realism of the War. The speaker offers violent masochistic invitations: "break / My body up as wheaten bread", "be fierce and thrust / Your white teeth in my flesh", "slay me with your lips". These propensities for violent, almost cannibalistic, flesh collisions go beyond Swinburne.[521] On one level they exemplify the sharp impact of Imagist forces; on another level they suggest the perverted practice of employing rawness and realism as

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[521] Laity traces "Swinburne's Decadent images of drowning and stormshattered bodies" in Eliot and Modernism. Cassandra Laity, "T. S. Eliot and A. C. Swinburne: Decadent Bodies, Modern Visualities, and Changing Modes of Perception," *Modernism/Modernity*, 11.3 (2004), 425-48.

ingredients for the fashioning of a Symonsian escape. What Aldington aims for is intensity of experience and thus he is a late disciple of Pater.

Besides Fletcher and Aldington, variations of Decadent images persist as with the Wildean orientalism of James Elroy Flecker and the Baudelairian envisioning of J. C. Squire. The Decadent Image is made into an interesting pastiche in Skipwith Cannell's "Poems in Prose and Verse: A Sequence".[522] With synaesthetic titles such as "Nocturne in Pastels" or "Nocturne Triste" he evokes Whistler and the Impressionist lyrics of Wilde and Symons. Cannell's poems have the flair of Wilde's fairy tales as well as Yeatsian Symbolism ("cloak of dreams") and the Yeatsian "Beloved". The mood of weariness and fatigue throughout is unmistakably Dowsonian ("I am weary with longing"). Cannell stands in contrast to Aldington's rawness; his Modernist experimentation consists of carefully placing the poetry of the nineties into the mixing pot in an act of rediscovery as other of his contemporaries did in various ways.

9.2 A New Aestheticism: The Poetics of Self-awareness

In his post-nineties alternative Modernism Yeats is preoccupied with the inadequacies of the image whose artifice of self-reflexivity renders it its own grave. This questioning of the poetic image which Michael O'Neill has named "Post-Romantic self-consciousness" is masterfully laid out in "Byzantium" from *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933). The poem is an example of the difficulties concerning life in its artistic representation and a complex critique of the Tennysonian "palace of art". Yeats speaks of an image which is "Shade more than man, more image than a shade", suggesting that it has the Aesthetic thinness of his early emblematic tapestries. In the first stanza the "starlit or moonlit dome" of splendid artifice "disdains / All that man is" pointing to the image for its own sake and self-value. Yeats is quick to undermine Aestheticism by introducing the funereal imagery of "Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth": this is a more sterile version of the Secret Rose with its folds. Yeats conveys a sense of strong Decadent sterility with the "mouth that has no moisture and

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[522] Skipwith Cannell, "Poems in Prose and Verse: A Sequence," *Poetry* 2 (1913), 171-6.

no breath." With the Aestheticism of a Huysmanian force the poet speaks of the scorning

> In glory of changeless metal
> Common bird or petal
> And all complexities of mire and blood.

This clear-cut assertion almost burlesques Decadent imagery of the nineties. The binary dynamic of the jewel-like trait of art and the organic trait of life collapses in a linguistic rearrangement in the last stanza. The sensuality of the "dolphin's mire and blood" is aestheticized by the "golden smithies" and the "Marbles of the dancing floor". But the sterile transformative power of the artificial images ends with the organic "dolphin-torn" sea, turning, in a supreme paradox, the sterility of images into the fertility of images that "Fresh images beget." This self-awareness of the poet as a weaver of a potentially hollow style culminates in "The Circus Animals' Desertion", Yeats's reassessment of "those masterful images" of his oeuvre. Yet even here the Decadent poetics makes its appearance; as the poem criticizes the tapestries of *The Wanderings of Oisin* and *Countess Cathleen*, its iconography is still the artifice of a personal tradition, a painfully self-conscious version of Wilde's tactic of self-quotation. As Michael O'Neill argues insightfully, "Yeats discovers that the poet is almost inevitably trapped in a 'dream.' [...] In the very act of composing a work to show the dangers of 'fanaticism and hate', Yeats himself develops a 'fanatical' attachment to his aesthetic creation."[523] In Yeats the Decadent image is modernized by turning on itself with the indeterminable tendency to cancel itself out or to persist in reassertion.

In exploring the city with its sordidness and allure, Eliot has discovered a poetic ark which supplies him with a score of new images; he keenly recognizes this in his essay on Baudelaire.[524] Eliot revisits Aestheticism in an almost Yeatsian manner in "Oh little voices of the throats of men" where he engages in the notion of "appearance". He tackles the problem of artistic representation and the relationship of life to art:

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[523] Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: OUP, 1997), 254. See also Dowling, *LaD*, 248, 282-3, and Watson, "Yeats, Victorianism, and the 1890s", 55-6.
[524] Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 426.

Appearances appearances he said,
I have searched the world through dialectic ways;
I have questioned restless nights and torpid days,
And followed every by-way where it led;
And always find the same unvaried
Intolerable interminable maze. (15-20)

Eliot's "appearances" are the update of the Paterian "impression", Wilde's "decoration" and Yeats's ideas of mask and dream. The poem is a self-reflexive journey in search of artistic liberation. The speaking voice is a restless persona who alternates among three personal pronouns; he is the confused and drifting Baudelairian voyager. The manner in which his confusion is expressed is that of a Symonsian wandering in the city with its "restless nights", "every by-way" and "maze". Symons's city is an artificial terrain of experiences; Eliot modifies it into a terrain of artistic self-discovery, also reinforced by the pun on "dialectic ways". What does not change is the sense of futility. His endeavour to reach to the bottom of things proves as futile as Symons's sexual excursions. The train of long abstract adjectives attached to the word "maze" produces a monotonous, tedious exasperation with the fathomless maze leading back to "appearances". This is Eliot's Modernist variation of the contingency of Aestheticism. These "appearances" are ultimately the Wildean topos of "contradiction" and are evaluated in a Keatsian way: they are "nowise real; unreal, and yet true; / Untrue, yet real" (26-7). Whilst Shelley asserts the truth of images and Yeats converts images to symbols[525], for Eliot this is what only exists: images, appearances. For Eliot whose thought is informed by Buddhist ideas, images are an all-encompassing world of illusion. Where the Decadents revel in artifice, in Eliot it becomes self-consciously threatening; suspicious, yet acceptable; its inevitability is dramatically affirmed.

Eliot's truthfulness of "appearances" is insinuated in his essay "Swinburne as Poet". He points out Swinburne's obsession with language; it is "the word that gives him the thrill, not the object" and in his work "the meaning is merely the hallucination of meaning."[526] These utterances fall into context when he attributes to his poetry a "diffuseness" between music and idea. Arguably, the concerns regarding "appearance" exist here in a rudimentary version. It is not hard to see that these ideas anticipate the "objective correlative". Eliot is not interested in how reality is

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[525] See "The Symbolism of Poetry" (1900) in Yeats, *Essays*, esp. 192.
[526] Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 326, 327.

assimilated in Aestheticism but in how the two are compromised in a new formula. In his essay "Baudelaire", he says of "art for art's sake" that Pater "spent many years, not so much in illustrating it, as in expounding it as a *theory of life*, which is not the same thing at all."[527] Eliot perfectly captures the Decadent paradox of Aesthetic appreciation and indulgent practice, which also characterizes the problematic workings of his "appearances". In Baudelaire and the metropolis he finds his Modernist solution:

> It is not merely in the use of imagery of common life [...] of the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to the *first intensity* – presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something much more than itself [...][528]

By "*first intensity*" he explains that the image is at once Zolaesque and Mallarméan, presentational and representational. One could call this hybrid Aestheticism but this is too facile; for Eliot, as C. K. Stead copiously argues, strives to create a new morality which is defined by style.[529] It is in this vein that in "Arnold and Pater" Eliot radically argues that Pater is a moralist. The "contradiction" of "appearances" celebrated in Wilde's *Intentions* is by Eliot reconceived and reassessed: appearance ceases to be a distantly appreciated monument; it is redefined as an interactive entity.

The nineties Aestheticism is embarked upon and given new complexity in Pound's monumental *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). An obvious observation to be made is that Pound carries on the battle between the Decadent aesthete and the forces of philistinism and so he projects himself as the artist-outcast in the manner of the Nineties. In his discussion of the poem Agostino Lombardo asserts that "Pound's entire disposition in *Mauberley* is typical of decadentism. Art and the artist are the themes of the poem; not man, not society."[530] Lombardo reaches the radical conclusion that the poem "constitutes the summing up, the epitome of the decadent experience; it is the last exaltation of art for art's sake."[531] But the poetics of Aestheticism in the poem are more convoluted than these claims. The morbid "reveries" of Pre-Raphaelitism and Decadence are evoked in the segments "Yeux Glauques" and "Siena Mi Fe'; Disfecemi Maremma" respectively, and are partly

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[527] Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 420.
[528] Eliot, *Selected Essays*, 426.
[529] See C. K. Stead, *New Poetic*, 132-3, 146.
[530] Agostino Lombardo, "Ezra Pound: The Last Decadent" in *Italian Images of Ezra Pound: Twelve Essays*, ed. and trans. Angela Jung and Guido Palandri (Taipei: Mei Ya, 1979), 21.
[531] Lombardo, "Ezra Pound," 22.

challenged through the satirical tone. Joseph Bristow also reaffirms the segments' connection with *fin-de-siècle* Decadence.[532] The voices of E. P. and Mauberley, the Poundian alter egos, mediate the poet's awareness of the problem of identification of Aestheticist beauty with sterile adherence to tradition and the coldness of commercialism.

Mauberley's poetic outlook is composed of retrospection and preservation. The image of enshrinement of beauty, as with Dowson and his dead girls, is the dominant note. Linguistically, preservation is present in the rich macaronic inscriptions of Greek, French and Latin. The stark contrasts between the "mould in plaster, / Made with no loss of time" and the "alabaster / Or the "sculpture" of rhyme"[533] reinforce the need of the poem to preserve artistic beauty. With "*τό καλόν*" being "Decreed in the market place", the poem anticipates the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Benjamin, especially the latter's positions against capitalism in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Pound's technique of preservation hinges both on Aesthetic escapism and scientific sterility. His destabilized artistic strategy is enhanced with imagery of medical discourse. In "Yeux Glauques" ("blue eyes") "The Burne-Jones cartoons / Have preserved her eyes;" and "The English Rubaiyat was still-born". In "Siena Mi Fe'; Disfecemi Maremma" the *fin-de-siècle* Decadents are "pickled foetuses and bottled bones" and in Lionel Johnson's "autopsy" the "tissue" is "preserved". All this is consistent with the theme of entombment in the first section titled "E. P. Ode pour l'Election de Son Sepulchre". In these first sections the images of premature entombment denote a heroic elegy of the rebellious artist of the previous century (including Pound himself); Fitzgerald with his "still-born" *Rubayiat* is such an instance. However they are also Aesthetic preservations, "pickled foetuses". The preserved organic matter indicates a sterility comparable to that of the technologically reproduced art criticized by Benjamin.

The section titled "Envoi (1919)" echoes Dowson's Michael Garth who preserves the youthful beauty of his fiancée in her picture. The Poundian persona wishes to aestheticize woman's "graces" in a typical *fin-de-siècle* decorative manner:

> I would bid them live

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[532] Joseph Bristow, ed., *The Fin-de-Siécle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (Athens, OH: Ohio UP, 2005), 28-31.
[533] Quotations of *Mauberley* are taken from Pound, *Selected Poems: 1908 – 1969.*

As roses might, in magic amber laid,
Red overwrought with orange and all made
One substance and one colour
Braving time.

The italicized lines indicate that this last poem of the first part ends with confessional sincerity. Although her "*worshippers*" (artists) are "*broken down*" by "*change*", it is "*Beauty alone*" that remains. As with Eliot's "appearances", Pound dwells on the thin boundary between disciplined, disengaged beauty and its narcissistic potentiality. This can be also explained in terms of the poem's Odyssean theme. Pound's Penelope is the laborious craftsmanship of "Flaubert"; however, his journey involves the obsession with "the elegance of Circe's hair", the stylistic sensuousness featured from Wilde to early Yeats.[534]

In the poem's second part, "Mauberley (1920)", the poet confronts himself more than society, following a movement towards self-isolation which is consistent with the theme of enshrinement. This self-isolation is detected in Mauberley's immersion in the experience of aesthetic sexuality that makes the life-in-art art-in-life paradox poignant. Like Symons's *flâneur* in an idealized world of prostitution, Mauberley "had moved amid her phantasmagoria, / Amid her galaxies, / NUKTOS' AGALMA". But like Charmides and his perverted sexual aspirations, the woman of these lines is "agalma" (statue), woman as pure artifice. With the touch of a Paterian Aesthete, Mauberley "Drifted on / To the final estrangement" in a mesmeric passage which denotes self-absorption. In "'The Age demanded'" he is guided by "invitation to perceptivity", an allusion to the faculty of experience which leads him to "isolation". Pound enshrines and inscribes in a Modernist reassessment the nineties image of the artist's disillusionment. Medical preservation gives way to enshrinement in the manner of eighties Aestheticism. Mauberley's "perceptivity" is ultimately engraved on "porcelain reverie". Pound writes Mauberey's epitaph of the artist-voyager "on an oar": "I was / And I no more exist; / Here drifted / An hedonist." Ultimately the Paterian Aesthete/Decadent is himself aestheticized in a fragment ("oar") which evokes the fragment-relic of Romanticism. Even the breaks of these lines disrupt their flow in a fragmentary manner. With the poem's final section,

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[534] W. Spanos argues that Penelope and Circe are identified and so "the disciplined pursuit of pure art passes easily [...] over into excessive aestheticism, in which the ideal of disciplined detachment paradoxically becomes, as it did for the poets of the 'Nineties, its antithesis, self-indulgence." William V. Spanos, "The Modulating Voice of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, 6.1 (1965), 80-1.

"Medallion", Pound reorients the entire poem as a work of multilayered profound irony. A piece Mauberley would write, "Medallion" is the poem's Aesthetic grave, the final enshrinement of "metal, or intractable amber" where in the medallion's face "Beneath the half-watt rays, / The eyes turn topaz." This is what Stead probably had in mind when he says that in Poundian technique, "a poem has crystallized out of experience."[535] The preservation of woman is carried out in a cold, technological detachment which is the last record of the poetic voice. The "*Beauty…braving time*" of "Envoi" suddenly becomes precarious, in danger of being misunderstood as a hollow monument of artifice or "mould in plaster". Ultimately, self-reflection which results from the questioning of Aesthetic modes seems trapped in the very Aestheticism it re-assesses; in order to "resuscitate the dead art", Pound deliberately confuses Aestheticism and scientific commercialism. In this elaborate exploration of the paradox where Aesthetic stasis encloses and is enclosed by Decadent action, Mauberley is the Decadent journeyman in search of experiences but does not wander from prostitute to prostitute like Symons and Dowson; his "Pacific voyages" through "A consciousness disjunct" involve experiencing various poetic stylistic experiments. The artificial self-mirroring of the nineties in Modernism has developed into O'Neill's "post-Romantic self-consciousness". *Mauberley* testifies that the image has attained a level of irony in which Aestheticism itself is aestheticized and this is its ultimate undoing.

9.3 Conclusion

> So short th' illumined hour – Alas, so long
> The inextinguishable vain desire!
>
> Rosamund Marriott Watson, "The Golden Hour" (15-6)[536]

These closing lines of Watson's lyric summarise the condition of the Decadent image: entrapment in perpetual dissatisfaction. This is reflected in the different variants of ineffectual erotic encounters, whether with Wilde's inorganic bodies, Symons's machine-like mistresses, or Dowson's dead girls. This impossibility accounts for what Decadence is: poetic language perverted, a tendency to textualize the experience of

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[535] Stead, *New Poetic*, 99.
[536] In Rodensky,ed., *Decadent Poetry*.

the senses almost literally. The Decadent follows Blake's maxim, "the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom".[537] But like King Midas, the ability to transmute poetry into gold turns to self-destruction.

The Decadent image does not result in completion but in generating more lack. This is the reason why it has to be constantly refined and elaborated. As a true dandy, Symons avers that he is not merely interested in the "senses", "it was a conscious, subtle, elaborate sensuality, which I knew not how to procure."[538] The ideal state is a refined level of the senses; it endorses a Sisyphean process of a pleasure which intensifies frustration and is in the long run elusive. The text as a bodily nirvana strives to fill a lack and in doing so it widens it more. Discussing Pater's notion of "brain-wave" in "Style", Dowling argues that "Pater's stylistic conduct" is what might be called "the aesthetics of delay" (*LaD*, 130), the controlled lingering moment, Watson's "illumined hour". But for the Decadent poet the fragility of this moment calls for its excessive outdoing. Wilde's hermaphroditic Samalcis in "The Burden of Itys" is fed by "fires" and is "unsatisfied / Through their excess" (122-3). Of course this is on a par with Symons's "unsatisfied appeal of sense", textuality turned into sensuality.

The three poets examined in this thesis follow a progressive movement: from Wilde's golden paganism and Byzantinism, to Symons's golden/silvery city textures, to Dowson's lunar stiffness. Wilde's Gautierian, jewel-like bodies in "Charmides" and *The Sphinx* are evenly balanced with Dowson's rigid dead girls. Impossibility of union is asserted through faulty propinquity. In Symons this impossibility is manifested by fusion in Symons's Verlainian synaesthetic dissolutions involving the flesh. Both fixity and fluidity as parts of the "elemental reverie" equation can lead to the same result and as Reed argues, Decadent poetry contains both the Parnassian and the Symbolist element (*DS*, 72). From the perspective of the Decadent-Aesthetic paradox, Wilde features Aesthetic Decadence, Symons reaches Decadence proper, and Dowson arrives at Decadence Aestheticized. For all three the image collapses in its own futility, denoting spiritual exhaustion, deadlock and *cul-de-sac*. Yet, the Decadent contingency achieves poetic breakthroughs and poetic complexities that stem from the futility of artifice and its paradoxes.

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[537] Blake, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, 130.
[538] Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, 38-9.

In reading Wilde, Symons and Dowson we follow the movement from décor and fragmentation, to the neurotic and obsessive gaze, to unfulfilled desire, to the despair of the lack. In *An Anthology of 'Nineties Verse'* A. J. A. Symons writes that "the poetry of the 'nineties, within its self-imposed and unrestrained limits, offers many and varied savours and essences".[539] The gamut of *iconolagnia* generated in the poetry of the three explored in this thesis more or less represents the other nineties poets. To a great degree the Decadent image in Wilde, Symons and Dowson reflects the output of their nineties peers collectively and at large.[540]

Just to offer a few instances of a very rough map, Johnson's homosexual discourses in the exceptional "The Dark Angel" nod to Wilde's sexual impossibilities of his jewelled, statue-like figures. In both cases the sexual incompatibility is accompanied with tormenting lust. Indeed, in this light, Charmides's sexual transgression can be a disguised metaphor for homosexuality. In Johnson the "elemental reverie" of fire and ice amalgamations and innovative lexical fusions is exemplarily at play. His style parallels Wilde's jewelled hardness as in "Holiday at Hampton Court". John Gray combines the Symonsian Impressionist gaze in a Wildean style of daintiness. Symons's Impressionism is exemplified in "Les Demoiselles de Sauve"; "The Barber" which is the cornerstone of Decadent eroticism is close to the "Bianca" poems. Lord Alfred Douglas displays fully Dowson's and Symons's sense of predicament of incompleteness in the fulfilment of pleasure ("Ennui"). Dowson's formula of Beauty and Death as well as suspension of expiration is also present as in Douglas's "Harmonie du Soir". Rosamund Marriott Watson offers lyrics extravagantly glossed over by jewelled Impressionism and the artifice of the city; her rich poetic textures often intensify the images and techniques of Wilde and Symons. In the prolific work of "Michael Field" one will find Wilde's sensuous palettes coupled with Dowson's death-longings ("Your Rose is Dead") or Wildean pastoral rendered in Dowsonian autumnal moods ("A Fête Champêtre"), Wildean tapestries ("L'Embarquement Pour Cythère") and excesses of the icy, jewelled style in a *danse macabre* theme ("Dance of Death"). John Barlas intensifies Wildean pastoral sensuousness of colour and eloquence ("The Palace of Pleasure") and Richard Le Gallienne's "A Ballad of London" is a fine exaltation of the Symonsian

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[539] A. J. A. Symons, ed., *An Anthology of 'Nineties' Verse* (London: Matthews, 1928), xx.
[540] For a brief grouping of the nineties Decadent poets see also Snodgrass, "The Poetry of the 1890s," 329-31.

nocturnal metropolis. Conspicuously, Theodore Wratislaw's lyrics are remodelled after Symons: the fragmented metropolis as in the group "Etchings", vanity of flesh ("Hysteria of Sense"), and dancing, prostitution, the city and the music-hall ("Opoponax"). What the nineties poets have in common is the uniqueness of the image: the proclivity to misread language through the wealth of all these imageries that, as we have seen, can be tightly scaled down to Wilde, Symons and Dowson. It should be noted that although these poets are massively influenced by their French counterparts, they differ; the French Decadents tend to celebrate transgression and antinomianism but the attention of the English Decadents is directed more to the heightened consciousness of the tragedy of impossibility, the awareness of illusion. Thus their art seems to be more precarious, like Keats's Lamia.

The development of the image-strain in Wilde, Symons and Dowson grounds their *fin-de-siécle* Decadent aesthetic firmly as an important artistic force. It does not just hijack Modernism but also persists recurrently in the literature and culture in the different stages of the long twentieth century and beyond. It is proof that the movement it represents embodies not only a transition from the Romantics to the Modernists, but also requires and rewards critical attention in its own right.

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