

'Paris and London, World-Flowers twain'

In his 'Ballad of London', one of the most enthusiastic celebrations of the city published during the 1890s, Richard Le Gallienne offered the following formulation: 'Paris and London, World-Flowers twain.'¹ The two cities were rival capitals of the nineteenth century and for the Decadent writers of the *fin de siècle* they loomed large as the centres of progressive art, literature and publishing. Yet for the Decadent residents of London, Paris often served as a reminder of how unworldly and aesthetically impoverished the English capital was. Oscar Wilde, writing a letter to the editor of the *Speaker* from Paris in 1891, suggested that London should at once introduce the 'charming kiosks that decorate Paris'. While the Parisian kiosk is all luminescent exoticism, London has 'merely the ill-clad newsvendor' who is 'always out of tune' and whose dishevelled appearance lacks the 'impression of picturesqueness' that is, for Wilde, the saving grace of the 'spectacle of poverty'.² Arthur Symons's French friends who visited him in the 1890s were dismayed at the dearth of London nightlife, finding in the city none of the late-night conviviality of the café. For those who like Symons were condemned to remain in London, there was little they could do except attempt to recreate the atmosphere of Parisian life: he recalls the 'desperate experiments of some to whom Paris, from a fashion, had become almost a necessity', who would seek out excitement in the most unlikely of places; Ernest Dowson infamously visited cabmen's shelters for companionship in the small hours.³ London needed the café so its citizens could avoid the ignominy of having to drink 'like cattle, standing'.⁴

The attempts by the writers and artists of the 1890s to ape the culture of Paris was nothing new: there was already a long-established two-way trade in culture between the capitals. Whether it was the fashion dolls in which scaled-down examples of the latest couture from the grand houses of Paris made their way to London to be reproduced during the eighteenth century, to the craze for Parisian Carnivale Quadrilles – an early version of the cancan – in London in the 1860s, the two cities shared a unique

cultural symbiosis.⁵ Parisian imports had always been viewed with great scepticism, even animosity in London, yet it was in the 1880s and 1890s that arguably the hostility to the latest fads and fashions of Paris was at its height; from the Café Royal to the unnatural hue of *The Yellow Book*, the great symbols of Decadent London were inspired by the culture of the French capital. But what does it mean to think Paris and London together? The movement of French ideas, culture and values to London precipitated from the 1870s onwards a wave of Franchophobia in which Paris was demonised in the melodramatic literature of counter-Decadence. In this chapter I will suggest that the Decadent response to this attempt to demonise Paris was to transform the representation of London through the importation of French literary style. While either city can easily lay claim to being the *ur*-locale of Decadence, their curious symbiosis ultimately works to unravel the very boundedness and stability of them as locations. This chapter then maps one of the most striking products of this federation of cosmopoli: the ways in which the movement of French literary forms to London worked to displace the very idea of a place-based literature. Paris held a draw on George Moore and Arthur Symons throughout their lives, even if they spent the majority of those lives living, working in and writing about London. In the work of both writers the importation of French literary forms – for Moore Zola's Naturalism, for Symons Verlaine's Impressionism – has the effect of making London ever more indistinct and imprecise. This chapter explores their youthful excursions to Paris – Moore's in 1873, Symons's in 1890 – and the influence these trips had on their subsequent experiments in writing London. These experiments were, however, not simply formal exercises, art for its own sake, but deeply engaged attempts to challenge the moralising strictures of Victorian culture. In doing so Moore and Symons produce a mode of landscape writing whose object is something far more than verisimilitude, of capturing the 'real' city. Their urban writing foregrounds artifice and literary form or style to erase and undermine any claims to a spatial stability. They take these iconic cities and use the intricacies of literary form to create literary landscapes that are universal and interchangeable, their Decadence distorting either city's claims to singularity.

The Drama of Paris

Most aspiring Decadents and Aesthetes packing their bags for Paris had, next to their Baedekers, Henri Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1847–49). This loosely connected series of tales, following a group of

young Bohemian men and women, provided an enticing model of transgression, aestheticism and community that proved intoxicating to George Moore, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Arthur Symons and many others. The tales, following formulaic stories of poverty, romance, drunkenness and arguments over art and literature have dated badly and it can be difficult for the modern reader to see their melodramatic appeal. Murger's preface from the 1851 edition attempted to frame the life he paints in these stories as universal and timeless: 'The class of Bohemians referred to in this book are not a race of today, they have existed in all climes and ages, and can claim an illustrious descent.'⁶ Murger explores the roots of the Bohemian life in ancient Greece and the Middle Ages before focusing on the Renaissance, his potted genealogy working to 'put the reader on his guard against any misapplication he might fall into on encountering the title of Bohemians', such as confusing them with an inauthentic interest in the arts.⁷ Murger's attempt to paint an authentic experience of poverty and dedication to artistic ideals was always a compromised one. His stories were written quickly and in a style that was to appeal to the publishers of magazines in his contemporary Paris, and throughout the tales anguish over the correct form of artistic living plays second fiddle to the problem of poverty. This is made clear in the final story from the collection, 'Youth is Fleeting', in which Marcel and Rodolphe – two of the central characters of *Scènes* – reflect on their life a year after Mimi's death, greeting their recent success and entry into the respectable world of Parisian artistic circles as the desired destination of Bohemian life. As Marcel says, 'I am quite willing to look back at the past, but it must be through the medium of good wine and sitting in a comfortable armchair.'⁸ Rodolphe can recall his transgression and poverty fondly on the condition it remained temporary, and it seems as if, for Murger, the romanticised ideal of the artist had as its logical conclusion an entry into the respectable world of bourgeois life.

Murger's Paris was undoubtedly attractive to those young men who travelled to Paris in the second half of the nineteenth century. It was, however, only one mode of representing Bohemia, which has, perhaps erroneously, been tied to Decadence. Mary Gluck outlines two traditions of Bohemia that emerge during the 1830s and 40s: the 'sentimental' Bohemians of Murger, and the 'ironic' Bohemians of Gautier's collection of parodic short stories *Les Jeunes France* published in 1833. While 'both were stylised figures that came into existence in the realm of popular culture', they were fundamentally opposed. Murger's sentimental melodramas were part of the bourgeois tradition and while 'superficially' in

opposition to many aspects of that tradition they were in 'harmony with the aesthetic values and epistemological categories of everyday life'. Gautier's ironic vision of urban modernity, Gluck claims, was established from the tradition of popular theatre: 'Its parodic performances, elaborate disguises, and carnivalesque gestures destabilized all notions of social authority, foundational truths or essentialist identities.'⁹ Gluck's separation of the two different forms of Bohemia can then help us articulate the different representations of Paris that litter the English literature of the *fin de siècle*. Most of those texts that depict 'Bohemian' life in Paris conform to the sentimental melodrama of the middle classes, taking a romanticised image of Paris, not dissimilar to Murger's, and using it to scandalise their readers before ultimately drawing them back into the comforting world of bourgeois morality. This world, and its representation, relies on essentialised identities and stable narrative structures of the middle-class novel in order to present Paris's iniquities as alien. The sentimental drama of Murger was hardly alien to British readers, as Arthur Symons notes: 'Murger has an almost English quality to his humour, a quality so foreign to the French mind that the English word has been adopted to express a thing so essentially English. With him, as with Dickens, for example, mirth runs easily into Pathos.'¹⁰ Pathos was at the core of many melodramatic popular Victorian representations of Paris, and it is a form antithetical to Decadent writing. Aspiring Decadents may have been attracted to Murger's tales in their youth, but it was in their Francophobic detractors that the legacy of Murger can truly be found.

In the melodramatic fiction of the late-Victorian period Paris became an earthly version of Dis, the hellish city in which many a young Englishman would find depravity and corruption. *The Fool and His Heart* (1896) by Conal Holmes O'Connell O'Riordan (who wrote under the pseudonym F. Norreys Connell) is a representative anti-Parisian tirade. O'Riordan, who had moved in London literary circles since 1890, dedicated the novel to his friend Ernest Dowson. One wonders what Dowson would have thought of the honour, given it is a turgid and moralising tale of the lures of Bohemian lifestyle and alcoholism, lures that Dowson knew only too well. The novel is a conventional *bildungsroman* of a young Irish man, Basil Thimm, who, seeking to run away from unrequited love, moves to London to pursue a literary career. Thimm's corruption begins when he starts to frequent The Unicorn, a disreputable pub in Covent Garden which Basil finds to be 'the real Bohemia, the living Bohemia'.¹¹ When Thimm is forced to flee London to escape creditors, his friend Farnie suggests he goes to Paris, to which his worldly friend Conway replies, 'Why not go to Hell

straight off?¹² Later, when Thimm and Conway venture to Paris after the death of Thimm's first wife (who is also Conway's sweetheart and responsible for his ending up physically deformed – it is a rather unruly plot), Conway takes him 'off the beaten track': 'It was not a regular tourist's visit . . . it was in the coulisses of disrepute that they took their royal pleasure. They dined royally at chez Foyot, supped at the Café d'Harcourt and breakfasted at Baratte's in the Market Place.'¹³ Thimm's corruption carries on to the point where he is too depraved even for the Bohemians of Paris. Once his corruption has hit rock bottom and he has contemplated suicide, he undergoes an inevitable 're-conversion' to the Catholicism of his youth and is saved. Importantly this is not an aesthetic or spiritual Catholicism but a social one, returning to the structures of the Irish Catholic Church.

The wanton lure of Paris is often left tellingly vague and indistinct in many works of the period; in Ménie Muriel Dowie's controversial 'New Woman' novel of 1895, *Gallia*, Mrs Leighton tells Gurdon that her grandson, Robbie, 'is getting into the ways of wicked Paris. You know what I mean?' Gurdon doesn't know what Mrs Leighton means, being a rather naïve young man with little worldly experience, and so she has to explain: 'but – er – Paris – the *ménage à deux*. Ah, these artists – and their models!'¹⁴ The dashes here are pregnant with meaning, and Dowie is clearly confident her readers know precisely what takes place in Paris. When Gurdon goes to visit Robbie, an old Oxford friend training as an artist in Paris, he finds out precisely what Mrs Leighton means, his friend residing '*à deux*', and perhaps even '*à trois*'. The loss of children to Paris is also the topic of Rosamund Marriott Watson's poem 'Old Pauline' in which one mother laments to another about the loss of her 'boys' to Paris: 'Twas then my heart broke "Phrasie, for my children gay and tall / For fair, vile, glittering Paris had taken them all".'¹⁵ Henry James, ever adept at capturing British middle-class prejudice and propriety, has the narrator in 'The Figure in the Carpet' (1896) note that for his 'Cheltenham aunt' Paris was 'the school of evil, the abyss'.¹⁶ The movement to Paris was not always a negative one, and in Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) it is in Paris, studying music, that Hadria Fullerton can begin to escape the constriction of her 'arranged' marriage in England and set about reinventing herself. Her arrival in Paris seeks to demonstrate the dramatic contrast between rural England and urban Paris:

The great Boulevard was ablaze and swarming with life. The *cafés* were full; the gilt and mirrors and the crowds of *consommateurs* within, all visible as

one passed along the street, while, under the awning outside, crowds were sitting smoking, drinking, reading the papers . . . Was it really possible that only this morning, those quiet English fields had been dozing round one, those sleepy villagers spreading their slow words out, in expressing an absence of idea, over the space of time in which a Parisian conveyed a pocket philosophy?¹⁷

Caird's is a classic entrance into the city in which the exotic allure of the *cafés* and the Boulevard are symbols of an even more profound cultural difference. The 'slow words' of England are, in many novels of the *fin de siècle*, replaced with a new sort of language, one that emphasises the rapid, phatic and performative nature of foreign tongues. The liberating rhythms and social mobility of Paris play on exactly the same logic as those texts that emphasise its corrupting qualities, both assuming that the reader understands a fundamental difference between life in England and that of Paris.

The most notorious and well-known depiction of 'decadent' Paris is Marie Corelli's 1890 novel *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris*, the lurid tale of Gaston Beauvais's corruption at the hands of absinthe. While all the characters in the novel may be French, the audience and the target of Corelli's cautionary tale were unquestionably English. The warning she provides is against the 'drug-drink' absinthe that, all the rage in Paris, threatens to infect the English capital. Yet absinthe appears as both cause and effect, going hand-in-hand with many aspects of French culture. There is no ambiguity here as to absinthe being symptomatic of the broader threat of French culture: 'The morbidness of the French mind is well known and universally admitted, even by the French themselves; the open atheism, heartlessness, flippancy and flagrant immorality of the whole modern French school of thought is unquestioned.'¹⁸ Gaston Beauvais is striking as the image of the Realist novelist as much as he is the drug-addled absintheur, and Corelli's introductory note makes the correlation explicit: 'In the many French *cafés* and restaurants which have recently sprung up in London, Absinthe is always to be obtained at its customary low price, – French habits, French fashions, French books, French pictures are particularly favoured by the English, and who can predict that French drug-drinking shall not also become *à la mode* in Britain?'¹⁹ The purpose here then seems to be not so much a warning of the dangers of absinthe, but an attack on the francophillia that was, at that point, *à la mode* in Britain.

The 'French books' influencing England were predominantly the work of Émile Zola and his English followers such as George Moore, whose 1883 novel *A Modern Lover* has Parisian Naturalism written large. As Beauvais says, addressing the reader: 'Surely it is time to leave off sermonizing about

dull household virtues! – an age of Realism and Zola has no time for them!²⁰ Repeatedly we are told that Paris is a scene of devolution, moral corruption and decay, often contrasted by Beauvais with ‘Albion’, which has yet to fully suffer the influence of the godless, depraved world of the boulevards. Beauvais becomes then not just a product of French corruption and decline, but a metaphor for it: ‘Paris, steeped in vice and drowned in luxury, feeds her brain on such loathsome literature as might make even the coarse-mouthed Rabelais and Swift recoil . . . the hateful cancer eats on into the breast of France, bringing death closer every day. France! – my France! degraded, lost, and cowardly as I am.’²¹ Corelli gives the language of decline and degeneration explicit parallels with Ancient Greece and Rome, yet these Classical symbols of decay fade in comparison: ‘Paris is described as a brilliant centre of civilization, – but it is the civilization of the organ-grinder’s monkey . . . it is not a shade near the civilization of old Rome or Athens.’²² The centre of European culture and the emblematic city of modernity is a crass and superficial civilisation, and the atavistic central image draws very clearly on the discourses of social Darwinism. Beauvais as the Naturalist and Decadent is also the social Darwinist, and Corelli conflates all of these positions as part of the same immoral viewpoint. As Beauvais says of studying the Parisian absintheurs: ‘Why then give glory to the English Darwin! For he was a wise man in his time, though in his ability to look back, he perhaps lost the power to foresee. He traced, or thought he could trace man’s ascent from the monkey, – but he could not calculate man’s descent to the monkey again.’²³ This image of the urban metropolis as the centre of a degenerate civilisation was of course found in the London literature of the period, most notably Stevenson, Jefferies and Wells.

Kirsten MacLeod has presented *Wormwood* and Corelli’s later novel *Sorrows of Satan* (1895) as part of a much broader English discourse of Francophobia, which she claims it is necessary to examine as a counter-balance to the Francophilia of the English ‘decadent’ writers such as Wilde, Symons and Moore.²⁴ Both these trends, and our attempts to account for them, rely on a necessary attempt to present Paris, and its literature, as distinct and separate from that of England, an essentialised idea of literary production which was arguably called into question by the very writers who are understood as ‘Francophiles’. If we think of Gluck’s division between sentimental and ironic Bohemianism, it is important to separate both the sentimental and essentialised models of Paris from Gautier’s attempt to create a more reflective and ironic literary style, the style that would be the impetus for Decadence. While it is necessary to see the

populist Francophobia of Corelli, Connell and others as an essential part of the milieu that produced the more avant-garde works of Decadence, we should examine how these Decadent texts represent a city such as Paris. The formal qualities of writers such as Moore and Symons work to erode the romantic and lurid image of Paris as a unique city that was as important for Murger as it was for Corelli.

George Moore's Paris

George Moore was certainly bitten with the bug for the Bohemian life and, as soon as his financial situation would allow, he took himself to Paris intent on becoming an artist and a student of life. Despite the grand Paris of the imagination his first impressions of the city in March 1873 were underwhelming, to say the least:

We all know the great grey and melancholy Gare du Nord at half-past six in the morning; and the miserable carriages, and the tall, haggard city. Pale, sloppy, yellow houses; an oppressive absence of colour; a peculiar bleakness in the streets. . . a dreadful *garçon de café*, with a napkin tied round his throat, moves about some chairs, so decrepit and so solitary that it seems impossible to imagine a human being sitting there. Where are the Boulevards? Where are the Champs Elysées? I asked myself, and feeling bound to apologize for the appearance of the city, I explained to my valet that we were passing through some side streets.²⁵

Having consumed the confections of Murger and others in Ireland, the reality of Paris was hard to stomach. Yet it didn't take Moore long to rekindle the Paris of his imagination, inspired this time by a Bohemianism updated to the 1870s, one in which the heady world of the French avant garde was transforming the future of European art and letters, with young George in the thick of it.

Moore's 1886 memoir *Confessions of a Young Man*, tellingly dedicated to Walter Pater, reveals the self-reflexive nature of his journey of self-creation, and the importance of his Parisian experiences in moulding his subjectivity beyond the repressive strictures of family and nation. The memoir begins:

My soul, so far as I understand it, has very kindly taken colour and form from the many various modes of life that self-will and an impetuous temperament have forced me to indulge in. Therefore I may say that I am free from original qualities, defects, tastes, etc. What is mine I have acquired, or, to speak more exactly, chance bestows and still bestows upon me. I came into this world apparently with a nature like a smooth sheet of wax, bearing no impress, but capable of receiving any; of being moulded into all shapes.²⁶

If the young Moore was without heredity, qualities and values, the process of education was imperative in moulding and shaping the individual he was to become. As the son of a wealthy MP it was perhaps expected that George Moore would have attended either of the great universities, yet as the *Confessions* make clear Moore was determined to be moulded by different forces. As Moore asserts: 'I did not go to either Oxford or Cambridge, but I went to the "Nouvelle Athens".'²⁷ George Moore's 'Paris' represents a compound of the place in which he lived for eight years, but also the process of self-fashioning that took place there. His city was about deconstructing and remaking himself, an operation that he would transpose onto place when he later returned to London.

Moore's decision to educate himself in the alternative surrounds of Paris was driven not just by his notion of a self-created identity, but by a rejection of national identity. As he unambiguously stated: 'All the aspects of my native country are violently disagreeable to me, and I cannot think of the place I was born in without a sensation akin to nausea . . . I am instinctively averse from my own countrymen; they are at once remote and repulsive; but with Frenchmen I am conscious of a sense of nearness; I am at one with them in ideas and aspirations, and when I am with them, I am alive with a keen and penetrating sense of intimacy.'²⁸ While Moore's rejection of national identity is a rejection of the Irish, it is in many senses paradigmatic as it reveals the arbitrary nature of identity and his conviction that one can take and shed influence as easily as one may do clothes. Moore explored this theme further in *Hail and Farewell*, stating, 'It seemed to me that myself was my country.'²⁹ Grubgeld contends that this statement underlies Moore's autogenic conceptualisation of the self, asserting: 'The life affirming country of the "I" here stands in diametric opposition to the call to death from father and nation. Citizenship in the country of the "I" demands the denial of other sources of origin.'³⁰ Moore's denial of origin is coupled with the denial of instructed influence. The country of the 'I' rejects any form of control, particularly pedagogy. Paris freed Moore from his past or, as he later formulated it, the city allowed him to live a dual life: 'How much of my mind do I owe to Paris? And by thus acquiring a fatherland more ideal than the one birth had arrogantly imposed, because deliberately chosen, I have doubled my span of life. Do I not exist in two countries? Have I not furnished myself with two sets of thoughts and sensations?' When Moore found himself 'weary to madness' from the mind-numbing routine of life in London, Paris was always there offering 'all the sensations of home, plus those of irresponsible caprice'.³¹ Paris was the

intellectual and spiritual home from which, living in London, Moore would always feel himself exiled.

Moore's education was as much sensual as it was intellectual; Moore frames his own experience as one of gluttony, of sensual avarice as he consumes ideals, politics, women, culture and language. 'As I picked up books, so I picked up my friends. I read friends and books with the same avidity; and as I discarded my books when I had assimilated as much of them as my system required, so I discarded my friends when they ceased to be of use to me.'³² Moore explicitly rejects education over experience as consumption that drove his journey of self-creation, asserting: 'The world still believes in education, in teaching people the "grammar of art." Education should be confined to clerks, and it drives even them to drink. Will the world learn that we never learn anything that we did not know before? The artist, the poet, painter, musician, and novelist go straight to the food they want, guided by an unerring and ineffable instinct, to teach them is to destroy the nerve of the artistic instinct.'³³ Moore's autobiographical journey is thus the idea of self-creation as experience.

Paris exposed Moore to those figures synonymous with the height of French literary innovation, such as Théophile Gautier, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Charles Baudelaire, Émile Zola, Mallarmé, Cattule Mendes and Villiers de l'Isle Adam. Indeed, as Elizabeth Grubgeld has suggested of the *Confessions*: 'Through direct reference to (Huysman's) *A Rebours* and other texts, Moore attempts to set his own book's avowal of artifice and individualism within a French, rather than English tradition.'³⁴ Moore indeed attempted to emulate the feats of this French Decadent tradition some years earlier in his 1877 collection of poetry *Flowers of Passion*. The title is indicative of its content: a passionate attempt to capture the ennui and exhaustion of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* that succeeded in documenting the enthusiasm and confusion of insecure sexual development in a stimulating environment. As Adrian Frazier has suggested of the collection: 'Sometimes the ineptitude was so rich that one suspects that George Moore was up to a game.'³⁵ Yet from Moore's impetuous and vitriolic response to the harsh criticism the volume received, it is certain Moore was making a serious attempt to capture the air of the writers that had had such a profound impact upon him. It is almost comic, and one does read it hoping, futilely, that all will be revealed as an ironic exercise. From the elaborate golden skull and cross-bones overlaying a broken lyre on the cover, to the poems' titles ('Ode to a Dead Body'; 'A Sapphic Dream'; 'Le Succube'), the collection is painfully obvious in its attempt to channel the spirit of Baudelaire. The necrophilic nihilism of 'A Martyr' has

been turned into a sort of hammer horror romp. Take 'Sonnet: The Corpse' as a representative example:

Wondering I gaze upon each lineament
 Defaced by worms and swollen in decay,
 And watch the rat-gnawed golden ringlets play
 Around the sunken outline, shrivelled, bent
 In hideous grimace. The bosom rent
 Is open rose-like 'neath the sun's warm ray
 And Nature, smiling on the new-born May,
 Doth open this corpse as part of her intent.

I try and lift it from the ground, but lo,
 The poor head falls.³⁶

This is clearly the Decadent elements of Baudelaire grasped as thematic rather than formal, failing to do little more than repeat central images and a vague feeling with none of the lyric quality. His second, and thankfully final, volume of verse, *Pagan Poems* was published on his return to London in 1881. Roughly half the poems are minimally revised highlights from *Flowers of Passion* and the themes are more or less the same – sex, unfulfilled desire, lesbianism, misogyny; their formal qualities are still lacking and move from the awkward archaism of the French Decadent writers to traditional and ill-executed sonnets: 'Yea, I am sick of women, one and all; / And thankfully I take my leave of vows / And lips and tresses, bodies hands and brows, / For verily love tastes to me like gall.'³⁷ It was an inauspicious start to his attempt to import a Parisian poetry to London.

Moore's attempt to ape French literature may have produced turgid first results, yet the journey he narrates in *Confessions* had no final destination. As Moore suggests, he is a ship, cast free in the wild seas of literature and art: 'This craft, fashioned of mother-o'-pearl, with starlight at the helm and moonbeams for sails, suddenly ran on a reef and went down, not out of sight, but out of the agitation of actual life. The reef was Gautier.'³⁸ The 'reef' of Gautier left the young Moore listing in the waters of French literature. Having gone to Paris intending to become trained as a painter, Moore's discovery of French literature dramatically altered both his time in Paris and his literary development that would have an undoubted effect on his career and the wider landscape of late nineteenth-century British literature through the *succès de scandale* of *A Modern Lover* (1883) and *Esther Waters* (1894). These Decadent and Naturalist novels were a direct response to his experience in Paris, as was his celebration of the position of the avant-garde writer.

Moore's Parisian experience led him not only to an immersion in avant-garde French art and literature, but to writing poetry and prose drama in French. The experience of Paris recounted in *Confessions* suggests that the move to compose in French led to a loss of his native tongue. As Moore explains: 'I have heard of writing and speaking two languages equally well, but if I had remained two more years in France I should never have been able to identify my thoughts with the language I am now writing in, and I should have written it as an alien.'³⁹ Given the centrality of language to conceptions of nineteenth-century nationalism, Moore's statement is striking. To lose the natural feeling for the language of your native tongue suggested there was little or no solidity to linguistic identity. Moore would later write that 'anything more useless than instruction in French I cannot imagine, for to learn a foreign language is the job of a lifetime.'⁴⁰ The result of his extended Parisian education then was to leave him ill at ease in both French and English, and in both London and Paris.

Parisian Naturalism in London

Following a revolt among his tenants in Ireland, Moore was forced to leave Paris in 1880 and return to County Mayo, before relocating to London intent on making an 'alien' contribution to the history of English literature. His initial reaction to the capital was one of derision. He had determined to become a proper writer by slumming it in the capital. As he wrote, by his own admission, 'a jargon that was neither French nor English' he attempted to 'assimilate, to become part of the vast incoherent mass which is London'. But following his experience of Paris this proved near impossible: 'To write about London I should have to begin by forgetting Paris, blotting out of my mind the Boulevards with their trees and the kiosque.' This longing for Paris increases with every experience of the capital: 'It reminded me how far I was from the Nouvelle Athens and the Boule Noire. It was the café that I missed, the brilliant life of the café, the casual life of the café, so different from the life of the bars into which I turned in search of a companion.'⁴¹ In *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (1906) Moore reflects on how much London had changed in the ten years he spent in Paris: 'When I returned to London after an absence of ten years I found a new London, a less English London.'⁴² The city had undoubtedly altered over the course of the 1870s, but real changes were marked not so much by the building boom of the period, or an influx of European migrants, but by something much more intangible. London was becoming a city of urban modernity, no longer linked to the nation but characterised

by a cosmopolitan culture that refused categorisation. It was this change that Moore attempted to capture as he transformed the city through the importation of French Naturalism. As he did so his mode of writing place worked to foreground transience, desire and impermanence, as he attempted to capture the city without sentiment, without romanticism. It is these qualities that mark Moore's writing out as a key text of Decadent landscape literature. What emerges is a writing that is 'foreign' to the city, foregrounding literary form rather than architecture, culture or history.

While Moore had first attempted Baudelairean verse in his quest to introduce modern French literary style into English, it was as a prose writer, and a practitioner of Zola's Naturalism that he was most successful. *The Confessions* dramatises Moore's development as a Naturalist as he transitions from the idealistic young man who was repulsed by Paris on first arrival to the detached and critical Zolaesque observer. Describing visiting a wealthy salon he states:

just as I had watched the chorus girls and mummers, three years ago, at the Globe Theatre, now, excited by a nervous curiosity, I watched this world of Parisian adventurers and lights-o'-love. And this craving for observations of manners, this instinct for the rapid notations of gestures and words that epitomize a state of feeling, of attitudes that mirror forth the soul, declared itself a main passion.⁴³

Here passion becomes refracted through the detached observation of Moore's peculiar Naturalism, desire is transformed into an obsessive, descriptive gaze. It was this passion that Moore brought back to London in 1880 as he tried to reinvent himself as a novelist and man of letters. The passion was also to reveal itself in an altering representation of the city, as the imaginative manifestation of reality gave way to an amoral science of writing, one that was to reduce London to no more than the site of a series of desires, both sexual and social. Moore's notorious 1883 novel, *A Modern Lover*, transforms London into a self-reflexive space of desire, a world in which human lust, envy and suffering are examined without restraint. *A Modern Lover* courted scandal as one of the first English attempts at 'Zolaesque' literature and while it is now considered a footnote in English literary history, it is arguably a very important one, marking the beginning of the tradition that would continue with Gissing and Crackanthorpe.⁴⁴ Moore more or less admitted a certain parasitism, stating, '*A Modern Lover* was the book of a young man who, in a moment of inspiration, hit upon an excellent anecdote, and being without the literary skill to unfold it, devised a strange text out of his memories of Balzac, Zola and Goncourt.'⁴⁵ Indeed

there are several sections of the novel, in particular the discussions of art in Volume I, that read as if they are straight out of Zola's critical writing on literature.

Moore's debut novel traces the fortunes of Lewis Seymour, a penniless artist and womaniser struggling to make a name for himself in modern London. While Moore's novel precedes many of those more famous works of literary Decadence, Seymour is described, in a manner that would become commonplace by the 1890s, as 'a young man of exquisite beauty, his feminine grace seemed like a relic of ancient Greece, saved by some miracle through the wreck and ruin of ages'; his face was 'as suggestive as a picture by Leonardo da Vinci'.⁴⁶ Seymour has been in London for two years, living the precarious life of a young painter who attempts to sell his watercolours for a few shillings so he can afford to eat. He meets the (apparently) wealthy widower Mrs Bentham in an art shop and she becomes his patron. The novel then follows the convoluted paths of desire as Seymour's amorous adventures with Mrs Bentham, Lady Helen and others.

A Modern Lover presents a sense of detached wonder and scientific examination through the narrative perspective that attempts to challenge and undermine any sense that the city is the site of imaginative response. The novel's Zolaesque qualities were recognised by critics; the *Academy* would dub it 'Zola in evening dress and with a clean face, but Zola all the same'.⁴⁷ Moore makes use of Naturalism both at the level of its observation and in the aesthetic philosophies of many of the characters in the novel. For instance Harding, a radical modern writer in the novel, offers a defence of the subject matter of the 'moderns' that reads like a textbook definition of Naturalism: 'We do not always choose what you call unpleasant subjects, but we try to go to the root of things, and, the basis of life being material and not spiritual, the analyst inevitably finds himself, sooner or later, handling what this sentimental age calls coarse . . . If your stomach will not stand the crudities of the moral dissecting room, read verse . . . The novel, if it be anything, is contemporary history, an exact and complete social reproduction of social surroundings of the age in which we live in.'⁴⁸ The language of science and medicine is almost taken directly from Zola's 1880 manifesto of sorts *The Experimental Novel* in which he concluded that the experimental novelist is 'the one who accepts proven facts, who points out in man and in society the mechanism of the phenomena over which science is mistress, and who does not impose his personal sentiments'.⁴⁹ While it was important that the author didn't impose 'personal sentiment', Moore was also influenced by the visual

and descriptive qualities of the great nineteenth century novels of France. Moore argued, in an essay on Balzac, that whereas earlier periods had maintained a distinction between the arts of painting as pictorial and literature as psychological interiority, the nineteenth century had made literature so much more descriptive.⁵⁰ Moore's prose maintains a 'pictorial' quality and a lack of moral sentiments at all times, qualities which he claims are distinctly French.

In developing his detached omniscient narrator, Moore created his own take on Zola's notoriously cold and clinical descriptive prose. Take, for instance, the description of Mrs Bentham:

She was well, but a little carelessly dressed; there was not that elegance and exactitude in her toilette which betokens the merely fashionable woman . . . After examining the crow's feet, which were beginning to crawl around the intelligent eyes, he would tell you that she was over thirty, and he would add, if he were very sharp, that she was probably a woman who had missed her vocation in life, and was trying to create for herself new interests.⁵¹

There is a suggestion here, as throughout, that the Zolaesque description belongs simultaneously to our unnamed narrator and to Lewis Seymour. Our narrator suggests through a series of conditionals that Seymour may be reading the lines around Mrs Bentham's face, or he may not. This distance between narrator and central character marks Moore's reinterpretation of Zola, concerned with the world of the artist's ideals as much as the 'real world' of life in London.

The focus then is very much on Lewis Seymour, and on his trials and tribulations. Yet Moore refuses sentiment or romanticisation. Seymour had arrived in the city two years previously where on his first night, standing in the Strand, 'Exultantly he had thought of the great city that had extended around him'. Now, after two years of intense financial hardship he describes himself as 'like a corpse over whose grave the city that had robbed and ravished him was holding a revelling carnival'.⁵² As he drags his cadaverous figure into the carnival of the city – the Strand as a crowd streams out of a theatre – he attempts to turn the spectacle into a work of art, and in the process obliterating his own experience of it: 'Lewis listened, and soon losing sight of his own personality, saw the scene as an independent observer, and dreamed of a picture to be called "suicide".'⁵³ As the role of observation destroys subjectivity, so Moore uses subjective experience to erode the certainty of objective reality. The narrator repeatedly projects Lewis's own desire and turmoil onto the blank slate of the city. Take for instance Lewis gazing upon the Thames after leaving the overwhelming colour and movement of the Strand:

All was fantastically unreal, all seemed symbolical of something that was not. Along the Embankment, turning in a half circle, the electric lights beamed like great silver moons, behind which, scattered in inextricable confusion, the thousand gaslights burned softly like night-lights in some gigantic dormitory. On the Surrey side an immense curtain of shadow stretched across the sky, out of which a red light watched him with the haggard gaze of a bleeding eye. But the mystery of the dark wandering waters suggested peace, and in the solemn silence he longed for the beatitude that death can only give, as in the glitter and turmoil of the Strand he had yearned for the pleasures of living.⁵⁴

There are several important elements in this passage. Firstly, its location is far from arbitrary. The passage, which takes place on Waterloo Bridge, mirrors Wordsworth's poem 'Lines Composed upon Westminster Bridge'. In this poem the great Romantic poet transforms the city he was later to critique so stridently in Book VII of *The Prelude* into an imaginative reflection of his youthful enthusiasm on journeying to France. In response, Moore's Lewis attempts to highlight the transitory and insincere nature of imaginative projection. The fantastical unreality of the scene struggles to represent experience. Again there is nascent free indirect discourse as Lewis's own hackneyed attempts at artistry are presented in omniscient narrative. The projected imagination of the artistic visionary doesn't transform the scene; instead that is left to the electrified lights as Lewis becomes aware that his attempts to imbue the city with a metaphoric gravity fail. This undermining of the position of the artist then opens up the realism of the novel to greater effect. The observations of human activity aren't to be compromised by an imaginative conceptualisation of the city that would make it a paradigmatic force in the life of its characters. Bridges over the river Thames would appear throughout Moore's work as sites of decision and division. In *Esther Waters* the eponymous character finds herself staring into the Thames after she is kicked out of her lodging house: 'At last she rested her burden on the parapet of a bridge, and saw the London night, blue and gold, vast water rolling, and the spectacle of the stars like a dream from which she could not disentangle her individuality. Was she to die in the star-lit city, she and her child.'⁵⁵ Here, by 1894 we can already see that Moore's metaphors are much more commonplace, his diction simpler. In 1916, when revising his earlier work for a new collected edition, Moore decided to rewrite *A Modern Lover* as a 'new' book, titled *Lewis Seymour and Some Women*. This 'new' book attempts to tell roughly the same tale with the 'jargon' and 'imperfections'

removed. Moore at this point has altered his writing style, attempted to distance himself from his earlier experiments, and has returned to narrative over 'style and presentation'.⁵⁶ It is perhaps unsurprising that his rewrite of the scene with Lewis on the bridge has removed all of the excesses and much of the misused metaphor.⁵⁷

It is of course important that the mode of representing London is universal and can be applied to any city, which Moore does in Volume II of the novel when Lewis and Mrs Bentham reside in Paris. The city here is subject to clinical description that uses awkward syntax to pull back from the verge of symbolism:

There, in the great squares of light that the glaring plate-glass windows threw over the pavement, sat groups and single figures drinking, talking or watching the crowd as it surged past . . . Out of all of this seething mass of life the tall houses, built in huge blocks of grey stone, arose and faded into darkness, whilst the boulevard with its immense grey *trattoirs*, and its two interminable lines of gas lamps running out into a host of other lights, extended until lost in what appeared to be a piece of starry sky.⁵⁸

The description here is detached until the moment when the gas lamps appear to be lost in the starry sky. That moment of symbolism though is checked through the very precise phrase 'what appeared to be a piece of', which works to expose any symbolism as a universal analogy based on the experience of the viewer, thereby rendering it subjective and partial. These attempts at self-reflexive landscape writing are repeated throughout the novel, for instance the description of the Thames in Volume III when Lewis and Lady Helen spend a day boating on the river while honeymooning at Teddington: 'Only a few streaks of colour remained to show where the sun had set, and out of the fast paleing heights there fell a calm, tender, vast and delicious: and the evening died, softly, gently, without an effort, wrapped in a winding sheet of soft shadow.'⁵⁹ The use of the archaic and awkward adjective 'paleing', the inappropriate and camp use of 'delicious' to describe the qualities of calm, and the excessive flourish of alliteration to close all work to draw attention to the sentimental romance of the scene. The cumulative use of these features works to draw attention to the novel's language, disrupting any illusion of 'realism'. It is perhaps these qualities that mark Moore's importation of Zola as not purely derivative. The constant move away from scientific description to a more self-conscious exposure of artistry turns Moore's spaces into purely textual edifices, rendered with no attempt to imbue qualities in landscape, only to expose the malleable, imprecise medium in which they are written. In this

manner he transforms Naturalism into Decadence, contorting the language of landscapes into a new idiom.

Unnatural Tourism: Arthur Symons in Paris

Arthur Symons met George Moore on a trip to Paris in spring 1890, and a few years later they were, along with W.B. Yeats, neighbours in the Temple in London. Symons saw Moore as very much cut from the same cloth, his novels 'entertaining, realistic and decadent; and certainly founded on modern French fiction'.⁶⁰ Moore and Symons had much in common, including a transformative experience of Paris that was to alter their lives and literature. On 25 May 1890 Arthur Symons, drunk on Parisian culture, wrote to J. Dykes Campbell: 'I am by this time getting so Parisian that the thought of London fills me with horror. I am contemplating permanent residence here; have forgotten most of my English (though I can still write it fairly well) and have begun to write in French for the "public prints".'⁶¹ Symons had been in Paris little over a month on this, his second visit with Havelock Ellis. Symons's claims that the experience had made him feel less affinity for the English capital, and for his native tongue, are hyperbolic, but certainly instructive; if he was truly a Francophile then he could have no love of the city on the Thames. An earlier letter to Campbell went to great lengths to list the exhausting theatre itinerary, the cafés, visits to the Folies Bergère and services at Notre Dame before, as if conscious that this was all a little common, declaring he was about to meet Verlaine, Zola, Renan and Huysmans at various receptions and had already met Odilon Redon, 'positively a French Blake', before signing off: 'Tell me how things are going with the poor folks who are condemned to live in England – terrible banishment from the earthly paradise!'⁶²

While Symons was intoxicated with life in the French capital, he was also taking in much more than its sights and sounds. His time in Paris introduced him to the latest movements in French literature and art, movements he would advocate for on his return to London. Perhaps more importantly, Paris introduced Symons to a vision of erotic life not constrained by English prudishness and conservatism. Paris was a world away from his provincial religious upbringing, offering him all manner of earthly delights. Reflecting on Paris many years later, he seemed to associate the city not so much with literature and art as with sex: 'Sex in Paris is an obsession'; 'in the Cafés, the grand Boulevards, in those of the Quartier Latin and elsewhere, one's conversation is inevitably mixed

with Sex and the Sexes; that rarely happens in London, except in the Café Royal, the Eiffel Tower and in certain night haunts.⁶³ As Symons's poetry of the 1890s attested, it was the sexual freedoms of Paris, as much as its literature that he attempted to introduce to the London capital.

Symons's writing about the French capital is representative of his broader interests: it explores the high-cultural space of avant-garde literature and the popular cultural spaces of the music hall and the street. Many examples of Symons's impressionism are evocative description, an exercise in retrospective memory of a profound experience. In a piece such as 'Gingerbread Fair at Vincennes', this takes the form of an elaborate description of a Parisian fair, attempting to create a swirling symphony of colour as he observes the changing light and movement of the fair from the afternoon through to its dying moments close to midnight. Symons here turns observation into narrative, as his impressions take on poetic licence, strangers become characters, the quotidian becomes lyric.⁶⁴ In other texts in the collection, such as the poem 'Paris' (1894), we see a more complex, self-reflexive impressionism:

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 red nose curved softly, like a shell,
A red mouth like a wound, a mocking veil:
Phantoms, before the dawn, how phantom-fair!

And every woman with beseeching eyes,
Or with enticing eyes, or amorous,
Offers herself, a rose, and craves of us
A rose's place among our memories.⁶⁵

Here Paris is already negated by the possessive, subjective experience of the speaker. Indeed 'my' works to undo Paris, as the rest of the poem presents us with a series of ambivalent experiences that could take place anywhere. They could easily have taken place in London, and for Symons the importance here is not the place, but the experience itself. The poem consists of a series of symbols – the rose, the red mouth, curls of hair, amorous eyes – that are designed to give the impression of female sexuality, suggesting that sexual freedom Symons claimed could easily be found in Paris, but certainly not to conjure up the city itself.

If the locale of the poem is hardly integral to its content, then we can begin to see that what the experience of Paris has done is not simply create an obsession with French culture but transform the model of representation into one that disrupts the confluence between place and identity. This is made clearer in Symons's essay 'Montmartre and the Latin Quarter' (1904), in which Symons identifies these locales as 'the two parts of Paris which are unique, the equivalent of which you will search for in vain elsewhere'.⁶⁶ The sights and spaces of these two epicentres of Bohemian Paris are, Symons emphasises, so antithetical to London that they are singularly Parisian: 'There will never be a Boul' Mich' in London. It is as impossible as Marcelle and Suzanne. The Boul' Mich' is simply the effervescence of irrepressible youth; and youth in London never effervesces.'⁶⁷ It is then such a shame that the English tourist avoids these centres of Parisian life and congregates on the Champs Elysées and the Grand Boulevards, selecting 'out of all Paris precisely what is least Parisian'.⁶⁸ For Symons the life that is to be found on the Boulevards is 'cosmopolitan', not Parisian, in the same way that Piccadilly is in London or the Unter den Linden in Berlin. The crowds that congregate in these places have 'the curiosity of an exhibition or an ethnological museum', but from them you can learn nothing about the life of the city's citizens.⁶⁹ London, according to the 'stern British moralist', is fortunate not to have a street akin to the Boulevard Saint-Michel, thereby discouraging 'the vice which flaunts there'. This moralist, for Symons, has developed something no less correspondingly vicious in London 'which takes itself so seriously as well as cautiously, is so self-convinced of evil doing and has all the unhealthy excitement of an impotent but persistent Puritan conscience'.⁷⁰ It was of course this Puritanical frenzy that had greeted the Wilde trials, and Symons maintained in an essay from the same period (1900) that 'We have still a great deal to learn from Paris, and especially on matters of the higher morality'.⁷¹ The relaxed attitude to sexuality, the respect for art and the 'friendly gaiety' of youth in Paris were, ultimately, harmless, and the essay slowly reveals itself as an attempt to undermine the logic of the 'stern British moralist' who wants to arrange the world with a simplistic moral compass.

The conclusion of Symons's essay coincides with the latter stages of an omnibus journey towards the summit of Montmartre. As the omnibus makes its way north from the Odéon, Symons describes in fleeting detail certain sites and spaces: the Boulevard Saint-Germain, Saint Sulpice, the Louvre, and the rue de Rivoli. This cataloguing of places and spaces would seem to give to Paris a concrete certainty, an equivocal link between space

and the experience of the city. Yet upon climbing Montmartre, Symons seeks to call into question the sense of the city as a knowable series of spaces:

Under a wild sky, as I like to see it, the city floats away endlessly, a vague, immense vision of forests of houses, softened by fringes of actual forest; here and there a dome, a tower, brings suddenly before the eyes a definite locality; but for the most part it is but a succession of light and shade, here tall white houses coming up out of a pit of shadow, there an unintelligible mass of darkness, sheared through by the inexplicable arrow of light. Right down below, one looks straight into the lighted windows, distinguishing the outline of the lamp on the table, of the figure which moves about the room, while in the far distance there is nothing but a faint, reddish haze, rising dubiously into the night, as if the lusts of Paris smoked to the skies.⁷²

The view from Montmartre is famously the clearest and most iconic of the city as a whole, yet tellingly Symons celebrates not a panoramic urban perspective, reducing Paris instead to a combination of shadow and light, inside and outside before metaphorically raising the city in an impressionistic conflagration. Symons is careful to foreground his own impression ('as I like to see it'), to deny legibility and intention ('unintelligible', 'inexplicable') and to limit any force that the Biblical associations of the smouldering city may connote ('*as if* the lusts of Paris smoked to the skies'). Paris is here reduced to a series of visual impressions, sensory effects and abstract patterns, while also drawing attention to the subjective nature of that impression and the ease with which, through metaphor, description can become moral judgement. In drawing attention to the language of moral condemnation, as well as the singularity of subjective impression, Symons subtly calls into question the symbolic significance of Paris in the Victorian imaginary. The final lines of Symons's essay reflect on a tour of Montmartre cabarets, concluding with The Café du Rat Mort on Place Pigalle 'of which an English lady novelist once gave so fanciful a picture'.⁷³ Symons's essay rejects any easy moralising; a café is just a café, and a city is just a city.

A Parisian Impressionism in London

Symons's obsession with place was coupled with restlessness, a perpetual unease with dwelling, the homely, routine and repetition as modes of inhabiting place. Despite long residences in rooms in Fountain Court in the Middle Temple, or Island Cottage in Wittersham, where he lived for twenty-five years, Symons never felt as if place and identity could be drawn

together. In a 1931 essay he stated: 'I have never known what it is to have a home, as most children know it; a home that one has lived in so long that it has got into the ways, the bodily creases, of its inhabitants, like an old, comfortable garment, warmed through and through by the same flesh.' These musings, autobiographical and reflective, give way to a dramatic statement of the restlessness of the artist. Of Baudelaire and Verlaine he suggests they were 'condemned to a perpetual kind of wandering. The artist, it cannot be too clearly understood, has no more part in society than a monk in domestic life.'⁷⁴ The artistic vocation as marked by the 'intense, singular narrative of unsettlement, homelessness, solitude and impoverished independence', to use Raymond Williams's formulation, manifests itself clearly in Symons's work on London.⁷⁵ Symons might argue in the same essay that, 'Cities are like people, with temperaments and souls of their own', but that does not mean that this spirit can be captured in writing.⁷⁶ A person, like a city, is a collection of impressions for Symons, and to know it is not to possess but to experience. In his memoir 'A Prelude to Life' Symons details his first few trips to London, finding the city mean and unwelcoming. However, after repeated visits he became comfortable in the crowd, yet only because it was transient, fleeting and anonymous. The hazy memory of his early childhood and the peripatetic life of his family allowed Symons, he claims, a freedom 'from many prejudices in giving me its own unresting kind of freedom; but it has cut me off from whatever is stable, of long growth in the world'.⁷⁷ Symons was unable to find consolation in place, and his London writing works tirelessly to undo any easy or familiar representation of the city; his London landscapes are textual rather than habitual, written rather than lived. In working to foreground literary form in his impressionistic poetry of the city, Symons develops a mode of Decadent landscape writing that was to have far-reaching effects.

On returning from Paris in 1890, Symons brought back the aesthetic of Verlaine, Huysmans, and Mallarmé. Symons found Verlaine's poetry 'as lyrical as Shelley's as fluid, as magical – though the magic is a new one. It is a twilight art, full of reticence, of perfumed shadows, of hushed melodies. It suggests, it gives impressions, with a subtle avoidance of any too definite or precise effect of line or colour . . . The impressions are remote and fleeting as a melody evoked from the piano by a frail hand in the darkness of a scented room.'⁷⁸ It is the transient and subtle nature of the impression that marks Symons's poetry of the 1890s, along with an attempt at capturing the *recherché* of the musical hall and the amorous adventures the city offered. His 1892 volume of poetry *Silhouettes* and

1895 volume *London Nights* sought to emulate this form of evocative and impressionistic French verse. The shift between these two Decadent volumes and the earlier *Days and Nights* of 1889 is striking. That earlier volume, written under the influence of Browning and Pater, is far more conventional and character-driven, with numerous short dramatic dialogues. The allusions to great works of literature and the classics come thick and fast, along with excessive ekphrasis and rather loose translations of Gautier and Leconte de Lisle. It is altogether a work of conventional aestheticism and provides little portent for the impressionism that was to mark his Decadent poetry of the 1890s.

For Symons, it is the ability of impressionism to record the experience of the city that made it the only form of truly modern poetry. In the 1896 preface to the second edition of *Silhouettes*, he justified his interest in the city as part of an aesthetic programme that refused any division between nature and artifice. It is a classic Decadent position, yet Symons doesn't go as far as Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* in suggesting that the artificial is more real than the natural. Instead, it is all about the position of the viewer rather than the matter to be viewed:

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 any one 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 on my own way.⁷⁹

Of all cities, however, London was the one that exercised the greatest challenge to the truly modern poet. As Symons stated in his essay 'Modernity in Verse' when reflecting on the poetry of William Ernest Henley, 'I think that might be the test of poetry which professes to be modern: its capacity for dealing with London, with what one sees or might see there, indoors or out'.⁸⁰

A poetry that could capture London would need to dissolve the public and the private, projecting the fleeting, amorous encounters of the bedroom onto the anonymous experience of the city. A London poetry would need to foreground empty, endless desire, while eroding the solidity of the bricks and mortar that make up the material and cultural edifices of the British capital. For Symons the most successful of Henley's poems were those from *London Voluntaries* (1893) that dealt with the 'pageant of London'; 'intensely personal in the feeling that transfuses the picture, it is with a brush of passionate impressionism' that Henley paints

the city.⁸¹ In his essay 'Impressionistic Writing', Symons provides a clear sense of what he imagines the process of composition should be. Ostensibly a review of Hubert Crackanthorpe's *Vignettes: a Miniature Journal of Whim and Sentiment* (1896), the essay attacks what it sees as the lack of spiritual gravity in much contemporary writing that attempts to pass off as impressionism. A quick glance at Crackanthorpe's 'vignettes' makes it clear why Symons would take issue with their cynical *ennui*. Take 'Paris in October' for instance where the city is 'garish, petulant', 'complacently content with her sauntering crowds, her monotonous arrangements in pink and white and blue; ever busied with her own publicity, her tiresome, obvious vice, and her parochial modernity coquetting with cosmopolitanism'.⁸² Using the example of trying to describe the Luxembourg Gardens, Symons suggests that impressionism is not about describing everything in the scene in order to evoke, but to discriminate in order to work out what is the 'essential part of my memory of the scene afterward'.⁸³ Symons is then an advocate of an impressionism that was mastered by Verlaine, one that is produced not by fleetingly recording impressions, but by eroding a description till there is nothing left but the kernel of the experience as it is lodged in the memory. Against Crackanthorpe Symons praises J.K. Huysmans's *Parisian Sketches* (1880) where the impression functions as 'the inner meaning of just that landscape, just that significant moment'.⁸⁴

There is a necessity for Symons in writing verse to remain true to both life and art. One should avoid description of life 'as it really is', unless it can be done in a style that is true to one's aesthetic principles. As Symons says of James Thomson's poetry, 'More than most he cared for the trivial details, the casual accidents of "Sunday's out," and shop-girls' dancing halls; and he tried to get full value out of these things by a certain crudity in his transference of them to canvas. To render vulgar life, it seemed necessary to be vulgar. It was in this he made his radical misapprehension'.⁸⁵ Symons poetry was, by contrast, about turning the quotidian and vulgar into a transformative aesthetic experience for the reader, and in his work from the 1890s this is achieved through an impressionism. It is important to note that these impressions, of the city in particular, are overwhelmingly visual. Symons noted many times how important the eye was, and *Silhouettes* is filled with a scopic verse. Take 'London Nights: I. Going to Hammersmith':

The train through the night of the town,
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.

Night, and the rush of the train,
 A cloud of smoke through the town,
 Scaring the life of the streets;
 And the leap of the heart again,
 Out into the night, and down
 The dazzling vista of streets!⁸⁶

The emphasis on colour, on the conditions of viewing, the quality of the light, the rhythm that attempts to capture the flash of light from the ‘fingers’ of streets as a train speeds through the outskirts of the city – this visual element will remain an important aspect of Symons’s 1890s poetry, although the specificity of the location will be eroded, so in the 1896 edition of *Silhouettes* this poem is printed identically but with a new title: ‘City Nights: I. In the Train’, making the poem far more universal and unbounded in its impressionism.

Silhouettes is littered with this attempt to capture London anew; there are poems set in specific places, such as the train to Kensington Gardens, Embankment, theatres (Haymarket and the Gaiety), Temple, others capturing the mood of London in different seasons, such as spring in ‘April Midnight’. Representative of these, perhaps, is ‘In Fountain Court’:

The fountain murmuring of sleep,
 A drowsy tune;
 The flickering green of leaves that keep
 The light of June;
 Peace, through a stumbling afternoon,
 The peace of June

A waiting ghost, in the blue sky,
 The white curved moon;
 June hushed and breathless, waits, and I
 Wait too, with June;
 Come through the lingering afternoon,
 Soon love, come soon⁸⁷

The title of the poem refers to Symons’s lodgings in the period he wrote this poem. Yet the specificity of the title is absent from the poem. Here Fountain Court cannot be represented by its proximity to Temple Bar or the architecture of the surrounding buildings or the thriving intellectual community that resided there in the 1890s.⁸⁸ Instead, it is the impression of

a June afternoon, the murmuring fountain, the play of light that has replaced any concrete impression of urban space; the personal recollection, the play of memory as a series of impressions, overwhelms the poem's site-specific object. As in a great deal of Symons's poetry, even the content begins to fade away as the lilting repetition of sounds forms its own impression, with the locality of the poem becoming twice removed. It was this absence of a tangible London that so frustrated Symons's contemporary, the Decadent Catholic poet Lionel Johnson. As Johnson wrote in notes on contemporary poetry to the Irish poet Katherine Tynan and published after his death, Symons was 'a slave to impressionism, whether the impression be precious or not. A London fog, the blurred tawny lamplight, the red omnibus, the dreary rain, the depressing mud, the glaring gin-shop, the slatternly shivering women, three dexterous stanzas telling you that and nothing more.'⁸⁹ As Johnson suggests, this is a poetic form that refuses to order and arrange the city, to judge the actions of those living in it, or to offer a greater spiritual or historical framework within which to anchor experience, as Johnson would himself offer in such poems as 'Plato in London' and 'The Statue of King Charles at Charring Cross'.

What we begin to see as we investigate Symons's model of representing the city is the substitution of locality for fleeting impressionism, as well as its inclusion as linguistic signifier with no reference to any tangible reality. This notion of locality being excluded through its inclusion as object is captured perfectly in the poem 'Impression'. Here London is evoked not to locate the action of the poem, which is non-existent, but as a word with its syllabic tone included for the sake of a rhythmic impression:

Outside, the dreary church bell tolled,
The London Sunday faded slow;
Ah what is this? What wings unfold
In this miraculous rose of gold?⁹⁰

The staccato rhythm of this second line is used to give further effect to the rhetorical flourish that closes the poem, to leave the language all the more urgent and pressing. This use of language for rhythmic purposes is a key feature of the Decadent desire to draw attention to the mechanics of the poem. Here London is not a place, a metropolis, a site of empire, a paragon of civilisation, nothing more than a word that can help produce the rhythmical life of language that would free it from the onerous imperative for meaning. This is repeated throughout the collection where 'London' is without fixity and meaning. It becomes a byword for

modernity and the impressionism of life in the city, rather than as a city with its own history and its own culture.

If London was invoked in *Silhouettes* as the site of experience, in *London Nights* the city is paradoxically absent; many of the poems here are about recalled erotic encounters that take place in vaguely remembered rooms. Here Symons uses the city in the title to precisely undermine the notion that a city is constituted of anything more than the manifold impressions and thoughts of those who live there. The Pastoral 'Intermezzo' also bears many place names as titles, but the content of each poem is resolutely lacking in descriptive detail. In the London poems in this volume we see the city emerge fully, as begun in *Silhouettes*, as a space in which the properly universal accumulation of symbols and impressions, of amorous encounter can take place. London is only mentioned in titles to sections and place names are absent in the body of the poems. There can be numerous evocations of encounters with actresses and prostitutes, rendered in the most intense verse, but nothing as to locality. The 'truth' of experience cannot be measured in fact, only in feeling. London, the knowable place that can be mapped and grasped, loses its identity, subsumed into Symons's own idiosyncratic experience of the city. Whereas in *Silhouettes* we are given the names of theatres and music-halls that the poet has frequented, here the music-hall becomes first abstracted, then internalised through analogy, which is refracted through the speaker watching himself as an analogy:

My life is like a music-hall
 Where in the impotence of rage
 Chained by enchantment to my stall,
 I see myself upon the stage
 Dance to amuse a music-hall.⁹¹

Observed and observer, impotent and active, the speaker here embodies a certain mode of engaging with the city. Describing his first residence in London, Symons states, 'Here in the "motley" Strand, among these hurrying people, under the smoky sky I would walk and yet watch. If there ever was a religion of the eyes, I have devoutly practiced that religion.'⁹² If life is like a music-hall it is precisely because one is called, in the city, to observe and be observed, never sure if one is actor or audience, on the stage or off it. There is clearly much of Baudelaire in Symons's idea of London as a stage and the artist as observer and observed. This attempt to grasp the movement of the city visually and render it linguistically becomes key to removing all material descriptive qualities from the poetry of the city.

Symons's impressionism was never simply about conveying the life of urban modernity: the ideal was seemingly to transcend it. Take one of Symons's most famous poems, 'Nora on the Pavement'. In its formal shifts the poem attempts to represent the freedom of urban life through the consonant and dissonant nature of rhythm:

As Nora on the pavement
Dances, and she entrances the grey hour
Into the laughing circle of her power,
The magic circle of her glances,
As Nora dances on the midnight pavement;

Petulant and bewildered,
Thronging desires and longing looks recur
And memorably re-incarnate her,
As I remember that old longing,
A footlight fancy, petulant and bewildered;

Here the poem uses a forced and jarring rhythm, repetition and an excess of stressed syllables to create the effect of claustrophobia. The form here seems to evoke the industrialised, automated life of the city in which the ceaseless rhythm constrains and contorts poetic control. This is contrasted to the final lines of the poem in which Nora and the rhythm are set free:

Herself at last, leaps free the very Nora.
It is the soul of Nora,
Living at last, and giving forth to the night,
Bird-like, the burden of its own delight,
All its desire, and all the joy of living,
In that blithe madness of the soul of Nora.⁹³

Here Nora's freedom is announced with a more measured rhythm, an absence of enjambment and internal rhyme suggesting that Symons's poetic practice both takes its rhythm from the transcendent soul of Nora and creates the form that frees Nora. Here poetry, Symons's poetry, offers an antidote to the constricting rhythms of modern life in the city. Nora's 'bird-like' freedom suggests that it is in the city and only the city that can offer a truly modern freedom, and it is the modern poet's task to realise it.

After Decadence: Symons Exiled in London

If London had been Symons's muse throughout the 1890s, by 1900 he no longer took his energy and inspiration from the city in the same fashion.

This was partly as a result of his marriage to Rhoda which, one imagines, put a curb on some of his less edifying nocturnal excursions. In 1906 Symons and his wife bought a timbered seventeenth-century cottage in Wittersham, Kent, to spend their summers. In a poem of this period, 'The Streets', he explains that he once 'loved the streets because / I feared myself and sought / In the crowd's hurry a pause / And sanctuary from thought.' That sense of unsettlement and insecurity had by now dissipated and the speaker's 'tired pilgrim feet / Have no more need to roam'.⁹⁴ If the streets of London are no longer necessary for poetic inspiration, the life on them can be revealed for what it is. If impressionism was a matter of recalling the effect of light, movement and desire on an individual's sense of self, the poetry that Symons was to produce after *London Nights* was no longer impressionistic in the same way because he no longer saw London in the same way. One of the most revealing instances of the transformation of Symons's ideas of place is the series of verses in *The Fool of the World* (1906) collected under the subtitle 'Amends to Nature'. Here Symons confesses he has loved 'colours, not flowers', and as a result 'has wasted more than half my hours / Without the comradeship of things'. Having undergone this seemingly Romantic realisation of the power of nature, his world-view is transformed: 'I feel, in every midge that hums, / Life, fugitive and infinite, / And suddenly the world becomes / A part of me and I of it.'⁹⁵ What follows are some rather questionable nature poems, largely inspired by Cornwall, such as 'Songs of Poltescoe Valley', 'To a Sea-Gull' and 'By Looe Pool', along with a striking rejection of the impressionist London he had done so much to create:

The sun, a fiery orange in the air,
 Thins and discolours to a disc of tin,
 Until the breathing mist's mouth sucks it in;
 And now there is no colour anywhere,
 Only the ghost of greyness; vapour fills
 The hollows of the streets
 . . .
 And, in the evil glimpses of the light,
 Men as trees walking loom through lanes of night
 Hung with the globes of some unnatural fruit.
 To live, and to die daily, deaths like these,
 Is it to live, while there are winds and seas?⁹⁶

We have certainly moved a long way from the smug elevation of the urban over the rural in the preface to the second edition of *Silhouettes*. Where Symons had once celebrated the artificial world of nocturnal light

and the vital movement of the crowds he now sees a city coloured grey, its streets hollow and empty, its lamplight akin to 'some unnatural fruit'. The living dead of Symons's London in this period seem to foreshadow Eliot's crowds of undead citizens streaming over London Bridge. Symons was no longer able to see the city as a space of freedom, in which its Noras could transcend the mundanity of the quotidian. In a poem from this period, 'London: Midnight', Symons would capture something of the deadening, carceral effects of modern urban life:

I hear, in my watch ticking, the vast noise
 Of Time's hurrying and indifferent and inarticulate voice;
 I hear, in my heart beating, the loud beat
 As of the passing of innumerable feet;
 And afar and away, without, like a faint sea,
 The sighing of the city is borne to me
 Out of the dumb, listening night;
 And the immeasurable patience and the infinite
 Weariness of the world's sorrow rise and cry
 Out of the silence up to the silent sky
 In that low voice of the city,
 So passionately and so intolerably crying for pity
 That I wonder at the voice of Time, indifferent, apart
 And at the lonely and sorrowful and indifferent voice of my heart.⁹⁷

This poem hardly fits with those of the early-mid 1890s in which the goal seemed to be to capture the play of movement, light and desire in developing an impression of the city. Perhaps the most important change in Symons's style here is the predominance of the aural over the visual. If Symons the impressionist of the 1890s was inspired by the paintings of Degas, the Symons of the turn of the century was blind. His response to London, in turning increasingly hostile, in turn focused on the aural overload of London life. The city has become a giant metronome, beating out regularity and routine upon the city whose pitying cries of protest leave both Time and the speaker 'indifferent'.

While Symons shed his earlier impressionism in his London poetry of the period, it was arguably in prose that he left his most striking, and strikingly ambivalent, evocation of the city. *London: A Book of Aspects* was written in 1906, as part of a collaboration with the American photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn. Struggling to find a publisher, Symons's text was privately printed (without the photographs) in 1909 following his mental breakdown.⁹⁸ The tone of that volume is a lyric nostalgia, combined with dense impressionism, but it is a sad and strange impressionism, lacking the

vitality and wonder of *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*. Symons had begun already to feel like a man out of time, a Victorian resident in a twentieth-century city. The book, in contrast with Symons's poetic evocations, seems conservative, with repeated statements that the 'Great Wen' was no longer so great: 'London was once habitable, in spite of itself. The machines have killed it. The old, habitable London exists no longer . . . To live in it is to live in the air of a clanging bell, to breathe its air is to breathe the foulness of modern progress.'⁹⁹ The evils, for Symons, were mechanisation and development; the ever-increasing desire to modernise the city was destroying the fabric of the London Symons knew. The most poignant vanished space for Symons was Hollywell Street, the seedy strip of bookshops, some peddling rather risqué merchandise, that were pulled down in 1906 to make way for the widening of the Strand: 'When I tell strangers about it, it seems to me that they can never know London now.'¹⁰⁰ London has become fixed in time for Symons; it was always going to be sometime between 1891 and 1896 in his mind, and the city that emerged after 1900 was not 'London'. Symons was one of many memoirists who had begun to write paeans to the Victorian London that was fast disappearing. G.K. Chesterton lamented in 1914 that the medieval functions of place names on the tube were increasingly unknown by the city's citizens: 'These old things, though fundamental, are fragmentary; and whether as ruins or merely as records, will tell the stranger little of what London has been and is, as distinct from Paris, Berlin or Chicago. London is a medieval town, as these names testify; but its soul has sunk deeper under other things than any other town that remembers medievalism at all. It is very hard indeed to find London in London.'¹⁰¹

One of the most striking features of *London: A Book of Aspects* is the dominance of technology in Symons's city. While Symons may have advocated 'modernity in verse' it was in a modernity of experience rather than things that he was interested. Writing about technology he seems transformed into a curmudgeonly conservative. Modern life has left the citizens of the city as mindless slaves to progress, stuck like cogs in a machine, suffering an almighty 'automobilization of the mind . . . In London there will soon be no need of men, there will be nothing but machines.'¹⁰² The railway, motor-car and motor-omnibus had turned the city's citizens into automata, destroying the leisurely and communal pleasures of perambulation; it is now a 'pain to walk in the midst of all these hurrying and chattering machines'.¹⁰³ The crowds of the city have transformed from the 'bath of the multitude' to 'the quivering phantoms of a cinematograph'; it is no longer certain if the technological innovations

are capturing or destroying life.¹⁰⁴ More than any other it is the excessive sounds of modernity that have destroyed the serenity and repose of the home, that necessary refuge from the incessant pressures of urban life: 'The plausible and insidious telephone aids us and intrudes upon us, taking away our liberty from us, and leaving every Englishman's house his castle no longer, but a kind of whispering gallery, open to the hum of every voice.'¹⁰⁵ It is ironic, given that the ideal of Decadence, according to Symons, was to become a 'disembodied voice', that he should have been so dismissive of the telephone and the gramophone.¹⁰⁶ The noises, the sights and the rhythms of London seemed so alien to Symons, and to his Paris-inspired impressionism.

The final chapter of *London: A Book of Aspects* considers the inhumane poverty of the London underclasses, which Symons bemoans as an immorality, but more so as a vulgar spectacle; the poorest Londoners of Edgware Road lack the colour, vitality and movement to produce poetic impressions. The poor are only able to take on appealing qualities for the impressionist in a rural setting: 'Go into the country, where progress and machines and other gifts of the twentieth century have not wholly taken the peasant's hand from the spade and plough, or to any fishing village on the coast, and you will see that poverty, even in England, can find some natural delights in natural things.'¹⁰⁷ Symons closes the book by reflecting on the cheerful lives of the villagers of a small coastal village in Cornwall. Far from the squalor of London these villagers live a life of purity and harmony with their environment: '[T]hey have room to live, air to breathe; beauty is natural to everything about them. The dates in their churchyards tell you how long they have the patience to go on living.'¹⁰⁸ Symons had seemingly had enough of London, exhausted by the pressure of the excessive publishing schedule he had taken on to finance his married life. Decadence, as Symons knew it, had come to an end and it seemed as though the London that had fostered the artistic energy of that movement was also at an end, transforming into the 'vortex' that would fashion another artistic revolution. After his breakdown the discomfort he felt in London increased to the point where he developed an aversion to the city. In 1922 he wrote to John Quinn that he was desperate to 'escape this horrible and vile London, in which I have lost almost all interest'.¹⁰⁹



On 13 June 1924 Arthur Symons and Havelock Ellis departed for Paris on a trip that echoed the one they had made together thirty-four years earlier. There were some significant differences in itinerary, however. Almost all of

the literary figures they had called on then were now dead and in their place they made visits to the artists and writers of a new generation, including James Joyce, Valéry Larbaud, Jean Cocteau and Natalie Barney. They visited Nancy Cunard, the modernist muse and poet whose Hours Press was to publish Symons's *Mes Souvenirs* (1929). Cunard recalls Symons's extended reflections on the Paris of the Decadents, and she 'fancied he always thought of himself as a *fin de siècle* figure'.¹¹⁰ Ezra Pound in 1920 recollected Symons similarly, claiming that after his illness he had 'reappeared as if still in the land of '95, writing still of Javanese Dancers, and certainly very much "out of the movement"'.¹¹¹ Symons had little intention, or more likely was unable after his illness, of reinventing himself as an artist for the twentieth century. The writers of a new literary avant garde saw him as outmoded, and Symons himself was becoming much more comfortable living in the past of the 1890s. In his documentation of visits to the French capital, 'Unspiritual Adventures in Paris' (1931), he appeared to himself as a relic of a bygone era and would repeatedly turn his thoughts to that transformative second trip with Ellis as he tried to evoke 'this vision: the vision of May 1890'.¹¹² Clutching his visiting card on which Verlaine, long since dead, had written his address, Symons toured Verlaine's and Baudelaire's former Parisian residences. Paris was a necropolis, a city haunted by the ghosts of a Decadence long dead, and Symons reduced to a pilgrim seeking out the vestiges of bygone days.

While Symons remained alienated from the London and Paris of the 1920s, his impressionism, and Moore's Naturalism, had altered the literary cultures of those cities more than either of them realised. The modernist's debt to the writers of the *fin de siècle* may have been repeatedly eschewed, but Symons's and Moore's attempt to transform urban spaces into landscapes of impression and desire foreshadow the urban poetics of T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) and Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920). Those later writers wrote of the city, rather than specific cities; the futile desires of Prufrock are cosmopolitan, suffered simultaneously in every city and no city in particular. Yet it is telling that both Pound and Eliot felt the need to evoke Decadent, impressionist writing so explicitly in those works. While their tone is somewhat mocking and dismissive, it can also be read as a begrudging mark of respect.