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Abstract:
This article examines the work of three British writers – Arthur Symons, James Elroy Flecker and Harold Nicolson – who all spent time in Constantinople in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Drawing on the Decadent literary aesthetic, they registered their distaste for a city then synonymous with decline. In their poetry, impressionistic prose and fiction they struggle to write about a city that seemed so amenable to a literature of exhaustion and decay. I argue that these writers reveal something like a limit point to the development of literary Decadence in the age of modernism. Rather than be a vehicle for affective, cosmopolitan community, Decadence encouraged solipsism and melancholy, a legacy that lives on in modernism.

Keywords: Constantinople, Decadence, Modernism, Aesthetics, Cosmopolitanism.

Of all the cultural sites in which Decadent writers experienced non-Western culture, it is the city with three names – Byzantion, Constantinople, Istanbul – that offers the greatest archive of encounters. The city was visited by a range of noted Decadents, including Gustave Flaubert, Théophile Gautier, Violet Fane, Ronald Firbank, and Constantine Cavafy. Perhaps no landscape of the fin de siècle embodied more the decline of great empires than this site of the Greek city of Byzantion, that became for a thousand years the home of the Eastern Roman Empire, and then from 1453 the seat of the Ottoman Empire, which at the beginning of the twentieth century was on its last legs. Saddled with an economy and political system that had been dysfunctional for most of the nineteenth century, the city was decline made manifest, its buildings crumbling, its lack of modernisation apparent in its infrastructure and daily life. Yet, as this essay will demonstrate, British Decadent writers, and those influenced by Decadence, were appalled by the
city. Arthur Symons, James Elroy Flecker and Harold Nicolson hardly embraced Constantinople’s air of decline, rather they retreated into aesthetic abstraction and Romantic melancholy. In tracing the empty, abstracted Constantinople in these three writers I also argue that the legacies of Decadence in the early years of the twentieth century are not always to be read in terms of affective community or radical cosmopolitanism; these twentieth century Decadent writers withdrew into aesthetic solipsism, which would become a feature of modernist engagements with Constantinople. The politics of the Decadent aesthetic are manifold, and the moments of impressionism and aesthetic reverie we see in these writers’ visions of Constantinople underpin the need to remain alive to the inherently conservative and even reactionary nature of Decadent writing as it mutates into the age of modernism.

**Reading Decadence in the Early Twentieth Century**

The past fifteen years have seen a series of profound shifts in the study of Decadence, many of which have coalesced around the simultaneous expansion of geographical and temporal frameworks. Stefano Evangelista has argued that the radical literatures of the fin de siècle, in particular Decadence, sought to “reclaim literature from the destructive forces of nationalism” that were so dominant in this period (20). In Oscar Wilde, George Egerton, Lafcadio Hearn and others he sees models of literary cosmopolitanism that take on a “political dimension, translating into a desire to challenge and undo the alliance between literature and nationalism, questioning the identities, emotions, and cultural practices on which this alliance relied” (30). In examining this specifically political dimension of Decadent cosmopolitanism, Evangelista is following critics such as Leela Gandhi and Matthew Potolsky who explored the ways in which Decadence and aestheticism developed alternative models of transnational community from which to, as Potolsky puts it, “criticize contemporary political arrangements and to define the possibility of new ones” (7). Mapping these new political imaginings has gone a long way to repudiating the
earlier Marxist dismissal of Decadent literature as the apolitical excrescence of bourgeois capitalism.

The transnational and cosmopolitan turns in Decadence studies have encouraged us to search for Decadence between national traditions, to look for zones of contact between cultures in which radical new forms of affective belonging emerged. At the same time there has been a wave of criticism that has demonstrated that Decadences proliferated in the twentieth century. It is no longer presumed that Decadence petered out in London in the wake of the Wilde trials, but rather that it shape-shifted and spread around the globe, emerging as a potent literary form for responding to the conditions of modernity. Regenia Gagnier has argued that Decadence is not simply a literary phenomenon of the fin de siècle, but a far more fundamental condition: “decadence is not a fixed state but a relation of part to whole within systems that change. Individuation as progress (autonomy) and individuation as decadence (alienation or isolation) are differently imagined relations to the whole” (Individualism 5). Decadence emerges as a dialectical response to modernisation, and the unequal development of the globe means that Decadence will be found in multiple periods. Baudelaire’s response to the Haussmannization of Paris in the 1850s was, in many ways, replicated – whether self-consciously or not – across the globe from the 1880s and 1890s in Britain, right through to responses to urbanisation in Asia and the Middle East in the late twentieth century. As Gagnier outlines, “the factors contributing to the rise of the Decadent Movement in France and England” (which in her analysis is the decline of tradition, variously considered) would see Decadence, as a literary strategy, emerge “repeatedly and distinctly in response to changes or crises within various nations and cultures” (Literatures 136). A striking example of the possibilities for these expanded geographical and temporal frameworks can be seen in Robert Stilling’s study of the ways in which postcolonial writers responded to late-nineteenth century Decadent literature as they developed decolonial and anti-colonial poetics. In a series of compelling case studies, including Derek Walcott, Agha Shahid Ali, Yinka Shonibare, Bernadine Evaristo and Derek Mahon, Stilling maps not so much the
influence of Decadence but the “tangled relations of affiliation, repudiation, and ambivalence” (25). In the twentieth century Decadent aesthetics offered these writers “a powerful vehicle for postcolonial critique” (2).

These expansions of the temporal and geographical manifestations of Decadence have in turn served to expand the canon of writers we study, and to revolutionise how we think of Decadent politics. However, there were other ways in which Decadence manifested itself as a literary aesthetic in the early twentieth century. As those who had imbibed the literatures of Decadence and aestheticism travelled across the globe, whether as tourists or as part of the bureaucratic infrastructure of Empire and the diplomatic services, they filtered their experiences through those paradigms. What we see in the ways Symons, Flecker and Nicolson wrote about Constantinople is a limit point to the Decadent aesthetic. Faced with a culture and history they struggled to fathom, they translated its streets and vistas into a language of evanescent impression and languid alienation. However, what they are seemingly unable to find in Constantinople’s decrepitude is the essence of Decadence. They all came to realise, in different ways, that their Decadence could only fetishize decline in the face of modernisation. The aesthetic of Baudelaire or Wilde was ill-equipped for dealing with Constantinople’s historical, cultural, and topographic singularity. Decline and dissipation had a piquancy when considered from London or Oxford, but in Constantinople it becomes clear that this pleasure is abstract and disconnected from the real. Their response was to disengage, to turn inward, to translate what they saw into an inner aesthetic experience that refused reality. This turn inwards was to be one of the ways in which the legacies of Decadence manifested themselves in modernism.

**Constantinople, Byzantism and Romantic Melancholy**

The roots of the Decadent inability to read Constantinople lay in the complex aesthetic inheritance of the city at the fin de siècle. When the Victorians imagined the city, they often did
so through the lens of Byzantinism. In the “Decay of Lying” Wilde valorised the Oriental arts for their rejection of mimesis, noting that the decorative arts in Europe were “the record of the struggle between Orientalism, with its frank rejection of imitation, its love of artistic convention, its dislike to the actual representation of any object in Nature, and our own imitative spirit.” It is in Byzantium, Sicily and Spain where “the visible things of life are transmuted into artistic conventions, and the things that Life has not are invented and fashioned for her delight” (175).

This interest in the non-mimetic qualities of the Oriental arts were manifest in the Byzantine Revival which swept European architecture in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. One of the signal origins for that revival in the English-speaking world was John Ruskin’s enthusiasm in *The Stones of Venice* for the Byzantine architecture of St. Mark’s. Neo-Byzantine aesthetics were more than an alternative to the Gothic and the Romanesque in ecclesiastical design, and many aestheticist, Decadent and modernist artists adapted Byzantium as both an aesthetic model and as an index for an alternative antiquity. The Byzantine was a fundamentally mobile aesthetic, shorn of any rigid associations, used as an inspiration for the work of Gustave Moreau, in particular his Salomé paintings so beloved by Joris-Karl Huysmans, or Gustav Klimt’s mosaic-inspired portraits, as well as Maurice Denis’s religious art. As Bullen explains, “by the end of the nineteenth century the Byzantine style had been adopted in French painting for both a pious asceticism and an extreme form of decadence. It might be said that they both had their roots in a reaction against the dominant mode of materialist realism and both pursued a symbolist pathway” (105). Byzantism was an influence on the development of the aesthetic of abstraction and symbolism that would form a constituent feature of Decadence, and one that the three writers I study here drew on as they penned their hostile sketches of the city.

The relationship between Decadence and Constantinople was not limited to the abstractions and nostalgia of aesthetic reverie. The French Romantic writers who visited the city in the middle of the century found a landscape eminently amenable to their ironic melancholy. The two most important documentations of these sojourns were Gérard de Nerval’s *Voyage to the
Orient (1851) and Théophile Gautier’s Constantinople (1853). These works offered readers a view of the city’s splendour and squalor in equal measure. Gautier was attracted not to the grand sights of the Mosques, but rather to the dark underbelly of the city’s cafés and music houses. His Constantinople was a fundamentally melancholic city, a space of lethargy, languor, and mournful memory: “a veil of melancholy appears to hang over this deserted palace, buried in masses of sycamores, beeches, and plane-trees, which almost hide it from the eye of the traveller, like the thick forest that surrounds the chateau of the Sleeping Beauty of the Wood; and the weeping-willows drop sadly into the water their tears of foliage” (Constantinople 361). This was, fundamentally, conventional lyricism. Gautier projects on to the city his desire and disappointment. Perhaps the most powerful instance of this is the poem “Kissing the shore, the suffering sea”:  

When all save pain at rest remains  

    The moon makes free  
    And to the dozing wave explains  
    Why pale is she  
    Your dome, Santa Sophia, gleams  
    Beneath blue sky;  
    And sky in turn reveals its dreams  
    To God on high  
    
    Here below, trees, graves, cliffs and tides  
    Roses and doves…  
    To something everything confides  
    Its woes, its loves  
    But naught before my lonely eyes  
    Echoes my wants  

Only your deep, drear voice replies –

The Hellespont’s! (Selected 365).

As Orhan Pamuk reminds us in his discussion of European writers on Istanbul, “the primary aim of a landscape painter is to awaken in the viewer the same feelings that the landscape evoked in the artist himself,” a principle that also animated Baudelaire’s appreciation of Eugène Delacroix’s painting in which he identifies melancholy as a dominant theme. As Pamuk notes, melancholy was a wholly positive feature for Decadent and Romantic artists and writers, and when Théophile Gautier visited Istanbul, he drew on Baudelaire’s language of melancholic landscapes (89). This romantic projection of personal mood onto cityscape was also the basis of Decadent landscape writing in English. Emerging out of Wordsworth and theorised by Pater and Ruskin, this landscape writing is characterised by a projection of desire and memory onto place. For the British Decadent writers who found themselves in Constantinople at the fin de siècle the stones contained sermons that reflected anxieties and desires that had little to do with the city itself. When writing about London or Paris, Decadent writers could revel in sexual license, embrace the whirlwind of urban modernity, yet their vision of the Constantinople demonstrates an unwillingness or inability to engage with its cultures, retreating instead into an aesthetic of melancholy consolation and abstraction.

“Inhuman, savage, incalculable”: Arthur Symons in Constantinople

Arthur Symons holds a singular place in the development of literary Decadence in English. Symons’s “cosmopolitanism, transcultural engagement and international profile” made him responsible for, Bizzotto and Evangelista argue, fin-de-siècle English literary culture becoming “more outward-looking and international” (9, 6). While much of this reputation is due to his work as a translator and literary critic, Symons’s travel writing seemingly offers a model of a cosmopolitan sensibility. Symons’s urban impressionism – in both poetry and prose – is one of
the defining literary forms of British Decadence. For Symons, it was only in and from cities that literary modernity could emerge: “I think that might be the test of poetry which professes to be modern: its capacity for dealing with London, with what one sees or might see there, indoors or out” (“Modernity” 188). From the airy evocation of the London music halls, to Parisian Boulevards, to the cool green spaces of dusty Seville, the grandeur of Rome’s imperial architecture, to the watery byways of Venice, Symons found that certain cities inspired him to write. Yet others left him cold: about Madrid, Vienna, St Petersburg, and Berlin he had nothing to say. There was a third class of cities, however, that moved him so negatively that he had to pen their impoverishment, sketch their suffering. Of Naples and Moscow, he writes, “I have suffered in them, merely because I was there; and how clearly I see them still, with that sharp memory of discomfort” (Cities vi). In all these cases, however, Symons was insistent that this was no mere subjective impression, but rather that he had come as close as he possibly could to an objective expression of urban space. “I have,” he claimed, “tried to draw confidences out of the stones that I have trodden but a few weeks or a few months.” (Cities vi). While Symons’s claims to attempting to achieve a sort of vraie vérité are easily dismissed, his response to Constantinople, more than any other city, reveals something like a limit-point to Symons’s Decadence, as well as his vaunted cosmopolitanism.

Constantinople was the final stop on a two-month Continental tour that Symons and his wife Rhoda took in the autumn of 1902, having visited Munich, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade and Sophia. Symons first published his sketch “Constantinople: An Impression” in the May 1903 volume of Harper’s, republishing it later that year as the final essay in his collection Cities. The reception of that book suggested that there was very little essential truth in what Symons had produced. The reviewer for The Athenæum declared: “Here, indeed, we have the decadent as traveller,” “the egoism of travel” (“Cities” 641). For the Saturday Review the collection was inconsistent, with the sketch of Constantinople singled out for suffering “excessive observation,” especially in details of the city’s “nastiness” (“Cities Through a Haze” 674). For L. March
Phillips, writing in *The Speaker*, Symons was out of his depth in Constantinople, “he writes like a man who is cut off from the source of his ideas. His observations become merely literal. His style grows pale and wan,” no longer possessing the energy and vitality of his descriptions of Venice or Rome (276).

Like so many writers before and since, Symons was to characterise the city as marked by the struggle between East and West, between Christianity and Islam, between civilisation and barbarism. This well-trodden trope is not, in itself, interesting, but it is instructive as to how Symons’s impressionism functions. The objectivity he claims to have achieved in his travel writing is revealed as illusory; what Constantinople reveals is the truth of Symons’s cultural conditioning, of his prejudices and preferences. At some 12,000 words it is the longest of Symons’s travel sketches, and ranges widely across the city, crossing the Bosphorus repeatedly, visiting cemeteries, mosques, performances of dervishes, and the frenetic streets and bazaars. While the sketch is long and varied there is one striking feature: Symons can only find aesthetic beauty in the city when it is depopulated, when he is describing topography, architecture, or the seascapes and river. That beauty, importantly, is abstracted from Constantinople’s vitality. When he finds himself face-to-face with its inhabitants, he can barely conceal his disgust and resorts to classic tropes of Orientalism: the Turks are inscrutable, ignorant, fanatical, barbaric, sensual, repulsive, and seductive.

The opening of Symons’s impression of Constantinople is a striking paragraph-long sentence that merely lists, with no discernible order, a series of sights and sensations with precious little in the way of discrimination or judgement. The purpose of this jumble of impressions is to convey something like the initial disorientation that Symons suffered in the city: “At the end of my first day in Constantinople I find myself bewildered, as if I have lost my way in my own brain. I seem to have been blown through a whirlwind, out of which I can clutch nothing tangible” (214). As Symons’s sketch demonstrates however, he was all too able to “clutch” the tangible life of the city as it overwhelmed his senses. His inability to organise his
thoughts and experiences is revealed to be a problem of both aesthetic observation and of memory. The immediacy of impressionism is, of course, an artfully constructed ruse, for the real-time recording of events and observations is antithetical to impressionism, as Symons understood it. For him the kernel of the impression was in the remembering of the experience and in the construction of its literary expression, not in the experience itself. The impression was not the totality of experience but the “essential part of my memory of the scene afterward” (“Impressionistic” 344). Yet in Constantinople Symons struggles to grasp the essential part of the scene either in the moment or after the fact; he finds himself too busy dodging carts, avoiding beggars, or overwhelmed by the stench of the streets to have been able to turn experience into aesthetic impression. The opening pages become a litany of Constantinople’s aesthetic failings, whether it be the shoddy construction of bridges, or the aural excesses of the streets, that “dense, uninterrupted noise, which I soon came to know as the unresting, inarticulate voice of the city” (217). If the city was visually too frenetic, and aurally too inarticulate for Symons to capture, he was more successful in conveying its olfactory essence: “the smell of the mud rises up into your nostrils, mingled with those unknown smells which, in Constantinople, seem to ooze upwards out of the ground and steam outwards from every door and window, and pour out of every alley, and rise like a cloud out of the breath and sweat and foulness of the people” (216). The Symbolist’s search for “the finer sense of things unseen, the deeper meaning of things evident” was seemingly incompatible with the experience of Constantinople’s streets (“The Decadent” 859).

So where, precisely, does Symons’s antipathy for the city lie? It would seem to be two-fold: it is both the city’s air of decay, and his alienation from a culture so remote from his own. Symons’s aversion manifests itself in, stylistically, one of the most claustrophobic and chaotic travel sketches he ever penned, as well as his use of wildly inappropriate analogy: “The streets of Stamboul climb and zigzag; to walk in them is to crawl like a maggot in rotting cheese.” Symons’s simile here suggests that the city is in a state of decomposition, and that he, in walking
through it, has become a party to this putrescence, with the obvious, and troubling, inference being that the city’s inhabitants are parasites. Yet he has also become one of their number, another maggot struggling to eke out experience amidst the foetid fromage. Even when Symons encounters the trappings of urban modernity there is little impact on the overall impression of decay: a “tram runs along one winding road, distracting it with a little civilisation” (219).

If Symons was troubled by the aural overload of the city, he found no respite in its quieter aspects. Walking uphill from the bridges, he left the hubbub of the marketplace and cafes behind, passing “into silence, and a disturbing emptiness of life”. These residential streets are not so much deserted as lacking in the vibrant communal life that Symons will find so inspiring in some Italian and Spanish cities. As he walks through the streets of the city, he has the uncomfortable experience of feeling an outsider: “a stranger passes, all eyes turn on him, with that doubtful, not hostile, but ready to be hostile look which I have come to know so well”. Elsewhere some country peasants subject him to an even sterner examination, staring “with a fierce faculty of attention, a dart of eyes which bored into you, screwing their way in with a child's eagerness” (222).

Symons’s uneasiness amongst the inhabitants of the city only evaporates when he describes the city from distance, looking either from the water, or down to the water from the hills. It is those natural features of the city that function, for Symons, as a means of cleansing it: “Water flows through the city, purifying it; light floods it, making it over again hourly”. Seen as an abstracted series of shapes and tones, the city can take on the qualities of a painting, stimulating in Symons an aesthetic reverie. From where he was staying, high above the river, Symons is able to translate the city into an aesthetic spectacle:

The sunset was brief, and the water has grown dull, like slate. Stamboul fades to a level mass of smoky purple, out of which a few minarets rise black against a grey sky with bands of orange fire. Last night, after a golden sunset, a fog of rusty iron came down, and hung poised over the jagged level of the hill. The whole mass of Stamboul was like
black smoke; the water dim grey, a little flushed, and then like pure light, lucid, transparent, every ship and every boat sharply outlined in black on its surface; the boats seemed to crawl like flies on a lighted pane. (226)

This abstracted description, dominated by colour and line, is markedly similar to many of Symons’s descriptions of cities from elevated vantage points, yet at the human level, the boats on the Bosphorus, Symons feels the need to reduce human activity to the action of insects, with imagery strikingly similar to Wilde’s great London poems “Symphony in Yellow” and “Impression du Matin”.

It was the tension between the city’s natural beauty and the poverty of its inhabitants, that marks the city for Symons and makes it so difficult to aestheticize. Take, for instance, Symons’s experience of crossing Galata Bridge on the Golden Horn one morning. He is captivated by the sunlight enveloping the scene, by minnows darting through the water when he sees, lying on a parapet, a young girl who has drawn up her skirt to show a raw sore in her flesh. It is in this contrast, between natural beauty and physical suffering, that “Constantinople is summed up”, and which makes the city “so disturbing, alluring, so violent and seductive at once in its appeal. It is, as the East is to the West, a kaleidoscope; but you must be prepared for the sudden shaking of the colours, and it will be well if you can look at the picture merely as a picture” (231). Symons’s metaphor here is striking: a kaleidoscope is arranged merely for the pleasure of the viewer, the creation of an optical illusion that pleasantly distorts reality. While the violence of human suffering may have a distorting effect, it will be well for the viewer if he can treat it detachedly, merely as a picture, rather than engage with it empathetically.

As will have become evident, Symons can find no romance in the decay of Constantinople. Decadent travel writing revels in the tension between modernity and obsolescence, yet in Constantinople’s ruins Symons can see only decline. Comparing the city’s walls to the other great city of early Christianity, he laments, “there is no beauty, as in the austere walls of Rome; merely ruined greatness”. Even the very land surrounding the city is without life:
“scared with cruelties,” it is like the innumerable stray dogs that repulse Symons, “its own master and left to decay” (236, 237). Symons’s distaste, however, subsides in the city’s mosques, and when he attends the ceremonies of whirling and howling dervishes. Symons is clearly fascinated by Islamic ritual, with its intensity of experience and ability to offer structure to the lives of its adherents. Yet it is necessary to treat Symons’s fascination with caution: it becomes clear that his admiration for Eastern religion is really its primitivism, his fetishization of otherness rather than any considered understanding and transcultural sensitivity. Symons is clearly drawn to the mysticism and movement of a dervish performance, offering vivid descriptions of the dancer’s spiritual ecstasy.

It was not the first occasion on which Symons found himself intoxicated by such a spectacle, being entranced by Eastern dancing while in Paris in 1889, his impressions captured in “Javanese Dancers”. In that poem it is the slow, rhythmic, undulating movements of the “phantom dancers” that captivates the speaker, yet they remain distanced from the performers, finding them “unintelligible” with “smiles inanimate” (59). The dervishes, however, threaten to overwhelm Symons: “In the ceremonies of the turning dervishes, there is beauty, together with a gentle hallucination which seems to draw one slowly into its own circle. The ecstasy is that of an enveloping dream, into which one sinks delightedly. But the ecstasy of the howling dervishes is a form of delirium, by which one may reach, first, imbecility, and then an epileptic madness” (Cities 247). The psychological fugue produced by gazing upon this spectacle is captured in his poem “The Turning Dervish”:

I turn until my sense,

Dizzied with waves of air,

Spins to a point intense,

And spires and centres there. (76-7)

At the conclusion of his description of the dervish ceremony Symons admits that “I felt the ultimate, because the most animal, the most irrational, the most insane, form of Eastern ecstasy”.
The scene gave him “the impression of witchcraft” and the “Saturnalia of barbarians”. What we have here is the impressionist as pseudo-anthropologist, and perhaps this is why Symons’s impressionism throughout his account of Constantinople is so limited. His concluding remarks on religion in the city make it clear how little he understands what he is seeing:

Inhuman, savage, incalculable, a frenzy and yet a part of religion, I seemed to find in it the essence of this strange place, in which the mind does not exist, in which reason is forgotten, and the senses are petted like slaves that have become masters, and have been masters so long that the people have forgotten that they were ever slaves. (251-2)

The inhuman animality of the residents of Constantinople can only be appreciated by Symons through a strangely contorted metaphor which suggests that the Turks are so immersed in sensuality they cannot see that it is in itself a prison.

There is, of course, something of an irony here, in that, Symons so often fetishized the sensual impression over cold analytic reason in both his literary criticism and his poetry. Yet Symons was able to recognise the somewhat problematic appeal the “East” had for the cynical pessimist of modernity, for the “attraction of the East for the West is after all nostalgia; it is as if, when we are awakened by dreams, we remember that forgotten country out of which we came. We came out of the East, and we return to the East; all our civilisation has been but an attempt at forgetting, and, in spite of that long attempt, we still remember” (259). Symons wants to claim an ancestral memory of the East that explains his attraction/repulsion towards it, giving him as the British traveller an elevated perspective, patronising in its declaration of understanding and sympathy, even if it might be meant as an expression of connectedness. Symons’s Constantinople was a product of his impressionistic aesthetic, a mode of engaging with and representing places and people that flattened out their singularity into a kaleidoscope of abstraction and melancholy.

“this terrible and malignant beauty”: James Elroy Flecker on Bosphorus Shores
Symons’s disorientation and disillusionment in Constantinople was shared by James Elroy Flecker who found the shores of the city overwhelmingly melancholic and alienating. Born in 1884, Flecker was part of aesthetic circles at both Oxford and Cambridge. He went up to Oxford in 1902 to study Classics at Trinity, graduating with a Third before studying Eastern languages at Gonville & Caius College Cambridge in 1908 in preparation for entering the consular service, which he did in 1910. At Cambridge he fell in with a crowd of queer aesthetes, including Ronald Firbank, Frederick Rolfe, Oscar Browning, and Robert Hugh Benson (Munro 31). He had been a fervent poet since his youth and in 1907 published his first collection, *The Bridge of Fire* with Decadent publisher Elkin Matthews. That collection was marked with all the trappings of Decadent verse, from poems written after Leconte de Lisle and Charles Baudelaire, to a smattering of Hellenism, and a general odour of ennui. The closing “Envoi” gives something of the general fin-de-siècle air: “The young men leap, and toss their golden hair,/ Run round the land, or sail across the seas:/ But one was stricken with a sore disease,/ The lean and swarthy poet of despair” (62). Flecker was, it seemed, destined to be a poet of little distinction, but his first consular office posting to Constantinople in 1910 saw him begin a complicated relationship with the cultures of Turkey and the Levant that would see him achieve some posthumous fame – he died from tuberculosis in 1915 – for his long verse drama *Hassan*, first published in 1922.

Flecker could romanticize the East from afar, but the reality repulsed him. Something of Flecker’s romantic delusions of the East were given by T.E. Lawrence, who penned an essay on Flecker, whom he had first met in Beirut where Flecker was the British Vice-Consul. Flecker, Lawrence explains, was “furiously British: patriotic, “God save the King” exile, nostalgic”. When Flecker could rouse himself to feel some form of passion for the Middle East it was a very particular and limited kind: “It wasn't the Fakir, the pilgrim, the hermit, the ascetic of the East, nor the poor man who called to Flecker's spirit. By instinct, by taste, by upbringing, by inheritance, his was the town-life of rich Syria, the satins and silks, perfumes, sweetmeats,
grocers and Syrian boys” (Lawrence “An Essay”). Flecker put it in a letter to a friend “I loathe
the East and the Easterns, and spent all my time there dreaming of Oxford” (Searight 188).

When Flecker moved to Constantinople he took rooms in Candilli, a hillside area
overlooking the busy shipping straits of the Bosphorus. It was from here he wrote an evocative,
impressionist sketch of the city that captures something of his ambivalence. “That there are
landscapes whose beauty is intrinsically mournful, I admit,” Flecker begins. Yet, he suggests,
melancholy does not seem to be explicable as he stares “down the cobbled and precipitous street
of Candilli, where dog and man lie sleeping, past the village minaret, out across the Bosphorus
and all the myriad laughter of the tiny waves, to the further shore where rise the chivalrous old
towers of Roumeli Hissar”. As undeniably beautiful and intoxicating as this prospect is it,
seemingly, leaves Flecker cold for, as he laments, “all its brightness and splendour does but fill
my mind with sorrow and unrest”. As he watches the sun setting over the castle walls of
Roumeli Hissar, the twilight fading to darkness, he is troubled by his own inability to enjoy the
experience: “Is it unmanly or decadent of me to long for a slagheap or a gaswork, or any strong,
bold, ugly thing to break the spell of this terrible and malignant beauty that saps body and soul?”
The picturesque beauty of Constantinople is too much for Flecker to take; his imagination
requires industrial modernity to save it from being overwhelmed by the dead hand of the past.
The conclusion of the sketch captures the soul-sickness that Constantinople can bring:

I am fascinated by deadly wonder; and he who sinks before this spell sits in his chair for
hours and plays with dreams. He dreams of a mistress as Thaïs gentle or as Helen fair,
and of the palace one might raise upon the hill in marble symmetry and store with
curious broideries of the East; and of all that life might be to a man who conquered it,
and why Antony was wise. And he dreams vain private hopes of his own of which he is
ashamed. And he ponders on the narrow lane of sea, and of all that ancient histories
have told him; of Sultans and Emperors; he remembers how the proud flags of Venice
once flew splendid in the breeze, and how the relentless Romans before them built walls
and ways, and how once the little Argo rounded the point with blue-eyed Jason on her prow, and the merry, toiling crew, bound on the first adventure of the world. And a light fever distracts the dreamer's body, and his mind longs for some coercive chain, and he begins to understand why men of the East will sit by a fountain from noon to night, and let the world roll onward. (*Prose* 56-9).

For Flecker, Constantinople and the East engender a strange lassitude. Recalling the city’s imperial past and its mythic origins brings on the ennui of decline. Dreaming of Helen, of Thaïs, of Cleopatra, or of immortalising oneself in monumental architecture is hardly a spur to activity. Echoing Arthur Symons’s characterisation of Decadence, he is “too languid for the relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or in conduct” (“The Decadent” 859). The city, or Flecker’s imaginative refraction of it, has brought on a light fever, its Eastern lethargy a disease, leaving Flecker an oneiric invalid, a passive bystander.

Flecker was jolted out of his mournful malady by the most unusual of experiences: travelling on a London omnibus that had found its way to Constantinople: “Across the Galata bridge it plies seething with a babel horde; beneath the shadow of the great mosques valiantly it rumbles on, till their spacious domes re-echo, and the lily minarets are all a-tremble; right into the secret ways of Stamboul it travels, the bright red motor-'bus” (*Prose* 60). Its new owners had not bothered to replace its list of stops, so as he travels across the Golden Horn the bus promises to call at “places half-forgotten and long desired”: Oxford Circus, Marble Arch, Edgware Road, and Cricklewood. The London bus produces home-sickness, the place names functioning “like a chime of silver, distant bells, or some sweet poem of a fickle lover who has strung together the names of his mistresses and loves”. The ache for home manifests itself as an acute form of patriotism: “I could weep for the bitterness of my exile and my great desire for London Town and English faces; for the thunder of Charing Cross and the cries of Oxford Circus, for the sweep of Regent Street and the motors of Piccadilly, for the glory of a great Empire and the fellowship of men”. Yet, ultimately, it is not the imperial grandeur of central
London that he truly misses, rather the more mundane, domestic charms of Cricklewood:

“Within your walls, brave Cricklewood, had you but walls, would be found more enlightenment and knowledge, more true learning and humanity than in all this bright imperial city, age-worn, battered, bejewelled, prostitute of East and West, which you now supply, O wealthy Cricklewood, with your superfluous means of transport” (Prose 61-2). Flecker’s tone here is simultaneously ironic and sentimental, knowing and longing. The nostalgia for London is deeply cliched, as is his characterisation of Constantinople, suggesting that his ultimate goal may be the deflation of the romanticisation of place.

While Flecker may have ironically undercut his own nostalgia, he was partial to romanticising the city once he had left. One of his most extraordinary poems is “Saadabad”, narrating a journey up Cendere, a tributary that discharges into the Golden Horn, to the site of Sa’dabad, an Ottoman palace complex that was destroyed in the eighteenth century. The spot was particularly popular with Europeans who called it Sweet Waters. The speaker intones his beloved to come away with him: “Let us deal kindly with a heart of old by sorrow torn:/ Come with Nedim to Saadabad, my love, this silver morn”. The city from which Flecker felt so alienated becomes transformed here:

    Down the Horn Constantinople fades and flashes in the blue,
    Rose of cities dropping with the heavy summer’s burning dew,
    Fading now as falls the Orient evening round the sky and you,
    Fading into red and silver as we row to Saadabad.

The city can now become transformed into an aesthetic spectacle, its alienating reality evaporating in the romance of distance. The journey is, however, towards a ruined past, Flecker’s speaker eulogizing Ottoman Constantinople long gone. As the poem closes:

    Broken fountains, phantom waters, nevermore to glide and gleam
    From the dragon-mouth in plaster sung of old by old Nedim,
    Beautiful and broken fountains, keep you still your Sultan’s dream.
Or remember how his poet took a girl to Saadabad? (*Poems* 159-61).

The reference here to Ahmed Nedîm Efendi, the great Ottoman poet is important. Both the poet and the palace were to fall victim of a Janissary revolt in 1730. That attack on the perceived opulence and decadence of the rule of the Sultan Ahmed III hovers on the edges of the poem. The opening section of the poem is, according to C.E. Bosworth, a translation of one of Nedîm’s own lyrics about the same journey (369). Flecker’s romanticisation of Constantinople is vaguely inspired by its Ottoman past, evoking its imperial grandeur while studiously avoiding the reality – in particular the political and social unrest – of its present.

Like Symons, Flecker uses the Decadent aesthetic as a means of escape; whether on a bus, gazing upon the Bosphorus, or sailing up the Cendere, Flecker dreams of other times or places, transporting himself through imaginative flights of fancy in order not to engage with the lives of those who live in the city. Decadence is all too often a refusal of connection, an elitist evasion of ethic responsibility and social reciprocity. In Constantinople we can see this aspect of Decadence with some clarity as writers exacerbate difference and dislocation through aesthetic solipsism.

**Harold Nicolson’s Decadent Satire of Constantinople Decadence**

Unlike Symons and Flecker, Harold Nicolson could not ignore the tumultuous politics of Constantinople in the first decades of the twentieth century. The dog days of the Ottoman Empire came with the failure of the Ottoman Army in the First Balkan War, 1912 –1913. The Great Powers demanded that the Ottomans cede the city of Adrianople (modern day Edirne), and in Constantinople a coup d'état saw the Grand Vizier, Kâmil Pasha forced to resign. This febrile period of military failure and political machination is the backdrop for Harold Nicolson’s 1921 novel *Sweet Waters*. Nicolson had inherited a Decadent poetic but found it incompatible
with a city in the throes of revolution. His Constantinople Decadence is rather a satire of aesthetic posturing, his pathetic poets demonstrating the emptiness of solipsism.

Having joined the Diplomatic Service in 1909, Nicolson was stationed in Constantinople as third secretary from January 1912 to October 1914 and drew on his experiences in this tale of romance and political intrigue. He was joined by his new wife, Vita Sackville West who composed her own delicately Decadent verse first published in her debut pamphlet *Constantinople: Eight Poems* in 1915. *Sweet Waters* follows three primary characters: Eirene Davenant, the daughter of a recently deceased English diplomat; Angus Field, a young archivist at the embassy, and Hugh Tenterden, an older, senior diplomat who has been stationed at the British Consulate as the temporary Ambassador during this period of regional crisis. Field is a budding poet and attempts, not altogether successfully, to pen Constantinople-inspired prose poems. He dismisses his first attempt as “precious”, “futile”, and “worse than Wilde” (23). The passages of free verse in the novel make it clear that Field aspires to a Decadent style inflected by Flecker's orientalism:

> Oh Languor of the East, to what sad lute do you tune your lethargy! Oh subtle apathy, with what soft touch you steal upon our strength! Twelve amber beads upon a silken string, a puff of spices in a narrow lane, a lilting song flung suddenly across the water. Oh lambent East, and all our wisdom, all our courage purposeless! (22)

The overuse of the exclamation mark, the air of ennui, the snatches of sense impressions are all evocative of the poets of the 1890s. Field starts to fear that the climate and culture of Constantinople are having a degenerative effect upon him. While he tried to convince himself that “mentally he was not decadent”, and that “his senses shied at preciousness”, he concluded that his current surroundings were having a deleterious impact. “Too soft, this Bosphorus Valley. Not the East even; only the Levant, ‘too Hellenistic’”. But even amidst these ruminations, Field laments his own propensity for the poetic: “Damn! Words, again, words! Phrases that minced across his vision.” While he contemplates a change of scenery, Field concludes that what he needs to rouse him out of his decadent effeminacy is a “cause”, either politics or romance (40).
is this desire to escape his poetic ennui that then becomes the catalyst for the action of the novel as he pursues Eirene and becomes embroiled in politics with tragic results.

Field’s desire for a cause may end up resulting in the death of two men in the novel, but his own precipitous downfall is framed throughout as inevitable given his residence in such a decadent city. Nicolson’s prose offers captivating vignettes of the decomposing city: “The city of Stamboul, the old Byzantium, slumbers upon the ridge that juts between the Mamora and the Golden Horn. For fourteen hundred years its boundaries have stood defined and changeless, - on three sides the sea, and on the fourth the walls of Theodosius”. Yet the city has lost all grandeur and all strength, now characterised by a “decayed antiquity. Toothless and blind, the city croons and mumbles, a little shrunken in is shabby clothes; resigned, inglorious, and silent; the plane trees sighing in the breeze of evening, the voice of muezzin calling to the dawn”. Out of this decay had arisen a new city of banal modernity, “of stucco and asphalt, urinals and little stilted trees” (253). Constantinople’s singularity was being obliterated in the process of modernisation, these new suburbs no different in appearance and character than Marseille, or Brest.

_Sweet Waters_ was written in early 1921, with Nicolson working on the novel at weekends and evenings while serving as First Secretary to the Foreign Office.Remarkably, he was writing his novel in tandem with a study of the French Decadent poet Paul Verlaine which came out the same year. It is perhaps this dual composition that explains why the odour of Decadence emanates so strongly from the pages of _Sweet Waters_. Nicolson’s account of Verlaine’s life and works begins with an apology: he is not sure if his book is even necessary. Writing of Verlaine in the 1920s he was certain that “the subject has been worn threadbare. For those who care for French literature the facts of Verlaine’s life are abundantly familiar. For those who do not care, the story may appear merely unpleasant or even deleterious.” While the scandal of Verlaine’s life was still liable to shock readers of the post-War period, Nicolson was not so certain the poet’s verse had survived posterity: “from a strictly literary point of view Verlaine is somewhat of a
back number, a plaintive miscellany thumbed only by the eighteen-nineties” (4-5). Yet Nicolson attempted to move beyond the “facile categories” of the moralist or the sexual psychologist, for here was a poet for whom “the conventions of ordered society cannot be applied, or can be applied only with a resultant pang of injustice and incompleteness” (270). In order to avoid such moralising frameworks, Nicolson’s study offers one of the most rigorous prosodic analyses of Verlaine hitherto produced in English.

Nicolson’s flirtation with Decadence in *Sweet Waters* and his biography of Verlaine belies both an affinity with the literature of the 1890s, but also a modish reticence. This discomfort with Decadence was, in part, an attempt to throw off the youthful affectation which had seen the young Nicolson drawn to Decadence when he went up to Balliol College, Oxford. His disdain for Decadence was exacerbated by an episode in Constantinople. In April 1912 the Neo-Decadent novelist Ronald Firbank stopped off in the city on his way back to England from Egypt. He had arranged to renew his acquaintance with Nicolson, whom he had met in Madrid in 1905 when Firbank had a letter of introduction to the British Ambassador, Sir Arthur Nicolson. Firbank’s effete, affected manner raised the young Nicolson’s ire, or what he would later come to call his “Kipling side” (Lees-Milne 24-6). Seven years later, Nicolson pledged to be more hospitable and planned to take Firbank sailing on the Bosphorus, but the languorous novelist stood him up. Nicolson smarted over this for some years, but in 1927 published in his collection of character studies, *Some People*, a thinly veiled portrait of the novelist, who was transformed into the poet “Lambert Orme.” In this account, Orme/Firbank writes to explain his absence: “Today is too wonderful, it is the most wonderful day that ever happened; it would be too much for me: let us keep today as something marvellous that did not occur” (68). The sketch has been accorded recent critical attention, largely as a result of the book having been, in part, the subject of Virginia Woolf’s essay on “The New Biography”. Max Saunders has explained that “it is easy to see how the imaginative fertility of Nicolson’s experiment with Auto/biografi...
might have attracted Woolf”, and inevitably influenced her own experimental biography of Nicolson’s wife, Vita Sackville-West, in *Orlando* (1928) (467).

In “Lambert Orme” Nicolson confesses his own irrational distaste for the literature of Decadence: “As so often in such cases, my ensuing reaction against the eighteen-nineties took the form of a virulent loathing which I have never since been able to shake off. I am assured by reliable people that it was a serious movement of revolt and liberation” (65). Nicolson paints a rather pathetic portrait of a man out of time whose enthusiasm for the 1890s reminded him of his own dabbling in Decadence: “he represented the rotted rose leaves of the Yellow Book. I came to be more and more ashamed of the period when I also had dabbled in aestheticism”.

Nicolson later admits that he did not see that Orme, and by inference Firbank, was at the time he knew him developing his aesthetic in ways that had moved beyond the 1890s: “while I dabbled in Bakst and Flecker, Lambert had already reached the van” (69). Nicolson’s picture of Orme’s aesthetic achievement takes a flight of fancy at the end of his sketch as he leaves Firbank’s biography far behind. Orme is killed in the war (Firbank died of lung disease in Rome in 1926) but had achieved some fame with a delicate book of poems. Leafing through them while bored at a Bloomsbury soiree, our narrator comes across a poem that narrates a trip that Lambert/Orme never took with him up the Bosphorus. That poem, “Constantinople: April 1912”, offers us a glimpse, perhaps, of a somewhat more advanced Decadent verse that Arthur Field from *Sweet Waters* may have graduated into:

Thera, if it indeed be you
That are Santorin,
There wander in,
The furtive steamers of the Khedivial Mail Company,
Rusted, barnacled.
And from the bridge the second officer
Shouts demotic to the Company’s agent
Nicolson’s poem is a brilliant pastiche of Decadent modernism; blending characteristic elements of Decadent verse – the references to the ancient Greek city of Santorin, the mechanical rhyme of the second and third lines – with an allusion to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922) and the “demotic French” of “Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant” (63), Nicolson’s poem offers us a glimpse of how seamlessly Decadence was “reinvented” by modernism, as Vincent Sherry puts it.

The most famous modernist visions of Byzantium – W.B. Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” (1928) and ‘Byzantium’ (1932) – owed much to late-nineteenth century poetry’s abstracted melancholy. As Adam Goldwyn argues, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, T.E. Hulme, amongst others, regarded it as “a symbolic city, the depiction of which could be adapted to suit a variety of different utopian visions,” ranging from W.B. Yeats’s spiritual symbolism to Charles Williams’s geometric perfectibility (226). The variety of neo-Byzantine art had, at its foundation, a rejection of modernity. As Norman Vance notes, the cities of the East offered writers an escape from contemporary reality, for when “history has brought disappointment and is going nowhere, there is a case for sailing to Alexandria or Byzantium to indulge in the decadent sense of disconnection, of sophisticated irony and awareness soothingly deprived of any power of effective action or intervention” (567). The Decadent response to Constantinople was inherited by modernists, and with it an aesthetic marked by disconnection and abstraction that had little to do with the reality of the city.

As Kristin Mahoney notes, recent scholarship has demonstrated that “the decadent ethos operated at the heart of modernism, informed postcolonial discourse, and served as a basis for a queer politics long after the fin de siècle”, but we are also becoming aware that Decadent cosmopolitanism could “often shade into Orientalism” (223). Symons, Flecker and Nicolson all indulged in Orientalism, yet it is their studious refusal to experience the city on any terms other than their own aesthetic concerns that is most striking. As the Decadent aesthetic travelled the
globe in the early years of the twentieth century it was to facilitate solipsism and ennui as much, if not more, than it did radical connection. These limit points of Decadence would be interrogated by the post-colonial writers that Stilling analyses in his study, and the global circulations of Decadence that Gagnier has so powerfully traced. Yet in the early years of the twentieth century in Constantinople we see a Decadence that has exhausted ennui and drained to the dregs dissipation as aesthetic strategies.

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