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Decadent Experience: Conservatism and Modernity

ALEX MURRAY

EDITH Cooper (1862–1913), the younger half of the aunt and niece who published as Michael Field, wrote in *Works and Days* on New Year's Eve, 1893: "I do not yet realise where modernity is taking me."[1] Among decadent writers, she was far from alone in expressing anxiety at the dramatic social and technological flux of the fin de siècle. Along with her aunt, Katharine Bradley (1846–1914), she would use a wide range of literary forms to capture, but also to critique, the experience of modernity. Yet there was little consistency either to that experience or to the literary forms that decadent writers deployed to capture it. Defining the nature of that experience and how decadent literature might respond to it is the task of this essay. Our understanding of decadence has largely glossed over the ways in which it emerges out of the "destruction of experience" that, for Giorgio Agamben, is the constituent feature of modernity. Decadent writers, I argue, responded in two very different ways (often simultaneously): either by reveling in the immediacy of sensation or by valorizing the transmission of knowledge from the past. Of these two, the former has dominated our understanding of decadence, but the latter is just as significant. This latter strain, which I will articulate as a conservative one, will be my primary focus here as I offer two examples of writers whose work emphasized the power of tradition for confronting the experience of modernity: Lionel Johnson and Michael Field.

One of the challenges in recovering the conservative mode of experience I am outlining here is that it requires scholars of decadence to reorient our frameworks for making sense of the social and cultural politics of decadent writers. As a field, we enthusiastically embrace our writers' transgressive attitudes and insouciant style. We happily align ourselves with Lord Illingworth in Oscar Wilde's *A Woman of No Importance* (1893), who tells Gerald: "The future belongs to the dandy. It is the exquisites who are going to rule."[2] But the dandy is, arguably,

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a conservative figure; Charles Baudelaire argued that dandyism emerged in, and was threatened by, the rise of democracy, being "the last spark of heroism amidst decadence," an endangered species in the face of "the rising tide of democracy, which invades and levels everything." This culture of homogeneity was "daily overwhelming these last representatives of human pride, and pouring floods of oblivion upon the footprints of these stupendous warriors."[3] Decadence, as it emerges in Baudelaire, is antidemocratic, an expression of disgust at the rise of bourgeois values and the destruction of tradition. Yet how we read this critique of modernity is a vexed question. Amanda Anderson argues that Victorian studies, as a field, has used the putative split between "bourgeois modernity" and "aesthetic modernity" as a structuring device. The field has tended to associate "critique" with a cultural attack on the Enlightenment, one embodied in Baudelaire, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Wilde. "The tendency," Anderson writes, "to substitute aesthetic modernity for philosophical/political modernity has governed" much of Victorian studies, accompanied with a "significant tendency to associate 'The Victorian,' whatever that might mean, with Enlightenment modernity in its more blinkered aspects."[4] Exemplary in this challenge to bourgeois modernity is Wilde, who has been annexed to a liberatory, deconstructive model of critique. Yet critique can be just as often conservative in nature, employed for the express purpose of challenging progressive social change, valorizing instead the past, the nation, and tradition as bulwarks against modernity. My goal here is to develop a more variegated understanding of this latter, decadent critique of modernity. I wish to find a framework that allows us to grasp both the transformative potential of modernity for decadent writers as well as their reactionary responses to democracy and liberalism, and their investments more specifically in the conventional nationalisms produced in times of war.

1. Modernity, Aesthetics, Experience

Conservatism has emerged in recent years as an unlikely principle on which to build a new model of literary critique. In *Against Democracy* (2012), Simon During has argued that "conservatism happens, then, whenever the past tribunalizes the present and, by the same stroke, when a check to progressivism is administered. What remains of strong critical thought outside the reform/refusal division—in other words critique—today is *in* conservatism conceived of like this."[5] Literary criticism, in During's account, conserves the conditions under which we can

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develop and maintain shared, collective experience. His goal is to return to the foundations of modern literary criticism in the work of F. R. Leavis, I. A. Richards, and T. S. Eliot in an attempt to outline how "English studies could sharpen its opposition to the destabilizing and debasing cultural consequences of industrialization, militarism, modernization, and democracy by appealing not to conventional and bankrupt categories like civilization, wisdom, and gentlemanly cultivation, but to what I have been thinking of as the elemental particle of being-in-the-world under democracy."[6] The elemental particle is experience itself, yet there is a difficulty in placing decadence and aestheticism within During's narrative, and that is the hostility that these three foundational figures of English studies harbored toward these movements. If Leavis valued literature for its ability to foster experience, then the aesthete failed to cultivate genuine sensual experience. For Leavis, Walter Pater "lacks all sensuous vitality." Where immediacy of experience should be the goal, Pater's prose was far from it; his style, "cloistral, mannered, urbane, consciously subtle and sophisticated and actually monotonous and irresponsive in tone, sentiment and movement (the eyelids always a little weary)—is a way of giving force to the judgment that for the Victorian aesthete art is something that gets between him and life."[7] Leavis's hostility was prefigured by Richards, who in *Principle of Literary Criticism* (1924) took aim at the post-Kantian tendency to declare that aesthetic experience was of a different order than other sorts of experience: "This view of the arts as providing a private heaven for aesthetes is . . . a great impediment to the investigation of their value. The effects upon the general attitudes of those who accept it uncritically are also often regrettable; while the effects upon literature and the arts have been noticeable, in a narrowing and restriction of the interests active, in preciousness, artificiality and spurious aloofness."[8] While Richards cites Vernon Lee as one example of such a tendency, it is clear, as Richard North notes, that Wilde and Pater are hovering in the background.[9] Eliot, in his curmudgeonly essay on Arnold and Pater (1930), took aim at the very principle of aestheticism, noting that Pater's celebration of art for art's sake "propagated some confusion between life and art which is not wholly irresponsible for some untidy lives," and that the principles of aesthetic autonomy might help keep an artist on the straight and narrow, but the "theory" of art for art's sake "never was and never can be valid for the spectator, reader or auditor."[10] The animosity toward decadence and aestheticism demonstrated by these influential figures in the establishment of English studies is, to a large extent, based on a

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willful misreading of aesthetic individualism as a diminution of experience. Yet experience was at the heart of decadence, and to understand how experience functions we must be alive to the two, often contradictory, forms of decadent experience.

English, frustratingly, uses the single word *experience* to express two radically different concepts: experience as a sensation (reading this essay is a nauseating experience), and experience as accumulated knowledge (my experience makes me perfectly qualified to nauseate you). German has no such problem, with *Erlebnis* used for particular experiences and sensations, and *Erfahrung* for the collective knowledge gained from experiences and transmitted through cultural memory and practice. English forces its users to muddle through, context providing the grounds on which to identify the two very different forms of experience conveyed by the same word. Raymond Williams would in *Keywords* (1976) designate these simply as "experience (present)" and "experience (past)," noting that the twentieth century saw a widening gulf between the two: "At one extreme experience (present) is offered as the necessary (immediate and authentic) ground for all (subsequent) reasoning and analysis. At the other extreme, experience (once the present participle not of 'feeling' but of 'trying' or 'testing' something) is seen as the product of social conditions or of systems of belief or of fundamental systems of perception, and thus not as material for truths but as evidence of conditions or systems which by definition it cannot itself explain."[11] For Walter Benjamin, modernity was characterized by the erosion of experience past (*Erfahrung*), as the guiding forces of tradition could no longer provide protection from the chaos of the present. Putatively a study of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, Benjamin's influential essay "The Storyteller" (1936) anatomizes the ways in which modern life destroys communicable experience. Benjamin's famous example was the dramatic changes wrought by the First World War: "never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power."[12] Constant change means that the accumulated knowledge communicated from generation to generation is no longer able to help us make sense of life. Yet, as Benjamin notes, the Great War was not the beginning but rather the acceleration of this process. Where the moralist and the politician would be eager to condemn this erosion of the "communicability of experience," Benjamin warns that "nothing would be more fatuous than to want to see in it merely

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a 'symptom of decay.'" Rather, the destruction of experience is "a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history, a concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a new beauty in what is vanishing."[13] Whereas previously the parable and the fable communicated collective experience, the ferocious and irrepressible forward movement of modernity was destroying the possibilities of transmitting and perpetuating collective cultural knowledge. For Benjamin this "new beauty" might also translate into the grounds on which a "coming philosophy" might be able to create new modes of experience and foster new forms of knowledge.

In *Infancy and History* (1978), Giorgio Agamben expanded Benjamin's discussion of the destruction of experience, making it the inevitable outcome of the conditions of modernity, whereby there are no longer any beneficial or productive fruits to the accumulation of experiences that make up a life: "Modern man makes his way home in the evening wearied by a jumble of events, but however entertaining or tedious, unusual or commonplace, harrowing or pleasurable they are, none of them will have become experience." Experience (past) has been destroyed or, more specifically, "expropriated," a singular adjective to use in this context, suggesting as it does the deprivation of property. Experience (past) in modernity exists as a form of knowledge removed or "expropriated" from language and the traditions that once sustained it. The result is that all our experiences (present) can no longer inform, and be informed by, experience (past). Rather, we face the imposition of hermeneutic frameworks that, in all their rational logic, are remote from lived experience. The result, Agamben argues, is that "experience" (past) "has its necessary correlation not in knowledge, but in authority." Power structures knowledge (Foucault is in the background of Agamben's work here), with the result that at the present time "all authority is founded on what cannot be experienced." The structures of knowledge that govern how we make sense of the world are then removed from our everyday experiences of that world, such that we remain oblivious to an authority we are subjected to but to which we do not connect our subjective experience.[14]

Agamben's account of the destruction of experience identifies the fin de siècle as a crucial juncture where the crisis of the experiential manifests itself in literary form, because "a good part of turn-of-the-century culture, including poetry, set out to capture this lived experience as introspectively revealed in its pre-conceptual immediacy" (40). This attempt to capture the immediacy of sensation in poetry began, Agamben argues,

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with Baudelaire who, "expropriated from experience[,] exposes himself to the force of shock." Shock, the dizzying sensation of life in urban modernity, is at the core of Baudelaire's notion of experience as sensation. Modernity had destroyed the Paris of his youth, leading him to lament in "Le Cygne": "The old Paris is gone (the form a city takes / More quickly shifts, alas, than does the mortal heart)."[15] The destruction of the past left the subject adrift, buffeted by sensation and shock. However, for Agamben, instead of producing a new form of knowledge and understanding, the shock of modernity merely produced hopeless alienation: "Estrangement, which removes from the most commonplace objects their power to be experienced, thus becomes the exemplary procedure of a poetic project which aims to make of the Inexperiencible the new 'lieu commun,' humanity's new experience. In this sense the *Fleurs du Mal* are proverbs of the inexperiencible."[16] Perhaps the consummate expression of Baudelaire's inexperiencible is the prose poem "L'étranger" from *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), which records a conversation between two men. The questioner interrogates the "enigmatical man," the "extraordinary stranger" who offers a series of negative responses to his enquires: he has no family, does not know his country, is estranged from beauty, hates gold. It is only to the final question—what do you love?—that he responds with enthusiasm: "I love the clouds . . . the clouds that pass . . . up there . . . up there . . . the wonderful clouds!"[17] The alienation of the stranger is hardly ameliorated by the transient, distant clouds. Their vague location—"là-bas" is a deictic term that, lacking context as this prose fragment does, remains opaque—makes them distant, seemingly as out of reach as the solid grounding that a family or a national identity might provide. With no tradition to fall back on, fleeting experience, from which the subject cannot develop knowledge, is all that remains. Baudelaire then establishes what will develop into one of the dominant decadent responses to the experience of modernity. Left without the surety of tradition, his poetic becomes about documenting the inexperiencible sensations of modernity.

2. Decadent Sensation

British decadence inherited from Baudelaire the shock of modernity, with a great many writers embracing the possibilities of sensation. The most important articulation of experience as key to decadence is Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873). In Pater's "golden book," as Wilde dubbed it,[18] we see a series of contradictory

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impulses in which one must yield to sensation yet also be guided by the past. In the book's conclusion, Pater clearly demarcates the two different versions of experience I outlined above: "Every moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or the sea is choicer than the rest; some mood of passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive for us,—for that moment only. Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end."[19] Living "for that moment only" must come at the expense of the knowledge that comes from accumulated experiences. To restrict knowledge to cultural authority, handed down from generation to generation, was to risk ossifying into predetermined patterns, which was, of course, anathema to Pater, for "our failure is to form habits."[20] As Kate Hext has argued, Pater's conclusion is marked by the influence of Hume's skeptical empiricism as Pater both embraces the possibilities that come from rejecting all a priori substances or structures that can give shape to the world, yet is troubled by the lack of coherence to the self that results from being buffeted by impression after impression.[21] Still, Pater's manifesto for a life of *Erlebnis*—experience as impression and sensation—also contains one of the great images of art as *Erfahrung*. Pater's celebrated description of Leonardo's *La Gioconda* identifies an alternative model of experience. One of the great feats of ekphrasis, Pater's Lady Lisa is the crystallization of history:

> All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there. . . . She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave. . . . The fancy of a perpetual life, sweeping together ten thousand experiences, is an old one; and modern thought has conceived the idea of humanity as wrought upon by, and summing up in itself, all modes of thought and life. Certainly Lady Lisa might stand as the embodiment of the old fancy, the symbol of the modern idea.[22]

The perpetual life of Lady Lisa is not so much vampiric as an expression of accumulated experiences. If art offers us a life of sensations and impressions, it is in part because it provides us with a concentrated conservation of experiences or collective cultural knowledge. As Hext writes, Pater's Lady Lisa is "the living body of humanity's history, and the spectator's organic connection with it."[23] The perpetual life that sweeps together ten thousand experiences can be read as part of Pater's esoteric reflection on Darwinian evolution. Carolyn Williams argues that in this image, we can see that Pater both "deeply understood and deeply feared

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Darwin's theory" and that he attempted to "neutralize its difference by figuring it merely as a modern version of an ancient belief in the transmigration of souls."[24] The image here of concentrated historical experience sits, perhaps, uncomfortably with the rejection in the conclusion of "the fruits of experience." As a work of art, *La Giaconda* offers us not experience as sensation but a delineation of myth that neutralizes the deeply unsettling consequences of Darwinian modernity. Pater then bequeaths to decadent writers two contradictory imperatives: (1) art offers a concentration of experience as sensation from which you should take pleasure, not knowledge, and (2) art offers a conservation of experiences that offers some ballast for the flux of modernity. Decadent writers inherited both of these understandings of experience, although the former is far more recognizable in decadent studies than the latter.

The decadent literature that follows Pater routinely explores the ways in which experience as sensation has become removed from overarching models of knowing. The exemplar here in a British context is Arthur Symons, whose poetry is a record of experience as fleeting impression and the mood of a moment. As he put it in "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893), decadent poetry was driven by "a desperate endeavor to give sensation, to flash the impression of the moment, to preserve the very heat and motion of life."[25] There is, of course, something paradoxical in the desire to preserve and communicate the impression of a moment, yet that communication is not in the service of a broader hermeneutic. In the history of philosophy, experience is often the foundation for empiricism and, accordingly, skepticism. It would, however, be misleading to suggest that the decadent quest for experience, for new impressions and sensations, was a sort of empiricism. Decadent writers, as a rule, had no desire to use their subjective experience as a means of confirming anything like a putative reality. Rather, they elevated art as the greatest concentration of experience. Symons was doubtful that experience could be a means to an end, a mode of pedagogy. This was particularly the case for artists who were constitutionally incapable of acquiring knowledge through experience. Symons's prime example of the dissolute artist incapable of learning was Paul Verlaine. As Symons declared in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), "to Verlaine, happily, experience taught nothing; or rather, it taught him only to cling the more closely to those moods in whose succession lies the more intimate part of our spiritual life." Symons later clarifies: "Verlaine may be said to have learnt nothing from experience, in the sense that he learnt everything direct from life, and without comparing

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day with day."[26] Verlaine's naïveté is key to his impressionism: the novelty of sensation requires the decadent to jettison the structures of experience: tradition, habit, ritual.

Oscar Wilde was not as absolute in his insistence on the novelty of experience and impression: for him experience could be both a Darwinian evolution of the imaginative faculty and the dead hand of conformism. This, of course, would be dependent on which particular version of experience Wilde was gesturing to at any one time. For instance, as Wilde's Gilbert puts it in "The Critic as Artist – Part II," to live in modernity it is essential to grasp that "it is not our own life that we live, but the lives of the dead, and the soul that dwells within us is no single spiritual entity." More than anything else, it is art that will "help us to leave the age in which we were born, and to pass into other ages, and find ourselves not exiled from their air. It can teach us how to escape from our experience, and to realise the experiences of those who are greater than we are." Gilbert goes on to offer a catalog of the various experiences to which literature offers us access, concluding that, if all are facilitated by the imaginative faculty, we must grasp that "the imagination is the result of heredity. It is simply concentrated race-experience."[27] Yet Wilde's evolutionary account of imagination as collective experience is premised on development and change, and it was curiosity and desire that were to be the engine of imaginative evolution. As Gilbert explains: "What is termed Sin is an essential element of progress. Without it the world would stagnate, or grow old, or become colourless. By its curiosity Sin increases the experience of the race. Through its intensified assertion of individualism, it saves us from monotony of type."[28] The implication here is that the proliferation of individual sensual experience results in a heterogeneity that will overcome the homogeneity of conformism. Yet this was not to say that experience was necessarily edifying or constructive; tradition or habit (experience past) was anathema to decadent individualism. As the narrator of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) explains:

> Experience was of no ethical value. It was merely the name men gave to their mistakes. Moralists had, as a rule, regarded it as a mode of warning, had claimed for it a certain ethical efficacy in the formation of character, had praised it as something that taught us what to follow and showed us what to avoid. But there was no motive power in experience. It was as little of an active cause as conscience itself. All that it really demonstrated was that our future would be the same as our past, and that the sin we had done once, and with loathing, we would do many times, and with joy.[29]

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Wilde is here seemingly rejecting the fruits of experience; if searching after new experiences and new sensations was to result merely in habit, then it was hardly going to be the catalyst for a new individualism. In this context our "sin" is to inherit from the past a stable set of moral values that would impede our ability—individual and collective—to find new modes of living. Yet experience could also be the ground on which a new ontological aestheticism could emerge. As the narrator of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* makes clear, the aim of the "new Hedonism" "was to be experience itself, and not the fruits of experience, sweet or bitter as they might be." The refusal to develop knowledge from experience required the new hedonist to live in a perpetual present, for "it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment."[30] Wilde's new hedonism was to be found by rejecting any lessons learnt from experience; refusing to impose any hermeneutic frame on sensation was success itself.

3. Conservative Experience

Turning from experience as sensation in Pater, Wilde, and Symons toward what I am labeling "conservative experience" in Lionel Johnson and Michael Field requires a few remarks on how I am framing conservatism. I am referring not to a strict ideological position on free trade or the size of the state, but to something more like what Raymond Williams called a "structure of feeling." Perhaps more precisely, I want to understand conservatism as an experience. Williams himself conceded that it was the more apposite term than "feeling" in his famous formulation, before discarding it: "An alternative definition would be structures of *experience*: in one sense the better and wider word, but with the difficulty that one of its senses has that past tense which is the most important obstacle to recognition of the area of social experience which is being defined. We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships."[31] While Williams abandoned the term *experience* because it didn't adequately allow for the emergence of new structures and our response to them, there is a value in understanding experience as such. Conservatism is a preeminent form of a structure of experience due to its deeply affective qualities, and the centrality of experience as inherited knowledge and practice goes to the heart of modern conservatism, and it has done so since the birth of that tradition with Edmund Burke. It is precisely because the British system of constitutional

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monarchy works and is known to work that it has such longevity. As Burke wrote in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790): "No experience has taught us that in any other course or method than that of an *hereditary crown* our liberties can be regularly perpetuated and preserved sacred as our *hereditary right*. An irregular, convulsive movement may be necessary to throw off an irregular, convulsive disease. But the course of succession is the healthy habit of the British Constitution."[32] But for the young men of the revolutionary societies of London, the stable experience of the social order was anathema: "it is vain to talk to them of the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, the fixed form of a Constitution whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience and an increasing public strength and national prosperity. They despise experience as the wisdom of unlettered men; and as for the rest, they have wrought under ground a mine that will blow up, at one grand explosion, all examples of antiquity, all precedents, charters, and acts of Parliament."[33] The valorization of experience in Burke is, however, not a reactionary attempt to return to a prerevolutionary world. As Frank Ankersmit argues, there is a profound difference between reactionaries and conservatives: whereas, after a traumatic event that has radically reoriented ways of life (i.e., the French Revolution), the reactionary will yearn for a return to the past, the conservative knows that there is no return. Ankersmit figures these as forms of desire: for the reactionaries, "the past is an object of the *desire of being*—they want to be(come) again what the past once was like. The conservatives, on the other hand, recognize that they are forever separated from the prerevolutionary past by the abyss between the two different historical or cultural identities. Their desire of the past can therefore only be a desire to know."[34] The decadent writers I am exploring here are aware there can be no return to the past; rather they wish to *know* the past, to mine it as a source of transcendent value that would help orient them in the fallen world of modernity. While my examples here are Lionel Johnson and Michael Field, the canon of British decadent conservatism is broad, including the arch antidemocratism of Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo), the curmudgeonly antimodernism of Arthur Machen, the nostalgic poetics of Louise Imogen Guiney, or the radical decadent conservativism of the firebrands who edited, and contributed to, the now-forgotten little magazines *The Whirlwind* (1891) and *The Senate* (1894–97). On the Continent the examples proliferate, with the medieval monasticism of late Huysmans, the nascent fascism of D'Annunzio's early fiction, or in Germany the *Volk* nationalism of Stefan George.

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The relative neglect of the conservative tradition within contemporary Victorian studies is therefore striking.

For a great number of decadent writers, their conservatism was intrinsically linked to questions of aesthetic judgment, or more precisely to what they perceived to be the poverty of contemporary art and literature when judged against the standards of the past. Lionel Johnson (1867–1902) was one of the more outspoken of the English antimoderns, declaring: "My sole days among the dead are the days passed among stillborn or moribund moderns, not the white days and shining nights free for the strong voices of the ancients in fame."[35] Johnson's reverence for the past was placed squarely in opposition to the literary modernity of his fellow decadents. After cataloging Elizabethan poets—minor and major—Johnson asks his reader, "Are you so intent upon the latest eccentricity of Paris, that you have no ears for these singers?"[36] Johnson was adamant that the impoverished state of contemporary English letters was a direct result of "too much ignorance of the past, an unreflecting concentration upon the present, and a morbid haste to anticipate the future." What Johnson is outlining here is his own conservatism as a mode of literary history, marked, as he puts it, by "humility, patience, reverence, three forms of one inestimable spirit."[37]

Johnson was famously dismissive of the strain of decadence that valorized the immediacy of experience. He derided Arthur Symons as "a slave to impressionism, whether the impression be precious or not."[38] The tendency of his poetic contemporaries to seek after intense and unique experiences that they could render in delicate verse was, for Johnson, a dereliction of aesthetic duty. Johnson mercilessly mocked the Symonsian school of impressionism in his short story "The Cultured Faun" (1891), in which he offered a formula for writing à la mode: "jumble all these 'impressions!' together, your sympathies and your sorrows, your devotion and your despair; carry them about with you in a state of fermentation, and finally conclude that life is loathsome yet that beauty is beatific." If his reader was to scoff at the simplicity of the impressionist's method, Johnson was insistent that this was all part of the ruse: "That is the charm of it, it shows your perfect simplicity, your chaste and catholic innocence. Innocence of course: beauty is always innocent, ultimately."[39] For Johnson the genuine, spiritual work of art, and of the artist, was antithetical to the fleeting experience of questing after new sensations.

Johnson's dismissive attitude to decadent writers of sensation and novelty was tied to the ways in which it was part and parcel of a desire

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to embrace an unknown future at the expense of the stable past. Johnson's anxiety over revolutionary modernity was captured most vividly in his dream-fugue "Dawn of Revolution" (1888), which imagined the febrile atmosphere at the beginning of an unnamed political insurrection. The speaker agonizingly asks:

What is the end? Nay! what know I,
With these drums thundering through mine ears,
Through the changed earth, the unchanging sky:
The wreck of immemorial years?

The answer is: "Liberty! for the end is come," yet the speaker has little confidence in the new dawn, this "sad birth through bitter stress, / And elemental misery / Of freedom's newfound righteousness."[40] The anxiety over the loss of historical knowledge and tradition emerges repeatedly in Johnson's work through the use of the term "immemorial." To designate something or someone immemorial is rather a paradox: if the years are immemorial, they are so old as to be beyond memory, no longer sustained through active recollection. Yet there is also the suggestion that the immemorial is so ingrained it has never been forgotten, and therefore there is no need to recall it. In Johnson's oeuvre, the word is predominantly used to designate antiquity of religion or the spirit of place: in "Ireland's Dead," the country is designated "Immemorial Holy Land"; in "A Dream of Youth," the young men, growing old, have their sorrow at the demise of youth ameliorated by the "charm of immemorial Law: / What we see now, the great dead saw"; in "The Church of a Dream," we find "one ancient Priest offers the Sacrifice, / Murmuring holy Latin immemorial"; In "Oxford," the city is "the fair, / The immemorial, and the ever young"; in "Cornwall," the county is home to "thine immemorial dead."[41]

To preserve the immemorial, it was essential to reject the immediacy of sensuous experience in favor of tradition. Penned in 1889, "Experience" was dedicated to George Arthur Greene, later a fellow member of the Rhymers' Club and vice-chairman of the Irish Literary Society in London.

THE burden of the long gone years: the weight,
The lifeless weight, of miserable things
Done long ago, not done with: the live stings
Left by old joys, follies provoking fate,
Showing their sad side, when it is too late:
Dread burden, that remorseless knowledge brings

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> To men, remorseful! But the burden clings:
> And that remorse declares that bitter state.
> Wisdom of ages! Wisdom of old age!
> Written, and spoken of, and prophesied,
> The common record of humanity!
> Oh, vain! The springtime is our heritage
> First, and the sunlight on the flowing tide:
> Then, that old truth's confirming misery.[42]

Being only twenty-two when he penned this sonnet, it is clear that Johnson speaks not of his own experience but of the accumulated knowledge bequeathed to him by tradition. The burden of "remorseless knowledge" engenders its own remorse. Try as one might to embrace the sunlight and flowing tide, the unerring truth of the burden of experience weighs heavily upon the speaker as a bitter misery. As Johnson's spirituality developed he began to see communing with the past as less of a burden and more of a liberation from the present. Johnson is ultimately able to turn the sensual experience of Pater into a form of conservative experience, as sensation becomes transhistorical communion. In Johnson's "Incense," the smell of heliotrope and mignonette are transformed from being symbols of modernity, as scent so often was for Symons, to the aroma of the ancients:

> A breath, a thought, a dream! Ah, what a choir
> Of long stilled voices: and of long closed eyes,
> What a light! So came, so mine heart's desire
> Came through the pinewood, where the sunlight dies
> To-night. Since now these fragrant memories
> Live, lives not also she, their soul of fire?[43]

Johnson's oneiric mysticism is a desire—reminiscent of Yeats's poetry of the period to embrace "the loveliness / That has long faded from the world"—an iteration of a conservative decadent rejection of modernity, mantled by the distant past.[44]

Johnson would turn to the past to confront so many of the experiences of modernity, including war. Nathan K. Hensley has recently reminded us that the Victorian period was one of "endless war," and that "the vexing fact of modern violence has haunted Victorian Studies since its inception."[45] If Victorian studies has remained willfully blind to the ubiquity of state-sanctioned violence, the study of decadence and aestheticism has, perhaps, been exemplary. One of the most turbulent events of the late-Victorian period was the second Anglo-Boer War, which broke out amidst jingoistic enthusiasm in October 1899 before

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ending, two years later, in the most humiliating, pyrrhic victory for the British. Perhaps no war before or since had been so widely supported by the public, which responded almost hysterically to the complicated mix of imperial hubris and anxiety it generated. M. Van Wyk Smith, in the only complete study of the poetry of the Boer War, argues that poems approving of the war can be divided as follows: "those imbued with the activist fervours of the 'Henley School'"; those "suffused with the exalted public school verities found in Sir Henry Newbolt's verse," and finally those "declaiming a crusading, vitalist doctrine of war." Van Wyk Smith argues that there was a "deep-seated antipathy between the activists and the aesthetes of the 1890s," suggesting that for Henley and other activist poets *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* "represented a decline in the quality of British civilization which was becoming all too noticeable in the wider field of international, commercial, military, and imperialist competition as well."[46] While the end point of decadence and aestheticism has been, and will continue to be, endlessly debated, whether it be Wilde's trials, the death of Dowson, Johnson, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper (Michael Field), or Symons, there is a strain of thinking that suggests the Boer War was the true end point. As Francis Gribble reflected in a review of Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen-Nineties* (1913), it was "the transition from the 'Yellow Book' to the Yellow Press; from 'Dorian Gray' to 'The Absent-minded Beggar,'" for the "brutal realities of the Boer War diverted men's admiration from the ideal of art for art's sake to that of fighting for fighting's sake."[47]

Yet the absolute opposition between the aesthetes of the 1890s and the "activist" poets who supported the imperial forces is problematic. There is a martial and patriotic strain in decadence and aestheticism that is somewhat neglected in criticism. It often manifested itself as a reverence for the valiant soldiers of older conflicts—such as the English Civil War, medieval battles, ancient Celtic clashes, or the imperial conquests of the Roman Empire—but it also appeared in fleeting responses to the conflict in South Africa. Michael Field has emerged in the twenty-first century as the epitome of queer decadent modernity. Embracing the pagan past, Bradley and Cooper developed a queer genealogy in their poetry, using the Sapphic and the Dionysian to articulate forms of queer and gender-transitive desire. Yet Field's antinomian approach to gender and sexuality did not translate into a socially progressive politics or into a radical cosmopolitanism. *Works and Days*, their compendious diary, is littered with snobbish dismissals and denigrations of working-class people and a thoroughly bourgeois approach to social propriety.

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Their sexuality and poetic performance of gender may have challenged the social mores of the fin de siècle, but in many respects they held the conventional prejudices and politics of the period. Their response to the Boer War reveals how deeply they identified with the conservative, patriotic nationalism that gripped the country.

Katharine Bradley took a very keen interest in the war in South Africa, and the pages of *Works and Days*, particularly from the outbreak of the war through to mid-1900, feature many reflections on events in the Transvaal, along with newspaper clippings on the progress (or not) of the British forces. Her documentation of the war, along with a handful of "war sonnets," underscores her belief in the strength and vitality of the empire, of the power of blood sacrifice to restore the nation to rude health. The war had begun badly. Public sentiment at the outbreak was bullish, and the newspapers declared the soldiers would be home for Christmas, the might of the British Empire easily routing the ragtag Boer militias. Yet by mid-December it was clear to the British public that the enemy had been underestimated: battles at Mafeking and Ladysmith had seen significant casualties and had prompted a swift response from the war office with Lord Roberts and Lord Kitchener deployed to South Africa. Bradley, who had found herself too anxious about events in South Africa to write properly, could return to her work. Relieved, she writes on December 18, 1899: "The best news for England the world could give." After the humiliation of Methuen, Gatacre, and Buller, she was delighted to read of the arrival of Kitchener, "the strong, strict and disliked."[48]

In the year's end summary, Cooper lamented that "defeat after defeat has fallen on our country," but with the entry of Kitchener into the campaign she struck a note of optimism: "I trust that jaw, those eyes with the flat eagle curve. Oh England, I have been your mourner for two months." As their thoughts turned to the new year, they saw their own success tied to that of the British in South Africa:

> I feel our new century will open to us much joy & trial that needs joy and faith to bring it to good. We shall bring a great new drama of the Renaissance but while we write it we shall have to strive for its trust in the life it embodies—like our country we shall face the difficulties of empire building when circumstances are stubborn. I believe both England and Michael Field will win. . . . I do not feel 1900 will be a peaceful year—but the strain to us & England will be athletic, not weakening.[49]

There are also a number of poems that attempt to reflect on the heroism of the soldiers fighting for empire. One such example is

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"Ladysmith." The poem commemorates the third, unsuccessful attempt by Redvers Buller, the British commander in chief, to end the siege of Ladysmith, imagining the Devonian leading his men to successful, inevitable victory: "Slowly through labyrinthine hills of flame / On, through his dead, avenging them he came."[50] The eventual relief of Ladysmith, on March 1, 1900, was greeted by Bradley with feverish joy. "We have not lived through such a great day before," she wrote. "On Change [the Royal Exchange, in the City of London, where crowds often gathered] London's citizens are singing the National anthem. . . . I resolve to buy a Ladysmith object—a Sheffield tray, or a charger for Krueger's head."[51] This image of the Boer leader's decapitated head served up on a dish, with its obvious echoes of Wilde's *Salome*, captures the odd fusion of decadent aesthetic and jingoism.

One wonders how their aesthetic friends responded to Bradley's patriotic passions: in a January 9 letter to Charles Ricketts and Charles Shannon they write: "The magnificent has been done—the Boers of barbarous scruple repulsed on every side. . . . I write as madly, as foolishly as St Paul this morning. I am still drunk with the hot milk of last night—the hot milk we drank to Sir George and those Devons." Shannon's sister, living in southern Africa, has been "turned out" by the Boers, but, they write, "he only smiles with sharp silver gaiety as the edges of a tulip smile."[52] On another occasion, Ricketts and Shannon arrive and are much perturbed to find Cooper and Bradley "making Bassett [their dog] drum out 'God Save the Queen' with his drum-stick paws. They as symbolists thought the sound meant no welcome."[53] The war also began straining familial relations. Amy Cooper, Edith's younger sister, wrote that she didn't believe that the final victory in South Africa could be led by Kitchener, for the "the gods do not allow the supreme fates of nations to be decided by a man with a name like Kitchener—Any more than an emperor could ever be called Boulanger." Bradley's humorless response reveals a troubling belief in the value of blood sacrifice for both the glory of the nation and for poetic production: "Calmly I go on writing my war sonnets. Neither shall their [Buller's and White's armies'] failure to fulfil that poetic behest damage the sonnet, because they are doing greater than popular things. Amy, it is good to feel that the little errand boys, yea, even the grocer's assistants have a chance now of living, being wounded in their bodies, not their susceptibilities, learning something about dying & being born again."[54] The relief of Mafeking on May 18, 1900, brought jubilation to the country after the failures at Spion Kop, and for Bradley it was a moment to rejoice.

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Returning from the newsagent, “I wave my *Daily Mail* to the sun, & thank Heaven! ‘Christ is Risen’—Mafeking is relieved! There is a touch of the universal Easter joy in the affirmation.”[55] Bradley’s celebration of this pyrrhic victory, waving around her copy of the newspaper that had emerged at the vanguard of the New Journalism, with its brash jingoism and tawdry sensationalism, sits uneasily with our image of the Michael Fields as the embodiment of the queer fin de siècle. Yet this incongruity belongs to our current conceptual frameworks for making sense of the progressive art of late-Victorian Britain.

4. Conclusion

Vincent Sherry has made the striking claim that the literary decadence of the 1890s is dominated by a mood of despondency that emerged as a response to the frustrated ideals of the French Revolution. The failure of the 1790s to effectuate radical political change manifested itself in decadence as a sense of the untimely, of living in the afterward, the late time of a modernity that had failed to flower as the radicals of an earlier generation had hoped.[56] Yet, as I have demonstrated here, the disillusionment of decadence was the product not only of the failure of the revolutionary impulse of modernity but of its success. Conservative decadent writers could not reconcile themselves to a new dispensation. Their turn to the past, to the traditions and values that were being eroded by modernity, is a very different model of decadent critique. Given the proliferation of reactionary conservatisms in the twenty-first century, we, as Victorianists, could benefit from paying more attention to those tendencies in our period of study, to understand the politics of nostalgia and nationalism that could often be found lurking in the aesthetic avant-garde.

Notes

1. Field, *Works and Days*, 1893.
2. Wilde, *A Woman of No Importance*, 132.
3. Baudelaire, *Painter*, 28–29.
4. Anderson, “Victorian Studies,” 198.
5. During, *Against Democracy*, 42 (italics in original).
6. During, *Against Democracy*, 60–61.
7. Leavis, *Revaluation*, 259.

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8. Richards, *Principles*, 13.
9. North, *Literary Criticism*, 29.
10. Eliot, “Arnold and Pater,” 404.
11. R. Williams, *Keywords*, 128.
12. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 143.
13. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 146.
14. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 15–16.
15. Baudelaire, *Flowers*, 175.
16. Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 47, 48. In the original, “inexperiencible” is capitalized on the first occasion but not the second.
17. Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, 1.
18. Yeats, *Trembling*, 20.
19. Pater, *The Renaissance*, 188.
20. Pater, *The Renaissance*, 189.
21. Hext, *Walter Pater*, 27–32.
22. Pater, *The Renaissance*, 98–9.
23. Hext, *Walter Pater*, 157.
24. C. Williams, *Transfigured World*, 122.
25. Symons, “Decadent Movement,” 860.
26. Symons, *Symbolist Movement*, 43, 44.
27. Wilde, “The Critic as Artist – Part II,” 255.
28. Wilde, “The Critic as Artist – Part I,” 232.
29. Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 52.
30. Wilde, *Dorian Gray*, 111.
31. R. Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 132.
32. Burke, *Reflections*, 109.
33. Burke, *Reflections*, 148.
34. Ankersmit, *Sublime Historical Experience*, 327.
35. Johnson, “Friends,” 209.
36. Johnson, “Friends,” 214–15.
37. Johnson, “Friends,” 217.
38. Pound, “Preface,” xi–xii.
39. Johnson, “The Cultured Faun,” 156.
40. Johnson, *Poetical*, 158–62.
41. Johnson, *Poetical*, 58, 65, 98, 174, 254.
42. Johnson, *Poetical*, 126–27.
43. Johnson, *Poetical*, 206.
44. Yeats, “Michael Robartes,” 27–28.
45. Hensley, *Forms of Empire*, 4.
46. Smith, *Drummer Hodge*, 42–43.

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47. Anonymous (attributed to Francis Gribble), “The Yellow Nineties,” 587.
48. Field, *Works and Days* (1899), 136r–137f.
49. Field, *Works and Days* (1899), 144r.
50. Field, “Ladysmith,” in *Works and Days* (1900), 30f.
51. Field, *Works and Days* (1900), 32r, 33f.
52. Field, *Works and Days* (1900), 6f, 6r.
53. Field, *Works and Days* (1900), 9r.
54. Field, *Works and Days* (1900), 23r.
55. Field, *Works and Days* (1900), 73r.
56. See Sherry, *Modernism*, 40.

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