

**Decadent sociability and Material Culture  
at the Fin de Siècle  
'A genius for friendship.'**

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# Abstract

This thesis re-evaluates decadence by investigating the relationship that emerged between sociability and material culture at the fin de siècle. Its focus on the mechanisms of sociability and on materiality situates decadent interactions within the physical world. Rather than treating the decadents as isolated individualists who rejected communality, as most critical readings of decadence suggest, the thesis argues that individual performances co-existed within the frame of the decadent group. This study recognises the importance of individuality to the decadents' self-presentation, but it emphasises the ways in which the decadents shared a collective investment in the decadent social project. A central element of this communality was the use of physical objects that provided decadents with an organising principle for their philosophies and a means of founding their common sense of self.

In order to trace the workings of decadent sociability, the thesis investigates five specific aspects of decadent material culture. The figure of the dandy is discussed as a recognised model of decadent behaviour: objects such as clothes, cigarettes, flowers and perfumes were used as props to stage a collective dandiacal identity. These performances are then considered within the context of the material spaces that decadent social networks negotiated. The public sphere of urban restaurants and music halls, and the private sphere of decadent interior design, each with their own distinctive material signifiers, become the sites of shared performative displays of selfhood. The thesis next explores how objects (books in particular) sit at the intersection of the personal and the material, and gain social currency through gifting rituals. A similar process can be seen in the exchange of decadent caricature as part of the fin-de-siècle gift economy. Finally, the thesis examines publishers and the business side of decadent publishing as vital and revealing components of decadent sociability. Rather than viewing publishers as purely commercial figures, it considers the significance of sympathetic relationships between booksellers and their authors. In analysing

these forms of sociability at the end of the nineteenth century, this thesis foregrounds an engaged reading of decadence: it is a social movement with a material vocabulary and a cultural language used to celebrate friendships, send signals to the initiated, and challenge the status quo.

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# Introduction

But beneath his ascetic intensity, and behind that battery of learning, there was a deep and warm and very companionable humanity, as my subsequent friendship with him was to discover. He had a genius for friendship, and no man was ever more devoted and loyal to his friends.<sup>1</sup>

When the Liverpudlian writer and decadent personality Richard Le Gallienne came to memorialise the people with whom he had worked and socialised in his memoir *The Romantic '90s* (1925), his tribute to the poet Lionel Johnson highlights the importance of sociability at the fin de siècle. Le Gallienne acknowledges Johnson's 'intensity' and 'learning,' but he chooses to emphasise the human qualities of his friendship. Here, true genius lies in the ability to relate amicably to the fellow members of one's social networks. *The Romantic '90s* is a retrospective, idealising account of the fin de siècle, but it nonetheless demonstrates the central role of sociability in the lives of decadent writers and artists. The ideal decadent is as much a friend, fellow-drinker and confidante as a literary figure. This is not to suggest that Le Gallienne minimises the artistry of his decadent friends, but that sympathetic socialising becomes part of this artistry.

This thesis explores the complex set of collective social practices and rituals in which decadent writers and artists engaged in the long fin de siècle. I take the 'long fin de siècle' to refer to the period from the 1880s to the early twentieth century. While I do not generally consider decadence in the early 1900s, these later manifestations of decadent culture feature in my analysis—especially in the form of biographies about fin-de-siècle decadents written by those who survived the nineteenth century. The central thrust of my argument is that material culture provides an organising principle for decadent philosophies: physical objects were (re-)fashioned as tools of decadent sociability. I start with the understanding that decadent interaction is a series of individual and group performances using owned objects to characterise the decadents' sense of self; I then show how a shared identity arises at the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), pp. 191-92.

intersection of decadent discourses of style, consumption, design, gifting and literary commerce. From this position, I demonstrate that the decadents were contesting mainstream culture's ownership of the public sphere by carving out a social niche where they could cultivate a heterodox incarnation of community, and by presenting themselves as a circle of inter-connected individuals initiated into the decadent mode of living. My analysis of decadence essentially suggests that the decadent social project was a means of establishing the rich set of behaviours and interactions that defined what it meant to be decadent at the fin de siècle.

Critical perspectives treating the decadents as a network rather than as isolated individuals have only become part of the field of decadence studies in recent years.<sup>2</sup> This reconceptualisation moves decadence away from the monad to a broader spectrum, where group dynamics form the basis of the movement. Looking at the intersection of models of decadent individuality and decadent collectivity reveals a specifically decadent form of sociability: the decadent social network is a *collective of individuals*. Decadent groups coalesced around influential tastemakers like Oscar Wilde, and, in imitating their behaviours and performances, created both a social language for the decadent network and an easily recognisable set of signifiers. The shared decadent identity that emerged allowed members to negotiate their positions in the social and professional worlds. Meeting in both public and private spaces, decadents placed a premium on interaction, and decadent accounts of the fin de siècle, such as *The Romantic '90s*, record the processes of decadent community in terms of friendships, rivalries and collaborations.

Understanding decadent networks as a community arising from the actions of individuals lies at the heart of decadent sociability. It establishes a collective model of self without sacrificing the performative mode of individuality for which decadents like Wilde are

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Potolsky's *The Decadent Republic of Letters* is the most sustained work on decadent networking to date. Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

famous. Decadent mimesis of their figureheads provided a means to celebrate decadent group identity, and such shared performances made the group easily identifiable to outside observers. Turning decadence into a brand in this way was an act of group-commodification that promoted and sold an idea of decadence. Decadents essentially appropriated Victorian materiality, transforming fin-de-siècle mainstream culture (represented by the cluttered interiors of the bourgeois home) in order to articulate their alternative vision (represented by the purposeful and transgressive collections decorating decadent interior spaces). This thesis proposes a reading of decadence as an engaged social movement, which was thoroughly rooted in decadents' interpersonal interactions. Through their social performances, decadents fashioned themselves as rebels willing to push against the boundaries of the acceptable, making decadent sociability into a series of purposeful transgressions against the societal norms of a bourgeois status quo.

In uncovering a specifically decadent incarnation of sociability, we should recognise the importance of decadent material culture, an area which has often been overlooked in critical studies of decadent networking. Seeing material culture in the light of decadent sociability allows us to understand how the decadents set themselves apart from the bourgeoisie and how their shared performance of taste united them as a group. Material objects were the anchors around which a collective social identity could be orientated, and collecting and claiming ownership over beautiful or unusual art objects became a means of differentiating the decadent consumer from the mainstream. Decadents represented objects in their art and surrounded themselves with material things in their lives as evidence of a refined sensibility, a sensibility shared by members of the decadent social circle and disparaged by the uninitiated. Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892) pathologises such collecting as a hallmark of the degenerate, arguing that it amasses 'aimless bric-à-brac, which does not



become any more useful or beautiful by being fondly called *bibelots*.<sup>3</sup> Decadents, however, resisted these prescriptive readings of their interactions with material culture. Instead, they used their objects as a form of social iconography: social signals rooted in material culture engaged the initiated and excluded outsiders.

#### **i. Decadence: a collective of individuals**

Decadence is wilfully ambiguous, resisting definition, but networks are key to understanding and defining the decadent movement at the fin de siècle. In studying decadence through a lens of social networks and material culture, I provide an alternative reading to traditional analyses of decadent culture, which emphasise the importance of individuals and isolation. According to such readings, decadence actively repudiates any communal impulse, making the individual the sole source of artistic potential. The tendency to treat decadent artists as disconnected individualists, after the fashion of the isolated Romantic genius archetype, is, I would suggest, an unnuanced interpretation of decadent interactions at the fin de siècle (though it does, of course, draw upon the way the decadents presented themselves to the public). This approach is exemplified by Malcolm Easton's 1972 biography of the illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, *Aubrey and the Dying Lady*. Easton not only claims that Beardsley's 'debts to contemporaries are not extensive,' but also that Beardsley would be 'distressed' at modern tendencies to view him as an inspiration and influence for later Art Nouveau and the Glasgow School in particular.<sup>4</sup> Easton's conception of Beardsley as a creative genius is dependent upon his disconnection from any and all social and artistic networks. More recently, Michael Patrick Gillespie draws on this trend in his book on Oscar Wilde's self-creation as a brand, *Branding Oscar Wilde* (2018). In his endeavours to define Wilde's engagement with his own brand, Gillespie acknowledges similarities with other fin-de-siècle

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<sup>3</sup> Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: William Heinemann, 1895), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Easton, *Aubrey and the Dying Lady: A Beardsley Riddle* (London: Secker & Warberg, 1972), p. 18.

figures (including Max Beerbohm, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Beardsley, Lily Langtry and Sarah Bernhardt), but promptly dismisses them as talentless eccentrics and poseurs who failed to share Wilde's 'deeper understanding of the process [of branding] and a firmer commitment to carrying it through.'<sup>5</sup> He ignores the complex social dynamics of decadent interaction and seemingly feels he must minimise the achievements of Wilde's contemporaries, friends and rivals to make Wilde unique and therefore worthy of study. He thus mocks what he perceives as Beardsley's 'bad haircuts,' Beerbohm's pretensions and Whistler's 'sense of self-importance [which] presumed that there would be interest in any ideas he would care to express.'<sup>6</sup> Gillespie allows Wilde little substantive engagement with his contemporaries and discounts his intellectual debts. My thesis will challenge these readings of decadent isolationism in order to establish a collective model where the individual is the basic building block of the decadent group rather than its quintessential embodiment. I will make a case for interpreting fin-de-siècle figures like Wilde and Beardsley as the products of a specific social and intellectual environment, not as geniuses who were uniquely superior to their friends and colleagues.

Regenia Gagnier's *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization* offers a much more nuanced analysis of decadent individualism than either Easton or Gillespie. As she convincingly demonstrates, individualism was a core tenet of the decadent movement, and this informs my reading of the decadents' public and private performances of self, which they used to set themselves apart from a perceived bourgeois mass. Gagnier defines decadence as 'a relation of part to whole in systems which change,' arguing that it represents a fundamental

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Branding Oscar Wilde* (New York: Routledge, 2018), locs. 44 and 190. <https://bodleian.idls.org.uk/accessnow/start.html> Accessed on 27/07/2018.

<sup>6</sup> Gillespie, *Branding Oscar Wilde*, loc. 81.

breakdown of artistic unity.<sup>7</sup> Gagnier's model of literary decadence arises from Havelock Ellis's 'A Note on Paul Bourget' (1899):

A style of Decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word. A decadent style, in short, is an anarchistic style, in which everything is sacrificed to the development of the original parts.<sup>8</sup>

This kind of artistic self-conscious isolation, Gagnier suggests, enacted decadence as 'the choice and fantasy of the individual psyche, detaching it from the social whole.'<sup>9</sup> My thesis expands on Gagnier's argument by placing more emphasis on the communal: the decadents were fascinated by the possibilities of social interaction, friendship, and artistic and professional collaboration. Decadent individuals were an integral part of the decadent networks that made up the decadent social system—I consider the parts but reattach them to the social whole.

Because he understands the decadents as a collective and politically engaged network, I use Matthew Potolsky's work as a theoretical underpinning for my research. His critical position is in direct contrast to the studies which emphasise isolation, and he usefully establishes the decadents as a group. Constructing a countercanon, he suggests in *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, was the chief tool for forging an engaged decadent identity. This decadent canon created a new subculture, which (borrowing the social theorist Michael Warner's term) he names a counterpublic: 'a public that defines itself against a dominant public.'<sup>10</sup> Potolsky's decadent counterpublic is defined in purely literary terms and he shows how decadents 'incessantly drew lines of affiliation' between themselves.<sup>11</sup> In this, Potolsky has provided a model for my own initial theories of decadent sociability, but he does not

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<sup>7</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Havelock Ellis, 'A Note on Paul Bourget', quoted in Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*, p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 133

<sup>11</sup> Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, p. 5

examine the effect of the decadents' social practices in the real world. In fact, the final chapter of his book is entitled 'A Republic of (Nothing but) Letters.'<sup>12</sup> Potolsky undervalues the significance of social interaction in the decadent counterpublic: in his omission of the eating, drinking and business transactions that sustained decadent life, he suggests that material interactions were secondary to the literary. Because I see late-Victorian material culture and social practices as central to our understanding of decadent social networking, my work aims to refocus attention on the material nature of social interactions as both real activities and as decadent performances.

Kirsten MacLeod's re-framing of decadence in *Fictions of British Decadence* provides an additional critical perspective to shape my analysis of fin-de-siècle culture: it establishes the broader political context of decadence and unpicks the traditional myths and tropes of the movement. MacLeod's examination of decadent mythicisation problematises the traditional narratives of decadence. Rather than a disconnected elite, she shows how many decadents were of middle-class, professional origins.<sup>13</sup> The adopted aristocratic personae that formed part of the performance of decadent identity did not reflect the reality of the decadents' social makeup. Many decadents wrote prolifically and were far more engaged with popular culture than traditional stereotypes suggest, but MacLeod demonstrates that 'they made a virtue of necessity and, rather than letting their hackwork serve to undermine their artistic creditability, they used it to further their image as artistic martyrs.'<sup>14</sup> As MacLeod's analysis shows, the romanticised image of decadence and the decadents is the result of a process of commodification—the mythicised decadent is above all else a marketing tool. To sell his reputation in the early twentieth century, for instance, Yeats described his fin-de-siècle peers as the 'Tragic Generation,' exaggerating the struggles and

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<sup>12</sup> Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Culture and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 46.

mortality rate of his fellow Rhymers' Club members in order to paint himself as 'the hero of his narrative,' the only one to survive into artistic maturity.<sup>15</sup> MacLeod's understanding of decadent commercial engagement, and the way the decadents exploited this, has influenced my conceptualisation of their relationship with the marketplace. My work draws on her revisionist model of decadence because, much like Potolsky, she disrupts the stereotypical categories of decadence. Unlike Potolsky, however, MacLeod insists on a more material focus, which is in keeping with my emphasis on material culture. *Fictions of British Decadence* does not explicitly deal with decadence as a force of sociability, but in emphasising the material realities of literary production at the fin de siècle it provides a framework for my analysis of the business of decadent writing.

## **ii. Cosmopolitan marginality**

Cosmopolitanism is about drawing connections between different cultures and between like-minded people—it is a philosophy of networks that provides a useful conceptual framework for thinking about the mechanisms of decadent social allegiance. In view of this, I argue that decadents created a social grouping on the margins of the mainstream in order to perform a conscious act of self-identification with the other. There was a definite drive to ally the decadent self with the foreign in opposition to the John-Bull jingoism of their society. In my thesis, I use Gagnier's definition of cosmopolitanism, at its most basic, as a 'rejection of prejudicial notions of difference.'<sup>16</sup> This internationalist model of self entails a politicised understanding of community that transcends national or ethnic boundaries. In the light of such cosmopolitanism, non-Englishness became a mark of distinction within decadent social networks. Those who had the option highlighted their non-English heritage: Wilde periodically emphasised his Irishness and periodically threatened to escape English

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<sup>15</sup> MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*, p. 40.

philistinism in France; Arthur Machen engaged with his Welshness in his weird fiction; the Liverpool-born Richard Gallienne rechristened himself Richard Le Gallienne as a signifier of his French descent; and Ellen Beardsley drew attention to her illustrator son's claims to Welsh blood in biographical sketches she wrote following his early death. Julia Prewitt Brown even suggests that Jack, in Wilde's farce *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), is the apogee of the fin-de-siècle cosmopolitan because of his rootless discovery in a handbag at Victoria Station, itself a place of movement and transition.<sup>17</sup> This pattern of drawing on heritage while implicitly rejecting it lies at the core of Brown's understanding of Wildean cosmopolitanism: 'It is part of the paradoxical existential condition of the cosmopolitan that he *has* roots [...] though he is perpetually cut off from them.'<sup>18</sup> The decadents, I would argue, intentionally cut themselves off from the concept of roots, and highlighting their national origins was a means of rejecting the problematic connotations of a specifically English identity.

The late-nineteenth-century cosmopolitan culture of writers and artists resisted crude alliances between nationality and artistic achievement. Whistler, writing to Henry Labouchère, expounded on the folly of establishing such a connection:

Learn then, O! Henry, that there is no such thing as English art. You might as well talk of English mathematics. Art is art, and mathematics is mathematics. What you call English art is not art at all, but produce, of which there is, and always has been, and always will be a plenty ...<sup>19</sup>

Whistler's statement is an unequivocal rejection of the parochial and the national. For him, good art is an innately international concept: once art is labelled as nationalist it becomes no more than a marketable product. He is dismissive of those who produce English art as 'commercial travellers' (44). Looking beyond Whistler's reductive tone and re-reading the

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<sup>17</sup> Julia Prewitt Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism*, p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> James Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: William Heinemann, 1890), pp. 43-4. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

‘produce’ label, however, makes this a perceptive description of the process whereby artists figuratively and literally travelled beyond their own borders to establish new consuming markets. In their works and lives, the decadents crossed and re-crossed national boundaries, engaging with foreign influences, making frequent trips over the English Channel to France, and rejecting the parochially British as they adopted a broadly European cosmopolitanism.<sup>20</sup> They embraced the cosmopolitan to reinforce their liminal status—something Potolsky sees as one of the defining features of decadent literature (though his study only engages with the works of British and French writers). For him, liminality is ‘a form of cultural production that begins with and recurrently thematises the act of literary and artistic border crossing.’<sup>21</sup> Cosmopolitan art and literature exist at the intersection of these boundaries, where artistic hybridity blurs the artificial distinctions which are used to justify the superiority of one culture over another.

At the fin de siècle, friendship becomes a political act that can transcend national and political boundaries to create a new and collective consciousness, and I use Leela Gandhi’s model of ‘affective cosmopolitanism’ to underpin my argument.<sup>22</sup> Her analysis is not singularly concerned with decadence but with the wider spectrum of countercultural subject positions associated with aspects of Indian identity. Nonetheless, her study of cosmopolitan and radical friendship is an appropriate framework for analysing decadent social networks. In *Affective Communities*, Gandhi explores the anti-colonialist potential of friendship and allegiance within broadly English fin-de-siècle networks. She focuses on ‘groups that have renounced their privileges of imperialism and elected affinity with the victims of their own

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<sup>20</sup> France was the major source of foreign inspiration for the British decadents of the fin de siècle, but they did engage more widely with a range of cultural inspirations. Arthur Symons, for instance, wrote about Spanish flamenco dancers and Leire Barrera-Medrano suggests that the ‘hitherto unexplored reception of flamenco was central to his conception of the interconnectedness of all the arts, as well as to his formulation of vernacular and cosmopolitan culture.’ Leire Barrera-Medrano, ‘“Inarticulate cries”: Arthur Symons and the Primitivist Modernity of Flamenco,’ *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 1 (2018), 1-18, p. 1.

<sup>21</sup> Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 17.

expansionist cultures.’<sup>23</sup> It is a radical politics of friendship which blurs cultural hegemony by cross-cultural alliances—Gandhi is particularly interested in the blurring of colonial lines in Victorian homosexuality, vegetarianism, theosophy and aestheticism. In her view, these non-conformist groups consciously abjured their given communities in favour of a utopian cosmopolitanism: an act of ‘affective cosmopolitanism.’ Gandhi challenges the long-asserted claim that anti-imperialism must always be ‘an action performed solely by the putative non-West upon the putative West,’ and instead stresses the social hybridity between non-West and West.<sup>24</sup> In her chapter on Wilde’s friendship with the poet Manmohan Ghose, Gandhi suggests that rather than simply orientalising Ghose through praise, ‘Wilde observe[s] in his beguiling foreignness the means for importing an estranging idiom into English prosody, the capacity to liberate the “aesthetic” from its nervous conformity to the world.’<sup>25</sup> She suggests that this identification between Irish and Indian poets offered an aesthetically sympathetic escape from ‘the prosaic sameness of imperial realism and narcissism.’<sup>26</sup> This thesis adapts and extends Gandhi’s discussion to a different late-nineteenth century context. In the light of her work, I will explore specifically decadent cosmopolitan friendship as a counterpoint to nationalist dogma and as an example of artistic and social hybridity. While the interactions I study are primarily amongst white, British writers, many of them had an anti-nationalist outlook and broadly shared in the rejection of the status quo which Gandhi highlights in her work on Wilde.

Cross-cultural interaction and inspiration are the key to understanding late-Victorian cosmopolitanism as a form of network thinking that mirrors the sympathetic interactions of Gandhi’s affective cosmopolitan model (see Chapter 3.2). This thesis addresses the relationship that emerged between British and French decadence, but it also builds on a

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<sup>23</sup> Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, p. 10

<sup>24</sup> Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, p. 145.

<sup>26</sup> Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, p. 161.



broader spectrum of cross-borders interaction with American Europhiles like Whistler, Henry Harland and Henry James representing the geographical scope of cosmopolitan friendships and working relationships at the fin de siècle. In terms of design, I am interested in the cosmopolitan influence of Japan on European decadence. There was little direct interchange between the two nations in this context, but that is not to say there were no social relationships. The painter Walter Sickert, for instance, learnt Japanese from school friends, members of the Hachizuka clan who had been sent to England to learn English.<sup>27</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, the Irish-Greek cosmopolite, became a naturalised Japanese citizen and changed his name to Koizumi Yakumo.<sup>28</sup>

I see cosmopolitanism as a motivating idea for decadent philosophy and as a direct influence on the decadents' ideas of sociability. My thesis treats decadent alignment with the conceptually foreign, whether in art or in life, as a conscious technique used by the decadents to set themselves apart from narrow bourgeois understandings of patriotism.<sup>29</sup> A perfect example of such cosmopolitanism can be found in Eric, Count Stenbock—a largely forgotten writer who has himself been marginalised in the narrative of fin-de-siècle decadence. Stenbock epitomises the border-crossing, cosmopolitan ideals that circulated throughout decadent networks: he was a Baltic Swede who travelled widely before settling in England; he had a fascination with Eastern esoterica; and he was openly homosexual in a time of institutionalised homophobia. His 1894 short story 'The True Story of a Vampire' uses the figure of the undead to represent the liminal cosmopolitan: the titular vampire, Count

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Walter Sickert: A Life* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Yoshiaki Fukuma, 'Representations of "the West," "Japan," and "the Periphery" in the Discourse of Lafcadio Hearn Studies,' *International Journal of Japanese Sociology*, 20 (2011), 89-106, p. 89.

<sup>29</sup> It should be acknowledged that not all versions of decadence were innately opposed to patriotism. For instance, Michael Shaw's Ph.D. thesis on the role of decadence in fin-de-siècle Scotland argues that decadent literature, art and design were used to foster a sense of Scottish national identity. In this instance at least, cultural nationalism grew from a decadent milieu. Michael Shaw, *The fin-de-siècle Scots Renaissance: the roles of decadence in the development of Scottish cultural nationalism, c.1880-1914* [doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015].

Vardalek, describes himself as ‘a cosmopolitan, a wanderer on the face of the earth.’<sup>30</sup> Even though he brings death and tragedy to the Polish family he befriends, Vardalek is a sympathetic monster. Stenbock does not condemn the vampire for his rootlessness or his sexuality; instead he praises his erudition and musical genius. Vardalek epitomises decadent boundary-crossing: his name is Hungarian, but he speaks German in a slightly Slavonic accent without a trace of Hungarian, and he is fluent in Polish and French. Vardalek transcends nationality. Unlike more famous Victorian vampires, such as Carmilla or Dracula, Vardalek escapes any form of punishment and his transgressive influence remains from beyond the margins of mainstream society.

### iii. Material culture

Decadents idealised objects as props and signifiers of their communal identity. Their interactions with the material culture of the fin de siècle therefore gave them a language to articulate their sociability. The archaeologist and anthropologist James Deetz defines material culture as ‘*that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behaviour*’. This definition includes all artefacts, from the simplest, such as a common pin, to the most complex, such as an interplanetary space vehicle.’<sup>31</sup> For Deetz, material culture is unavoidable; we cannot opt out of interactions with things. Working with this model, I argue that the members of a society create their own collective material culture through their basic interactions with the objects of everyday life. This can be a passive activity (people do, after all, take their material surroundings for granted), but my thesis explores the ways in which decadent social networks interacted consciously with their late-Victorian material cultures to stage performances of self and group.

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<sup>30</sup> Eric, Count Stenbock, ‘True Story of a Vampire,’ *Studies of Death: Romantic Tales* (London: David Nutt, 1894), p. 136.

<sup>31</sup> James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 35.

My understanding of decadent material culture does not draw upon psychoanalytic theories of objects, although critics like Patricia Pulham have usefully applied these approaches to fin-de-siècle writers.<sup>32</sup> Central to my argument, however, is Bill Brown's suggestion that objects take on a form of agency through their representation and use: 'a subject-object binary no longer makes sense and the object world comes to life [...] vivified by the human aspiration, frustration, and aggression it has gathered.'<sup>33</sup> My thesis explores the ways the decadents instilled emotional value in their material objects and the material practices which circulated around them. Because decadent thought was preoccupied by things, decadents paid great attention to personal inventories in their writings and art. It is no coincidence that Joris-Karl Huysmans' novel *A Rebours* (1884), one of the seminal texts of late-nineteenth-century decadence, is structured like a list, each chapter describing a different aspect of the protagonist Des Esseintes' private collection. Material objects provide a foundation around which he can forge an identity, and my thesis considers how the decadents used their collections to present a sophisticated and distinguished persona to the world. It was a process of idealisation that linked symbolic objects with the decadents in the collective imagination. By using and representing them in text and image, objects became a shorthand for decadent identity and for the decadent network itself.

Decadent interactions with material culture were distinct from mainstream Victorian material culture because they chose not to create a distinction between things and commodities. Thing culture idealises interactions with objects because things have an emotional weight; commodity culture is mediated by the market. Elaine Freedgood argues

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<sup>32</sup> Patricia Pulham, *Art and the Transitional Object in Vernon Lee's Supernatural Tales* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Bill Brown, *Other Things* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 6.

that this is an innately hostile dichotomy since ‘thing and commodity culture are perhaps always locked in struggle.’<sup>34</sup> She acknowledges that:

a thing culture remained vibrantly extant well into the Victorian period, perhaps only becoming truly vitiated toward the end of the century. Even then, it left powerful traces of itself in those marginal or debased cultural forms and practices in which a found object can be invested with a consoling or even redemptive degree of meaning.<sup>35</sup>

While she recognises that traces of thing culture survive into the commodity culture of the late nineteenth century, her reading is based on the understanding that there is a distinction between the two. My research shows, however, that decadents blurred the boundaries between these forms of material culture. They ascribed commodities with the emotional value of things in their role as late-Victorian consumers and producers; they turned things into commodities in their role as decadent writers and artists working in the capitalist marketplace. They did not marginalise the concept of the commodity, but fashioned an economic niche for their products and consciously made the marketplace part of their identities. The objects they produced (whether elaborately designed books or pieces of visual art) were part of the material performances on which they staked their identities in the public sphere.

#### **iv. Situating sociability**

The phenomenon of decadent sociability finds itself in the space between the individual and the collective, and I explore the decadents as an interconnected network of friends, collaborators and rivals. In brief, I aim to show that their writing and art articulates an intermingling of communality and individuality. This is most clearly expressed in Wilde’s *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* (1891)—a text which Potolsky does not touch on in his discussion of the decadent group dynamic. Wilde elaborates upon the importance of a

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<sup>34</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 143.

<sup>35</sup> Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, pp. 149-50.

reformed and fairer society before declaring: ‘Socialism will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism.’<sup>36</sup> He does not seem to feel that there is any contradiction between a socialism which prized the common good and an artistic philosophy which emphasised the transformative potential of individual freedom. In Wilde’s vision, the socialist state would take on the role of providing for the people who, freed from the burden of work, could devote themselves to an aesthetic appreciation of beauty and self-development. Socialism is a collectivist ideology, but, in Wilde’s reconceptualisation, collectivism is a means to pursue the goal of a higher individualism. Reading decadence in the light of Wilde’s comments, it becomes a communal project which draws its sense of community from a diverse collection of wilfully individualistic subject positions.

The decadents’ social project did not develop in a cultural vacuum and, I would argue, it is best understood as having emerged from the historical processes that established the public sphere. The public sphere relevant to fin-de-siècle social networking looks back to the salon and coffee-house culture of the Enlightenment, so I position my discussion of decadent socialising in relation to work by Jürgen Habermas, and Emily D. Bilski and Emily Braun. Asserting ownership over the spirit of debate associated with the more elite and private world of the salon and transplanting it to the public sphere of the coffee house, Habermas argues, gave bourgeois intellectual networks a form of cultural authority and thus crystallised their growing significance as a class.<sup>37</sup> According to his framework, bourgeois identity initially arose from the private sphere: the bourgeois subject was the ‘private man,’ a figurehead who

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<sup>36</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism, The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde IV: Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 233.

<sup>37</sup> Habermas asserts that such a crossing over between public and private realms is integral to the redefinition of the bourgeois which took place during the Enlightenment:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor.

Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989), p. 27.

‘combined the role of owner of commodities with that of head of the family.’<sup>38</sup> This private-sphere identity laid the groundwork for ‘the political self-understanding of the bourgeois public.’<sup>39</sup> The emerging bourgeois class frequented the coffee houses because they opened up public discursive spaces where caffeine, commerce and conversation went hand in hand. The uncontrolled and unmediated expression facilitated by the houses was seen as a threat to political stability. Indeed, the discursive function of the coffee house was so integral to their functioning that they were described as ‘Penny Universities’ because of the way they democratised knowledge.<sup>40</sup> This had a transformative effect on discourses of the public sphere, which can be applied usefully to the decadent networks of the fin de siècle. There are suggestive parallels between the subversive effect of the Enlightenment’s emergent bourgeoisie’s social project and the fin-de-siècle decadents’ explicitly anti-bourgeois reworking of sociability; both social forms set out to radically transform their respective status quos.

As recent critical studies suggest, Habermas’s narrative of rowdy debate and public sociability within the coffee house is problematic (especially in terms of inclusion).<sup>41</sup> Despite declaring that the public sphere ‘stood or fell with the principle of universal access,’ he makes it clear that women were excluded from coffee house sociability.<sup>42</sup> For Habermas, this fundamental difference from the world of salons is an advantage: he claims that barring women from coffee houses allowed for more serious discussion, believing that salon

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<sup>38</sup> Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 28.

<sup>39</sup> Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 29.

<sup>40</sup> Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities: A History of the Coffee Houses* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956), p. xv.

<sup>41</sup> Accounts of salon sociability by critics like Bilski and Braun, and Amy Prendergast call into question the universality of this public sphere by exploring the engagement of minority and provincial voices in the salon. Emily D. Bilski and Emily Braun, with Leon Botstein, Shira Brisman, Barbara Hahn and Lucia Re, *Jewish Women and their Salons: The Power of Conversation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005). Amy Prendergast, *Literary Salons Across Britain and Ireland in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

<sup>42</sup> Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 85.

conversation was ‘inconsequential.’<sup>43</sup> He certainly recognises that the emergent eighteenth-century bourgeoisie appropriated the ‘art of critical rational debate’ from the ‘elegant’ sphere of the salon.<sup>44</sup> He undermines, however, the salon’s status as ‘the catalyst for political cultural tendencies, disseminating new ideas while also pursuing the art of spirited conversation.’<sup>45</sup>

Following the cosmopolitan inspiration of France, the apparently elite salon had the potential to be more inclusive of minority voices than the bourgeois coffee house. The findings of Bilski and Braun’s study of salons have shown that not only did women tend to hold positions of authority, both as salonières and guests, but that the salons gave marginalised European Jews an entrée into polite society—holding a salon could exert the same social force as undergoing a Christian baptism without the associated rejection of their Jewish heritage.<sup>46</sup> Bilski and Braun usefully discuss salons as a forum allowing Jewish women to ‘test the freedoms and limitations of emancipation—as both women and Jews.’<sup>47</sup> The salon may have been associated with the social elite, but as a dynamic social space it created an inclusive context—where a Jewish writer and salonière such as Ada Levenson, who was at the heart of decadent sociability, could function as host, friend and fellow creator of decadent culture. Salons were often organised by women and allowed cross-gender debate and socialising. Moreover, the salon enacted an international connectivity since networks of salon members interacted through travel and letter-writing to create a shared culture.<sup>48</sup> By welcoming marginalised people into a socially inclusive (if nonetheless elite) gathering, salons created intellectual counterpublics which commented on and critiqued their public. It was, I would argue, an innately cosmopolitan form of intellectual sociability that influenced

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<sup>43</sup> Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Habermas, *Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 29.

<sup>45</sup> Ute Brandes, ‘Salons,’ *The Blackwell Companion to the Enlightenment*, eds. John W. Yalton, Roy Porter, Pat Rogers and Barbara Maria Stafford (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1991, repr. 1992), p. 471.

<sup>46</sup> Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, p. 16.

<sup>47</sup> Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Prendergast, *Literary Salons Across Britain and Ireland*, p. 1.

decadent interactions. My analysis does not explicitly deal with the decadent salon, but this over-arching narrative of sociability leads to a context in which the fin-de-siècle decadents could forge their own version of sociability. I suggest that salon values run beneath the surface of decadent thought: the decadents used the discursive rules of the salons to enable a more vibrant articulation of their social and intellectual ideals than the bourgeois public sphere allowed.

Of course, by the fin de siècle, the bourgeois were the dominant force in the public sphere. Their influence gave rise to the kind of public figure which Stefan Collini designates as a ‘public moralist.’<sup>49</sup> These public intellectuals, men like Thomas Carlyle (Collini states that he is explicitly not considering the role of women as public moralists), ‘invoked a particularly strenuous ethic, and gave such moral considerations priority over other concerns, whether personal, political, or aesthetic.’<sup>50</sup> It was this emphasis on moral rigour that underlined the bourgeois earnestness and work ethic against which decadent thinkers, writers and artists reacted. These ideals, Collini suggests, had a grounding in the social network of members’ clubs which served as a hub for mid-Victorian intellectual life.<sup>51</sup> The bourgeois ideals which had emerged from the eighteenth-century coffee houses, now shorn of their counter-cultural radicalism, thus had a basis in the nineteenth-century social world, and this is what decadent sociability acts against.

Social projects, like those of the fin-de-siècle decadents, thus aimed to reinterpret what it meant to occupy the public space, and I am interested in how the public space can be disrupted through radical sociability. The model of sociability which the decadents created meets Warner’s definition of a counterpublic which ‘is not based on a precise demography

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<sup>49</sup> Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1859-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Collini, *Public Moralists*, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Collini, *Public Moralists*, pp. 16-18.



but mediated by print, theatre, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like.’<sup>52</sup> I argue that decadent dissenting networks used these strategies of social propagation to oppose dominant forces in society (whether governmental or a perceived general public), and to shape a counterpublic sphere for themselves. As a counterpublic, the decadent network is innately oppositional, and this lies at the core of the sociability it represents. For the decadents, I would suggest, contrarianism was an end in and of itself (see Introduction v.) and they implicitly fashion their social groupings to facilitate this.

#### **v. Conceptualising networks**

Frameworks of social theory offer an insight to fin-de-siècle socialising by exposing the decadents’ relationship to the social sphere. The conceptual model which facilitates my understanding of sociability emerges from a synthesis of modern and nineteenth-century critical analyses of the social realm. While I am primarily concerned with the materiality of social interaction, an understanding of the theoretical critical positions that underpin networks and networking casts light on the composition of decadent networks, and on the ways in which decadent sociability created a discourse to mediate the decadents’ interaction with society.

The interplay of individuality and communality, as I have already suggested (see Introduction, i.), is key to my understanding of decadent conceptions of the group, and drawing on contemporary theorising of social interaction and sociability supports my reading of the decadents’ self-conscious networks. Georg Simmel, a fin-de-siècle sociologist, emphasises the relationships between members of the group in his definition of society, and this is a useful starting point: ‘society itself, in general, refers to the interaction among individuals.’<sup>53</sup> From this, he establishes the mechanisms by which individuals become

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<sup>52</sup> Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002, repr. 2005), pp. 56-7.

<sup>53</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (London: The Free Press, 1950), p. 40.

networks through the concept of sociation, which is built around ideas of individuals existing as separate entities but sharing features that make them socially compatible as a group:

Sociation thus is the form (realized in innumerable, different ways) in which individuals grow into units that satisfy their interests. These interests, whether they are sensuous, or ideal, momentary or lasting, conscious or unconscious, casual or teleological, form the basis of human societies.<sup>54</sup>

Since sociation sets out to form societies, it inevitably transforms individuals into networks through a ‘concrete’ form of interaction which is rooted in the practices of the real world.<sup>55</sup> In my thesis, I suggest that a recognition of shared interests allowed decadent individuals to form a group with an identifiable set of material practices and a common aim of challenging the cultural forms of the dominant Victorian public through their *épater le bourgeois* stance. Given their marginal position in relation to society, fin-de-siècle decadent versions of sociation emphasised the importance of cliquishness, with its tight community and its appeal to insiders. Paul Langford’s associational model of British sociability in the eighteenth century provides a means of conceptualising late-Victorian decadents’ drive for social exclusivity:

English sociability was about association, that richest of English terms. It is a form of clubbing together, always with the implication that there will be people not in the club, or alternatively that there will be other clubs.<sup>56</sup>

The decadent networks I explore are self-consciously formed of insiders (like-minded individuals) in opposition to outsiders (the uninitiated). In separating themselves from the mainstream bourgeois public, I argue, the decadents bestow a mark of distinction upon their networks. Decadent cliquishness is thus a necessary step in the process of their sociation because it gives them a heterodox identity around which to establish themselves.

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<sup>54</sup> Simmel, *Sociology*, p. 41.

<sup>55</sup> Simmel, *Sociology*, p. 45.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Langford, ‘Manners and the Eighteenth-Century State: The Case of the Unsociable Englishman,’ *Rethinking Leviathan: The Eighteenth-Century State in Britain and Germany*, eds. John Brewer and Eckhart Hellmuth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 314.

If sociation forms the networks of the social realm, then the shared rituals of sociability maintain them. Simmel's incarnation of sociability has no aim beyond the act of sociability itself—it is, as it were, the art-for-art's-sake of the social realm. This analysis of sociability is of particular importance to my thesis because it emphasises the processes of social interaction. Simmel treats sociability as a less serious kind of interaction—it is the '*Play-Form of Sociation*.'<sup>57</sup> He claims sociability is an abstract notion because it is 'spared the frictions with reality by its merely formal relation to it.'<sup>58</sup> This makes sociability 'the only world in which a democracy of the equally privileged is possible without frictions;' it is a medium of 'wholly pure interaction' between individuals which ignores or supplants the social hierarchies of wider society.<sup>59</sup> Given the playful nature of Simmel's sociability, I see it as a constructive expression of group identity for decadent networks, which idealised a sense of the ludic. At odds with the dominant public, the decadents are using the playfulness of sociability as a means of maintaining their interpersonal connections and of highlighting their difference from an earnest mainstream. By engaging in sociability, decadent social networks, I argue, find a means of negotiating the position of the self in relation to fin-de-siècle society. I would, therefore, update Simmel's claims for the purposelessness of sociability and contend that it has a function within networks. To be sociable, we must obey the codes of politeness that enable an individual to function in line with group expectations—Bruno Latour designates the word sociable to refer to the skillset 'enabling individuals to live politely in society.'<sup>60</sup> While these social expectations can be a way of excluding non-normative voices, each network develops its own understandings of politeness, and its own vision of the discourses of social politeness needed to find one's place within a network. Thus, I argue, decadent networks forge a decadent version of politeness in order navigate their own

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<sup>57</sup> Simmel, *Sociology*, p. 43.

<sup>58</sup> Simmel, *Sociology*, p. 44.

<sup>59</sup> Simmel, *Sociology*, p. 48.

<sup>60</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 6.

sociability—they create social codes by establishing behavioural expectations fitting for their social context that are rooted in material culture.

The potential for alliance between individuals and a group is perhaps best epitomised by Max Stirner's term in *The Ego and Its Own* (1844), a 'Union of Egoists [*Verein von Egoisten*].'<sup>61</sup> In the light of my work, this phrase usefully describes the decadents, who are a group of flamboyant individuals united by a shared desire to stand out. They are a union of individuals which is nonetheless a union. Stirner is oppositional to the concept of society, but his desire for a 'union of egoists' undercuts his emphasis on an isolated figure shattering society's polite façade. As an anarchist thinker, he proposes the ideal of the egoist as an anathema to human society since the egoist represents an antidote which will replace 'men' with 'an I against a You' (160). He is thus engaged in his own process of network-creation even though he despises the constraints of all human societies. He claims only to 'utilize' society and to 'transform it rather into [his] property and [his] creature' (161), but this transformation represents a social project in itself. Without meaning to, Stirner's egoists form a network of their own. And it is this concept of a network built of distinct individuals coexisting that is central to my study.

More recent critics working on forms of community and networking emphasise its collective nature. Potolsky, in applying Warner's counterpublic to the decadents of the fin de siècle, argues for a collective, cosmopolitan and politically-engaged understanding of the late nineteenth-century decadent movement—and this is a stance on which I build. He has usefully challenged the dominant critical tradition of decadent individuation by asserting the collective nature of decadence, but his active repudiation of individualism is overstated.<sup>62</sup>

Potolsky ignores the almost solipsistic focus in much decadent literature in favour of his more

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<sup>61</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, trans. Steven Byington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 161. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>62</sup> Potolsky references the twentieth-century Marxist critics who used the decadents as a byword for the individualism they rejected on principle. He sees an irony here, claiming that the decadents 'attacked' the concepts of individualism and social fragmentation. Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, p. 173.

communal vision. His reading draws on the theories of the psychoanalytic philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy for whom the individual is a problematic entity, innately opposed to the collective project of sociability. Rather than a force for personal and social emancipation, Nancy reads the individual as ‘merely the residue of the experience of the dissolution of community.’<sup>63</sup> It is a negative conceptualisation of individuality within the social sphere. Nancy even goes as far as to declare that ‘the individual can be the origin and the certainty of nothing but its own death.’<sup>64</sup> Because of their positions on the individual, neither Potolsky nor Nancy can account for the full complexity of fin-de-siècle decadent social dynamics. My study, however, explores the strong focus in decadent networks on the individual and his/her place within society, drawing on Gagnier’s understanding of individuation. Her critical framework problematises Potolsky’s emphasis on decadent community because she asserts the significance of the individual as a creator of decadent culture. The tension between these two readings allows me to develop a more subtle understanding of decadent sociability: in this thesis, I consider how individuals exist *within* the decadent community.

If decadent sociability represents a process of identification and alliance in opposition to the hegemony of the broader fin-de-siècle social context, decadent networks need to be understood (at least in part) in terms of what they stood against. My thesis draws on Warner’s theoretical model: society is made up of the social realm and publics. The social realm represents ‘a cultural form, interwoven with the political form of the administrative state and with the normalizing methodologies of modern social knowledge.’<sup>65</sup> The discourses of the mainstream social order take the form of a public—this public, in Warner’s words, ‘is a kind of social totality’ which also exerts a normative force on society (although this is not

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<sup>63</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor, Lisa Garbus, Michael Holland and Simona Sawhney (Minneapolis: The University of Minneapolis Press, 1991), p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, p. 3.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Warner, ‘Introduction,’ *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), p. xxvii.

necessarily bound up with the apparatus of government).<sup>66</sup> His reading suggests that the phenomenon of society acts as a normative agent on those who participate in public discourses. The areas of society in which social interactions take place thus exert a controlling influence over sociability. In this thesis, when I refer to the mainstream and the bourgeois, I am drawing on this understanding of a controlling social orthodoxy. This is the normative force against which decadent sociability fashioned itself. Warner approaches the question of the social from a queer theory perspective, arguing that ‘being in public is a privilege that requires filtering or repressing something that is seen as private.’<sup>67</sup> Social entry into the public world involves a negotiation of the self in line with external demands and pressures. Warner’s understanding of societal repression is in line with Stirner’s early nineteenth-century view of the state as the principle engine of society that uses vapid pieties and moralities to divide its subjects into the man and the un-man, ‘a man who does not conform to the *concept* man’ (159). Both Warner and Stirner see these restrictions on expression as a form of control that limits individualism in an attempt to enforce identities deemed to be permissible by the state. The philosopher and social theorist Giorgio Agamben’s work reinforces such restrictive models, arguing that states exist to ensure social conformity by opposing any networks that resist easy definition—an apt description of the decadents who built their group identity on paradox and implication. The state therefore acts to force its citizens to find ‘inclusion in some identity, whatever identity (but the possibility of the *whatever* itself being taken up without an identity is a threat the State cannot come to terms with).’<sup>68</sup> These critical positions underpin my understanding of the decadents’ rejection of authorised identities: decadent socialising created a space where the socialisers were under less pressure to filter or repress behaviours of which society disapproved.

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<sup>66</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 65.

<sup>67</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 23.

<sup>68</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993, repr. 2001), p. 86.

What is of particular importance for my work is that both Warner and Agamben allow for acts of resistance. In the social realm, Agamben sees the greatest threat to authoritarian influences coming from ‘humans [who] co-belong without any representable condition of belonging:’ they form a social network, but resist conforming to a single ‘representable’ identity.<sup>69</sup> The multivalent and ill-defined nature of decadent culture thus makes it a perfect expression of the type of network Agamben addresses. Decadence actively resists definition and thus, I would suggest, resists authoritarianism. For Warner, the proliferation of counterpublics is a means of challenging the repression brought about by normative social rules. In opposition to a dominant public, a counterpublic ‘enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority.’<sup>70</sup> In applying this concept of oppositional groups in the form of counterpublics to my own research, I can usefully describe decadent networks as existing in opposition to or separate from mainstream society.

Decadence, as a social and cultural identity, is an inherently antagonistic position. I see it defined by its opposition to the status quo and its refusal to adopt any fixed ideological position beyond a general sense of rebellious contrarianism. Reminiscent of the model of identity that Agamben discusses, my thesis frames the decadents in terms of a nebulous oppositionism—while they drew shared signifiers of group identity from the material world, they used the possibilities of constant rebellion to keep their performances of self fluid. Potolsky demonstrates that these acts of opposition take precedence over the specifics of ideology using the example of Charles Baudelaire, who ‘moved from the radical left to the radical right.’<sup>71</sup> This ideological flexibility, he suggests, allowed the multivalent network of Baudelaire’s admirers and disciples to adopt and refashion him for their own causes. He describes how Algernon Swinburne ‘effectively depoliticizes Baudelaire, not in order to deny

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<sup>69</sup> Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 86.

<sup>70</sup> Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, p. 23.

his political import, but to redefine it in his own terms.<sup>72</sup> Swinburne, as a democratic republican, had little sympathy with Baudelaire's post-1852 beliefs, but Potolsky argues that Swinburne ignored philosophical discrepancies to treat the French poet as a 'quasi-republican ideal of poetic and personal liberty.'<sup>73</sup> Swinburne recreates Baudelaire as a sympathetic rebel: his acts of opposition were more important than his specific political beliefs. Baudelaire had similarly appropriated Poe to engender the myth of an outsider-poet martyred by a dull bourgeoisie, showing the valency of decadent appropriation as a means of opposition. I use Potolsky's emphasis on such purposeful rewritings to show that decadent literature does not just represent a retreat into isolation, or an apathetic disengagement from the contemporary world. My focus is on the way in which decadent networks use such posturing as a self-conscious act of rebellion against the status quo.

The dynamic of these rebellions against the dominant public are illuminated by Michel de Certeau's ideas about passive resistance to a dominant society. He suggests that groups struggling against an imposed or dominant culture (re-)appropriate that culture from the fringes:

They metaphorized the dominant order: they made it function in another register. They remained other within the system which they assimilated and which assimilated them externally. They diverted it without leaving it. Procedures of consumption maintained their difference in the very space that the occupier was organizing.<sup>74</sup>

Along the lines of Warner's counterpublics, de Certeau's model allows strata of oppositional networks to exist within the structures of society at large. In my thesis, I use this principle to show that an ethos of resistance to the contested public sphere allowed the decadents, a marginal group, to appropriate the means of expression from a dominant culture in order to form their own counterpublics.

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<sup>72</sup> Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, p. 60.

<sup>73</sup> Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, p. 60.

<sup>74</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 32.



## vi. The self-conscious decadent network

Late-Victorian decadence is a profoundly self-conscious movement with an ethos of self-conscious connectivity; it places fashionings of performative identity at the heart of the decadent social form. Gagnier argues that decadence is characterised by an ‘emphasis on introspection [and ...] nerves [...]—the nerves that preoccupied the Decadents pointed to the psyche inside coming out, imposing itself on the world.’<sup>75</sup> This nervous introspection, I would argue, emerges in the ways they thought about their networking, and in the ways their work represents material evidence of their social concerns. As Simmel’s text demonstrates, the decadents’ contemporaries engaged intellectually with the concept of sociability and theorised networks.

In critical terms, such self-awareness of networks and networking practice is seen as a purely modern activity. In their study of the ideologies of Neo-Liberalism, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello acknowledge that networks have been a constant feature of human social interaction. They make the problematic claim, however, that

it is as if we had to wait until the last third of the twentieth century for the activity of mediating, the art of making and using the most diverse and remote kinds of connection, to be autonomized – separated from the other forms of activity it had hitherto been bound up with – and identified and valued for itself.<sup>76</sup>

This understanding of networking does not recognise the existence of sociability for the sake of sociability outside the discourses of postmodernity. My critical intervention here implicitly challenges this presumed periodisation of network studies: the performance of decadent sociability is multifaceted and resists easy critical impositions of period. Theorists like Boltanski, Chiapello and Sianne Ngai claim that their critical frameworks are only of value in a mid-twentieth to early-twenty-first century context, but I argue these critics of postmodernity offer a useful lens for looking at the late nineteenth century and at the

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<sup>75</sup> Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization*, p. 92.

<sup>76</sup> Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2004, repr. 2005, 2007), p. 108.

performativity of decadent sociability. As this thesis shows, there is ample evidence at the fin de siècle of what Boltanski and Chiapello describe in the late-twentieth century as ‘a network world.’<sup>77</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello’s account of the ‘*multiplying connections and proliferating links*’ that maintain a network are characteristic of the fin-de-siècle decadent social project.<sup>78</sup> Le Gallienne’s catalogue of anecdotes in *The Romantic ’90s* provides just such evidence of the connections that constitute sociability in decadent networks. His memoir is an extensive act of network mediation addressing late nineteenth-century social interactions in the early twentieth century. The networking experiences he recounts reflect what Ngai describes as ‘connexionism.’<sup>79</sup> It is a network aesthetic ‘that revolves around connection and information.’<sup>80</sup> Drawing on Boltanski and Chiapello, Ngai also reads networking as a philosophy for the late twentieth century, as a uniquely modern self-awareness, but her philosophy is equally applicable to the fin de siècle.<sup>81</sup> My work shows that decadent written and drawn engagements with sociability, friendship and the risks such interactions pose articulate a fin-de-siècle connexionism that is mediated through the physicality of the books and artworks the decadents produced. These artefacts become material embodiments of a connexionist philosophy.

Decadent self-awareness led to a network aesthetic preoccupied with societies and social groups in states of decline. In exploring the mechanisms of their interactions, the

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<sup>77</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*, p. 111.

<sup>78</sup> Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*, p. 111.

<sup>79</sup> Sianne Ngai, ‘Network Aesthetics: Julianna Spahr’s *The Transformation* and Bruno Latour’s *Reassembling the Social*,’ *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimension*, ed. Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 368.

<sup>80</sup> Ngai, ‘Network Aesthetics,’ p. 368.

<sup>81</sup> I am primarily interested in the late-Victorian applications of Ngai’s work on postmodern networks, but her book on zaniness, interestingness and cuteness has a potential decadent application. The zany, as a performance of ‘affective labor,’ is particularly relevant to unpicking the social and aesthetic mechanisms of fin-de-siècle decadence. Considering the decadent caricature (see Chapter 4.3) as a zany (hence affective) artefact draws out the complex network of emotional and interpersonal engagement that caricature represents. Ngai asserts a modern counter-aesthetics which is rooted in our engagement with capitalism. The marginality of the zany, the cute and the interesting allows them to represent the ways in which commodification has altered the aesthetic experience. I suggest that the same dynamic is at play in late-Victorian decadent engagements with marginality and the commodity marketplace in which decadents touted their cultural products. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012, repr. 2015), p. 7.

decadents created a meta-narrative of social decay. The books they produced were material evidence of their concerns, and their writing became a means for exploring the health of their social circles. Wilde's consideration of the potential failure of decadent discourses of community in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) participates in this fin-de-siècle analysis of the mechanisms of decadent sociability. Dorian's doomed attempts at engaging with the social realm represent a threat to the decadent social project because he fails to apply its intellectual subtleties to his lifestyle. Wilde's literary unpicking of the mechanisms of social failure is perhaps decadent connexionism at its most self-conscious. Throughout the novel, Dorian either misapplies Lord Henry's aphorisms or interprets them too literally: everything he does is a pale imitation of Lord Henry, who performs in words not actions. Wilde consistently presents Dorian as someone who is unable to take part usefully in the decadent performance of sociability. He wants to become the ideological lynchpin of a decadent counterpublic network, but his sympathy for the decadent platform is not enough—he lacks the intellectual nuance to effect change or to engage with his social network. When Lord Henry proclaims that 'It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances,' Dorian fails to understand that, in decadent terms, one must be outwardly shallow to have depth.<sup>82</sup> Catherine Spooner's argument that Dorian's eventual death is not judgement for his life of vice is persuasive: he 'is punished not for being bad, but for taking himself too seriously.'<sup>83</sup>

Wilde stresses that Dorian 'never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system' (280), but, paradoxically, this accurately describes his interaction with Lord Henry's aphoristic sayings. Dorian has a fundamentally unimaginative approach to enacting fin-de-siècle social ideologies. He repeatedly and erroneously tries to find depth in his own existence, and fails to recognise that

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<sup>82</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde III: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 186. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>83</sup> Catherine Spooner, *Fashioning Gothic Bodies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 105.

the dandy's pose of immorality is above all else a pose—a pose that transcends the need for physical actions. Basil's comment on Lord Henry exemplifies the philosophy lying behind the decadent social performance: 'You never say a moral thing, and you never do a wrong thing. Your cynicism is simply a pose' (172). Wilde suggests that Dorian's actual immorality is not conducive to the decadent social atmosphere. To act as one preaches would run the risk of producing the social earnestness prized by the Victorian bourgeoisie.

Decadent explorations of sociability under threat would seem to lend credence to Potolsky's anti-individualistic conception of the decadent counterpublic: as an individual, Dorian is unable to co-exist productively in a decadent network. Wilde's novel, however, suggests that the threat to decadent community comes less from individuals in general than from inappropriate individuals. The fact that some clubs reject Dorian could be a mainstream reaction to his overt decadence, but it also highlights the negative effect he has on those who socialise with him. Basil remarks that Dorian's 'friendship is so fatal to young men' (293), and interactions with him lead to murder and to blackmail. Wilde directly figures the damage that Dorian inflicts on those around him in terms of social interaction:

One has a right to judge of a man by the effect he has over his friends. Yours seem to lose all sense of honour, of goodness, of purity. You have filled them with a madness for pleasure. They have gone down into the depths. You led them there. (294)

Dorian's influence could represent the generous activity of sharing one's pleasures with friends; his indulgences could represent the sensuality and sensuousness mimetically shared through a network of likeminded decadents. Dorian, however, cannot share. Rather he is a social predator, more akin to a psychic vampire than a member of a supportive social group. Decadent networks may be communities of individuals, but they are communal nonetheless; Dorian, on the other hand, creates no community and simply drives those around him to despair and death. If Basil, with his profound engagement with homosocial friendship (especially in the 1890 Lippincott edition of the text), represents artistic sociability, then

Dorian murders this possibility in killing the artist. He represents the disintegration of friendship into vindictive backbiting without the shared ethos of art and sociability that motivated fin-de-siècle discourses of community. Wilde is concerned with eroding interpersonal bonds in *Dorian Gray* and his novel provides a means for examining threats to the decadent social project arising from within the group. This self-conscious articulation of the bonds of sociability is a form of connexionism that actively engages with the discourses of interaction.

## **vii. Methodology and chapter outlines**

In this thesis, I make close readings of the many texts and images which articulate the decadent understanding of what it means to be sociable. I supplement this by unpicking the mechanisms of decadent sociability through material analysis and through readings of personal correspondence. In addition to using reprints and critical editions, I have drawn on late-nineteenth-century editions of texts where possible. Methodologically, this has enabled me to examine the material design decisions of books in addition to analysing the words on the page. Archival research gave me access to primary materials, many of which are unpublished: I have referenced material from the Richard Le Gallienne Collection, held by the Liverpool Records Office; the Aubrey Beardsley Collection and the J. Harlin O'Connell Collection of the 1890s, held at the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University; the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, held at the University of Delaware; and the Steven Halliwell Collection. Given my emphasis on material culture, an interdisciplinary methodology was vital since decadent networks were composed of painters, illustrators-cum-caricaturists and publishers as well as writers. To appreciate the nuances of the decadents' cultural products, I have drawn on art history and cultural history in addition to the tools of literary studies. My intervention in the field aims to offer fresh insights into the functioning of networks by nuancing the established critical narratives of decadent isolation

(Easton) and of decadent collectivism (Potolsky). Moreover, my decision to ground the social in the material serves as a corrective to readings which marginalise real-world interactions.

In my research, I engage with a cast of flamboyant social and artistic personalities, whose friendships, rivalries and business relationships form the core of this study. Given the importance of their relationships (with each other and things), a decadent *dramatis personae* is a good starting point. Wilde and Beardsley, as perhaps the archetypal decadent personalities (according to both *fin-de-siècle* and modern commentators), are inescapable. Whether as decadent individualists or as sources of inspiration and imitation for decadent networks, their celebrity status provided clear models for identity and performance within a public sphere. Whistler too provides a behavioural archetype which decadents assimilated into their identities. He may have been primarily associated with the aesthetic movement, but this was closely aligned with decadence. It is in this context which I touch upon Huysmans. Although not a *confrère* of the London decadents, he affords another decadent model (and a cosmopolitan air) through his character Des Esseintes. I am, however, also concerned with the secondary (and often more obscure) strata of decadent society, where individuals consciously commented on the phenomenon of networking whether in essays (Le Gallienne), biographies and autobiographies (Netta Syrett and William Rothenstein), or parodic caricature (Beerbohm and Levenson). Alongside this, I consider the role of publishers and their publishing houses (John Lane and the Bodley Head, Leonard Smithers, and H. S. Nichols) as agents of decadent professional sociability. While perhaps less famous than Wilde and Beardsley, these decadent personalities produce richly socialised decadent art.

My research shows how these *fin-de-siècle* individuals act out a decadent philosophy of sociability by recreating their own networks in their work. They engaged in acts of decadent life writing (or in Beerbohm's case, life caricature) as a memorial to their networks, representing subject positions that did not fit the demands of a Victorian patriarchal

mainstream: Syrett and Levenson as New Women; Levenson and Rothenstein as Jews; Wilde as an Irish homosexual (both identities that have been extensively analysed); and Beerbohm as an affectedly delicate dandy. While not marginalised in the same way, Le Gallienne, hailing from Liverpool, and Beardsley, who grew up in Brighton, represented a provincial decadent voice. These non-conformist men and women exemplify the alliance between decadence and marginalised identity. Through an analysis of their social and artistic expression in the form of material products, my thesis explores their diverse range of subject positions.

I break new decadent ground by featuring an analysis of the social role played by Beardsley's sister Mabel, who has often been assigned a marginal role (and indeed Easton's treatment of her in *Aubrey and the Dying Lady* is outright misogynist).<sup>84</sup> As a result of original archival work and studying fictionalised versions of Mabel created by her friends Levenson and W. B. Yeats, my chapter on dandyism treats Mabel as a dandy, an equal to the men in her circle. I read her as a vibrant influence within the decadent social sphere and as an active participant in decadent sociability. My research trajectory has also led me to include cameo appearances by the Indian nationalist leader Mohandas K. Gandhi and the occultist Aleister Crowley. While they may be famous for their twentieth-century work, I show that both men were influenced by late-Victorian countercultures in their formative years—their engagements with fin-de-siècle networking shaped their social, intellectual and artistic interactions.

In Chapter 1, 'Communities of Style,' I focus on the material selves fashioned by decadent dandies. This is probably the area of decadent social life which has received most critical attention since the figure of the dandy (for example Wilde and Beardsley) is intimately associated with decadence in the period. I begin with the dandy's use of dress

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<sup>84</sup> To avoid confusion between the Beardsley siblings, and since Aubrey is the Beardsley who features most prominently in this thesis, I refer to Mabel by her first name.

before branching into questions of self-conscious artifice and ephemerality. To make a case for expanding the decadent social canon, I read patterns of fin-de-siècle female decadent performance as examples of dandyism, which critics often treat as a predominantly male activity. My argument is that the dandy's presentation of self interacts with similar performances of friends to create a collaborative social code for decadent socialising.

In Chapter 2, 'Public Spectacles of Consumption,' I look at the decadents' use of the public sphere as a space in which social networks could form and interact. I use their love of city spaces and of playing the part of the flâneur to lay the groundwork for public decadent sociability, and focus specifically on decadent restaurant culture. I argue that the restaurant space provided a hub for decadent networking and socialising. Restaurants represent areas on the boundary of public and private and this, I suggest, gave decadent patrons a licence to transgress as they used the back rooms to give private performances in ostensibly public establishments. I demonstrate the importance of their interactions with the physical location of the dining space, but also show how food and drink (absinthe in particular) are material signifiers of shared pleasure and communal dining.

Inverting this relationship between public and private in Chapter 3, 'Interior Design and the Construction of Interiority,' I consider the relationship between décor and self-performance. Fin-de-siècle decadents made public restaurants into their own private stages, but I show how they also used overtly performative engagements with interior design to make private spaces into public displays. Literary texts that influenced the decadents' love of design (such as works by Poe and Huysmans) emphasise the isolation created by an obsessive performance of self through décor, but in fin-de-siècle Britain these discourses were refashioned as a collective vision of taste. Moreover, the increasing cultural capital attached to Japanese art and Japonisme allowed decadent networks to make their redefined taste an



expression of cosmopolitanism. I argue that the material make-up of decadent interiors created a theatrical space within which decadents could stage their group identity.

I develop my analysis of material objects in Chapter 4, 'Reading Decadent Gifts and (Inter-) Textual Exchanges,' by emphasising the importance of exchange in decadent culture. I argue that gifting transformed things into signifiers of decadent community. This chapter is particularly concerned with the object status of books in decadent circles and the use of book dedications when gifting copies. I suggest that these personal messages gave a vicarious sense of textual ownership to the receiver of the gift. As a further aspect of the decadent gift economy, I look at the social phenomenon of caricaturing friends and colleagues (both in drawings and in writing) and the social discourses which arose from these practices. I show that gifts provided a means of reaffirming social networks and forming material connections between members.

Finally, I unpick the intersections of the social and professional decadent spheres in Chapter 5, 'Publishing Networks.' Decadent writers were as fully invested in the marketability of their books as their publishers and, vice versa, publishers can be seen to take engaged roles in the aesthetic dimensions of the literature which they published. These socio-professional relationships straddled the spheres of friendship and the marketplace, and reframed textuality to produce hybrid books in which both artistic concerns and the material cost-driven realities of book production were valued. I consider the decadents' awareness of the commodity status of books and how this influenced decadent self-presentation and branding. Moreover, in addressing publishers' desire to capitalise on popular interest in decadence, I explore how they played on the scandalous connotations of decadence—some even forging decadent texts and images and ascribing them to figures like Wilde and Beardsley. In this, they can be seen to enact the transgressive ideologies of the social networks with which they engaged.

These five chapters each focus on an aspect of material culture that is a productive signifier of sociability and group identity. Together, they suggest that the full complexity of decadent community and of the decadents' performances of interpersonal allegiance cannot be understood without an appreciation of the social power they gave to their objects.

# Chapter 1

## Communities of Style

The figure of the dandy is perhaps the aspect of decadent identity which has been paid most critical attention, but the phenomenon has traditionally been considered a very individual performance of self. By emphasising the importance of social interaction, I will make the case for a more collective side to dandiacal decadent self-fashioning. This group performance of self is rooted in the material world, and I will consider clothes, flowers, cigarettes and perfumes as material signifiers of the dandy's performance. Their engagements with material culture were copied and disseminated throughout their social networks, allowing dandies to share a vision of decadent identity through social rituals that created a model for decadent social interaction. My focus on dandiacal community will also take account of the women who took part in similar performances of selfhood. They have largely been ignored by understandings of dandyism that treat it as a solely male activity; this chapter will make the case for recovering their position in decadent social discourses—as influencers of and participants in a shared dandiacal culture.<sup>1</sup> Since the behavioural archetype of the dandy fitted into established patterns of decadent resistance and opposition to the status quo, fin-de-siècle decadents took on the role of the dandy as a direct challenge to traditional Victorian performances of gender.<sup>2</sup>

In the early nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle had set out to define the dandy in his satirical novel *Sartor Resartus* (1836): the dandy was primarily a 'Clothes-wearing Man, a

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<sup>1</sup> Talia Schaffer has analysed the place of woman in aestheticism, but she suggests that women were excluded from decadence. *Women and British Aestheticism*, eds. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999). Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian London* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The late-Victorian male dandy has been well-studied. Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummel to Beerbohm* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960). James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Culture and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

Man whose trade, office and existence consists in the wearing of clothes.’<sup>3</sup> Such a self-consciously shallow figure was a threat to the moral earnestness which Carlyle prized. James Eli Adams argues that Carlyle figures the dandy as ‘the grotesque icon of an outworn aristocratic order, a figure of self-absorbed, parasitic existence, against which Carlyle evokes a heroism founded on superbly self-forgetful devotion to practical labor.’<sup>4</sup> The dandy of *Sartor Resartus*, therefore, exists solely to provide a counterpoint to Carlyle’s masculine ideal. He condemns dandies for being ‘willing to sacrifice [...] the Immortal to the Perishable’ (185), and for building their identities on sartorial fripperies and neglecting spiritual seriousness. For the proto-decadent Charles Baudelaire, the underlying significance of dandyism is far from being frivolous: the Baudelairean dandy inverts Carlyle’s model of dandyism by making rigour and austerity central to the performance of style. In ‘The Painter of Modern Life’ (1863) he declares that dandyism is like ‘a kind of religion.’<sup>5</sup> Drawing on this religious analogy, the dandy becomes an icon for decadent culture, a hieratic symbol of elegant performative potential, a priest of style. Baudelaire personified a severe school of dandyism and made black clothing part of his personal dandiacal brand—Ellen Moers suggests that ‘austerity of line, restraint in colour and ornament symbolized a spiritual aloofness.’<sup>6</sup> While fin-de-siècle dandies were influenced by Baudelaire’s performances (Beardsley, for instance, wore an iconic monochromatic grey ensemble), there are notable differences as these later dandies embraced playfulness.<sup>7</sup> Moers suggests that for the French poet, the ‘austerity of his style was a protest against the adolescent dramatics of his own

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: Heroes and Hero Worship* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1885), p. 184. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>4</sup> Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life,’ *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1997, repr. 1992, 2006), p. 421. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Moers, *The Dandy*, p. 273.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography* (London: Pallas Athene, 1998, repr. 2011), 136.

circle: the *joyeux enfants de la Bohème*.<sup>8</sup> Decadent dandies of the 1890s, however, engaged with their fellows, making fin-de-siècle dandyism a facet of decadent sociability.

Personal style provided dandies with a social language rooted in the materiality of dress to identify their networks; the sartorial is therefore of utmost importance to the dandy's image. Catherine Spooner goes as far as to argue that Griffin, the megalomaniac scientist protagonist of H. G. Wells' *The Invisible Man* (1897), is the supreme literary dandy because of his reliance on clothes. Although Griffin does not demonstrate the detachment and wit associated with the type, his invisibility means that his clothes define him. When he first arrives in Bramblehurst he is 'wrapped up from head to foot,' a cipher of cloth until he reveals the nothingness beneath.<sup>9</sup> As Spooner puts it, 'Without the necessary surfaces with which his identity can be made manifest, the Man is unable to function, is unrecognizable, a walking vacuum.'<sup>10</sup> Griffin's experiments have reduced him to a point where he has become nothing more than Carlyle's 'Clothes wearing-man.' Indeed, the novel becomes a critique of dandyism: Robert Slifkin argues that the aesthete Whistler is the 'veiled target' of Wells' novel.<sup>11</sup> While Slifkin reads the text as a satire on the hollowness of aestheticism, it can also be read as a satire on Whistler's dandyism. Slifkin draws attention to the links between the cover design of the first edition of *The Invisible Man* (showing a seated Griffin as an empty smoking jacket and a pair of slippers) and Whistler's portrait *Arrangement in Grey and Gold, No 2: Thomas Carlyle* (1872-3). The cover design satirically binds Carlyle to self-consciously outré late-Victorian ideologies in order to stress the aesthete and the dandy's inferiority to the Victorian prophet of work's worthiness. It echoes Carlyle's own criticism that a dandy is nothing more than 'a Poet of Cloth [...] his body the (stuffed) parchment skin

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<sup>8</sup> Moers, *The Dandy*, p. 273.

<sup>9</sup> H. G. Wells, *The Invisible Man*, (London: Penguin, 2005), p. 5. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Catherine Spooner, *Fashioning Gothic Bodies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Slifkin, 'James Whistler as the Invisible Man: Anti-Aestheticism and Artistic Vision,' *Oxford Art Journal*, 29.1 (2006), 55-75, p. 56.

whereon he writes' (*Sartor Resartus*, pp. 184-5). These critiques of the dandy's pose make it appear utterly devoid of intellectual intent—all performance, no substance.

Dandies, however, understood the ways in which clothing shapes perceptions of identity within society, a function summarised by Richard Martin and Harold Koda:

Fashion is anthropomorphic. Dress, surrounding the body, is determined by the shape it envelops. But the body is also defined by fashion in a manner that mingles the determinate form of physiology with the variable values and needs of culture.<sup>12</sup>

This modern theorising reflects the fin-de-siècle philosophy of dress which Max Beerbohm outlines in his essay 'Dandies and Dandies' (1896): costume is 'a supremely apt medium for the expression of modern emotion and modern thought.'<sup>13</sup> In cultural terms, irrespective of period, fashion has the potential to express what it means to be contemporary; it reflects the mood of a time and thus the cultural shifting of identities. Carlyle may have treated such an exaltation of fashion as emblematic of a weak and overly effete social order, but, as a dandy, Beerbohm argues it has a liberating potential. Clothing gives its wearer 'liberty of all expression' (151); the opportunities for performance that clothing represents allow a public articulation of dandiacal selfhood. In essence, dandies act out Lord Henry's maxim from *Dorian Gray* that 'It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances.'<sup>14</sup> They understand the value of the surface in establishing and displaying one's true interior self. Clothes thus articulate a chosen identity to the world; they are medium and message. MacLeod has demonstrated that in their actions and attitudes 'the Decadents were both bohemian and dandy,' but their choice of clothes represented two very different models of decadent identity.<sup>15</sup> Where dandies highlighted sartorial exactitude, bohemians like Le

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Martin and Harold Koda, *Waist Not: The Migration of the Waist, 1880-1960* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Max Beerbohm, 'Dandies and Dandies,' *The Prince of Minor Writers: The Selected Essays of Max Beerbohm* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2015), p. 150. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde III: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 186. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>15</sup> MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 12.

Gallienne embraced a comfortable, less immaculate style, with ‘long hair, wide-brimmed black hats, flowing ties, capes and velveteen jackets.’<sup>16</sup> In this way, clothes function as a uniform, a visible manifestation of group identity that plays out a shared agenda.

This thesis challenges the traditional critical narrative of the isolated decadent, but it does not dismiss the importance of individualism. Fin-de-siècle dandies saw their social group as a network of interaction and borrowing, in part defined by a collective display of clothing, but there can be no doubt that in terms of the purely visual the dandy desired to stand out above all else. Beerbohm’s potted biography of Beau Brummell in ‘Dandies and Dandies’ recounts how the Regency dandy, having bought a commission in the Tenth Hussars, designed a personal light blue uniform to distinguish himself from his fellows. It is a sympathetic account comparing Brummell to a ‘god’ (141), and Brummell’s performance of identity inspires the colonel who disciplines him to apologise for the ‘narrow system’ (142) that condemns his individualism. Thorsten Botz-Bornstein interprets this wilful individuality as the cornerstone of dandiacal personae:

The main problem of dandyism is that of its own foundation. The dandy is an anarchist, because he rejects *all* rules and *all* norms but he is an anarchist who does not claim anarchy. The reason for this is that the dandy does not claim anything.<sup>17</sup>

And yet, identifying with a shared cultural stance through dress *is* claiming a form of collective representation for a group. The clothes worn by the followers of a subculture speak to and for the network, creating a pattern of allegiances amongst those who dress similarly. Beerbohm suggests that the interaction between dandyism and the social realm is ‘but one of the accidents of an art’ (143), but dandyism nonetheless is part of the decadent social world. Indeed, Beerbohm’s essay begins with a description of the slightly ridiculous ‘stiff-necked, over-hatted, wasp-waisted gentlemen’ (140) who congregate around Brummell as a dandified prophet of fashion. The creation of such dandiacal identities is described by Botz-Bornstein

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<sup>16</sup> MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, ‘Rule-Following in Dandyism: “Style” as an Overcoming of “Rule” and “Structure,”’ *The Modern Literature Review*, 90.2 (April 1995), 285-95, p. 286.

as ‘an act of auto-foundation.’<sup>18</sup> This recalls Moers’ statement that the dandy ‘stands on an isolated pedestal of self.’<sup>19</sup> Moers’ and Botz-Bornstein’s arguments draw on Baudelaire’s incarnation of the dandy with his ‘haughty, patrician attitude, aggressive even in its coldness’ (‘Painter of Modern Life,’ 421), but this isolated ideal does not match the lived reality of the fin-de-siècle dandy. Such critical readings of fin-de-siècle dandyism ignore the concept of dandiacal community and the connectivity that underpins decadent networks. Fin-de-siècle writers, it would seem, were very aware that being a dandy was not an act of ‘auto-foundation,’ but a group performance of similarity, which sympathetically mirrored their friends and allies.

*The Green Carnation* (1894), Robert Hichens’ satire on Wilde’s networks of lovers, disciples and parasites, recognises the tensions between independence and collective iconography, and parodies the association between the shared signifiers of a group identity and the apparently creative individuals who adopt them. Esmé Amaranth’s devotees all wear green carnations, but they claim ‘it is not a badge at all. They wear it merely to be original.’<sup>20</sup> Hichens is poking fun at these dandies’ pretensions, but in doing so he ignores any sense of communal originality. Although those who wear the green carnation in the novel are copying one another (as those who wore green carnations in the real world were imitating Wilde), the counterculture created by wearing their chosen badge is original. It is a rejection of mainstream dress conventions. Even in the apparently anti-dandiacal *Invisible Man*, Griffin’s sartorial identity attracts imitators: ‘young humourists would up with coat-collars and down with hat-brims’ (23). They may be mocking this dandy-scientist, but in doing so they transform themselves into mirrors of his dress-identity. The collective sense of self which seems to have emerged from dandiacal performances is more radical than Botz-Bornstein’s

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<sup>18</sup> Botz-Bornstein, ‘Rule-Following in Dandyism,’ p. 290.

<sup>19</sup> Moers, *The Dandy*, p. 17.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Hichens, *The Green Carnation* (London: William Heinemann, 1894), pp. 15. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



vision of the self-sufficient, self-creating dandy. He is right that the dandy ‘is a man of style,’ but together dandies also created a community of style.<sup>21</sup>

## 1.1 The dandy consumer

As a result of their self-conscious reliance on objects, the dandies’ dominant social identity is that of the consumer: they use and enthusiastically share products of the material world to sustain their networks.<sup>22</sup> The performance of self through things is a decidedly decadent activity, but it developed from a more mainstream desire for superiority over those lower in the social hierarchy. Dandies self-consciously parodied the acquisitive ideals of bourgeois society by building social identities around their material signifiers. This can be seen at work in the reception of the distinctly decadent aperitif absinthe (see Chapter 2.2). Jad Adams has shown that in France the paraphernalia integral to performing the social rituals necessary before drinking the emerald alcohol (for instance slotted absinthe spoons and a vessel to drip water over the sugar) became necessary accoutrements for bourgeois drinkers only after absinthe had become popular amongst poorer consumers. Owning the correct tools for drinking stylishly provided ‘a method of demonstrating social superiority, the costliness of the equipment matching the finesse of the drinker.’<sup>23</sup> Decadent dandies appropriated this brand of material distinction: they applied the Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk* (total work of art) aesthetic to their own bodies by forming a public self based on the objects with which they surrounded themselves. As Dennis Denisoff puts it, dandies were ‘interested in fashioning themselves as art, with the process of artistic commodification leading to a major accord

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<sup>21</sup> Botz-Bornstein, ‘Rule-Following in Dandyism,’ p. 286.

<sup>22</sup> My understanding of the dandy as consumer draws upon Gagnier’s work on the relationship between Oscar Wilde and the marketplace. She suggests that Wilde critiqued the Victorian cult of productivity through his writings and his life. Regenia Gagnier, *The Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987).

<sup>23</sup> Jad Adams, *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle* (London: Tauris Parke, 2008, repr. 2009), p. 66.

between presenting themselves as art and presenting themselves as valuable.<sup>24</sup> They did not reject materialism, but, as a group, used it to transform themselves into a collective, lived artwork.

Citizens of a capitalist society are expected to consume products and thus maintain the interchange of money, but dandiacal acts of consumption take on a more radical potential. Appropriating the tools of capitalism becomes a means of resisting the Victorian work ethic. As Walter Houghton suggests, work was idealised as the source of ‘money, respectability, and success.’<sup>25</sup> A good Victorian was a good worker. Dandies, however, resisted the drive to earnest productivity—while happy to use the products of others’ labour, they kept themselves at a remove from the production cycle. They collectively embraced a performance of idleness as a rebuke to an over-worthy bourgeois class. Though many decadent dandies had middle-class roots, they mimicked an aristocratic hauteur to disassociate themselves from the dominant class of Victorian capitalism. As the grandson of a lord on his mother’s side and the son of an infantryman, Dorian Gray falls between signifiers of social rank; he can be seen to embody the class tensions which ran through the dandyism of bourgeois decadents.

The simultaneous embrace of conspicuous consumption and the eschewing of productivity leads to the decadent idealisation of the invalid and the criminal: types who consume without producing, and who are therefore deemed superfluous to the functioning of capitalist societies. Through sickness, the invalid is incapable of labour; the criminal simply consumes the produce of others. In claiming that he had caught a chill after leaving the tassel off his cane, Beardsley demonstrates how sickness was an integral part of the performance of dandyism.<sup>26</sup> He implicitly draws attention to his own terminal condition, but connecting it with the material trappings of dandyism makes his tuberculosis a mark of personal

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<sup>24</sup> Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957, repr. 1964), p. 243.

<sup>26</sup> Sturgis, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 149.

distinction. Beardsley presents himself as a dandy dying from the art of living. If Beardsley was presenting himself as a non-producing invalid, then Wilde's essay 'Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green' (1891) represents a virtual canonisation of the criminal. He transforms the poisoner Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, who had been transported to Australia in 1837, into a decadent icon. Wilde lionises the murderer as a 'young dandy who sought to be somebody, rather than to do something.'<sup>27</sup> The fact that he stands apart from the cycle of production is presented as a reason for praise. And Wilde makes this explicit when recounting a conversation between Wainewright and a fashionable insurance agent who visited his cell:

I have been determined through life to hold the position of a gentleman. I have always done so. I do so still. It is the custom of this place that each of the inmates of a cell shall take his morning's turn of sweeping it out. I occupy a cell with a bricklayer and a sweep, but they never offer me the broom. (119)

Wainewright attributes his distance from labour to his gentleman-status, but it is his criminal activities which allow him to play the part of the gentleman. Wilde treats Wainewright's forgeries and poisonings as a form of artistic expression and the subtitle of the essay, 'A Study in Green,' is transparently a reference to Whistler's titling conventions. Wilde transforms his subject into the perfect dandy-consumer: Wainewright makes beauty without running the risk of doing anything too productive.

Decadent men and women on the fringes of the bourgeois sphere made their performative possessions into a metonym for the dandy, thus laying the foundations of their radical reimagining of sociability. Dandies become a network of imitation, consuming the same clothes, flowers and cigarettes to bind the group together. By using and writing about objects as part of the performance of identity, the dandy not only stakes a sense of self in the material world, but also creates an imitable pattern of consumption. The mimetic potential of

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<sup>27</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'Pen, Pencil and Poison: A Study in Green,' *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde IV: Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 108. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

dandyism's interaction with objects shared throughout dandiacal networks thus becomes a powerful signifier of decadent sociability.

## 1.2 Fashioning artifice

Where the bourgeoisie valued moral sincerity and professed to frown upon the superficiality of outer display, dandies refuted the importance of inner depth through performances of purposeful artificiality. Jonathan Dollimore, writing on camp, sees artificiality as the means of undermining societal worship of personal depth since it:

hollows out from within, making depth recede into its surfaces. Rather than a direct repudiation of depth [...] depth is undermined and being taken to and beyond its own limits.<sup>28</sup>

Such performances of depth assert the kind of a radical shallowness celebrated by Wilde in his preface to the 1891 edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'All art is at once symbol and surface. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril' (168). In Dollimore's words, living and creating art on the surface is a process of 'pure pleasure, a release from the subjective correlatives of dominant morality.'<sup>29</sup> Embracing the shallowness of the self-consciously artificial is a liberating counter to the tradition of moralistic earnestness represented by Carlyle; the dandy self-identifies as the 'Clothes-wearing Man' in an act of personal, social and artistic resistance that exposes the radical and rebellious side of dandyism Carlyle ignores in his effort to condemn it. Such contrarianism is the central tenet of dandiacal society. Indeed, Moers defines the dandy in terms of constant opposition: 'not middle-class and drab, not philistine and stupid.'<sup>30</sup> By using material performances to stage their artificiality, dandies rejected the performances of depth and seriousness associated with the Victorian middle classes. Making themselves and their dandiacal objects into

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp. 310-11.

<sup>29</sup> Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, p. 311.

<sup>30</sup> Moers, *The Dandy*, p. 13.

representations of the artificial subverted the cultural authority of the bourgeoisie—subversion being an end in and of itself.

The fin-de-siècle fascination with the artificial draws upon Huysmans' *A Rebours*. Circulating amongst decadent social networks as an inspirational text, it became a lifestyle guide (see Chapters 2.2 and 3.1). The house which Huysmans' protagonist Des Esseintes constructs at Fortenay is defined by its artifice. This preoccupation with artificiality is brought to the fore when Des Esseintes buys flowers to decorate his home. The fact that he 'has always been excessively fond of flowers' is a marker of his dandiacal sensibilities.<sup>31</sup> Dandies take apparently natural flowers and transform them into objects of artifice by transplanting them into their performances of selfhood. While in Paris, Des Esseintes demonstrates his 'inborn taste for the artificial' by collecting false flowers, which are superior to the real things by virtue of having been crafted by 'true artists' (83).

Once Des Esseintes is ensconced in Fortenay, however, Huysmans gives flowers a kind of dandiacal agency: 'tired of artificial flowers aping real ones, [Des Esseintes] wanted some natural flowers which would look like fakes' (83). These real flowers, like dandies, perform artificiality. They are perhaps more artificial than the mock flowers by virtue of their pretence at artificiality. Des Esseintes' flowers are framed as if they are fashioned from artistic materials: the *Madame Mame*, for instance, 'seemed to be simulating zinc, parodying bits of punched metal coloured emperor green and spattered with oil paint, streaks of lead and white' (84). Huysmans' descriptions elevate nature to the level of an artist; it produces works as seemingly artificial as the paper flowers Des Esseintes used to covet. In the decadent social realm, the artificial becomes the natural. Beerbohm is at pains to legitimise these discourses of artificiality, writing that a dandy's artificial performance of identity 'must be produced in

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<sup>31</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (A Rebours)*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 82. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

accord with the age's natural influence' ('Dandies and Dandies,' 149). He suggests that, perversely, to be an unnatural dandy is more natural than to be natural.

The dynamic between natural flowers and decadent artifice which characterises Des Esseintes' dandyism is explicitly linked to the dandy's body in the opening of Beardsley's unfinished pornographic fragment, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (1907).<sup>32</sup> As Tannhäuser (called Fanfreluche in the expurgated *Savoy* text) prepares to enter the gate to the Venusberg, Beardsley's attention to the detail of his hand, 'slim and gracious as La Marquise du Deffand's in the drawing by Carmontelle,' transforms the knight into an exquisite work of art(ifice).<sup>33</sup> Comparing Tannhäuser with a drawing highlights the constructed nature of his representation as a dandy. This process is made visual in 'The Abbé' (1895, Figure 1.1), the illustration which accompanied this chapter when it was published as *Under the Hill* in *The Savoy*, with the central figure's camp pose, wasp-like waist and waves of curled hair. Significantly, a rose catches on the knight's muff; it is 'deliciously incongruous' (21) in comparison to the rest of his costume. It represents the natural world entangling itself with Tannhäuser's studied artifice, and, in deciding to keep the rose, he incorporates it into his dandiacal iconography. Beardsley acknowledges the tension between the flower and Tannhäuser's costume: 'the hardy petal's invasion of so delicate a thing' suggests that the dandy's artifice is more fragile (and hence more beautiful) than nature. The rose becomes unnatural through its association with a dandy's costume—as indeed, does the supreme overabundance of flowers in the background of the illustration. There is no space for the natural in this image as the flowers are transformed into an aspect of the dandy's set-dressing. Decadent dandies appropriate the seemingly natural—Beardsley makes this behaviour a

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<sup>32</sup> *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* was censored before its 1896 publication in the *Savoy* magazine under the title *Under the Hill*. The expurgated edition was published by John Lane in the 1904 *Under the Hill and Other Essays in Prose and Verse by Aubrey Beardsley*. The unexpurgated text remained unpublished until 1907 when Leonard Smithers produced a pirated edition.

<sup>33</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (London: For Private Circulation, 1907), p. 19. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.





**Figure 1. 1**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Abbé,' *The Savoy* 1 (1895).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.



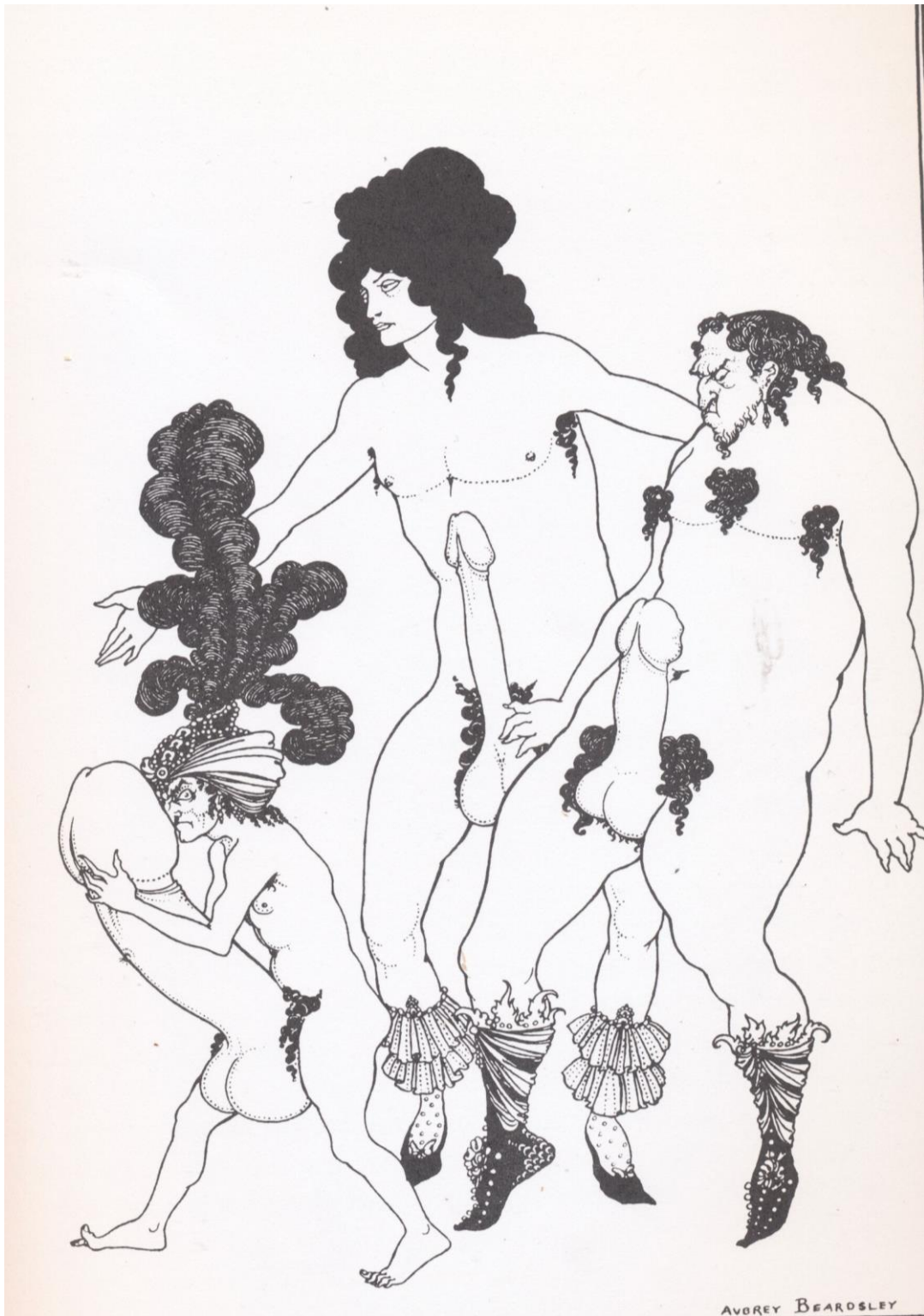
social signifier in ‘The Lacedaemonian Ambassadors’ (Figure 1.2), a picture which he drew for Leonard Smithers’ 1896 edition of Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata*. The three Spartans are unmistakably dandies with their coiffed hair, frilly socks and the elaborate ostrich plume hat worn by the dwarf, but they do not orientate their dandyism around clothing (the socks and hats are tangential props). Instead, they make their nakedness artificial, replacing any need for the constructed artifice of clothes—and the insouciance of their erections conveys the dandy’s impish desire to subvert bourgeois social codes. The curlicues with which Beardsley depicts these Spartan dandies’ pubic, underarm and chest hair highlight the delicate artifice of their nudity. While the central figure of ‘The Abbé’ is alone, these dandies are presented as a united social unit: together they do not need clothes to reject the demands of nature.

Max Beerbohm’s essay ‘The Defence of Cosmetics’ (1894), from the first volume of the *Yellow Book*, presents itself as the highpoint of the decadent cult of artifice. It opens with an overt provocation: ‘NAY but it is useless to protest. Artifice must queen it once more in the town.’<sup>34</sup> Beerbohm positions the artificial, represented by makeup, as a necessary facet of fin-de-siècle life. It is an era in which the Victorian virtue ‘of sancta simplicitas is quite ended’ (65); cosmetics (and therefore artifice) provide a new cultural signifier around which dandies and decadents can collectively fashion an identity. The question of group identity is a subtext running throughout the essay. Beerbohm even subversively suggests that, should a personified ‘Old England [...] lose her martial and commercial supremacy’ (79), English patriots should take comfort in the proficiency of British women at wearing makeup. He presents artificiality and beauty as an antidote to both imperial decline and imperialism itself. Instead of exalting military might, Beerbohm suggests, ‘Artifice is the strength of the world’ (68)—in ‘The Defence of Cosmetics,’ it is a redeeming force which can transform its subjects not only from ugliness, but also from jingoistic nationalism.

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<sup>34</sup> Max Beerbohm, ‘A Defence of Cosmetics,’ *The Yellow Book* 1 (1894), 65-82, p. 65. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.





**Figure 1.2**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Lacedaemonian Ambassadors,' *The Lysistrata of Aristophanes* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896).

Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

As part of his rejection of patriotic ideologies, Beerbohm also uses makeup to position himself within decadent debates about the role of surfaces and apparent shallowness, explicitly challenging those who ‘think of surface even as reverse of soul’ (67). He presents the apparent shallowness of dandies as a performance of their inner depth; makeup-wearers and dandies articulate the soul by manipulating an artificial front. False and unnatural it may be, but this performance stakes their claim for identity in the social realm for all to see. Beerbohm is at pains to legitimise the application of cosmetic products as an art form. When declaring that modern makeup artists are ‘as cunning in the use of brush and puff as any who lived at Versailles’ (80), he emphasises the skill of practitioners as painters. Moreover, Beerbohm cites Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* (2 AD), a text both canonical and erotic, to give the visual art of cosmetics a literary pedigree rooted in the classical education central to Victorian pedagogy. While his reference to Ovid’s poem relies on canonicity for its force, Beerbohm emphasises its dandiacal potential by describing it as ‘a treatise upon artifice’ (80). In the essay, the decorated face becomes a modern incarnation of classical Greek theatrical masks: covering the face, whether with a mask or makeup, becomes a performative act that reveals a version of selfhood.

Towards the end of the essay, Beerbohm appears to exclude men from cosmetic performances of artificiality. He argues that:

If men are to lie among the rouge-pots, inevitably it will tend to promote that amalgamation of the sexes which is one of the chief planks of the decadent platform and to obtund that piquant contrast between him and her, which is one of the redeeming features of creation. (78-9)

His appeal to normative gender roles is, at face value, a startling contrast to the essay’s apparent radicalism—especially given Beerbohm’s own social and ideological connections to the late-Victorian ‘decadent platform.’ But when considered in the light of dandyism’s subversive borrowing of areas traditionally considered feminine preserves, it becomes hard to take Beerbohm’s protestations too seriously. There is a tension between style and message.

Rather than the rigid masculinity of Carlyle's critiques of unmanliness, Beerbohm's mannered tone suggests something of the dandy's delicacy. The apparent message may be conventional, but the language ('lie among the rouge-pots [...] obtund [...] piquant') is overtly decadent. There is a hyperbolic note to his warnings which suggest he is parodying hysterical critiques of gender indeterminacy. This is highlighted when the clean-shaven Beerbohm proclaims the value of beards and moustaches. Beerbohm's praise for facial hair seems especially tongue-in-cheek given the mid-Victorian debates which had made beards a mainstream of patriarchal conservatism. The trend for clean-shaven men originated from Brummel's Regency dandyism, but beards had been popularised as patriotic markers of masculinity following the Crimean War. A shaven chin went from being seen as a mark of civilisation to 'the mark of a man who was, in some worrying sense, not quite a proper man' as thinkers like Carlyle associated facial hair with Muscular Christianity.<sup>35</sup> An untamed beard became 'the marker of manly energy' and of Christian fortitude.<sup>36</sup> Through their performances of artificiality, fin-de-siècle dandies erode the problematic gender constructs which 'A Defence of Cosmetics' pretends to defend.

Despite the overt eroticism of Beardsley's drawings (and his obvious attraction to the subject), Lorraine Janzen Kooistra suggests that his 'real interest is not so much sexuality as artificiality.'<sup>37</sup> The androgynes and hermaphrodites of Beardsley's illustrations call attention to the constructed nature of gender by positioning themselves on its boundaries. He deploys artifice to question socially-assigned roles. In 'The Abbé,' Tannhäuser may be a man, but his fulsome lips and wasp waist make him an androgynous figure; in 'The Lacedaemonian Ambassador,' the figure in the centre combines the sexual signifiers of both Beardsley's men and women, transforming him into a hermaphroditic figure. By uniting the Spartan's fulsome

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<sup>35</sup> Kathryn Hughes, *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in the Age of Decorum* (London: 4<sup>th</sup> Estate, 2017), p. 107.

<sup>36</sup> Hughes, *Victorians Undone*, p. 110.

<sup>37</sup> Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, 'Sartorial Obsessions: Beardsley and the Masquerade,' *Haunted Texts: Studies in Pre-Raphaelitism*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 189.

erection with the facial features of the archetypal Beardsley Woman, who was, Linda Zatlin suggests, characterised by her sexual self-assurance, Beardsley positions his Grecian dandy between gender signifiers.<sup>38</sup> Such pictures are part of a dandiacal iconography where self-conscious artifice legitimises dandies' rejection of accepted masculinity and carves out a space for their shared performance.

### 1.3 Icons of ephemerality

In rejecting the solidity and stability of bourgeois life, dandies idealised the fleeting and the ephemeral; paradoxically, they manifested these concepts in material objects. Their social artefacts allowed them to question the bourgeois model of self in society through an exploration of the tensions between a thing as a concrete object with a physical presence and as something insubstantial with only a fleeting presence. Decadent dandies used ephemerality to distance themselves from an outside world built on permanent edifices and to insist on their own liminality. Their ideology of the insubstantial and the intangible became a collective challenge to the ethical codes propagated by thinkers like Carlyle.

Music became the decadents' ideal model of art because it is innately impermanent, created in the moment of its performance and ceasing to exist once the notes have faded.<sup>39</sup> Decadent commentators thus treated music as the most distinguished of art forms, drawing on Walter Pater's pronouncement in 'The School of Giorgione' (1872) that '*All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music.*'<sup>40</sup> Beerbohm uses music as an analogy to describe the true aesthetic achievement of cosmetics: they are 'rather akin to the art of music lasting, like music's echo, not for very long' ('Defence of Cosmetics,' 78); when Dorian first appears in Wilde's novel, he is reading the sheet music for Schumann's *Forest Scenes*. Sheet music may

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<sup>38</sup> Linda G. Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>39</sup> For an extended study of the place of music in decadence, dandyism and art, see Emma Sutton's monograph on Wagner's influence on Beardsley's work and thought. Emma Sutton, *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>40</sup> Walter Pater, 'The School of Giorgione,' *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, repr. 2010), p. 124.

bind the insubstantial aurality of music to the material page, but it still requires the individual performance to articulate the notes. Dorian toys with pianos throughout the novel, but, as Phyllis Weliver points out, he ‘never plays a piece from start to finish.’<sup>41</sup> This implies that Dorian leaves his musical performances unfulfilled. He intensifies the ephemerality of the musical notes by indefinitely delaying the end of the piece—the un-played notes hang suggestively without finding a conclusion.

The decadents’ rejection of permanence was articulated through the emphasis they placed on material objects which expire in the act of using. Cigarettes were perhaps the most powerful signifier of material ephemerality that became consecrated as part of a dandy’s collective social iconography. Not only do they produce flurries of smoke, but they burn away to ashes in the act of consumption—they are inherently ephemeral. While cigarette-smoking was a part of decadent self-performance, the activity of smoking had been seen as a bourgeois activity for much of the nineteenth century. Decadent and dandyish smoking had different cultural associations from the mainstream respectability of the pipe and cigar. Matthew Hilton’s cultural history of smoking reveals a ‘sharp distinction between the manly, knowing and discriminating pipe and cigar smoker and the passive user of the cigarette who is referred to not as a smoker but as a “consumer.”’<sup>42</sup> This supposed passivity led to cigarettes being considered an effeminate means of consuming tobacco. Bourgeois smoking was, Hilton suggests, characterised by ‘carefully constructing a personal relationship with a divine weed reified, feminised or anthropomorphised into a trusty companion, but which was always sufficiently subjugated to the smoker’s masculine control as he maintained his strong-minded grasp on the material world.’<sup>43</sup> By implication, a pipe-smoker paternalistically mastered his feminine pipe weed while an unmanly cigarette-smoker was vapidly using a commercial

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<sup>41</sup> Phyllis Weliver, ‘Oscar Wilde, Music, and “The Opium-Tainted Cigarette”’: Disinterested Dandies and Critical Play,’ *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 14.3 (2010), 315-57, p. 316.

<sup>42</sup> Matthew Hilton, *Smoking in British Popular Culture, 1880-2000: Perfect Pleasures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 28.

<sup>43</sup> Hilton, *Smoking in British Popular Culture*, p. 4

product. Decadent cigarette-smoking, this thesis suggests, actively revelled in the associations which bourgeois users rejected.

Wilde publicly drew attention to the act of smoking as an artistic display by delivering his curtain call for *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892) with a lit cigarette. After the show, he appeared, smoking, to thank the audience for having enjoyed the play almost as much as he had. The playwright presents himself as the most enthusiastic audience member through the medium of a stage performance and his cigarette is a prop to facilitate this display. Wilde's act of public smoking serves to implicate the audience in his dandyism and, no doubt, to send a message to friends who understood its artistic significance. Ruth Robbins perceptively suggests that this act contained a scandalous element of gender performativity given that smoking had become the 'New Woman's key marker of emancipation.'<sup>44</sup> This was all part of Wilde's self-presentation as a society dandy. His performance of public smoking grabbed attention and caused a moral outrage amongst conservative critics for bringing the private act of cigarette consumption into the public sphere.<sup>45</sup> Associating himself with the New Woman in this way places him in a liminal zone between genders; like cigarette smoke he refuses to be pinned down. The relationship between the physical and the fleeting suggests that for decadent dandies the tangible can achieve something on a more metaphysical plane. 'The Critic as Artist' (1891) makes this theme explicit. Gilbert criticises those who 'rage against Materialism, as they call it, forgetting that there has been no material improvement that has not spiritualised the world.'<sup>46</sup> Playing the part of the materialistic consumer allowed dandies to achieve metaphysical goals and to spiritualise their social networks.

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<sup>44</sup> Ruth Robbins, 'Always Leave Them Wanting More: Oscar Wilde's *Salome* and the Failed Circulation of Desire,' *Economies of Desire at the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Libidinal Lives*, eds. Jane Ford, Kim Edwards Keates and Patricia Pulham (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 21.

<sup>45</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1987, repr. 1988), p. 347.

<sup>46</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Critic as Artist,' *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde IV: Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 148. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Wilde pays particular attention to the cigarette's role as a decadent signifier in *Dorian Gray*. Lord Henry first appears smoking 'innumerable cigarettes' (169). The fact that they are beyond numbering plays into the hazy sense of transience reflected in Basil's décor (see Chapter 3.3). Wilde describes the smoke in overtly sensuous terms which give the first chapter an obscured, almost dream-like quality. Lord Henry must look at Basil through 'the thin blue wreaths of smoke that curled up in such fanciful whorls from his heavy opium-tainted cigarette' (170). The presence of opium characterises this smoking as a decadent form of pleasure, adding to the atmosphere of general haziness. Lord Henry aphoristically swears by a cigarette as 'the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite and it leaves one unsatisfied' (236). The cigarette is a permanently ephemeral pleasure, Wilde suggests, because it leaves the smoker desiring more. He reuses this concept in 'The Critic as Artist' where Gilbert proclaims: 'There is nothing left for me now but the divine *μνοχρονος ηδονη* [momentary pleasure] of another cigarette. Cigarettes at least have the charm of leaving one unsatisfied.' (142). This praise of the '*μνοχρονος ηδονη*' and the 'charm' of the unfulfilled pleasure is given an overtly intellectual dimension by virtue of appearing in one of Wilde's most theoretical works. Rather than a one-off witticism, elevating the ephemeral through the material lies at the heart of Wildean dandyism. Dandiacal smoking, to borrow Carlyle's words, 'sacrifices the immortal to the perishable' (*Sartor Resartus*, 185). By idealising the passing moments of cigarettes and life, dandies challenge the importance of permanence and social stability. They create a world of transient impressions and delightful fripperies which defy the moral earnestness of the hard-work culture praised by Carlyle and reinforce their network identity.

The titular object of 'An Egyptian Cigarette' (1897), a short story by the American writer Kate Chopin, becomes a tool of decadent escapism. Chopin's cigarettes signify a sense of mystery because they are held in a box 'covered with glazed, yellow paper, so skilfully

gummed as to be all one piece,’ and are without a label.<sup>47</sup> Sealed in such a way, they are indefinable until the seal is broken—even the architect who gives Chopin’s female narrator the cigarettes has only the word of the fakir from whom he bought them that they are indeed cigarettes. Once lit, the transcendent quality of the cigarettes becomes clear: they transport the narrator into a vision of an ancient Egyptian past. Tobacco coming from Egypt (including Wilde’s own preferred cigarettes) was often laced with opium, and Chopin is perhaps adding to the trance-like state of her prose by suggesting the experience is drug-induced.<sup>48</sup> Capturing eternity in a fleeting instant, it is an intense vision which Chopin defines by its sensuous presence: ‘Oh! how the sand blisters my cheek! and I have no tears to quench the fire. The river is cool and the night is not far distant’ (3). The vision is perhaps a painful one, but it is nonetheless transcendent (and transient). The narrator ultimately chooses to reject the possibilities opened up by these ‘mystic fumes’ (4), destroying the box and its contents at the end of the story. This seems a half-hearted reassertion of normalcy after the dreamlike, surreal quality of the smoke-induced vision; smoking has set her apart, even if only temporarily. But in destroying the cigarettes, Chopin’s narrator also intensifies the transience of their effect. Like the unfulfilled strains of Dorian’s piano, the narrator’s experience of the cigarettes is left unfinished and thus represents the ideal dandiacal performance celebrated by decadent social networks. In her act of smoking, Chopin’s protagonist is undertaking a version of gendered rebellion: her engagement with the cigarettes in this story represents an active performance of female dandyism.

The ephemeral connotations of smoke, hazily arising from material cigarettes, was similarly reflected in fin-de-siècle considerations of scent and perfume. The wearing of scent could be as much a dandiacal performance as Wilde’s public cigarette consumption at *Lady*

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<sup>47</sup> Kate Chopin, ‘An Egyptian Cigarette,’ *Daughters of Decadence: Stories by Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Elaine Showalter (London: Virago Press, 1993, repr. 2016), p. 1. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>48</sup> Weliver, ‘Oscar Wilde, Music, and “The Opium-Tainted Cigarette,”’ p. 334.



*Windermere's Fan*. Decadent perfume-wearers used the ephemerality of their scents to fashion themselves as works of art. Violet Wyndham, Ada Levenson's daughter, writes that wearing scent on the hair was a hallmark of the dandy.<sup>49</sup> Stenbock, for instance, carried 'a little gold vial of scent' in his pocket with which to scent his finger-tips before running them through his hair.<sup>50</sup> His fragrant locks thus became a clear marker of his social positioning as a dandy. The artificiality of fragrances like coumarin, heliotropin and ionone, Catherine Maxwell suggests, specifically attracted decadent consumers.<sup>51</sup> Perfume—fashioned by perfumers—united the dandy's obsession with artifice and the transience of odour. Beardsley, for instance, invited Levenson to arrive early for a dinner party to help him 'scent the flowers;' she arrived to discover him spraying petals with opopanax and frangipani perfume.<sup>52</sup> He was transforming the scent-identity of the flowers and thus fashioning them as his own works of art to display before friends. Even non-decadent nineteenth-century writers seem to have understood ideologies of perfume in terms that would have made sense to dandies. Baroness Staffe's advice manual *The Lady's Dressing Room* (1891) uses language reminiscent of the *gesamtkunstwerk* when describing the ideal approach to creating a scent-identity:

I repeat that every woman should reject a mixture of scents. She should choose a perfume, and keep to it. All her belongings, her books, her note-paper, her boudoir, the cushions of her carriage (in the eighteenth century they used to be stuffed with sweet-scented herbs, called "*herbes de Montpellier*"), her clothes, the smallest things she uses, should give out the same sweet fragrance.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Violet Wyndham, *The Sphinx and her Circle: A Memoir of Ada Levenson by her Daughter* (London: André Deutsch, 1963), p. 58. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>50</sup> Ernest Rhys, *Everyman Remembers* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons Limited, 1931), p. 15.

<sup>51</sup> Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Pallas Athene, 1995, repr. 2011), p. 156.

<sup>53</sup> Baroness Staffe, *The Lady's Dressing Room*, trans. Lady Colin Campbell (London: Cassell & Company Limited, 1892), p. 325.

Staffe's ideal perfume-wearer is unified by her perfume. Ephemeral scent ties together her material possessions and completes the overall effect of her costume and paraphernalia.

Fragrance, as much as her choice of clothing, constructs her social identity.

Smells themselves are intangible but, critics suggest, are often connected with our conception of memory. Indeed, in Maxwell's words, while a poem 'may not be able to conjure up an actual smell, it can certainly evoke vivid feelings and images associated with that smell with an analogous smell sensation.'<sup>54</sup> In literature, appeals to the sense of smell can create symbolic links with the past. Arthur Symons' poetry of urban sexuality makes the connection between scent and memory explicit. His poem 'White Heliotrope' (1893) may begin with a description of a sordid and disordered bedroom, but it ends on a note of reflection articulated through the eponymous perfume:

This (need one dread? nay, dare one hope?)  
Will rise, a ghost of memory, if  
Ever again my handkerchief  
Is scented with White Heliotrope.<sup>55</sup>

Symons creates a connection between the momentary fragrance (and the recollection it will lead to) and the chaotic physicality of the location of the narrator's tryst. The disarray of 'tumbled skirts upon a chair,/The novel flung half-open, where/hats, hair-pins, puffs and paints are spread' (49) is idealised through the impermanence of White Heliotrope's smell. Jane Desmerais argues that creating an alliance between olfaction and memory is central to the poem. Symons uses the perfume 'to mnemonically create a fleeting impression: not only of a past sexual encounter, but also one of memory's transience. Perfume is both material and immaterial; it functions as the nominal subject of the poem and its vaporising qualities are

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<sup>54</sup> Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, p. 197

<sup>55</sup> Arthur Symons, 'White Heliotrope,' *London Nights* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 49. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

suggested in the places where regular rhythms of the poem falter.<sup>56</sup> The ethereal scent is materialised through the poem—Symons reminds his readers of the material liquid, stored in a material vessel. In decadent literature, calling upon the effect of a fragrance or smell acts as a means of anchoring intangible memory.

Perfume tended not to be worn on the skin during the nineteenth century, but it was applied to a handkerchief that was then kept on the person, as demonstrated in ‘White Heliotrope.’<sup>57</sup> The scented handkerchief transforms a fleeting fragrance into a very tangible accessory. While it was seen as a sign of effeminacy to use perfume in this way, products like heavily perfumed soap and scented hair oils were commonplace and acceptable for Victorian men.<sup>58</sup> In the light of this, objections to the scented handkerchief may have less to do with the use of a fragrance than with the affectation of the handkerchief. It is perhaps a little ironic therefore that in Symons’ poem the scented handkerchief is explicitly linked with a heterosexual tryst—the (presumably) male speaker uses his White-Heliotrope-infused handkerchief to remind himself of his liaison with a woman. *Dorian Gray* creates a similar link between sex and perfume. When at Lord Henry’s house, Dorian finishes declaiming his love for Sybil Vane and his rapture at her artistry by perfuming his handkerchief. His action is a dandiacal flourish to make his point. Wilde emphasises the materiality of his action by describing the ‘large, gold-topped bottle’ (218) in which Lord Henry keeps his perfume. Maxwell sees Dorian’s act as a sign of his confidence; he is showing himself to be ‘completely at home in Lord Henry’s domain.’<sup>59</sup> Developing Maxwell’s reading, it is equally an appropriation of Lord Henry’s scent as a signifier of Dorian’s newfound belief in his social place as a dandy. The fleeting nature of smell foreshadows how fleeting Dorian’s passion for Sybil will be. Wilde doesn’t condemn the dandiacal emphasis on the transient, but

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<sup>56</sup> Jane Desmerais, ‘Perfume Clouds: Olfaction, Memory and Desire in Arthur Symons’ *London Nights* (1895),’ *Economies of Desire at the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, p. 71.

<sup>57</sup> Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, p. 33.

<sup>58</sup> Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, p. 42.

<sup>59</sup> Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility*, pp. 243.

he is critical of Dorian: Sybil's suicide is yet another result of Dorian's inability to fully understand and engage in socialising (see Introduction, vi). Despite the human cost, the aesthetic richness of Wilde's descriptions of smoke and scent in *Dorian Gray* prioritise the moment of experience and performance. Grounding the ephemeral in the material object gives the transient moment a paradoxical permanence. More significantly, the material object transforms this moment into dandiacal paraphernalia that can be carried around, seen and imitated as part of the collective performance of selfhood.

#### **1.4 The dandiacal woman**

Decadent networks were not exclusively male, and fin-de-siècle women did not just adopt the ideologies of their masculine counterparts—they actively helped to create late-Victorian dandyism as a movement. An understanding of this should underpin any study of the role of dandiacal networks in the wider phenomenon of decadent sociability because the gender dynamic of the group complicates what it means to be a dandy. The critical tradition has been to study dandies as a purely male archetype: Moers traces the origins of the male dandy from the Regency to the fin de siècle; James Eli Adams's study of Victorian masculinities traces the gender performativity of dandies; Chris Snodgrass specifically focuses on Beardsley and his use of grotesque illustrations to act out his personal brand of dandyism; and MacLeod considers the role of the dandy in marketing an idea of decadence. This is understandable given the fact that dandyism was, at least in part, a reaction against patriarchal Victorian gender norms governing men. In Adams' words, Victorian (and indeed modern) men were controlled 'not simply by medico-juridical regulation of the body, but by assignments of gendered identity which circulate outside the discourse and are shaped through comparatively occasional, informal, even haphazard engagements.'<sup>60</sup> The male dandy, therefore, embraced a performance of delicacy and effeminacy in order to contest his assigned roles. Associating

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<sup>60</sup> Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, p. 4.

themselves with the New Woman's cigarette and the feminine perfumed handkerchief was a means of resisting patriarchal expectations of masculinity.

Decadent women engaged in the same brand of transgressive self-performance, and yet they have received little critical attention as dandies. Talia Schaffer has done significant work to recover the place of women in the Aesthetic Movement, but she suggests that they were not decadents (she defines decadence as 'a brief defensive reaction of embattled elite male writers').<sup>61</sup> Her gendered view of decadence precludes women from being dandies even though she sees Ouida's [Maria Louise Ramé] women characters (her *mondaines*) as dandyish and Ouida as a source for Lord Henry's epigrams.<sup>62</sup> For Ann Ardis, New Women novelists did not participate actively in contemporary literary movements because they were instead prefiguring Modernism.<sup>63</sup> Fin-de-siècle women could write books with female-dandy characters, but these readings suggest that they did not take part in real-life decadent social performances. Nonetheless, as Linda Dowling demonstrates, for 'most late-Victorians, the decadent was new and the New Woman decadent.'<sup>64</sup> In the public imagination, gender transgression was intimately bound up with the decadent platform. This is not to suggest that all aspects of decadent culture were necessarily accessible (or, indeed, welcoming) to women—elements of the decadent socio-professional sphere did exclude them. They were not members of the proto-decadent Rhymers' Club and Margaret Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner argue that the *Yellow Book* art pages only really commissioned women once Beardsley was sacked as art editor.<sup>65</sup> In the private sphere, Ernest Dowson was uncomfortable with women of his own social background and age, preferring his classist,

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<sup>61</sup> Schaffer, *Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, p. 6.

<sup>62</sup> Schaffer, *Forgotten Female Aesthetes*, p. 124.

<sup>63</sup> Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>64</sup> Linda Dowling, 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890's,' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33.4 (1979), 434-53, p.436.

<sup>65</sup> Margaret Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* (Cambridge: The Houghton Library, 1994), p. 33.

paedophilic vision of the innocence of the underage, working-class girls with whom he was fixated.<sup>66</sup> While drawing on these studies, and acknowledging the misogyny of aspects of decadence, this thesis is more concerned with the ways in which women and men worked together to fashion decadence—it is less a question of a masculine decadence versus a feminine aestheticism than a matter of exploring the similarities and intersections between male and female performances of dandyism.

I situate Ada Levenson as a female dandy because she was a central member of Wilde's circle, but more importantly because her conversations and writings played with the same brand of overtly performative wit that characterised male practitioners of dandyism (see Chapter 4.3). She coined the witticism 'Nothing spoils a romance more than a sense of humour in a woman and the lack of it in a man,' which Wilde was to borrow for *A Woman of No Importance* (1893).<sup>67</sup> And the playwright paid tribute to Levenson in an 1893 telegram by calling her 'the Sphinx of Modern Life.'<sup>68</sup> Such a title is a form of encomium; Wilde is praising an equal. Despite an undercurrent of disapproval for her mother's association with the decadents, Wyndham consistently refers to Levenson by her Wildean epithet 'the Sphinx' in her biography *The Sphinx and her Circle* (1963). She opens her book by tracing Levenson's ancestors back to Don Cesar Orobio who was burnt at the stake 'for refusing to abandon the Jewish faith' (13), and to Isaac Simon who 'took an active part in the emancipation of slaves in Jamaica' (14). As the product of a long heritage of familial anti-orthodoxy, Wyndham explicitly portrays her mother as a rebel, placing her in a tradition of free-thinking in opposition to prevalent mores and at odds with her own society. She is waspish about Wilde's influence on her mother's sartorial tastes, describing 'a white chiffon

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<sup>66</sup> Jad Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2002), pp. 29-30.

<sup>67</sup> Margaret Debelius, 'Countering a Counterpoetics: Ada Levenson and Oscar Wilde,' *Women and British Aestheticism*, p. 192.

<sup>68</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 568.

gown edged with sable, costing forty guineas,' and ascribing the luxurious materials and high price to 'Oscar inspir[ing] extravagance' (29). Such dandiacal prodigality was a shared performance: Levenson and Wilde were collaboratively creating themselves through dress. They certainly shared a close personal bond and flouted respectable authority. Wilde stayed with Levenson after his first criminal trial—and Braun and Bilski show that the emerging scandal played out in Levenson's salon.<sup>69</sup> It is such detachment from orthodoxy that gives both the male and female dandy the freedom to critique their society.

Mabel Beardsley moved in the same circles and displayed the same dandiacal tendencies, but she remains a more obscure(d) figure than Levenson. She has been eclipsed by her brother's reputation, and when she is mentioned it is often in relation to questionable rumours of an incestuous relationship with her brother to bring a note of scandal.<sup>70</sup> Re-examining her position within decadent social networks of the fin de siècle both expands the canon of dandyism and restores a forgotten woman to her place at the heart of dandiacal sociability. Mabel adopted similar poses to her brother, and had a creative role in the emergence of fin-de-siècle decadent culture since, according to her mother Ellen Agnus Beardsley, she 'invent[ed] the title' for *The Savoy*.<sup>71</sup> If knowing the right people was part of a dandy's social education, then Mabel was exposed to the same intellectual and stylistic influences that motivated her brother's art and lifestyle.

Revisiting accounts of Mabel written by her friends certainly reveals her social performance of dandyism in fin-de-siècle networks. She became close friends with the writer Netta Syrett after the two worked as teachers at the Polytechnic School for Girls in London,

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<sup>69</sup> Emily D. Bilski and Emily Braun, with Leon Botstein, Shira Brisman, Barbara Hahn and Lucia Re, *Jewish Women and their Salons: The Power of Conversation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 18.

<sup>70</sup> These rumours appear to have originated from an ambiguous line in (the notoriously unreliable) Frank Harris' autobiography, *My Life and Loves* (1922). After explaining his theory that mature women introduce young boys to sex, Harris claims that Beardsley said, 'It's usually a fellow's sister who gives him his first lessons in sex. I know it was Mabel here, who first taught me.' Aside from Harris' questionable veracity as a chronicler of the fin de siècle, Beardsley's statement need not suggest that this teaching involved a practical element. Frank Harris, *My Life and Loves*, vol I (Paris: Privately Printed, 1922), p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> Ellen Agnus Beardsley, 'Aubrey Beardsley,' *A Beardsley Miscellany*, ed. Robert Walker (London: The Bodley Head, 1949), p. 78.

and Mabel appears in Syrett's autobiography *The Sheltering Tree* (1939). Mabel is portrayed in terms that stylistically and thematically mirror contemporary descriptions of other fin-de-siècle dandies—she is one of the group. Syrett is at pains to establish the ordinariness of Mabel's appearance, writing that there was nothing 'exotic' about her and that she could 'scarcely be called pretty.'<sup>72</sup> This is significant: dandyism requires an element of transformation—the dandy makes him or herself extraordinary through artifice, and both siblings used their appearances to create their public personae. Mabel's plan to 'Go on the stage and become a society beauty' (73) mirrors the aspiration of male dandies to make themselves objects of display, and her matter-of-fact tone here is supremely dandiacal in its apparent disinterest. Syrett plays along with Mabel's performance of artistic beauty in describing her 'Titian colouring' (73); the dandy, regardless of gender, transforms the self into a living work of art. In crediting Mabel's transformation into a society beauty to her fine choice of wardrobe, Syrett is recognising the parallels between Mabel's dandyism and that of fin-de-siècle men. A 1901 letter which Beerbohm wrote to Reggie Turner reveals the dandiacal affectation behind Mabel's philosophy of dress as she 'trails about, all day in evening dress—low neck, no sleeves, and a train as long as the Rue de l'Hôtel de Ville.'<sup>73</sup> To dismiss her performance of beauty as conforming to sexist social discourses would deny Mabel's performance of dandyism the transformative agency which motivated the high camp style of male dandies. The female dandy implicitly rejects the role of woman as helpmeet to a (no doubt earnest) man—Mabel performs beauty for performance's sake. This is a tendency mirrored by Flora Luscombe, a character from Levenson's novel *The Limit* (1911) inspired by Mabel (*The Sphinx and her Circle*, 72). Flora (an actor like Mabel) wears only evening dress

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<sup>72</sup> Netta Syrett, *The Sheltering Tree* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939), p. 68. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>73</sup> Max Beerbohm, *Letters to Reggie Turner*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), p. 146.



‘except in the evening.’<sup>74</sup> She (and by implication Mabel) fashion themselves as artificial constructs in order to control their public selves.

Artificiality is central to Levenson’s depiction of Flora. Even when alone, she is constantly performing and in ‘the habit of talking always as if she were surrounded by crowds’ (78). At times, Levenson is seemingly dismissive of her Mabel-character, who is well meaning but painfully naïve. Socially, Flora is ‘intensely a peacemaker’ (80), but inevitably creates awkwardness in her social circles:

She had a real genius for making people accidentally meet who had just broken off their engagement, or had some other awkward reason for not wishing to see each other—and then pushing them together so that they could not get away [...] but people who had met there rarely made up their quarrels. (80)

Her apparent friends (the morally questionable) Valentia and Harry cruelly gossip about Flora; the narratorial voice describes her invitations to her weekly tea parties as ‘pathetic, yet cheery’ (110). Nonetheless, there is something affectionate in the lampooning—Flora’s artificiality redeems her. In Levenson’s novel, Flora’s narrative arc concludes in one of the few straightforwardly happy (if conventional) endings with her engagement to Rathbone, a tattooed dandy. By making her relationship into a performance, Levenson ultimately endorses Flora’s status as a dandy: ‘The first real love scene Flora had ever acted in was a triumphant success’ (180). Rathbone recognises that ‘such affectations as [she has] are natural’ to her (178). For the dandy, whether female or male, to perform the self is to make the artificial natural, as Beerbohm suggests in ‘Dandies and Dandies.’

The writings of Mabel’s contemporaries demonstrate her central position in decadent social networks. Nowhere is this more revealing than in W.B. Yeats’s poem ‘Upon a Dying Lady’ (1919), written about Mabel’s death from cancer in 1916. Even as death approaches the Mabel of the poem, even as she loses her lucidity, Yeats attributes to her the social qualities of a dandy. Physically reduced by her illness, she retains her wit:

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<sup>74</sup> Ada Levenson, *The Limit* (London: Grant Richards, 1911), p. 49. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

She would not have us sad because she is lying there,  
And when she meets our gaze her eyes are laughter-lit,  
Her speech a wicked tale that we may vie with her  
Matching our broken-hearted wit against her wit,  
Thinking of saints and of Petronius Arbiter.<sup>75</sup>

Yeats's version of Mabel is inextricably linked with the cultural products of decadence: the reference to the late-Roman author of the *Satyricon* is significant for its idealised place within the decadent counter-canon. He is not creating a sentimentalised vision of a peacefully dying woman, but instead highlights her wit and links her to transgressive texts. His dying Mabel is radical. Moreover, when Yeats praises her stoicism in the face of impending death, he presents it as an aspect of decadent sociability:

She has not grown uncivil  
As narrow natures would  
And called the pleasures evil  
Happier days thought good [...] (75)

Yeats frames Mabel as a supremely self-conscious dandy rather than as a passive victim of her illness: maintaining an air of civility and gentility in the face of infirmity is all part of the dandy's pose. Yeats is positioning her in relation to familial and social networks by suggesting she can draw strength from the example of 'her dead brother's valour' (76). Such connectivity recognises Mabel as a dandy among dandies.

In *A Beardsley Miscellany* (1949), Robert Walker claims that Mabel was 'urged to try' and produce a piece of writing about her brother's life, but that as far as he was aware she produced nothing (though he suggests that she may have collaborated with her mother for the piece which appears under Ellen's name).<sup>76</sup> In fact, she did produce a biographical sketch of her brother, now held by the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections at Princeton University. While Mabel's unpublished writing does not feature any obscure biographical details, it is striking for the parallels it offers with modern Beardsley scholarship. Robert Ross

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<sup>75</sup> W. B. Yeats, 'Upon a Dying Lady,' *The Wild Swans at Coole* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1919), pp. 72-3. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>76</sup> Robert Walker, 'Forward to "Aubrey Beardsley" by Ellen Agnus Beardsley,' *A Beardsley Miscellany*, p. 74.

claimed that ‘Beardsley has no predecessors, no rivals’ (though he does acknowledge some artistic influences on the illustrator), but Mabel emphasises her brother’s artistic interconnectedness.<sup>77</sup> She argues that after the Pre-Raphaelitism of the *La Morte d’Arthur* he embraced a wide variety of influences:

he fell under the Japanism, the Greek antique and the French art of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He was simultaneously eclectic and original. He absorbed as an intellectual stimulus everything that he admired in art and literature. He had a short and sure receptivity of every kind of beauty that was congenial to his nature and he learned from it, though he remained always himself and unique, and independent.<sup>78</sup>

By writing this piece, Mabel can be seen to assert her position as a decadent dandy, and her place within the tradition of Beardsley biographies. Unlike the life writings of friends such as Ross, Mabel thoroughly situates her brother’s art within the intellectual context while simultaneously stressing its individuality. She describes his ‘new style [as] marked by a morbid over-refined taste, by a specific modern over-sensitive sensuality.’ Where mainstream art critics condemned what they perceived as the overt sexuality and ugliness of Beardsley’s art, Mabel endorses its modernity and embraces (and shares in) its performance of dandiacal decadent identity. Mabel’s decadent life writing thus cements her ideological allegiance to her decadent friends and, more broadly, demonstrates a dandiacal woman asserting her authority over the cultural narratives of decadence.

Despite her dandiacal performances and despite her connections to the now canonical figures of the decadent circle, Mabel’s position has not been restored by critical work on women in decadence. She appears in neither Schaffer’s *Forgotten Female Aesthetes* nor Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades’ *Women and British Aestheticism*. On some levels, these omissions are understandable—as an actor Mabel did not produce the extensive catalogue of texts which have enabled the reappraisal of popular women writers of the fin de siècle, and what she did write is unpublished (with the exception of letters to newspapers).

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<sup>77</sup> Robert Ross, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: The Bodley Head, 1909), p. 55.

<sup>78</sup> *Aubrey Vincent Beardsley*, Mabel Beardsley, Aubrey Beardsley Collection, Box 5b, Folder 12A. Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

And yet, her literary output shows her alignment with fellow decadents, and her material and social performances of selfhood cast her as a woman dandy. Considering Mabel Beardsley as a dandy and as a decadent life-writer exposes the broader spectrum of decadent sociability and provides another model for gendered decadence.

## Chapter 2

### Public Spectacles of Consumption

Decadent literature and art betray a fascination with the urban world—a stage on which the decadents could perform their sense of self in a social context—and this chapter looks at the social possibilities offered by the act of eating in restaurants or cafés, where food and drink were made into tools of decadent identity by association with decadent dining, and the act of watching theatrical performances. The decadents self-consciously played with concepts of public spaces, using locations like restaurants, theatres and the music halls to build countercultural social networks. Such engagements took the form of a studied misuse of the public space: they were ludic acts of transgression to resist and subvert social authority, giving the performers a measure of cultural control. The decadents incongruously transposed the private sphere onto the public sphere to create a space over which they had a symbolic ownership.

The concepts of space and play have been linked by Pierre Bourdieu in his analysis of fields of power. The material spaces which people move through, socialise within and occupy are one aspect of these fields of power, and Bourdieu argues that the exercise of social power influences these spaces:

A field of possible forces exercised on all bodies entering it, the field of power is also a field of struggle, and may thus be compared to a game: the dispositions, that is to say the ensemble of incorporated properties, including elegance, facility of expression or even beauty, and capital in its diverse forms – economic, cultural, social – constitute the trumps which will dictate the manner of playing and success in the game.<sup>1</sup>

The game which decadent socialisers played with public and private spaces used these ‘trumps’ to carve out a space for their networks in opposition to societal condemnation of their work and lifestyles. They created semi-public spaces by fusing the public and the

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 10.

private, thus transforming private socialising into a performative and highly public display. Such a reappropriation of spaces can be seen as a form of *épater le bourgeois*.

In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu is concerned with the struggle between competing discourses that define a space for the producers of literary and artistic culture in nineteenth-century France. In the case of the British decadents, this spatial and cultural struggle can be seen as a form of passive resistance to an imposed, hegemonic power. Such passive resistance, Michel de Certeau argues, allows the people within a space to subvert the dominant social codes ‘not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept.’<sup>2</sup> While the marginal peoples to whom de Certeau referred were the indigenous peoples of Latin America resisting Spanish colonialism, he notes that:

Marginality is today no longer limited to minority groups, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an act that is unsigned, unreadable, and unsymbolized, remains the only possible one for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself.<sup>3</sup>

De Certeau therefore suggests that in a consumerist society the requirement to buy products, rather than to create them, forces an identity on consumers—an identity which prevents them from actively resisting their own marginalisation. To assert themselves, he suggests, ‘the weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them’.<sup>4</sup> In this way, they play on their marginalisation in order to resist disempowerment. If Bourdieu’s spaces are the products of social and economic forces within the literary world, then de Certeau’s understanding emphasises the ways in which people’s material and practical behaviours construct spaces.

Given the dominance of market forces by the late-nineteenth century, the decadents had to situate their group identity in relation to consumerism—in de Certeau’s terms, they did

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<sup>2</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xvii.

<sup>4</sup> De Certeau, *The practice of Everyday Life*, p. xix.

not reject but sought to alter and reframe society's rules of play. Decadent writers and artists produced culture, setting them apart from de Certeau's definition of marginality, but they based their understanding of production on their own status as consumers of and commentators on mass nineteenth-century culture (see Chapter 1.1).<sup>5</sup> Their love of the trappings of material culture allowed them to make criticism and discussion of culture an art form; Wilde's *The Critic as Artist* proclaims that 'criticism demands infinitely more cultivation than creation does,' suggesting that decadents made their consumption and discussion of art a hallmark of their distinction.<sup>6</sup> Given the decadents' wilful contrarianism, opposition was another facet of this distinction: as a heterodox group under a capitalist society, the decadents' challenge to the status quo was in embracing its discourses and spaces, and in subverting them through use. Appropriating public spaces like the eating places of London, they could articulate a shared vision of pleasure and sociability throughout their networks. In restaurants, music halls and theatres, they staked out 'an autonomous field' and claimed 'the right to define [...] the principles of its legitimacy.'<sup>7</sup> Commandeering cultural spaces gave the decadents the freedom to manufacture their own alternative form of cultural capital.

This fusion between cultural capital and Victorian dining culture had been established by the fin de siècle. The semi-public eating place was a site in which cultural capital could be created and spent. As Patrick Leary has demonstrated in *The Punch Brotherhood*, the communality of group eating was integral to the success and smooth functioning of *Punch*.

Leary's book is a reaction against the critical school of thought that makes the fictive Mr

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<sup>5</sup> Gagnier and MacLeod have studied the intersection of decadence and mass culture. MacLeod has demonstrated that decadents were more engaged with the world of popular culture than is generally assumed and Gagnier shows how Wilde specifically targeted his plays at the late-Victorian consuming public. While seeking to speak to their specific group through a mythified self-presentation, the decadents also consciously tried to appeal to a general audience. Regenia Gagnier, *The Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987). Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Culture and the Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist, The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde IV: Criticism: Historical Criticism, Intentions, The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 145.

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 61

Punch into ‘a univocal agent’ and sees the magazine as a monolithic expression of Victorian values.<sup>8</sup> He is instead interested in the ways in which the weekly editorial dinners held at their printers’ premises in Bouverie Street (recorded in Henry Silver’s diaries) establish a polyvocal and communal *Punch*, and in the materiality of the spaces in which this creative collective met. This materiality is encapsulated in the dinner table onto which the evolving circle of editors carved their initials: the table becomes the cornerstone of *Punch* publishing life. The carved initials act as evidence of cultural capital, perhaps even what Bourdieu terms ‘the capital of consecration—implying a power to consecrate objects (this is the effect of a signature or trademark) or people (by publication, exhibition, etc.), and hence of giving them value, and of making profits from this operation.’<sup>9</sup>

Sitting around this table at the weekly dinner-meetings, the editorial staff would eat, drink, gossip and discuss the next issue of the magazine. Business was intimately entwined with riotous dining. Leary argues that ‘talk was enshrined as a stage in [the] production mode itself’ at these dinners and, as a result, it put a premium on ‘the personal compatibility of the staff members with the proprietors and one another.’<sup>10</sup> Leary’s theoretical model of communal dining can be expanded to include other creative networks that met and socialised in similar surroundings. The decadents certainly recognised the power of semi-public spaces to solidify (and codify) their social and cultural networks. Public spaces became semi-public when the networks which occupied them used them as sites for their private performances of sociability. While the *Punch* Brotherhood met in rooms belonging to their printers, decadent social networks chose to associate with the spaces of the urban public sphere.

The decadent metropolis was at once a material and a conceptual space. The decadents moved, worked and socialised in the physical locations of the city, and their

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<sup>8</sup> Patrick Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* (London: The British Library, 2010), p. 37.

<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 148.

<sup>10</sup> Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood*, p. 158.



writings and artworks celebrated the concept of the metropolis as a place of possibility and interchange. The city space represented a site in which the varying publics and counterpublics which make up the social realm, united by urban proximity, came into contact (see Introduction, v.). While these publics may have represented varying (and not always complimentary) subject positions, they were physically close to each other. The city was a site of epistemological tensions where different discourses and communities competed, seemingly united by an understanding of the city as a cohesive social structure. The decadents drew on the divergent possibilities of these urban cultures, using their art to fragment the idea of a unified city. Without a single monoculture, the fin-de-siècle city becomes marginal, an urban-demi-monde, a space ‘situated between bohemia and “society” ... [which] recruits from the two opposed universes.’<sup>11</sup> It was thus a space where the decadents could embrace marginality, escaping the conventions of polite society, rubbing shoulders with the seedier side of urban life, and deploying their cultural capital to consecrate the urban spaces they inhabited.

Beardsley is typical of the decadents in his romanticisation of and identification with the urban environment. Haldane Macfall describes him as finding ‘his subjects in the half-world—he took the blatant side of “life” as it was lived under the flare of the electric lights of Piccadilly Circus and the cafés thereabouts; its powdered and painted patchouli “romance” amused him.’<sup>12</sup> For Beardsley and his fellows, the city could be idealised as a space of limitless self-creation. Indeed, the twentieth-century poet Derek Stanford has identified Beardsley as a new type of human development, ‘*homo metropolitanis*—for whom the artifices and urbanities were a necessary part of his daily nourishment.’<sup>13</sup> Beardsley himself

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<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Haldane Macfall, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Man and his Work* (London: The Bodley Head, 1928), p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> Derek Stanford, *The Purgatory and Paradise of Aubrey Beardsley: An Essay and a Narrative Confession in Verse* (Francetown: Typographeum, 1999), p. 17.

declared: ‘London is the epitome of Humanity, and Final.’<sup>14</sup> This pronouncement suggests that the urban world (and in particular the decadent subversive spaces of the city) represents the high point of human evolution. The bustling liminality of the demi-monde city enthused the decadent commentators who talked, ate and drank within it.

## 2.1 Contesting spaces

The restaurant is a liminal space: it is a place of interchange where patrons pass through without occupying it permanently; they enter, eat their meal and then leave. Positioned along the streets, the arterial spaces of the city, restaurants enact the urban public sphere by providing a social space for food and camaraderie outside the personal sphere. Restaurants thus gave urbanite decadents spaces built around consumption which emphasised the elements of city-life they celebrated.

Because the weekly editorial dinners of the *Punch* Brotherhood had taken place in their printers’ offices, they had sole-control over the space; it was what Leary describes as a ‘male domestic space.’<sup>15</sup> These meetings allowed a ‘kind of unreserved male conversation—with all the casual bawdiness, grossness, unvarnished prejudice, and intimately personal gossip—’ which was forbidden from appearing within the pages of *Punch* itself.<sup>16</sup> In short, it provided a gendered model of public dining—its domesticity was achieved by eliding those members of society who did not fit with the orthodox viewpoint of the *Punch* staff. Their security within this space was built on acts of exclusion and hostility towards those who could be described as other. It was a space where women were not welcome and different models of sociability had no influence.

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<sup>14</sup> A. W. King, *An Aubrey Beardsley Lecture* (London: R. A. Walker, 1924), p. 38. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood*, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood*, p. 28.

*A Writer of Books* (1899), by George Paston (Emily Morse Symonds), suggests that restaurants could equally be hostile spaces for Victorian women. In her novel, she acts out the dynamic identified by Linda Dryden: flâneurs sexually harassed ‘the newly liberated female’ who was asserting her place in the arterial spaces of the city.<sup>17</sup> In the novel, the young woman Cosima Chudleigh determines to become a writer by experiencing all that London has to offer. She attempts to adopt the role of the disinterested observer, the subject position of the *flâneuse*, characterising herself as ‘a scientific spectator.’<sup>18</sup> In her first trip, Cosima is taken to a restaurant by a young man; since she has answered his request for directions, the man assumes that she cannot be ‘altogether “straight”’ (53). The *flâneuse* has been mistaken for a streetwalker. There is a sense in the restaurant that it is somehow improper for a young woman to be unchaperoned in such an environment. Cosima therefore insists on paying for her own meal—in this transactional world, she is aware that accepting a meal from the young man would rob her of her independence (the only social currency she has with which to defend herself in this interaction). Nonetheless, her dining companion interprets her willingness to go to the restaurant as a sign of sexual availability. The public eateries of *A Writer of Books* are clearly hostile spaces for women, populated with what the harassed barmaid Bess Heywood describes as ‘human pigs with diseased appetites’ (58). By using restaurants, women like Cosima contest male control of such spaces in the fin de siècle.

Real-world examples of women contesting male ownership of restaurants can similarly be found in *Dinners and Diners* (1899), a collection of *Pall Mall Gazette* restaurant reviews by Lieutenant-Colonel Nathaniel Newnham Davis. He records an anecdote about taking the daughter of a friend, unchaperoned, to the Hotel Continental on Regent Street. The young woman, known by the pseudonym ‘Miss Brighteyes,’ is eager to experience the world

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<sup>17</sup> Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles: Stevenson, Wilde and Wells* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 63.

<sup>18</sup> George Paston, *A Writer of Books* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1899), p. 53. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

of public dining. Her mother fears that the Hotel Continental is ‘a little fast;’ her father asserts, however, that there can be ‘no harm in being seen with an old buster, old enough to be her father.’<sup>19</sup> This reinforces the pernicious sexual dynamic of mixed-gender dining which Paston exposes in *A Writer of Books*—it can be acceptable for a man and woman to be seen together in a restaurant only if there is such an age gap that an affair would be unlikely. Miss Brighteyes’ father accepts rather than challenges the sexist discourse which dominated the use of restaurants, but during dinner Miss Brighteyes remarks: ‘Isn’t it *delightfully* improper to be dining alone with a gentleman in a restaurant! I do wish Madame Quelquechose could see me now ...’ (124). Contrary to both her mother’s moral fears and her father’s blithe assertions, the impropriety of public dining is presented as an attraction for the younger generation—and for young women in particular. It represents a colonisation of the male-gendered restaurant space: women eating in and moving through restaurants unsettled the patriarchal associations of public dining.

The late-Victorian period also saw restaurant spaces used to problematise British colonialism through the networks which gathered in them. During his time in London between 1888 and 1891, Mohandas K. Gandhi, in his dandy phase, took an active part in the radical counterculture of vegetarian dining societies. Leela Gandhi suggests that the friendships Gandhi forged with the members of the London Vegetarian Society (he was to become a committee member) provided the young man with ‘a formative initiation into the crucial political skills of biculturalism.’<sup>20</sup> Engaging with the cosmopolitan-minded members of the Society, all united by a common diet, played a role in developing the political and religious philosophies which would motivate Gandhi’s passive resistance campaign against British rule over India in the twentieth century. Gandhi himself argued that ‘this brief and

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<sup>19</sup> Nathaniel Newnham Davis, *Dinners and Diners: Where and How to Dine in London* (London: Grant Richards, 1899), p. 123. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>20</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 71.

modest experience gave me some little training in organising and conducting institutions.’<sup>21</sup>

In the light of this comment on political organisation, Gandhi’s work with the Vegetarian Society can be seen to demonstrate the ways in which a group can exercise a collective force to negotiate spaces and stake their claim to places in the public sphere.

Social networking brought Gandhi into contact with people considered ‘pillars of vegetarianism’ (77) who acted as formative influences. He was to arrange a farewell dinner at the Holborn Restaurant for his vegetarian friends which encapsulated the radical potential of fin-de-siècle restaurant culture. According to Leela Gandhi, this was a notably vegetarian-unfriendly space, and Gandhi saw it as an opportunity to perform a dietary experiment. It was a matter of normalising a heterodox diet in a potentially hostile space, transposing a vegetarian dinner to a non-vegetarian restaurant:

‘A vegetarian dinner could be had,’ I said to myself, ‘in vegetarian restaurants as a matter of course. But why should it not be possible in a non-vegetarian restaurant too?’ (83)

Gandhi did persuade the manager of the restaurant to serve his friends an entirely vegetarian meal. It was an act of particular personal significance for him—he had once had to leave the Holborn Restaurant after a well-meaning English friend had taken him there to try and persuade him to eat meat—but it was also, as Leela Gandhi sees it, a “reterritorialization” of a mainstream eating establishment.’<sup>22</sup> In his memoir, Gandhi describes the restaurant as ‘a palatial place’ (69) and its scale perhaps links it with British cultural hegemony. He used the cosmopolitan restaurant space and the shared pleasure of a dinner with his English friends to implicitly challenge British imperialism. This may have been a small rebellion, but he would later go on to challenge the system overtly by rejecting the products of the West. The cross-

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<sup>21</sup> Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Gandhi’s Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, trans. Muhadev Desai (Washington D. C.: Public Affairs Press, 1948), p. 80. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>22</sup> Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, pp. 74-5.

cultural friendships he found in the world of vegetarian restaurants represent Leela Gandhi's concept of 'affective cosmopolitanism' in action.<sup>23</sup>

Vegetarianism was what James Gregory terms 'part of that larger counterculture against capitalism, traditional gender relations and positivistic science.'<sup>24</sup> This was certainly played out in the close links between vegetarianism and women's suffrage groups (in particular, the Women's Freedom League which had broken away from the Women's Social and Political Union in 1907).<sup>25</sup> Wilde was aware of the radical implications of choosing a vegetarian diet and demonstrated his understanding in a letter to the vegetarian writer Violet Fane (Mary Montgomery Lamb), where he expounds vegetarianism's intellectual links with classical philosophies and 'with modern socialism, atheism, nihilism, anarchy, and other political codes.'<sup>26</sup> He does not disavow his love for a 'diet of roast snipe and burgundy' but he makes the tongue-in-cheek declaration that 'those who live on lentils and artichokes are always calling for the gore of the aristocracy and the severed heads of kings' (6). Humorous this may be, but there is an underlying truth as with all of Wilde's aphorisms: even when not explicitly anti-colonial (as was Gandhi's vegetarianism), dietary choices can exert a political force.

Feminist and anti-colonial re-territorialisations of public dining spaces have parallels with decadent (mis-)uses of restaurants: countercultural groups could contest ownership because of the liminality of such spaces. Beardsley explores this liminality in his 'Garçons du Café' (1894, Figure 2.1). It appeared in the second issue of the *Yellow Book* with this title, but, in a letter to Frederick Evans, Beardsley refers to it as '*Les Garçons du Café Royal*'.<sup>27</sup>

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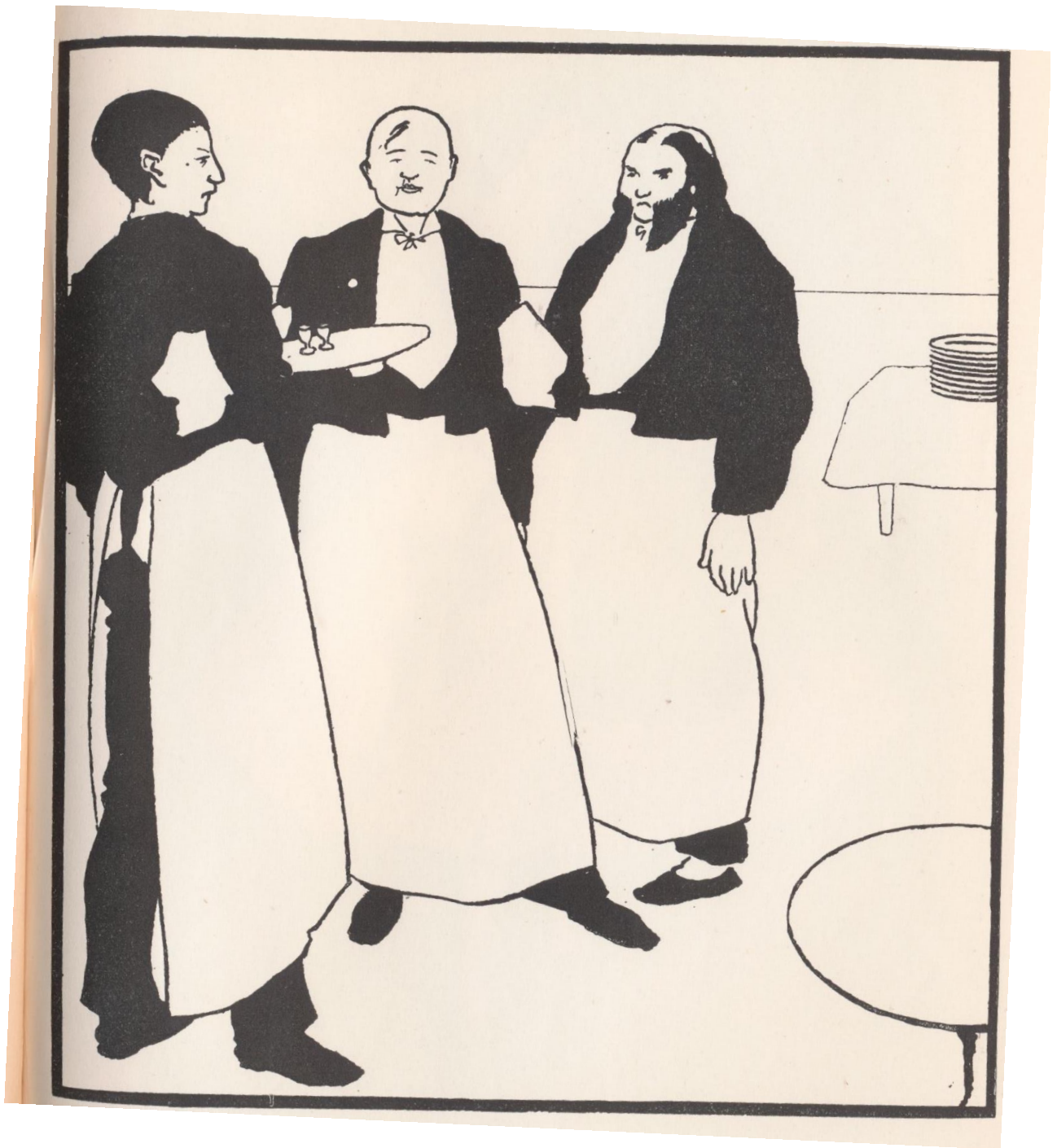
<sup>23</sup> Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> James Gregory, *Of Victorians and Vegetarians: The Vegetarian Movement in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2007), p. 113.

<sup>25</sup> Leah Leneman, 'The Awakened Instinct: Vegetarianism and the Women's Suffrage Movement in Britain,' *Women's History Review*, 6.2 (1997), 271-287, p.271.

<sup>26</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Oscar Wilde on Vegetarianism: an unpublished letter to Violet Fane* (Edinburgh: The Tragara Press, 1991), 6. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, eds. Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan and W. G. Good (Oxford: Plantin, 1970, repr. 1990), p. 72. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



**Figure 2.1**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'Garçons du Café,' *Yellow Book* 2 (1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

The discrepancy between these two titles encapsulates the question of decadent spatiality. In the letter, where he gives the piece a very specific title, Beardsley describes ‘Les Garçons’ as ‘an astounding piece of decorative realism’ (72). This interpretation of the image is reinforced by his friend A.W. King in a 1924 lecture: ‘those who have dined late at a certain restaurant may have seen these waiters’ (*An Aubrey Beardsley Lecture*, 40). The claim to realism, however, belies the anti-realistic space which Beardsley has created—a predominantly empty white plane with flattened perspective and strangely proportioned tables. Even the waiters themselves are drawn with a stylised simplicity. ‘Les Garçons du Café’ is not aiming for realism in any straightforward sense of the word. Zatlin notes in the *Catalogue Raisonné* that the setting is recognisable as the Domino Room at the Café Royal—though waiters at the Café were required to wear aprons which touched the floor.<sup>28</sup> The blank white restaurant thus becomes an ambiguous space; it is neither the Café Royal, nor is it not the Café Royal. In essence, Beardsley has created a non-specific restaurant space, capturing the liminality that attracted decadent social networks to these semi-public eating spaces.

The cosmopolitan cast of the urban demi-monde found its reflection in fin-de-siècle restaurants because they represented an internationalist element within the city through the food they offered and the clients they attracted. Victorian London played host to what Brenda Assael describes as a ‘pluralism of cuisines:’ Indian curries, French cooking and traditional English fare.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Newnham Davis records seeing actors, magnates and Indian princes all rubbing shoulders at the tables of London’s elite establishments. Situated between bourgeois and avant-garde spheres, they became what Bourdieu termed ‘a zone of social weightlessness.’<sup>30</sup> The restaurant provided a space in which the luminaries of the fin de siècle

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<sup>28</sup> Linda Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Brenda Assael, ‘On *Dinners and Diners* and Restaurant Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century London’, *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*. Accessed 22/11/15.

<sup>30</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 12.



could articulate divergent ideas and identities—and they were, therefore, ideal spaces to create social groupings and to explore countercultural sociability. Decadents, along with new Women and anti-imperialists, inhabited restaurants as spaces in which identities could be forged. As a marginal group, they were able to assert their countercultural position by appropriating the space and methods associated with the dominant social order, and by refashioning them to their own ends—as de Certeau argues ‘Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others.’<sup>31</sup>

## 2.2 Decadent eating and drinking

The decadents’ use of food and drink analogies articulates a shared vision of pleasure which unifies their networks as they move throughout the eating and drinking spaces of London. The liminal, contested nature of the restaurant certainly attracted decadent social circles to congregate in places where the act of eating and drinking was authorised as a means of aesthetic engagement. The ideological force associated with consuming is suggested in Hichens’ *The Green Carnation*. Mrs Windsor, an older woman who seeks to emulate her decadent idols, declares ‘I love drinking Bovril in secret. It seems like a vice ... I feel so delightfully vicious when I drink it, so unconventional!’<sup>32</sup> The reference to Bovril is comically banal, but nonetheless food and drink were invested with transgressive qualities in the fin de siècle. Certain foods could give aesthetic sustenance, but decadent writers suggest that inferior food could atrophy one’s aesthetic sensibilities. In the early twentieth-century novel of artistic psychic vampirism, *The House of the Vampire* (1907), Wilde devotee George Sylvester Viereck (later involved with Aleister Crowley’s occult decadent circles and a Nazi sympathiser) suggests that consuming uninspiring food could have a detrimental effect. Reginald Clarke, the titular vampire, blames American philistinism on historical coarse

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<sup>31</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xii.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Hichens, *The Green Carnation* (London: William Heinemann, 1894), pp. 13-14. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

eating: ‘we are what we eat and what our forefathers have eaten before us. I ascribe the staleness of American poetry to the griddle-cakes of our Puritan ancestors.’<sup>33</sup> Eating as a process of aesthetic development had been enshrined in the canonical text of late nineteenth-century decadence, Huysmans’ *A Rebours*. Des Esseintes holds a final, funereal banquet to mourn his lost virility before he retreats to the solitude of his house at Fortenay. The banqueting hall is draped with mourning black, but the design sensibility extends even to the extravagant meal he serves:

Dining off black-bordered plates, the company had enjoyed turtle-soup, Russian rye bread, ripe olives from Turkey, caviar, mullet botargo, black puddings from Frankfurt, game served in sauces the colour of liquorice and boot-polish, truffle jellies, chocolate creams, plum-puddings, nectarines, pears in grape-juice syrup, mulberries and black heart-cherries. From dark-tinted glasses they had drunk the wines of Limagne and Roussillon, of Tenedos, Valdepeñas and Oporto. And after coffee and walnut cordial, they had rounded off the evening with kvass, porter and stout.<sup>34</sup>

The passage demonstrates that the meal itself is integral to the decadent dining experience and to the aesthetic effect Des Esseintes wishes to create.

Huysmans similarly includes Des Esseintes’ tastes in tea in the vast inventory of his possessions and passions. He has ‘an impeccable blend of Si-a-Fayoun, Mo-you-Tann and Khansky – yellow teas brought from China into Russia by special caravans’ and tea itself is described as ‘liquid perfume’ (44). Huysmans focuses on the exclusivity and the sensuous appeal of the teas—such consumables are transformed into artistic commodities and possession of them accrues Des Esseintes cultural capital. Considering the role of *A Rebours* in the development of decadent philosophy (Paul Fox calls it a ‘Decadent Baedeker’), Huysmans could be seen to expend his cultural capital to elevate eating and drinking into a fully engaged aesthetic activity.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> George Sylvester Viereck, *The House of the Vampire* (New York: Moffat, Yard & Company, 1912), p. 129.

<sup>34</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (A Rebours)*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 13. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>35</sup> Paul Fox, ‘Dickens À La Carte: Aesthetic Victualism and the Invigoration of the Artist in Huysmans’ *Against Nature*’, *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De-Humanizing Art, the Artist and the Artistic Receptor*, ed. Kelly Comfort, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 62.

Le Gallienne similarly consecrates food in *The Romantic '90s* (1925) where he describes an encounter with Jane Burden. As the widow of William Morris and the subject of many of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's paintings, Le Gallienne treats her as the Pre-Raphaelite muse par excellence. During the social gathering, he praises a quince jam produced by Burden and is rewarded with a jar. Le Gallienne does not treat this as an everyday, domestic gift; instead he presents it as a moment of transcendence which sends him into aesthetic raptures: 'A jar of quince jam made by the beautiful lady whom Morris had loved and Rossetti had painted! It was like receiving it at the hands of Helen of Troy!'<sup>36</sup> Le Gallienne makes this more than just a jar of jam: Burden's links to the Pre-Raphaelites seemingly imbue her jam with the weight of the artistic movement's ideology. The gift of food (even, it would seem, everyday food) allows Le Gallienne to have a vicarious (but seemingly intimate) engagement with Pre-Raphaelitism. Burden's quince jam becomes part of Le Gallienne's cultural capital, giving him a direct link to the Pre-Raphaelite painters, whom he idolised. By the 1890s, however, the notion of culinary art was not purely an aesthetic concept. It had percolated into bourgeois circles. For instance, Newnham Davis emphasises the importance of finding 'a really artistic dinner' (*Dinners and Diners*, xix). What separates the decadent artistic dinner from Newnham Davis's vision of an artistic dinner is the fixation on the sensory phenomenon of consuming.

Given this emphasis on stimulating the senses, it is unsurprising that decadent writers tended to fixate on alcohol. Baudelaire, in his biographical sketch of Edgar Allan Poe, declared that 'Poe's drunkenness was a mnemonic means, a method of work, an energetic and deadly method;' he makes alcoholism an integral part of Poe's literary procedure.<sup>37</sup>

Huysmans also explores Des Esseintes' experiments with an alcoholic artistry. Des Esseintes

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<sup>36</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), p. 126. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Edgar Allan Poe, his Life and Works,' *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 1997, repr. 1992, 2006), p. 184.

constructs an elaborate liquor dispenser at Fortenay, which he calls his mouth organ. It is a series of spigots connected in such a way that they can all be opened at once to fill the cups beneath them. Des Esseintes treats imbibing alcohol as a distinctly musical pastime, through which he can ‘perform upon his tongue silent melodies and mute funeral marches’ (*A Rebours*, 46). His invention blends the sensory phenomena of music and taste as he composes private symphonies of flavour. Huysmans fuses alcohol and music into a chaotic, synaesthetic cacophony:

Dry curaçao, for instance, was like the clarinet with its piercing velvety note; kummel like the oboe with its sonorous nasal timbre; crème de menthe and anisette like the flute, at once sweet and tart, soft and shrill. Then to complete the orchestra there was kirsch, blowing a wild trumpet blast; gin and whisky raising the roof of the mouth with the blare of their cornets and trombones; marc-brandly matching the tubas with its deafening din; while peals of thunder came from the cymbal and the bass drum, which arak and mastic were banging and beating with all their might. (45)

The sensuous, sensual medley is deepened by the confusion between instruments and musicians—the curaçao is like a clarinet, but the arak and mastic are personified as the percussionists rather than the instruments themselves. This confusion adds to the impression of overwhelming sensation which Huysmans conveys. Des Esseintes even seeks to transform existing compositions into a liquid form ‘following the composer step by step, rendering his intentions, his effects, his shades of expression, by mixing or contrasting related liqueurs, by subtle approximations and cunning combinations’ (46). Decadence thus makes music into a multivalent form of expression which can be captured in both flavour and colour. Des Esseintes’ alcohols are made to serve the same purpose as Le Gallienne’s mythicised quince jam: consecrated food and drink become markers of personal and cultural distinction for those who own them, those who appreciate them, and those who consume them.

There was (and is) cultural and social capital attached to ownership of distinguished wines. Beardsley used an interview with Arthur H. Lawrence in *The Idler* to proclaim his connoisseurship in the field of clarets. He recommends that the interviewer ‘lay down a

dozen of [a fine claret] while there is a chance of getting hold of it.’<sup>38</sup> Lawrence lightly chides Beardsley in an authorial aside for his ‘childlike heedlessness’ in assuming a columnist could afford claret, but this rather misses the point of Beardsley’s suggestion. It is less a serious recommendation than evidence of Beardsley’s own appreciation of fine wine. Moreover, the impression of scarcity he creates (by suggesting that it will soon be unavailable) serves to enhance his own prestige for owning it. It is a form of decadent conspicuous consumption that speaks directly to his social networks.

The debate surrounding Beardsley’s title page vignette for the first volume of the *Yellow Book* (1894, Figure 2.2) shows that alcohol could be used as a signifier of decadent creativity (and an implicit jibe at bourgeois level-headedness). The illustration, depicting a fashionably-attired woman playing a piano in a meadow, was attacked by reviewers for what was perceived as ‘unpardonable affectation.’<sup>39</sup> Beardsley responded to these criticisms in an open letter published in the *Pall Mall Budget* by claiming authority deriving from the eighteenth-century composer Gluck:

Christopher Willibald Ritter von Gluck, in order to warm his imagination and to transport himself to Aulis or Sparta, was accustomed to place himself in the middle of a field. In this situation, with his piano before him, and a bottle of champagne on each side, he wrote in the open air his two *Iphigenias*, his *Orpheus*, and some other works. (*Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, 68)

The two bottles of champagne are as much a part of Gluck’s (imagined) creative process as the outdoor setting and his piano—Sturgis argues that this anecdote is probably a fabrication on the illustrator’s part.<sup>40</sup> The link Beardsley establishes between champagne and the making of art reinforces alcohol’s decadent cultural capital, which in turn legitimises Beardsley’s own decadent illustrations. He invents a defence founded on the symbolic presence of alcohol.

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<sup>38</sup> Arthur H. Lawrence, ‘Mr. Aubrey Beardsley and his Work,’ *The Idler* (London: Chatto & Windus, March, 1897), p. 196.

<sup>39</sup> *National Observer* (21 April, 1894), quoted in Zatin, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, p. 76.

<sup>40</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography* (London: Pallas Athene, 1998, repr. 2011), p. 196.



# The Yellow Book

An Illustrated Quarterly

Volume I April 1894

London : Elkin Mathews  
& John Lane  
Boston : Copeland &  
Day

**Figure 2.2**

Aubrey Beardsley, Title page vignette, *Yellow Book* 1 (1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

Such a link between alcohol and creativity (building upon Des Esseintes' pseudo-mystic attitude to taste and drinking) became apparent in artistic Britain's obsession with absinthe. The emerald liquid was a weighted cultural symbol in avant-garde social circles. Le Gallienne described it as 'mysteriously sophisticated and even Satanic' (*Romantic '90s*, 192). For him,

it had the sound of hellebore or mandragora ... in the '90s it was spoken of with a self-conscious sense of one's being desperately wicked and suggesting diabolism and nameless iniquity. Did not Paul Verlaine drink it all the time in Paris!—and Oscar Wilde and his cronies, it was darkly hinted, drank it nightly at the Café Royal. (192-3)

The myth of absinthe fashioned it into a madness-inducing instrument of artistic inspiration. It became a symbol of bohemian life and reflected what Le Gallienne saw as the attractively sinister energy of Victorian London French cafés. An autobiographical piece by Coulson Kernahan, one of Le Gallienne's friends, published in *Chambers Journal* (1930), recalled Le Gallienne's fixation on the continental associations of absinthe: 'I've only read of it in French novels or English short stories about Parisian or Bohemian life. Paul Verlaine is pictured always as sipping it—the source for his inspiration as a poet, I'm told.'<sup>41</sup> Kernahan describes how he and Le Gallienne were lured into a London café by a sign declaring that absinthe was for sale. He cements the links between the potent green spirit and France through the figure of the hyperbolically-accented French waiter who served them. Absinthe was as much about embracing cosmopolitan influences as about a quick path to extreme inebriation: drinking absinthe in company became yet another form of *épater le bourgeois*. To quote Jad Adams's cultural history of absinthe, 'Artists became not only pro-French but anti-English.'<sup>42</sup> The transgressive pleasure of the proverbial green fairy can be seen in Le Gallienne's description of sharing absinthe in Lionel Johnson's rooms. He recalls that 'it was with a pleasant shudder that I watched it cloud in our glasses' (*Romantic '90s*, 193). This aura of titillated horror was

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<sup>41</sup> Coulson Kernahan, 'Two Absinthe-Minded Beggars', *Chambers Journal*, June 1930, quoted in Jad Adams, *Hideous Absinthe: A History of the Devil in a Bottle* (London: Tauris Parke, 2008, repr. 2009), p. 140.

<sup>42</sup> Jad Adams, *Hideous Absinthe*, p. 8.

self-consciously cultivated to convey the impression of decadence and to exclude the uninitiated.

For decadent consumers, the choice of alcohol was a mark of allegiance to a particular social set. Wilde was very aware of the performative nature of playing the part of the *absintheur* as he confided to Arthur Machen ‘I could never quite accustom myself to absinthe, but it suits my style so well.’<sup>43</sup> Decadent discussions of absinthe should therefore be interpreted in the same manner as Beardsley’s claret recommendations. Indeed, in *The Green Carnation*, Hichens explicitly parodies this tendency by linking absinthe to the badge of Esmé Amaranth’s social circle, the eponymous green carnation. Mrs Windsor confides that Esmé chose to make the green carnation the symbol of his personal cult because ‘it blended so well with the colour of absinthe’ (18). In a similar way, Wilde’s dubious praise of Beardsley’s illustrations, (dubiously) recorded by Frank Harris, uses an absinthe simile to articulate the effect of Beardsley’s style:

Absinthe is to all other drinks what Aubrey’s drawings are to other pictures; it stands alone; it is like nothing else; it shimmers like southern twilight in opalescent colouring; it has about it the seduction of strange sins. It is stronger than any other spirit and brings out the subconscious self in man. It is just like your drawings Aubrey, it gets on one’s nerves and is cruel.<sup>44</sup>

The example of absinthe demonstrates the ways in which the decadents used food and drink as signifiers of their identity. By drawing attention to the physical act of consumption itself, they used their collective interest in eating and drinking to highlight their understanding of themselves as a network of consumers and artists.

### 2.3 Dining circles

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Basil’s first meeting with Dorian is at an evening

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1987, repr. 1988), p. 528.

<sup>44</sup> Frank Harris, *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions*, Volume 1, (New York: Frank Harris, 1916, repr. 1918), p. 129



dinner party—‘a crush at Lady Brandon’s.’<sup>45</sup> Wilde uses this textual example to make the market dynamics of such a socio-professional gathering clear; Lady Brandon ‘treats her guests entirely as an auctioneer treats his goods’ (174). Attendance is a chore to which Basil must subject himself:

You know we poor artists have to show ourselves in society from time to time, just to remind the public that we are not savages. With an evening coat and a white tie, as you told me once, anybody, even a stock-broker, can gain a reputation for being civilized. (173)

The aesthete Basil is forced by the pressures of the artistic market to attend this stifling high-society world (the marketplace in which he can transform the social and cultural capital accrued by his art into actual capital). And it is fitting that he meets the young man who will later murder him in a situation which threatens to murder his artistry. Bourdieu explores the influences that such high-society salons exerted over artistic production:

The constraints inherent in belonging to the field of power also apply to the literary field owing to exchanges that are established between the powerful—for the most part upstarts in search of legitimacy—and the most conformist or the most consecrated of writers, notably through the subtly hierarchized universe of the salons.<sup>46</sup>

He is writing about the salons of the French Second Empire where writers surrendered their cultural capital to gain the financial capital of the newly wealthy salonières, who had gained political power under Napoleon III but lacked cultural distinction (this is, of course, distinct from the more socially equitable possibilities of the Enlightenment salon-culture, see Introduction, iv). Like Lady Brandon’s crush, these salons were spaces in which the artist was beholden to the rules established by those who were already powerful within society. Although the salon gave artists an opportunity to interact with each other, it also gave artistic

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<sup>45</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde III: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 173. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>46</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 50.

patrons the opportunity to ‘impose their vision on artists and to appropriate for themselves the power of consecration and legitimisation which they hold.’<sup>47</sup>

Like the high-society salons, decadent dining circles were structured around individual figures. Most artists lacked the financial power to be patrons within their own networks, but influential figures could provide ‘a form of symbolic patronage.’<sup>48</sup> As a result, groups tended to congregate around symbolic patrons who provided capital of consecration rather than financial aid. This was a tendency which Le Gallienne observed when writing of Henry Harland in *The Romantic '90s*: ‘He was born to be the life and soul of those *cénacles*, which from their café-tables in “the Quarter” promulgate all those world-shaking “new movements” in art which succeed each other with kaleidoscopic rapidity’ (136). Removing the emphasis on the exchange of cultural capital for financial capital provided a more sympathetic space for sociability—decadent gatherings were not devoid of interpersonal rivalries, but they did not force writers and artists to subordinate themselves to the whims of would-be patrons. As the conversational ‘life and soul’ of a decadent social network, figureheads had the symbolic power to consecrate their meetings as cultural endeavours.

Decadent socialising created a refuge from mainstream fields of power. The decadent groups who shared meals together fashioned a version of sociability as a rejection of what they perceived as a philistine society. Their engagement with the decadent social sphere of writers and artists provided a relief from the dynamics of a high-society world which sought to capitalise on their artistic and cultural reputations. Because dining spaces were being contested throughout the *fin de siècle*, and because the act of consuming food and drink had been consecrated in the decadent mind, restaurants became ideal locations for anti-orthodox groups of cultural producers to socialise. Indeed, the notion of dining was so integral to the self-fashioning of the decadent network that contemporary writers used the semantic field of

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<sup>47</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 51.

<sup>48</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 251.

food to create a frame of reference for their discourses. Whistler, for instance, criticised Wilde for what he perceived as plagiarism using figurative language closely connected with dining. He makes their circle into a metaphorical group of diners around a table:

What has Oscar in common with Art? except that he dines at our tables and picks from our platters the plums for the puddings he peddles in the provinces. Oscar—the amiable, irresponsible, esurient Oscar—with no more sense of a picture than the fit of a coat, has the courage of the opinions—of others.<sup>49</sup>

Whistler's group are united by the act of eating in company and, as a perhaps unintended corollary, Wilde is party to this rarefied world of aesthetic dining society even as Whistler seeks to distance him.

Whistler's Sunday breakfasts provide an example of dining networks in action; during his time living in the White House on Tite Street, he held these meals for a network of likeminded figures so that they could interact and eat in each other's company. It was more than just an excuse for socialising within a circle of friends, neophytes and hangers-on—food was an integral part of the experience. The American painter personally took charge of the menu, prepared the meal, and dressed the table with his much-loved Japanese china; he served food which was inspired by both his homeland and by France.<sup>50</sup> The effect of these morning meals was cosmopolitan. Whistler and his avant-garde company, sharing a cross-cultural meal, created a boundary-blurring, aesthetic space. They had created a 'zone of social weightlessness.'<sup>51</sup> Unlike the countercultural groups who met within the more public sphere of the restaurant, however, those who dined privately with Whistler in Tite Street were not explicitly '*poaching*' from another sphere.<sup>52</sup> Because they met within the private realm, they cannot really be said to manufacture a public arena for their networks.

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<sup>49</sup> James Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: Sheridan Ford, 1890), p. 113. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>50</sup> Devon Cox, *The Street of Wonderful Possibilities: Whistler, Wilde & Sargent in Tite Street* (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2015), p. 47.

<sup>51</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 12.

<sup>52</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. xii.

In contrast to the meeting of minds at Whistler's breakfasts, the public sphere was defined by a widespread anti-intellectualism. Manmohan Ghose (an Indian-born, Oxford-educated associate of the Rhymers' Club) was to complain about the lack of intellectual companionship at Oxford:

The sole success of all attempts at union is in Athletics [...] I have no grudge against athletics ... But it grieves me to see such fine physical endowments and activities lacking what would so enhance their pleasure and value – a little more of reflective and appreciative powers.<sup>53</sup>

Arthur Waugh similarly lamented the anti-intellectual dimension of the English education system in his autobiography *One Man's Road* (1931): 'The elimination of self, the merging of the individual in the crowd—that, I suppose was the ideal of all education in the nineteenth century; it was certainly the principal effect of such a system as I have been describing it.'<sup>54</sup> In response to such societal anti-intellectualism, Whistler's breakfasts demonstrated a desire to forge a space for artistic and intellectual companionship, just as the Rhymers' Club attempted to create an ideal poetic community in the semi-public space of the Cheshire Cheese pub, located off Fleet Street. The proto-decadent club was founded by Yeats and Ernest Rhys to replicate what Sturgis describes as the 'atmosphere of convivial debate' which had been experienced by explorers of the Parisian artistic scene.<sup>55</sup> Their meetings foreshadow explicitly decadent restaurant sociability—many of the Club's alumni, including Le Gallienne and Ernest Dowson, would be represented within the pages of the *Yellow Book*, and many would also appear in the more overtly decadent *Savoy*.

In their use of the Cheese, the Rhymers can be seen to poach from the preserves of wider society. The pub was not the pinnacle of fashionable London, and there was very little decadent about the space they had chosen, but the Rhymers were beginning to insert

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<sup>53</sup> Manmohan Ghose, *Collected Poems*, quoted in Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, p. 163.

<sup>54</sup> Arthur Waugh, *One Man's Road: Being a Picture of Life in a Passing Generation* (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1931), p. 54. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Pallas Athene, 1995, repr. 2011), p. 77.

themselves into the public sphere. Newnham Davis emphasises the unprepossessing nature of the pub in his review:

It is not a cheerful thoroughfare that leads up to the Cheshire Cheese. It is a narrow and dark passage, and the squat little door of the tavern is not inviting, for it is reminiscent of a country public-house. It is not until one is through the sawdusted passage and into the lower room that one is in warmth and comfort. (*Dinners and Diners*, 10)

Nonetheless, the Cheese had a strong literary pedigree (having been frequented by Dr Johnson and Charles Dickens) and offered a nurturing environment for the future decadents. It also featured a series of arcane dining rituals which, Newnham Davis recalls, acted as a social lubricant for conversation. Each evening at 6:30, the host would bring out a huge pudding dish filled with lark, kidney, oyster and steak under a crust. Connoisseurs of the Cheshire Cheese knew to arrive before 6:30 to ensure the best slices—the later one arrived, the more the pudding sank in the bowl as the stew was depleted (10-11). Sharing in the nightly pudding ritual opened up conversational ‘floodgates’ amongst the diners (13); it offered an opportunity to deploy aesthetic social currency.

The Rhymers’ Club was not, however, an entirely successful experiment in using London’s dining culture to aesthetic ends. Yeats admits in *The Trembling of the Veil* (1922) that his attempts to introduce intellectual discussion to the Club ended with ‘gloomy silence.’<sup>56</sup> And yet, he gives a romanticised eulogy to the Rhymers’ Club in his poem ‘The Grey Rock’ (1914), a strange blend of encomium for the Rhymers and a narrative describing Irish warriors fighting off Viking invaders with the help of an invisible man. Yeats begins with a direct address to the ‘*Poets with whom I leaned my trade/ Companions of the Cheshire Cheese.*’<sup>57</sup> He draws a parallel between the companionship of the Rhymers meeting in the Cheshire Cheese, and the battleground loyalties of Prince Murrough’s band of fighters. These

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<sup>56</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Trembling of the Veil, The Collected Works of W. B. Yeats: Volume III: Autobiographies* (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 148. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>57</sup> W. B. Yeats, ‘The Grey Rock,’ *Responsibilities: Poems and a Play* (Churchtown: The Cuala Press, 1914), p. 1. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

worlds are united by the associations of wine, ‘the juice that made them wise’ (2); it is a common denominator providing a transition between the two timeframes. In the midst of the action, Yeats breaks into a eulogy for his dead companions:

*Since, tavern comrades, you have died  
Maybe your images have stood,  
Mere bone and muscle thrown aside,  
Before that roomful of as good.  
You had to face your ends when young –  
‘Twas wine or women or some curse –  
But never made a poorer song  
That you might have a heavier purse;  
Nor gave loud service to a cause  
That you might have a troop of friends.  
You kept the Muses’ sterner laws  
And unrepenting faced your ends,  
And therefore earned the right – and yet  
Dowson and Johnson most I praise –  
To troop with those the world’s forgot,  
And copy their proud steady gaze. (2-3)*

Yeats fashions his circle of poets into martyrs who have transcended the ‘*bone and muscle*’ of the everyday through a virtuous aesthetic obscurity. In contrast, Yeats aligns himself with Aoife’s lover, the invisible warrior who has failed to die alongside his prince and brothers in arms. Yeats’s poetic voice is thus cast in the role of a guilty survivor who must memorialise the lost generation of artistic diners. ‘The Grey Rock’ makes the tavern comradeship of the Rhymers a form of heroic friendship.

The cenacle which congregated around Wilde was perhaps an even more unorthodox dining group. The booze-soaked meetings in the Café Royal were self-consciously extreme performances of excess. Beerbohm, in a letter to Reggie Turner, recounts an encounter following the closing night of *A Woman of No Importance* (1893):

Oscar was at the last night of the Haymarket; with him Bosie and Robbie and Aubrey Beardsley. The last of these had forgotten to put vine-leaves in his hair, but the other three wore thick clusters—especially poor Robbie. Nor have I ever seen Oscar so fatuous ...<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Max Beerbohm, *Letters to Reggie Turner* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1964), pp. 52-3.

The Bacchanalian connotations of the vine leaves play into this cultivated image of performative excess: adorning themselves creates a collective vision of decadent pleasure. It is a self-conscious performance of conspicuous consumption. For those following Wilde's example, the Café Royal became the dining place of choice—his social and cultural capital had consecrated the café as a site of decadent networking. This imparted the slightly suspect heterodox associations of the cenacle to the Café Royal. Hichens parodied the countercultural associations of Wilde's dining group in *The Green Carnation*, where Esmé and Lord Reggie share a late-night dinner and make their meal symbolic of their public reputation: 'Ah! here are our devilled kidneys. I suppose you and I are devilled, Reggie. People say we are so wicked' (23). The implication is that Wilde, and those who ate and drank with him, revelled in appearing as devilled as their kidneys.

The community created around the tables of fashionable restaurants recollected in Wilde's *De Profundis* (1897) can be defined by its embrace of overabundance. Wilde cannot escape from luxuriating in the description of excess even while criticising Bosie for his indulgences—conspicuous consumption was an integral part of the social capital of the cenacle:

what made the extravagances to me at any rate so monotonously uninteresting, as your persistent grasp on my life grew stronger and stronger, was that the money was spent on little more than the pleasures of eating, drinking, and the like. Now and then it is a joy to have one's table red with wine and roses, but you outstripped all taste and temperance.<sup>59</sup>

There is a breakdown of the costs of Wilde's relationship with Bosie: 'I spent with you or on you more than £5000 in actual money, irrespective of the bills I incurred' (41). Wilde's emphasis on his lover's epicurean vices is, given his own predilections for fine dining, a little hypocritical, but he contrasts Bosie's wasteful extravagances with an idealised recollection of a cheap meal he had with Ross in a Soho café—'One of the most delightful dinners' he had

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<sup>59</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde II: De Profundis, Epistola In Carcere Et Vinculis*, ed. Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 41. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

ever had, which ‘cost as many shillings’ as his dinners for Bosie ‘used to cost pounds’(41). While associating meals with Bosie with uncontrolled spending, Wilde celebrates the conversation he had with Ross. There is a notable irony in Wilde praising ‘*Plain living and high thinking*’ (41), but he is suggesting that Bosie lacked the intellectual stamina to be a part of a cerebral counterculture. Wilde dismisses him as lacking ‘the “Oxford temper” in intellectual matters’ (39), a quality necessary to make decadent group dining more than a simple sousing. Wilde is not condemning spending excessively on eating and drinking in its totality, but instead suggests that Bosie was not worthy of his largesse. Excess becomes problematic when it is a part of a toxic social (and in this case, romantic) relationship; productive overindulgence becomes a matter of finding the appropriate social circle.

Wilde challenged the function of the restaurant space as a site of heterosexual, patriarchal authority. His notorious ‘champagne lunches’ with young men in the private rooms of eating establishments added a sexual undercurrent to decadent group meals.<sup>60</sup> He makes the cosmopolitan act of eating out into a covert blazon of his homosexual identity. Such meals in the back rooms of restaurants, with those in the know and rent boys, shut out Victorian bourgeois morality. During the Regina v. Douglas trial, the notion of ‘a champagne lunch’ in ‘a private room’ was shocking to the prosecutor Edward Carson—in no small part because of the cross-class discourse it represented. Carson’s questions about Wilde’s relationship with Edward Shelley, an employee of John Lane, are particularly telling. He insists on describing Shelley as ‘an office boy’ (133) and emphasises the fact that his wages were only ‘eighteen to twenty shillings a week’ (134). Instead of describing his lover as ‘an office boy,’ however, Wilde maintains the ennobling work of bookselling: ‘I consider to be connected in any capacity to a bookseller’s shop is a high privilege’ (137). He challenges Carson’s link between wealth and gentleman-status. For Wilde, being a gentleman reflects

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<sup>60</sup> Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003, repr. 2004), p. 122. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



the way one is treated by one's peers: 'I regarded him as a gentleman. I had always seen him treated as a gentleman' (134-5). What seems to outrage Carson most about Wilde's dining habits is not their homosexual nature. Rather, he is appalled that Wilde, literary celebrity, Irish gentry, and established man-about-town, would bring working class men into London's elite restaurants. He fails to understand that, by Wilde's measure, Shelley's behaviour and productive sociability make him a gentleman—a direct contrast with the account of Bosie in *De Profundis*, where family wealth and property do not make up for his inability to contribute to the decadent discourse of sociability. Wilde's description of his dinners as 'feasting with panthers' (*De Profundis*, 130) could be interpreted as a wilfully poetic attempt to ignore the seedy side of his relationships. This reading, however, ignores the very real transgression which Wilde's dining habits represented—his choice of dinner companions challenged the strict social codes of Victorian England. He was using the semi-public dining space to bring the socially unacceptable into polite society.

#### **2.4 Performative dining**

The idea of private versus public spaces is integral to understanding the dynamics of decadent dining and its transgressive potential. The private rooms of restaurants allowed decadents to stage their collective visions of shared pleasure and sociability within a semi-private space. These rooms were at a remove from the more public sphere of the main room, but, nonetheless, remained part of the restaurant world. During the Wilde trials, Carson fixated on whether Wilde's meals with Shelley had taken place in a private suite at the Albemarle, or in the main room. There is a definite sense in fin-de-siècle considerations of the restaurant space that there was something illicit about private rooms. The implication was that they could conceal all manner of sins. In de Certeau's terms, '*space is a practiced place,*' and the decadents transform the function of private rooms into transgressive social spaces through

their riotous behaviour.<sup>61</sup> The freedom which these closed spaces afforded the networks who socialised within them is demonstrated by a letter Dowson wrote to Henry Davray recounting a trip he had taken to France with Beardsley and Leonard Smithers:

We went to see Lautrec & Beardsley took some haschish for the first time. There was no result for some hours: then suddenly, while we were dining with Smithers at Margery's the haschish began to work very powerfully. Luckily we were in a *cabinet* or I think we should have been turned out—for Beardsley's laughter was so tumultuous that it infected the rest of us—who had not taken haschish & we all behaved like imbeciles.<sup>62</sup>

As Dowson's letter suggests, the private rooms were governed by different, less stringent rules—if nothing else, it seems to have been harder to be thrown out of a *cabinet*. Despite having excluded the general public, such instances of decadent dining were very much performances: back-room diners were a closed-circle unlike the wider stage offered by the main room, but they still created a social identity through their displays of collective pleasure. Dowson, Smithers and Lautrec act as the drugged Beardsley's appreciative audience. Newnham Davis was also aware of the performative nature of restaurant dining in his role as an observer who is content to watch the social butterflies around him go about their dinners. In his review of the *Savoy*, he observes that 'the view of one's neighbours and their wives is no unimportant part of the Sunday dinner' (*Dinners and Diners*, 73). His self-imposed function as audience even informs his choice of seating: 'I wanted to be given one of the two tables on either side of the door of entrance, tables from which one can see better than any others the coming and going of the guests' (74). He terms the social medley around him a 'society salad' (76), and the performances of the decadents dominated this metaphorical salad.

The 1890 exhibition of the New English Art Club, organised by Walter Sickert, demonstrated another aspect of performative consuming culture. The NEAC was a wilfully

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<sup>61</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 117.

<sup>62</sup> Ernest Dowson, *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, eds. Desmond Flowers & Henry Maas (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1967), p. 345.

cosmopolitan network of artists (many inspired by Whistler), who had even considered naming themselves ‘The Society of Anglo-French Painters.’<sup>63</sup> They demonstrated their radical opposition to the norms of artistic display by holding the exhibition not in a gallery, but in the domestic setting of Humphrey Mansions, a newly constructed block of flats. Sickert’s decision to serve tea to the guests was an equally unconventional statement: tea-drinking performed opposition to the norms of the gallery setting.<sup>64</sup> It was more than simple refreshment and made the figurative consumption of art into a quite literal act of consumption. The gallery-goers could sip tea, admire the paintings and, most importantly, make their purchases. Unlike decadent binges at the Café Royal, the NEAC performed a version of respectable, domestic consumption. Transplanting this over-decorous nicety into a gallery-space, however, does court scandal.

Beardsley was clearly fascinated by the decadent possibilities which performances of eating allowed and he makes the performative potential of dinner explicit in *Venus and Tannhäuser*. Dinner provides an opportunity for displays of lust in the libidinal world of the Venusberg. If conversation acted as the prime form of social currency amongst decadent social networks, then in the Venusberg it is sex. The sex of the novel is a very public affair and Beardsley foregrounds the question of audience—this is especially true at the dinner which Venus holds to mark Tannhäuser’s arrival. Here Beardsley provides an extensive list of names, predilections and scandals:

Pulex and Cyril and Marisca and Cathelin opened a fire of raillery. The infidelities of Cerise, the difficulties of Brancas, Sarmean’s caprices that morning in the lily garden, Thorilliere’s declining strength, Astarte’s affection for Roseola, Felix’s impossible member, Cathelin’s passion for Sulpilia’s poodle, Sola’s passion for herself, the nasty bite that Marisca gave Chloe, the *épilatière* of Pulex, Cyril’s diseases, Butor’s illness, Maryx’s tiny cemetery, Lesbia’s profound fourth letter, and a thousand amatory follies of the day were discussed.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Walter Sickert: A Life* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 151.

<sup>64</sup> Sturgis, *Walter Sickert*, p. 177.

<sup>65</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (London: For Private Circulation, 1907), pp. 41-2. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

The listing of characters creates the impression that Beardsley is addressing a coterie audience. By introducing characters as if readers were acquainted with them, Potolsky argues, 'Beardsley's novel mimics the literary effect of writing for a counterpublic.'<sup>66</sup> Like Wilde's feasts with panthers, the libidinal meals of the Venusberg are spectacles for the initiated only; reading *Venus and Tannhäuser* gives the reader passage into the cenacles and cliques which surround Venus:

I wish I could be allowed to tell you what occurred round table 15 just at this moment. It would amuse you very much, and would give you a capital idea of the habits of Venus' retinue. Indeed, for deplorable reasons, by far the greatest part of what was said and done at this supper must remain unrecorded and even unsuggested. (42-3)

Beardsley uses the textual space of his novel to give the illusion of accepting exclusivity, but he simultaneously suggests, tongue-in-cheek, that his reader is not fully initiated into the mysteries of the Venusberg. This technique creates the impression that there are networks within networks, maintaining the exclusive appeal of decadent society. Beardsley implicitly creates a hierarchy of decadent sociability in which key individuals became taste-makers of fin-de-siècle networks, interlinked figureheads each with their circle of acolytes.

Beardsley pays close attention to the meal that is served, linking the chef's culinary performances and the conversational performance of the guests as the repast 'unloosed all the décolleté spirits of astonishing conversation and atrocious laughter' (37). The list of French food reflects the Francophile cosmopolitanism of fin-de-siècle dining culture. It also serves to heighten the impression of gourmet indulgences and sensory excesses, much like the list structure of *A Rebours*:

the *Dorade bouillie sauce maréchale*, the *ragout aux langues de carpes*, the *ramereaux à la charnière*, the *ciboulette de gibier à l'espagnole*, the *pâté de cuisses d'oiseaux aux pois de Monsalvie*, the *queues d'agneau au clair de lune*, the *artichauts à la Grecque*, the *charlotte de pommes à la Lucy Waters*, the *bombes à la marée*, and the *glaces aux rayons d'or*. (37)

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<sup>66</sup> Matthew Potolsky, 'The Decadent Counterpublic,' *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*, 48 (2007), p. 17. Accessed 15/06/16.

Using French terminology to convey a cosmopolitan distinction to his culinary descriptions and sexual innuendos, he ties together the Venusberg's cultural capitals of food and sex, which, in the dinner party setting, are explicitly connected. For instance, Beardsley describes Claude performing cunnilingus upon Venus as 'taking his coffee *aux deux colonnes*' (43), and Sophie becoming 'very intimate with an empty champagne bottle' and swearing 'it had made her *enceinte*' (42). The potentially blasphemous overtones of Sophie's semi-virgin pregnancy and the decadent associations of the drained champagne bottle intensify the scandal. Neither Venus nor Tannhäuser eat much, but Beardsley figures the pleasure they take in each other's bodies in terms of eating—Venus nibbles his skin while Tannhäuser 'slaked his parched lips at her mouth' (43). The public nature of the orgy ensures that the panoply of sex acts becomes a performative dining experience.

The ability to ensure a sympathetic audience is central to the semi-public nature of decadent restaurant spaces. Unlike Newnham Davis, watching his 'society salad' from a remove, the denizens of the Venusberg are both observers and participants in the activity of dining. As a climax to the meal, they even watch a ballet while they eat fruit and drink wine. Eating and watching are intrinsically linked in the novel where Beardsley's account of the daily masturbation of Adolphe, Venus's pet unicorn, combines dining, sex and performance:

The Queen bared her left arm to the elbow, and with the soft underneath of it made amazing movements horizontally upon the tightly-strung instrument. When the melody began to flow, the unicorn offered up an astonishing vocal accompaniment. (70-1)

Potolsky argues that Adolphe is 'akin to both artist and audience;' he is subject to Venus's ministrations, but then produces a musical accompaniment.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, Venus's morning ritual is described in explicitly musical language, and the inhabitants will not begin breakfast until they have heard 'the outburst of these venereal sounds' (71). As a decadent performer,

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<sup>67</sup> Potolsky, 'The Decadent Counterpublic,' p. 21.

Adolphe has control over the social rituals of consumption; decadent spectacle creates a set of social customs which influence the practices of sociability.

The preoccupation with performative dining was more than a literary pastime. Beardsley was involved with the 1894 dinner held to celebrate the launch of the *Yellow Book*. The Hotel d'Italie provided a suitably (if unfortunately) bohemian setting for the meal according to Arthur Waugh, who described it as 'a smelly and ill-favoured place.'<sup>68</sup> Nonetheless, it offered a space in which like-minded diners could interact while eating a shared dinner. These diners included both men and women, reflecting a broad spread of social and literary personalities: women guests included the poet Pearl Craigie, Waugh's wife Catherine Charlotte Waugh, and Olivia Shakespear (the *Yellow Book* dinner was her first meeting with Yeats).<sup>69</sup> Unlike the Rhymers' Club meetings at the Cheese, the artistic diners at the Hotel d'Italie were able to interrogate their ideologies while dining. Waugh writes that the space was 'heavy with overcharged atmosphere and unmelodious with cackle.'<sup>70</sup> It was a noisy, bohemian occasion and the guests ate and drank together in a shared vision of sociability and pleasure. Waugh seems to be aware of the significance of such conversation, writing 'The dinner, quâ meal, was bad, bad, bad: but everyone talked to his heart's content.'<sup>71</sup> It was an opportunity for decadent conversational social capital to be converted into cultural capital through speeches. This brand of semi-public conversation was a performance in and of itself. The diners created a carnivalesque space of convivial chaos. Lionel Johnson's repeated (and presumably drunken) heckle of 'I abominate Beardsley' contributed to the orchestrated misrule of the meal.<sup>72</sup> The conversational rules of polite

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<sup>68</sup> Arthur Waugh, quoted in John Harwood, *Olivia Shakespear and W. B. Yeats* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), p. 31.

<sup>69</sup> Harwood, *Olivia Shakespear and W. B. Yeats*, pp. 30, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Waugh, quoted in Harwood, *Olivia Shakespear and W. B. Yeats*, p. 31.

<sup>71</sup> Waugh, quoted in Harwood, *Olivia Shakespear and W. B. Yeats*, p. 32.

<sup>72</sup> Waugh, quoted in Harwood, *Olivia Shakespear and W. B. Yeats*, p. 32.

society were consensually suspended in favour of a rowdy performance of hectoring conviviality.

The witticisms and revelry in the Hotel d'Italie were, much like the ribaldry of the *Punch* Brotherhood's weekly dinners, an integral part of the creative process. Sickert's speech on this occasion demonstrates how the decadent dinner performances at the magazine's launch had a serious function. He used the space to articulate the artistic ideologies motivating the *Yellow Book*:

he looked forward to the time when authors would be put in their proper places, by being compelled to write their stories and poems round pictures, which should be supplied to them ready-made by their task-masters, the artists. (*One Man's Road*, 255).

Such a statement represents the logical culmination of ideas circulating throughout the social networks in which he and Beardsley moved. It drew heavily upon Whistler's theories of art, which had introduced this rebellious, anti-textual ethos into British painting. Whistler saw no necessity for images to be illustrative or narrative in their content, thus Beardsley and Harland, as editors of the *Yellow Book*, insisted on maintaining a separation between written and visual entries. The decadent display at the Hotel was a riot of drink and talk which served a primarily social function by forging links of friendship between the magazine's contributors. Decadent sociability thrived in this fusion of association and intellectualism because it facilitated both interpersonal and professional connections. The philosophical messages of the speeches were enhanced by the carousal rather than drowned out in the noise. The *Yellow Book* group redefined the social codes of politeness for their gathering and so redefined what was appropriate behaviour for that space: what could be perceived as hostile behaviour in the outside world becomes part of the performance of supportive decadent sociability.

## 2.5 Consuming spectacle in the city space

Beyond the sphere of the restaurant, decadents engaged with other forms of urban culture. As in the eating places they frequented, they fashioned themselves as both consumers of and performers in the spectacle of late-Victorian metropolitan life, and decadent commentaries on the metropolis became part of a discourse of praise. Le Gallienne's 'Ballad of London' (1892), for instance, is a celebration of the unnatural beauty of the decadent city space. Nocturnal London is figured as a 'Great flower that opens but at night,/ Great city of the midnight sun,/ Whose day begins when day is done.'<sup>73</sup> In creating a decadent city space, Le Gallienne mixes natural and artificial imagery ('Like dragonflies, the hansoms hover,' 26), reinforcing the city's attractive liminality—it is a place where boundaries can be blurred.<sup>74</sup> The poem shows an awareness of the city's morbid appetites, but, rather than condemning this death-fed beauty, Le Gallienne chooses to embrace it.

Upon thy petals butterflies,  
But at thy root, some say, there lies  
A world of weeping trodden things,  
Poor worms that have not eyes or wings.

From out corruption of their woe  
Springs this bright flower that charms us so,  
Men die and rot deep out of sight  
To keep this jungle-flower bright. (27)

The city is saturated in physical, aesthetic and artistic experience, and the 'corruption' from which this beauty springs is an integral element of the decadent metropolis.

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<sup>73</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, 'The Ballad of London', *R.L. Stevenson and Other Poems, 1895* (Poole: Woodstock Books, 1996), p. 26. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>74</sup> The liminality of the late-Victorian metropolis is well evidenced in critical studies. Judith R. Walkowitz has shown how the idea of the flâneur emerged from the construction of a city with clear boundaries between districts and classes, and how late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century London functioned as a cosmopolitan space. Linda Dryden explores how gothic writers create an urban gothic landscape which is built around duality. Richard J. Walker suggests that this same duality and liminality fashions the city as a site of modernity and crisis. Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (London: Virago Press, 1992). Judith R. Walkowitz, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012). Linda Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles*. Richard J. Walker, *Labyrinths of Deceit: Culture, Modernity and Identity in the Nineteenth Century* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).



De Certeau suggests that even before the advent of skyscrapers, cities were conceived of from above—a ‘scopic’ view of the city.<sup>75</sup> Decadent city-dwellers, however, reject the scopic in favour of the eye within the city. They treat moving through the streets as an act of artistry: it allows them to take on the mantle of the disinterested observer. Such fin-de-siècle versions of the metropolis draw on Baudelaire’s understanding of the dandy-flâneur:

The crowd is his domain, just as the air is the bird’s, and water that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to merge with the crowd. For the perfect idler, for the passionate observer it becomes an immense source of enjoyment to establish his dwelling in the throng, in the ebb and flow, the bustle, the fleeting and the infinite.<sup>76</sup>

The flâneur’s fascination with the sights and sensations of the crowded city and Baudelaire’s emphasis on their ‘enjoyment’ undercuts the dandiacal disinterest he celebrates in ‘The Painter of Modern Life.’ By engaging in street-level interactions as urban consumers and performers, decadents reaffirmed the city as the locus of their shared pleasures.

The decadents’ idealised vision of the defiantly urban space celebrated the illicit sex and decay that worried respectable Victorian commentators. The sexologist John Laws Milton had suggested that early urbanisation had been responsible for the emergence of the malady spermatorrhoea: ‘Most likely the complaint began to affect men as they first commenced abandoning the rude life of the hunter and the shepherd for that of citizens – when they began for the safety and greater ease of living, to sleep in the low-browed, pent-up rooms of the close-built, little fortified cities and towns of the olden times; for such is its nature.’<sup>77</sup> But the implicit sexuality of the demi-monde urban space was an attraction for the decadents—as demonstrated by Dowson’s eroticised praise of his lover’s ‘bought red mouth’ in ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’ (1896).<sup>78</sup> Beardsley’s city illustrations, many of which were produced during his tenure at the *Yellow Book*, use urban spaces as the

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<sup>75</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 92.

<sup>76</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘The Painter of Modern Life,’ *Selected Writings*, p. 399.

<sup>77</sup> John Laws Milton, *Pathology and Treatment of Spermatorrhoea*, 12<sup>th</sup> edition (London: Henry Renshaw, 1887), p. 1.

<sup>78</sup> Ernest Dowson, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae,’ *Verses* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 17.

backdrop to night-time intrigues, moments caught by gas-light. The stark contrasts between dark and light in 'Lady Gold's Escort' (1894, Figure 2.3) articulate the morbid yet fascinating beauty of the decadents' demi-monde world. The picture depicts another side to urban bought sex where fashionable young men surround a wealthy dowager. To quote Zatlin, 'this drawing presented to the suburban middle-class 1890's audience the spectacle of wealthy social outsiders—those who could flout middle-class morality.'<sup>79</sup> Beardsley's worldly socialites meet outside the Lyceum Theatre; their performance in front of Lady Gold echoes the performance taking place outside the frame of the image. Such preoccupations with the erotic commerce of the city were used to define a decadent group identity in opposition to conservative understandings of morality.

The cover for the prospectus of the *Yellow Book* (1894, Figure 2.4) shows a woman visiting a bookshop by night, intimately aligning decadence with the vision of the nocturnal city. Beardsley demonstrates the night-time setting through an innovative massed field of black, broken by the white of lit streetlamps. The disapproving figure of the shopkeeper, clad in a clown's costume, emerges from the building—the impotent face of society's disapproval in the face of this metropolitan new woman consumer. The woman, for Stephen Calloway, represents the seedier side of London intruding into the bourgeois world of the shop's proprietor. In Calloway's words, this woman 'proclaims her, at best, dubious social position by the mere fact of her nocturnal shopping expedition, alone and unchaperoned in the street.'<sup>80</sup> Zatlin, on the other hand, focuses on the radical independence of the woman who ignores the ridiculous clown-clad figure in favour of the book bins in front of her. She is an independent consumer who refuses to have her tastes dictated to her.<sup>81</sup> As an incarnation of the decadent's ideal consuming public, she is metropolitan, independent and unafraid of

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<sup>79</sup> Zatlin, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, p. 105.

<sup>80</sup> Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley*, (London: V & A Publications, 1998, repr 1998), p. 107.

<sup>81</sup> Zatlin, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, p. 71.



**Figure 2.3**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'Lady Gold's Escort,' *Yellow Book* 3 (1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

Announcement

# The Yellow Book

An Illustrated Quarterly

Volume I April, 1894



London : Elkin Mathews & John Lane

Price Five Shillings Net

**Figure 2.4**

Aubrey Beardsley, Prospectus cover for the *Yellow Book* (1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

bourgeois disapproval. Through her use of the city space, I would suggest, she makes her perusal of the wares into a performance of decadent identity—the theatrical connotations of the scene are framed by the bookseller’s Pierrot costume which turns him into a creature of the boardwalks. The theatrical overtones of the picture suggest that Beardsley is staging a decadent vision of the city and so ridiculing the shopkeeper’s middle-class performative outrage at the liberated metropolitan decadent.

The decadent love of performance primed decadents to appreciate theatres, music halls and opera houses since they were places built for the sole purpose of performance. The dancer represents an ideal vision of the performer for the decadents: dance transcends the need for language in its reliance on movement; it represents the moment of performance in its most essential form. Thus, in George Egerton’s (Mary Chavelita Dunne) ‘A Cross Line’ (1893), when the protagonist imagines herself as a truly powerful, liberated figure, she sees herself as a dancer:

she fancies she is on the stage of an ancient theatre, out in the open air, with hundreds of faces upturned towards her. She is gauze-clad in a cobweb garment of wondrous tissue; her arms are clasped by jewelled snakes, and one with quivering diamond fangs coils round her hips; her hair floats loosely, and her feet are sandal-clad ... She bounds forwards and dances, bends her lissome waist, and curves her slender arms, and gives to the soul of each man what he craves be it good or evil. And she can feel now, lying here in the shade of Irish hills, with her head resting on her scarlet shawl and her eyes closed, the grand intoxicating power of swaying all these human souls to wonder and applause. She can see herself with parted lips and panting, rounded breasts, and a dancing devil in each glowing eye, sway voluptuously to the wild music that rises, now slow, now fast, now deliriously wild, seductive, intoxicating, with a human note of passion in its strain.<sup>82</sup>

The imagined dance places Egerton’s unnamed protagonist in a position of sexual authority—it is a performance of female sexual liberation. The focus on her ‘parted lips,’ ‘rounded breasts,’ and voluptuous movements does not create a simple object of desire, but rather a figure who can not only control the desire of her audience, but also her own. Since it takes place in her daydream, Egerton’s protagonist becomes both performer and witness to the

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<sup>82</sup> George Egerton, ‘A Cross Line,’ *Keynotes* (Cambridge: University Press, 1893), pp. 27-8.

spectacle of her own performance. This kind of mystically empowered dancer is fused with the iconography of the stage dancer in Beardsley's illustration 'The Stomach Dance' (Figure 2.5) for Wilde's *Salome* (1893 and 1894). Beardsley figures Salome's sexual power through the flowers which adorn her breasts and the priapic state of the grotesque musician in the foreground. Like Egerton's protagonist, Beardsley's Salome is not a victim of the desires of others. In decadent spaces, the imagined dancer is elevated into a source of power in her own right: through her performance, she stages and takes control of her own identity.

Watching a performance was a group activity for decadents, and it was an act of participation in the display. In Lautrec's *La danse mauresque* (1895), one in his series of paintings of the Moulin Rouge, Wilde watches the dancers while also being clearly recognisable in the foreground amongst representations of Lautrec and his friends. Even though the painter depicts only the back of Wilde's head amongst the audience, the playwright's celebrity makes his appearance in the painting a performative act, and his presence explicitly marks out the concert hall as a locus of decadent socialising. This audience/performer dynamic is epitomised by Beardsley's *Yellow Book* illustration 'The Wagnerites' (1894, Figure 2.6). The framing of the image places us within the black-and-white audience of *Tristan und Isolde*—Beardsley thus casts his viewers in the dual role of fictive Wagnerite and observer of his artwork. One man in particular is looking not towards the stage, but out into the audience and beyond the page. This figure can be said to recognise that he and his fellows are as much a part of the performance as the unseen singers on stage.

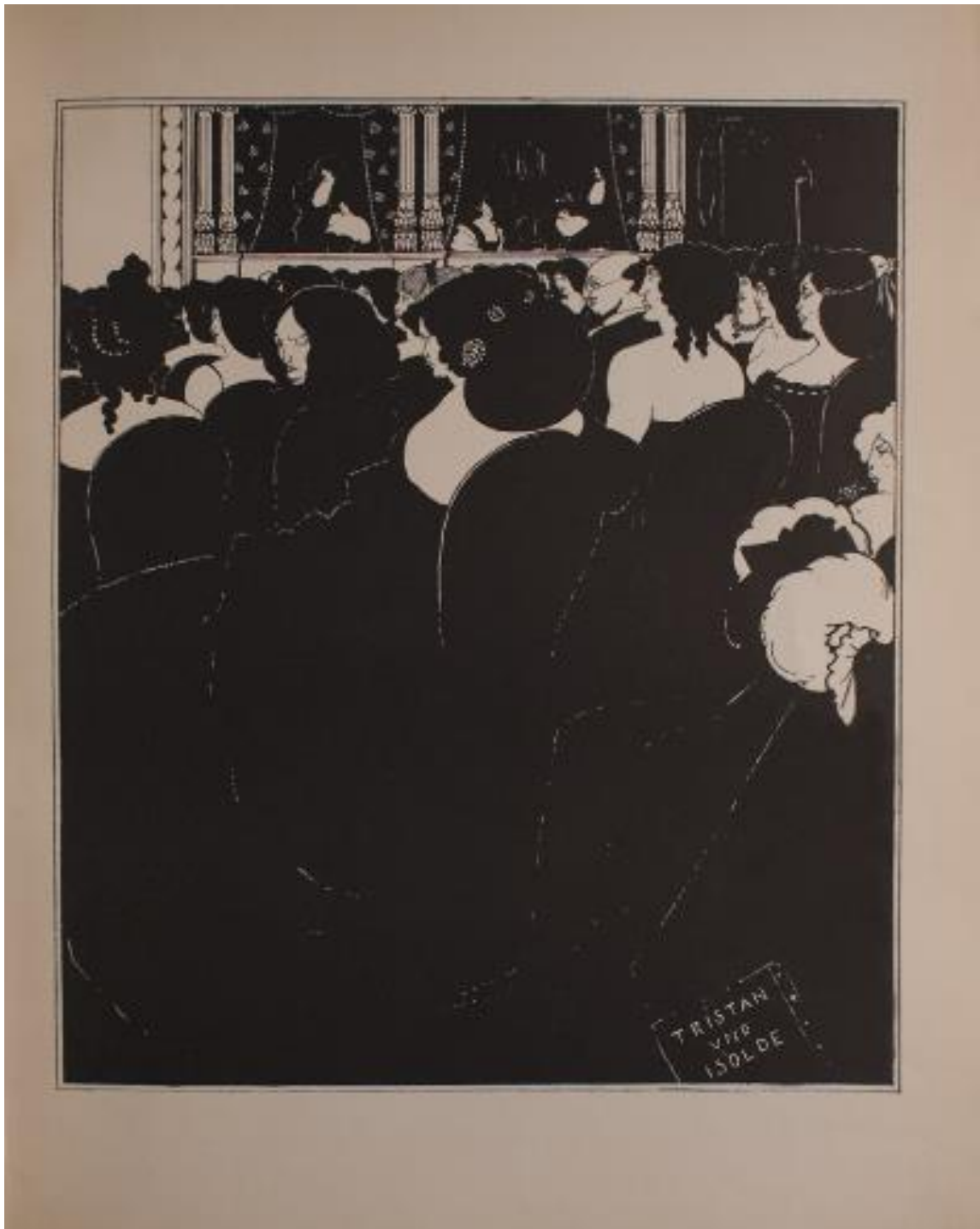
Even as consuming audience members, the decadents maintained a performative element in their behaviour. The performative audience member challenges the supposed anonymity of the passive viewer and problematises the role of the performer, recalling the sympathetic audience which had fashioned a niche within fin-de-siècle restaurants. The decadents attended performances and wrote about what they saw, spending their cultural





**Figure 2.5**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Stomach Dance,' *Salome* (London: Bodley Head, 1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.



**Figure 2.6**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Wagnerites,' *Yellow Book* 2 (1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.



capital to consecrate the medium of performance. Because of its association with dance, the decadents particularly loved the possibilities of the music-hall space, where audiences were thrilled by spectacles of song, dance, comic routines, acrobatics and even animal performances. In creating a music-hall discourse, they were asserting their social identities as consumers and performers.

Barry Faulk sees a reifying effect in Victorian understandings of the authenticity of music hall. While his overall argument is persuasive, it is less convincing when he suggests Beerbohm and Symons straightforwardly fit this model (although he does not explicitly reference them as decadents). In the Victorian context, music-hall entertainments were associated with popular culture, and were often seen as an authentically and uniquely British form of expression. Such claims of authenticity served to reify an idealised national vision of music hall: commentators were using the medium to promote a model of a working-class Britain that had never really existed. There are problems inherent in such a reading as Faulk notes: ‘The search for the authentic within a performing art inevitably produces essentialist claims that overlook modes of production.’<sup>83</sup> Reinstating the narrative of music hall marketing and production, however, shows that popular music hall was becoming the domain of the bourgeois consumer—Faulk argues that the increasing professionalisation of music-hall criticism created ‘a structure for the integration of the music hall into the canons of middle-class culture.’<sup>84</sup> Managers were keen to move away from an outlaw image, romanticised notions of a free and rebellious music hall, in order to attract this new lucrative audience. It may have become a more respectable middle-class form of entertainment, but decadent commentators ascribed cultural capital to the music halls as spaces of defiant opposition to bourgeois values. Faulk’s analysis interrogates this position as a by-product of

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<sup>83</sup> Barry J. Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>84</sup> Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity*, p. 24.

nationalistic essentialist narratives. However, decadent thought valued the artificial above the authentic (see Chapter 1.2); desiring authenticity was therefore not a decadent stance. If music hall, as Linda Dowling suggests, ‘had dispensed with the laborious theatrical realism of the legitimate Victorian stage productions,’ then decadent consumers engaged wholeheartedly with the resultant self-conscious artificiality of the music hall’s staged world.<sup>85</sup> In interpreting decadent readings of the music hall as reductionist appropriations of a mass medium art form, Faulk does not seem to allow for the possibility that decadents identified with the medium and its spectacles artistically rather than simply exploiting it.

Decadent music hall criticism was not, as Faulk suggests, simply a matter of seizing the authority of the professional critic from the cultural establishment; instead, decadent commentators looked for a critical space which could reflect their heterodox performances of identity. Celebrating their urban music-hall experiences through critical writing allowed aficionados of the halls to make their visits into literary performances of their engagement. They did not write about the music hall because it was different, but because they could identify with it and because they engaged with their subject, seeing elements of their own performative tendencies reflected on the popular stage. Beerbohm’s memorial essay for the music hall celebrity Dan Leno (1904) does not dwell on the authenticity or innate Englishness of Leno’s performance, but presents him as an artist in his own right ‘radiating an ethereal essence all his own.’<sup>86</sup> Beerbohm describes Leno in terms reminiscent of the encomiums which decadents wrote for their friends: ‘Yet in his hand, how glorious it blazed, illuminating and warming! All that trite and unlovely material, how new and beautiful it became for us through Dan Leno’s genius!’ (331). At no point in the essay is Leno essentialised or

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<sup>85</sup> Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986, repr. 1989), p. 236.

<sup>86</sup> Max Beerbohm, ‘Dan Leno,’ *The Prince of Minor Writers: The Selected Essays of Max Beerbohm* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2015), p. 332. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

trivialised—Beerbohm takes the man and his performances seriously as an artistic expression worthy of remembrance.

Critics like Beerbohm, Faulk argues, used music hall criticism ‘to develop an image of London music hall as an essential adversary to monolithic establishment conformity, forged by consumer capital, supervised by professional critics, and resolute in its hostility to reigning discourses of propriety while at the same time quintessentially English.’<sup>87</sup> For him, it becomes a reifying process which sought to establish a new kind of critic—a parvenu aficionado in opposition to traditional structures of criticism. Freeing themselves from the bourgeois cultural associations of critical networks allowed writers like Symons to mythicise themselves as amateur experts who worked outside professional circles. MacLeod identifies this as a decadent hallmark: ‘the concept of dilettantism allowed [the decadents] to construct themselves outside the cycle of production.’<sup>88</sup> The music hall became a space where decadent critics could create cultural capital and thus accrue status within their networks. Even as amateurs, their performance of cultural authority evidences de Certeau’s argument that ‘in the Expert, competence is translated into social authority.’<sup>89</sup>

The link between criticism and expertise is troubling for Faulk; he argues that it arises from a classist discourse based around a notion of ‘a barbarous and stupid England that was nonetheless truly English.’<sup>90</sup> According to this reading, music hall’s supposed authenticity relied on removing any artistic agency from music-hall performers, rendering them passive receptacles for an English zeitgeist. He misreads the anti-national focus of decadence in his emphasis on the uniquely English quality of the medium. Decadent writers are less concerned with the inherent Englishness of music hall than with the fact that it offered a vision of English sociability and culture outside the middle-class drawing room. Rather than a

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<sup>87</sup> Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity*, p. 25.

<sup>88</sup> MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, p. 30.

<sup>89</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 7.

<sup>90</sup> Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity*, p. 32.

reification, decadent music-hall writing is ultimately a sympathetic reading of the medium; the decadents' art self-consciously mediated the literary canon and their writing recognised an affinity for mediation in the music hall.

Arthur Symons was perhaps the most prolific celebrant of the (semi-fictive) decadent music hall. He canonises it as a performative space where corrupt sensuality, which decadent writers associated with the metropolitan space, was given free rein. Symons' music-hall-set verses potentially run the risk of falling into the essentialist narrative which Faulk explores. The poems of the London halls are, however, almost indistinguishable from his poems about the Parisian Moulin Rouge. Instead of trying to uncover a uniquely English outlaw space, Symons creates an internationale of resistance to the status quo. His poem 'Emmy' (1891) plays on the associations of deviancy which attracted the decadents. Though they are not yet on the stage, the women are intimately involved with the scandalous performances of the hall.

There, in the midst of the villainous dancing-hall,  
Leaning across the table, over the beer,  
While the music maddened the whirling skirts of the ball,  
As the midnight hour drew near,

There with the women, haggard, painted and old,  
One fresh bud in a garland withered and stale,  
She, with her innocent voice and her clear eyes told  
Tale after shameless tale.<sup>91</sup>

The poet establishes a clear contrast between Emmy's purity and her 'villainous' surroundings, but she is nonetheless an enthusiastic participant in the 'shameless' storytelling taking place amongst the women. Symons' poetic voice may declare that she will 'dance the dance of death' (117) and may speculate about the punishments awaiting those who lured her into the music hall, but this condemnation is only surface deep. As is the case in much urban decadent literature, the transgressions that the music hall space facilitated and the sociability of the communal interactions are supremely alluring.

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<sup>91</sup> Arthur Symons, 'Emmy,' *The Collected Works of Arthur Symons: Poems: Volume 1* (London: Martin Secker, 1924), p. 116. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

## 2.6 Decadent survivals

The social performances of networks that occupy a place leave an indelible mark on its cultural significance; though the original performances may be transitory, accrued cultural capital persists and marks out the distinction of a space. Decadent writers and artists had consecrated performative spaces, which were thus loaded with the associations of the groups who had met, dined and feasted their eyes on the tantalising displays within them. De Certeau's definition of 'place' seems apposite in understanding these post-decadent spaces: 'Places are fragmentary and inward-turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve, remaining in an enigmatic state, symbolizations encrusted in the pain or the pleasure of the body.'<sup>92</sup>

After Wilde's conviction in 1895, there was a public backlash against those associated with decadence. The effects of this widespread condemnation seem to have affected even the restaurant spaces which the decadents frequented. Newnham Davis records some of these repercussions after visiting the Café Royal in 1897—now, apparently, a place where a retired Lieutenant Colonel like Newnham Davis could feel quite comfortable in taking his sister-in-law, the daughter of a dean. A new maître de called Oddenino, he recalls, had instituted changes to the café regime (no doubt in the light of the Wilde trials). He lamented, however, that some diners still feared 'the company that frequented the restaurant was rather Bohemian' (*Dinners and Diners*, 210). Indeed, Newnham Davis's review of the Café implicitly suggests that the restaurant space still contained the aura of transgression that it had in Wilde's days of swilling absinthe with his followers. Wilde's cenacle may have vacated the restaurant space, but their collective vision of pleasure remained. The Café Royal, if no longer specifically decadent, persisted as a space where diners could playfully push against the boundaries of polite society. In this performative context, Newnham Davis's sister-in-law

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<sup>92</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 108.

can laugh too loudly at a joke and reject the social conventions seemingly upheld by her respectable male chaperone:

I reproved her austerely, telling her that if she laughed thus she would be taken for an actress. Whereon she retorted that she did not want to be taken for an actress, but that she wanted to be one. I opened my eyes in a query, and she said that if actresses were given every night such a dinner as she had eaten she wanted to be an actress. (214)

Newnham Davis's story is above all an affectionate anecdote—his horror at his sister-in-law's behaviour is tongue-in-cheek—but it nonetheless conveys a decorous version of the performances of social upheaval in which Wilde and his friends took part. As a site of decadent consumption, the Café has become inextricably linked with the social identity and personality of its most famous diner: the quality of the dining experience could make even the respectable daughter of a dean long for the illicit world of acting.

## Chapter 3

### Interior Design and the Construction of Interiority

Decadents consciously appropriated locations of the public sphere in order to create spaces for socialising and delineating their artistic identities, but they also exploited the possibilities offered by the private sphere to further their collective self-fashioning. This chapter will examine the decadent tendency to transform the private home into a semi-public site of display. While utilising existing restaurant spaces for their socialising, the decadents consciously constructed interior spaces to house and display a vision of the decadent self. The individuals who created these decorated spaces used decadent acts of self-creation as a means of proclaiming an alliance to their socio-cultural networks. Space was, in many ways, a socialising mechanism. Decadent interiors might have been constructed in idiosyncratic styles and within private homes, but they were very much part of a collective identity. Aesthetic and decadent writers and artists deployed their ‘capital of consecration,’ borrowing Bourdieu’s phrase, to secure interior design a prestigious place in their ideologies of sociability.<sup>1</sup> Such an elevation of interior design has similarities to their relationship with the semi-public act of group dining, but it is here tied to material spatiality itself rather than to an activity which occurs within a space. Decorating one’s home in a particular style, often linked to the emergent Art Nouveau movement, was therefore an act of allegiance to the wider countercultural cause espoused by the producers of decadent culture.

I will argue that interior design was often used to display a simulacrum of the owner or designer’s interior self publicly to both an appreciative audience of artistic connoisseurs and a consuming public. De Certeau and Gaston Bachelard are key critics for my conceptualisation of the significance of location and I will bring together their approaches to

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 148.

explore questions raised by fin-de-siècle interior design: de Certeau's materialist approach to the use of actual spaces (primarily those of the city), with Bachelard's more psychoanalytical stance on the interior space. Applying de Certeau's principle, that '*space is a practiced place,*' to the field of decadent interior design uncovers a performative dynamic within the private world; designing and decorating an avant-garde room sent a clear signal about one's aesthetic position to visitors.<sup>2</sup> Bachelard's concept of topoanalysis, 'the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives,' offers an interpretative frame whereby the self is mapped onto the locations it occupies; the psychological symbolism of the interior exposes the link between intimate spaces and the people who inhabit and use them.<sup>3</sup> I will use de Certeau's sense of physical space and Bachelard's sense of the psychology of a room to show how late-Victorian interior design functions as a form of semi-public self-fashioning. Interior design thus could be described as a mobilisation of interiority.

Using interior design as a model of the self reflected a re-imagining of spatial dynamics by fin-de-siècle consumers. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth and Beate Söntgen argue that this relationship between interiors and identity emerged in seventeenth-century Dutch art. The Dutch Masters' representation of the interior has shaped cultural understandings of intimate places: 'these new interior views provided not only a vision of a richly described private life, but also an image of a distinct mode of spatialized self-experience, one that was based not in self-reflection as much as visual observations of the material world.'<sup>4</sup> This link between self and space was not just a matter of performative psychology; it was intimately linked with market forces—the interior designer anchored his or her public-facing self on displays of conspicuous consumption (articulated through a carefully curated material world). The historian Frank Trentmann, in his study of the development of consumer culture from the

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<sup>2</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Randal (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p 117.

<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Ewa Lajer-Burcharth and Beate Söntgen, 'Introduction: Interiors and Interior,' *Interiors and Interior*, eds. Ewa Lajer-Burcharth and Beate Söntgen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 2.



fifteenth century to the twenty-first, suggests that acts of consumption allowed the British middle-classes to use ‘new goods and tastes to establish new distinctions and create their own, more private vision of culture.’<sup>5</sup> Trentmann’s discussion of individual interactions with products throws light onto fin-de-siècle commodity culture, and can be applied to the role of interior design as an agent of identity.

The production of aesthetically satisfying interiors became a shorthand for taste in the period.<sup>6</sup> Mainstream proponents of design presented good taste as a moral necessity for the nation because of the social benefits it conferred. People living in well-designed, harmonious spaces were deemed to be morally upright and physically healthy. In the early 1880s, the writer of decorative manuals Mary Eliza Haweis explicitly equated beautiful surroundings with personal wellbeing: ‘We should never have asked whether the culture of beauty is good for us, had we observed that beauty simply means the harmonious adaptation of each thing to its purpose and to the purposes of the rest.’<sup>7</sup> In the fin-de-siècle, Lesley Hoskins argues, taste was not seen as something innate or especially personal. Instead, writers ‘presented it as an absolute, a perquisite to recognise and appreciate the good or the beautiful. But it was not necessarily innate; taste could be learned and the primary purpose of [decoration manuals] was to educate the reader.’<sup>8</sup> The teaching of good taste could start at an early age, with interior design used to shape a child’s formative experiences and to provide an early education in the aesthetics of taste. Haweis’ manual directed readers in the application of taste, but, for children, the room itself could become a teaching aid. In her autobiography, the

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<sup>5</sup> Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-first* (London: Allen Lane, 2006), p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> The importance of taste had been emphasised by the Arts and Crafts movement, which William Morris used to propagate ‘a message of truth to material, simplicity and practicality.’ According to Morris’s biographer Peter Stansky, ‘under Morris’s aegis a new public was being created [...] it exercised an important influence on how the world looked and how it was looked at toward the end of the century.’ Peter Stansky, *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 6, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Eliza Haweis, *The Art of Decoration* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Gere with Lesley Hoskins, *The House Beautiful: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetic Interior* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2000), p. 110.

actress Ellen Terry describes the self-consciously cultivated interior of her children's nursery (their father was the aesthete, architect and designer Edward William Godwin): 'they were allowed no rubbishy picture books but from the first Japanese prints and fans lined the nursery walls while their English classic was Walter Crane.'<sup>9</sup>

Haweis promotes the necessity of teaching good taste, but, as a seller of taste manuals, she had a definite commercial stake in creating a buying public for her ideas of beauty. By educating her readers in the basic principles, she sold her expertise as tastemaker, converting her cultural capital as a critic of design into financial success. The concept of taste may have revolved around the trade in aesthetic commodities, but it also offered a means of remaking the private self for public display. In a hybrid of the individual and the collective, those who followed avant-garde taste-makers like Whistler and Wilde formed a network which professed radical design philosophies. Taste could still be learnt—the Victorian art world propagated itself through mentorship cliques surrounding established artists—but it was more a matter of learning to be an individual follower *with taste* within the decadent community.

Like the Arts and Crafts movement, the decadents saw design as a vibrant and significant form of artistry, insisting on 'the validity of a sophisticated engagement with decorative objects.'<sup>10</sup> This was a counter to the traditional critical snobbery which treated decoration as inferior to the fine arts. In satirising notions of fashionable taste, George and Weedon Grossmith drew on this suspicion of design in *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892)—a series which began in *Punch*, but which was later collected as a novel. Though consistently attempting to ape chic aesthetic decoration, Pooter, the narrator, constantly claims to be

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<sup>9</sup> Ellen Terry, *The Story of My Life*, quoted in Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon, 1996, repr. 2011), p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Imogen Hart, *Arts and Crafts Objects* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 140.

‘superior to the follies of fashion’ and laments his son Lupin’s extravagances.<sup>11</sup> The most famous example of Pooter’s misadventures takes place after he discovers the concept of a unified colour-scheme. His wife Carrie complains after Pooter has painted the bath with red enamel paint, but Pooter dismisses her concerns saying, ‘It’s merely a matter of taste’ (32). The Grossmiths suggest that Pooter’s addiction to the cult of ‘taste’ has a dangerous undercurrent when the paint runs with his bath water and he fears that he is bleeding to death. This is a comic moment which subverts Pooter’s pretensions, but the Grossmiths’ implication that aesthetic taste could exert a harmful influence over petit-bourgeois consumers like Pooter is serious. George du Maurier’s cartoons for *Punch* had certainly done much to fix the contemporary image of the ridiculous and shallow aesthete. Mr Maudle and Jellaby Postlethwaite teach their circle of devoted hangers-on a parody of aesthetic thought; such an education, the Grossmiths suggest, is ultimately specious. The commercial aptitudes of the proponents of aestheticism no doubt played into this criticism—during his tour of America, Wilde had been described as an ‘a\$\$-thete.’<sup>12</sup> The label suggested that these prophets of individual freedom through artistic decoration were misleading the public for their own ends. The fact that these criticisms were so ubiquitous suggests that aesthetic interior design had reached a widespread audience.

The fracas which surrounded Godwin’s designs for Whistler’s White House on Tite Street demonstrates further contemporary debates about taste and the role of design. Godwin’s plans and elevations for the White House were rejected by the Board of Public Works, but Whistler commenced construction regardless. His planned home was to provide a rigorously aesthetic counter to the failure of contemporary architecture, and an idealised artistic space for his personal studio. Even Whistler’s mother had lamented that ‘all the

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<sup>11</sup> George and Weedon Grossmith, *The Diary of a Nobody* (London: Penguin, 1945, repr. 1965, 1999), p. 29. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Michèle Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 60.

Studios being built now are totally wrong.’<sup>13</sup> Discussion about the propriety of a particular piece of architecture such as the White House mirrored wider debates about Whistler’s artistic radicalism and his break with tradition. His home thus became something of a *cause célèbre* for the late nineteenth-century avant-garde—and the Board’s refusal to sanction Godwin’s work suggests that Whistler’s ideal aesthetic building had indeed succeeded in his constant goal of *épater le bourgeois*. Whistler’s spat with the Board reveals the public controversies of late-Victorian aesthetics, but much of fin-de-siècle design emphasises the inwardness of the designer. As Maureen Moran argues in her work on Walter Pater and the House Beautiful: ‘The material surroundings of the home are no longer simply a backdrop to indicate status, but a significant element in the psychological experiences that comprise the individual mind.’<sup>14</sup>

In the fin de siècle, such ideas can be seen in Whistler’s colour composition paintings, which tend to depict an individual within an interior. While the white dress of the central woman in *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1861-62, Figure 3.1) is distinct from the particular white of the curtains, she is intimately embedded within the ambient white of the room. Whistler uses his colour harmonies to create ideal occupied interiors. *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl* (1864-5, Figure 3.2) returns to this theme with Whistler building a definite sense of space through the reflections in the mirror. As Ayako Ono points out, the picture space of this painting is composed from a series of square shapes (the fireplace, the two sections of the mirror and the reflected picture frames); this subdivision ‘creates a narrow pictorial space.’<sup>15</sup> The clearly defined segmentation creates an impression that the imagined room is in harmony. The spatial and chromatic consonance is reinforced by

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<sup>13</sup> Anna Whistler, quoted in Devon Cox, *The Street of Wonderful Possibilities: Whistler, Wilde & Sargent in Tite Street* (London: Frances Lincoln Limited, 2015), p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Maureen Moran, ‘Walter Pater’s House Beautiful and the Psychology of Self-Culture,’ *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 1.1 (2007), 291-312, p. 292.

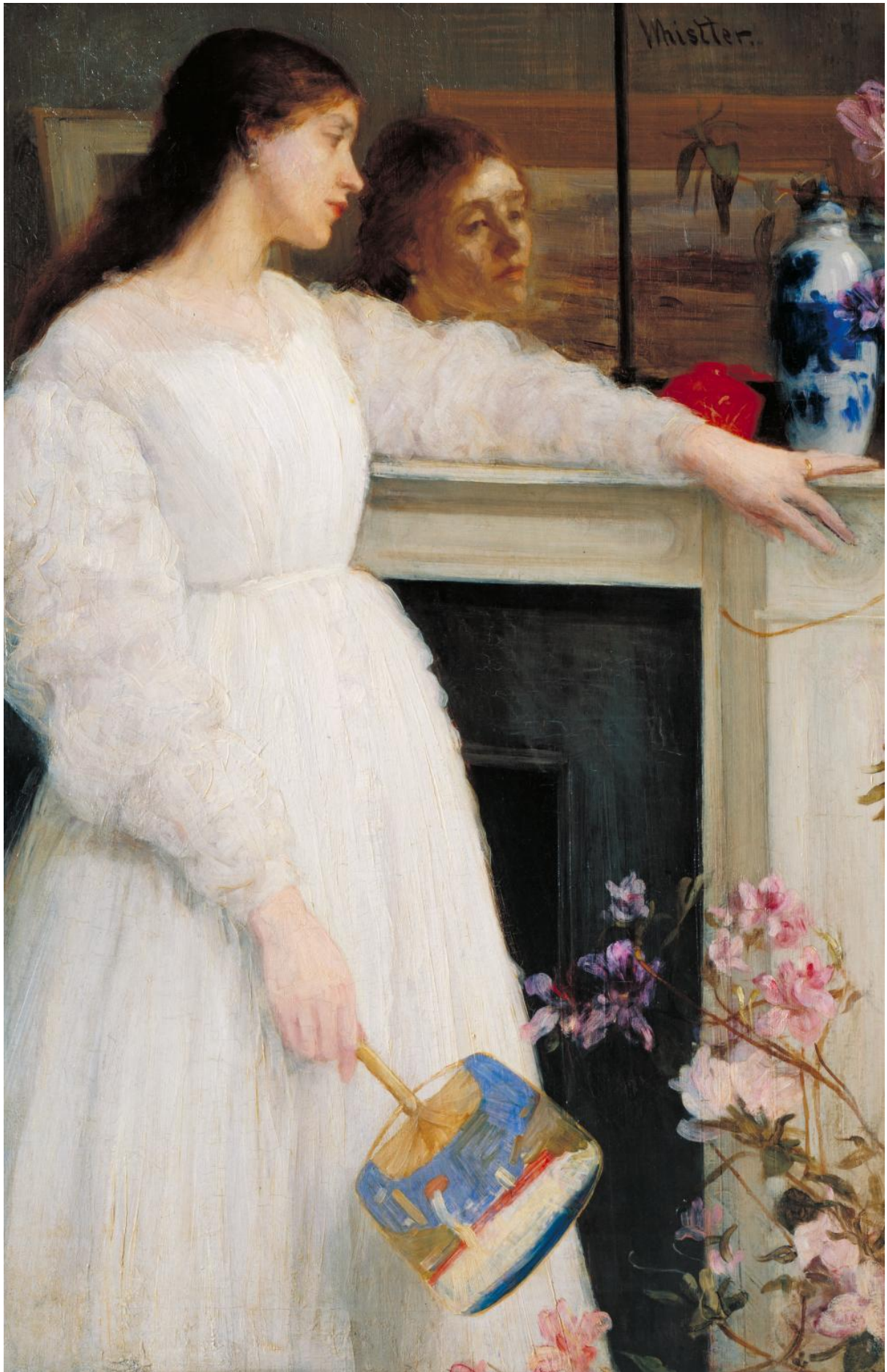
<sup>15</sup> Ayako Ono, *Japonisme in Britain: Whistler, Menpes, Henry, Hornel and nineteenth-century Japan* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 54.



**Figure 3.1**

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl* (1862).  
Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.





**Figure 3.2**

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Symphony in White, No. 2: The Little White Girl*, 1864, Tate (N03418), digital image © Tate released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported)

the title of the series of paintings, *Symphony in White*—the musical connotations evoke an aesthetic synaesthesia.

Whistler's paintings depict people who are fully immersed in their surroundings; they are representations of spatial stability in colour and tone. The interior space of *Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1871, Figure 3.3) is, if anything, more orchestrated than that of *The Little White Girl*: 'the controlled design of the rectangular shapes, such as the pictures on the wall and the dado, are well balanced and these elements give the paintings stability and tranquillity.'<sup>16</sup> Bachelard argues that 'A house constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are constantly re-imagining its reality.'<sup>17</sup> Understood in terms of Bachelard's theories, Whistler's framing of geometric shapes uses the imagined aesthetic interior to anchor his subjects. His pictures are not portraits—they represent figures who are so in tune with the aesthetics of the painted space that they become part of the decoration, the sympathetic colour-schemes binding each individual to the interior spaces they occupy.

The Art Nouveau house was fashioned as a space in which the members of social and cultural groups could display their own interiorities to each other and participate in a collective process of self-creation. The mirrors of *The Little White Girl* have the same effect that Wolf sees created by the use of windows in Art Nouveau design:

[...] the interior spaces enclosed by colored Art Nouveau windows did obstruct any perspective upon the outer world, the street, the square, the daily life of the city. Due to their colourful "lack of transparency" the gaze rebounds inwards, into the hermeticism of the interior.<sup>18</sup>

Such a technique creates a sense of obsessive interiority, which is articulated through the interior design. In Huysmans' *A Rebours*, Des Esseintes' house at Fortenay is similarly oppressive and enervating in its solipsism: the death of his gilded tortoise suggests that the

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<sup>16</sup> Ono, *Japonisme in Britain*, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Norbert Wolf, *Art Nouveau* (London: Prestel, 2011), p. 30.





**Figure 3.3**

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Arrangement in Grey and Black, No. 1: Portrait of the Painter's Mother* (1864-65).

Musée d'Orsay.  
Personal photo.

decorated interior space has a vampiric influence. Not even its designer can long survive its atmosphere before he has to return to Paris, drained by his isolation.

In the realm of interior design, the boundaries between aestheticism and decadence were porous; Whistler and Godwin were aesthetes, but their decorative works inspired the decadent frame of mind. Marking out the private space of the home as a location for aesthetic development, however, allowed the artistically curated room to function as a crucible for personal development. Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner's work on the *Yellow Book* demonstrates that this emphasis on personal artistic growth was intimately linked with the commercial side of decadent culture. The Bodley Head's flagship periodical was 'designed to persuade the reader that to invest the sum of £1 a year in a subscription would be a way of making a cultural statement.'<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the decision to produce the *Yellow Book* as a bound book with a distinctive colour-identity meant that the series could be prominently displayed. A series of the yellow volumes on a shelf acted as part of the radical accoutrements of the counterculture of design. Decadent decorative commodities thus acted as a means of showcasing taste as part of the decadents' social positioning.

### **3.1 Influences and the isolating interior**

The proto-decadent literary texts which inspired and motivated fin-de-siècle design tended to emphasise the role of the individual designer rather than the social group dynamic. Later receptions of decadent interiors, however, bring a greater focus on the space as a social setting—the changing discourses of decorated space mark a movement from isolation to a new vision of sociability embedded within a space.

Poe's writing, which was to be consecrated as part of the decadent canon by Baudelaire, frequently displayed an awareness of the aesthetic powers of design and décor.

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<sup>19</sup> Margaret D. Stetz and Mark Samuels Lasner, *The Yellow Book: A Centenary Exhibition* (Cambridge: The Houghton Library, 1994), p. 8.

His short story ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ (1842) perhaps best displays the hallmarks of what would be termed literary decadence at the end of the century, and it has a definite focus on the role of the individual within a space. It is constructed around the outlandish design of Prince Prospero’s abbey folly, in which he and his court hope to escape the plague ravaging the country. Prospero is the acme of the decorative artist, with a taste for the bizarre: ‘He had a fine eye for colors and effects. He disregarded the *decora* of mere fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric luster.’<sup>20</sup>

Interior design is a central organising conceit in Poe’s story. The figure of the artist-prince is inextricably linked with the perversities of his ball and the artistically-curated space in which it takes place. Both the fortified abbey and the narrative structure of Poe’s text are defined by the progression of seven differently-coloured rooms. Poe states that ‘it was [Prospero’s] own guiding taste which had given character to the masqueraders’ (131) and the same can be said of the rooms they occupy. Brett Zimmerman argues that the varying colours which characterise the rooms of the abbey reflect the different stages of human life. He is interested in the colour symbolism he believes to be at play in Poe’s text, suggesting that in the first blue room, ‘blue does not represent the first, the morning, stage of human life solely but also the supernatural stage before birth.’<sup>21</sup> The pattern continues until the final black and scarlet room represents disease and death. Zimmerman’s reading links at least some of the stages to mental and emotional development: for instance, that the orange room ‘represents the most lustful and therefore least innocent period of human life—adulthood.’<sup>22</sup> Despite Poe’s focus on the singular figure of Prospero, however, there is little sense of interiority in Zimmerman’s analysis. A more productive reading of ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ is to understand it as an exercise in Bachelardian topoanalysis where psychology is mapped onto

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<sup>20</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Masque of the Red Death,’ *Selected Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, repr. 2008), p. 131. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Brett Zimmerman, ‘The Puzzle of the Color Symbolism in “The Masque of the Red Death”: Solved at Last?’, *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 10.3 (2009), 60-73, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Zimmerman, ‘The Puzzle of the Color Symbolism,’ p. 66.

the private space. Prospero's use of colour and extravagant set-dressing is ultimately a performance of creative interiority:

There were seven [rooms]—an imperial suite. In many palaces, however, such suites form a long and straight vista, while the folding doors slide back nearly to the walls on either hand, so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely impeded. Here the case was very different, as might have been expected from the duke's love of the *bizarre*. There was a sharp turn at every twenty or thirty yards, and at each turn a novel effect. To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the winding of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied in accordance with the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened. (129-30)

Here, Poe's narrative of decorative genius foreshadows the almost obsessive interiority that would characterise Art Nouveau interior design. Prospero's gallery is constructed in such a fashion that there can be no escape from his interiority. The windows offer no outside relief to the inhabitants because they open onto other interiors; the sharp turns allow no clear line of sight. Both masqueraders and readers are ensnared by the controlling taste of the creator. Without the opportunity for distraction from the lurid colouring, the text and the fictional décor it evokes create an almost monomaniacal drive onwards. Taste becomes an exercise in power over those who experience it.

As Kermit Vanderbilt suggests, such an understanding of taste as an expression of social power allows tastemakers to restructure reality and open up other possibilities for decorative expression: 'Objective nature outside having been ravaged by the plague, Poe's hero will employ his taste and imagination to create a symbolic equivalent of nature's elements—a combination which can transform earthly reality into the artist's liberating vision of immortal beauty.'<sup>23</sup> This 'immortal beauty' is a perverse and idiosyncratic beauty, which explains the story's attraction to the decadents:

Be sure [the dancers] were grotesque. There were much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm—much of what has been since seen in 'Hernani.' There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much

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<sup>23</sup> Kermit Vanderbilt, 'Art and Nature in "The Masque of the Red Death,"' *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 22.4 (1968), 379-389, p. 380.

of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. (*Masque of the Red Death*, 131)

However, the corpse-like, blood-spattered costume which the figure of the Red Death sports outdoes the display of Prospero's court—the revellers can embrace the grotesque, but the Red Death outperforms them. As the plague strikes them down, their decadent isolation (represented by Prospero's design) fails and they share the bloody fate of the outside world.

Given the appreciation for grotesquery in Poe's story, it is perhaps unsurprising that 'The Masque of the Red Death' (Figure 3.4) was one of the four images Beardsley produced when he illustrated *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1894-5), but the centrality of colour in Poe's text and the illustrator's black-and-white medium inevitably lead to a difference in focus. Beardsley does not dwell on Prospero's choice of décor: there is only the faintest suggestion of drapery and a lone tassel hanging slightly off-centre on the plain white field of the page. He places emphasis instead on the society of revellers who make up Prospero's court and take part in his ball. By focusing on this social network of grotesques who have chosen to dance their way through the horror of the Red Death, the illustrator implicitly suggests that fin-de-siècle decadence has a more communal outlook than Poe's short story—Beardsley is less interested in Prospero's monomaniac psychology. Nonetheless, décor is not absent from Beardsley's piece. His use of a flattened perspective and the statuesque lack of movement in the shocked revellers give them an almost frieze-like quality; they and their grotesque costumes have become part of the decorations. The central role which Beardsley assigns Prospero's hangers-on contrasts with Poe's approach where they are defined by an unreal insubstantiality—he describes them as 'dreams.' Beardsley uses Poe to provide a highly-socialised vision of decadent decoration in which the networks who socialise within the space constitute part of the aesthetic ambiance. And yet the illustration does not erase Poe's emphasis on the individual psyche within a decorated space. The authority in



**Figure 3.4**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'Masque of the Red Death,' *The Works of Edgar Allam Poe* (Chicago: Herbert S. Stone and Company, 1895).

Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

Beardsley's image lies in the left-hand margins with the emerging figure of the Red Death in the guise of the pierrot, a powerful symbol of self-fashioning for Beardsley throughout his career. Even as Beardsley socialises 'The Masque of the Red Death,' he links his illustrative role with that of the outsider. This sleight of hand allows him to preserve the decadent concern with marginality and individuation alongside the vision of shared community and shared pleasure which characterises decadent sociability.

Poe's relationship with fin-de-siècle decadence was primarily mediated through Baudelaire, but *A Rebours* provided a much more immediate influence for decadent discourses of design—much as it had the decadent discourses of eating and drinking. Like 'The Masque of the Red Death,' *A Rebours* is concerned with the figure of the isolated interior decorator; Des Esseintes' house at Fortenay is another example of individual topoanalytical mapping. Huysmans actively makes interior design a cipher for the designer's psychology. Potolsky disagrees with such an individualistic reading of Huysmans' novel, arguing that the novelist 'casts [Des Esseintes'] retreat in unmistakably political terms.'<sup>24</sup> For Potolsky, Des Esseintes' ennui is an engaged reaction to the nationalistic jingoism of French culture; he undeniably finds himself 'wincing at the patriotic or political twaddle served up by the papers every morning.'<sup>25</sup> Decadence is indeed more collective than critics have often assumed, but there can be no denying that Des Esseintes desires to separate himself from all social networks—the desire for isolation surpasses any political motivations. He tailors his home to create an illusion of absolute separation even though his solipsistic paradise is dependent upon the aid of his two servants to function. To avoid engaging with them, Des Esseintes oils door hinges and installs 'long-pile carpeting' (18) to muffle any noise. Interior decoration becomes a tool for ensuring an artificial separation from the demands of the

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<sup>24</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 71.

<sup>25</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (A Rebours)*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 8. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



outside world; it is a mechanism for Des Esseintes' interiority. Huysmans' protagonist co-opts his servants into his design schemes (and not in the communal way in which Beardsley made the revellers the decorative centre of his 'Masque of the Red Death' illustration). As a result, the female servant must wear an anachronistic costume to create an appropriate atmosphere:

he had no desire to see her commonplace silhouette through the window, he had a costume made for her of Flemish faille, with a white cap and a great black hood let down on the shoulders, such as the beguines still wear to this day at Ghent. The shadow of this coif gliding past in the twilight produced an impression of convent life, and reminded him of those peaceful, pious communities, those sleepy villages shut away in some hidden corner of the busy, wide-awake city. (18-19)

Such interactions are part of Des Esseintes' attempts to distance himself from the mass of humanity and his nineteenth-century French context. The products of human interaction are presented as crude and messy, while the products of design can transcend fleshly limitations. His anti-naturalist response to trains highlights these isolationist tendencies. Des Esseintes believes that the manufactured beauty of a train surpasses that of any 'being conceived in the joys of fornication and born in the throes of motherhood' (23). The trains which he hears while ensconced at Fortenay reinforce the sense that it is the outside world that is unreal—while the artificiality of his aesthetic exile becomes real. In his decorated isolation, the distant trains are reduced to mere 'toy trains' (27). Huysmans' novel suggests that decadent interior design has the potential to radically remake our conceptions of the real. It is a canonisation of the anti-natural, which prepares us to read the real world as a work of fiction. By emphasising the unreality of reality, Huysmans creates an interpretative space in which the products of design can manufacture their own reality. This is in keeping with the decadent love of artifice and implicitly challenges the boundaries which society draws between the real and the unreal. By investing the fantasy of his fictive interior space with a form of concreteness, Huysmans diminishes the demands of the outside world and celebrates the decadent space as a site of self-creation.



The first half of *A Rebours* is a drawn-out discussion of interior design—a constant reminder that Fortenay is at a remove from the exterior world. In describing Des Esseintes' decorating plans, Huysmans emphasises his position as a man of taste: he is 'a connoisseur of colours both simple and subtle' (11). Des Esseintes' predilection for orange (an example of his aesthetic sensibilities) is even linked with his gastronomic tastes:

As for those gaunt, febrile creatures of feeble constitution and nervous disposition whose sensual appetite craves dishes that are smoked and seasoned, their eyes almost always prefer that most morbid and irritating of colours, with its acid glow and unnatural splendour – orange. (16)

His rarefied tastes set him apart as Huysmans demonstrates the creative possibilities opened up by the unreal and anti-natural in Des Esseintes' use of his preferred colours for interior decorating projects. Since the chosen colour palette will only be observed under artificial light, it is inconsequential 'if [the colours] looked crude or insipid in daylight' (14).

Furthermore, one of the rooms has walls clad in 'large-grained crushed morocco' (16) to look like the bindings of books. This suggests that Des Esseintes' interior design is something to be read and interpreted in the fashion of literature; *A Rebours* is not just a catalogue of actual design suggestions, but an opening up of real-world interior decoration to literary readings.

Huysmans transforms the imagined space of Fortenay into a literary text, but he also shows an awareness of the materiality of design. He specifies, for instance, the fact that that the crushed morocco is 'glazed by means of strong steel plates under a powerful press' (16). *A Rebours* was to become a very material text as fin-de-siècle readers drew inspiration from the novel to decorate their own homes. For Fox, this 'Decadent Baedeker' was read as 'the handbook not of an abstract philosophy, but a guide to how to live one's life artistically.'<sup>26</sup> It linked social and cultural capital with aesthetic eating, and consecrated decadent interior design.

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Fox, 'Dickens À La Carte: Aesthetic Victualism and the Invigoration of the Artist in Huysmans' *Against Nature*', *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De-Humanizing Art, the Artist and the Artistic Receptor*, ed. Kelly Comfort, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 62.

It is at this point that the movement of *A Rebours* from the bible of decadent isolation to a text with social currency among avant-garde circles becomes clear. There are notable examples of how the novel's literary reception influenced late Victorian interior design. The influence of *A Rebours* on Eric, Count Stenbock's interior design resulted in an elaborate fantasia: he transformed the entire upper storey of his home with incense, opium, hothouse plants and tortoises to create what Sturgis describes as 'an artificial paradise.'<sup>27</sup> Rather than simply borrowing a colour-scheme in homage to Huysmans' novel, Stenbock used decoration to forge the link between interior spaces and the senses. The count was able to create this decadent space because of the money from his Swedish estate. By contrast, the drawing room of the house on Cambridge street which Beardsley shared with his sister and mother reflects a reception of *A Rebours* more bound by material constraints. Beardsley's friend Aymer Vallance painted the room in an orange and black scheme which had the hallmarks of Des Esseintes' interiors. In her memoirs, *The Sheltering Tree*, Syrett emphasised the avant-garde effect of the Beardsleys' choice of décor:

its deep orange walls, black doors, and a black-painted book-cases and fireplaces—a scheme of colour new to me, designed by an early “interior decorator,” a friend of Aubrey's and the forerunner of many young men who now make their living by adorning and sometime ruining other people's houses. The room was always rather dark for it was an affectation of the Beardsley set to exclude ‘the crude light of day.’<sup>28</sup>

The illustrator's claim that he never worked in sunlight, what Syrett terms 'His craze for darkness' (95), represents a performance of Huysmans' anti-naturalism. Beardsley's desire to exclude natural light while he was working recalls Des Esseintes' search for colours which would be striking in artificial light. Syrett found Beardsley's shunning of light an unhealthy affectation (though she was not displeased by the unconventional effect of the room), but it is a self-conscious acting out of Huysmans' principles. Professing to work only under artificial

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<sup>27</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (London: Pallas Athene, 1995, repr. 2011), p. 177.

<sup>28</sup> Netta Syrett, *The Sheltering Tree* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939), pp. 78-9. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

light, in an intentionally dark space, allowed Beardsley to create a link between himself and the inspirational decadent Baedeker. William Rothenstein, like Syrett, was taken by the arresting design and the socio-cultural stance it represented: ‘The walls of his rooms were distempered a violent orange, the doors and skirtings were painted black; a strange taste, I thought, but his taste was all for the bizarre and exotic.’<sup>29</sup> A member of the same social networks, Rothenstein could recognise this style as part of Beardsley’s decadent performance of taste. Haldane Macfall presents a less understanding reading of the Cambridge Street room in his biography of Beardsley. He claims to have found it ‘dull and stale.’<sup>30</sup> It should be remembered, however, that throughout his memoir Macfall is at pains to distance himself from Beardsley’s decadent style and his social networks. He does not mention *A Rebours*, but would no doubt include it amongst the myriad influences which he believed corrupted Beardsley and his work. The fact that Macfall attacks Beardsley’s design choices suggests that they were intimately associated with his decadent creative identity.

The work of the American Poe and the French Huysmans were adopted and repurposed to facilitate decadent design discourses in fin-de-siècle Britain. Looking at an international range of inspirations embedded the decadents’ interior decorating within their cosmopolitan vision of community. Even though the two texts discussed here prioritise the individual relationship with a space devoid of communality, their receptions (whether drawn or real-world) provided a collective framework of identification for decadent networks.

### **3.2 The cosmopolitan possibilities of Japonisme**

The cosmopolitan ideals of decadent networks found an outlet in the realm of design as they transformed the interior sphere into a cosmopolitan site. Their interactions with Japan led to

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<sup>29</sup> William Rothenstein, *Men and Memories, 1872-1900*, Volume I (London: Faber & Faber, 1931, repr. 1934), p. 134. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>30</sup> Haldane Macfall, *Aubrey Beardsley: The Man and his Work* (London: The Bodley Head, 1928), p. 54. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

perhaps the most striking examples of bi-cultural influences in action. W. S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan's comic opera *The Mikado* (1885) embedded Japan in Victorian popular culture, much as *Patience* (1881) had done for Wilde and the aesthetic movement. The opening song of the opera, 'If You Want to Know Who We Are,' shows that Gilbert and Sullivan were engaging with contemporary decorating culture and with the social currency attached to Japan by contemporary design conventions. The Japanese nobles of the fictitious town of Titipu are presented as metonyms of their artistic representations:

If you want to know who we are,  
We are gentlemen of Japan:  
On many a vase and  
On many a screen and fan,  
We figuratively paint  
Our attitudes queer and quaint  
You're wrong if you think it ain't.<sup>31</sup>

Vases, screens and fans were all material accoutrements of the aesthetic home and *The Mikado* suggests that the Japanese themselves have become part of the set-dressing. There are some explicit Japanese references in the opera: Nanki-Poo has 'a native guitar' (20) on his back and the Mikado's bodyguards enter singing 'Miya sama, miya sama' (181), which had been sung by Meiji forces during the Boshin War (1868-9).<sup>32</sup> But *The Mikado* is ultimately a parody of Britain and its Japanese setting is tangential. Gilbert and Sullivan are satirising the late-Victorian obsession with the trappings of Japonisme while further contributing to its commodification. The opera represents Western fantasies of the East as a way of remaking the West.

It is difficult to separate the commercialism of Japonisme from aesthetic appreciations of Japan—the two work in concert to create the Japonesque artistic commodity. Richard Martin and Harold Koda refer to Japonisme as 'a mercantile fast-boat that carried

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<sup>31</sup> W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan, *The Mikado: Vocal Score*, ed. Carl Simpson and Ephraim Hammett Jones (Saint Louis: Dover, 2000), pp. 14-15. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>32</sup> This conflict ended the reign of the Tokugawa Shogunate and cemented Japan's engagement with the West—as a result of the imperial government's modernisation policies, Japanese art-products continued to feed the cultural appetites of the occidental markets.

impressions and artifacts in plentitude.’<sup>33</sup> It is as if selling the idea of Japan was a necessary precursor to any appreciation of it. The marketing of Japonisme created Japonese commodities, but these became things through the process of appreciation which occurred alongside the financial transactions. The shop owner Arthur Liberty certainly had an integral role in creating the vision of late-Victorian Japan through the art fabrics and other decorative commodities he sold. But Liberty was very aware that he had created a market for aesthetic taste which went beyond his storefront—in an 1895 piece in *The British Warehouseman*, for instance, he discussed his influence on the Wilde phenomenon:

My “art-fabrics” were produced before [Wilde] became a celebrity. I gave him his opportunity and he helped me mightily through the publicity he commanded. I am glad to be able to realise that all that world-famous aesthetic movement of fifteen years ago, which had its perihelium in Gilbert and Sullivan’s Savoy Opera *Patience*, was not a cause but a result of my persistence.<sup>34</sup>

By marketing Japan in Liberty’s, Liberty brought the possibility of Japonese interior design to a wide audience, and the commodity status of bought-Japonese furnishings facilitated the decadents’ appreciative interactions with the cosmopolitan.

The commercialisation of Japonisme and Japonese interior design did not preclude more sensitive interactions with the Japanese among avant-garde circles.<sup>35</sup> Decadent networks of writers and artists displayed a cosmopolitan appreciation of the artistic possibilities suggested by the Japanese tradition rather than a simple voyeurism for the spectacle of the foreign. Since Japan had opened to the West in 1853, it had offered artists a dramatic break with the formalistic demands of the Western canon. Artists in the period

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Martin and Harold Koda, *Orientalism: Visions of the East in Western Dress* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994), p. 73.

<sup>34</sup> Arthur Liberty, *The British Warehouseman*, February 1895, quoted in Gere with Hoskins, *The House Beautiful*, pp. 48-9.

<sup>35</sup> There is extensive criticism charting the influence of Japanese art and design on western receptions, both in material and literary terms. Yoko Chiba, ‘*Japonisme: East-West Renaissance in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century*,’ *Mosaic*, 31.2 (1998), 1-19. Pamela Genova, ‘*Japonisme and Decadence: Painting the Prose of A Rebours*,’ *Romantic Review*, 88.2 (1997), 167-90. *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCOhost <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db+a9h&AN+9707065158&site+ehost-live> Accessed 03/06/17. Pamela Gerrish Nunn, ‘*Fine Art and the Fan, 1860-1930*,’ *Journal of Design History*, 17.3, *Dangerous Liaisons: Relationships between Design, Craft and Art* (2004), 251-266.

adopted stylistic conventions of Japanese art (such as flattened perspectives, cropping and asymmetry) in acts of engaged borrowing. Godwin provides the pivotal link between late-Victorian Japonisme and design since he was amongst the first Britons to collect prints after the 1859 trade deal with Japan. Perhaps the most significant acquisitions he made were the two volumes of Katsushika Hokusai's *Manga* which included images of Japanese construction methods.<sup>36</sup> The *Manga* were source books of themes and approaches from which interested artists could draw ideas. Copies in Europe were shared between friends and acquaintances, transmitting Japonisme through the social rituals of gifting and shared viewing of art. Hokusai's sketches were to inspire Godwin's revolutionary Art Nouveau furniture. Specifically designed for aesthetic spaces, Godwin's furnishings were constructed with the same awareness of Japanese artistic conventions that shaped Japonese art: 'They are characterised by an exploration of abstraction and symmetry in the distribution of mass and void; the use of surface effects and flat colour instead of costly materials and finish, and of distinctive black ebonising with reeded borders and stylised motifs picked out with gilding.'<sup>37</sup> In Europe, it would seem, Japan functioned as an abstracting influence to counter contemporary realist trends: Japonese interior design tended towards eclecticism and the bizarre to create a sense of the unreal.

In decadent receptions of Japanese art, there is often an emphasis on liberation from the strictures governing the production of and response to Western art. The decadents' cosmopolitan agenda drew from foreign examples in order to pose different modes of existence to those espoused by their own cultures. One area of Japanese culture which symbolised this freedom was the frankness of its erotic *shunga* tradition. These pornographic works had a clear influence over Beardsley's oeuvre (for instance the tumescent Greek-Japanese hybrids of *Lysistrata*). *Shunga* should be read through the concept of the floating

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<sup>36</sup> Lionel Lambourne, *Japonisme: Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West* (London: Phaidon, 2005, repr. 2007, 2008, 2011), p. 86.

<sup>37</sup> Gere with Lesley, *The House Beautiful*, p. 49.

world, a Japanese philosophical model which has striking similarities to fin-de-siècle decadent thought. In 1665, the novelist Asai Ryoi described the floating world in terms of a bohemian disregard for the demands of the mundane:

Living only for the moment, turning our full attention to the pleasures of the moon, the snow, the cherry blossoms and the maple, singing songs, drinking wine, and diverting ourselves just in floating, caring not a whit for the poverty staring us in the face, refusing to be disheartened, like a gourd floating along with the river current – this is what we call *ukiyo-e*.<sup>38</sup>

‘Floating world’ is ultimately a religious term which implies ‘the pleasurable realities that art deals with are just evanescent bubbles, captivating illusions without value.’<sup>39</sup> And yet the art produced in this liminal world of sexual and philosophical hedonism transcends fleeting irrelevance. While it is unlikely that many European artists were aware of the philosophical and ideological trappings of the floating world, it would seem that they recognised some form of intellectual affinity in the thematic approaches of the Japanese masters. Artists of the floating world were the decadents of the Tokugawa Shogunate and therefore their cultural products found a sympathetic space within the Victorian decadent interior.

The thematic similarities between *shunga* and European decadence go beyond the explicit content of the prints. The Tokugawa shoguns had issued various edicts against aspects of floating world culture in fear that it praised the trivial and encouraged its consumers to obsess over modish fashions. Timon Screech argues that, in addition to the explicit sexuality of these *ukiyo-e*, they ‘were elaborate in the attention they gave to interior furnishings, personal accessories and dress. They egged on buyers and made the [...] lifestyle of the epicentres of fashion into something visible in any bourgeois context.’<sup>40</sup> This link between the *shunga* of the floating world and the accumulation of material objects reflects the

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<sup>38</sup> Asai Ryoi, *Tales of the Floating World*, quoted in Lambourne, *Japonisme*, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Phillip Rawson, *Oriental Erotic Art* (Hong Kong: Book Club Association, 1981 repr 1983), p. 138.

<sup>40</sup> Timon Screech, *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan 1700-1820* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999, repr. 2009), p. 55.

fin-de-siècle commodification of interior design. After European aesthetes embraced *shunga*, it became a risqué means of decorating a room.

Consecrated by the passion of collectors (much like Hokusai's *Manga*), *shunga* functioned as a commodity to be gifted amongst decadent and aesthetic networks. The artist Rothenstein recalled giving Beardsley a book of erotic Japanese prints. Based on Rothenstein's description, Calloway surmises that these images will have been from one of Kitagawa Utamaro's black-and-white pillow books (*makura-e*).<sup>41</sup> It is not surprising that Beardsley chose to decorate his walls with black-and-white drawings that were very similar to his own work in the Japanese fashion, and these gifted pictures were absorbed into the decadent interior space the illustrator and his family had fashioned for themselves:

I picked up a Japanese book in Paris, with pictures so outrageous that its possession was an embarrassment. It pleased Beardsley, however, so I gave it him. The next time I went to see him, he had taken out the most indecent prints and hung them around his bedroom. Seeing he lived with his mother and sister, I was rather taken aback. (*Men and Memories*, 134)

Rothenstein's embarrassment shows that even amongst the avant-garde consumers of Japonisme not every commentator professed sang froid about the explicit content of *shunga*. In an account of a visit he made to the Beardsley household, the German art historian Julius Meier-Graefe gives a more detailed representation of the nature of these pieces and Beardsley's decorative use of them:

At Beardsley's house one used to see the finest and most explicitly erotic Japanese prints in London. They hung in plain frames against delicately coloured backgrounds, the wildest fantasies of Utamaro, and were by no means decent, though when seen from a distance delicate, proper and harmless enough. There are but few collectors of these things, as they cannot be exhibited.<sup>42</sup>

Beardsley clearly appreciated *shunga* as decorative emblems and, in a snub to received propriety, displayed them in his semi-public space (his bedroom was private but clearly open to visitors). He was using interior design as a means of transgressing normative social codes.

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<sup>41</sup> Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 100.

<sup>42</sup> Julius Meier-Graefe, quoted in Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: V & A Publications, 1998, repr 1998), p. 99.



Surrounding himself with these decorative products, reinforced the creative link between the decadence of the 1890s and Japan. Beardsley was displaying his influences to his guests and so transforming them into a spectacle for his social networks.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the significant influence of Japan on aesthetic interior decorating, there was a backlash against its use. Such a dynamic can be seen in *The Mikado* during Ko-Ko's song 'I've Got a Little List.' Gilbert and Sullivan implicitly criticise cosmopolitanism through Ko-Ko's condemnation of 'the idiot who praises with enthusiastic tone,/ All centuries but this and every country but his own' (*The Mikado*, 58-9). In the first run of the opera, Ko-Ko was played by George Grossmith, linking the anti-aesthetic satire of Gilbert and Sullivan to the anti-aesthetic satire of *The Diary of a Nobody*. Ko-Ko lists the people he could behead in his role as Lord High Executioner without anyone missing them, and these potential victims are often aesthetic stereotypes ('the lady novelist' and 'clowns of private life,' 59, 60). William Morris, leading light of the Arts and Crafts movement, was equally scathing. For him, Japonese design lacked the communal element which he believed necessary to producing good art:

[Japanese] works of art are isolated and blankly individualistic, and in consequence ... they remain mere wonderful toys, things outside the pale of modern art, which ... cannot be carried on without the architectural sense that connects it with the history of mankind.<sup>43</sup>

Morris's criticism of Japanese art is an orientalist attempt to create an artificial distinction between east and west—Lorraine Janzen Kooistra suggests that he presents the cultural products of Japan (and no doubt of Japonisme) as utterly disconnected from any wider social significance. For the Socialist-orientated Arts-and-Crafts movement, architecture was the most useful art form, expressing beauty at the same time as it shelters and protects.<sup>44</sup> This is the ideology of Morris and the Gothic revival, not of Beardsley and Art Nouveau. If

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<sup>43</sup> William Morris, 'Textiles,' *Arts and Crafts Essays* (London Rivington, Percival & Co., 1893), p. 35.

<sup>44</sup> Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality in Fin-de-Siècle Illustrated Books* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995, repr. 1997).

parochially western Gothic represents Morris's communal vision, then, inevitably, the Japanese style preferred by Whistler and Beardsley was seen as perversely individualistic. But Morris fails to take account of the way in which contemporary receptions of Japan were used to build up networks of like-minded connoisseurs.

Macfall has similar reservations to Morris, suggesting that in the public desire to mimic the styles of Japan 'the London house became an abomination of desolation' (*Aubrey Beardsley*, 14). He sees Japanese-influenced interior design as having too many open spaces and insufficient Victorian clutter. As artists (part of the Glasgow Boys and disciples of Whistler), George Henry and Edward Atkinson Hornel took a different position. The experiences of their tour of Japan in 1893-4 shaped their understanding of the interior design as a medium for artistic expression. In Ono's words, they 'found that in Japan interior space was appreciated as a part of art, and this tradition made Japanese life artistic.'<sup>45</sup> The paintings they later produced of ostensibly authentic Japanese interiors were over-loaded with clutter, but Henry and Hornel clearly understood the significance of the interior space in avant-garde culture.

The designer Christopher Dresser recognised the value of the Japonique, arguing that the resultant Cult of Japan was a necessary step in the development of British public taste: 'I firmly believe that the introduction of the works of Japanese handicraftsmen into England has done as much to improve our national taste as even our schools of art and public museums.'<sup>46</sup> The cosmopolitan tastes which Japonisme exemplified provided the cultural tools to fashion a social identity in opposition to the mainstream tastes which criticised and mocked cosmopolitan iconography. This decorative break with Western tradition in the fin de siècle energised a radical philosophy of wilfully cosmopolitan interior design. Decadent

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<sup>45</sup> Ono, *Japonisme in Britain*, p. 120.

<sup>46</sup> Christopher Dresser, *Japan, its Architecture, Art and Art-Manufacture*, quoted in Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement*, p. 33.

networks could thus collectively resist nationalist culture by celebrating foreign influences and designing their personal spaces as signifiers of anti-nationalist identity.

### 3.3 Spaces and people

The individualism of the interior space evoked by Huysmans and the collective vision and consumption of Japan combined to create a decadent vision of space. It was a space which encouraged a hybridity of cultures, sociability and individualism. The artistically decorated interior was at once private and public, individual and communal. In this way, a space became a means of constructing and displaying the owner's interiority to a like-minded social circle. Norbert Wolf, commenting on the design of Whistler's White House, expounds the role of individuals within the designed house:

It was less the inventory of objects than the lavishly decorated walls, the boundaries between rooms structured with precious decoration, that conveyed an aura of luxury and refined taste: in rooms like these, the inhabitants and everything they do are transformed into living ornaments.<sup>47</sup>

He suggests that the personalities who use a space become part of the effect created by its decoration. Syrett notes this phenomenon in her recollections of the tea parties held by the Beardsleys: there she would see 'Aubrey, his back to one of the windows, talking vivaciously to a group of young men, every now and again making great play with his wonderful hands' (*The Sheltering Tree*, 79). Framed against the window, Syrett makes Beardsley and those around him an element of the room's décor. In a similar way, Isobel Field, Robert Louis Stevenson's stepdaughter, recollects creating a space in which Wilde could become part of the spectacle of sociability through the decorated room. For a San Francisco tea party she and her husband, the artist Joe Strong, held for Wilde on his US tour, their painter friend Jules decorated the skylight with flowers to create the illusion of roses trailing up to the second floor: 'you saw the sunshine filtering through green leaves while great clusters of red roses

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<sup>47</sup> Wolf, *Art Nouveau*, p. 121.

glowed on the glass as though they were growing there.’<sup>48</sup> Joe and Jules then dressed one of Joe’s modelling dummies in clothes, hat and veil, named her “Miss Piffle,” and sat her at the party as an artificial guest (141)—Wilde later had a conversation with her. Because their Chinese cleaner Sing Lee wanted to see Wilde, he volunteered to bring ‘the most exquisite tea service of delicate China’ (143) to the party and did so in traditional Chinese dress, recreating San Francisco’s Chinatown within the apartment. Field’s account of Wilde’s arrival emphasises the intensity of the effect this display of social decoration had on Wilde: ‘This is where I belong! This is my atmosphere!’ (143). He presented himself as an enthusiastic guest who actively took part in the social discourse which had been fostered by the decorated space.

The creation and decoration of the Peacock Room in 49 Princes Gate London provides perhaps the most daring example of late-Victorian Art Nouveau design; it represents the fusion of Whistler’s prickly individualism and the Japonisme which he had helped to propagate. The Liverpool shipping magnate Frederick Leyland, Whistler’s patron and friend, had asked the painter to hang his *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelain* (1864), later retitled *Rose and Silver: The Princess from the Land of Porcelain*, in a room designed to hold Leyland’s significant porcelain collection. Leyland envisaged the room as a *gesamtkunstwerk* in which the painter would play a significant role by hanging his own work as the centrepiece of the decorative effect—he even gave Whistler his blessing to paint the red flowers adorning the Spanish leather walls gold.<sup>49</sup> Fashioning himself as the conductor of the decorative *gesamtkunstwerk*, Whistler argued that this new colour scheme would better harmonise with the tones of his painting, and he went beyond Leyland’s specifications, adorning the room with golden peacocks and dressing the ceiling with ‘Dutch metal’ (an imitation gold leaf).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Isobel Field, *This Life I’ve Loved* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd., 1937), p. 142. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler: A life Lived for Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 139.

<sup>50</sup> Lambourne, *Japonisme*, p. 93.

After redecorating at his own whim, Whistler invited the press to view the room in Leyland's private home without consulting Leyland. This press conference not only demonstrates Whistler's penchant for self-promotion, but also the semi-private quality associated with the decadent interior. The artist (if not his patron) treated the artistically-created and artistically-curated interior as something to be publicly displayed. Leyland was certainly interested in the possibilities of Japonisme in design: he had incorporated *mon* (Japanese heraldic devices) into the custom fire grate of his morning room. However, he neither appreciated the suddenly inflated bill nor being co-opted into Whistler's semi-public display of self-fashioning, and the debacle surrounding the creation of this room ultimately broke down the artist-patron relationship.<sup>51</sup>

The legend of the Peacock Room has largely been subsumed into Whistler's self-fashioning as an art-for-art's-sake artist, but Linda Merrill's revisionist cultural biography of the room suggests that the social meaning of this space has been wilfully forgotten. By buying the Peacock Room in 1904 and bequeathing it to the American nation, Charles Freer 'wilfully divorced the decoration from its former associations [... and ...] put an end to its unseemly commercial history' in order to make it 'conform to his ideal of Whistler's work as esoteric and refined.'<sup>52</sup> The room certainly reflected Whistler's aesthetic theories and tastes, but it also reflected the social dynamics between the American painter and his Liverpoolian patron. After Leyland refused to pay him what he felt was owed—and, adding insult to injury, paid him in pounds (the currency paid to tradesmen) rather than guineas (for gentlemen)—Whistler painted a gilt mural of two peacocks.<sup>53</sup> The peacock standing on a pile of coins is bullying a second peacock with a silver crest, an implicit link to Whistler's own famous shock of white hair.<sup>54</sup> By representing himself in his wall painting, Whistler places

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<sup>51</sup> Sutherland, *Whistler*, p. 144.

<sup>52</sup> Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 25.

<sup>53</sup> Sutherland, *Whistler*, pp. 140-41.

<sup>54</sup> Merrill, *The Peacock Room*, p. 244.

his recriminatory relationship with Leyland at the heart of the room's significance. Given the 'avowedly allegorical mural,' Whistler's redecoration is as much about an interplay of art and personalities as it is an artwork in its own right.<sup>55</sup>

While critics like the anti-decadent Macfall criticised Whistler's design for perceived over-affected Japonisme, it was these qualities that consecrated the Peacock Room as a venerable location for the decadents. Just like the much-imitated fictional spaces of *A Rebours*, the Peacock Room had a self-conscious air of artificiality, which connected it to the values of artifice underpinning the collective decadent social identity. The room became an inspiration and visiting hub for the London avant-garde—when recently arrived in London, Beardsley and his sister made a visit to the Peacock Room. In a letter written to G. F. Scotson-Clark, Beardsley praised *La Princesse du Pays de la Porcelain* as 'very beautiful and gorgeously painted.'<sup>56</sup> The room clearly affected the illustrator: he included both a colour representation of the painting (with a backdrop of blue peacocks) and a sketch of himself and Mabel being shown around in the letter.<sup>57</sup> His self-portrait is self-deprecatingly scruffy and he looks out of place in the opulent settings, but this underplays his very real affinity with Whistler's peacock theme, which would reoccur throughout his own work. Even Macfall acknowledges that this visit had a positive influence upon Beardsley's artistic development: 'the superb peacock shutters by Whistler also left their influence on the sensitive brain of the younger man—those peacocks that were to bring forth a marked advance in Beardsley's decorative handling a couple of years later, when he was to give his *Salome* to the world' (*Aubrey Beardsley*, 16).

In his discussion of the production and value of art, Bourdieu emphasises the intellectual and cultural apparatuses which collude in the selling of art as a separate (and

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<sup>55</sup> Merrill, *The Peacock Room*, p. 25.

<sup>56</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, eds. Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan and W. G. Good (Oxford: Plantin, 1970, repr. 1990), p. 21. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>57</sup> Linda Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 415.

superior) product from design. It is a false dichotomy which draws distinctions based on ascribed cultural worth: ‘As long as painting is measured by surface covered or by length of labour, or by the quantity and price of the raw materials used (gold or ultramarine paints), the artist-painter is not radically different from a house painter.’<sup>58</sup> While nineteenth-century taste distinguished between the consecrated artist and the work-a-day decorator, the decadent school of thought saw both as participants in the creative economy. Fin-de-siècle decadents were attuned to the radical possibilities of art-commodities, and they placed importance on design as a means of confronting a post-industrial consumer culture on its own terms—they consciously celebrated the use of the most rarefied artistic materials. Decadent understandings of the artistry of design emerged from sympathetic cultural discourses: aesthetes like Whistler and proponents of the Arts and Crafts movement like Morris both recognised that the ‘artist-painter’ and the ‘house-painter’ did not need to be antithetical positions. They had the freedom to work as artist-designers, however, only because they had been consecrated as tastemakers by their work with the more traditionally artistic medium of painting. The decorated decadent space was therefore doubly commodified, both through the processes of interior design and because it was created by artists with a recognised market force. It provided a space for the playful commodification that engaged decadent networks to be actualised through design.

The alliance between art objects and commodities may seem oppositional to the decadent and aesthetic calls for art for art’s sake. Josephine Guy is particularly suspicious of the critical tendency to blur the lines between cultural products and the market. She suggests that there is no evidence that late-Victorian writers were well-versed in economic theory, and argues that when the categories of ‘aesthetic man’ and ‘economic man’ are linked ‘the

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<sup>58</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 292.

categories of the aesthetic and the economic are collapsed together in terms of the latter.’<sup>59</sup> And yet ‘aesthetic man’ and ‘economic man’ are fictitious categories created to streamline readings of fin-de-siècle culture. The decorated interior cannot be separated from its economic realities. Even though the Peacock Room became a monument to Whistler’s egoism and artistic vision, and even though it brought about a break with Leyland, it was only possible because of Leyland’s wealth. Dubbed the ‘Liverpool Medici,’ Leyland was a patron of the arts who could give the economic support necessary for aesthetes to create their art.<sup>60</sup> Even Beardsley’s initial choice of black-painted wood alongside orange may well have been born of financial stringencies alongside his obvious artistic debt to Huysmans—Calloway argues that painting affordable second-hand pieces of furniture in a single colour scheme allowed them to ‘impose some sense of unity and style on a rather heterogeneous collection.’<sup>61</sup> Separating the economic from the aesthetic was not a luxury allowed to many early career artists.

Commodified spaces provided a means of self-construction: the idea of the House Beautiful, the ideal living space, was intrinsically bound up with the personalities who espoused it. Charlotte Gere argues that part of Wilde’s success was in giving ‘a personality to the pervasive but essentially indefinable Aesthetic Movement.’<sup>62</sup> Wilde lectured on the House Beautiful when he was in America, and in ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’ he argues that the development of collective decorative taste was a direct result of individual producers:

It has chiefly been due to the fact that the craftsmen of things so appreciated the pleasure of making what was beautiful, and woke to such a vivid consciousness of the hideousness and vulgarity of what the public had previously wanted, that they simply

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<sup>59</sup> Josephine Guy, ‘Aesthetics, Economics and Commodity Culture: Theorizing Value in Late Nineteenth-Century Britain,’ *English Literature in Transition, 1880 – 1920*, 42.2 (1999), 143-71, p. 153

<sup>60</sup> Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement*, p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 96.

<sup>62</sup> Gere with Hoskins, *The House Beautiful*, p. 11.



starved the public out. It would be quite impossible at the present moment to furnish a room as rooms were furnished a few years ago ...<sup>63</sup>

Wilde ties interior design and decorative taste to the influence of artists and craftsmen working as individualistic taste-makers, who nonetheless created a collective market for their products.

In literary works, personalities and interiors are often conflated, making fictional rooms a metonym for those who inhabit them. Wilde's description of Basil's studio at the beginning of *Dorian Gray* draws on Japonese furnishings and symbolism to paint the room as a queer space—its implied cosmopolitanism makes the studio a liminal zone in which Basil's non-normative, Oxford-Hellenism-inflected homoeroticism can flourish and Dorian can come under Lord Henry's decadent social influence. Wilde's description consciously appeals to all the senses. The studio is a space in which sensuous and sensual inspirations blend and, given the decadent love of synaesthesia, it signifies the transcendent qualities of Basil's painting; the space reflects his identity, but it also creates an aesthetically attuned environment in which Dorian's self can be tied to his portrait. Wilde evokes smells rather than sights: the room is 'filled with the rich odor of roses ... the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.'<sup>64</sup> There is a veritable 'floating world' of sensations in the space Basil has created for his work (the Japanese emphasis on transient beauty foreshadows Dorian's own fears):

now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flittered across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio who, in an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion. (169)

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<sup>63</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde IV: Criticism: Historical Criticism: Intentions: The Soul of Man*, ed. Josephine Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 260.

<sup>64</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde III: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 169. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

The association between the silk curtains and Japanese paintings links them to the popular silk-screens which decorated many late-Victorian interiors, but it also highlights Japan's hybrid role as a source of decorative and painterly inspirations.

Syrett's short story 'Far Above Rubies' (1897), from the twelfth issue of the *Yellow Book*, similarly ties an individual personality to an interior space. Mrs Gilman, a villainous and sexually-forward decadent woman, is characterised by the bric-a-brac with which she surrounds herself, and by her longing for the Japonesque 'wonderful Eastern jar, of green metal, the colour of a peacock's neck with the sun upon it.'<sup>65</sup> Syrett creates an oppressive atmosphere from the sheer overabundance of objects: 'The folds of the heavy curtains over doors and windows gleamed in the firelight, which flashed also on the silver toys with which the many small tables were loaded, on the shining cushions tossed on the floor, and on the fragile china and glass of the tea-table' (254). The decorative commodities which fill her personal space become a cipher for her immorality. Given Mrs Gilman's attempts to first seduce and then blacken the reputation of a virtuous village doctor, it is fair to describe her villainy as following a gendered model: she is a decadent femme fatale. Syrett implies that there is a parallel between Mrs Gilman's decadent consumption of art objects and her exploitation of people. The drawing room's décor becomes evidence of its owner's interpersonal failings.

Mrs Gilman's conduct throughout the narrative seemingly gives credence to the popularly-held negative attitudes to the alliance between a carefully-curated aesthetic interior (complete with a longing for Japonesque peacock-tones) and a decadent sensibility. Syrett seems to be suspicious of both the female decadent and the female interior designer. The domestic space of the home was often treated as the woman's sphere, but 'Far Above Rubies' suggests that avant-garde interiors are better left to men. It is a surprisingly conservative

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<sup>65</sup> Netta Syrett, 'Far Above Rubies,' *The Yellow Book* 12 (1897), 250-73, p. 255. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

sentiment from a New Woman writer like Syrett. Although she was friendly with many decadents, it must be remembered she was writing after the Wilde trials and after Beardsley's dismissal from the *Yellow Book*, and addressing a public opposed to the hallmarks of literary decadence; Ann Ardis certainly argues that Syrett's twentieth-century writing about the fin de siècle sets out a 'tamer, more respectable version of life among the *Yellow Book* set.'<sup>66</sup> But Syrett's seemingly counter-decadent descriptions of the Gilman household are nonetheless decadent in their effect through the loving enumeration of Mrs Gilman's decadent set-dressing. The conservatism of this short story reflects the anti-decadent literary marketplace in which Syrett had to situate her work. To earn a living from her writing, Syrett had to provide what her editors and publishers wanted—'Far Above Rubies' reflects popular fears rather than expresses conservatism on Syrett's part.

The parallels drawn between people and their rooms suggest that a space needs to be inhabited to be of value. Bachelard and de Certeau agree that without occupants an empty space lacks any motivating force. As Bachelard observes, 'we are far removed from any reference to simple geometric forms. A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space.'<sup>67</sup> De Certeau similarly argues that:

A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make functions in it a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.<sup>68</sup>

These theories of people and spaces, while respectively psychoanalytic and materialist, emphasise the significance of those who use a space. The Art-Nouveau Peacock Room, for instance, was given cultural significance by the people like Beardsley who came to see it.

Alastair Duncan has defined Art Nouveau as '*a movement, not a style*;' it was as much

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<sup>66</sup> Ann Ardis, 'Netta Syrett's Aestheticization of Everyday Life: Countering the Counterdiscourse of Aestheticism,' *Women and British Aestheticism*, eds. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), p. 234.

<sup>67</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 51.

<sup>68</sup> De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 117.

motivated by the networks who promoted it as by the demands of the art style it epitomised.<sup>69</sup> The Art Nouveau house was thus fashioned as a space in which like-minded people could display their own interiorities to each other and participate in a collective process of self-creation. The more cooperative possibilities of fin-de-siècle interior design hint at an intimate and engaged relationship between people and the spaces they move through and socialise within. Decadent rooms were created as a means of displaying a version of the self to their networks and to the wider world.

### 3.4 Spaces and things

The aesthetic interior was intimately associated with the objects that furnished it and ideal things were specifically chosen to complement the decorative ethos of the space—they were integral to its success as a *gesamtkunstwerk*. If the decorated house provided a stage for performances of identity, then the things which filled it became props; if interior design provided a way of displaying the self, then the items which were put on display provided performative flourishes. As Marius Kwint suggests, ‘objects are instrumental to the formation of consciousness, enabling the self to prise its sense of separation from the world.’<sup>70</sup> A thing invested with interiority performs a similar anchoring function to the Bachelardian house. If the house is ‘a concentrated being [which] appeals to our consciousness of centrality,’ then this also applies to the objects which it hosts.<sup>71</sup> The thing is something to which an owner can bind his or her own interiority—it has an emotional force. Schaffer sees things as a means of encoding ‘pervasive, important, and unresolved anxieties,’ but they also provide a means of resolving these anxieties.<sup>72</sup> Understanding the ‘topoanalysis’ of things is therefore necessary

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<sup>69</sup> Alastair Duncan, *Art Nouveau* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Marius Kwint, ‘Introduction: The Physical Past,’ *Material Memories: Design and Evocation*, eds. Marius Kwint, Christopher Breward & Jeremy Aynsley (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>71</sup> Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> Talia Schaffer, *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Fiction & Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, repr. 2014), p. 15.

to unpick the decadent philosophies of design and decoration, and to appreciate their public construction of self.

Inanimate possessions take on significance from the context in which they are used, as Trentmann recognises: ‘It is wrong [...] to think about the things people put in their homes as if they were free-floating objects. They derive part of their significance from their relation to the brick and mortar that surrounds them.’<sup>73</sup> The relationship between spaces and things lies at the heart of Beardsley’s images, a dynamic clear in the many drawings he produced depicting women at their toilette. The cover for the third volume of the *Yellow Book* (1894, Figure 3.5), for instance, shows a woman applying makeup before a mirror, surrounded by the accoutrements of her beauty. The bottles, jars and brushes become part of the decorative effect. Her mirror is also decorated: a winding creeper adorns the metal frame and what appear to be built-in streetlamps illuminate it. For some readers, these lights suggested that the woman was a prostitute—decorative objects could hold a transgressive charge and bring the idealised decadent urban environment into the artistic interior.<sup>74</sup> Aside from the city-scape design of the mirror, the décor of the wider room is suggested by the lines of curtains in the background. The tassel of the drapes (reminiscent of the butterfly-pictogram which Whistler used in place of a signature) ties the image together. It draws on Whistler’s authority as a creator of spaces to highlight Beardsley’s transgressive décor.

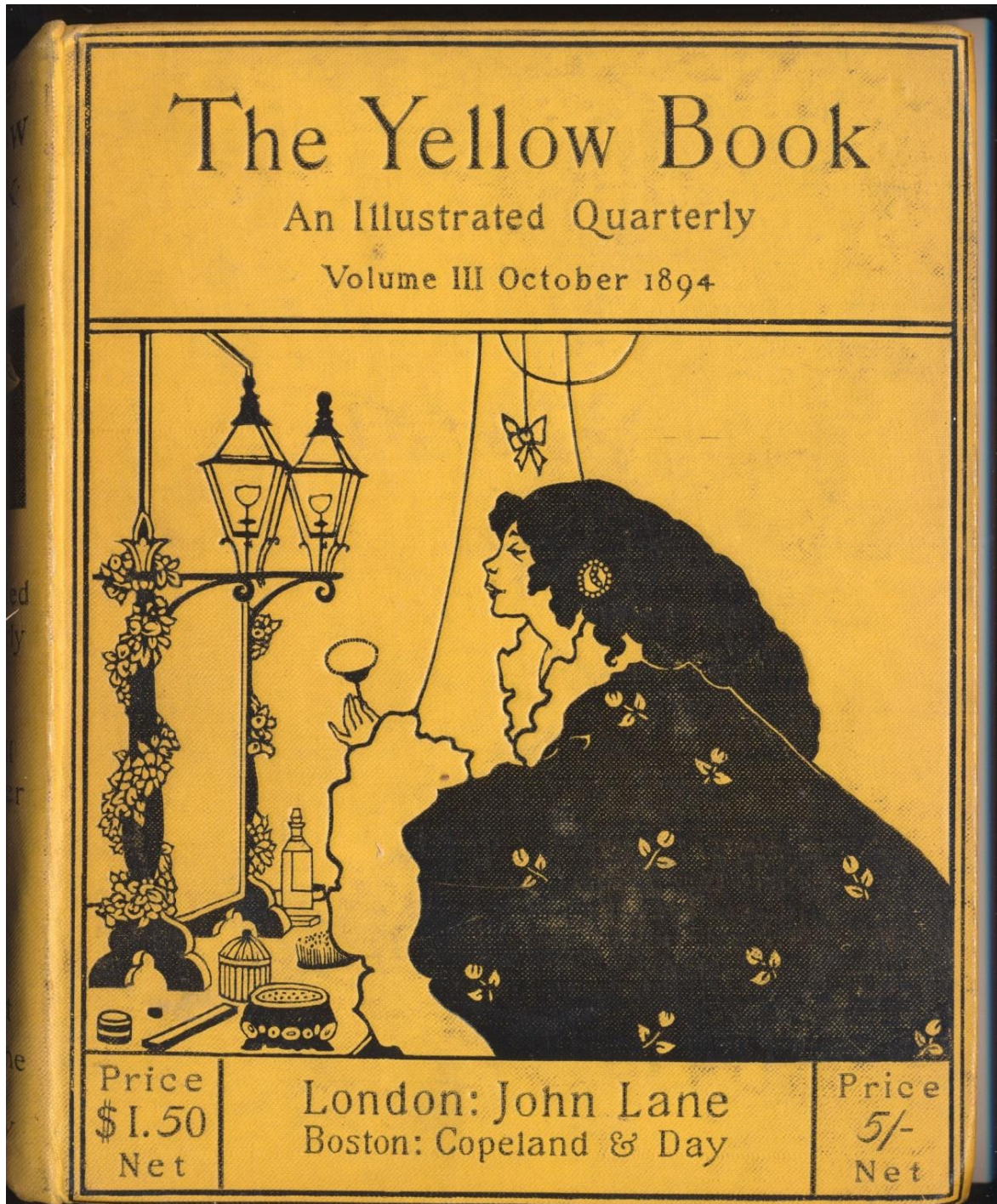
The act of building a collection is a recurrent motif in decadent thought and art, and Potolsky states that even when decadent texts do not explicitly describe a collection, ‘they are often constructed like them.’<sup>75</sup> *A Rebours*, for instance, quite literally takes the shape of a catalogue detailing the many objects which can and should be included within the decadent interior. Decadent networks used ideas of collecting and displaying art objects to generate

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<sup>73</sup> Trentmann, *Empire of Things*, p. 236.

<sup>74</sup> Zatlin, *Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, p. 101.

<sup>75</sup> Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, p. 73.



**Figure 3.5**

Aubrey Beardsley, Cover design, *Yellow Book* 3 (1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

cultural capital. It played into their self-image as a group of connoisseurs characterised by their refined tastes. And organising one's objects was an important step in designing an interior. Leyland had commissioned the decoration of the dining room at 49 Princes Gate so that he might have a space to display his collection of porcelain.<sup>76</sup> His Japanese china acted as a motivating factor in the design. The decadents' love of things drew directly from an aesthetic engagement with their material culture. Aesthetes like Wilde embraced their relationship with art-commodities—so much so that their tendency to align themselves with things was satirised in the 1882 'Aesthetic Teapot,' designed by James Hadley. This bizarre vessel has two-faces: one in the shape of a languid aesthetic man, the other an equally supine aesthetic woman. Both wear the kind of clothing that Wilde's American costume had associated with the art-for-art's-sake movement. The teapot's base carries the inscription 'Fearful consequences through the laws of Natural Selection and Evolution of living up to one's teapot.'<sup>77</sup> This is a clear allusion to Wilde's Oxford witticism that 'I find it harder and harder every day to live up to my blue china.'<sup>78</sup> Not only does Hadley link the aesthetic movement with the post-Darwinian spectre of degeneration and a deleterious gender-indeterminacy, but also implies that its proponents are in danger of becoming the very objects they praise.

The relationship between personal objects and an interior space is exemplified by Beardsley's decadent appropriation of space at the Hôtel Cosmopolitain in Menton, where he was to die from tuberculosis. He stayed at the hotel with his mother, largely confined by his illness. As a hotel room, it can hardly be described as Beardsley's private space and yet he transformed it into an expression of his creative self through the set-dressings he brought with him. He gave this intimate interior space a social dimension by sending a photograph of the room to his friend and collector Herbert Jerome Pollitt (Figure 3.6). Pollitt had visited Beardsley while he

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<sup>76</sup> Lambourne, *Japonisme*, p. 92.

<sup>77</sup> Inscription on the James Hadley 'Aesthetic Teapot,' quoted in Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement*, p. 124.

<sup>78</sup> Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde* (London: Penguin, 1987, repr. 1988), p. 43.



was in Dieppe and the illustrator encouraged Pollitt to visit him at Menton (*Letters*, 405).<sup>79</sup> Pollitt may not have made the journey, but the photograph gave him access to the same decorative performance of selfhood which guests to the orange and black Cambridge Street drawing room would have experienced. This image enters into the discourse of late-Victorian studio portraits in which images of artists at home and in their studios were produced to feed what Gere sees as ‘an apparently insatiable curiosity about art and its practices.’<sup>80</sup> Such photos sold an idea of artistic intimacy and allowed artists to structure their public personae—Beardsley’s image is much more private, having been sent to his friend and patron, but it uses décor to frame a vision of his decadent selfhood for Pollitt. The array of religious Renaissance prints on the wall, in combination with the rosary-draped crucifix, are an overt nod to the artist’s recent conversion to Catholicism. The stand of pens on the folding table and the pair of ormolu candlesticks (without which Beardsley claimed to be incapable of working) on the Godwinesque desk represent a performance of Beardsley’s artistry. He drapes the room in symbols of personal significance as a means of transforming it—the set-dressings are not just accessories but the tools of his decorative performance. He may not have owned the room itself, but the photograph stakes an ideological ownership over the space. Sarah Chaeng argues that by placing an object in a collection ‘it is severed from its origins and takes on the meanings generated by its new context,’ but the transposition of Beardsley’s collection of personal objects served to generate a new meaning for its space.<sup>81</sup>

### 3.5 Spaces as self

The interior designer had the power to transform a room or house into an expression of the self, which could then speak to a wider network. The décor of avant-garde homosexual

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<sup>79</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography* (London: Pallas Athene, 1998, repr. 2011), p. 336.

<sup>80</sup> Charlotte Gere, *Artistic Circles: Design & Decoration in the Aesthetic Movement* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010), p. 23.

<sup>81</sup> Sarah Chaeng, ‘The Dogs of Fo: Gender, Identity and Collecting,’ *Collectors: Expressions of Self and Other*, ed. Anthony Shelton (London: The Horniman Museums and Gardens, London and The Museu Antropológico da Universidade de Coimbra, 2001), p. 61.





**Figure 3.6**

Photograph of Beardsley's hotel room at Menton. Signed for H. C. J. Pollit (1898).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

cultural figures, for instance, created sympathetic locales to nurture the socially proscribed identities of outsiders. In an essay on the queer space which Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon created for each other, John Potvin argues that they ‘did not necessarily refute societal norms, more expressly the ideals of domesticity, but transformed them, making them their own to accommodate a community itself often at odds with culture.’<sup>82</sup> In this way, the so-called ‘Sisters of the Vale’ enacted the transformative ethos of fin-de-siècle design.<sup>83</sup> They refashioned their home as part of their quiet rebellion against Victorian sexual values, destabilising the heteronormative coding of the homely interior by enacting a male-domesticity. Like the decadent dandy’s borrowing of the signifiers of femininity, the artists’ household performance, though less showy and public, appropriates the iconography of the familial space, which a homosexual couple were denied by society.

The Vale, as Ricketts and Shannon’s Chelsea home was known, epitomises the aesthetic space. It had a notable countercultural pedigree since it had once been occupied by Whistler, and Rothenstein suggests that there was a harmony of space and inhabitant in this aesthetic interior:

I was charmed by those men, and by their simple dwelling, with its primrose walls, apple-green skirting and shelves, the rooms hung by Shannon’s lithographs, a fan-shaped water-colour by Whistler, and drawings by Hokusai—their first treasures, to be followed by so many others. (*Men and Memories*, 167)

There is an implicit link between the cosmopolitanism of Whistler’s Japonisque and the Japanese work of Hokusai, and the functioning of a queer space. The collection of international art objects transforms the Chelsea home into a liminal space—as Matt Cook suggests, Shannon and Ricketts were ‘rejecting not home, but what they saw as a mundane

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<sup>82</sup> John Potvin, ‘The Aesthetics of Community: Queer Interiors and the Desire for Intimacy,’ *Rethinking the Interior, c. 1867–1896: Aestheticism and Arts and Crafts*, eds. Jason Edwards and Imogen Hart (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), p. 171.

<sup>83</sup> Sturgis, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 149.

lower middle-class English version of it.’<sup>84</sup> By positioning themselves on the boundaries of society, and decorating the Vale to create what Rothenstein describes as a ‘Florentine aura’ (167), Ricketts and Shannon could display both their taste and their sexual identities. Their cosmopolitan queer space even influenced Ricketts’ description of Shannon’s pet Japanese mice. Despite being ‘supposed to be of one sex,’ the mice were not engaging in ‘unnatural vice’ as Ricketts hoped and produced a litter of ‘mousekins.’<sup>85</sup> He makes the baby mice a part of the decorative space which he and Shannon had created by describing them as ‘exquisite scraps of design.’<sup>86</sup> Unlike the suffocating, fictional space of *A Rebours* which kills Des Esseintes’ pet tortoise, this historical aesthetic space fostered a productive harmony between the location and its inhabitants, both human and rodent.

Aleister Crowley as a Cambridge undergraduate also recognised the transformative potential of the decadent queer space. The rooms he occupied in 1898, his final year, functioned as a nexus for his emerging identities. It was at Cambridge that Crowley transformed himself from Edward Alexander Crowley to the more Celtic Aleister; it was at Cambridge that he explored his bisexual identity in a relationship with Pollitt; and it was at Cambridge that he became involved with the world of turn-of-the-century magic. He described the setup of his rooms in an unpublished short story, ‘The Sage.’ Decadence and the occult are virtually indistinguishable in his account:

... the floor was covered with a carpet; rich sombre peacock blue with an uncertain snaky pattern of deep purple; but here was laid a circular Venetian mosaic. Around its edge ran a band of white marble stones, with what was apparently an inscription. The characters were those of an unfamiliar language; they were inlaid in vivid red. Within this band the circle was yellow of a tint suggesting jaundice; the repellent effect was emphasized by the devices, crabbed and crooked, wrought in it of some sickly green eloquent of all unwholesomeness from mal-de-mer and arsenic to carrion in

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<sup>84</sup> Matt Cook, ‘Domestic Passions: Unpacking the Homes of Charles Shannon and Charles Ricketts,’ *Journal of British Studies* 51 (2012), 618-40, p. 631.

<sup>85</sup> Letter from Ricketts to T. E. Lewinsky, quoted in J. G. P. Delaney, *Charles Ricketts: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 305.

<sup>86</sup> Letter from Ricketts to T. E. Lewinsky, quoted in Delaney, *Ricketts*, p. 305.

corruption, and even by the formidably severe lines of the great black star of six points ...'<sup>87</sup>

In his autohagiography *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley* (1929), Crowley claims to have understood the appeal of decadent refinement while never allowing himself 'to fall under its dominion.'<sup>88</sup> The 'peacock blue' carpet, the mystic symbol etched onto the floor and the cosmopolitan overtones of the 'Venetian mosaic,' however, are figured in unmistakably decadent terms—a description worthy of *A Rebours*. Crowley's design scheme articulates his sense of self, both his sexual and occult identities. It rejects the normative strictures of the polite world of the Victorian drawing room; it rejects any version of domesticity in favour of an overtly decadent assault on the senses.

The 'Sisters of the Vale' and Crowley used the contents of their private living spaces to codify a semi-public identity. Sexual otherness could not be openly expressed, but interior decoration allowed society's outsiders to display their identities and speak to those in the know. The rooms decadents inhabited became a dynamic means of self-creation; the contents rendered materialist commodities into mechanisms of decadent identity. Their spaces were ciphers for marginalised identities and loci for counterculture socialising. Engaged acts of design allowed such locations to become sympathetic to the outré artistic, political and sexual philosophies espoused by the thinkers and friends who made up fin-de-siècle social networks.

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<sup>87</sup> Aleister Crowley, 'The Sage,' quoted in Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2000), pp. 43-4.

<sup>88</sup> Aleister Crowley, *The Spirit of Solitude: An Autohagiography, Subsequently re-Antichristened The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, Volume One (London: The Mandrake Press, 1929), p. 191.

## Chapter 4

# Reading Decadent Gifts and (Inter-)Textual Exchanges

The gift exchanges which took place at the fin de siècle form a gift economy which shored up social relationships and provided decadents with a means of praising others and reinforcing a sense of self through their choice of presents—particularly those that are written and drawn. The previous chapters have explored how material objects can be made part of a performance of collective identity, and the act of gifting makes things into active agents of sociability. Gifting gives inert objects a social charge and actualises the social currency with which the decadents invested objects. By exploring the decadent gift economy, this chapter will demonstrate how the exchange of gifts facilitated performances of self and of decadent sociability as a means of building positions within networks.

I have refashioned the seminal work of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss to create an understanding of gift economies that applies to fin-de-siècle decadence. Mauss's basic assertions that the act of giving and receiving a gift creates social bonds between the members of a group is certainly useful in understanding decadent gifting. He suggests that in many societies 'exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily.'<sup>1</sup> If the network of obligations between members is not fulfilled, gifting becomes a source of conflict since gifts 'are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare.'<sup>2</sup> In fin-de-siècle London there may have been no warfare, but the complex interactions brought about by gifting in the purely social sense mirrored the private and public obligations Mauss outlines.

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<sup>1</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The form and reason for exchange in archaic societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 7.

Mauss's 1925 study is culturally specific: the main focus is indigenous Polynesian and North American cultures. The title of his book declares that it is a study of 'archaic societies' and Mary Douglas, in her preface to the 2002 edition of *The Gift*, claims that to apply the model of the gift economy to contemporary western political structures is 'jumping the gun.'<sup>3</sup> But it is not the geographical or temporal contexts that prevent Mauss's theories being applied more widely. It is, rather, his belief that once a society embraces a monetary economy the gift economy becomes purposeless:

We shall describe the phenomena of exchange and contract in those societies that are not, as has been claimed, devoid of economic markets – since the market is a human phenomenon that, in our view, is not foreign to any known society – but whose system of exchange is different from ours. In these societies we shall see the market as it existed before the institution of traders and before their main invention – money proper.<sup>4</sup>

Mauss presupposes that all modern markets are purely financial, having superseded non-monetary markets. This is not the case, however—as my work on the fin de siècle will show—since non-financial markets exchanging cultural and social capital can (and do) exist simultaneously with financial markets. As Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos points out in her book on gift-exchanges in early-modern England, there are problems with the clear-cut distinction Mauss sees between markets and gifts.<sup>5</sup> Mauss acknowledges that gift economies persist under the surface of modern societies, but he limits the agency of such alternative markets running in parallel to Western capitalism. Gifts, however, do have social currency even within the capitalist field of power. As Aafke E. Komter suggests, 'interpersonal gift exchange and market transactions should not be opposed too strictly.'<sup>6</sup> They are, in fact, interdependent social economies co-existing at the heart of social interaction.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Douglas, 'Foreword,' Mauss, *The Gift*, p. xxx.

<sup>4</sup> Mauss, *The Gift*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *The Culture of Giving: Informal Support and Gift-Exchange in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Aafke E. Komter, 'Introduction,' *The Gift: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Aafke E. Komter (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996), p. 10.

Given decadents' wholehearted embrace of late-nineteenth-century commodity culture, the potential of gift exchanges as part of a social economy should be recognised as a means of facilitating interpersonal alliances within the decadent social realm. While Scot Cutler Shershow foregrounds questions of exchange, he would disagree with this reading. He denies the existence of the gift economy: 'To attribute some qualities of gift giving to commerce is merely to provide an ideological mask for the latter; to interpret gift giving as no more than a process of exchange is to annul the gift.'<sup>7</sup> For him, the gift economy is limited to a process of obligatory exchange, which undermines the principle of gifting. In the light of fin-de-siècle decadents, this reading is reductive; it fails to understand the decadents' constructive relationship with markets as spaces in which social bonds can be built and reinforced through the gifting of commodities. For my work, David Cheal offers a more illuminating interpretation of the decadents' gift economies since he recognises that the burgeoning of capitalism was changing the role of the gift, 'without necessarily implying that the social significance of the gift has been drastically diminished.'<sup>8</sup> The decadents gained social capital by using gifts to ease introductions and pay homage to the leading lights of the movement. Bourdieu's theories of other forms of capital help to create a more complex understanding of these non-monetary market structures, which existed alongside the primary market in a capitalist society.<sup>9</sup> Since the cultural and social capitals which he studies facilitate other forms of social interaction, it is useful to ascribe these non-financial forms of capital to the gift economy. As an example of Bourdieu's cultural capital, the decadent gift accrues value by being exchanged throughout a network which could appreciate the signifiers of decadence.

In order to address the significance of the gift economy in the fin de siècle, it is necessary to consider the social value of the things the decadents were exchanging and their

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<sup>7</sup> Scot Cutler Shershow, *The Work & the Gift* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 100.

<sup>8</sup> David Cheal, *The Gift Economy* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p.148.

worth as decadent objects. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, things, with all their concomitant emotional currency, articulated personal and social identity when displayed in a room, but this is also true of given objects. Books, dedications and caricatures had material value as physical objects, but they also had cultural capital as gifts. I will situate them within the material culture of the late nineteenth century in order to understand their value as gifts in decadent social networks.

#### **4.1 The power of the book: collecting, reading and giving**

The centrality of books in decadent circles was due in no small part to the number of decadents who wrote, produced and sold them. Books represented the decadents' stake in the fin-de-siècle literary market, but the bibliophilia which was a hallmark of decadent interactions with books ensured they were treated as more than monetary artefacts. Collecting books as treasured objects was a material interaction; reading books as a form of initiation (a common trope in decadent fiction) was a textual interaction. Books thus occupied a special position in decadent thought as elaborate artefacts and as ideological symbols—cultural significances which galvanised their status as gifts. Gifting a book united material and textual understandings: the given book was a beautiful object that implicitly directed the choice of reading matter for the recipients and shaped their decadent identity.

The social capital which decadents attached to the given book emerged from its status as a physical object which had been the product of a material design process. In her study on the material cultures of Victorian book-ownership, Leah Price emphasises the physicality of the book; her theoretical stance can be usefully applied to reveal the importance of the book-object within decadent social networks. Contemporary commentators feared that people had become more interested in adopting books as furnishings and less interested in reading them. There was a cultural confusion about how people should interact with books:



That books function both as trophies and as tools, that their use engages bodies as well as minds, and that printed matter connects readers not just with authors but other readers and handlers—these facts troubled a genre busy puzzling out the proper relation of thoughts to things, in an age where more volumes entered into circulation (or gathered dust on more shelves) than ever before.<sup>10</sup>

Book collecting was not just a decadent pastime since collections have long been marks of social distinction amongst the wealthy. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, as literacy increased and the costs of book production dropped, it became easier for a wider spectrum of people to own books. This created a situation in which the pre-existing elite of book-owners and collectors felt the need to establish a new form of distinction for themselves in relation to their libraries. Price argues that increasingly the Victorians ‘cathected the text in proportion as they disowned the book. More specifically, they identified themselves as *text-lovers* in proportion as they distinguished themselves from *book-lovers*’ (emphasis added).<sup>11</sup> According to this Victorian worldview, while upper and middle-class collectors prized books for their contents, working class readers could see them only as objects. From the mid-nineteenth century on, in a desire to separate themselves from working class readers, the bourgeoisie (ironically, a class built on the idea of ownership) tried to distance themselves from engaging with the book-commodity. By disparaging the material book, they established the worthiness of an idealised word-constructed book—a book made up of nothing more than the words on the page. The decadents, rather than severing the text from the physicality of the book, chose to unite these possibilities.

Decadent book-owners certainly relished the materiality of the book-object as decorative-object. Transforming books into material objects was a purposeful act of transgression against Victorian acceptable textuality, which prized word over appearance. Beardsley refashioned the book into a decorative (rather than simply textual) object in the front matter of his illustrated edition of *The Rape of the Lock*, which states that the book has

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<sup>10</sup> Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, repr. 2013), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> Price, *How to Do Things with Books*, pp. 4-5.

been ‘Embroidered with Eleven Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley.’<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Frankel explicitly draws on the decorative connotations of this phrasing, suggesting that ‘ In Beardsley’s view the effect of illustration is one of embellishment, accentuating the material totality of the text or book as object.’<sup>13</sup> I would suggest that the implicit connection to the decadent discourses of design serves to cement the emotional significance of the book-as-thing. Le Gallienne emphasised such emotional resonance in a four-line poem which he included in an 1893 letter to Lane:

What are my books? My friends, my loves  
My church, my tavern, & my only wealth,  
My garden—yea my flowers, my bees, my doves,  
My only doctors—& my only health.<sup>14</sup>

While these lines do not assert the materiality of Le Gallienne’s idealised books, they do foreground their emotional effect on him as a reader and owner. The thingness and commodity-nature of the decadent book are united in Le Gallienne’s essay ‘The Philosophy of Limited editions’ (1894), where he makes a case for limited edition print runs of books in order to preserve their status as ‘miraculous memories of high thoughts and golden moods.’<sup>15</sup> Le Gallienne praises what he terms the ‘literary Malthusians’ (121) who seek to limit the number of books. He implicitly assigns cultural capital to collecting limited runs by suggesting that ‘There is no telling how we should value our possessions if they were more arduously come by’ (123). Le Gallienne makes the material scarcity of the books in a decadent’s library evidence of their personal value.

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock: A Heroi-Comical Poem in Five Cantos* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1897), front pages.

<sup>13</sup> Nicholas Frankel, ‘Aubrey Beardsley “Embroiders” the Literary Text,’ *The Victorian Illustrated Book*, ed. Richard Maxwell (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), p. 262.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to John Lane, 920 LEG 4, Letters from Richard Le Gallienne to Other Correspondents, Folder 4, Item 53. Liverpool Record Office.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, ‘The Philosophy of Limited Editions,’ *Prose Fancies* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1894), p. 119. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

The libraries of decadents, Potolsky argues, were ‘made up of objects gathered for their singularity or their supreme embodiment of some rare perversity.’<sup>16</sup> If anything, in an affront to worthy Victorian textuality, they venerated the reified book. Ada Levenson and Wilde, for instance, joked about producing a book which was

*all* margin; full of beautiful unwritten thoughts, and [...] bound in some Nile-green skin powdered with gilt nenuphars and smoothed with hard ivory, decorated with gold by Ricketts (if not Shannon) and printed on Japanese paper; each volume must be a collector’s piece, a numbered one of a limited “first” (and last) edition: “very rare.”<sup>17</sup>

And it must, of course, be illustrated by Beardsley. Entirely removing the word from this hypothetical volume and paying such rigorous attention to the methods of its production (even if Ricketts and Shannon are rendered interchangeable) creates something which is all object. The necessity of its being ‘very rare’ suggests that the ideal book is an artefact for a collector—the hermeneutics of the collected book are about its handling and the visual effect it creates when placed on a shelf. The ideal collectable book is something distinctive; it is rare not just because it is part of a limited edition, but because it is unusual. Wilde explores such non-textual interactions with the material book-object when describing the collection that Dorian builds of copies of the so-called ‘poisonous book,’ a fictionalised version of *A Rebours*.<sup>18</sup> It may offer inspirational reading for the young decadent, but it is essentially treated as a decorative object. Wilde is especially concerned with Dorian’s attempts to make these books into ornamental emblems of his interior condition:

He procured from Paris no less than five large-paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colors, so that they might suit his various moods and the changing fancies of a nature over which he seemed, at times, to have almost entirely lost control. (276)

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<sup>16</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 74.

<sup>17</sup> Ada Levenson, *Letters to the Sphinx from Oscar Wilde* (London: The Westminster Press, 1930), pp. 19-20.

<sup>18</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde III: The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Joseph Bristow (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 274. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Browsing the shelves of a decadent library, then, will give an insight into the collector's aesthetic taste: whether or not the books have been read becomes immaterial to the materiality of their presence. The book on the shelf is a performance of decadent selfhood because it symbolises its owner's ideological allegiances (the book's exterior can also be said to represent its as-yet-unread pages). It is a dynamic of representation which recalls Walter Benjamin's claim that books in a private library are the 'scene and showplace of their identity.'<sup>19</sup> Using theatrical language, Benjamin represents the ownership of books as a staged performance. Applied to decadent collections, books are a tool for their owner to present a version of him- or herself to the world; they are a means of integration with a like-minded network.

The self-association between decadents and their libraries was made a matter of public controversy and scandal during Wilde's trials, where the emphasis on categorically pinning down (and publicly condemning) Wilde's influences shows that the wider reading public accepted the connection between self and book. Carson ruthlessly quizzed the playwright on his literary influences and even read out in full the passage of *Dorian Gray* where Dorian is gifted the poisonous book by Lord Henry and begins his collection of its coloured volumes. The prosecution was at pains to establish that this (fictional) book was *A Rebours*. Even after Wilde acknowledged Huysmans' novel as an influence, Carson was seemingly unable to understand that the 'poisonous book' was not a real text but an allusion:

CARSON: I ask you, now, was the book you had in your mind as the book sent by Lord Henry Wotton to Dorian Gray, was it *À Rebours* or was it not?

WILDE: It was not.

CARSON: But you told me a moment ago it was.

WILDE: No.

JUDGE: I certainly took it down.

WILDE: What I meant was – if you will allow me to say so – I am not quibbling about the matter – in the book sent to Dorian Gray by Lord Henry Wotton there is an

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<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Collecting,' *One Way Street and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 162.

allusion in the next chapter—  
CARSON: I do not want to know that.<sup>20</sup>

This is a supremely uncooperative dialogue in the unsympathetic space of the courtroom where the forces of judicial authority refused to understand Wilde's use of allusion. The wilfully nebulous ambiance of decadent writing was banished in favour of definitive facts—Carson seems intentionally blind to the nuance of Wilde's literary borrowings. He pressured Wilde to say that Huysmans' novel was an 'immoral book,' but Wilde's only expression of condemnation was that 'It is not well written' (96). Such references to texts of the countercanon were a powerful means of building a collective identity amongst the decadents, but Carson was denying Wilde all creative agency in his fictionalisation of fin-de-siècle decadent culture. The implication was that Wilde's public persona was inseparable from his reading matter—ironically, the supremely decadent concept of presenting the self through literary artefacts was being used to attack decadence. Carson recognised the literary suggestion in Wilde's use of Huysmans, and then deployed it against him in a crudely literalising way. In the courtroom, the link between self and books was shorn of all the countercultural radicalism that energised the decadents in their appropriation of decadent literature.

The influential power of books can also be seen in the two versions of 'The Toilet of Salome' illustration (1893) for Wilde's *Salome* where Beardsley plays on Victorian concerns about the role of books in the home. Both images are loaded with the trappings of fin-de-siècle counterculture to produce a decadent space. In the original image (which was suppressed, presumably because of the gamut of masturbatory activities taking place within it), Salome's libraries reinforce her countercultural taste and allow Beardsley to send a signal to the readers of Wilde's text. The books on display in 'Toilet – 1' (Figure 4.1) are transgressive—they make a decadent's required reading (or perhaps collecting) list, including

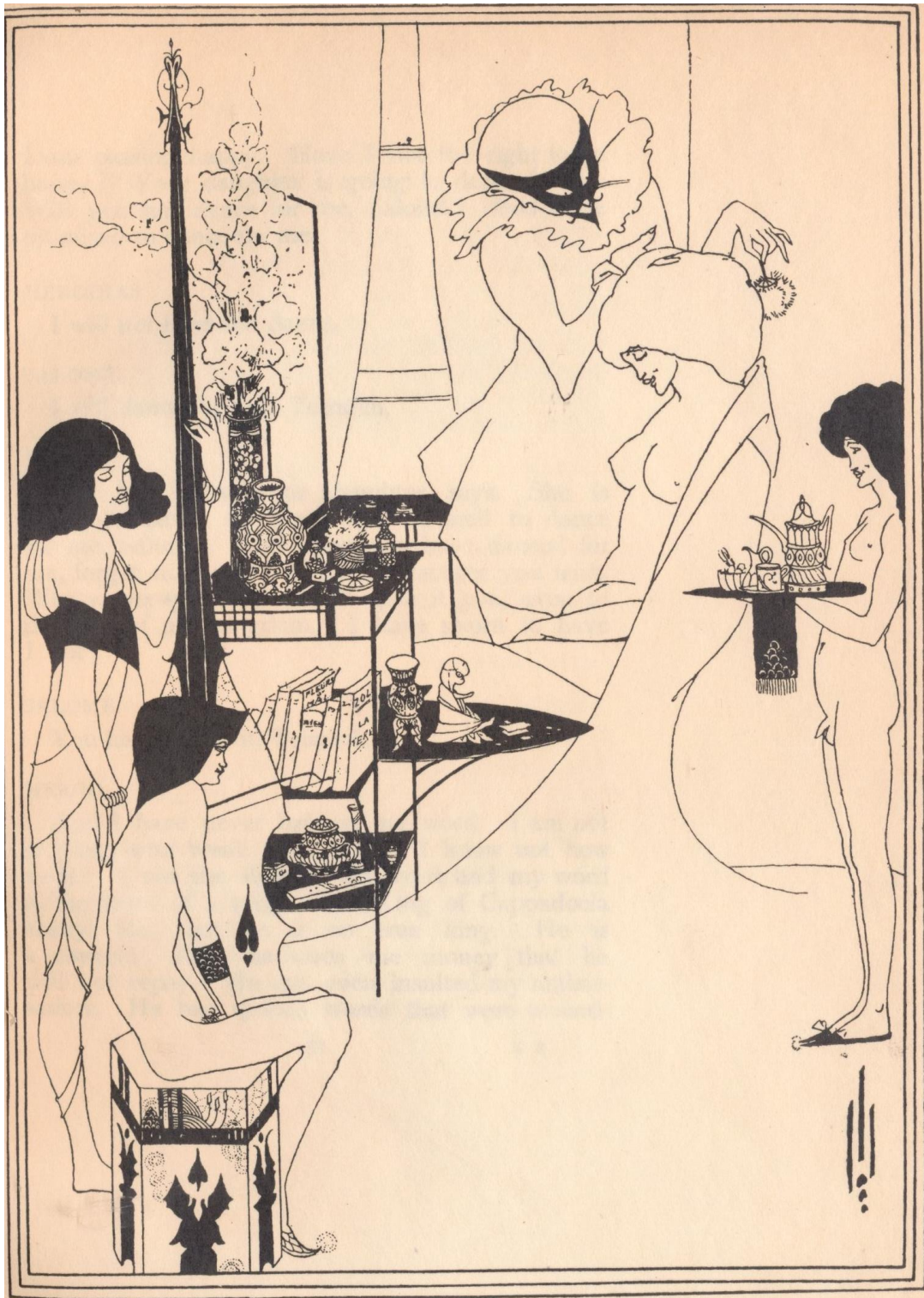
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<sup>20</sup> Merlin Holland, *Irish Peacock & Scarlet Marquess: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003, repr. 2004), p. 98. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and Zola's *La Terre*. 'Toilet – 2' (Figure 4.2), the version deemed more acceptable by the publisher John Lane, includes an even more transgressive library—an unspecified book by the Marquis de Sade, the Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* and Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*. While Beardsley played at bowing to social convention by drawing a new illustration, he used the drawn books both to goad the public and to address his own social circles, who would appreciate the content of the books as well as Beardsley's baiting of public opinion.

The book spines which adorned the decadent library functioned as material signifiers, but this did not imply their owners attached no importance to the text. They appreciated the way in which a purely decorative book refuted the textual-emphasis of bourgeois attitudes to books, but their networks also relied on sensitive readings of text. This results in two interrelated models of identity at play: the decadent collector (book as object) and the decadent reader (book as text). This relationship between materiality and textuality is key to understanding the importance of books as gifts. If the decadent relationship with books leads to two models of identity, then it stands to reason that there will be different models of gifting: a book may be given as an exquisite *objet d'art* which has value because of its design, or it may be given for the inspirational quality of its text.

Arthur Machen's short story 'The White People' (1904) enacts the tensions between textual significance and the physicality of the book-object through the occult possibilities of the Green Book at the heart of the story. Written by a young girl who has been found dead in front of a pagan statue, the Green Book is presented in terms strikingly reminiscent of Wilde's 'poisonous book.' Machen uses his imagined book to embody the 'Sorcery and sanctity' which inspire Ambrose's philosophising on the nature of sin, paying meticulous attention to its 'morocco binding,' the way in which 'the colour had grown faint'



**Figure 4.1**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Toilet of Salome - I,' *Salome* (London: Bodley Head, 1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.





**Figure 4.2**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Toilet of Salome - II,' *Salome* (London: Bodley Head, 1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.



and its lack of wear.<sup>21</sup> He even compares its smell to the ‘odour that sometimes haunts an ancient piece of furniture’ (119). Machen’s articulation of the Green Book’s materiality is paradoxical (even though Ambrose fussily professes ‘never [to] make paradoxes,’ 112). While the description of the book focuses on its physical presence, Ambrose suggests that material culture prevents people from coming to the truth. He claims that it is the materialism of the late nineteenth century which ‘has done a good deal to suppress sanctity [and] has done perhaps more to suppress evil’ (117). People are shut off from ‘natural reason:’ ‘our higher senses are so blunted, we are so drenched with materialism, that we should probably fail to recognize real wickedness if we encountered it’ (115). Sin is not what society regards as criminal behaviour; sin is ‘an esoteric, occult thing’ (116), which is an anathema to the limitations of nature. Supreme good and supreme evil transcend the petty concerns of the everyday—magic has no place in market-driven philosophies. To think only about the materiality of a magical book, Machen suggests, would be to bind it to the worldly plane.

Ambrose lends Cotgrave this book in order that he might read it and thus understand the spirituality required for true evil, suggesting that, in line with mid-century bourgeois ideas about textuality, it is the written words which are most important. And yet, the girl’s narrative draws attention to the failure of textuality to grasp occult mysteries. She cannot write the secret ‘Aklo letters,’ cannot write in ‘Chian’ (119), ‘Xu’ (120) or any of the other ‘wonderful languages’ (119) she has learnt, and cannot ‘say who the Nymphs are, or the Dôls, or Jeelo, or what voolas mean’ (119). The Green Book is a text which cannot textually represent its own subject matter. It is instead a network of obscure allusions which can speak only to those who already understand them. The contents are as unsatisfactory as, it would seem, its material components. Machen’s fictional book must, therefore, find its significance in the interpretative gap between the text and its binding. The two (potentially competing) elements

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<sup>21</sup> Arthur Machen, ‘The White People,’ *The White People and Other Weird Stories* (London: Penguin, 2011), pp. 110, 118. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

of materiality and textuality are resolved by the end pages ‘oddly decorated with coloured patterns and faded gold’ (119). These signs capture the occult on the page, but are framed in decorative, material terms. For all Ambrose’s suspicions, ‘The White People’ makes the ideal book a hybrid artefact.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry gifts the first copy of the ‘poisonous book’ for its subject matter. The book is part of Dorian’s decadent education: his initial engagement with Lord Henry’s gift is his response to reading it; later, he collects and rebinds copies of the book, appropriating it as a material signifier of his emerging decadence. The gifting of books became a key signifier of community and shared identity amongst the networks forged by decadents—particularly given the rather public ownership of their displayed books, which were idealised precisely because they had a physical presence. As objects (their covers, typography and printing the result of material design), books anchored social interactions and exchanges in the material world. Collecting and reading books in the fin de siècle was about the creation of networks, of social allegiances which grew up around the shared appreciation for the materiality and textuality of books. A book that is simply a text can be read; a material book can be gifted and shared. The hybrid nature of the decadent book is key to securing social networks.

In Syrett’s new-woman *bildungsroman* novel *Rose Cottingham* (1915), Rose, the eponymous heroine, is given transgressive reading matter at her boarding school by the Robinson sisters (though they lack the intellectual curiosity to engage with the texts themselves):

[the Robinsons] returned from home with various magazines and novels concealed in their handbags, which they passed on to Rose as the recognized daring reader and critic of advanced fiction. In this way she devoured the works of “Ouida” and derived infinite gratification from the fact that according to May Robinson, not only were they

“frightfully improper,” but their discovery meant instant expulsion for her and every girl who had turned their poisonous pages.<sup>22</sup>

Such acts of gifting provide a direct connection between people through books, but also empower Rose as an intellectually curious young woman. In *Rose Cottingham*, reading outré books is not just an activity for the homosocial world of Wildean cenacles, but an instrument of female emancipation. Rose rebels against the worthy reading imposed by her school mistresses, and takes pleasure in her midnight reading of smuggled ‘contraband literature’ (153). The ‘poisonous pages’ may well be an allusion to Wilde’s ‘poisonous book,’ the literary decadent influence par excellence, but they also serve to poke fun at the moral hysteria surrounding reading in the nineteenth century. Such ‘frightfully improper’ literature allows decadent outsiders to stake their identities in books.

As part of the fin-de-siècle gift economy, giving books cemented the decadents’ symbolic link between people and textual objects, and thus allowed them to reify their interactions in the semi-public sphere. Characters like Rose and Dorian create identities around the books they are given, but we cannot underestimate the importance of the networks their preferred reading matter represents. Even in fiction, books tie their owners into wider networks of exchange and comradeship. As Price argues, simply handling a book binds individuals into a network of others who have engaged with and held it.<sup>23</sup>

#### **4.2 Decadent dedications**

If the material book could be shared and gifted in decadent networks as a vehicle for sociability, it became an even more potent signifier of sociability when the author personalised the gift with a dedicatory inscription. The decadents prolifically gifted their associates with dedicated books either in the form of signed individual presentation copies or in dedicatory epistles printed into every copy of a text. If the first form of gift was strictly a

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<sup>22</sup> Netta Syrett, *Rose Cottingham: A Novel* (London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1916), p. 153-4. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Price, *How to do Things with Books*, p. 15.

private material act, then the latter brought the act of dedication (and the personal and ideological allegiance it represented) into a public sphere of readers. It was a rich form of material interaction which provided a means of solidifying decadent relationships in front of a collective public of readers.

Traditionally, the dedicated book had been a tool in patronage cultures allowing writers to fête the wealthy and to secure the financial capital they needed. Narratives around the emergence of the free market suggest that patronage dissipated as a social force with the advent of the literary marketplace since writers were no longer dependent on patrons for monetary support. The networks and material bonds of patronage may have been partially replaced by free-market literary economics and the rise of the professional writer, but this is an overly simplistic reading of complex financial and interpersonal relationships at the fin de siècle. Although her research is based in early twentieth-century American literature, Francesca Sawaya's work on gifting and patronage shows that patron/client relationships continued to be a significant force.<sup>24</sup> Philanthropy certainly flourished in the Victorian period ('the amount of money spent on private charity in 1860s London was almost equal to the government's naval estimates').<sup>25</sup> And as long as late-Victorian authors required financial support, the structures of patronage still had purpose.<sup>26</sup> Philanthropic gifting provided a means for writers and artists to work under the aegis of a patron (who accrued social and cultural capital through their connection to the art world).

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<sup>24</sup> Francesca Sawaya, *The Difficult Art of Giving: Patronage, Philanthropy, and the American Literary Market* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between the Classes in Victorian Society* (London: Verso, 1971, repr. 2013), p. 245.

<sup>26</sup> Baron Corvo [Frederick Rolfe], for instance, was a decadent dependent on charitable patronage. Expelled from a seminary college in Rome, he became homeless. The Duchess of Sforza-Cesarini took him in, acting as both charitable donor (in taking him off the streets) and as patron (in bestowing on him, or so he claimed, the title 'Baron Corvo'). His precarious finances meant that he needed the support of a patron-figure long after traditional understandings of the literary free market suggest such support was no longer necessary. Kristin Mahoney has argued that the unequal power and economic dynamics which defined Corvo's life and literary career are critiqued in the sado-masochistic hierarchical relationships which proliferate throughout his fiction. Kristin Mahoney, 'Camp Aesthetics and Inequality: Baron Corvo's Toto Stories,' *Economies of Desire at the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Libidinal Lives*, eds. Jane Ford, Kim Edwards Keates and Patricia Pulham (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

The dedication is a loaded statement under patronage cultures, acting as a symbolic payment in exchange for the patron's capital. It makes authorship a fraught issue. John A. Butchel, studying the posthumous dedication of Chapman's translation of Homer, argues that the phrase 'I dedicate' is an 'explicit performative utterance' which transfers symbolic ownership of the text to the patron.<sup>27</sup> This dynamic is equally true for fin-de-siècle dedications. For Butchel, it is a brand of 'super-ownership' ensuring that the 'work remains the patron's regardless of who owns copies:' it seemingly transfers authorial authority to those with the greatest financial power.<sup>28</sup>

Despite representing a significant act of interpersonal allegiance, there has been little criticism addressing the role of book dedications in the late nineteenth century—most work in this field touches on manifestations of dedication culture in the Renaissance and the eighteenth century. While caution is necessary when applying these theories to late-nineteenth-century culture, there are elements of the earlier dedicatory acts which are transferable to a Victorian context. Zoran Velagić's nuanced approach to the politics of dedication provides a framework for establishing the significance of book dedications to fin-de-siècle social networks. He claims that book historians have a tendency to consider dedications 'as a manifestation of the patronage system—not as individual acts or concrete texts, but rather as concepts in the context of the history of the book and wider cultural history.'<sup>29</sup> Looking at the individual and textual significance of fin-de-siècle dedicated books outside the dynamics of the economic relations between patron and writer exposes the sociability which book dedications facilitate. The close social and professional bonds between decadent dedicators and decadent dedicatees merit as much attention as the mechanisms of patronage.

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<sup>27</sup> John A. Butchel, 'Book Dedications and the Death of a Patron: The Memorial Engraving in Chapman's "Homer,"' *Book History*, 7 (2004), 1-29, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Butchel, 'Book Dedications,' p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Zoran Velagić, 'The patron function in eighteenth-century book dedications: the case of Croatian religious writing,' *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 21.3 (2014), 363-77, p. 363.

Unlike the artists of the eighteenth century, Beardsley's pseudo-patron/client relationship with Smithers (his publisher and main source of income) did not leave him beholden to an artistic patron; it allowed him to engage subversively with the politics of dedication by creating a mock dedicatory epistle to the fictitious Cardinal Giulio Poldo Pezzoli in *Venus and Tannhäuser*. The cardinal's titles are listed in full and Beardsley feigns fear at being 'arraigned of presumption in choosing so exalted a name' (13) for the dedication of his book. The self-consciously archaic language harks back to a time when authors had to fawn over patrons for financial stability: it is a deliberate departure from the ironic self-assurance which defines decadent self-presentation. On the first page, Beardsley adopts an exaggerated display of self-deprecation, describing himself as a 'HUMBLE SERVITOR/ A SCRIVENER AND LIMNER OF WORLDLY THINGS.'<sup>30</sup> His mock prostration before an imagined patron draws attention to Beardsley's liberation from patronage as a decadent writer and artist. He sets out to play with the power dynamics of the patron/client relationship. Beardsley has the freedom to mock the economic restraints on literature imposed by a patron's influence in a playful text which would never reach a wide audience.<sup>31</sup> With nothing to lose (though he and his family were in need of philanthropic support from Smithers), he could mock the system of unequal dedication which had subordinated artists. Velagić suggests the unequal patron relationship was, in eighteenth-century texts, demonstrated by the disparity in size between the names of patron and author on the title page.<sup>32</sup> To present himself as an equal, Beardsley's name is printed in the same size font as the cardinal's. It is a ludic inversion of the traditional patron/client relationship embodied by the dedicatory epistle.

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<sup>30</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (London: For Private Circulation, 1907), p. 11. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>31</sup> George Y. Trail argues that Beardsley will have been aware that the unexpurgated text of *Venus and Tannhäuser* would never be published, even in the decadent pages of the *Savoy*. He therefore suggests that the pornographic version could only have been intended for a select audience. George Y. Trail, 'Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhäuser*: Two Versions,' *Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 18.1 (1975), 16-23, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Velagić, 'The patron function in eighteenth-century book dedications,' p. 367.

Stetz is one of the few critics who has directly addressed the dynamics of decadent dedication: her discussion of the copy of *Keynotes* George Egerton gave John Lane demonstrates the significance of the dedicatory gifted book in decadent circles (Figures 4.3 and 4.4). Signed from ‘Thy little friend George,’ Egerton’s use of the archaic familiar determiner and the diminutive ‘little’ implies that as a writer and a woman her status is subordinate to Lane’s. In replacing the Beardsley-designed cover with her own embroidery and in writing marginal comments into her text, however, she foregrounds her interpretative role as an author.<sup>33</sup> She insists on her own creative potency even as she uses dedication to court her publisher’s favour and ensure her continued position at the Bodley Head. Stetz argues that Egerton’s annotations are central to understanding the gender dynamics of her gift; they make it ‘both handiwork [treated as a woman’s preserve] and brain-work [the professional masculine realm], blurring the boundaries between decorative and High Art, as well as between masculine and feminine.’<sup>34</sup> Emerging through the annotations, Stetz sees a flirtatious dynamic in Egerton’s apparent identification with her sensual protagonists—she seems, therefore, to be encouraging a degree of intimacy with Lane.<sup>35</sup> Egerton runs the risk of succumbing to the threat that the sociologist Komter identifies for female gift-givers of ‘losing their own identities, given their unequal societal and economic power compared with that of men.’<sup>36</sup> By interpreting her own text (and judiciously mentioning her husband in her annotations), however, Egerton keeps herself independent of Lane’s direct influence. While Egerton’s act of embroidery draws on a narrative of women’s work, it also represents an assertion of control over her text. She covered her book in green satin and embroidered it—the iconic key designed by Beardsley for the Bodley Head’s *Keynotes* series is picked out in lavender thread. While this key motif references Beardsley’s designs for the series, Egerton

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<sup>33</sup> Margaret D. Stetz, ‘*Keynotes*: A New Woman, her Publisher, and her Material,’ *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 30.1 (1997), 89-106, p. 95.

<sup>34</sup> Stetz, ‘*Keynotes*,’ p. 92.

<sup>35</sup> Stetz, ‘*Keynotes*,’ p. 98.

<sup>36</sup> Aafke E. Komter, *Social Solidarity and the Gift* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 8.

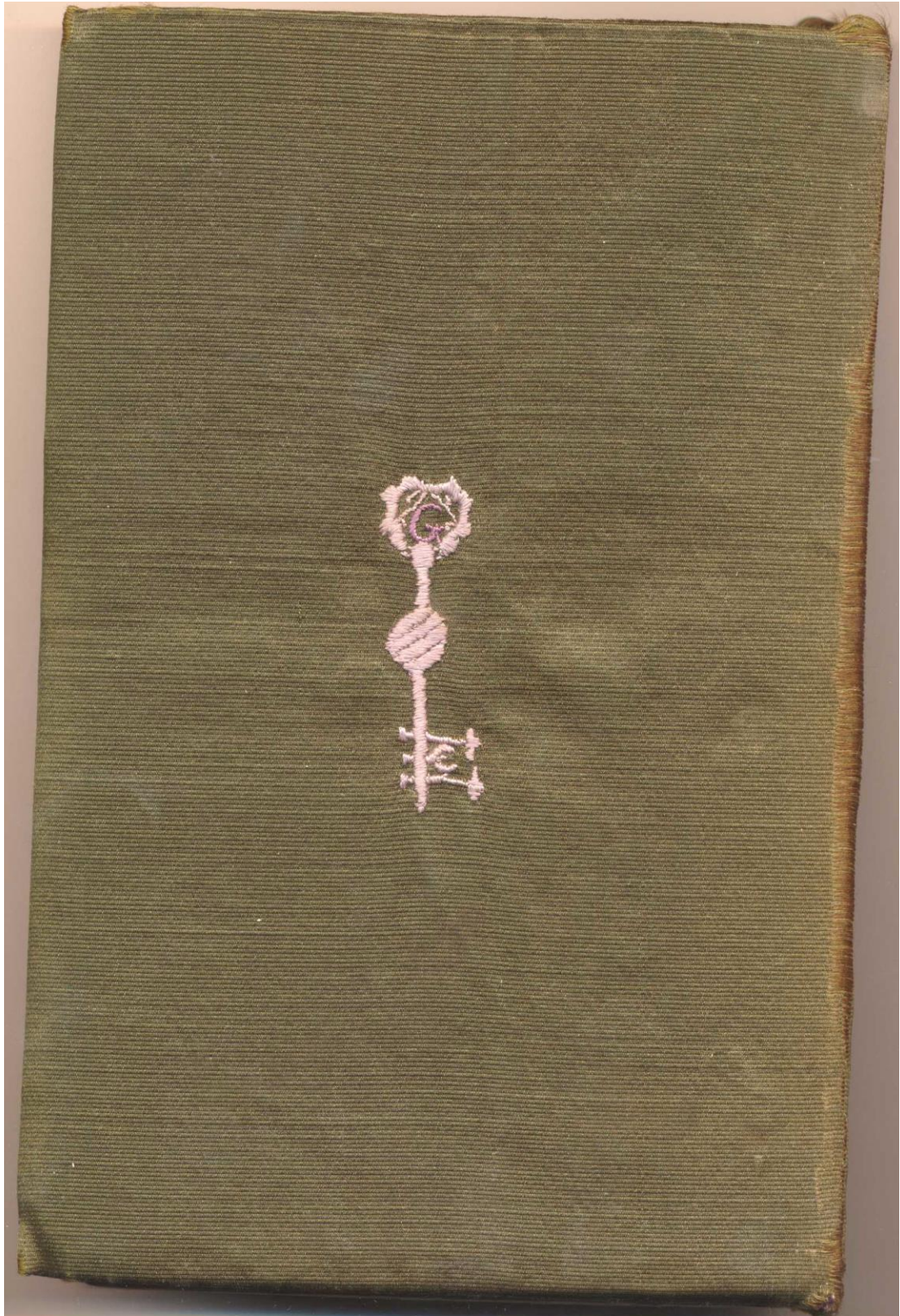




**Figure 4.3**

George Egerton, rebound copy of *Keynotes*, front cover (1893).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.





**Figure 4.4**

George Egerton, rebound copy of *Keynotes*, back cover (1893).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

nonetheless replaces his cover with her own work. Even if she used this gift to affirm her client/patron relationship with Lane, she redefines the book in her own terms, using her decorative art to engage with the materiality of the decadent book-object. Her redesigned cover implicitly energises her role as author and giver. She may have transferred ownership of this book to Lane, but her handiwork ensures her a stake in the gifting rather than subordinating her as an embroiderer. She does not, therefore, become subsumed by Lane's super-ownership of her work as a publisher/patron. By giving him a personalised copy of her book, Egerton forces him to keep her and her art in mind. The gift allows her to leverage her lower status through the decadent gift economy—she is creating an obligation.

The re-bound *Keynotes* emphasises the problematic nature of the book which has been dedicated to a patron figure. Egerton's individual copy for Lane has a dual identity as both a gift to a friend and an act of tribute to the man who, as her publisher, controlled her economic future. After Lane's death in 1925, his widow auctioned his books and Egerton bought back her embroidered presentation copy.<sup>37</sup> Her decision to do so suggests that in spite of using her handiwork to invest the gifted copy with her personal agency, Egerton felt she had renounced something of herself through the act of giving a gift to a more powerful man. She reclaims ownership over the text by re-appropriating this symbolic token.

Fin-de-siècle writers had a greater stake in the literary market than earlier writers who had been bound to their funders, allowing the dedicated book to be transformed into a tool of decadent self-promotion. This playful balancing act of creative egos is evident in the dedicatory letters Wilde wrote on 23 February, 1893 to accompany gift copies of *Salome* (though a letter written in March to a Mr Iredale, an employee of Lane and Mathews, complains that several of Wilde's friends, including Le Gallienne and George Bernard Shaw,

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<sup>37</sup> Stetz, 'Keynotes,' p, 91.

had not received their copies).<sup>38</sup> These letters may not be dedications in the traditional sense, but they perform the same function by gifting particular copies of Wilde's text to specific friends and fellow decadents. Sending out such presentation copies to the people who reviewed and recommended his books allowed Wilde to position himself within the decadent literary economy. Unlike the embroidered *Keynotes* which Egerton made for her publisher, Wilde used dedicated gift-copies of *Salome* to promote himself among his peers.

In this gifting ritual, the discourses of praise were complicated. The most straightforward encomium in the series of letters is Wilde's address to Edmund Gosse. The gift of *Salome* is to be taken as 'a slight tribute of [...] admiration' for his 'delicate gift of English' (553). Wilde's overt language of praise is a sign of Gosse's status. Describing *Salome* as 'a slight tribute' is an uncharacteristically self-deprecatory statement for Wilde, but it serves to elevate Gosse. Wilde is paying homage to a prolific and established writer who was part of many artistic networks—he is Wilde's equal. The letter to Shaw, on the other hand, praises the playwright for his ability to understand Wilde and his work. Here, friendly gifting is figured using explicitly decadent imagery as Wilde jokingly gives his gift agency: 'for these and many other reasons Salomé presents herself to you in purple raiment' (554). The letter's central conceit of a self-revealing Salome, and the consciously decadent imagery, presents and praises Shaw as an ideal reader.

The complex dynamics of praise in decadent gifting is evident in the *Salome* letter that Wilde wrote to Le Gallienne. The tone is much less formal—perhaps because of Le Gallienne's role as Wilde's disciple and Wilde's superior social and literary status—and is devoid of the potentially fawning tone of his letter to Gosse. Wilde recalls how 'years ago [Le Gallienne] glided into [his] heart' (552), suggesting a link between the homosocial bonds of the Wildean circle and the sharing of their writings. Wilde's chiding of Le Gallienne is

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<sup>38</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 559. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

unique amongst these letters: Wilde accuses the younger writer of having ‘tainted’ his authorial ‘divine’ literary vision in a review for the *Star* (552). He is nonetheless effusive with praise for his disciple (seemingly linking Le Gallienne’s physical beauty with his intellectual prowess). Le Gallienne has ‘got into the secret chamber of the house in which *Salomé* was fashioned, and I rejoice to think that to you has my secret been revealed, for you are the lover of beauty, and by her much – perhaps over-much—loved and worshipped’ (552). Here Wilde’s writing is almost flirtatious: the eroticised imagery is reminiscent of the language of the love letters which he would write to Bosie. Wilde’s dedicatory letter to Le Gallienne demonstrates how the exchange of books and dedications acted as an intimate emotional and sexual currency amongst members of the decadent community. The gifted book could be flattery, flirtation and tribute in one binding

In Ernest Dowson’s *Verses* (1896), he formalised this philosophy of interconnectivity by printing dedications in the text not to any patron but to his various friends and fellow decadents. *Verses* thus functions as a microcosm of the decadent social realm; it is a public declaration of affiliation through dedications which would appear in all copies of the text. These were gifts in the figurative sense. He dedicated the entire collection to Adelaide Foltinowicz, the young girl over whom he obsessed, but particular poems in the collection are dedicated to significant individuals. Dowson’s biographer, Jad Adams, interprets the dedication strategy of *Verses* as a means of creating exclusivity, ‘as if the reader were entering a private world when reading Dowson’s verse.’<sup>39</sup> The dedications establish the impression of an avant-garde in-crowd and mark the book out as a metaphorical social space for Dowson’s coterie. The process also embodies Simmel’s concept of sociability. Since the individual poems have very little to do with their dedicatees, Dowson’s dedications reflect a sociability which has ‘no objective purpose, no content, no extrinsic results, [and] depends

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<sup>39</sup> Jad Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2002), p. 130.

entirely on the personalities among whom it occurs.<sup>40</sup> The literary significance of the alliance between person and poem which Dowson creates in *Verses* is secondary to the social allegiance which the volume's dedications signify. By printing these numerous dedications in every copy rather than writing by hand in specific presentation copies, Dowson is reifying his decadent networks in the public sphere of print culture.

The dedicatory letter which Wilde sent to the critic William Archer demonstrates that personal dedications could extend to strengthening professional ties. Archer had defended *Salome* against Wilde's critics and, while the letter is not as informal as the one Wilde wrote to Shaw, it is just as concerned with affirming the bond between the two men. Wilde thanks Archer for his support:

you were, with the exception of George Bernard Shaw, the only critic of note who upheld me at all against the Censorship. The others were grotesque in their antics of vulgar and ignoble delight at an occurrence which they regarded as an insult to me, but which was, in truth, merely an insult to the art of acting. (554-5)

This is an expression of personal gratitude; Wilde is reaffirming Archer as a perceptive (and even courageous) critic. By defending *Salome*, Wilde suggests, Archer has defended the institution of drama against the wider ramifications of censorship. The playwright uses the dedicatory letter accompanying the gifted text to depict himself as the victim of a 'grotesque and vulgar' society, and thus as an opponent of a philistine majority. Embedded in this act of professional sociability between writer and critic, there is an undeniable act of ideological alignment.

Le Gallienne had earned his introduction to Wilde by sending him a signed copy of his first volume of poetry and the dedication remained a potent tool for establishing connections—as Aleister Crowley's extended poem *Aceldama: A Place to Bury Strangers* (1898) demonstrates. There is none of the public affirmation of decadent shared identity which is found in Dowson's *Verses* (especially since Crowley published as an anonymous

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<sup>40</sup> Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (London: The Free Press, 1950), p. 45.



‘Gentleman of the University of Cambridge’), but of the two vellum copies of *Acelandama* which were produced, Crowley dedicated one to an ‘A.B.’ Timothy d’Arch Smith has shown this to be Beardsley.<sup>41</sup> Of the hundred copies produced, ten had been printed on Japanese vellum, with the remaining eighty-eight on hand-made paper, meaning that the gifted vellum copy was a notable tribute. Although it is unclear whether Crowley and Beardsley ever met in person, the A.B. copy is a material signifier of Crowley’s desire to form a connection.<sup>42</sup> Beardsley was to die before he received his presentation copy, and it became part of Pollitt’s collection.<sup>43</sup> As a friend to Beardsley and Crowley’s university lover, Pollitt’s library provided a sympathetic space to memorialise the decadent interconnectivity represented by the gifted book.

The ‘A.B.’ copy may have been a single book, but the dedicatory tone is also played out in the running allusions in the poem, allowing Crowley to transfer a limited super-ownership to Beardsley. Valerie Schutte, writing on book dedications in the early modern period, argues that by dedicating a book, the dedicator reveals what he or she believes the dedicatee ought to be reading.<sup>44</sup> In his dedication to the literary celebrity, Crowley is suggesting his own work as recommended reading for Beardsley. He is implicitly seeking to promote himself by appropriating Beardsley’s cultural capital through a process of transference. ‘Aubrey’ appears within the text as an inspirational presence. Since there are also invocations to the poets Tennyson and Browning, it would seem that Crowley is writing about actual people in the literary world. This, along with the presentation copy dedicated to A. B., would suggest that the textual ‘Aubrey’ is indeed Beardsley. There may be no printed

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<sup>41</sup> Timothy d’Arch Smith, *The Books of the Beast: Essays on Aleister Crowley, Montague Summers and Others* (London: Mandrake Press, 1987, repr. 1992), p. 31.

<sup>42</sup> While Crowley’s biographer, Lawrence Sutin, states that the occultist met Beardsley through Herbert Pollitt, this claim has been questioned. In his study on Beardsley’s bookplates, for instance, Mark Samuels Lasner points out that Sutin’s statement does not have any corroborating citation. Lawrence Sutin, *Do What Thou Wilt: A Life of Aleister Crowley* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2000), p. 44. Mark Samuels Lasner, *The Bookplates of Aubrey Beardsley* (High Wycombe: The Rivendale Press, 2008), p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> Samuels Lasner, *The Bookplates of Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 42.

<sup>44</sup> Valerie Schutte, *Mary I and the Art of Book Dedications: Royal Women, Power, and Persuasion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 1.

dedication to the illustrator at the start of the poem, but Crowley's evocation functions as a covert act of dedication—it is buried within the text and creates a bond between the dedicator and the dedicatee with whom Crowley hoped to build a socio-professional relationship. Crowley uses this textual dedication to invest *Aceldama* with the transgressive associations of Beardsley's art, thus transforming Browning and Tennyson into transgressive figures defined by transgressive love. Crowley sees Browning experiencing a 'Profane desire' in his poem 'Evelyn Hope,' while Tennyson's relationship with Arthur Hallam is transformed into an act of homoerotic necrophilia: 'his warm kisses drew no answering sigh/ From that poor corpse corrupted utterly.'<sup>45</sup> The desire Crowley links to Beardsley is marked by a decadent superabundance of passion: 'Wonderful dream of women, tender child/ And harlot, naked all, in thousands piled, On one hot writhing heap' (25). He captures the fever-dream tone of Beardsley's illustrations and there is something supremely decadent about the excesses of his vision of Beardsley's debauchery. Through the process of in-text dedication, Crowley celebrates Beardsley as a martyr artist dying for both sensation and his art.

As with Wilde's dedicatory *Salome* letter to Le Gallienne, there is a very real erotic dimension to the flirtatious act of literary dedication. Le Gallienne had dedicated *My Lady's Sonnets* (1887) to J.A.W., his close friend James Welch, referring to Welch as 'My Pardner,' a faux western term of endearment. In their 2016 exhibition on Le Gallienne and Liverpool, Stetz and Samuels Lasner suggest that 'Pardner' is an allusion to Walt Whitman's 'Camarado,' denoting a same-sex attachment.<sup>46</sup> This is not necessarily to say that Le Gallienne and Welch had such a relationship, but the suggestive terminology does foreshadow the ways in which the Liverpoolian writer was prepared to play with perceptions of his sexuality through the dedicated book. Dedications allow gifters to play with their own

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<sup>45</sup> Aleister Crowley, *Aceldama, A Place to Bury Strangers In: A Philosophical Poem* (London: Privately Printed, 1898), p. 24. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>46</sup> *Richard Le Gallienne: Liverpool's Wild[e] Poet* (2016) [Exhibition]. Liverpool Central Library. 5 August 2016 – 31 October 2016.

representation while also suggesting (or in certain cases perhaps imposing) an identity for the subject of their generosity. More than simply giving a book as a present, dedicating it, whether in public or private, intrinsically binds it to the dedicatee. Decadent dedication made books into highly personal signifiers of identity and camaraderie.

### **4.3 Gifting caricature and (self-) parody**

Caricatures and parodies were an especially potent form of the decadent gift economy because of the way the decadents played with notions of grotesquerie and selfhood by exchanging caricatures. In presenting the self in an unconventional light, they used caricature to promote a collective iconography which reaffirmed interpersonal connections. They embedded versions of the gifter in the material object, further integrating both subject and artist into the decadent network. Caricature was thus an important tool of sociability: creating and exchanging parodies of themselves and their friends provided a material form of interaction. As gifts in the figurative sense, they promoted decadent ideology by raising the profile of the group and of key individuals. In this way, the caricature-as-gift plays into the same decadent encomium tradition as their dedications.

Given the importance which decadents placed on ironising their interactions with friends, rivals and acquaintances, it is no surprise that parodic versions of themselves and those they knew became powerful social tools within their networks. Caricatures produced by decadent artists were multifaceted social artefacts which could serve a range of purposes. Beardsley's hostile representations of Whistler and his wife demonstrate that decadent caricature could serve as a personal attack, but it was also used to reinforce a sense of community. Their more playful images toyed with decadent ideas of the grotesque to build social bonds. Even in these tongue-in-cheek engagements, decadent artists were using their caricatures to destabilise the Victorian status quo—and, symbolically, to liberate themselves and their networks from its influence. Andrew Eastham sees such aesthetic detachment as an



unavoidable product of the art-for-art's-sake philosophy which underpins aestheticism and decadence: 'By insisting on [its] autonomy, aestheticism risked the identification of art as an aristocratic position of irony, its detachment depicted as an icy reserve, a refusal to manifest itself in the public sphere.'<sup>47</sup> Yet fin-de-siècle irony was about more than an individualistic assertion of independence. A pretence at an aristocrat pose was certainly an element of a decadent's public self (especially the strain of decadent thought which drew on dandyism), but their ironic façade poses a greater challenge to society than Eastham allows. This is epitomised by Wilde's paradoxical unpicking of social assumptions. For instance, in saying 'Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others,' Wilde is both calling the concept of 'wickedness' into question and (more transgressively) suggesting that 'wickedness' is a creation of those who want to control the behaviour of others.<sup>48</sup> What seems at face value to be a simple witticism is undermining the construct of social morality. Such uses of decadent irony, rather than reinforcing the status quo as Eastham implies, problematise it. Humour had a transgressive potential, as Shearer West's work on the Whistler/Ruskin libel trial shows:

Neither evanescent nor trivial, the laughter Whistler sought and harnessed was employed as an aesthetic strategy – more volatile than “art for art's sake”, but sharing some of that concept's liberating potential. Laughter was a subversive yet unstable by-product of aesthetic innovation'<sup>49</sup>

As an act of resistance to socially mandated earnestness, avant-garde writers and artists used laughter to ironise their representations of themselves and their friends. In his essay 'The Spirit of Caricature' (1901), Beerbohm explicitly links ironisation with caricature—for him, laughter is the 'æsthetic' of caricature, a recognition of the artistic quality underpinning the

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<sup>47</sup> Andrew Eastham, 'Aesthetic Vampirism: Pater, Wilde and the Concept of Irony,' *Art and Life in Aestheticism: De-Humanizing and Re-Humanizing Art, the Artist and the Artistic Receptor* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 79.

<sup>48</sup> Oscar Wilde, 'Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young,' *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Harper Collins, 2003), p. 1245.

<sup>49</sup> Shearer West, 'Laughter and the Whistler/Ruskin Trial,' *Journal of Victorian Culture*, March 1, 2007, 42-63, p. 43.

image, and mimics the way in which ‘tears [...] are shed at sight of a very beautiful statue.’<sup>50</sup>

The decadents’ use of caricature allowed them to resist social expectations and perpetuate a collective self-fashioning of decadent identity. Their laughter, whether arising from courtroom witticisms or caricatures, underpinned decadent creative philosophies, transforming interpersonal interactions into a form of art.

The decadents’ tendency to present themselves and their compatriots as caricatures subverted the more conservative tradition of non-political cartoons, which had dominated in the early nineteenth century. In the 1820s, Brian Maidment points out:

The mocking of the cultural aspirations and ambitions of the mass of the populace formed a familiar topic for caricatures of this period, where laughter and the grotesque were used to publicize and to manage the threats and uncertainties of a “world turned upside-down”.<sup>51</sup>

Decadent caricatures also turn the world ‘upside down,’ but, unlike the 1820s images which Maidment considers, they do nothing to reassert order. They revel in the carnivalesque chaos embodied by the caricatured self. These transgressive tendencies are epitomised by the self-portraits which Beardsley produced throughout his career. He constantly plays up his own sense of monstrosity. In 1891, he included an unflattering description of himself in a letter to A. W. King: ‘I am now eighteen years old, with a vile constitution, a sallow face and sunken eyes, long red hair, a shuffling gait and a stoop.’<sup>52</sup> Beardsley is playfully highlighting his own physical shortcomings and does so again in his drawing ‘Self-Portrait’ (late 1891-early 1892, Figure 4.5). His head has a definite skeletal quality: aware of his terminal illness, Beardsley is presenting himself as a ghoul. These self-images represent an intentional performance of grotesque solipsism which serves to embed Beardsley within a social group of grotesques.

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<sup>50</sup> Max Beerbohm, ‘The Spirit of Caricature,’ *The Prince of Minor Writers: The Selected Essays of Max Beerbohm* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2015), p. 354. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>51</sup> Brian Maidment, *Comedy, caricature and the social order, 1820—50* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 184-5.

<sup>52</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, eds. Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan and W. G. Good (Oxford: Plantin, 1970, repr. 1990), pp. 21-3.

Decadent caricatures thus embody a grotesque sociability, binding the group together and highlighting the social function of gifts.

Transgressive decadent self-representation also underpins Beardsley's 'Portrait of Himself' (1894, Figure 4.6), which appeared in the third volume of the *Yellow Book*. The version of himself he represents in this image disdains public opinion while entertaining his friends. Despite the title, Beardsley is a marginal presence in his own image; buried between the covers of a monstrously large bed, his tiny head is dwarfed by an absurdly oversized nightcap. The drawing's focal point is not the figure in the bed, but the armless, breasted satyr which decorates the bedpost. Its presence anchors the image in the grotesque and the French legend in the top righthand corner reinforces the suggestion of monstrosity: 'PAR LES DIEUX JUMEAUX TOUS LES MONSTRES NE SONT PAS EN AFRIQUE' (By the twin gods, not all monsters are in Africa). Viewers of this image, Beardsley suggests, should see him as a grotesque creature, foreshadowing the claim he made in his 1897 *Idler* interview that 'If I am not grotesque I am nothing.'<sup>53</sup> The illustrator is implicitly celebrating his own grotesqueness in order to shock middle-class propriety; as Zatlin argues, artistic and literary grotesques were acceptable if they were made 'ridiculous,' but not if the artists revelled in the grotesquerie.<sup>54</sup> Beardsley's self-caricatures were part of his personal publicity strategy—he was fashioning himself into a decadent construct in the public eye. There is perhaps no better example of this than the way in which he exploited the technological form of the photographic portrait in the picture taken by Frederick Evans (1895, Figure 4.7). In this pseudo-caricature, Beardsley adopted the pose of the Notre Dame gargoyle known as Le Stryge, transforming his distinctive physiognomy into gothic architecture. Such a metamorphosis of one's own image into an icon of monstrosity was a direct challenge to

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<sup>53</sup> Arthur H. Lawrence, 'Mr. Aubrey Beardsley and his Work,' *The Idler* (London: Chatto & Windus, March, 1897), p. 198.

<sup>54</sup> Linda G. Zatlin, *Beardsley: Japonisme and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 173.



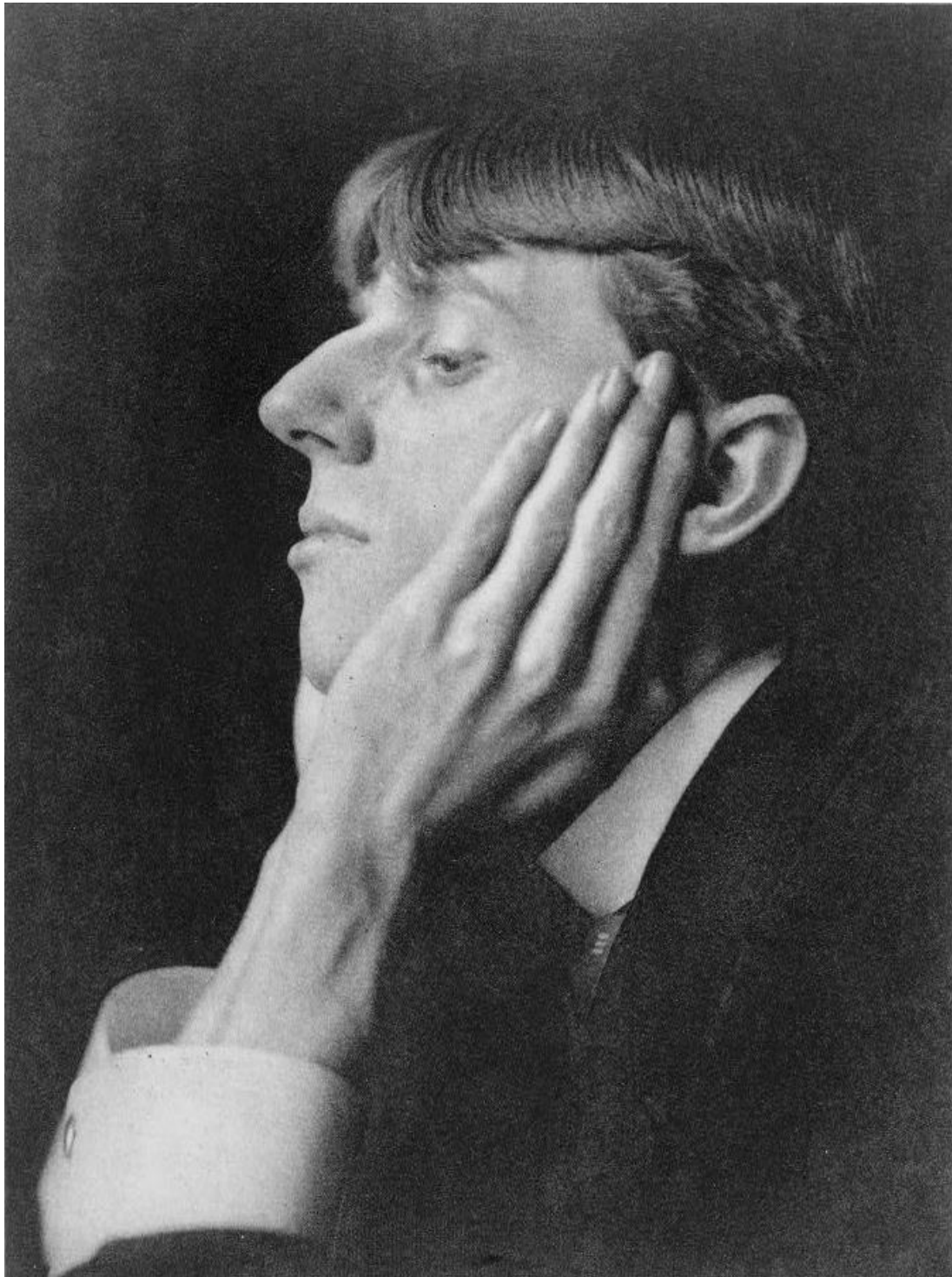
**Figure 4.5**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'Self-portrait,' (c. 1891-92).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.



Figure 4.6

Aubrey Beardsley, 'Portrait of Himself,' *Yellow Book* 3 (1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library



**Figure 4.7**

Frederick Evans, *Aubrey Beardsley* (c. 1895).

Retrieved from the Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/95500934/>.



notions of propriety and public decency; it staked a claim for the transgressive self through artistic representation.

If caricature is a form of exchange in which the artist cements a relationship with the drawn subject by embedding something of himself in the picture, then Beardsley's caricatures of Wilde serve to expose the social dynamics underlying their working relationship. 'Oscar Wilde at Work' (1893, Figure 4.8) depicts a puffy-faced Wilde surrounded by books. These include Swinburne, Gautier and Josephus' histories. The most direct barb lies in the foreground of the image: 'French Verbs at a Glance.' Wilde had originally written *Salome* in French and Beardsley appears to be insinuating that Wilde's grasp of the language was not as magisterial as Wilde may have wished others to believe. Susan Owens makes the problematic claim that this picture represents 'Wilde's true self, far removed from his public persona of

wit and raconteur.'<sup>55</sup> This interpretation simplifies the nuances of Beardsley and Wilde's relationship; it discounts the ways in which caricature can function as an agent of amicability. In the light of Owens' reading, Beardsley's image becomes a veritable literary crime scene—Wilde grows rich (and fat) from the work of others. Her hostile reading draws on equally hostile readings of the Wildean caricatures which Beardsley embedded in *Salome*. Wilde appears as the moon in both 'The Woman in the Moon' (1893, Figure 4.9) and 'A Platonic Lament' (1893, Figure 4.10); these moons show the jowls distinctive to contemporary cartoons of the notoriously portly Wilde. The jowly frown of Beardsley's moon seemingly presents Wilde as an irredeemable sybarite, drunk and 'seeking everywhere for lovers' (716). Such unsympathetic readings of the moon caricatures draw inspiration from the play's text. Herod describes the moon with a horrified (not to mention titillated)

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<sup>55</sup> Susan Owens, 'The Satirical Agenda of Aubrey Beardsley's "Enter Herodias"', *Visual Culture in Britain*, 2.3 (2001), 81-102, p. 88.



Figure 4.8

Aubrey Beardsley, 'Oscar Wilde at Work' (1893).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.





**Figure 4.9**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'The Woman in the Moon,' *Salome* (London: Bodley Head, 1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.



**Figure 4.10**

Aubrey Beardsley, 'A Platonic Lament,' *Salome* (London: Bodley Head, 1894).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

fascination: ‘She is like a mad woman, a mad woman who is seeking everywhere for lovers. She is naked too. She is quite naked’ (716). This speech associates the moon (and in Beardsley’s illustrations, Wilde) with gluttony, madness and sexual excess. The text also feminises the moon, which allows Beardsley to hint at Wilde’s homosexual proclivities. His illustrations can thus be seen as a form of character assassination—a continuation of the artistic ‘parricide’ which Matthew Sturgis believes Beardsley committed against his early mentor Burne-Jones to achieve his artistic independence.<sup>56</sup> Once again, Beardsley, on the brink of entering a new phase of work, appears to be using art to sever himself from a major influence—just as he did with his hostile caricatures of Whistler.

Such readings, however, ignore the nuances and ambiguities inherent in Wilde’s text. The moon is actually a multivalent symbol in *Salome*. Herod may see it as ‘a mad woman’, but it is also much more: to Herodias’ page it is ‘a woman rising from a tomb’ (707); to the Young Syrian it is ‘a little princess’ (707), to Salome herself it is ‘a virgin’ (710); and for the supremely practical Herodias, ‘the moon is like the moon, that is all’ (716). All the characters of the play project their own desires onto the moon, but do not expose its true nature: the moon in *Salome* is more a subjective mirror than an exact symbolic representation. Far from attacking the dramatist, Zatlin argues, Beardsley’s association of Wilde with the moon, ‘recognizes its attraction for Wilde both as a symbol and a technique to reveal the characters’ preoccupations.’<sup>57</sup> By representing Wilde as the moon, Beardsley thus makes him the focal point of desire in a play all about desire. Beardsley’s sensitive interpretation problematises the traditional assumption that he and Wilde had an antagonistic collaboration. Theirs may not have been the smoothest relationship, but nonetheless Beardsley’s caricatures expose decadent professional sociability in action. Placing Wilde at the heart of his own play transforms the act of illustration into a gift.

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<sup>56</sup> Sturgis: *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 157.

<sup>57</sup> Linda G. Zatlin, ‘Wilde, Beardsley and the Making of *Salome*’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 5.2 (2000), 341-357, p. 354.

The decadents used the gift dynamic of caricature to praise their friends. In the cartoons which Beardsley and Beerbohm produced of each other, the two artists comically refashion their subject in order to expose a ludic parody of decadent selfhood. The underlying sense of approval unites the two even as they poke fun at each other. These images demonstrate Beerbohm's theories of caricature in action, a philosophy of transformative exaggeration whereby the subject must 'be melted down as in a crucible, and then, as from the solution, be fashioned anew. He must emerge with not one particle of himself lost, yet not with a particle of himself as it was before' ('The Spirit of Caricature,' 356). Beardsley's Beerbohm-esque creatures in the *Bon Mots* series both transform and celebrate. In *The Bon Mots of Charles Lamb and Douglas Jerrold* (1893, Figure 4.11), Beerbohm appears as a well-dressed foetus (one of Beardsley's favourite grotesque icons) in evening wear and a small cape. The later caricature, in *The Bon Mots of Samuel Foote and Theodore Hook* (1894, Figure 4.12), depicts Beerbohm as a be-hatted baby, complete with bat wings and a ridiculously short cane, leading a tiny dog in a decorative coat. The devilish wings add an impish quality to the dandyish baby, which Zatlin sees as a tribute to 'Beerbohm's ability to transform people through caricature.'<sup>58</sup> Beardsley presents Beerbohm as an over-elegant baby to draw attention to his perceived youth (he was three days younger than Beardsley).<sup>59</sup> The illustrator could be claiming the authority of age over his (marginally) younger friend, but equally could be drawing attention to the performance of youth, which was an important part of the decadent pose since it allowed them to mock a staid and respectable status quo. In 1904, Lane claimed that 'Beardsley's defect as an art editor was youth. He would not take himself seriously: as an editor and a draughtsman he was almost a practical joker'.<sup>60</sup> But Beardsley's presentation of himself as a wilfully immature artist was a means of subversion.

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<sup>58</sup> Linda Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 471.

<sup>59</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Biography* (London: Pallas Athene, 1998, repr. 2011), p. 148.

<sup>60</sup> John Lane, 'Introduction', *Aubrey Beardsley, Under the Hill and Other Essays in Prose and Verse* (London: Bodley Head, 1904), p. vi.

By depicting Beerbohm as a grotesque child, Beardsley is giving his friend a kind of transgressive authority. He is constantly new and in rebellion against the old.

Beerbohm reciprocated Beardsley's cartoonish treatment in his collection *Caricatures of Twenty-Five Gentlemen* (1896, Figure 4.13). The Beardsley who appears in this book is a monstrously effete creature, almost entirely arched nose and tapering fingers. Beardsley's 1894 caricature of Beerbohm gave him a lapdog, and Beerbohm's monstrous version of Beardsley has a toy dog on wheels. Beerbohm is drawing attention to Beardsley's self-conscious artificiality in a bizarre form of encomium. If, as Snodgrass suggests, caricature is where 'the dandy and the grotesque have traditionally met,' then these over-refined grotesques allow the dandy caricaturists to enact their preferred social identities in front of each other.<sup>61</sup> The hyperbolic grotesquerie of the decadent caricature thus propagates the artificial and the monstrous as a new social ideal for their networks. Drawing (and thus gifting) reciprocal images of friends gave this ideology a material form of interchange in front of an appreciative audience. Such subversive art was gifted throughout fin-de-siècle social networks as is shown in Rothenstein's brief biographical note accompanying his lithograph portrait of Beerbohm (1896) in *Oxford Characters*:

A dandy. His use of curious and obsolete words, as of boot-buttons in his cuffs has earned him a place in a larger circle than that of Mr. Street's "elect." His brilliant caricatures which were the joy of his friends at Oxford, where they were eagerly passed from hand to hand, have since given him the well-deserved reputation of our only caricaturist. Suave, smiling, polished and cynical, we can but wish him the successful career which should accompany talents of so precious an order.<sup>62</sup>

Placing Beerbohm in the subversively humorous avant-garde of student life, Rothenstein's tone of praise in the biographical note is unmistakably decadent. He celebrates Beerbohm for his dandiacal affectation and his 'brilliant caricatures.' The emphasis on the currency of their exchange value—they were 'eagerly passed from hand to hand' at

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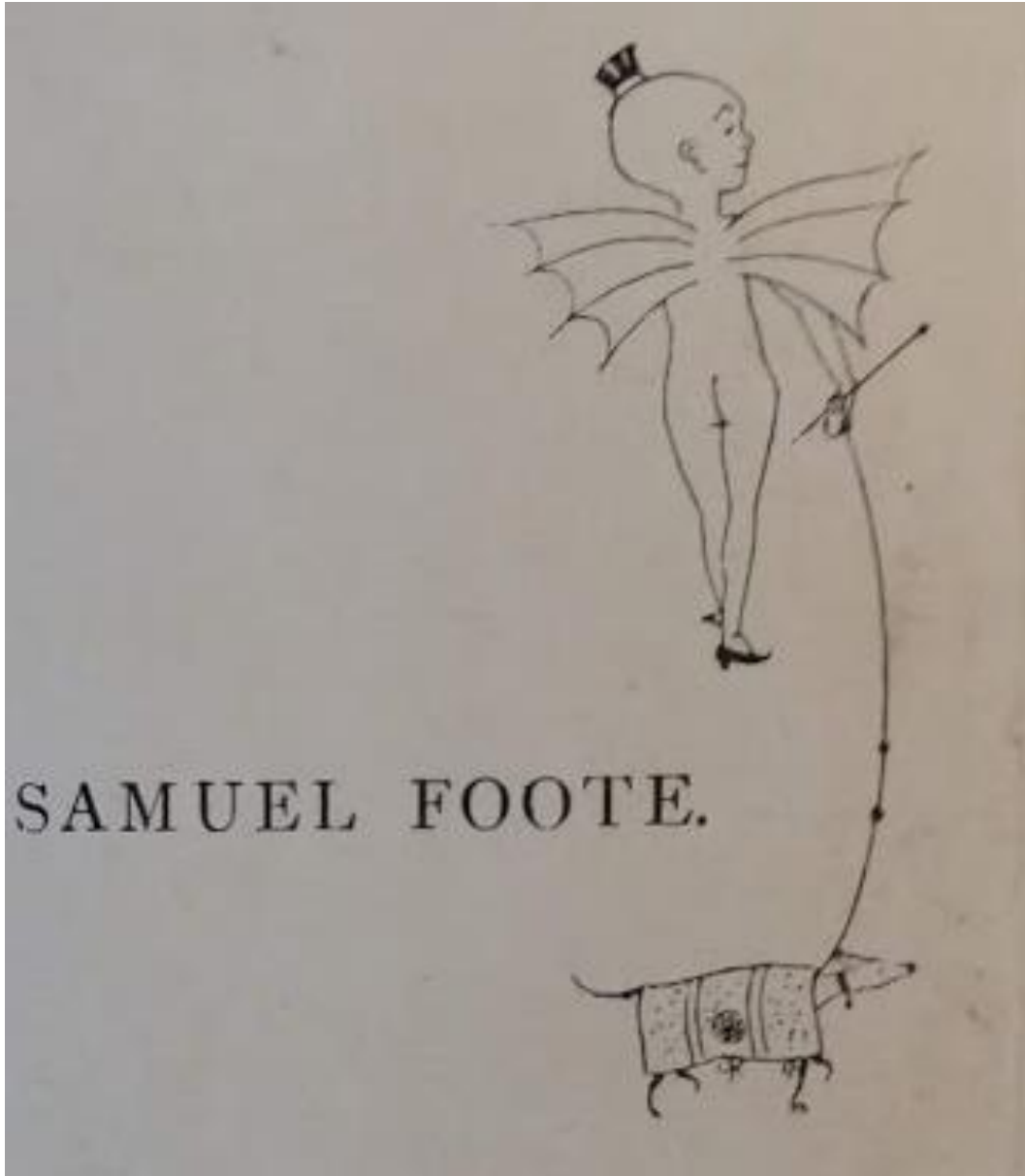
<sup>61</sup> Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 236.

<sup>62</sup> William Rothenstein, *Oxford Characters: A Series of Lithographs, Part VII* (London: The Bodley Head, 1896).



**Figure 4.11**

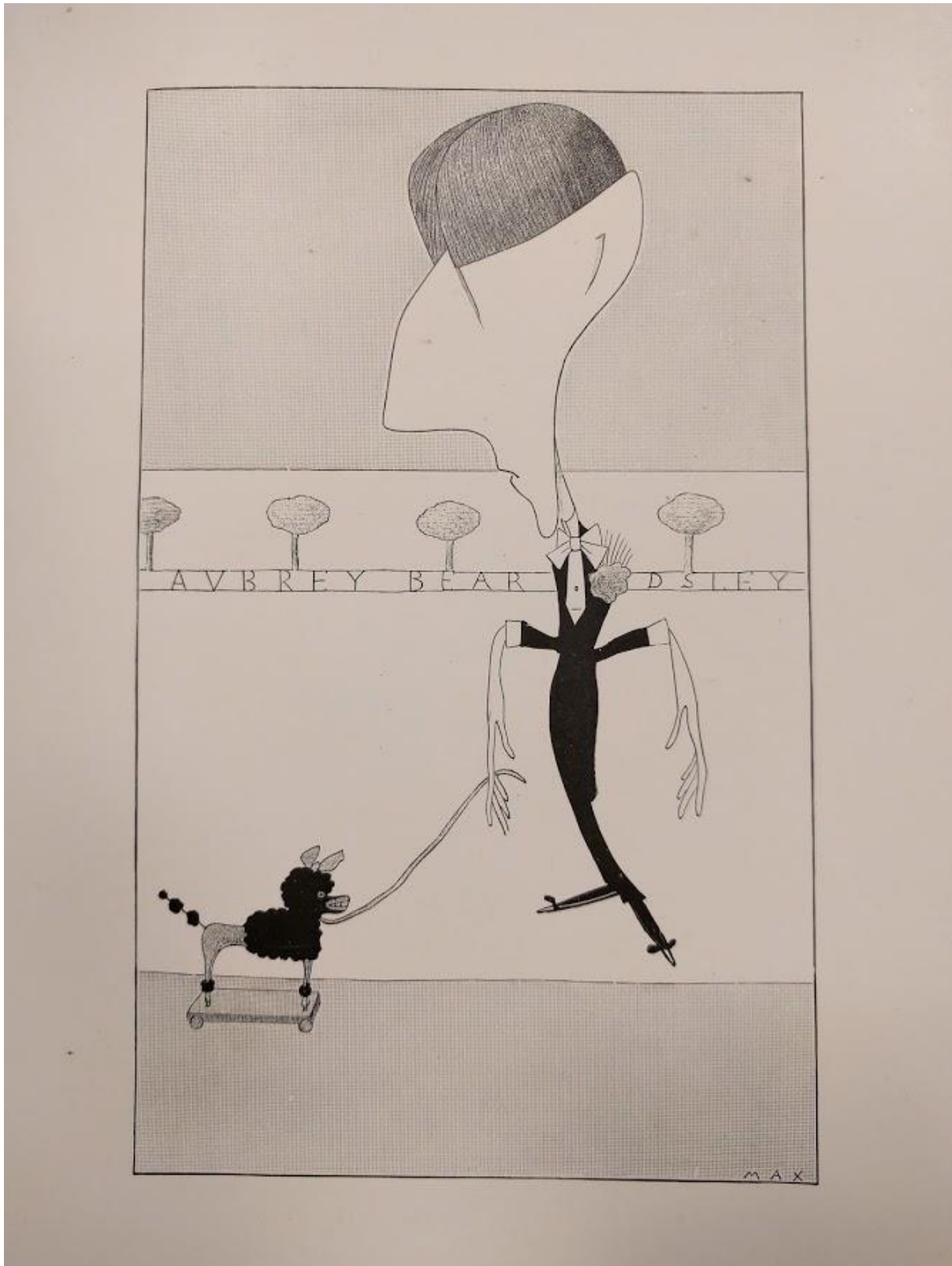
Aubrey Beardsley, grotesque, *Bon Mots of Charles Lamb and Douglas Jerrold* (London: J. M. Dent, 1893).  
Personal collection.



**Figure 4.12**

Aubrey Beardsley, grotesque, *The Bon Mots of Samuel Foote and Theodore Hook* (London: J. M. Dent, 1893).  
Personal Collection.





**Figure 4.13**

Max Beerbohm, 'Aubrey Beardsley,' *Caricatures of Twenty-Five Gentlemen* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896).

Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.  
Copyright to the Estate of Max Beerbohm.



Oxford—demonstrates the importance of the drawn tribute as a tool of sociability.

The only real market value of Beerbohm's *Twenty-Five Gentlemen* and Rothenstein's *Oxford Characters* was to those who were interested in a specific circle. These image collections retain their topicality for the coterie audience by framing group social dynamics in a particular place at a particular time; they represent a fixed point in the artist/subject's social life, capturing moments of friendship. An image thus becomes a dynamic agent of decadent community. Nineteenth-century published collections of *Punch* cartoons served very different function. Maidment shows how the earlier bound volumes:

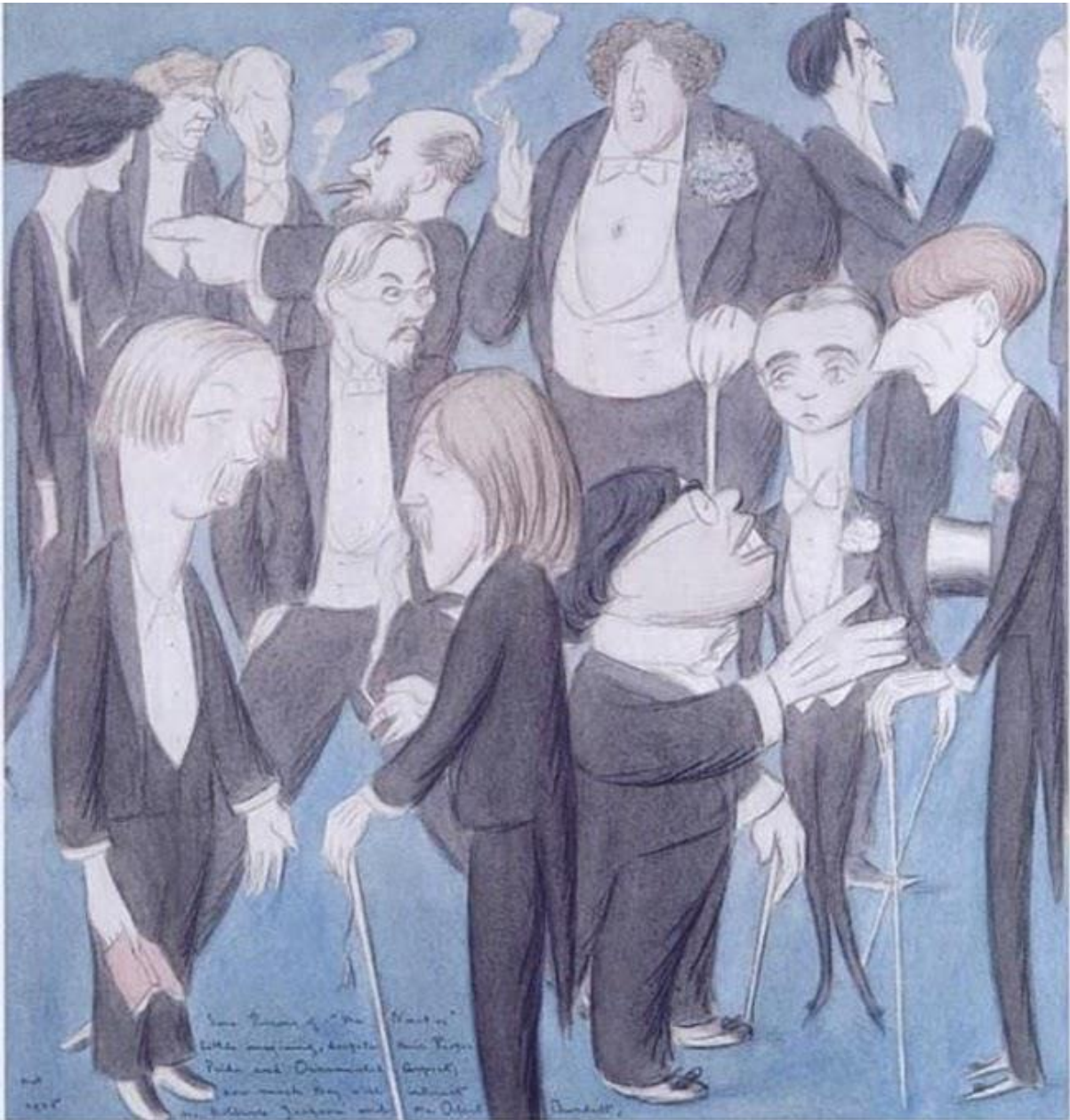
attempted to transcend a central aspect of the satirical image – its topicality. Such an implicit denial of topicality as a key rationale of graphic satire raises some interesting questions [...] about the relationship between visual comedy and the precise historical moment of its making.<sup>63</sup>

The periodical's satire was transformed into a marketable artefact for bourgeois shelves: the emphasis of the cartoons changed from skewering contemporary figures to providing atemporal humour. Aimed at the mass consumer and dependent upon a wide frame of knowledge, *Punch* was very much a public form of humour; the decadent caricature was intimate and personal—it had social relevance but did not speak to society. The work of Beerbohm and Rothenstein could, uncharitably, be viewed as nothing but social solipsism in its appeal to the already initiated, but this ignores the gift potential of the visual artefact as a signifier of friendship and shared identity.

Caricatures of a single person forged a bond between illustrator and subject, but caricatures of a group engaged in socialising could reinforce a decadent social framework. Beerbohm's 'Some Persons of "the Nineties" little imagining that despite their Proper Pride and Ornamental Aspect, how much they will interest Mr Holbrook Jackson and Mr Osbert Burdett' (1925, Figure 4.14) presents a decadent society engaging in conversation. Here everyone is somewhat grotesque, but in 'The Spirit of Caricature,' Beerbohm makes it

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<sup>63</sup> Maidment, *Comedy, caricature and the social order*, p. 11.



**Figure 4.14**

Max Beerbohm, 'Some Persons of "the Nineties" little imagining that, despite their Proper Pride and Ornamental Aspect, how they will interest Mr Holbrook Jackson and Mr Osbert Burdett' (1925).

Ashmolean.

Copyright to the Estate of Max Beerbohm.

Back row, from left to right: Richard Le Gallienne, Walter Sickert, George Moore, John Davidson, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats and Enoch Soames.

Middle row: Henry Harland.

Front row, from left to right: Arthur Symons, Charles Conder, William Rothenstein, Max Beerbohm and Aubrey Beardsley.

explicit that ridiculing a friend through caricature is not a hostile act—'the most revered should be made just as ridiculous as the most despised' (353). The image is a means of articulating sociability—together they form a network which can subvert society from its borders. Beerbohm lampoons Le Gallienne as a dreamy mass of hair, Beardsley as an enervated ghoul, and Wilde as a bloated monstrosity. Despite Beerbohm's attention to unflattering details, it is ultimately a supportive form of parody. Social caricature, I would suggest, refutes Snodgrass's claim that the caricaturist 'exposes or unmasks the subject's individuality in order to devalue and dismiss it.'<sup>64</sup> As Stetz points out, while Beerbohm affectionately emphasises Rothenstein's shortness, he 'never drew upon contemporary racial stereotypes of Jews.'<sup>65</sup> He satirises his friend without vitriol or abuse. Beerbohm's (self-) parodic agenda is made clear by the partially obscured figure of Enoch Soames (his face just emerging from beyond the edge of the page). Soames is the eponymous protagonist of Beerbohm's 1916 short story about a fin-de-siècle minor poet who sells his soul to the devil in order to find out how his reputation will have survived in a hundred years' time. Featuring this character in a depiction of historical decadents blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction: the fictional Soames is engaged in what seems to be an animated discussion with Yeats implying that there is something semi-fictional about all of Beerbohm's friends. As in his cartoon of Beardsley dragging a dog on wheels, Beerbohm is covertly celebrating decadent artificiality by including someone who is entirely artificial. His image takes part in the performance of decadent selfhood by highlighting the playful pretence of his friends and colleagues. Rather than undermining the strength of the network, their brand of self-conscious individuality connects them as a network of individual grotesques.

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<sup>64</sup> Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley*, p. 239.

<sup>65</sup> Margaret D. Stetz, *Facing the Late Victorians: Portraits of Writers and Artists from the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), p. 100.

Decadent social parody was not, however, confined to art: literary caricatures of decadent networks appear in writings of the period and offered another form of encomium. In Le Gallienne's semi-autobiographical novel *Young Lives* (1898), his protagonist Henry Mesurier meets a parody of the *Yellow Book* circle while he is visiting a publisher in London. This chapter provides the most overtly comic scene in the novel, adding a tone of bizarre anarchism (Henry accidentally becomes a member of a secret society of Jacobites) to what is a witty but primarily realistic novel. It is a genial lampoon of Le Gallienne's decadent social group. The chapter jokingly raises questions of individualism and community by invoking ironised representations of friends. Versions of Lionel Johnson and Yeats are amongst those Le Gallienne parodies. There is also a 'pallid young man with a preternatural length and narrowness of face,' who fits the iconography of Beerbohm's Beardsley caricatures.<sup>66</sup> Le Gallienne reserves his most enthusiastic praise and parody for himself. It is a decadent performance of complete literary self-absorption. The Le Gallienne of *Young Lives* is presented as a beautiful creature, who is above the exaggerated grotesquery of his associates: 'a tall young man with a long, thin face, curtained on either side by masses of black hair, like a slip of the young moon glimmering through a pine-wood' (311). There is something paradoxically grotesque in Le Gallienne's exaggeration of his own good looks—he is caricaturing himself through self-celebration. His representation of himself in *Young Lives* alludes to Beerbohm's cartoon presentation of Le Gallienne as a mass of hair with no discernible face. And as such, it is a good example of the gift economy that functions at the heart of the decadents' artistic exchanges. His self-description opens a creative dialogue with caricatures drawn by his peers. Le Gallienne is, much like Beerbohm, making himself into a figure of fun even as he boastfully describes himself as 'our young apostle of sentiment, our new man of feeling, the best-hated man we have' (312). Embracing the mantle of 'best-hated'

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<sup>66</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *Young Lives* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1898), p. 311. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

marks him out as a member of the counterculture even as he uses his self-proclaimed beauty to rise above his fellow decadents. His exceptional appearance marks him out as an individual amongst individuals and thus a bellwether for a network based on a collective vision of uniqueness and egoism. While not explicitly a gift, Le Gallienne's fictional version of himself and his society functions as a public affirmation of decadent sociability.

The sketches Ada Leveson produced for *Punch*, enthusiastically received by her friends and collaborators, function in the intersection between social caricature, public critique and decadent marketing campaign, transporting the intimate fin-de-siècle social dynamic to a mass reading audience. Bilski and Braun argue that Leveson's pieces 'offered free advertisement for [the decadents'] own expensively produced works and kept them in the public eye in more accessible publications with large circulation.'<sup>67</sup> Leveson provided a window into the world of transgressive countercultures for the *Punch* readership—a gift of promotion for her associates given the comparatively low circulation of the *Yellow Book* and their select audience. Calloway suggests that such parodies were the only way that many Victorians interacted with Beardsley's work.<sup>68</sup> The magazine, a bulwark of respectable Victorian entertainment, was anti-decadent and Leveson's sketches ostensibly mock decadent pretensions and artifice. In 'The Advisability of Not Being Brought up in a Handbag' (1895), her parody of *The Importance of Being Ernest*, Leveson adds a character called Dorian (a clear allusion to Wilde's novel) and uses him to satirise one of the proclamations from Wilde's 'A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated' (1894):<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Emily D. Bilski and Emily Braun, with Leon Botstein, Shira Brisman, Barbara Hahn and Lucia Re, *Jewish Women and their Salons: The Power of Conversation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 54.

<sup>68</sup> Stephen Calloway, *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: V & A Publications, 1998), p. 12.

<sup>69</sup> Wilde's original reads 'To be really mediæval one should have no body. To be really modern one should have no soul. To be really Greek one should have no clothes.' Wilde, 'A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated,' *Complete Works*, p. 1242.

To be really modern one should have soul. To be really mediæval one should have no cigarettes. To be really Greek –<sup>70</sup>

By replacing ‘body’ with ‘cigarettes,’ Levenson implies that the decadent emphasis on material signifiers of identity transforms them into nothing more than commodities; by interrupting Dorian mid-witticism, she prevents him from reaching Wilde’s philosophical complexity. Her humorous interventions here reflect the apparently morally normative tone in her parody of *The Savoy*, the ‘Saveloy’ (1896). The statement that there ‘is not an article in the volume that one can put down without feeling the better and the purer for it’ could have come straight from a denunciation of decadent literature.<sup>71</sup> And yet, Levenson plays on this reading—she may suggest that putting down the Saveloy is purifying, but in order to have put it down, one must first have read and engaged with it. Her endorsement of the products of decadent sociability is hidden within satiric condemnation.

Levenson’s parodies of decadent culture, much like the chapter in *Young Lives*, are a veritable *dramatis personae* of decadent caricatures: Max Meerboom (Beerbohm), Daubaway Weirdsley (Beardsley), Richard Medallion (Le Gallienne) and Simple Symons (Symons, ‘The Saveloy,’ 45).<sup>72</sup> The gentle mockery contained in these rhyming names enacts the paradoxical nature of decadent sociability—it is a playful form of hostility. When Levenson writes that ‘we may learn from the Caricatures of the day what the *Decadents* were in outward semblance’ (‘From the Queer and Yellow Book,’ 58), she makes explicit the representative dynamic behind decadent caricature. While on the surface seeming to condemn it, these parodies essentially create a covert decadent space within *Punch*; they appropriate the periodical to propagate and make profitable decadent social performances. Levenson’s parodies essentially gifted the decadents an advertising stake in a mass-market forum.

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<sup>70</sup> Ada Levenson, ‘The Advisability of Not Being Brought up in in a Handbag,’ *Punch*, Saturday, March 02, 1895, p 107.

<sup>71</sup> Ada Levenson, ‘The Book of the Week. The Saveloy.,’ *Punch*, Saturday, February 01, 1896, p. 45. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>72</sup> Ada Levenson, ‘From the Queer and Yellow Book,’ *Punch*, Saturday, February 02, 1895, p. 58. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text; Levenson, ‘The Boot-Bills of Narcissus,’ *Punch*, Saturday, March 02, 1895, p. 101.

#### 4.4 Giving meaning

The decadent gift economy gives new vigour to the objects beloved by decadents. In the Wilde trials, it could be argued, this decadent culture of exchange was put on trial with the playwright. Cigarette cases were, as emerged during the trials, one of Wilde's preferred gifts to his younger, often working-class lovers-come-prostitutes. Cigarettes and cigarette cases thus took on a renewed significance when treated as items of social exchange. This no doubt built upon the social and cultural significance of smoking to decadent dandies (see Chapter 1.2), but exchanging these objects transformed cultural capital into social capital within the decadent gift economy. Carson was especially concerned with the financial value of these cases: he asks whether Sidney Mavor (one of Wilde's young men) had been sent 'a cigarette case value four pounds eleven shillings and sixpence' (*Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess*, 203). Wilde ignored the economic realities, focusing instead on the social function of giving presents to those who surrounded him:

CARSON: [...] What did you give him the cigarette case for?

WILDE: Why do I give people whom I like presents? Of course if I like them, I like giving them presents. I like doing it.

CARSON: You had only known him a month?

WILDE: I think that is quite long enough to express admiration or interest. A present that I give, might have been on a birthday or anything – it is absurd to go on about it like this – a present I usually give to anybody I like. (*Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marquess*, 203).

Wilde is not, of course, being entirely honest. He presumably was paying Mavor for his company and for sex, but his response to Carson exposes the decadent cultural cachet associated with gifting. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, all the farcical lies, misunderstandings and revelations of the play only take place because Algernon discovers the gifted silver cigarette case which Cecily gave to Jack. As Christopher Craft argues, cigarette cases in *Earnest* provide 'rich metonyms of Wilde's sexual practices.'<sup>73</sup> After Algernon has

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<sup>73</sup> Christopher Craft, 'Alias Bunbury: Desire and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest*,' *Representations* 31 (1990) 19-46, p. 28.

read out the inscription on the mislaid case, Jack retorts that ‘It is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case’ and it is exactly such an ‘ungentlemanly’ reading which Carson undertook.<sup>74</sup> His legal reading denies the gifted cigarette case its social significance as evidence of interpersonal relationships and sociability between fellow dandies and their hangers-on. By trying to define the specific nature of this exchange, Carson robs it of wider social nuance. Unpicking the cultural associations of the objects and images with which decadents fashioned their gift economy, however, restores this nuance.

Gift theory suggests that the given object finds meaning by being given; equally, the chosen gift endows the act of giving with meaning. Gifted objects are the material anchors for the gift economy; they are physical reminders of the shifting bonds of allegiance and obligation which proliferate throughout social networks. The decadents gave gifts to secure professional relationships, to facilitate peer praise, to promote decadent individuals and ideology, and to articulate sociability. These exchanges were reciprocal acts, fundamental to fin-de-siècle networking.

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<sup>74</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest, The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, repr. 1998, 2008), p. 256. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



## Chapter 5

### Publishing Networks

While the preceding chapters have primarily focused on interactions between decadent writers and artists and their peers, publishers who sold decadent works to the late-Victorian consuming public added a significant layer to their networks. The publishers often intimately associated themselves with their writers, creating direct interactions between the professional world of publishing and the decadent social realm. The smaller (and often more dubious) presses run by figures like Smithers, Harry Sidney Nichols and Charles Carrington helped to create decadent products and certainly provided the means for social and professional interactions. John Lane and the Bodley Head, however, perhaps offer the best model for looking at this particular form of socio-professional engagement, whether in economic, social or literary terms. Through its publications and celebrity authors, the Bodley Head represented the public face of decadence and contributed to the decadents' collective cultural capital.

Understandably, when analysing the networks that defined the decadents' material interactions with the sphere of publishing, there remains a tendency to present their publishers as economic agents who see only the commercial potential in the books they print and sell. The assumed division between writer/creator and publisher/seller goes hand in hand with the art-for-art's-sake ideology which Bourdieu explores: for artists, art is 'effectively *without commercial value*, [...] it has no market.'<sup>1</sup> This view of art gives artists cultural status: they are individuals who work at a remove from the economic transactions of daily life. Such an ideological standpoint emerged from the growing professionalisation of the literary world where the figure of the artist was a recognised cultural construct. Describing art as having no value is, ultimately, a means of giving it cultural capital and of selling an artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 81.

identity. Bourdieu describes the division between market and philosophy in dichotomous terms, divorcing the market-driven dynamic from nineteenth-century artists' ideological positions. It is a matter of the ideal (artistic creativity) coming into conflict with the real (the economic necessities of life under capitalism). Such a dichotomy has been nuanced by numerous studies (including this thesis); these highlight and explore interconnections between the self-proclaimedly disinterested sphere of art and the commercially-invested publishing marketplace.<sup>2</sup> This chapter argues that publishers, in addition to situating the decadents within a marketplace, could play an artistically sympathetic role.

By the fin de siècle, there had been an explosive growth in publishing. Between 1860 and 1900, the number of periodical titles produced and sold in Britain increased from 1,445 to 4,799. In 1860, only 28% of these products had been magazines (as distinct from newspapers), but by the turn of the century this had increased to 49%.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, 'between 1816 and 1914, the production of books increased fourfold and the price dropped by half.'<sup>4</sup> These general print trends highlight not only a dramatic change in reading habits, but also new opportunities for publishers and writers. The practice of net booking saw publishers control market prices. Under a net book policy, publishers would give particular books to sellers only if they agreed to sell at a price fixed by the publisher rather than at a discount determined by the store. The 1890 Macmillan edition of Tennyson was amongst the first books marketed in this way. Gerhard Joseph argues that the net-book procedure 'confirmed, if it did not actually initiate, the modern circulation of the book as a "branded good" by an

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<sup>2</sup> In addition to Gagnier's work on the subject, critics such as Michèle Mendelssohn, Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small have done substantive work on Wilde's deliberate engagement with market forces in the production of his books. Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1987). Michèle Mendelssohn, *Henry James, Oscar Wilde and Aesthetic Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). Josephine M. Guy and Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession: Writing and the Culture of Industry in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Graham Law and Robert L. Patten, 'The Serial Revolution,' *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume VI: 1830-1914*, ed. David McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 156-7.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Leary and Andrew Nash, 'Authorship,' *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume VI*, p. 172.

author with a valued name.’<sup>5</sup> Publishing houses and decadent writers fashioned themselves as clear brands within this expanding literary marketplace in order to stake a claim to cultural capital and the market share it represented. It was, however, a brand very much under the publisher’s control. Ian Fletcher suggests that Lane profited from ‘the need of the *avant garde* to advance from the safe world of the coterie’ to a wider reading public—publishers maintained influence over writers by gatekeeping access to the general readership.<sup>6</sup>

Walter Besant founded the Society of Authors in 1884 to protect the position of authors within this publisher-dominated economy. The Society specifically ‘fought to raise the incomes and security of writers’ and sought to secure them ‘recognition through the honours system.’<sup>7</sup> In essence, Besant was creating a group identity for authors which was separate from the brand of their publishing house. It is a very different model of literary community to that which centred around the publishing houses frequented by decadent authors, like the Bodley Head. Besant was openly hostile to cliquishness in the publishing world and ‘feared [...it...] was increasing”—W. Robertson Nicol, his neighbour and fellow writer, described it as ‘a considerable evil.’<sup>8</sup> The new professional writerly identity that the Society of Authors represented stood in opposition to the associational collegiate atmosphere of the small decadent presses, and the author-publisher relationship was further formalised by the rise of the literary agent, who ‘professionalized and systematized the role of middle man.’<sup>9</sup> While the decadents’ interactions with the sphere of book-selling were no less professional than any other late-Victorian writers, their display of dilettantism kept their social identities at a remove from the professional author identity promoted by Besant.

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<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Joseph, ‘Commodifying Tennyson: The historical transformation of “brand loyalty,”’ *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of literature and economics*, eds. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 308.

<sup>6</sup> Ian Fletcher, ‘Decadence and the Little Magazines,’ *Decadence and the 1890s* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), p. 192.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers, & Reputations: Literary Life in Britain, 1870-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 526.

<sup>8</sup> W. Robertson Nicol, *A Bookman’s Letters* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), p. 152.

<sup>9</sup> Waller, *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p. 628.

## 5.1 Economic engagements

The interrelations between decadence, aestheticism and the marketplace have been well-noted by critics. Gagnier, for instance, argues that Wilde's social comedies aimed to be 'commercially competitive and critical—or to marry and divorce art and life simultaneously.'<sup>10</sup> Wilde's parodies of late-Victorian mores and opinions relied on his plays functioning as commercial commodities while simultaneously maintaining an ironical distance from the demands of the bourgeois world. He satirised his middle-class audiences, while relying on them to become paying consumers of his work. It was connections with publishers that specifically allowed the decadents to orient themselves in relation to the literary marketplace. Far from the stereotype of the disenfranchised artist in the garret, decadent writers were fully engaged participants in the financial world of publishing. For Bourdieu, however, the exchange of money was viewed as inimical to the ethos of an artistic society. Regardless of the commercial realities, he argues, artists sought to present themselves as beings at a remove from the world of economics. Groups of artists claimed to manufacture their own societies in order to provide their own non-financial markets and thus distance themselves from the crude materialism of publishers and patrons:

This society offers the most favourable and comprehensive welcome to the audacities and transgressions that writers and artists introduce, not only into their work but also into their existence (itself conceived as a work of art); the rewards of this privileged market, if they do not manifest themselves in cold cash, have at least the virtue of assuring a form of social recognition for those who otherwise appear (that is, to other groups) as a challenge to common sense.<sup>11</sup>

Decadent writers and artists certainly formed social networks and coterie marketplaces to disseminate their works amongst a sympathetic audience and, given Whistler's professed disdain for the 'commercial travellers of art,' the anti-commercial state of mind was familiar

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<sup>10</sup> Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, p. 8.

<sup>11</sup> Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, p. 58.

to avant-garde fin-de-siècle thinkers.<sup>12</sup> Bourdieu makes clear the financial reality of artistry: as jobbing writers supporting themselves through writing, disengaging themselves from the professional world was a luxury few could afford. And yet, the picture of nineteenth-century artistic culture which emerges in Bourdieu's book draws too stark a dichotomy between art and the market. He makes this complex relationship into a binary opposition between a workaday reality and a disconnected ideal. While Bourdieu unpicks the tensions of these dynamics, there is more nuance to creative ideologies than he identifies. By the 1890s, thinkers were positioning themselves in an ideological mid-point between the market and an art-for-art's-sake utopia. In addition to selling their works through distinctive publishing houses, fin-de-siècle decadents (for instance, Wilde and Le Gallienne) consciously engaged with their own commodification as an ideological statement. Unlike Bourdieu, this thesis suggests that commodification became an aesthetic act for the decadents.

Henry James was an active participant in the creation of complete editions of his works, as Michael Anesko shows; he was not a passive spectator to his publishers' endeavours. The prospect of reissuing earlier texts in an affordable version under a unified design scheme for the 1883 Macmillan Collective Edition pleased James, and he was clearly interested in the material composition of the books, making it a condition that Macmillan produced '*charming*' books which were 'as pretty as possible.'<sup>13</sup> James's awareness of the price ('18 pence a volume') and the effect that the sale value would have on production demonstrates his engagement with the commercial realities of the marketplace in which he worked. For Macmillan, it was a business venture, a calculated gamble on long-term investments; it was not born of a desire for aesthetic unity or for the creation of a definitive text: 'in contrast with the marketing strategies for later *éditions de luxe*, the publisher's ambition for this series was to broaden and consolidate the market for the author's *future*

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<sup>12</sup> James Whistler, *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies* (London: Sheridan Ford, 1890), p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Henry James, quoted in Michael Millgate, *Testamentary Acts: Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 80.

books, not just to sell current titles.’<sup>14</sup> The New York Edition (1906-10), on the other hand, gave James the perfect opportunity to revisit and revise his own books with a minute (and time-consuming) attention to detail—although his revisions were welcomed by neither his publishers (who saw his style as increasingly convoluted) nor his readers (who objected to much-loved books being changed), and the Edition did not have immediate success in terms of sales.<sup>15</sup> Scribner saw the collected edition as a marketing opportunity to sell to an (albeit small) audience prepared to invest in deluxe editions, but for James it was an aesthetic project, an opportunity to ‘reinvent the genre by making his edition distinct.’<sup>16</sup> His concern, as David McWhirter demonstrates, was with the creation of a ‘mythicized “Henry James”’ as a high art aesthete who stood apart from the market.<sup>17</sup> This self-creation was, Anesko argues, a conscious step to ‘shape the contours of his posthumous reputation and direct the lines of critical inquiry that would reflect it.’<sup>18</sup> While fin-de-siècle writers, as we shall see, manufactured a vision of a disconnected art for art’s sake as a marketing tool, here James is selling a posthumous identity. He is perhaps less concerned with immediate profit than with curating his reputation; it is more a matter of ideology than profiteering. James’s personal editorial influence over the collected editions of his work was all about selling himself as a cultural commodity rather than a commercial one.<sup>19</sup> The debates which surrounded James’s collected editions reflect the broader context of literary commodification and the commercial

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<sup>14</sup> Michael Anesko, ‘Collected Editions and the Consolidation of Cultural Authority: The Case of Henry James,’ *Book History*, 12.1 (2009), 186-208, p. 191.

<sup>15</sup> Anesko, ‘Collected Editions and the Consolidation of Cultural Authority,’ pp. 196-7.

<sup>16</sup> Anesko, ‘Collected Editions and the Consolidation of Cultural Authority,’ p. 193.

<sup>17</sup> David McWhirter, “‘The Whole Chain of Relation and Responsibility’: Henry James and the New York Edition,” *Henry James’s New York Edition: The Construction of Authorship*, ed. David McWhirter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Anesko, *Monopolizing the Master: Henry James and the Politics of Modern Literary Scholarship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> It would seem that James was abetted in this by the modernists who appropriated him and his work in the twentieth century and so ‘appropriate[d] the Master’s aura, wanting to transfer or borrow his cultural capital to sure up their own artistic agendas.’ James provided a useful symbol to represent an avoidance of (or perhaps even aversion to) the realities of writing within a capitalist market. Anesko, *Monopolizing the Master*, p. xi.

role of publishers, and the ways in which the decadents situated their own products and their relationships with their publishers.

The unfavourable caricatures of publishers in decadent fiction lend credence to the model of publishing which enshrined them as unsympathetic chief actors in the marketplace. Le Gallienne claims that Algernon's valet Lane in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is an unfavourable caricature of the Bodley Head's John Lane.<sup>20</sup> Though Lane is a very minor character, he admits that he and his fellow servants happily drink the lion's share of Algernon's champagne at dinner parties. While Wilde does not condemn this behaviour (Algernon actually sympathises with servants who are forced to serve in married households where 'the wine is rarely of a first-rate brand'), it is symbolic that the business-like valet helps himself to the possessions of a high society dandy.<sup>21</sup> If we accept Le Gallienne's reading, Lane is represented as parasitic, consuming rather than producing. The tension between artist and seller becomes overtly hostile in Crowley's short story 'At the Fork of the Roads' (1909). In the late 1890s, Smithers had published two volumes of Crowley's decadent poetry, *Acelandama* and *White Stains* (1898), but the relationship became acrimonious. While Yeats and the illustrator Althea Gyles (Crowley's Golden Dawn rivals) are the main targets of Crowley's ire in the text, Smithers appears as a Bond Street publisher characterised by a physicality both gross and grotesque: 'bloated with disease and drink; his loose lips hung in an eternal leer; his fat eyes shed venom; his cheeks seemed ever on the point of bursting into nameless sores and ulcers.'<sup>22</sup> D'Arch Smith interprets the hostile portrayal as retaliation since Smithers had conned the poet out of his advance for *Green Alps* (1899).<sup>23</sup> In Crowley's

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), p. 164. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest, The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, repr. 1998, 2008), p. 253.

<sup>22</sup> Aleister Crowley, 'At the Fork of the Roads,' *The Drug and Other Stories* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2010, repr. 2015), p. 128.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy d'Arch Smith, 'Aleister Crowley's "Acelandama" (1898): The "A B" Copy,' *The Book Collector*, 56.2 (2007), 213-237, p. 215.

overtly occult story, the Smithers-figure's bodily corruption is a clear marker of his spiritual corruption.<sup>24</sup>

Imagining a straightforwardly hostile relationship between publisher and published is, however, somewhat simplistic. As Jonathan Freedman puts it, real-world aestheticism was a 'complete but complex entanglement' of art for art's sake with 'the development of a cultural apparatus at once thoroughly professionalized and wholly commodified.'<sup>25</sup> The sheer proliferation of decadent commodities (see Chapter 3) is evidence that selling the idea of a group identity was just as important as maintaining the idealised concept of the isolated artistic genius—publishers and writers were both economically invested. The idea of the materialistic poet is a common theme in Le Gallienne's work, and he appears to be preoccupied with questioning traditional assumptions about the financial illiteracy of poets. His short story 'The Woman's Half Profits' (1894) playfully draws attention to the avarice and economic stinginess of the archetypal generously profligate poet. The protagonist Hyacinth Rondel is held up at gunpoint by his former muse, Annette—she demands a half share in the profits of Rondel's poetry as recompense for having inspired its creation. Le Gallienne not only presents her sympathetically as a wronged woman, but also implicitly condemns poets as venal men who exploit women for financial gain. Annette's criticism of her abandonment by Rondel is articulated in economic terms:

'Look you,' she continued, 'an artist pays his model at least a shilling an hour, and it is only her body he paints: but you use body and soul, and offer her nothing. Your blues and reds are the colours you have stolen from her eyes and her heart—stolen, I

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<sup>24</sup> Crowley explores a different (and less vituperative) instantiation of decadent publishing in his 1929 opus *Magick in Theory and Practice*. He makes his printers, publishers and booksellers an integral part of his magical process, describing them as 'spirits who must be 'constrain[ed ...] to convey [his] message' to his readers through a magical act of will. In the light of such later philosophies, a publisher was (if only by authorial delegation) a spiritual agent in the creation of texts. Aleister Crowley, *Magick in Theory and Practice, Magick: Liber ABA. Book Four. Parts I-IV.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 1997, repr. 2008), p. 126.

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Freedman, *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. xix.



say, for the painter pays so much a tube for his colours, so much an hour for his model' [...]<sup>26</sup>

Annette's demand for recompense is initially described as a 'somewhat mercantile statement' (38) by the narratorial voice (in Rondel's idiolect), but Le Gallienne makes it clear that it is the poet who is a grasping mercenary. After he grudgingly decides to save his own life and part with his money, the empty space in Rondel's chequebook is 'fresh as a new wound, from which indeed his bank account was profusely bleeding' (44). Le Gallienne argues that despite any claims of art for art's sake, poets are no less worldly than publishers. He dismisses any claims to the exceptionalism of the poet: 'Like most poets [Rondel] was a prudent man' (43).

Narcissus in *The Book-Bills of Narcissus* (1891), who is a much more sympathetic character than the avaricious Rondel, is also defined by his interactions with the marketplace. The narrator opens the novel by declaring that accurate wine bills are of more consequence than a diary when writing a biography: 'Lend me your private ledger. "There the action lies in his true nature."' <sup>27</sup> Excessive spending is, admittedly, associated with the non-commercial poet and signifies a general unworldliness (Narcissus is largely unaware of the implications of his prodigious spending on books), but from the very title of Le Gallienne's book Narcissus is defined by his relationship with the book market. Le Gallienne portrays writers as thoroughly implicated in fin-de-siècle materialism—there is ample historical evidence to reinforce his claims, such as Wilde's insistence on selling his books at the highest possible prices both to present them as elite and rarefied works of art and to ensure the maximum possible royalties. <sup>28</sup>

Le Gallienne's presentations of fictional commercially-engaged writers can be considered alongside discussions in his non-fiction writing. Here, he also challenges

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, 'The Woman's Half Profits,' *Prose Fancies* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1894), p. 41. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *The Book-Bills of Narcissus* (London: The Bodley Head, 1895), p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Josephine M. Guy, 'Cultural Versus Financial Capital: Defining Literary Value at the *Fin de Siècle*,' *Victorian Literature and Finance*, ed. Francis O' Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 173.

contemporary perceptions of the unadulterated materialism associated with publishers. In *The Romantic '90s*, for instance, he argues that 'a publisher may occasionally be something like a creative artist. By his selective encouragement of new talents, he may be instrumental in setting new fashions in literature, and by the general character of his business be no little of a contributory creator of taste' (164). Such an understanding of the publisher's role transforms the producer and seller of books into an artist of social networks. It is an art form based on bringing people together in a professional context, thus creating new and exciting literary movements. The books which are produced as a result of these collaborations, all under the auspices of the publisher, embody an aesthetic of interconnectivity. It is an active example of Ngai's 'connexionism' and 'network aesthetic,' predating her 1965 cut-off point (see Introduction vi).<sup>29</sup> Like the twentieth-century authors about whom Ngai writes, Le Gallienne is self-consciously celebrating an aesthetic which arises from interpersonal connection. Fin-de-siècle publishers and those who worked with them manipulated their social networks as an aesthetic instrument. They leveraged their interpersonal and business relationships to produce books which were material artistic objects as much as they were saleable commodities.

Such re-evaluations of publishers' and writers' business acumen are combined in Le Gallienne's essay 'Poets and Publishers' (1894). Though this piece opens with the accepted wisdom that 'a poet is a fool, and a publisher is a knave,' the writer subverts these expectations.<sup>30</sup> Le Gallienne's text explicitly states that poets are competent combatants in the literary marketplace, even if his tongue may be somewhat in cheek as he declares that 'I would back any poet of my acquaintance against any publisher in a matter of business' (77). Poets no longer had to 'humbly' (78) wait on publishers but were instead courted. Le Gallienne acknowledges that publishers may employ 'many shapes of beguilement' (78) and

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<sup>29</sup> Sianne Ngai, 'Network Aesthetics: Julianna Spahr's *The Transformation* and Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social*,' *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimension*, ed. Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 368.

<sup>30</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, 'Poets and Publishers,' *Prose Fancies*, p. 71. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

may flatter poets by praising their business sense—but this is nonetheless an inverted power dynamic, where the representatives of the economic world must use guile rather than overt financial muscle to take advantage of writers. The essay thus paints publishers as ‘in the main a very much abused race’ (85); Le Gallienne comes very close to presenting them as victims of poetic rapaciousness. By analogy with the poet’s denial of ‘the woman’s half-profits in the matter’ (85), he suggests that poets readily abuse the generosity of publishers. The implicit allusion to his short story (which appears in the same collection) allows Le Gallienne to challenge financial stereotypes: for him, it is the publisher who is exploited.

As Le Gallienne suggests, writers were very aware of the necessity of productive business relationships. He may have parodied Yeats in *Young Lives* as an otherworldly figure ‘with purply black hair, that kept falling in an elflock over his eyes, and violet eyes set slantwise [...] talking earnestly of fairies in a beautiful Irish accent,’ but Yeats was eminently professional.<sup>31</sup> In a letter to Lady Gregory, he was to complain, following the 1900 schism in the leadership of the Golden Dawn, that his fellow Kabbalists were ‘hopelessly unbusinesslike and thus minutes and the like are in complete confusion.’<sup>32</sup> While this gripe is not related to the business of books, the poet is notably concerned with the bureaucracy of his occult practices. *Young Lives* propagates the myth of an otherworldly, obscurely Celtic Yeats, but the reality was a writer who did not live on fairies alone and who engaged actively with the business of magic and writing. As Alexander Bubb suggests, Yeats’s ability ‘to wield the Celtic discourse without becoming hostage to its tropes and types, ripe for pastiche’ allowed him to portray a version of both himself and of Ireland to a consuming public.<sup>33</sup> Le Gallienne’s 1889 correspondence with Frank Murray, the publisher of *The Book-Bills of Narcissus*, demonstrates a similar kind of business acumen—building on his narrative of

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *Young Lives* (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 1898), pp. 309-10.

<sup>32</sup> W. B. Yeats, quoted in Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2002, repr. 2010), p. 79.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Bubb, *Meeting Without Knowing It: Kipling and Yeats at the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 118.

prudent poets.<sup>34</sup> While Le Gallienne does discuss the central conceit, plot and themes of his novel, these letters are primarily business negotiations in which he aims to secure his financial stake in the novel. Le Gallienne rejects the ‘half-profits system’ outright, instead offering Murray the chance to ‘make [him] a firm offer of £20.’<sup>35</sup> Five days later, presumably after receiving a counter offer, he accepted £15 (presenting it as a personal favour to Murray) with the following proviso: ‘I suppose you would have no objection to “throwing in” two or three presentation copies’ (3). This caveat transforms Le Gallienne’s own book into currency. Moreover, in describing these books as ‘presentation copies,’ it is clear that Le Gallienne himself is treating them as social gifting currency which will secure his place within his socio-literary networks (see Chapter 4.1). He was also clearly happy to use his place within the Bodley Head’s networks as both a friend and reader to secure his financial and cultural capital. His skill at self-promotion can be seen in an 1893 letter to Lane: in a discussion of possible authors for a book on Walt Whitman, he puts himself forward—as though it were an after-thought:

If you could only get Stevenson to do it! Symonds would have been the best man. No one else particularly related to Whitman remains, I fear. Either you must get a big man, just for the sake of his name—irrespective of his sangfroid to Whitman—or you must get a comparatively unknown man who will make up for the lack of fame and sympathy with a [sic] enthusiasm in his author. Talking of unknown men, why not give me a chance? Whitman has certainly no more devoted disciple.<sup>36</sup>

The rhetoric of ingratiation is clear: by beginning with the ‘big m[e]n’ of literature, Le Gallienne acknowledges their cultural capital in the intellectual marketplace and the financial pull that this represents. When he undercuts this, however, it is not phrased in terms of the marketplace, but instead of the enthusiasm which a lesser-known writer could bring. Having proved to Lane his familiarity with the names of the literary world, he stakes his own faux-

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<sup>34</sup> These letters were reprinted for a limited circulation pamphlet of 95 copies by the Cynara Press in 1982. By 2016, only twelve had been bound as presentation copies.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Le Gallienne, *The Book-Bills of Narcissus: Some Letters of Richard Le Gallienne to Frank Murray* (London: Cynara Press, 1982), p. 1. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>36</sup> Letter to John Lane, 920 LEG 4, Letters from Richard Le Gallienne to Other Correspondents, Folder 4, Item 53. Liverpool Record Office.

self-deprecating claim to the job on his literary devotion to Whitman. Le Gallienne is implicitly presenting himself as a source of cultural and financial capital, both of which would make him a valuable commodity to a publisher.

## 5.2 Publishers and sociability

The business and social models of fin-de-siècle publishing were closely intertwined, with publishers and their companies situated at the heart of decadent sociability. The Victorian explosion in the print sector, Patrick Leary and Andrew Nash suggest, encouraged some writers to ‘look back with longing to a more intimate, personal relationship [with publishers] that had been overtaken by cold commercial calculation.’<sup>37</sup> And Stetz has explored how increasingly isolated writers claimed to envy the community shared by office workers.<sup>38</sup> In this context, publishing houses provided a collaborative structure of production in which decadents worked and socialised. A steady relationship with a publisher offered a form of social solidarity—an antidote to the atomisation of the literary world. Le Gallienne certainly had a close connection with Lane—in his letters he uses such informalities as ‘My dear London Partner,’ ‘you rascal’ and ‘old man.’<sup>39</sup> There is an easy familiarity to their correspondence, combining both the economic and social realms. It highlights the fact that publishers could sustain equal social relationships with their writers. The fin-de-siècle commentator Leopold Wagner’s guide to publication, *How to Publish a Book or Article and How to Produce a Play* (1890), explicitly suggested that maintaining friendships was integral to the publication process: a young writer should ‘devote one-half of his energies to

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<sup>37</sup> Leary and Nash, ‘Authorship,’ p. 188.

<sup>38</sup> Margaret D. Stetz, ‘Publishing industries and practices,’ *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, repr. 2012), p. 115.

<sup>39</sup> Letter to John Lane, 920 LEG 4, Letters from Richard Le Gallienne to Other Correspondents, Folder 4, Item 11. Liverpool Record Office.

producing good work, and the other half to making friends, and seeking serviceable introductions.’<sup>40</sup>

It was this socio-professional model which facilitated the kind of social interaction exemplified by the 1894 *Yellow Book* dinner discussed earlier (see Chapter 2.4). Stetz has suggested that, analogous to a domestic unit, publishing houses ‘emphasised the importance of personal connections and allegiances.’<sup>41</sup> Though these networks were driven by profit, the bonds of association were often strong. With the increasing professionalisation of writing, the social function of publishers diminished as agents became increasingly important and ‘the author-agent relationship took on a form of financial sponsorship which had been a feature of some long-established author-publisher relationships.’<sup>42</sup> Small publishing houses like the Bodley Head, however, resisted this trend, maintaining a more social relationship with employees. J. Lewis May, for example, began his career as an apprentice cashier for the Bodley Head, but he later became one of their writers. This publishing house looked after its own. May’s book *John Lane and the Nineties* (1936), a biography of Lane and general encomium to the Bodley Head dedicated to Le Gallienne, was about the people who congregated around the publishing house, and it records the social and professional life of the Bodley Head community. His recollection of how Lane encouraged May’s father to invest in Le Gallienne’s *Volumes in Folio* (1889) encapsulates the intersection of the book trade and a domesticised friendship. Visiting his friends in the evening, Lane

invited [May’s] father to become the possessor of one or more of them. Nor did he forbear to appeal to our baser instincts. He assured us that, before very long, the book would be at a substantial premium and that, if we could ever bring ourselves to part with a thing so precious, we should make money by the transaction.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Leopold Wagner, *How to Publish a Book or Article and How to Produce a Play: Advice to Young Authors* (London: George Redway, 1898), p. 144. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>41</sup> Stetz, ‘Publishing industries and practices,’ p. 121.

<sup>42</sup> Leary and Nash, ‘Authorship,’ p. 204.

<sup>43</sup> J. Lewis May, *John Lane and the Nineties* (London: The Bodley Head, 1936), p. 33.

Touting his wares in May's family home, Lane acts as both guest and salesman. May does not, however, treat this incident as an imposition—rather, it seems to be an accepted facet of the social interactions surrounding the Bodley Head. He goes on to praise the beauty of the book design, Le Gallienne's talent and the Bodley Head's role as a taste-maker. Lane's pitch presents Le Gallienne's book as both an aesthetic and commercial artefact, endowed with financial and emotional significance. This type of sociability allows for an easy exchange of friendship, cultural capital and money; the decadent networks which surrounded avant-garde publishers provided a broadly mutually supportive environment (albeit one weighted in the publishers' favour) in which the decadents could negotiate their place in the general market.

### 5.3 Materiality and the published book

The material value of books as collectable and giftable art objects discussed in Chapter 4 was a significant aspect of the cultural cachet the decadents assigned to books, but the sphere of publishing encouraged a divergent (though not necessarily hostile) ideology of the materiality of books. Given the economic realities of the market, this understanding of the physical book was primarily concerned with the fiscal costs of book construction. Thus when J. M. Dent commissioned the then unknown Beardsley to illustrate Thomas Malory's *La Morte d'Arthur*, he was looking for what Stanley Weintraub describes as 'a Burne-Jones without the Burne-Jones fee.'<sup>44</sup> The aesthetic books of Morris's Kelmscott Press had a definite cultural cachet and Dent hoped to capitalise upon this distinction to produce an affordable edition of Malory which would, notably, be cheaper to produce.

Patrick Collier suggests that the raw materials of books are the clearest evidence of their commodity status and the mechanisms of publishing culture reinforce this viewpoint.<sup>45</sup>

The materiality of a text emerges directly from the financial planning of the publisher.

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<sup>44</sup> Stanley Weintraub, *Beardsley* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967, repr. 1972), p. 50.

<sup>45</sup> Patrick Collier, *Modern Print Artefacts: Textual Materiality and Literary Value in British Print Culture, 1890-1930s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 6.

Decadent texts presented themselves as elite commodities, worthy of artistic recognition for the quality of their manufacture, but they were also the result of prudent economic judgements. For instance, Guy and Ian Small suggest poems and plays were especially popular with fin-de-siècle publishers because the reduced amount of text on the page lowered printing costs.<sup>46</sup> The design decisions which influenced decadent book manufacture balanced commodification (book as commodity) with textual artistry (book as art object). Extensive margins (see Chapter 4.1) were a hallmark of the aesthetic book-object: the text was framed by an expanse of empty page, deploying the whiteness of the paper to set off the printed text. Such margins, as Stetz notes, also allowed the canny publisher to present a relatively contained piece as an entire volume.<sup>47</sup> The love of generous margins gave economic publishing practices an ideological stake; the cultural capital of the margin saved money. A publishing house could also reduce costs while still printing on high-quality paper by buying remaindered stock from the manufacturers at a good discount.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the Bodley Head bought up remaindered printed sheets of Wilde's *Poems* (1881) from their original publisher David Bogue, and then bound and sold them themselves.<sup>49</sup>

The negotiations between quality and economy mean that fin-de-siècle decadent texts refuse to conform neatly to predetermined notions of high and low culture. As Guy suggests, they should be treated as ““cross-over” fiction, works which addressed both popular and “high” taste simultaneously, as authors attempted to maximize both cultural and financial capital.’<sup>50</sup> Fiscal responsibility was repackaged as luxurious design: Stetz has shown how the Bodley Head managed to keep print runs low and hence cheaper by emphasising ‘a

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<sup>46</sup> Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, p. 148.

<sup>47</sup> Margaret D. Stetz, ‘Sex, Lies, and Printed Cloth: Bookselling at the Bodley Head in the Eighteen-Nineties,’ *Victorian Studies*, September 1 (1991), 71-86, p. 74.

<sup>48</sup> Stetz, ‘Sex, Lies and Printed Cloth,’ p. 74.

<sup>49</sup> Guy and Small, *Oscar Wilde's Profession*, p. 148.

<sup>50</sup> Guy, ‘Cultural Versus Financial Capital,’ p. 174.



philosophy of limitation.’<sup>51</sup> This marketing technique of manufactured scarcity made Bodley books appear to be luxury, collectors’ items. Collier suggests that ‘the more lush or exotic the materiality of a book, the more it could be seen as transcending the banality of the mass market.’<sup>52</sup> And Lane’s books demonstrate this marketing illusion: they may have been art objects, but they were also designed to fetch a price on the literary market.

The art-driven materiality of book as thing and the market-driven materiality of book as commodity influenced the creation of decadent books. The printing philosophy of the Bodley Head, for instance, created aesthetic synergies with a more idealistic vision of books. The *Yellow Book* enacts this brand of hybridity. Even though by the fin de siècle the majority of commercial publishers were selling books with machine-cut pages, removing the need for consumers to cut their own pages, the Bodley Head doggedly persisted in selling unopened books. It gave their products an air of a nostalgic and antiquarian literary past, but also saved the firm money by cutting out a stage of book production.<sup>53</sup> Despite technically inconveniencing readers, it marked out the Bodley Head’s books as belonging to a rarefied brand.

Typographical and print decisions during the editorial and production processes of decadent texts defined their artistic identity within the print market. Linda Dowling suggests such print decisions enabled Beardsley and Harland’s ideological commitment to separating image from text in the *Yellow Book*: images could be printed separately on high-quality art paper with a hand press because they did not have to share a page with letterpress.<sup>54</sup> It led to the high-production value of the pictures for which the periodical became famous. Meanwhile, the use of Caslon Old Face for typesetting the *Yellow Book*’s text reinforced the brand identity which its publishers were creating. Described by the modern typographer

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<sup>51</sup> Stetz, ‘Sex, Lies and Printed Cloth,’ p. 74.

<sup>52</sup> Collier, *Modern Print Artefacts*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Stetz, ‘Sex, Lies and Printed Cloth,’ p. 74.

<sup>54</sup> Linda Dowling, ‘Letterpress and Picture in the Literary Periodicals of the 1890s,’ *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 16 (1986), 117-31, pp. 120-1.

Robert Bringhurst as one of the ‘distinguished creations’ of eighteenth-century printing, Caslon Old Face had a clear cultural significance.<sup>55</sup> Its history gave it a cultural cachet in the fin de siècle and it was Whistler’s typeset of choice for *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*: ‘Because it was comparatively black and irregular, it became the type-face of deliberate and principled reaction or anachronism.’<sup>56</sup> The cultural connotations of the typeset played into the self-conscious archaism fostered by the magazine’s production processes. The material makeup of the *Yellow Book* (influenced by market considerations) allowed the editors to act out its radical artistic ethos. There is a harmony between artist-driven materiality and publisher-driven materiality, which unite in the form of the decadent literary commodity.

#### 5.4 Branding authors

Wagner identified three chief types of publisher in his guide: ‘the manufacturing or popular publisher, the editorial publisher, and the speculative or “up-to-date” publisher’ (*How to Publish*, 62). His types are all defined by the brand of literary commodities which they commission and sell. As a practical guide, *How to Publish* is less concerned with the creative potential of publishers. Whether publishers act as business men or as creative artists, their chief purpose is to sell books (though Wagner’s ‘golden rule’ is that an aspiring writer should ‘find a publisher who is in direct sympathy with the peculiar character of his work,’ 54). It is therefore inevitable that fin-de-siècle publishers commodified the social networks of writers and artists which formed around their publishing houses, and sold the idea of authors as well as their books to consumers. Creating a brand identity in this way staked a claim to cultural authority by intimately associating the company with the personalities it managed, and thus the works they produced. Michael Patrick Gillespie’s analysis of Wildean branding usefully underlines the marketing potential of the author-brand:

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<sup>55</sup> Robert Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Point Roberts: Hartley & Marks, Publishers, 1992, repr. 1996, 2004, 2005), p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> Dowling, ‘Letterpress and Picture,’ p. 124.

He did not simply call attention to himself. He presented a succession of personae that engaged the public imagination. He configures stages of the brand to encourage a range of possible perspectives, each sufficiently flexible to sustain multiple interpretations and each subtly distinct from the previous iteration.<sup>57</sup>

The decadent commercial identity was fluid: it could adapt to developing market tastes and so ensure its continued commercial viability. The link between a writer's public persona and the book commodity implicitly afforded the publisher a portion of the cultural capital accrued by those whose books they sold, but commodifying writers as celebrities also allowed publishers to fashion themselves as style-setters—they *created* cultural forms rather than simply selling the products of others.

Interactions between publishers and savvy writers had the potential to be collaborative, but there was room for ambivalence in this socio-professional relationship. The tensions that accompany the transformation of a writer from an isolated genius to a public brand are foregrounded in Henry James's short story 'The Death of the Lion' (1894). Perhaps ironically, this story about the dangers of commodifying authors was the first prose piece to appear in the first volume of the *Yellow Book*—Lane's flagship publication for selling an avant-garde vision of the Bodley Head brand. James's narrator is a journalist who is at first complicit in, and then struggles against, the commodification of the unworldly novelist Neil Paraday. He sets out, with the blessing of his editor, to write about Paraday and so to 'create the demand [they] required' to sell further stories about the writer.<sup>58</sup> This piece transforms Paraday into a celebrity and leaves him vulnerable to the demands of a consuming public who do not necessarily appreciate his aesthetic credentials.

Paraday, who James is at pains to portray as an ingénue, is exploited by Mr. Morrow, a mercenary journal publisher who represents the stifling and unartistic nature of an utterly

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<sup>57</sup> Michael Patrick Gillespie, *Branding Oscar Wilde* (New York: Routledge, 2018), loc. 133. <https://bodleian.idls.org.uk/accessnow/start.html> Accessed on 27/07/2018.

<sup>58</sup> Henry James, 'The Death of the Lion', *The Yellow Book* 1 (1894), 7-52, p. 8. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

commoditised literary marketplace. Morrow speaks at length of the ‘syndicate of influential journals’ and of ‘a particular commission from the Tatler’ (18) without inviting active engagement from Paraday—this is a monologue rather than a dialogue. Morrow claims that his ‘publics [...] are in particular sympathy with Mr. Paraday’s line of thought’ (18), but he fails to show any such sympathy himself and represses Paraday’s quiet artistry: the novelist walks next to Morrow ‘as if he had been in custody’ (17). The publisher is completely disconnected from the social and creative lives of his writers, seeing them as no more than marketable products.

Morrow’s exploitative control of his artists is underlined by his reference to a woman writing under the male pseudonym Guy Walsingham, whose work he had publicised. Walsingham writes as a man not for any artistic purpose, but for the markets; she is ‘a lady who goes in for the larger latitude. Obsessions, by Miss So-and-So would look a little odd, but men are more naturally indelicate’ (19). The consuming public, while happy to read ‘indelicate’ material written by a man, must be appeased—burying Walsingham’s true identity in a gendered pseudonym satisfies their prudish sensibilities. It is tempting to read an allusion to Mary Robinson’s novel *Walsingham: or the Pupil of Nature* (1799) in Walsingham’s name. In this late-eighteenth-century novel, the eponymous protagonist’s cousin, Sir Sidney, is born a girl but has been forced to pretend to be a boy by her mother in order to steal Walsingham’s inheritance. Guy Walsingham’s identity, it would seem, has equally been forced upon the writer in order to transform her into a saleable commodity which has a guaranteed audience.

James’s short story explicitly condemns the commodification of writers and their works by the commercial literary establishment, but Ella D’Arcy’s ‘The Death Mask’ (1898) appears to be less suspicious of the process. This short story does not feature the sphere of publishing, but nonetheless deals with the commodification of a poet after his death. The

notorious Parisian writer known as the Master (a fictionalised version of Paul Verlaine) has died, and his friends and hangers-on commission a sculptor named Felon to produce his death mask; as a means of commemorating the poet and securing his legacy, his corpse is transformed into a commodity. Felon's plaster cast serves to expose the Master's dual nature. From one angle he is 'so utterly repulsive, so hideously bestial,' but when lit from above, 'You saw a splendid dome-like head, Shakespearean in contour.'<sup>59</sup> The mask provokes both disgust and a semi-religious awe in D'Arcy's narrator, allowing him to re-evaluate the man he had seen wallowing in Parisian stews and dives: 'never in the living man had I suspected anything of the beauty, of the splendour, that I now saw' (179). Wilde had, according to Le Gallienne, quipped that 'Whenever a great man dies, Hall Caine and William Sharp go in with the undertakers' (*Romantic '90s*, 30), criticising the commodification of a dead artist's reputation. The Master's commodified death mask, however, actually reveals his true complexity both as a man and as a poet. D'Arcy's story suggests that the decadent commodity can radically engage with and explore art even as it markets the artistic product to consumers.

Established authors like James entertained anxieties about their reputations and sought to influence their reception (as demonstrated by Millgate and Anesko's studies), while publishers sought to create new brands. Le Gallienne, despite showing sympathy for publishers in his writing, does express scepticism about cults of celebrity created around new writers:

The era of the engineered boom was beginning, and one had a feeling that men were getting "famous" too quickly. The bud was already being taken for the flower. Hasty unripe biographies began to be written, and autobiography even was beginning to precede achievement. (*Romantic '90s*, 13)

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<sup>59</sup> Ella D'Arcy, 'The Death Mask,' *The Decadent Short Story: An Annotated Anthology*, eds. Kostas Boyiopoulos, Yoonjung Choi and Matthew Brinton Tildesley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp.178-9. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

His retrospective stance is somewhat ironic given Le Gallienne's own complicity with the marketing of late-Victorian decadence in his role as a reader for the Bodley Head. Taking 'the bud [...] for the flower' was integral to Lane's publicity strategies, which created demand by first making its stars famous. Stetz has shown that despite Beardsley's relative obscurity when he began working for the Bodley Head (his illustrations for the *Morte* being his only major previous work), Lane presented him as a star: 'The advertisements themselves affirmed his importance, just as they deliberately manufactured in the buyer's mind the confusion of scarcity with quality.'<sup>60</sup> Selling the idea of an artist along with the books allowed publishers like Lane to create their own audience of consumers. The public personae of his authors were thus integral to Bodley Head marketing strategies, and thus to the commercial success of the books themselves.

The process of creating and promoting the authorial brand is exemplified by the lecture tours of America which Wilde and Le Gallienne both undertook. Such transatlantic tours were, as Amanda Adams suggests, 'a central aspect of nineteenth-century authorship' rather than isolated performances.<sup>61</sup> Lecture tours fashioned writers as cross-cultural brands with an international market appeal rather than geographically isolated figures. Not only did the aura of celebrity afford them the financial foundation on which to live, but it also publicly proclaimed them as influencers and creators of public taste. Wilde's 1882 tour was itself a marketing endeavour for Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *Patience*—it was feared that an American audience would not understand the aestheticism which was being satirised and so Wilde was hired to promote it by publicly performing the role of a society aesthete, thus educating American audiences and making them into better consumers of *Patience*. The tour was an exercise in commodification. Wilde's iconic aesthetic costume, complete with velvet, floppy hat and knee breeches, was even mandated by his contract with Richard D'Oyly Carte,

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<sup>60</sup> Stetz, 'Sex, Lies, and Printed Cloth,' p. 74.

<sup>61</sup> Amanda Adams, *Performing Authorship in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Lecture Tour* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), p. 2.

Gilbert and Sullivan's producer.<sup>62</sup> When the Irishman arrived in New York, he met Colonel William Francis Morse, the New York business manager who acted as Wilde's initial chaperone, manager and agent in America. Given the prominence of agents like Carte and Morse in facilitating the tour, one could view the endeavour as being at a remove from the world of publishing. The celebrity Wilde engendered abroad, however, helped secure him the cultural capital to establish himself as a writer, and, as Eleanor Fitzsimons reveals, the initial idea for the lecture tour came from the American publisher Mrs Frank Leslie. Born Miriam Florence Folline, Leslie took over her husband's newspaper and publishing firm after his death. She changed her name to Frank Leslie by deed poll, 'stamping her authority on the enterprise.' Leslie often visited London and was a habitu  of the salon hosted by Wilde's mother.<sup>63</sup> Given her familiarity with the Wilde family, this places the US tour at the intersection of market forces and decadent sociability.

Wilde's posing for the New York photographer Napoleon Sarony demonstrates that he was not only willing to self-present as an affected dandy-aesthete, but also made it a part of his personal brand (Figure 5.1). He was not merely being commodified by his employers to sell the opera; he was commodifying himself in order to sell his own reputation. Sarony was well known for taking celebrity photographic portraits (including images of the world-famous actress, and Wilde's friend Sarah Bernhardt), mass producing them, and then distributing them to retailers, who in turn sold the photos to the consuming public.<sup>64</sup>

Photographed by someone intimately associated with the commodification and marketing of celebrity, Wilde portrayed himself as a sensational spectacle. He quite literally gave himself as a marketable commodity to his American audiences by selling autographs and locks of hair—though, in a letter to Mrs George Lewis, he confided the fact that he had hired

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<sup>62</sup> Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, p. 56.

<sup>63</sup> Eleanor Fitzsimons, *Wilde's Women: How Oscar Wilde was Shaped by the Women he Knew* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2015), p. 101.

<sup>64</sup> David M. Friedman, *Wilde in America: Oscar Wilde and the Invention of Modern Celebrity* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014), p. 82.

secretaries to provide both Wildean commodities.<sup>65</sup> Adams points out that ‘it wasn’t really his person that was being sold on the market place.’<sup>66</sup> These fake Wildean artefacts, however, represented his body through the process of branding: he figuratively sold himself even if the reality was more prosaic. And this was reflected in the American advertising campaign:

HE IS COMING!!!  
WHO IS COMING???  
OSCAR WILDE!!!  
THE GREAT AESTHETE!!!<sup>67</sup>

The hyperbolic tone of this poster text treats Wilde as a commodity which is at once new and yet also established as ‘GREAT.’

Wilde’s stay in Missouri, a few weeks after the outlaw Jesse James had been shot by his friend Robert Ford on 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1882, inspired what Adams sees as Wilde’s most perceptive comment on his own commodity status. Wilde was certainly fascinated by the commodification of James’s legacy as he explained in a letter to Norman Forbes-Robinson:

They sold his dust-bin and foot-scraper yesterday by public auction, his door-knocker is to be offered for sale this afternoon, the reserve price being about the income of an English bishop. The citizens of Kansas have telegraphed an agent here to secure his coal-scuttle at all hazards and at any cost, and his favourite chromo-lithograph was disposed of at a price which in Europe only an authentic Titian can command, or an undoubted Mantegna. (*Letters*, 164)

For Adams, Wilde’s letter represents an act of self-identification with the murdered bandit, which acknowledges how both men are observed and consumed by the American public.<sup>68</sup> The gunslinger’s notoriety meant that 2,000 people attended his funeral in hopes of seeing the body, turning his corpse into a spectacle.<sup>69</sup> In focusing on the market value ascribed to James’s possessions, Wilde gives this posthumous celebrity a clear financial value. There is an implied criticism in the link made between the cost of the outlaw’s ‘favourite chromo-

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<sup>65</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 126. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>66</sup> Adams, *Performing Authorship*, p. 94.

<sup>67</sup> Poster, quoted in Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummel to Beerbohm* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1960), p. 298.

<sup>68</sup> Adams, *Performing Authorship*, p. 95.

<sup>69</sup> T. J. Stiles, *Jesse James: Last Rebel of the Civil War* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 377.





**Figure 5.1**

Napoleon Sarony, photograph of Oscar Wilde (1882).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

lithograph' and the value of Titians and Mantegnas, but, despite the sarcasm, Wilde, too, gave things cultural capital by association and was quite happy to repackage his best witticisms. In a letter he wrote on the same day to Hattie, a woman with whom he had had a flirtation and whom Sturgis has now identified as Harriet Crocker, many of the points he raises are similar.<sup>70</sup> But he repeats verbatim 'and his favourite chromo-lithograph was disposed of at a price which in Europe only an authentic Titian can command, or an undoubted Mantegna' (165). Even in his private correspondence, Wilde repurposes his witticisms to commodify his individual brand and impress his different audiences with the force of his personality.

Le Gallienne may have complained about men who had become famous before meriting their celebrity (and Wilde's career as a playwright did come after he had returned from America), but he fashioned himself after Wildean celebrity and worked in an imitative style. The Liverpudlian decadent had been inspired to become a writer by watching a post-tour Wilde re-deliver his lecture at the Claughton Music Hall, Birkenhead in December 1883.<sup>71</sup> He even implicitly praises Wilde's economic acumen when he recounts how his business-like father (a Birkenhead brewer) responded to the lecture by saying 'Don't make any mistake. That man is no fool.' (*Romantic '90s*, 242). Wildean self-branding made decadence a commercially viable strategy, and Le Gallienne himself was no stranger to (re)branding, having added the Francophone prefix 'Le' to his family name of Gallienne in order to associate himself with France and to cultivate a sense of exoticism. In 1895, he too would go on a lecture tour of America, where, like Wilde, he was commodified. It is demonstrated by the effusive (almost cartoonish) tone of encomium found in the prospectus designed to advertise his journey:

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<sup>70</sup> Matthew Sturgis, *Oscar: A Life* (London: Head of Zeus Ltd, 2018), pp. 246-47.

<sup>71</sup> 'Mr Oscar Wilde at Birkenhead,' *Liverpool Mercury*, 11 December 1883.

MAJOR POND takes the liveliest pleasure in announcing that the newest genius in English literature, the brilliant poet, critic and lecturer

MR. RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

has consented to give a series of Lectures in America in the Season of 1895-6. The position which Mr. Le Gallienne has won in England is all but unexampled in the history of literary *tours de force*. Book writing and book reading England have recognized in Le Gallienne a new and powerful personality and at the same time a personality possessing a degree of charm that inevitably results in a widening popularity.<sup>72</sup>

While this advertisement makes claims for Le Gallienne's literary genius, the focus on his 'personality' is significant. It situates him within the social realm, implicitly linking him with the celebrity of Wilde's personality, and suggests that he is famous for more than his work. In describing the man and his writing, the prospectus is at pains to present him as at once affected, exotic and interesting, but also authentic. It is a balancing act which positions him at the intersection of decadent and more mainstream markets; he is given a multi-valent appeal. Le Gallienne must be viewed as well as read—the prominent photograph of the author posing in a Wildean fashion serves to highlight his good looks and intensify the sense of spectacle surrounding his tour. Le Gallienne, like Wilde before him, is his own commodity; nonetheless, he is a commodity produced collaboratively with his promoters.

This kind of joint marketing also characterised the socio-professional interactions between publishers and writers. Together the Bodley Head writers created a shared social identity for their work. Stetz even argues that 'John Lane devised the first modern sales campaign in publishing: the first not to focus on individual authors or titles, but on an entire line of new and unfamiliar merchandise; the first to create and sell an image of the publishing firm itself.'<sup>73</sup> The nature of Lane's flagship *Keynotes* series—ranging from Egerton's first short story collection (which gave the series its name) to Machen's weird fiction *The Great God Pan and the Inmost Light* (1894)—was disparate, but Lane gave the books a sense of unity as a commercial product through titling conventions and distinctive Beardsley covers.

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<sup>72</sup> Prospectus for Richard Le Gallienne's series of lectures in America, 920 LEG 10, Miscellaneous items relating to Richard Le Gallienne, Folder 10, Item 8. Liverpool Records Office.

<sup>73</sup> Stetz, 'Sex, Lies, and Printed Cloth', p. 75.

The sense of sameness which characterised Bodley books goes beyond the material makeup and into the adverts in the back pages. Stetz suggests that it is these advertisement paratexts which define the product identities of Lane's books.<sup>74</sup> The 'List of Books in Belles Lettres,' which appeared in the end pages of the 1895 Bodley Head reprint of *The Book-Bills of Narcissus*, offers a useful case study. The cover page prominently features the publisher's seal—the head of Thomas Bodley—all the left-hand pages feature 'THE PUBLICATIONS OF' as a headnote and the right side reads 'JOHN LANE.'<sup>75</sup> Highlighting the publisher's role on each page presents him as a unifying figure who brings together the diverse authors under a single marketable banner. This, combined with the clear visual and material identities of Bodley books, creates a brand to promote the sale of commodities. It fosters a social identity for the range—especially in the listing for the *Yellow Book*, where it records the names of all the contributors, creating an avant-garde network.

## 5.5 Selling scandal

Shocking consumers was a key strategy in marketing decadents and decadent commodities. Michèle Mendelssohn has shown how Morse and Carte were complicit in encouraging a hostile American press in order to generate controversy and column space. Journalists and advertisers drew on popular anti-Irish stereotypes and racist depictions of African Americans to criticise aestheticism and Wilde as its most vocal proponent.<sup>76</sup> The damage done to Wilde (including an article in the *Washington Post* saying he should be driven back to England and killed for playing the part of an Englishman) was insignificant to his employers compared with the market potential of the outcry.<sup>77</sup> If publishers adopted the discourses surrounding commodification to sell decadent books, they also transformed the idea of *épater le bourgeois*

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<sup>74</sup> Stetz, 'Sex, Lies and Printed Cloth,' p. 75.

<sup>75</sup> 'List of Books in Belle Lettres,' *The Book-Bills of Narcissus*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>76</sup> Michèle Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 91.

<sup>77</sup> Mendelssohn, *Making Oscar Wilde*, p. 95.

into a marketing strategy. The desire to scandalise and shock a bourgeois audience was central to decadent performances of self—opposing and satirising the values of mainstream society was, of course, a motivating tenet of their networks—but it was not necessarily the toxic brand of scandal which characterised responses to the American lecture tour. Wilde could jokingly complain to Robbie Ross that Smithers ‘is so fond of “suppressed” books that he suppresses his own’ (*Letters*, 924), suggesting, tongue in cheek, that the strategy of limited runs and scandalous associations could backfire. Lane had arranged a marriage of convenience with decadence and decadents, but publishers like Smithers and his one-time partner Nichols enacted a decadent ethos through their shocking marketing campaigns. While the more outré publishers were not usually lynchpins of decadent social networks (though Smithers certainly was), their means of selling pseudo-pornographic books fitted decadent social and creative practices.

One could ask whether an engineered scandal has the same social force as Wilde’s transgressive public smoking or Beardsley’s salacious illustrations, but the publishers’ marketing campaigns can certainly be seen as a continuation of the decadent performance. The publicity which they created for their products may have been fuelled by financial interest rather than a challenge to late-Victorian mores, but it nonetheless established the countercultural tendencies of decadent circles in the public imagination. Decadent scandal could be seen to work in the same way as Levenson’s *Punch* parodies, which jokingly refashioned decadent high art in the popular press (see Chapter 4.3). Both the parodies and the engineered scandal fed off and promoted a model of the decadent self which enticed Victorian consumers.

There were definite precedents for orchestrating scandals to attract press attention and audience interest; for example, the uproar which surrounded the titling of Whistler’s *The White Girl*. This incident emphasised Whistler’s canny understanding of the press, his

consumers and how a carefully managed scandal could invigorate the artistic market. When the painting was first exhibited, journalists referred to it as ‘The Woman in White’ and criticised it for not reflecting the events of Wilkie Collins’ 1859 novel. Daniel E. Sutherland, Whistler’s biographer, blames Matthew Morgan, who managed the gallery at 14 Berners Street, for the controversy—he advertised the painting as ‘Whistler’s Extraordinary Painting: the WOMAN IN WHITE.’<sup>78</sup> Aileen Tsui, however, has found that Whistler himself was involved with titling his painting ‘The Woman in White,’ and, contrary to his protestations, he seems to have been aware of the bestselling novel: the secretary of the Berners Street Gallery wrote to the *Athenaeum* that ‘Mr. Whistler was well aware of his picture being advertised as “The Woman in White” and was pleased with the name.’<sup>79</sup> Tsui interprets this apparent confusion as a deliberate marketing strategy on Whistler’s part: ‘This seeming contradiction of encouraging a reading in order to condemn it as false is an example of the artist’s strategic exacerbation, even cultivation, of public incomprehension of his work.’<sup>80</sup> Whistler used the debates and arguments which arose from the title to popularise his painting as a commodity in the public imagination. When he came to display the painting in France, where Collins’ novel had been less popular, he actually referred to it as *La Dame blanche* in an implicit reference to Adrien Boïeldieu’s and Eugène Scribe’s popular opera comique, *La dame blanche* (1825).<sup>81</sup> Whistler’s marketing strategy provided a clear pattern which could be replicated by fin-de-siècle decadent publishers and it seems fair to argue that booksellers learnt the market appeal of scandalising middle-class morality from their artistic friends and colleagues.

Lane at the Bodley Head was certainly receptive to using scandal as a marketing strategy, though he lacked any ideological commitment to decadence. After the Wilde trials,

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<sup>78</sup> Daniel E. Sutherland, *Whistler: A Life Lived for Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 71.

<sup>79</sup> Mr Buckstone quoted, Aileen Tsui, ‘The Phantom of Aesthetic Autonomy in Whistler’s Work: Titling *The White Girl*,’ *Art History*, 29.3 (2006), 444-75, p. 452.

<sup>80</sup> Tsui, ‘The Phantom of Aesthetic Autonomy,’ p. 453.

<sup>81</sup> Tsui, ‘The Phantom of Aesthetic Autonomy,’ p. 453.

he gave in to pressure both from the public and some of his writers to sack Beardsley from his position at the *Yellow Book* and to distance his firm from the cultural phenomenon it had helped to create. Before this, however, he had exploited Beardsley's controversial reputation to design covers and title pages for the *Keynotes* series. Although the first cover design (1893, Figure 5.2), for Egerton's short story collection, has little to do with the text it accompanies, it is a striking image. A black-clad pierrot strums a two-string viol (a recurrent symbol of masturbation in Beardsley's oeuvre), while a clown in the more traditional pierrot-white manipulates a gigantic New Woman puppet. The white clown is redolent with disturbing sexuality; not only does he have sensual lips and leer suggestively, but he holds a large pole which disappears beneath the layers of the woman's dress. Moreover, his complete lack of a nose suggests he is afflicted with syphilis.<sup>82</sup> The woman seems to be a passive object who is dominated by the lusts of Beardsley's lascivious clowns. Unlike the threatening sexuality of Beardsley's cover design, Egerton's stories celebrate female sexual emancipation, but both creative engagements were an affront to social morals. The most controversial story, 'A Cross Line,' appeared as the last in Egerton's original manuscript, but in the published book it became the first.<sup>83</sup> This was a canny marketing decision as press coverage fixated on the morality of the story, ensuring the collection's notoriety and success. It was Le Gallienne in his role as reader for the Bodley Head who recommended changing the position of Egerton's story.<sup>84</sup> Foregrounding the most controversial piece and using a

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<sup>82</sup> Soft tissue erosion was one of the symptoms of tertiary syphilis—in the late stages of the disease, the nose could rot away. Richard Barnett, *The Sick Rose: or; Disease and the Art of Medical Illustration* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), pp. 199-201.

<sup>83</sup> Stetz, 'Sex, Lies and Printed Cloth,' p. 73.

<sup>84</sup> The fragment of the reader's report where Le Gallienne suggests re-ordering Egerton's stories is held in the Liverpool Records Office and was displayed in the 2016 *Liverpool's Wild(e) Poet* exhibition. The first section of the report is in the Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, at the University of Delaware. Incomplete letter, 920 LEG 4, Incomplete letters to unknown correspondents, Folder 4, Item 114. Liverpool Record Office. *Richard Le Gallienne: Liverpool's Wild[e] Poet* (2016) [Exhibition]. Liverpool Central Library. 5 August 2016 – 31 October 2016.



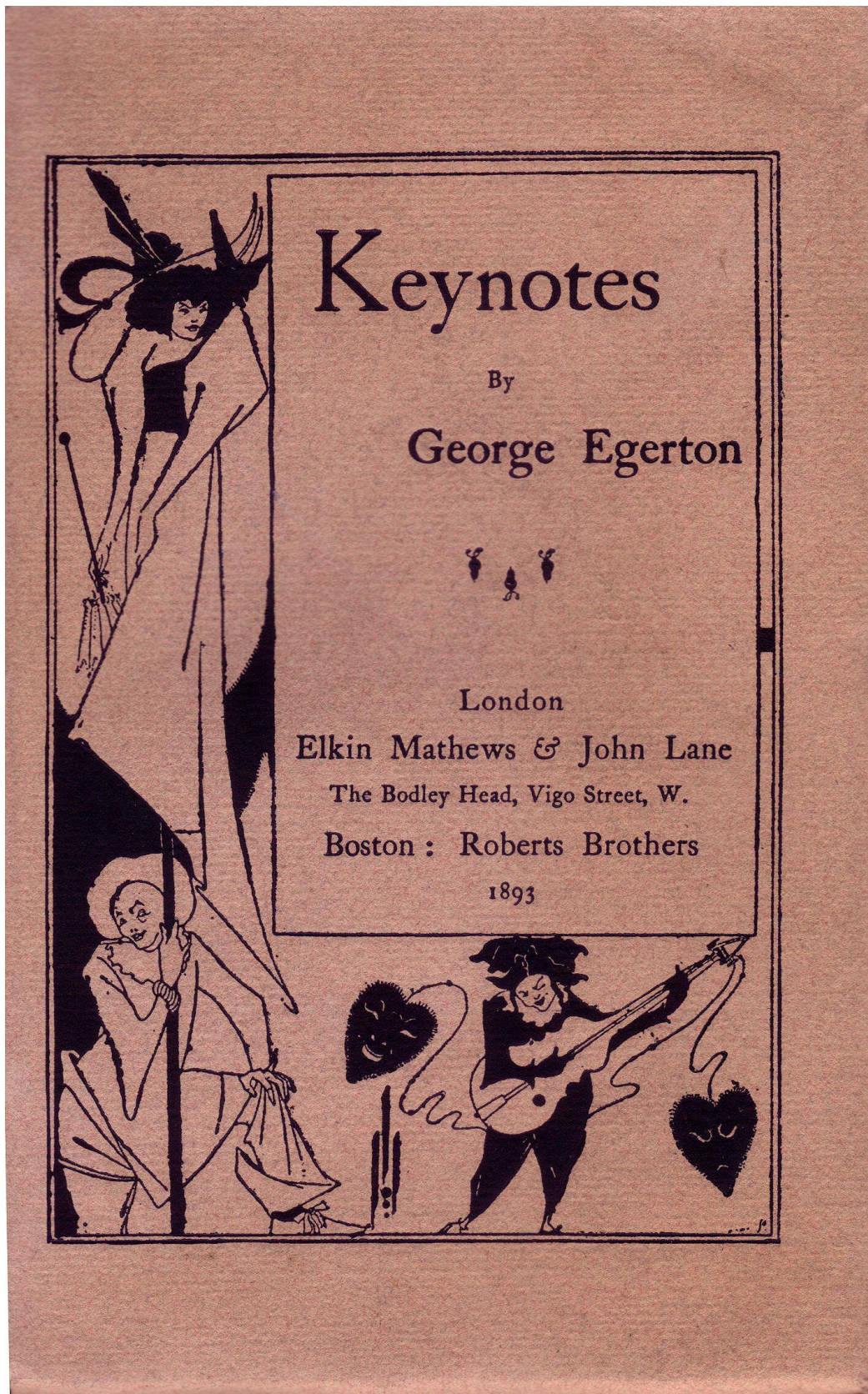


Figure 5.2

Aubrey Beardsley, Cover Design, *Keynotes* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1893).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.



scandalous design for the cover, ensured *Keynotes*' success and 6,071 copies were sold in the first fourteen months.<sup>85</sup>

Even after the Wilde scandal led Lane to sack Beardsley, the *Yellow Book* retained a surprisingly decadent outlook. Despite the notable absence of Beardsley's art, the periodical had not been defanged of its potentially scandalous content. Volume 6 (1895), for instance, featured R. Murray Gilchrist's dreamlike horror story 'The Crimson Weaver.' Here a supernatural femme fatale who lives in a ghostly land wears 'men's lives,' which she fashions on her loom from a 'bleeding heart whence a crimson cord unravelled into many threads.'<sup>86</sup> When the Crimson Weaver lifts her skirts, she reveals 'feet shapen as those of a vulture' (277) suggesting an affinity with the bi-formed grotesques for which Beardsley was famous. Indeed, wearing the very veins and lifeblood of her victims makes the Weaver into a vampiric dandy. The *Yellow Book* never recovered its earlier reputation, but the presence of stories like 'The Crimson Weaver' implies that the Bodley Head was still willing to flirt with scandal and decadence even if it did not necessarily pay off. The continuing decadence of the *Yellow Book* demonstrates Lane's commercial acumen; he disavowed Beardsley and the label decadent when it was necessary to preserve the Bodley Head brand, but he continued his efforts to profit from the cultural cachet associated with the scandal.

Lane's flirtation with commodifiable scandal was, however, not as overt as less-mainstream publishers, many of whom (notably Smithers and Nichols) had business interests in pornography. Their awareness of this lucrative market had a profound influence on their use of the scandalous in producing and selling decadent literature. Charles Carrington, who would produce Wildean forgeries in the early twentieth century, was notorious for selling scientific sexological tracts that flirted with the boundaries of erotica. As Sarah Bull argues,

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<sup>85</sup> Linda Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 489.

<sup>86</sup> R. Murray Gilchrist, 'The Crimson Weaver,' *The Yellow Book* 6 (1895), 269-77, p. 276. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

‘in the Victorian imagination, perceptions of sexual science were so deeply entangled with anxieties about obscenity that the “line” between licit and illicit sexual depictions was indeterminate.’<sup>87</sup> There is a clear overlap with the decadent love of liminality: Carrington positions his scientific books on the margins of pornography while many of his more overtly sexual publications mimic the discourses of scientific and ethnographical texts. For instance, when he released *Untrodden Fields of Anthropology*, a translation of the anonymous *L’Amour aux colonies* (1893), Carrington wrote a preface to claim a fictitious adulation from the English scientific community.<sup>88</sup> The scientific nature of Carrington’s books also seems to have helped him get his more explicit material past the censors by acting as what Rod Boroughs terms ‘cover-items.’<sup>89</sup> In a similar way, Nichols’ publication of an annotated and unexpurgated issue of Richard Burton’s translation *The Thousand Nights and a Night* (1894) emphasised its role as a cultural document rather than as a work of erotic literature—combined with the limited number print-run, this gave the text the respectability required for publication.

Smithers wanted to work as a risqué publisher of literature, but his partner Nichols preferred to specialise in pornography.<sup>90</sup> Their partnership dissolved in 1896 potentially because of this difference of opinion. Working independently, Nichols printed and sold texts which cultivated an aura of scandal while not actually committing to pornographic representation. These books, which could be advertised more openly than the genuinely pornographic texts he sold, marketed themselves by promising sexual enticement—though they did not actually deliver on this. Nichols’ 1899 reprint of T. Bell’s *Kalognomia* (1812), a

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<sup>87</sup> Sarah Bull, ‘A Purveyor of Garbage? Charles Carrington and the Marketing of Sexual Science in Late-Victorian Britain,’ *Victorian Review*, Vol. 38, No 1, Spring 2012, 55-76, p. 59.

<sup>88</sup> Bull, ‘A Purveyor of Garbage?’, p. 62.

<sup>89</sup> Rod Boroughs, ‘Oscar Wilde’s Translation of Petronius: The Story of a Literary Hoax,’ *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 38.1 (1995), 9-49, p. 13.

<sup>90</sup> James G. Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents: Leonard Smithers in the Careers of Beardsley, Wilde and Dowson* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), p. 43.

book on female anatomy and beauty, exemplifies these tendencies.<sup>91</sup> Of the 25 plates, 10, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24 are not printed into the main body of the book and a note at the beginning of the text warns that they ‘*should not be carelessly exposed to either Ladies or to Young Persons.*’<sup>92</sup> These apparently more explicit images are contained in a pocket built into the binding. Nichols’ description of these plates ostensibly treats them as ‘*entirely scientific and anatomical,*’ but he implicitly subverts these claims by emphasising the need for secrecy: he even points out that the plates can be ‘*taken out of the pocket and locked up.*’ It is debateable whether the actual images themselves live up to the publisher’s claims. Plate 10 depicts detailed images of a penis and a vagina (Figure 5.3). The other illustrations are anatomical cross sections: they are more clinical than erotic. Even Plates 22 and 23, which actually depict intercourse, slice the lovers in two in order to focus on their internal organs (Figure 5.4). While the anatomical Venuses of the eighteenth century, which Elizabeth Stephens argues served to achieve an ‘aestheticisation of female anatomy,’ did present an eroticised image of the female interior, they use a very different strategy of representation to the cross sections of *Kalogynomia*.<sup>93</sup> For all their exposed organs, the Venuses are full-bodied with rapturous expressions while the plates are devoid of real eroticism. They are, if anything, medical diagrams masquerading as pornography.

Nichols also published a series of translated memoirs written by European courtiers (a genre that Smithers dabbled in too). These relied on the popular image of political and sexual intrigues amongst foreign aristocrats to attract an audience. The books themselves, however,

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<sup>91</sup> *Kalogynomia* was published by the Walpole Press, which, while owned by Nichols, was not publicly linked to him. The office was not even listed under Nichols’ name because he was bankrupt at the time. Steven Halliwell, email message to Joseph Thorne, 28 March 2019.

<sup>92</sup> T. Bell, *Kalogynomia, or the Laws of Female Beauty: Being the Elementary Principles of the that Science* (London: The Walpole Press, 1899), Front Matter. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>93</sup> Elizabeth Stephens, ‘Venus in the Archive: Anatomical Waxworks of the Pregnant Body,’ *Australian Feminist Studies*, 25.64 (2010), 122-45, p. 140.

failed to fulfil the promise of titillation. The translation of *Secret Memoirs of the Court of St. Petersburg* [sic] (1895) begins with a disclaimer:

THE publishers of the following translation—*i.e.*, the original—have been induced, by a sense of decency and propriety, to suppress or soften a few anecdotes contained in the original, the grossness of which would undoubtedly outrage the public and private feelings of Englishmen.<sup>94</sup>

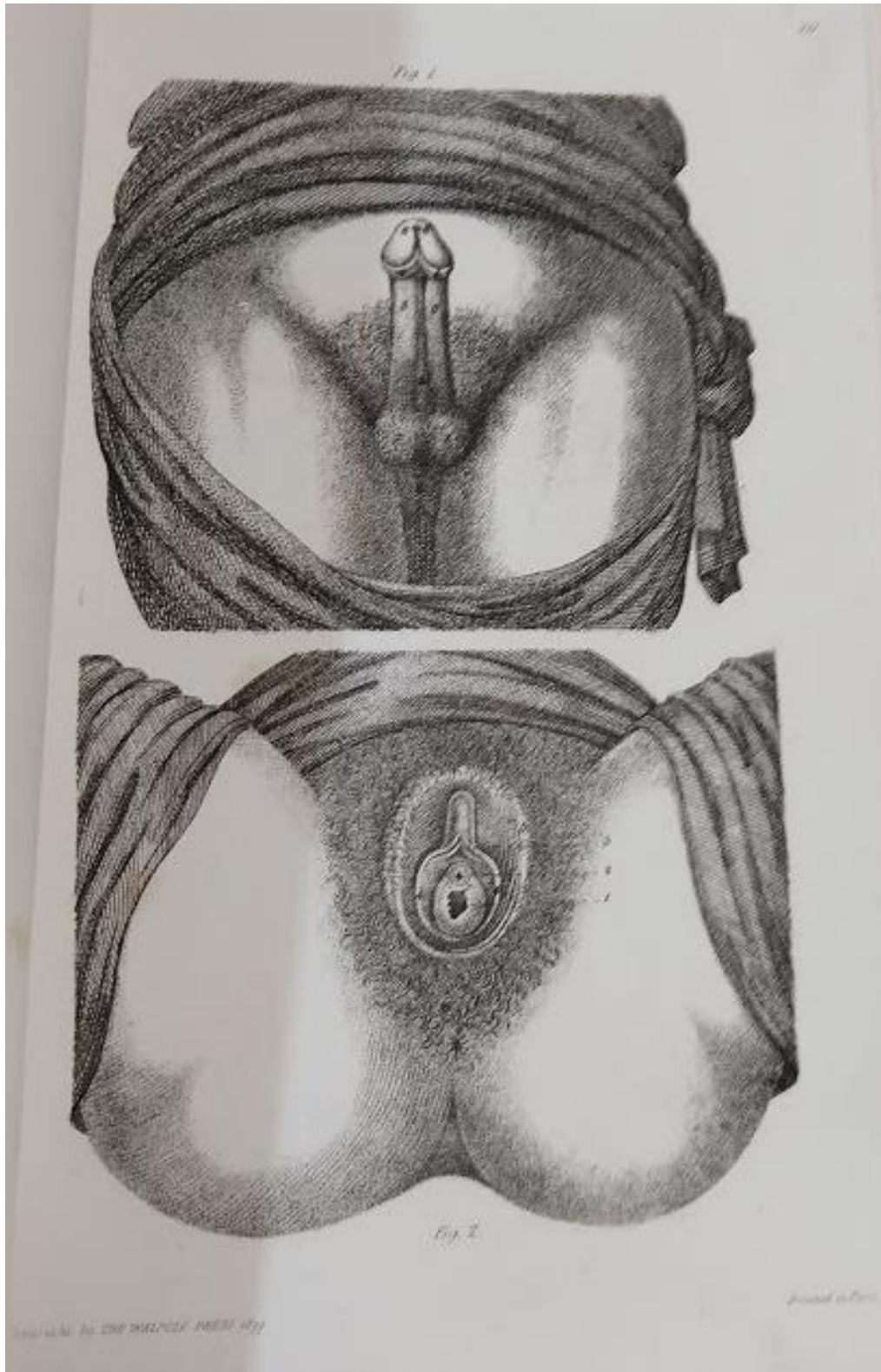
Despite explicitly stating that he has had to edit the original for its salacious content, Nichols nonetheless gives his text an erotic subtext by referring to the ‘grossness’ of the diaries. Even as he makes *Memoirs of the Court of St. Petersburg* acceptable for a mass audience (unlike his explicitly pornographic books), he plays on (and manufactures) its scandalous associations. These published memoirs also have a wider significance for the intersections of publishing and decadent sociability as they essentially sell readers an insight into a social network. They play on the connotations of exotic extravagance and depravity which surrounded foreign aristocrats in the public imagination to characterise this model of sociability as something innately scandalous and hence fascinating. It suggests that decadent sociability is a titillating spectacle which can be sold to consumers at a market price.

## 5.6 Forging decadence

In addition to the legitimate decadent texts they marketed, publishers like Smithers and Nichols became notorious for producing and selling illicit forgeries of their best-selling writers and artists, including Wilde and Beardsley. These decadent counterfeits tended to play on the scandalous reputations of those framed as their authors, and further commodified their decadent reputations. In many ways, the proliferation of fakes was the culmination of the marketing strategies of decadent publishers, and there is also something uniquely decadent about the spread of this pseudo-canon. The publishers who sold forgeries of decadent art and literature were unknowingly playing with the same discourses of mimesis, plagiarism and

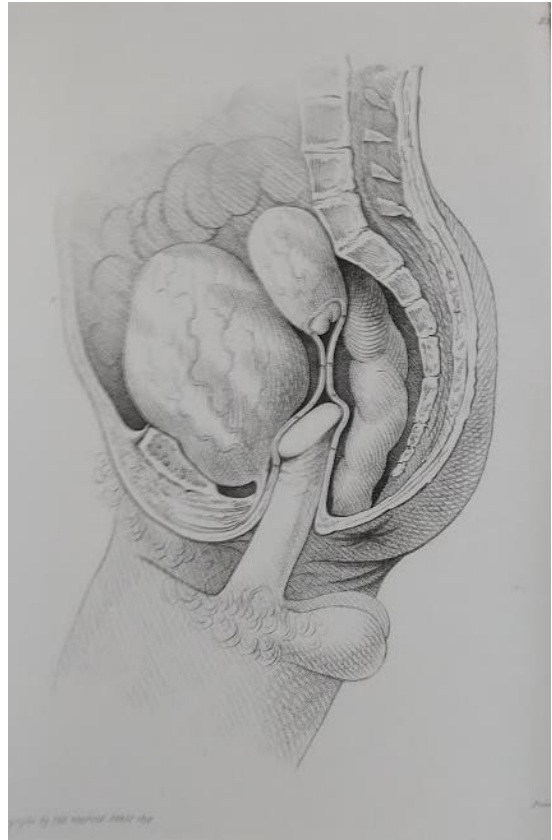
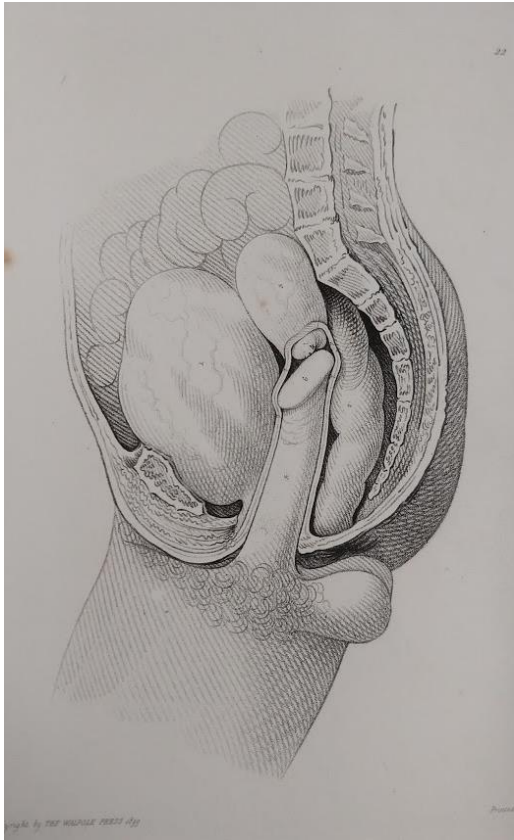
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<sup>94</sup> Anonymous, *Secret Memoirs of the Court of St. Petersburg: Particularly towards the end of the Reign of Catherine II. And the Commencement of that of Paul I.* (London: H. S. Nichols & Co, 1895), front pages.



**Figure 5.3**

Plate 10, *Kalogynomia; or the Laws of Female Beauty: Being the Elementary Principles of that Science* (London: The Walpole Press, 1899).  
Steven Halliwell Collection.



**Figure 5.4**

Plates 22 and 23, *Kalognomia, or the Laws of Female Beauty: Being the Elementary Principles of the Science* (London: The Walpole Press, 1899).

Steven Halliwell Collection.

authorship which fascinated the decadents.<sup>95</sup>

In 1902, Carrington brought out 515 copies of an apparently new English translation of Petronius' *Satyricon*, a core text of the decadent countercanon: *The Satyricon of Petronius: A New Translation with Introduction and Notes*. The translation was 'a very inferior text,' according to Boroughs, and draws heavily on the Bücheler edition in 'some of the more corrupt passages.'<sup>96</sup> What marks out this book as part of a fraudulent decadent pseudo-canon is the slip of paper which Carrington glued into the copies he sold:

#### IMPORTANT NOTICE

The present translation was done direct  
from the original Latin by "Sebastian  
Melmoth" (Oscar Wilde).<sup>97</sup>

Despite the fact that Wilde had no involvement with the project, it masquerades as a Wildean text: his sexual notoriety is used to sensationalise a Roman novel which was already associated with homosexuality in the nineteenth-century consciousness. The fact that Carrington credited Wilde with authorship on a separate piece of paper, not bound into the book itself, gives the text a veneer of illicitness. Moreover, referring to Wilde by his post-prison soubriquet, Sebastian Melmoth (a reference to the homosexual icon St. Sebastian and the cursed wanderer of Charles Maturin's 1820 gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer*), intensifies the sense of suppression even while the parenthesis openly acknowledges Wilde. The attached slip presents Wilde's supposed authorial role as a secret scandal, which can only be acknowledged by tangential paratext—that Carrington openly acknowledged it in each copy he sold was in conflict with the narrative of secrecy his publication crafted.

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<sup>95</sup> Gregory Mackie's study of the extensive body of posthumous Wildean forgeries (published in June 2019), which positions them as a form of 'fan fiction,' was not available at the time of writing. Gregory Mackie, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

<sup>96</sup> Boroughs, 'Oscar Wilde's Translation of Petronius,' p. 9.

<sup>97</sup> Charles Carrington, *The Satyricon of Petronius: A New Translation with Introduction and Notes*, quoted in Boroughs, 'Oscar Wilde's Translation of Petronius,' p. 10.

Wilde's posthumous reputation was exploited by publishers such as Carrington, but Beardsley was perhaps the decadent artist most prolifically forged by his publishers. Smithers, who was especially close to Beardsley, was aware that his star illustrator was terminally ill and, James G. Nelson suggests, may have been preparing William T. Horton to take over in his stead.<sup>98</sup> After Beardsley's death, Smithers, in financial straits, produced pirated editions of his works (including the 1907 unexpurgated text of *Venus and Tannhäuser*), and sold Beardsley forgeries (most of which were produced by the barrister John A. Beck).<sup>99</sup> Since Smithers owned the original zinc blocks used to print Beardsley's drawings, he could employ these to create pen-and-ink forgeries by copying from the original blocks.<sup>100</sup> Individual elements of Beardsley's illustrations could be copied and combined with others to create an apparently new work built from the basic elements of the originals.

The illustration often referred to as 'Adoramus' demonstrates these reprographic processes (Figure 5.5). 'Adoramus' presents itself as a suppressed illustration to *Lysistrata* (conveniently ignoring that the illustrations Smithers actually published for the play were themselves sexually explicit) and shows a kneeling woman burying her face in the balloon-like testicles of a massively endowed young Spartan. The forged picture's visual antecedents are clearly scattered throughout the *Lysistrata* images. The young man is transparently a reverse copy of the Spartan herald in 'The Examination of the Herald' (1896); in 'Adoramus' he has a black robe rather than the white of Beardsley's original. The woman is a more hybrid figure: her torso seems to be a mirror image of Lampito's body in 'The Toilet of Lampito' (1896), albeit with greater emphasis on her exposed breast (which may have been copied from 'Cinesias Entreating Myrrhina to Coition,' 1896); her gartered stockings also draw on 'The Toilet of Lampito;' her hair is a modified version of one of the two women in 'Two

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<sup>98</sup> Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents*, p. 102.

<sup>99</sup> Nelson, *Publisher to the Decadents*, p. 277.

<sup>100</sup> Linda Zatlín, *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 2 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 446.





**Figure 5.5**

'Adoramus,' *Lysistrata*: Aubrey Beardsley (Vienna: Privately Printed, 1905).  
Steven Halliwell Collection.

Athenian Women in Distress' (1896). While the figures of 'Adoramus' may be superficially Beardsleyan, a closer examination reveals that the facial features are less polished, and the genital details do not match the other *Lysistrata* illustrations. Despite the clear signs of forgery, however, this image is significant because of the ways in which it plays on popular conceptions of Beardsley's sexually explicit work and uses this reputation to legitimise itself. It at once sells itself as an erotic commodity and solidifies Beardsley's reputation as a producer of such material.

These forgeries seem to have achieved a wide audience to the extent that even some modern writers cite them as authentic. Timon Screech's 1999 book on *shunga* art, for instance, in addition to claiming erroneously that all the *Lysistrata* illustrations remained unpublished, uses 'Adoramus' to portray Beardsley's erotica as fundamentally misogynist.<sup>101</sup> This misreading of the Beardsley canon is indicative of the tendency for forgeries to highlight 'lewd or simpering sexuality, as if each forger was intent on capitalising upon Beardsley's supposedly wicked work.'<sup>102</sup> Decadent publishers could use such forgeries to target specific markets, continuing to profit from a scandalous writer or artist's novelty even after death. These scandalous faux-decadent commodities continue to shape reception of the movement in the present day, highlighting their publishers' success in shaping the public narrative of the fin de siècle to maximise sales. In perhaps an ironic echo of decadent artificiality, the knowing artificiality of these decadent fakes helps to curate a mythicised reputation for their subjects—the decadent forgery becomes part of the decadent project.

Nichols' *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* (1920) is perhaps the most tonally consistent Beardsley forgery even though the assembled fifty illustrations are quite divergent in style. The mere act of presenting them together as a single book transforms the individual images into a collective whole (in much the same way that decadent interior designers created unified

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<sup>101</sup> Timon Screech, *Sex and the Floating World: Erotic Images in Japan 1700-1820* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999, repr. 2009), p. 189.

<sup>102</sup> Zatlin, *Catalogue Raisonné*, Volume 2, p. 447.

interior identities). Each image is preceded by a title page which includes the claim that the image is ‘*Hitherto unpublished.*’<sup>103</sup> While this no doubt served to obscure the deception at work in marketing *Fifty Drawings*, it also has a social purpose. Much like the dedication mechanisms found in decadent texts (see Chapter 4.2), Nichols’ distribution of apparently private artworks invites the viewer into a social realm of select connoisseurs. This sense of community may have been based on a façade, but it played into decadent social posturing. Nichols’ editorial decision to include a portrait of Oscar Wilde amongst the forgeries is especially telling (Figure 5.6). This image uses the visual iconography of Salome to play on the popularly conceived connection between playwright and illustrator—the painting hung on Wilde’s wall in this picture clearly features one of the demonic pierrot-figures from ‘The Toilet of Salome—I.’ Nichols creates a false social artefact, which in turn creates a shared sense of decadent identity—his customers can become a part of the network by buying the book.

Decadent forgeries, however, are not necessarily at odds with the artistic movement which they ape. Forgery does not simply sell an idea of decadence—it creates an expansive pseudo-canon which plays on the movement’s cultural capital. The emphasis on re-building the canon of literature places simulation and copying at the heart of the decadents’ creative ideologies. *A Rebours*, for instance, is fundamentally concerned with establishing a decadent canon, and Huysmans devotes three whole chapters of the novel (Chapters 4, 13 and 14) to detailing Des Esseintes’ preferred reading matter. The novel at once draws on the transgressive connotations of the texts with which Des Esseintes stocks Fortenay, but also imparts an aura of transgression through the very act of listing. If, as John Guillory observes, the canon served the ‘historical function of distributing, or regulating access to, the forms of

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<sup>103</sup> Harry Sidney Nichols, *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: H. S. Nichols, 1920).



**Figure 5.6**

'Oscar Wilde,' *Fifty Drawings by Aubrey Beardsley* (New York: H. S. Nichols, 1920).  
Steven Halliwell Collection.

cultural capital,' Huysmans changes the terms of cultural capital.<sup>104</sup> The list-like structure of *A Rebours* allows it to function as the catalogue for an ideal decadent library. He dismisses the traditionally vaunted writers of the classical world: he paints Virgil, for instance, as 'one of the most appalling pedants and one of the most deadly bores that Antiquity ever produced.'<sup>105</sup> Des Esseintes instead idealises Lucan's 'enamelled and jewelled verse' (though he disdains the content), and the satires of Petronius (29). Huysmans' list of suggested reading is a gesture of appreciation for the ethos of these classical texts, but it also represents a rejection of the literature that society deems worthy; he establishes a decadent canon which can inspire a network of rebellious readers and writers. Imitation, and by extension forgery, of both style and message thus lies at the heart of decadence.

In his self-conscious borrowing, Wilde seems to have been aware of the importance of copying within decadent frames of culture, and there is an underlying assumption that his reader is aware of this borrowing. It is playful rather than hostile; the source becomes a staging point for decadent re-imaginings. Wilde may have popularised the theories of people like Pater through his lecture tours and writings, but, rather than vulgarising aesthetic theory, he gave it new life. The quasi-vampiric mechanisms of decadent artistic self-replication create a community united by its shared source texts. For Potolsky, the decadent vision of community was seen as 'a dispersal phenomenon arising out of discrete moments of artistic production and reception, an almost utopian sense of belonging forged across space and time.'<sup>106</sup> Decadent writing itself could be seen as a constant mediation of the act of reception: the alternative canon is given force through quotation, allusion and copying. Indeed, Robert Macfarlane argues that the very

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<sup>104</sup> John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. vii.

<sup>105</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature (A Rebours)*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 27. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>106</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 9.

possibility of literary originality, and therefore of literary plagiarism, depends upon the assumption of the possibility of property in language. The possibility of property in language depends in turn upon the possibility of drawing a boundary around the individual mind; of delimiting what originates from inside that mind, and therefore belongs to it, and what does not.<sup>107</sup>

By drawing from a shared countercanon, decadent writers implicitly refute the privatisation of language. Even if publishers like Nichols and Carrington did not share this philosophy, they inadvertently enter into the social dialogues of decadent plagiarism through the forgeries they commissioned and sold. Forgeries of decadent art enter into this mimetic literary ecosystem and become marketable decadent commodities.

### 5.7 A case study in co-production

While most late-Victorian publishers will have found it beneficial to engage with their writers on a personal level, it is Smithers who seems to have fitted most comfortably into social networks. He frequented decadent haunts with his writers and shared in their alcoholic and drug-induced pleasures (see Chapter 2.4). He was compatible with the decadent social realm and, in contemporary letters, he is presented as being more of a fellow decadent than a business man. Wilde, writing to Reggie Turner in 1897, characterised the publisher with an overtly decadent encomium:

he is usually in a large straw hat, has a blue tie fastened with a diamond brooch of the impurest water—or perhaps wine, as he never touches water: it goes to his head at once. His face, clean-shaven as befits a priest who serves at the altar whose God is Literature, is wasted and pale—not with poetry, but with poets, who, he says, have wrecked his life by insisting on publishing with him. He loves fine editions, especially of women: little girls are his passion. He is the most learned erotomaniac in Europe. He is also a delightful companion, and a dear fellow, very kind to me. (*Letters*, 924)

By emphasising Smithers' clothing, Wilde characterises him as something of a dandy (straw boaters had been a calling card of Whistler's dandiacal self-fashioning). He is positioned in the liminal space between the holy and the impure—Wilde treats him as a living paradox whose bibliophilia is a form of religion. Perhaps as a tribute to his purposefully illicit

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<sup>107</sup> Robert Macfarlane, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 67.

catalogue, the letter also highlights Smithers' fascination with sex and sexuality. Underneath the Wildean witticisms, however, lies a portrait of Smithers as an artist of networks, reminiscent of Le Gallienne's portrayal of Lane in *The Romantic '90s*. There is something of a barb in the analysis that Smithers has been wasted away 'not with poetry, but with poets;' Wilde may even be suggesting that he lacks a sufficiently aesthetic engagement with the works he publishes. Wilde's bon mot, however, also attests to Smithers' close relationship with decadents in the social sphere. His amicability was part of his commercial success, winning him the friendship of potentially marketable authors.

The letters Beardsley sent to Smithers while he was writing *Venus and Tannhäuser* are testament to the strength of their relationship. Like Le Gallienne writing to Murray about *The Book-Bills of Narcissus*, the letters address business-like concerns such as sending copies of illustrations for printing. But these letters are markedly less formal than those exchanged between Le Gallienne and Murray, and it is significant that Beardsley also felt comfortable sharing radical thoughts—potentially commercially risky artistic decisions—with his publisher. The unexpurgated text of *Venus and Tannhäuser* is certainly experimental in its approach to form, with frequent digressions and extended footnotes, and Beardsley's letters suggest that he had more elaborate plans in line. A letter written on 27<sup>th</sup> March, 1896 suggests that 'Chapter 10 will consist of pictures.'<sup>108</sup> A letter written on April 26 declared 'I have also written a little of the "Chronicles" and have a good idea for a story to be told by Mrs Marsuple, in which Hop-o'-my-thumb is the hero' (126). There seems to be no extant evidence of the Chronicles, and Beardsley did not write Mrs Marsuple's story, but these letters show that he intended to play with the narrative conventions of his novel. In outlining prospective literary innovations to Smithers, Beardsley was clearly relying on a commonality of understanding between himself and his publisher. Of course, friendship only went so far

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<sup>108</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *The Letters of Aubrey Beardsley*, eds. Henry Maas, J. L. Duncan and W. G. Good (Oxford: Plantin, 1970, repr. 1990), p. 120. All further references are to this edition and are given in the text.



and Smithers did not fulfil Beardsley's final request to 'destroy *all* copies of *Lysistrata* and bad drawings [...] By all that is holy *all* obscene drawings' (439). Instead, he continued to capitalise upon his dead friend's scandalous reputation and even sold facsimiles of Beardsley's deathbed letter to collectors along with prints of the *Lysistrata* illustrations.<sup>109</sup>

Smithers' refusal to destroy Beardsley's pornographic works highlights another function of the decadent publisher: the conserver of decadent legacies. While Smithers was no doubt chiefly motivated by profit, his publications preserved the memory of his social networks. Herein lies the crux of the publisher's position between the social and economic realms. In selling a vision of decadence created by friends and colleagues, publishers manufactured a sense of the decadent milieu for late-Victorian consumers. In *The Romantic '90s*, Le Gallienne problematises the overarching vision of the fin de siècle:

It is always as misleading as it is tempting to compress a period into a formula, and to find for it a "spirit" in which its expressive figures are supposed to participate, to bear the seal of it, so to say, upon their foreheads. In spite of the great diversity of personalities and ideals, social and artistic "messages" and "movements," that were so actively going their several ways in those many-coloured energetic years, "the '90s" are usually spoken of as if they had only one colour: the "yellow" '90s, or the "naughty" '90s, or the "decadent" '90s. (*Romantic '90s*, 162)

His analysis of the decade is no doubt accurate, but he ignores his own role in creating this vision of the naughty, yellow nineties. As Lane's reader, a newspaper reviewer and prolific writer, Le Gallienne was instrumental in producing the texts which defined the decadents, and in perpetuating their self-created myths. Publishers thus provided the cornerstone of decadent sociability; Le Gallienne even argues that 'one might almost say that [the decadents] had nothing in common but—a publisher' (163). And yet sharing a publishing house provided a framework for a collective business identity that allowed the decadents to sell their works to the consuming market. Publishers helped to create an audience in front of whom their writers could perform their identities and solidify their shared and individual

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<sup>109</sup> Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, 'Sartorial Obsessions: Beardsley and Masquerade,' *Haunted Texts: Studies in Pre-Raphaelitism*, ed. David Latham (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), p. 178.



brands. The relationships concretised by the books that were produced suggest that publishers acted as facilitators for the phenomenon of decadent sociability.

Publishers were organising figures in the decadent social world, offering financial capital which attracted writers. But this perhaps undervalues the agency of the decadents themselves. By interacting with their publishers on a (relatively) equal basis and by wilfully taking part in the process of commodification, writers fashioned the sociability of decadent publishing. As this chapter has shown, decadent writers are best understood as active participants in the business of writing.

## Conclusion

My dearest Bobbie, Bosie has insisted on stopping here for sandwiches. He is quite like a narcissus—so white and gold. I will come either Wednesday or Thursday night to your rooms. Send me a line. Bosie is so tired: he lies like a hyacinth on the sofa, and I worship him.

You dear boy. Ever yours

OSCAR<sup>1</sup>

Wilde wrote this short letter to his friend and former lover Robert Ross in 1892 while staying at the Hotel Palace Royal in Kensington. It encapsulates many of the thematic strands which characterise decadent material sociability. Bosie has visited Wilde in order to consume sandwiches with his lover; the playwright compares Bosie to flowers, drawing on their function as dandiacal signifiers; Wilde plans to visit Ross's personal interior space later in the week. It is a personal letter, composed in the semi-private space of Wilde's hotel room, but it invites Ross into this intimately private world. There is none of the jovial competitive spirit that characterises public-sphere displays of decadent friendship (such as the rowdy *Yellow Book* dinner). Instead, there is an affectionate familiarity. Nonetheless, the language Wilde chooses to depict Bosie has an undeniably performative quality. Tellingly, the flowers with which he compares the young man have classical (and homoerotic) associations: Narcissus who died staring at his own reflection is essentially self-martyred through an appreciation of his own beauty and Hyacinth was Apollo's male lover. These mythological references presumably draw on the trappings of Oxford Hellenism to emphasise the erotic subtext of the letter. As with his green carnation buttonhole, Wilde sends social signals to the initiated (in this case his friend) through his use of a decadent social language. The materiality of the letter, the paper and ink of which it is composed, becomes part of its currency: it is above all else an emotional artefact which fosters decadent intimacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde*, eds. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Fourth Estate, 2000), p. 526.

Wilde's letter engages with the forms of social discourse which this thesis analyses: it exemplifies the connections between the social, the material and the decadent group identity. The spatiality of the hotel room, which is at once public and private, the social codes that function as signifiers for the initiated, the intentional distancing from the moralistic gaze of the bourgeois establishment are all central to my discussion of decadent sociability. Wilde's letter demonstrates how the socio-professional interactions of the decadents create an artistic space where decadent sociability can grow, and the allusions to things in his letter (sandwiches, flowers, furniture) become symbolic tools of decadent social identity. In self-consciously cultivating an association between self and object, the decadents make their sociability as much about the relationships between people and things as it is about the relationships between people. This makes material culture a powerful vehicle for decadent discourses of community. Using the same things as their peers creates a shared performance of taste; as a collective material display, it anchors an individual decadent identity at the same time as it reinforces a shared identity in the public consciousness. The interplay between the group and the individuals who make it up is integral to the decadent social performance: Wilde's social network emerges clearly in his letter. The decadents are a group who broadly share an ethos of contrarianism and an identifiable aesthetic while nonetheless remaining defiantly individualistic. This paradoxical alliance between individualism and communality is central to understanding the social and material dynamics of decadent circles.

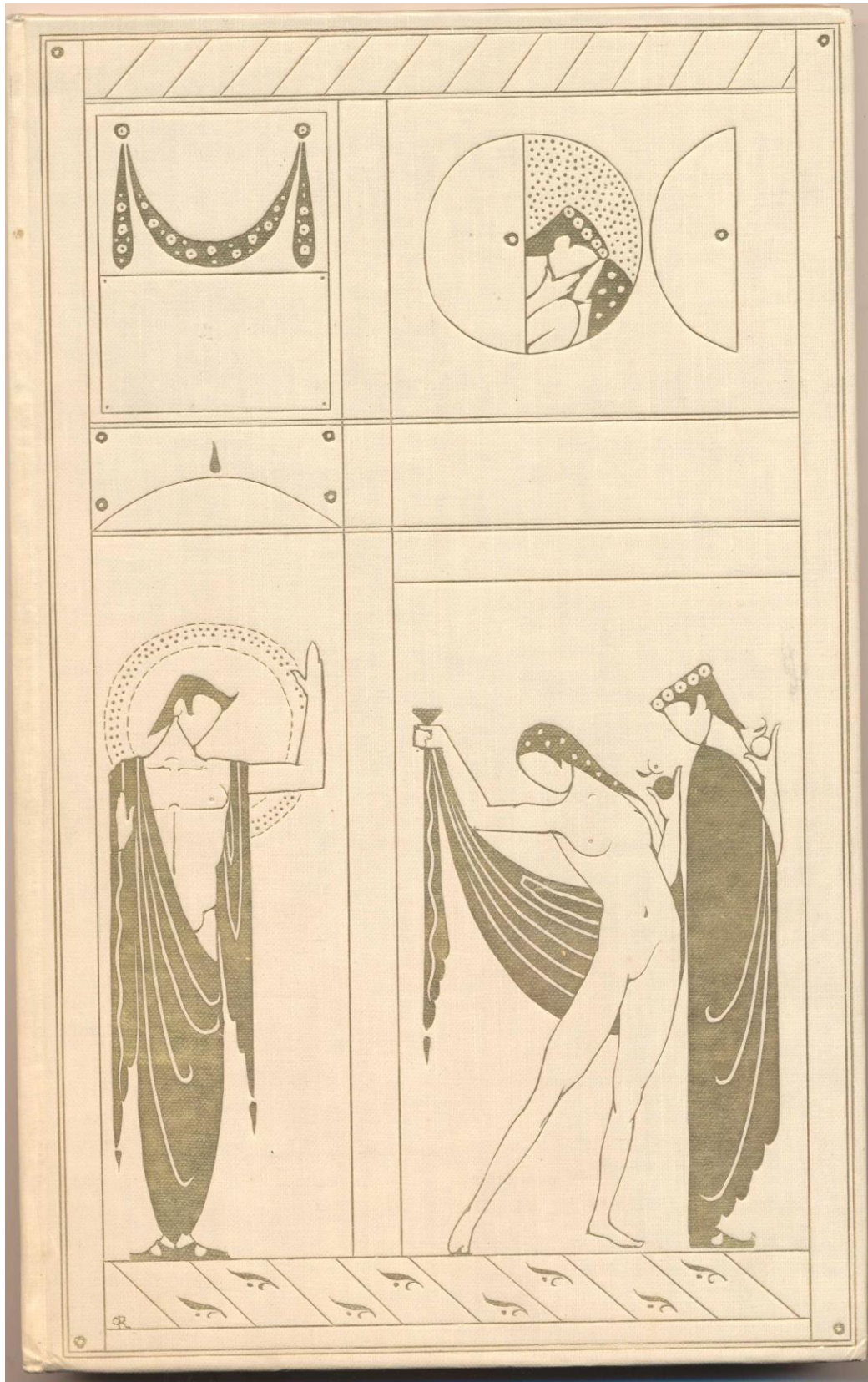
The material artefacts produced by the decadents ultimately become a means of preserving the legacy of their sociability. By their very nature, the mechanisms of interactions are fleeting. Like the music which dandies loved, conversation exists in the moment and then is gone. Decadent memoirs represent an attempt to concretise past friendships by capturing key moments of the decadents' social performances. As a collection of anecdotes, *The Romantic '90s* makes no claims to be anything more than a subjective set of recollections, but

its physical existence frames the memorialising of Le Gallienne's networks. Likewise, Charles Ricketts' cover design for his *Oscar Wilde: Recollections* (1932, Figures 6.1 and 6.2) represents the visual strategies of commemorative materiality in post-Victorian decadent memoirs. The elegance of the cover makes the book into a form of reliquary, providing a luxuriously aesthetic container for the social recollections within. Ricketts' lavishly designed cover recalls his design for the binding of Wilde's poem *The Sphinx* (1894): the main body is a field of ivory white with decorative figures picked out in gilt. The faceless group of Hellenic revellers seemingly draws on the cultural currency of Oxford Hellenism amongst Wilde's circle (the Grecian style hints at the homosexual community of which he was a part); the spiritual overtones of Ricketts' iconography (the man standing nearest the spine on both the front and back covers has a halo) portray Wilde as an almost saint-like character who can declare 'Art like religion should be a mystery.'<sup>2</sup> The figures combine signifiers of both Christianity and paganism: one raises a hand in benediction, or blessing; one lifts a *kylix* (an ancient Greek cup). The style of decoration plays into Ricketts' life-writing strategy by foregrounding a specific version of his friendship with Wilde. He claims that the fictional French writer Jean Paul Raymond (the pseudonym under which he writes *Recollections*) befriended Wilde on the Riviera, but the book clearly draws on Ricketts' friendship and sympathy with his subject. The materiality of such decadent social artefacts allows them to outlast the initial moment of social performance and preserve the idea of the decadent network.

To uncover the nuances of decadence, Decadence Studies needs to take account of the place of materiality. As this thesis demonstrates, the decadents were deeply invested in late-Victorian material culture both as producers of art objects (books, illustrations and paintings) and as consumers (clothes, cigarettes, perfumes, comestibles). Their things and commodities

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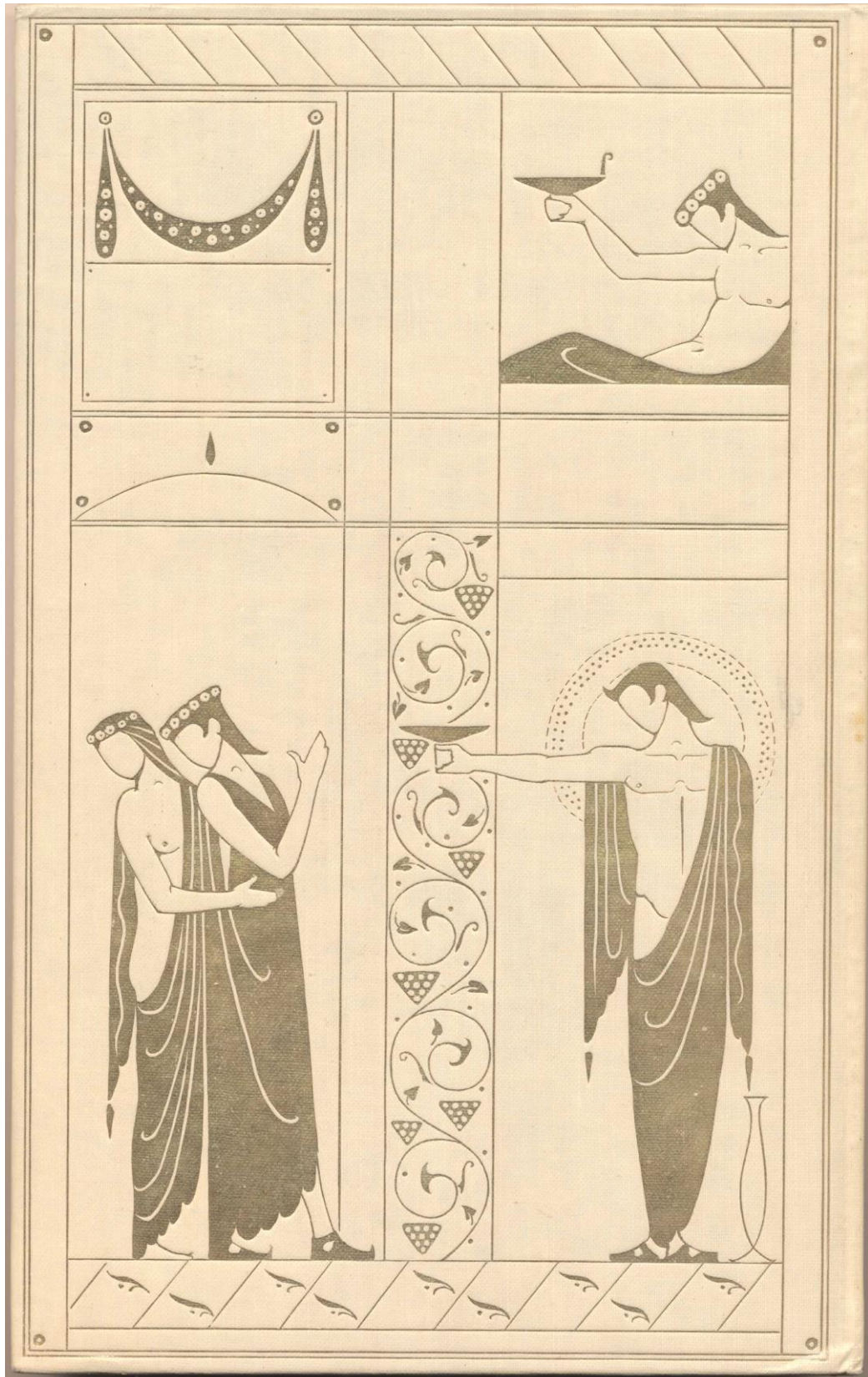
<sup>2</sup> Charles Ricketts, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections* (London: The Nonesuch Press, 1932), p. 34.



**Figure 6.1**

Charles Ricketts, Cover design, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections*, front  
(London: The Nonesuch Press, 1932).  
Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.





**Figure 6.2**

Charles Ricketts, Cover design, *Oscar Wilde: Recollections*, back  
(London: The Nonesuch Press, 1932).

Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library.

were not passing concerns: they were integral to the mechanisms of decadent sociability. By engaging with things enthusiastically, and then sharing this enthusiasm with their fellows, decadents made things the cornerstone of their group identity. They idealised the commodification of things and the thingness of commodities, fashioning a form of material culture that is specifically decadent.

This thesis demonstrates that communal and individual contributions to the material dimensions of decadent sociability are fundamental to its ethos. My critical position lies between the traditional isolationist model and Potolsky's works on a more collective movement: decadent networking revolves around people coming together as a group, but individuals, the constituent parts making up the group, shape the nature of decadent sociability. In adopting a materialist analysis of decadence and by underpinning it with archival work on letters, images and writings, I offer an alternative critical narrative grounded in the literary and artistic artefacts produced by the decadents. My discourse of connectivity and the objects which facilitate it offers a new perspective on decadent practices at the fin de siècle.

Decadence should be approached through interdisciplinary methodologies, treating literature, art history, book history and cultural history not as isolated disciplines but as part of an all-inclusive reading strategy. This has not been part of our narrative of nineteenth-century decadence. Ellis saw the 'style of Decadence as one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give way to the independence of the page.' Decadent studies must reverse the process and analyse the fragments of decadent culture to restore a critical understanding of the decadent whole.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Havelock Ellis, 'A Note on Paul Bourget,' quoted in Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 2.

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## **Exhibition**

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