

## REVIEW ESSAY

### The Age of Decadence

MARGARET D. STETZ 

University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, USA

WHAT does “decadence” mean? Does it mean anything at all? Is it sinister or irresistibly appealing? Regardless of the ambiguity that surrounds the word “decadence” (often with a small “d”), no one can deny that decadence (frequently with a capital “D,” especially when it alludes to the late nineteenth-century European cultural movement) has been sweeping the world of academic publishing. Seen from the perspective of 2022, the past few years appear to have been, at least among scholars, a decade of decadence. Joseph Bristow opens his chapter on “Female Decadence” for the 2016 volume *The History of British Women’s Writing, 1880–1920* by saying, “There is no question that by the mid-1890s one word had come to define avant-garde art and literature in Britain,” and that word was decadence.<sup>1</sup> Judging by the recent proliferation of books and art exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic, history appears to be repeating itself and on a broader scale. Decadence is now defining, or at least preoccupying, many of us.

But why now? Writing in the *New York Times* in February 2020, the politically conservative columnist Ross Douthat suggests that our current century is “The Age of Decadence,” a label that encapsulates for him a combination of “*economic stagnation, institutional decay and cultural and intellectual exhaustion at a high level of material prosperity and technological development*” (italics in original). To those in sympathy with Douthat’s perspective, decadence represents a grave danger and, to use a word popular at the end of the nineteenth century, a state of degeneration. Thus it is a term of opprobrium, too, for another rightward-leaning journalist

---

**Margaret D. Stetz** is the Mae and Robert Carter Professor of Women’s Studies and Professor of Humanities at the University of Delaware. When it comes to being guilty of promoting decadence through her publications, she has a long rap sheet going back to the 1980s. She has also been curator of numerous exhibitions related to the subject, the newest being *Aubrey Beardsley, 150 Years Young*, co-organized with Mark Samuels Lasner, at the Grolier Club, New York City, in fall 2022.

*Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 50, No. 2, pp. 417–429.

© The Author(s), 2022. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/S1060150322000018

and social historian, Simon Heffer, in his 2017 volume, *The Age of Decadence: Britain 1880 to 1914*, where he looks back disapprovingly at the “swagger” that was “the predominant style of the period”—the “obsession with show; the importance of the pose; the decline of the spiritual and the rise of the material”—and at the “moral, intellectual and industrial decline” that allegedly resulted.<sup>2</sup> There is nothing new here. That was the understanding implicit as far back as 1916 when Benjamin Griffith Brawley, the African American literary critic who was also dean of Morehouse College, referred disparagingly to the “heresy” that a “rose is more poetic when it is fading than when it is blooming[.]” an error of judgment that he tied directly to “the aesthetic principle” having been allowed to develop in the nineteenth century “more and more at the expense of the moral”—in other words, to grow decadent.<sup>3</sup>

Others of a different political persuasion, however, have seen these matters in a less apocalyptic light. The earlier “Age of Decadence” that defined the West in the 1890s had a rebellious and, perhaps paradoxically, an innovative and liberating side that balanced any so-called sense of “exhaustion.” Many writers and visual artists of the period who aligned themselves with decadence energetically violated social conventions and rejected an array of accepted categories of thought in search of more creative, individualistic alternatives. They were looked upon as revolutionaries, rather than as mere embodiments of enervation. As Dustin Friedman and Neil Hultgren note in their 2019 essay, “Decadence and the Weird: New Perspectives,” decadence “was a common, if rather imprecise, late-Victorian term that was used to describe anything that seemed to threaten the cultural status quo.”<sup>4</sup> Often, the challenge being posed was to fixed ideas about sexuality and its proper expression. Today, when further classifications and hierarchies—such as those associated with race and gender that undergird injustice and prop up unequal access to power—are being dismantled, there might be positive and even laudable reasons for wishing to explore the phenomenon of the decadent movement and for feeling connected to the decadent past.

Regardless of whether one cares to make the case for some resemblance or special sympathy between the present as an allegedly decadent moment and decadence at the *fin de siècle*, it is inarguable that an extraordinary amount of information about the latter has been appearing over the last ten years. Countless readers, it would seem, wish to know about that earlier period of decadence and about its chief figures; many scholars wish to write about them. There have been studies by

individual authors, such as Matthew Potolsky's *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (2013) and Kostas Boyiopoulos's *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson* (2015); edited volumes of essays, such as Jason David Hall and Alex Murray's *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle* (2013), Marja Härmänmaa and Christopher Nissen's *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle* (2014), and Alex Murray's own *Decadence: A Literary History* (2020); and collections of extracts and shorter texts of the period, such as Jon Crabb's *Decadence: A Literary Anthology* (2017), issued by the British Library. A new international scholarly journal began appearing in 2018, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, with issues so far focused on single figures, such as Arthur Symons, along with broader topics, such as "Decadence and Cinema," as the creation of a Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths, University of London (which also houses the British Association of Decadence Studies, with the charming acronym BADS). Decadence has been traced backward in time, to the earlier part of the so-called long nineteenth century, in Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy's volume, *Decadent Romanticism: 1780–1914* (2015). In addition, there have been convincing efforts to extend the period in question well into the century that followed, as in Kristin Mahoney's *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015). There is even an entire publishing series dedicated to new editions of the works of decadent writers—called "The Jewelled Tortoise," as a tribute to the hapless reptilian victim of des Esseintes's fatal act of shell-decoration in *À rebours*—created by Stefano Evangelista and Catherine Maxwell in 2014 for the Modern Humanities Research Association in the UK. Decadence is everywhere and inescapable; it undergirds careers, and it sells books.

As might be expected, decadence has boosted the visibility of individual figures affiliated with it in the public mind. Under the editorship of Sarah Parker and Ana Parejo Vadillo, the second essay collection devoted to Katharine Bradley and Edith Cooper, the queer British couple who lived and wrote together, bears the eye-catching title *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns* (2019). But even when the word is absent, it still functions as part of the landscape, entering into studies of prominent exponents of decadence and arousing greater curiosity about their texts and their lives. Surely it is no accident that, at a time when the concept of decadence attracts and entices both academic and nonacademic audiences alike, volumes about Oscar Wilde, for instance, are multiplying

unstoppably and competing in the marketplace, with collections ranging from Michael F. Davis and Petra Dierkes-Thrun's *Wilde's Other Worlds* (2019) to Frederick S. Roden's *Critical Insights: Oscar Wilde* (2019) emerging almost simultaneously. So, too, major biographies of Wilde have followed in quick succession on bookstore shelves: Nicholas Frankel's *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years* (2017) and his more comprehensive *The Invention of Oscar Wilde* (2021); Matthew Sturgis's massive *Oscar: A Life* (2018); and Kimberly J. Stern's *Oscar Wilde: A Literary Life* (2019).

In recent years, Wilde has also dominated the world of museum and library exhibitions, much as he dominated the cultural scene in his own day. Wilde's grandson, the author Merlin Holland, was responsible for mounting the very large-scale and artwork-based *Oscar Wilde: Insolence Incarnate*, which ran from September 2016 to January 2017 at the Petit Palais in Paris. Less ambitious, though tremendously informative, was a display of Wildean manuscript and print material curated by Joseph Bristow at UCLA's William Andrews Clark Library and held in conjunction with an interdisciplinary conference titled "Curiosity and Desire at the Fin de Siècle" in May 2018. More narrowly focused exhibitions—both of them co-curated by Mark Samuels Lasner and me—were staged in the United States at the Rosenbach of the Philadelphia Free Library in spring 2015 ("*Everything is going on brilliantly*": *Oscar Wilde and Philadelphia*) and, in the UK, at Liverpool Central Library, where the spotlight in autumn 2016 was on the sway that Wilde exerted over the career of his Liverpool-born disciple, Richard Le Gallienne. (Yes, I too plead guilty to encouraging the viral spread of decadence studies outward from universities to the general public.)

The most widely viewed and internationally publicized phenomenon, however, was Andrew Bolton's summer 2019 extravaganza, *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, which linked Wildean images of decadent style to the haute couture industry of later decades, via Susan Sontag. That this last enterprise would be launched in America's fashion capital was only to be expected. As Alice Condé has said in "Decadence and Popular Culture" for the volume *Decadence and Literature* (2019), "Oscar Wilde remains the 'High Priest of the Decadents' . . . [and] is the archetypal decadent dandy."<sup>5</sup> Who in New York City does not admire a dandy, of whatever gender or era, and wish to stare at the clothing he still inspires?

When it comes to Wilde, however, a question remains: at what point did he cease to be an aesthete and turn into a decadent instead? Was it

with the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which paid tribute, though never by name, to J. K. Huysmans's novel *À rebours* (1884)? Or was decadence *avant la lettre* present as an element in Wilde's work nearly a decade earlier, in poems such as "The Harlot's House"? The slope of allegiance from one antibourgeois movement to another was slippery, not only for Wilde but for other contemporaries. In Britain, at least, aestheticism and decadence were rarely as separate from each other as some of the older Pre-Raphaelites and Morrisian arts-and-crafts socialists might, in the 1890s, have preferred to believe. Conversion experiences happened all the time, but newly minted decadents did not necessarily give up an aesthetic commitment to Beauty (with a capital "B"). In the case of Wilde, moreover, an interest in abolishing the capitalist system remained part of his philosophy; his essay "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891) was published in the same year as the seemingly apolitical Ward, Lock and Company version of *Dorian Gray*. For Wilde, decadence was, as he had said about truth, rarely pure and never simple.

Problematic issues of classification hardly ever arise, however, in relation to the other figure of the 1890s with comparable global recognition and influence, Aubrey Beardsley. All of his work is usually categorized unhesitatingly as decadent. That label was affixed to him almost from the first moment that he was brought to the attention of the British public, starting in 1893 with a pseudonymous article by Theodore Wratlaw in *The Artist and Journal of Home Culture*, and it followed him until his untimely death in 1898 at age twenty-five. A year before that tragic event, one of his detractors, the Scottish poet Margaret Armour, used the forum of the *Magazine of Art* to go on the attack with "Aubrey Beardsley and the Decadents." There was no ambiguity there about what decadence meant to her and those who shared her antipathy. As she insisted, "Beardsley is a Decadent, and must do as the Decadents do: he must gloat upon ugliness and add to it; and when it is not there, he must create it."<sup>6</sup> That was not the end of her charges: "To be a devout Decadent, too, you must not only be wicked; you must be worse—as *Punch* would say—you must be vulgar." In Beardsley's art, the result was a certain "grossness, which revolts one even in his treatment of inanimate things, [and] gets free rein in his men and women." Decadence thus served as a "great black, damning shadow . . . that, to many eyes, is total eclipse" and darkened all his accomplishments.<sup>7</sup>

The irony was that Armour's husband, the artist William Brown MacDougall, who supplied the illustrations throughout the 1890s for

her many books, worked in a style closely imitative of Beardsley's. Evidently, Armour believed that what she called the "genius" of Beardsley's technique could be divorced from what decadence allegedly had overlaid upon it: "disdain of classical traditions in art, and of clean traditions in ethics."<sup>8</sup> Future generations of critics, of course, would deny both that such a separation was possible and the premises on which this hope was founded.

Jan Marsh, for instance, in *Aubrey Beardsley: Decadence & Desire* (2020), has no trouble deciding that what makes Beardsley's art unique and important is the deliberate yoking of its "lines elegant and subjects often classical" with a "treatment of them [that] is subversive, provocative and frequently obscene." For her, "These contradictions lie at the heart of Beardsley's aesthetic appeal, as visual pleasure is both undercut and enhanced by ugly content, eliciting a shiver of disgusted delight."<sup>9</sup> That Marsh would produce such an argument and do so in a small-format book at a low price (£14.95; \$19.95), clearly aimed at a mass readership and meant to be sold in venues such as museum gift shops, is perhaps further proof of the current marketability of decadence, which features prominently in her volume's subtitle, coupled with the erotic charge of the word "desire."

Marsh is among the foremost scholars of Pre-Raphaelitism as well as the preeminent expert on women in the Pre-Raphaelite movement (and curator of an outstanding 2019 exhibition at London's National Portrait Gallery on the latter subject). She has not, until now, been widely identified with fin de siècle subjects. Given her area of special knowledge, it is no surprise that the artist who, after Beardsley himself, most often commands Marsh's attention in this book is Edward Burne-Jones. His name appears within the text a total of twelve times. Indeed, his opinions function sometimes as a kind of touchstone, with Marsh quoting his alarmed reactions as Beardsley moved ever farther from Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic principles. We hear, therefore, that Burne-Jones spoke of him as a "Damned young fool" for having affiliated himself with Oscar Wilde's "horrid set," and that he was appalled by the highly sexualized drawings that Leonard Smithers commissioned for an edition of *Lysistrata* (1896), condemning them as "detestable" and "lustful."<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the name of the publisher John Lane turns up only once in Marsh's text, in connection with Wilde's *Salome* (1894), although Beardsley supplied numerous designs for Lane's Bodley Head volumes, and Lane was the force behind the *Yellow Book* (1894–97), employing Beardsley as its art editor. (All other mentions of Lane are merely in the credits for illustrations taken

from Bodley Head publications.) Marsh reproduces a little-known sketch of Burne-Jones by Beardsley, done in 1891, that is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. But there are no references to, let alone images of, such significant contributions to 1890s publishing—including examples of “female decadence”—as Beardsley’s title pages for Florence Farr’s *The Dancing Faun* (1894) and for *Keynotes* (1893), by “George Egerton” (Mary Chavelita Dunne); nor does Marsh discuss any of his innovative initial key designs for over a dozen of the titles in John Lane’s *Keynotes Series*, despite several of those volumes being concerned with both “decadence” and “desire.” In a book that closes so gracefully the gap between academic studies and what the general population will find interesting, and that makes its author’s immense learning accessible to all, such omissions are puzzling.

Both of those groundbreaking Bodley Head title pages are, however, reproduced in *Aubrey Beardsley* (2020), edited by Stephen Calloway and Caroline Corbeau-Parsons. This is the catalog of their wide-ranging exhibition at Tate Britain, which encompassed everything from a large selection of Beardsley’s own works, to portraits by other artists of members of Beardsley’s social and familial circles, to a fascinating group of artworks labeled as “After Beardsley”—twentieth- and early twenty-first-century images, all influenced by or responding to Beardsley, such as a 1901 Picasso drawing of Marie Derval, Klaus Voorman’s black-and-white cover for the Beatles’ *Revolver* album, and a naughty caricature (with an erect penis even taller than the ones in *Lysistrata*) by Gerald Scarfe. Unlike Marsh’s book, which is clearly meant to introduce Beardsley to new audiences, Calloway and Corbeau-Parsons’s large-format and elegantly produced volume appeals more readily to those who are at least somewhat familiar with the artist and his milieu, if only because they saw the exhibition in person during its pandemic-limited runs either in London or in Paris at the Musée d’Orsay. Everything about the catalog is eye-catching and attractive, starting with the front cover, which reproduces Beardsley’s own design for the cover of *Le Morte Darthur* (1893–94) in shining gold against matte black—recalling the effect, of course, of Beardsley’s front cover for Wilde’s *Salome*. A distinctively self-mocking form of decadence rears its head (or some other body part), moreover, on the back cover, which prints in golden capital letters a quotation from the artist himself: “A NEW WORLD OF MY OWN CREATION . . . QUITE MAD AND A LITTLE INDECENT.” It is easy to imagine Beardsley being pleased with the unusual appearance of this volume, given his own penchant for striking design, which extended

to the rooms he inhabited. As his contemporary (and fellow *Yellow Book* contributor) Netta Syrett recalled in her 1939 memoir, *The Sheltering Tree*, there were “deep orange walls, black doors, and black-painted book-cases and fireplaces—a scheme of colour new to me” (78). This combination was, by no coincidence, one that the Tate Britain exhibition used for the room devoted to members of Beardsley’s circle, in an act of self-consciously decorative decadence—a kind of queering of modern gallery space, which so often presents bland white walls and blonde wood, indistinguishable from an Apple store.

*Aubrey Beardsley* preserves in book form the first major UK exhibition devoted to the artist since a 1998 show at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum, timed to coincide with the centenary of Beardsley’s death, which was also curated by Stephen Calloway. Why this one opened in 2020—rather than 2022, the 150th anniversary of Beardsley’s birth—is unclear, although 2020 also saw the founding of an international Aubrey Beardsley Society.<sup>11</sup> The need, however, for a new reckoning has felt increasingly urgent since the publication by Yale University Press of Linda Gertner Zatlin’s massive two-volume *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*—a jaw-droppingly ambitious work of scholarship that proved a kind of crossover popular hit, turning up on the shelves of Waterstones bookstores all over Britain in 2016, while irrefutably demonstrating Beardsley’s significance in the world of art historians. A spirit of reconsideration informs the volume edited by Calloway and Corbeau-Parsons, though none of the writers of its seven essays ever doubts that Beardsley was and continues to be a formidable figure, or that his art, though so often comic and playful in its excess and irreverence, is worthy of serious study. There is little of the now-standard analysis of Beardsley within the context of British or even French decadence; instead, the contributors take up such subjects as obscenity (Clare Barlow), music (Emma Sutton), and satire (Susan Owens), doing so in essays that are both highly illuminating and well written.

Two essays also examine Beardsleyan legacies abroad. While many scholars have commented on what Beardsley owed to Japanese art—none more authoritatively than Zatlin in her 1997 *Beardsley, Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal*—few have told us how Beardsley, in turn, influenced artists in Japan. Joichiro Kawamura’s contribution on this topic is most welcome, although the chronological period covered here does not extend beyond the 1930s. Anyone familiar, however, with the edgy black-and-white manga of the artist Kuniko Tsurita knows that Beardsley’s impact was just as strong in the late twentieth century.



Indeed, ongoing public interest in Japan may be gauged by the release in 2013, well before Marsh's or Calloway and Corbeau-Parsons's volumes, of Hiroshi Unno's *Aubrey Beardsley: The Fin-de-Siècle Magician of Light and Darkness*, another survey of Beardsley's career with a very large selection of images. Later translated by Polly Barton and then published in 2020 by PIE for distribution in both the UK and the US, it offers a somewhat eccentric structure, beginning inexplicably with a ten-page-long section on the 1896 illustrations for *The Rape of the Lock*, before presenting an otherwise chronologically ordered account of Beardsley's life and work. Nevertheless, it makes plain throughout its author's enthusiasm for Beardsley as an artist exemplifying fin de siècle decadence, while still being "fresh and modern even now," and obviously anticipates Japanese readers sharing this appreciative view of his duality.<sup>12</sup>

Thanks to an essay by Rosamund Bartlett, Calloway and Corbeau-Parsons's catalog also provides a brief account of Beardsley's importance to the visual arts and theater in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century and during the years just before the Russian Revolution. But the choice of Japan and Russia alone as foci seems arbitrary, and the story of Beardsley as a global figure remains incomplete. Surely there should at least have been some coverage of the very significant role that Beardsley played in the American arts scene in the same period, where the shadow of his characteristically outré decadence overhung everything from photographs taken in the New York studio of Zaida Ben-Yusuf, to Djuna Barnes's drawings published in newspapers from around 1917, to the graphic artist Rea Irvin's illustrations for Levy Newman's hilarious *Opera Guyed* (1923).

Barnes does turn up, at least in passing, in another recent essay collection, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (2019), edited by Kate Hext and Alex Murray, although both Sarah Parker and Vincent Sherry, in separate essays, focus more attention on Barnes's decadent writing than on her Beardsleyesque art. A very important American connection to Beardsley, however, gets its due in the work of another contributor, Michèle Mendelssohn. Her "A Decadent Dream Deferred: Bruce Nugent and the Harlem Renaissance's Queer Modernity" describes how Nugent, who was openly gay at a time when few of his Black contemporaries in the New York art scene dared to be, "retooled Beardsley's decadent style in *Drawings for Mulattoes* (1927–28), a stark celebration of the queer mulatto who is black and white, man and woman," and in his own versions of the dancing Salome.<sup>13</sup> Hext and Murray's

edited volume is filled with such fascinating discoveries and recoveries of fin de siècle decadence as a shaping force in high modernism on both sides of the Atlantic, even in the productions of authors who vehemently insisted upon their own “make it new”-ness and absence of debt to the past. This is a delightful collection to read, as one contributor after another demonstrates how the claims of canonical and noncanonical modernists alike to being *sui generis* fall by the wayside, and the unmistakable perfume of Wildean gold-tipped cigarettes fills the air. Those contributors include scholars who have long treated readers to marvelous insights into the late Victorian period—from Nick Freeman and Ellis Hanson to Joseph Bristow and Kirsten MacLeod—but who move easily here into the twentieth century to talk about everyone from Carl Van Vechten and H. H. Munro (“Saki”) to Virginia Woolf’s contemporary, the poet Margaret Sackville. The co-editors, Hext and Murray, deserve to be commended for spearheading such an enterprise, for providing an introduction that celebrates what they call “The Queer Vitality of Decadence,” and for defending decadence against the charge of being “some embarrassing jejune infatuation” that was supposedly “grown out of” by later generations.<sup>14</sup>

For those who wish to see decadence situated within an even wider frame—indeed, in a mirror that reflects much of Western history in general—there is also *Decadence and Literature* (2019), edited by Jane Desmarais and David Weir. It is a complementary, rather than a competing, volume although it, too, moves into the modernist period with essays such as Deborah Longworth’s chapter on “Paris-Lesbos” in the early twentieth century and Gerald Gillespie’s “Decadence and Modernism.” Chronologically, however, it starts with a section of “Origins” that takes readers all the way back to ancient Rome (via an essay by Jerry Toner), then leads them forward through later constructions of Rome as decadent by European historians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although a collection titled *Decadence and Literature* might be expected to concentrate exclusively on literary examples, this one does not. Not only does it embrace historiography but the visual arts (Laura Moure Cecchini), classical music (Emma Sutton), film (David Weir), and modern pop culture phenomena such as David Bowie and Lady Gaga (Alice Condé). There are discussions of disciplines ranging from sociology to philosophy, science, and theology, all in relation to decadence. Whereas Calloway and Corbeau-Parsons’s catalog located Beardsonian decadence in Japan and Russia, Katharina Herold’s chapter in Desmarais and Weir’s collection examines it in the context of

turn-of-the-century Vienna and Weimar Berlin. Stefano Evangelista broadens the scope even more productively with “Transnational Decadence,” viewing decadence in terms of a network of relationships that circled the globe while paying homage to “decadent writers” for being “at the vanguard in finding new models for understanding and practising literature beyond the framework of the nation.”<sup>15</sup> Evangelista’s emphasis on this newness and on the politically innovative turn of decadence accords well with the positive perspective of the volume’s editors. In their introduction, Desmarais and Weir highlight the “remarkably dynamic reversals of meaning” inherent in decadence, so that “the idea of decay or decline becomes—or can become—generative, inventive, creative, even progressive.”<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, despite the seeming comprehensiveness of *Decadence and Literature*, there is one sphere where decadence has been of great importance but escapes consideration, for there is no chapter on theater. For that, one must go to yet another collection, this one edited by Alex Murray alone, *Decadence: A Literary History* (2020). Sos Eltis’s essay there, “Theatre and Decadence,” offers a useful survey that moves beyond Wilde and Ibsen to encompass everything from Elizabeth Robins’s *Alan’s Wife* to G. B. Shaw’s *Heartbreak House*. Clearly, the hunt for further fields where decadence left its mark is not over, nor should it be.

As my brief survey suggests, attention to decadence has become an increasingly sober, scholarly business along with a culturally significant and respectable one. But there is something jarring, too, in such a development. No matter how one chooses to define or respond to decadence or to the fin de siècle decadent movement, it is obvious that being respectable was never part of the decadents’ concern, nor would most of them have welcomed such academic study. For readers seeking an alternative to being immersed in so much profundity and wishing to experience decadence directly, at its outrageous best, I recommend a refreshing dip into a small volume edited by Matthew Sturgis: *Bons Mots & Grotesques* (2020), by Aubrey Beardsley. It is filled with the imaginatively peculiar drawings that Beardsley produced as “grotesques,” along with examples of his remarkably witty pronouncements on his own work and on the world around him. Let his be the last word on a form of art that has long been both condemned and praised, while being labeled the epitome of decadence: “I represent things as I see them—outlined faintly in thin streaks (just like me).”<sup>17</sup>

## NOTES

1. Bristow, *History of British Women's Writing*, 86.
2. Heffer, *Age of Decadence*, 1, 30.
3. Brawley, "Pre-Raphaelitism," 79.
4. Friedman and Hultgren, "Decadence and the Weird," 35.
5. Condé, "Decadence and Popular Culture," in Desmarais and Weir, *Decadence and Literature*, 379.
6. Armour, "Aubrey Beardsley and the Decadents," 10.
7. Armour, "Aubrey Beardsley and the Decadents," 10.
8. Armour, "Aubrey Beardsley and the Decadents," 9.
9. Marsh, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 6.
10. Marsh, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 26, 28.
11. The Beardsley Society's website is <https://ab2020.org>.
12. Unno, *Aubrey Beardsley*, 221.
13. Mendelssohn, "A Decadent Dream Deferred," in Hext and Murray, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, 258.
14. Hext and Murray, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*, 23.
15. Evangelista, "Transnational Decadence," in Desmarais and Weir, *Decadence and Literature*, 330.
16. Desmarais and Weir, *Decadence and Literature*, 4.
17. Beardsley, *Bons Mots & Grotesques*, 14.

## WORKS CITED

- Armour, Margaret. "Aubrey Beardsley and the Decadents." *Magazine of Art*, January 1897, 9–12.
- Beardsley, Aubrey. *Bons Mots & Grotesques*. Edited by Matthew Sturgis. London: Pallas Athene, 2020.
- Boyiopoulos, Kostas. *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons, and Dowson*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
- , and Mark Sandy, eds. *Decadent Romanticism: 1780–1914*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2015.
- Brawley, Benjamin. "Pre-Raphaelitism and Its Literary Relations." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 15, no. 1 (January 1916): 68–81.
- Bristow, Joseph. "Female Decadence." In *The History of British Women's Writing, 1880–1920*, edited by Holly A. Laird, 85–96. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- Calloway, Stephen, and Caroline Corbeau-Parsons, eds. *Aubrey Beardsley*. London: Tate Britain, 2020.
- Crabb, Jon, ed. *Decadence: A Literary Anthology*. London: British Library, 2017.

- Davis, Michael F., and Petra Dierkes-Thrun, eds. *Wilde's Other Worlds*. New York: Routledge, 2019.
- Desmarais, Jane, and David Weir, eds. *Decadence and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.
- Douthat, Ross. "The Age of Decadence." *New York Times*, February 7, 2020, [www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/opinion/sunday/western-society-decadence.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/opinion/sunday/western-society-decadence.html).
- Frankel, Nicholas. *The Invention of Oscar Wilde*. London: Reaktion Books, 2021.
- . *Oscar Wilde: The Unrepentant Years*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017.
- Friedman, Dustin, and Neil Hultgren. "Decadence and the Weird: New Perspectives: Introduction." *Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism* 4 (Summer 2019): 35–44.
- Hall, Jason David, and Alex Murray, eds. *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Härmänmaa, Marja, and Christopher Nissen, eds. *Decadence, Degeneration, and the End: Studies in the European Fin de Siècle*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Heffer, Simon. *The Age of Decadence: Britain 1880 to 1914*. London: Random House, 2017.
- Hext, Kate, and Alex Murray, eds. *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019.
- Mahoney, Kristin. *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Marcus, Laura, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr, eds. *Late Victorian into Modern*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Marsh, Jan. *Aubrey Beardsley: Decadence & Desire*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2020.
- Murray, Alex, ed. *Decadence: A Literary History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- Parker, Sarah, and Ana Parejo Vadillo, eds. *Michael Field: Decadent Moderns*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2019.
- Potolsky, Matthew. *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Roden, Frederick S., ed. *Critical Insights: Oscar Wilde*. Ipswich: Salem Press, 2019.
- Stern, Kimberly J. *Oscar Wilde: A Literary Life*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Sturgis, Matthew. *Oscar: A Life*. London: Head of Zeus, 2018.
- Syrett, Netta. *The Sheltering Tree*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939.
- Unno, Hiroshi. *Aubrey Beardsley: The Fin-de-Siècle Magician of Light and Darkness*. Tokyo: PIE International, 2020.
- Zatlin, Linda Gertner. *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.
- . *Beardsley, Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.