

compared Trollope to, and mentions of particular characters. I am grateful to Paul Pival, special and numeric data services specialist in Libraries and Cultural Resources at the University of Calgary, who scraped the reviews and introduced me to NVivo.

5. *Goodreads*, November 27, 2017, [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/29151142-doctor-thorne?from\\_search=true](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/29151142-doctor-thorne?from_search=true).
6. “*Doctor Thorne* > Lists,” *Goodreads*, November 27, 2017, <https://www.goodreads.com/list/book/29151142>.
7. Cassandra, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, November 10, 2013; and Kelly, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, December 3, 2016.
8. Cynthia, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, February 25, 2008.
9. Douglas Dalrymple, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, May 21, 2015; Carol Apple, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, February 26, 2015; Margaret, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, October 26, 2010.
10. Christen, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, July 19, 2016.
11. Spiros, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, July 5, 2009.
12. For a summary of this position, see Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 28.
13. Meg, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, February 7, 2017.
14. Margaret O’Connor-Hurst, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, December 29, 2015.
15. Sharon, “Review of *Doctor Thorne*,” *Goodreads*, July 2, 2015.
16. Andrew Goldstone and Ted Underwood, “The Quiet Transformations of Literary Studies: What Thirteen Thousand Scholars Could Tell Us,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 3 (2014): 359–361.



## Decadence

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Though our thoughts turn ever Doomwards,  
 Though our sun is well-nigh set,  
 Though our Century totters tombwards,  
 We may laugh a little yet.

—John Davidson, *A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender*<sup>1</sup>

IN a recent review of Matthew Potolsky's *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (2012) and Vincent Sherry's *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015), Richard Kaye wonders if we might be witnessing the onset of a "new decadent studies," "a decisive point similar to that of modernist studies in the 1990s, when a monolithic 'modernism' was toppled in the wake of scholarly accounts accentuating diverse, contradictory strains."<sup>2</sup> This kind of work is certainly welcome, as it has allowed us to see a Decadence that extends beyond boundaries of nation and period and to locate Decadence in surprising and unlikely places. Decadence is a concept that invites, or even necessitates, the kind of thinking Kaye describes, definitional work that allows for diversity and contradiction. It is, as Arthur Symons reminds us, a restless aesthetic that "piles over-subtilizing refinement upon refinement."<sup>3</sup> It pushes back against order, restraint, and categorization. It is perversely christened after the concept of decay, and it highlights deterioration, meaning Decadence foregrounds decline but it also revels in the dissolution of edges and frontiers. In terms of periodization, it is a point of dissolve between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the richest area of contact between our period and the next, a movement that forces us to confront the arbitrariness of the Victorian/modern divide. Decadence's cosmopolitanism and its more troubling Orientalism emerge from its tendency to glory in the disintegration of national perimeters at a moment of globalization. Decadence engenders a style in which "the page decomposes to make way for the independence of the sentence" and "the unity of the book falls apart."<sup>4</sup> And the movement is, of course, known first and foremost for accelerating the corrosion of conventional sexual and gender ideologies and reveling in the sloughing off of fixed categories of identity and desire. It is a movement that welcomed confusion and thus forces us to work within the realm of confusion, with challenging, intricate, and excessive forms, outside the limits of our period and of any one national tradition, and with an understanding that we may be unable to place or fix the way these authors and artists conceived of affiliation or eroticism.

All of this is very exciting, but it means that almost every monograph on Decadence must at some point engage in obligatory hand-wringing about the difficulty of defining the term. In this, Decadence resembles its close friend "camp," a sensibility whose elusiveness forced Susan Sontag to resort to notes and lists of "random examples," a mode of definition that insists upon its own fragmentation and inadequacy and seems to say, "Of course we can't actually delineate this concept, but here is this

list of things. Can't you see how camp they are?"<sup>5</sup> Sontag's list includes lots of Decadent and post-Victorian Decadent things (*Zuleika Dobson* [1911], Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, the novels of Ronald Firbank and Ivy Compton-Burnett), and the notes themselves are "for Oscar Wilde," implying that Decadence's dissolution and disintegration, its resistance to definition, has infected the camp sensibility.<sup>6</sup> If Decadence is a "beautiful and interesting disease," its symptoms seem to include disorientation, and the malady is contagious.<sup>7</sup>

This disorientation makes writing an entry like this one challenging, especially as I would only want to extend, rather than delimit, the accentuation of diverse and contradictory strains of Decadence that Kaye describes. The contribution I would like to make to the ongoing (and perpetually incomplete) work of defining Decadence should not be understood as a move toward shutting down the borders of Decadence or shutting out any of the figures or texts that have recently been welcomed into the fold. Highlighting another manner in which Decadence resembles camp, I would simply like to emphasize that Decadence is often funny. With this in mind, I wish to propose that we include Max Beerbohm's "A Defence of Cosmetics" (1894) among the constellation of foundational texts used to establish a definition of Decadence, a set that more typically includes Pater's "Conclusion" to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Symons's "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893), and Bourget's essay on Baudelaire (1881).

In his "Defence," Beerbohm, parodically echoing Baudelaire's "Éloge du Maquillage" (1863), gleefully hails the decline of Victorian innocence and simplicity and the onset of a new era of artifice as manifested in the widespread use of cosmetics. While he marveled in a follow-up, "A Letter to the Editor" (1894), that anyone managed to take such an excessive celebration of rouge seriously, he continued to taunt moralistic readers with the threat that British literature would "fall at length into the hands of the decadents," making it clear that he at once did and did not mean what he had said.<sup>8</sup> Placing a text that has such a complex and double relationship to Decadence, at once satirical and affectionate, at the center of the aesthetic might only stand to further trouble our ability to define this movement. But what is to be gained, I would argue, by understanding Beerbohm's "Defence" as a foundational text within, rather than only a parody of, the Decadent tradition is clearer insight into the extent to which Decadence is so often laughing at itself, finding itself hilarious. Wilde, Beardsley, and Beerbohm enact such an exaggerated form of Decadence that they

often appear to be lampooning the very aesthetic they are known for creating. Like “a woman walking around in a dress made of three million feathers,” the excesses of *Salome* (1891) are funny.<sup>9</sup> Beardsley’s terminal god with eyes for nipples is funny.<sup>10</sup> Even the most seemingly earnest forms of minor Decadence practice the aesthetic in such an exaggerated fashion that laughter seems to be the only appropriate response. R. Murray Gilchrist’s horrifying Decadent landscapes, for example, are populated with “satyrs vomiting senilely,” which is also funny.<sup>11</sup> Including burlesques of Decadence, such as Beerbohm’s “Defence,” within the Decadent canon makes the boundaries of the movement dissolve even further, but this draws out the camp sensibility within works we have tended to hail as fully and authentically Decadent. When we rely primarily on the somewhat humorless Symons for our definition of Decadence, much of this is lost.

Attending to the humor in Decadence, I would argue, is crucial because it is its camp qualities, its irony, and its derisive laughter that underwrite most of what attracts us to the movement today. If we are interested at this moment in speaking about form, about a transnational Victorian studies, about gender and sexual dissidence, about Victorian modernism, focusing on the camp excesses of Decadence enables us to do so. The “curved line[s],” “extravagant gesture[s],” and rococo stylistic qualities of Decadent writing; the parodic reimagining of Decadence on the part of writers in the Harlem Renaissance; the excessive performances of gender and the operatic treatment of desire; and the afterlife of Wilde and Beardsley in the camp modernism of the early twentieth century are all phenomena that highlight the centrality of camp humor to Decadence.<sup>12</sup> When we foreground Decadence’s detachment, irony, derision, and laughter, it is much easier to see how this aesthetic enabled resistance to troubling forms of earnestness, such as nationalism, moralism, and the depth model of identity. Its power came from its refusal to take power seriously.

#### NOTES

1. John Davidson, *A Full and True Account of the Wonderful Mission of Earl Lavender* (London: Ward & Downey, 1895), iv.
2. Richard Kaye, “Review of *Decadence and the Reinvention of Modernism* by Vincent Sherry and *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* by Matthew Potolsky,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 78, no. 1 (2017): 132–37, 136.

3. Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 87 (June 1893): 858.
4. Paul Bourget, *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine* (Paris: Lemerre, 1883), 25.
5. Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964): 515–30, 517.
6. Sontag, "Notes," 516.
7. Symons, "The Decadent Movement," 859.
8. Max Beerbohm, "A Letter to the Editor," *The Yellow Book* 2 (July 1894): 284.
9. Sontag, "Notes," 522.
10. This image appeared in Beardsley's design for the title page of the 1894 Bodley Head edition of *Salome*. See Oscar Wilde, *Salome* (London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894).
11. R. Murray Gilchrist, "The Crimson Weaver," *The Yellow Book* 6 (July 1895): 270.
12. Sontag, "Notes," 523.



## Democracy

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WE have plenty of reasons to think about democracy just now. In ways that would have seemed frankly unimaginable a year or two ago, reference is being routinely made to the authoritarian and maybe inexorable decay of democratic norms in the otherwise staid opinion pages of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and even *USA Today*. Just a month ago, E. J. Dionne (neither an alarmist nor a revolutionary) wrote about our Trumpian moment, "Democracies sometimes collapse suddenly. More typically, they waste away."<sup>1</sup> Maybe more worrisome is the fact that so many ordinary people seem already to have given up, seem, regardless of party affiliation, to have taken up a casually, if corrosively, skeptical attitude to elections that are the institutional basis of any democracy. If one group appears to believe that elections are "rigged" (fraudulent votes, stolen elections, hacked machines), the other seems to think most other voters are too bigoted, ill-informed, or stupid to