AESTHETES AND DECADENTS OF THE 1890'S

An Anthology of
British Poetry
and Prose

**With an Introduction
and Notes
by Karl Beckson**

Revised Edition

WITH 16 ILLUSTRATIONS
BY *Aubrey Beardsley*

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To my wife, Estelle,
and
To my sons, Mace and Eric,
who are neither Aesthetes nor Decadents

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

In 1961, Ian Fletcher, calling the 1890's a "lost decade," pointed out that our understanding of that decade had suffered from two approaches that were both "viciously constricting." The first presents the nineties as a "period piece": "with its green carnations, gas lamps blooming in a Whistlerian Thames, music halls, smoky-crocketed pub interiors, Sherlock Holmes' deerstalker, it is all safely dead." The other approach is by way of Yeats's mythic view of the "Tragic Generation," which, as Fletcher states, "concentrates on the heroic failures." If the nineties have indeed provided journalistic entertainment, Yeats attempted to lend dignity to disaster, a vision that, despite its "constricting" effect, still haunts us, as it did him, precisely because it is history heightened by imagination.

In the twenty years since Fletcher's article, which gave us a view of the "variety and vivacity of the decade," the scholarship lavished upon this period has been quite extraordinary. Many figures who do not come within the scope of this anthology have particularly benefited—for example, Shaw, Hardy, Wells, and Gissing, among others. Fletcher's insistence that "we need more fundamental texts" has been partly answered by the appearance of editions of primary works and letters, the latter by such figures represented in this volume as Pater, Wilde, Dowson, Beardsley, Beerbohm, and Symons. In addition, the appearance of the "Makers of the Nineties" series, edited by Dr. G. Krishnamurti, Honorary Secretary of the Eighteen Nineties Society (London), is providing new material on the lesser-known figures of the decade and reprints of almost forgotten works. (In addition to publishing biographies of such writers as Olive Custance, John Oliver Hobbes, and Henry Harland, the Society has reprinted *The Cameleon*, the notoriously homosexual periodical that died with

its first issue.) Indeed, the establishment of the Eighteen Nineties Society in 1972 (which incorporated the Francis Thompson Society, in 1963) has given much-needed direction and stimulus to scholarly activity. In addition to the annual *Journal of the Eighteen Nineties Society*, the Society publishes a newsletter, *Keynotes*, which serves as a clearinghouse for information and inquiry. Such publications augment the valuable work published by *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, edited by the late Helmut Gerber, who for many years had been a driving force in the study of this period.

While the nineties continue to exert their special fascination for those who work its rich ore, in recent years the decade, often called "transitional," with its multitude of "isms" (such as Aestheticism, Impressionism, Symbolism, and Naturalism), has been slowly absorbed by a new "ism" that, like Hamlet's crab, has been going backwards. Once widely used to describe literary experimentation with its development of new styles and sensibilities between the two world wars, the term *Modernism* has been extended by many literary historians to the late nineteenth century (as far back as the 1870's by some). In their anthology, *Modernism: 1890-1930*, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane argue that Modernism is "the one art that responds to the scenario of our chaos." With the failure of Victorianism as cultural compromise in the late nineteenth century, Modernism arose as a response and challenge. Therefore, the nineties, both end and beginning, acquire crucial significance.

In preparing this volume for re-issue, I have expanded the bibliography in recognition of significant scholarship published since 1966, and I have provided selective annotations (especially where titles of works are inadequately descriptive) as a guide for students undertaking a study of Aestheticism and Decadence in the nineties. Since my original "Introduction" advanced the view that the Aesthetic Movement led to twentieth-century Modernism (though I did not use the latter term), I have not seen the need to revise what I have said there. However, had I done so, I would have revised some rather demeaning remarks on Wilde to reflect current critical estimates (as well as my own). In their recent view of research on Wilde, Ian Fletcher and John Stokes have written:

> *A clever graduate student once observed, "How can I write anything about Wilde? He is always right about everything." Some have written about Wilde, holding an opposite belief; but more truth subsists in the remark than in the notion that Wilde is insincere, shallow, immoral, irremediably minor. It needs to be said unequivocally that Wilde is a major figure, a master of the moral life. In all their dealings with Wilde, the English have been wrong about practically everything.*

And much current criticism on Wilde has asserted that he was less a slavish borrower than a brilliant originator. One final correction to the "Introduction": *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was never serialized. The first version appeared complete in the July, 1890, issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* (London and Philadelphia.)

K.B.
November 1, 1981

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

To most students of the period, the 1890's in England—more specifically, London—are less a chronological designation than a state of mind. For some, the decade conjures yellow visions of Decadence, of putrescence in life and art, with its loss of the "complete view" of man in nature, perhaps best symbolized by fetid hothouses where monstrous orchids, seemingly artificial, are cultivated as a challenge to nature and an assertion of man's cunning. For others, the 1890's suggest the artist's protest against a spiritually bankrupt civilization, his imagination striving for the unattainable to restore his wholeness.

Limited as the phenomenon of Decadence was—one writer has rightly referred to it as but a single stone in the mosaic of the Nineties[1]—in recent years it has attracted the attention of critics who see in its curious posing, its desire to shock with excursions into perversion, its devotion to artifice, and its desire to pull down the decaying temples of Victorian respectability, not only an absorbing chapter in literary history and taste but also a significant prelude to and major influence on contemporary literature. In both the Decadence of the Nineties and in our current literature, one encounters a similar quest for new experience and for new forms of expression in a world bereft of unassailable truths.

The attempt to state precisely what Decadence and Aestheticism mean has led numerous literary historians to dash themselves on the semantic rocks. For most modern critics, the term "Decadence"—when used to describe certain nineteenth-century works—does not carry pejorative con-

[1] This was also the period, one recalls, of Shaw, Wells, Kipling, and Thomas Hardy, among others.

notations. In the Nineties, however, it generally implied marked condemnation and on many occasions was used to characterize the artist's moral and spiritual depravity.[2] In 1893, Arthur Symons turned its pejorative suggestions into praise by describing Decadence as a "beautiful and interesting disease," though later in the decade he limited the term to style alone. (There was confusion in the Nineties—and to some extent today—in the use of "Decadent" to characterize the artist, his work, or both; Ernest Dowson is still widely referred to as a Decadent because of his erratic life, though his poems reveal few decadent qualities.) Similar problems exist with the term "Aesthete," which in the 1880's evoked visions of effeminate poets holding various floral displays in characteristic poses, as in the case of Wilde, who welcomed the label. However, Aestheticism implies certain attitudes rather than forms of behavior, attitudes associated with the concern over aesthetic form and experience divorced from moral judgment. Despite the attendant difficulties, both terms can be usefully employed to delineate attitudes, style, and subject matter.

In the Introduction that follows, I have attempted to set down some main lines of the "Aesthetic Movement"—the term "movement" is itself misleading, for actually it refers to a great number of writers who subscribe, with varying degrees of assent, to some loosely defined aesthetic principles. In choosing selections, I have been generally guided by the dual principle of quality and relevance.[3] Consequently, I have included such works as the imitative verse of Theodore Wratislaw, whose representative decadent poems occupy as

[2] Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892), which attacked such writers as Baudelaire, Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Zola as degenerates, discovered evidence of madness in their works. "Who but a 'decadent' would treat all these alike?" quipped Nicholas Butler, then a young professor at Columbia University. In the Nineties, Shaw's *The Sanity of Art* and A. E. Hake's *Regeneration: A Reply to Max Nordau* argued against Nordau's thesis.

[3] I have omitted William Morris and John Ruskin from the discussion, for though they are certainly a part of the movement they are at the same time apart from it since they were animated primarily by the desire to reform society's tastes for moral ends, believing not in "art for art's sake" but in art for society's sake.

much space here as the early verse of Yeats, whose work in the Nineties is associated with Aestheticism. In the Appendix, I have included selections from two works that inspired the English Aesthetes and Decadents (Pater's *Renaissance* and Huysmans' *A Rebours*), as well as two satires (one of Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, and one of *The Yellow Book*) which indicate late nineteenth-century attitudes toward the Aesthetes and Decadents.

Since no editor is infallible (one recalls the motto that Symons, as editor of *The Savoy* used in the July, 1896, number: *Ne Juppiter Quidem Omnibus Placet*—"Not even Jupiter pleases everybody") and since limitations of space are a major consideration, the reader may be disappointed by certain inclusions or omissions; to have included all that I wished would have resulted in a volume at least twice its present length.

In the preparation of this volume, several friends and colleagues generously offered their assistance whenever textual problems arose. To my colleagues in the City University of New York—namely, Konrad Gries, of Queens College; Gloria Glikin and Jules Gelernt, of Brooklyn College—I wish to express my gratitude. To John M. Munro, of the American University of Beirut, I am especially grateful for his careful reading of the Introduction (which remains my responsibility) and for enlightening me on several troublesome allusions in the text. I should also like to thank Miss Berenice Hoffman, of Random House, for her patience and helpfulness in the preparation of the manuscript.

The co-operation of the New York Public Library and the Butler Library of Columbia University in reproducing various works has saved me countless hours of tedious copying. And, finally, I am grateful to the Princeton University Library for providing me with a copy of the text of Aubrey Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhäuser*, which had been available only in a privately printed edition prior to its appearance in this volume.

KARL BECKSON

Brooklyn College,
The City University of New York,
November 1, 1965

INTRODUCTION

Oh Wilde, Verlaine, and Baudelaire,
their lips were wet with wine,
Oh poseur, pimp, and libertine! Oh
cynic, sot, and swine!
Oh voteries of velvet vice! . . . Oh
gods of light divine!

ROBERT SERVICE

When *The Yellow Book* appeared in April, 1894, a "universal howl" went up, wrote John Lane, its publisher, because of Beardsley's cover and title page designs. The London *Times* decried Beardsley's efforts as "repulsive and insolent" and labeled the entire enterprise "a combination of English rowdyism and French lubricity," despite the fact that such contributors as Henry James, Edmund Gosse, and George Saintsbury—little known as rowdies or libertines—provided proper balance to Beardsley and Beerbohm. Reacting to the latter's "Defence of Cosmetics," the *Westminster Gazette* clamored for an "act of Parliament to make this kind of thing illegal." In the United States, the prominent literary journal *The Critic*, heading its initial review "A Yellow Impertinence," called *The Yellow Book* "the Oscar Wilde of periodicals," [1] and later referred to a subsequent

[1] Wilde, furious at not being invited to contribute to *The Yellow Book*, wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas on the appearance of the first number: "It is dull and loathsome: A great failure—I am so glad."

number as "A Yellow Bore," both "indecent and dull." By February, 1895, *The Critic*, its hostility increasing, declared that the fourth number pandered to "depraved tastes." [2] Though for much of the press the daring of *The Yellow Book* was interpreted as a deliberate and dangerous assault upon respected codes of decency, for *Punch*, less inclined to hysteria, this newest expression of Decadence provided comic inspiration for doggerel verse.

Not since the publication of Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* (1866), attacked for its paganism and satanism, had there been such a sensation in the literary world. Swinburne had been charged with perversity, unwholesomeness, and morbidity—terms later flung at the Aesthetes and Decadents, who wore them as badges of their sensitivity and superiority. In this they had been instructed by their counterparts in France, who declared that the bourgeoisie was not only their natural enemy but also their sport, for in order to demonstrate their moral superiority, they would have to shock and dazzle the dull and muddy mettled middle classes—*épater le bourgeois*.[3] For a brilliant exponent of the pose, the English needed only to turn to Théophile Gautier (1811–72), who, more than any other figure of the nineteenth century, had

[2] In 1897, *The Critic*, commenting on the apparent suicide of Hubert Crackanthorpe, a contributor to *The Yellow Book*, wrote that it was not "surprised": "No young man, or old one, for that matter, could write such morbid, loathsome stories as he wrote and have a sane mind. He was the most pronounced type of the decadent. . . . There is, after all, a good deal of truth in some of Nordau's theories. A man must have a diseased mind who finds pleasure in writing of diseased morals."

[3] In 1894, *The Chameleon*, a journal with distinctly homosexual preoccupations, appeared in England, with Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas as contributors. Its first number was its last. In an anonymous essay titled "On the Appreciation of Trifles," the writer argues: ". . . if the average Philistine were to be civilized and were suddenly to become enamoured of the beauty of those trifles that today are the exclusive enjoyment of the artist, we should feel the loss of his quaint antics very keenly. It would be very sad if we were to lose that great delight to which I alluded earlier: it would be very sad if there were no one left to shock." (See Wilde's "Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young.")

publicized the idea of "art for art's sake"—*l'art pour l'art*[4] —and who had developed shocking as a fine art.

At the age of nineteen, Gautier attended the stormy premiere of Hugo's anticlassical drama *Hernani* (1830) dressed in a bright pink waistcoat, to which he later ironically attributed his fame as a young man. He was, however, not in complete sympathy with Hugo's belief in art for progress' sake. Gautier felt that Hugo, like other leading Romantics, such as Vigny and Lamartine, was debasing art by lending his pen to humanitarian causes. In the introduction to his second volume of poems, *Albertus* (1832), he wrote: "In general, when a thing becomes useful, it ceases to be beautiful," an idea he developed in the celebrated preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835), which advanced the idea that art was concerned only with itself in opposition to the idea of *l'art utile* held by political radicals and bourgeois writers. In an attempt to force a cleavage between art and social reform, he contended that beauty and usefulness were mutually exclusive:

> *Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless, everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need and the needs of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor weak nature. The most useful place in a house is the lavatory.*

As the foremost inspiration in the "Aesthetic Movement," Gautier established what was to become a central concept of Parnassianism: the supremacy of form. In his *Victor Hugo* (1835), he announced that the difference between a block of stone and a statue lay in its form, that the poet, too, was a sculptor, for he carved ideas and images out of words. The separation of form from content was, he contended, incomprehensible, for "Une belle forme est une belle idée."

By stressing the analogy with the plastic arts, Gautier attempted to make poetry objective and impersonal. In his poem "L'Art," which he added to his 1858 edition of *Emaux*

[4] First used in 1804 by writers to indicate disinterestedness in art, a concept which the German philosopher Kant had expressed as "purposiveness without purpose." By the late 1820's, however, it designated a movement which expressed hostility to the intrusion of moral, political, and social ideas in art.

et camées (*Enamels and Cameos*), he issued a manifesto urging poets to avoid easy rhythms and to forge hard, clear lines. Only an art purified of irrelevant intrusions of morality and social-political ideas could resist time.[5] Spontaneity, he cautioned, was the reckless outpouring of emotion without suitable control, a fault he noted in the Romantics. Art required the chisel and the file.

To achieve the impression of hardness and clarity, Gautier employed such images as exquisitely carved cameos, porcelains, marble statues, and gems. The lapidary quality of his verse was sufficiently distinctive and attractive to influence both the French and English Parnassians.[6] To preserve artistic purity and autonomy, Gautier employed what the Romantics had called *transposition d'art*, by which poetry, for example, attempted to suggest the effects produced by the other arts. Sonnets were called pastels; and pastels sonnets. Thus, in *Emaux et camées*, "Symphonie en blanc majeur" is designed to suggest a musical composition.[7]

Though the English Parnassians agreed with Gautier that

[5] The English Parnassian Arthur O'Shaugnessy was later to write:

> What is eternal? What escapes decay?
> A certain, faultless, matchless, deathless line
> Curving consummate . . .

[6] Théodore de Banville (1823–91), who titled a volume of poems *Améthystes* (1862), announced in his *Petit traité de poésie française* (1872) that the sharply defined image should be the poet's major concern; that poetry was "at the same time music, statuary, painting, and eloquence"; and that poets should return to older fixed forms of verse, such as the ballade, rondeau, and triolet. Influenced by Banville, Austin Dobson, whose free translation of Gautier's "L'Art" provided the English Parnassians with a manifesto, titled a series of poems "A Case of Cameos" (1876) and in 1893 published *Proverbs in Porcelain*. Like Andrew Lang, Edmund Gosse, and W. E. Henley, Dobson followed Banville's example in using the older French fixed forms.

[7] The influence of *transposition d'art* is apparent in the American painter Whistler, who painted "harmonies" and "nocturnes." When he contributed an illustration to the second number of *The Yellow Book* titled "Symphony in White," the critic for the *Saturday Review* wanted to know why the title should be used for a picture with so many colors. Whistler replied: "And does he then believe that a Symphony in F contains no other note, but shall be a continued repetition of F, F, F? . . . Fool!" (See Wilde's "Symphony in Yellow.")

form and craft were of primary importance, the doctrine of *l'art pour l'art* was alien to their temperaments. Essentially moral in their attitude toward art, they adopted the poetic fashions and ignored the slogans, for the aestheticism they were attracted to did not imply hostility to the bourgeoisie. They wished to avoid the unrestrained verbal fleshliness of Swinburne, who, like the earlier Spasmodics, valued spontaneity. Traditional form and restraint, the English Parnassians agreed, were suitable to a British man of letters, an ideal expressed by Dobson in "In After Days," which he regarded as his epitaph: "He held his pen in trust/To Art, not serving shame or lust."

Dobson's declaration of purity was an attempt to dissociate himself from French Decadence as well as from "The Fleshly School of Poetry" in England. The latter phrase, coined by Robert Buchanan in an article which appeared in the *Contemporary Review* in 1871, had ignited a controversy that involved Dante Gabriel Rossetti, one of the primary targets of the moralists. As leader of the Pre-Raphaelites, Rossetti was attacked for his fleshliness in verse ("fleshly all over from the roots of his hair to the tips of his toes"), his lack of wholesomeness, his erotic daydreams and for his aestheticism. Preferring medievalism to materialism, he was both poet and painter who, like Gautier, saw the possibility of combining the arts. Though he held ideas somewhat similar to those of the French Aesthetes, he was convinced that subject was more important than mere form and that *l'art pour l'art* was a meaningless doctrine. The sensuality of Rossetti and other aesthetic poets, Buchanan raged, was "shooting its ulcerous roots deeper and deeper, blotching more and more the fair surface of things." [8] For many young Aesthetes, however, Rossetti, despite his hostility to Aestheticism and artifice, provided inspiration rather than discoloration.

Though the Pre-Raphaelites were far from being apostles of amorality in art, they were regarded by their later worshippers as the archetypes of anti-Philistinism. Rossetti, the

[8] In 1887 Buchanan, revising his estimate, declared that "those who assert that Rossetti loved Art 'for its own sake' know nothing of his method."

cloistered dreamer devoted to beauty, appealed to those young writers who saw nineteenth-century science and progress, industrialism and prosperity as forces destructive to the imagination.[9] Yeats considered him a "subconscious influence" on the Rhymers' Club (1890–95), which included Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson, Arthur Symons, Richard Le Gallienne, and Yeats himself, who had helped to found it.

Buchanan's other major target in his attack was Swinburne, who deserves more than anyone before him the distinction of being called "the first Decadent in England." Already hailed by an anonymous reviewer for the London *Saturday Review* as "the libidinous laureate of a pack of satyrs," Swinburne was amused by Buchanan's fulminations over *Poems and Ballads* and the evil influence of Baudelaire, whom Buchanan referred to as "a fifth-rate *littérateur*" and "the godfather of the modern Fleshly School."

When Gautier died, Swinburne was asked to contribute to a memorial volume, *Le Tombeau de Gautier* (1873; the only other English contributor was John Payne, a minor Parnassian poet). Swinburne's contribution—which Tennyson called "poisonous"—was a sonnet in praise of Gautier's novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, about which he wrote: "This is the golden book of spirit and sense,/The writ of beauty . . ." The novel, which Mario Praz has called "the apologia of lesbian love" and "the Bible of the Decadence," reveals Gautier's love of physical beauty and his interest in sexual perversion. (Gautier himself took up weight-lifting and spent much time in the Greek rooms at the Louvre.) The Chevalier d'Albert, its hero, suffers from a feeling of spiritual impotence and ennui. In his craving for the impossible—which Gautier believed was a central characteristic of the decadent sensibility—he yearns to be a woman in order to taste new experiences. At the estate of his mistress, d'Albert falls in love with a handsome young man who he suspects is a woman in disguise. The "young man" is, of course, Mademoiselle de Maupin, who confesses to her epistolary confi-

[9] In a famous pronouncement, the Pre-Raphaelite painter Burne-Jones declared, "The more materialistic Science becomes, the more angels shall I paint."

dant that she cannot love either a man or a woman completely. Before leaving the estate, she appears in d'Albert's room. Disrobing before d'Albert, she poses like a Greek goddess at the Louvre; enthralled by the perfection of her body, he studies her as though she were a work of art, reluctant to take his eyes from the vision. After a night of love, she leaves d'Albert, but not before spending some time with his mistress as well.[10]

Though Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* was universally condemned—*The Athanaeum* said that Swinburne was "unclean for the sake of uncleanness" and a letter from Dublin threatened him with castration—it did not suffer legal prosecution as had Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. In the first essay on Baudelaire to appear in England, Swinburne in 1862 defended him by taking the position of *l'art pour l'art*, thus becoming the first English exponent of the idea: "The critical students there in France, as well as here . . . seem to have pretty well forgotten that a poet's business is presumably to write good verses, and by no means to redeem the age and remould society." Countering the charge of immorality, to which Baudelaire had been subjected in France—and to which *Poems and Ballads* would be subjected later—Swinburne saw "not one poem of the *Fleurs du mal* which has not a distinct and vivid background of morality to it," despite the fact that it was, admittedly, poetry of "strange disease and sin." Most Englishmen, including Swinburne, did not grasp the complexities of Baudelaire, but they acknowledged his power and originality. Though Swinburne believed he

[10] In his early twenties, Swinburne, under the spell of Gautier's novel, wrote *The Chronicle of Tebaldeo Tebaldei*, a tale of the Borgias in which Swinburne totally disregarded the Victorian conviction that the primary function of art was moral instruction. In addition to his fascination with perverse and androgynous figures, Swinburne was preoccupied with the theme of the fatal woman—the *femme fatale*. Mario Praz has pointed out in *The Romantic Agony* that the Romantics, such as Byron, were absorbed with the idea of the fatal man, but from mid-century the image of the destructive woman dominates much of the work written by the Aesthetes and Decadents, as indication, some critics believe, of the change from masculine assertion to decadent passivity.

was doing in English what Baudelaire had done in French, T. S. Eliot has remarked that "had Swinburne known anything about vice or sin, he would not have had so much fun out of it." [11]

The most perceptive essay on Baudelaire in the century was unquestionably Gautier's, which appeared as the "Notice" to the 1868 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*. As A. E. Carter states in his important study, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature* (1958), Gautier was in reality summing up his own work while discussing Baudelaire's, for he had anticipated virtually all that one may find in *Les Fleurs du mal*. Gautier perceived that Baudelaire's concern with artifice —which had developed into a cult by mid-century—was of metaphysical significance—that man in a state of nature was evil and that virtue, since it was artificial, was good. In his "Eloge du maquillage" ("Praise of Cosmetics"), Baudelaire had written:

> *All that is beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation. Crime, the taste for which the human animal draws from the womb of his mother, is natural in its origins. Virtue, on the contrary, is* artificial *and supernatural, since gods and prophets were necessary in every epoch and every nation to teach virtue to bestial humanity, and man* alone *would have been powerless to discover it. Evil is done effortlessly and naturally by fate, the good is always the product of some art.*

The employment of make-up, therefore, results in the transcendence of nature:

> *Woman performs a kind of duty when she endeavors to appear magical and supernatural, she should dazzle men and charm them, she is an idol who should be covered with gold in order to be worshiped. She should therefore borrow from all the arts the means of rising above nature in order to better subjugate all hearts and impress all minds.*

[11] Swinburne was, however, not unaware of his own posturing:

> Some singers indulging in curses,
> Though sinful, have splendidly sinned;
> But my would-be malefient verses
> Are nothing but wind.

Similarly, the Decadents' fascination with such drugs as hashish and opium and their preference for absinthe—the official beverage of the movement—enabled the ego to transcend itself and thus improve its natural state.

The artist, too, must proceed from nature to a transcendent reality in order to invest his art with spiritual beauty. For Baudelaire, unlike the earlier Romantics, nature was not an inspiration to his creative genius but the material from which to forge new images; it existed only because it had its origins in the spiritual world. Under the influence of the mystic Swedenborg, Baudelaire adopted the Platonic idea of the universal analogy between the natural and spiritual worlds and Swedenborg's belief that forms, numbers, colors, and perfumes in both worlds were reciprocal. The latter idea was not new, for there had been experiments with synaesthesia in the previous century.[12] Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondences," which had an enormous influence on the Symbolist movement, sets forth the doctrine that nature is a "forest of symbols" and that perfumes, colors, and sounds "answer one another." The imitation of nature was to be avoided; the poet must interpret the vast storehouse of symbols which revealed the spiritual world, the source of all beauty. Asked to write nature poetry, Baudelaire replied in a famous letter to Fernand Desnoyers in 1855 that he was incapable of being moved by vegetables, adding, to indicate his preference for artifice, that he preferred to swim in a bathtub rather than in the sea and that a music box pleased him more than a nightingale.

A believer in original sin, Baudelaire had contempt for humanitarian ideals and the nineteenth-century faith in progress. As a dandy, he cultivated a cold, precise exterior which masked intense suffering brought about by a perverse will. He said that Milton's Satan was just such a figure; and indeed Baudelaire's admirers were attracted to the Satanic elements of his dandyism. In his vision of man and nature, Baudelaire inspired the cult of artifice, a challenge to Rousseau's cult of nature, to which most Romantics subscribed. In this connection, Carter describes the paradox of the revolt:

[12] See G. L. Van Roosbroeck's *The Legend of the Decadents* (New York, 1927), pp. 21–39.

> *The decadents, even when they refused to live by Rousseau's gospel, never denied its truth. They were like unfrocked priests celebrating the Black Mass—perfectly aware that their cult was blasphemous. They accepted Nature as their norm, and primitivism as synonymous with virtue. They admitted, either tacitly or enthusiastically (depending on the individual writer's desire to shock or astonish) that anything different, anything civilized or "artificial" was* a priori *unnatural and depraved. From the very beginning, decadent sensibility is thus self-consciously perverse, and its cult of the artificial distinguishes it sharply from Romanticism, whatever traces of depravity may be found in certain Romantics.*

Indulgence in the abnormal became, moreover, "proof of man's superiority to natural law." The exercise of individual will thus superseded adherence to universal principles. The Romantic—emotional and flamboyant—pursued an ideal love rooted in the natural relations of the sexes; the Decadent—intellectual and austere—sought new sensations in forbidden love, for sexual depravity revealed a desire to transcend the normal and the natural.

Gautier himself did not identify artifice with Decadence, though he had suggested as much in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. He was, like many Decadents, absorbed by paganism and exoticism (such as one finds in *Une Nuit de Cleopâtre*), which for Baudelaire held no interest. Baudelaire did, however, see that modernism, artifice, and Decadence were intimately related. As a Decadent, he envisioned the decay of civilization and the horrifying, seductive evils of men in a style which, as Gautier has described, contains

> *the morbidly rich tints of decomposition, the tones of mother-of-pearl which freeze stagnant waters, the roses of consumption, the pallor of chlorosis, the hateful bilious yellows, the leaden gray of pestilential fogs, the poisoned and metallic greens smelling of sulphide of arsenic, . . . the bitumens blacked and browned in the depths of hell, and all that gamut of intensified colors, correspondent to autumn, to the setting of sun, to overripe fruit, and the last hours of civilization.*[13]

[13] In "Langeur," Verlaine, regarded as a leader of the Decadents at the end of the Second Empire (1852–1870), announced: "Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la Décadence." For an attempt—perhaps satirical—to imitate Baudelaire's images without grasping their function, see below, Michael Field's "From Baudelaire."

All the themes and images which had absorbed the Decadents from Gautier on are to be found in the novel that was to have a profound effect upon the English Decadents—Joris-Karl Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884), usually translated as *Against the Grain*, which Arthur Symons called "the breviary of the Decadence." Its sexually perverse hero, Des Esseintes, like many fictional Decadents, is an aristocrat, the last of his tainted line, who suffers from severe neurosis, later complicated by indigestion, for which he takes—with considerable pleasure—enemas to provide nourishment. His genius and delight is to cultivate an interest in artifice and the abnormal. Thus, in his strange house outside of Paris, where he has secluded himself from a hated bourgeois society, he becomes absorbed in the authors of the Latin Decadence, and exotic gems, diseased flowers and monstrous orchids that look artificial.[14] Suffering from boredom, he seeks new sensations which are *à rebours*: he builds a "mouth organ" which instead of musical tones releases various liquors in symphonic arrangements to suit changing moods; he collects and mounts precious gems on the back of an enormous turtle that dazzles the eye.

In "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893), Symons wrote that Huysmans "has concentrated all that is delicately depraved, all that is beautifully, curiously poisonous, in modern art." Barbey d'Aurevilly, the dandy whom

[14] Though Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* is largely responsible for the strange, exotic flowers that grow in decadent literature—hothouses and orchids becoming central images of the Decadents' disdain of nature—Gautier's *Fortunio* (1837) anticipates both Baudelaire's and Huysmans' works. The hero, who resembles Des Esseintes, lives in a windowless house with a greenhouse of tropical plants in the courtyard. In 1878, George Moore's feeble attempt to imitate Baudelaire resulted in *Flowers of Passion*, which one critic has called "infantile diabolism." Maurice Maeterlinck titled a volume of verse *Les Serres chaudes* (1890), or "Hothouses," and in the Nineties Theodore Wratislaw wrote highly derivative decadent verse with such titles as "Orchids" and "Hothouse Flowers" (see below). See also Symons' "Violet," which restates the decadent devotion to the hothouse.

Mario Praz calls "a Holy Father of the Decadent Movement," wrote of *A Rebours*: "After such a book, it only remains for the author to choose between the muzzle of a pistol or the foot of the cross." Like Des Esseintes, who at the end of the novel returns to bourgeois society to embrace the Church, Huysmans became a devout Catholic.

Though young Aesthetes found in Rossetti and in Keats, whom the Pre-Raphaelites had "discovered," a devotion to beauty and to the world of the imagination, and in Swinburne an extraordinary sensibility which had dramatically widened the area of subject matter in Victorian literature, it was in *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) by Walter Pater, the Oxford don, that they discovered their "golden book." The famous "Conclusion" talked of the flux of life and of the necessity of experiencing with intensity the constantly fleeting impressions: "To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life." And the equally ambiguous: "Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end." And finally, what earned Pater a reputation as the foremost Aesthete of his day: "For art comes to you professing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake."

Pater's subtle, evocative prose, with its sinuous ambiguities and attention to strangeness, had brought to criticism a new sensibility. His admirers saw in *The Renaissance* an unmistakable manifestation of Decadence: in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci, for example, Pater writes that the artist's life was one of "brilliant sins and exquisite moments" and finds that in his work "the fascination of corruption penetrates in every touch of its exquisitely finished beauty." The famous description of Leonardo's *La Gioconda* is Pater's impression of that corruption. Wilde is reported by Yeats to have said of *The Renaissance*: "It is my golden book. I never travel without it; but it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written." Arthur Symons, who had become friendly with Pater in the late 1880's and to whom he dedicated his volume of poems *Days and Nights* (1889), wrote that *The Renaissance* seemed to

him "to be the most beautiful book of prose in our literature. Nothing in it is left to inspiration: but it is all inspired. Here is a writer who, like Baudelaire, would better nature. . . . An almost oppressive quiet, a quiet which seems to exhale an atmosphere heavy with the odour of tropical flowers, broods over these pages; a subdued light shadows them."

Pater became known as the apostle of art for art's sake—he had unfortunately used the term in his "Conclusion"—with all the misunderstandings which that term is heir to. He was, however, concerned with moral development through art, and was not—as some of his professed disciples were—opposed to moral considerations in art. Aware that he was misinterpreted by those who claimed him as their spokesman, Pater removed the "Conclusion" from the second edition (1877), but restored it in the third edition (1888) after he believed that his position had been made clear in his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885). In restoring the "Conclusion," he wrote:

> *This brief "Conclusion" was omitted in the second edition of this book, as I conceived it might possibly mislead some of those young men into whose hands it might fall. On the whole, I have thought it best to reprint it here, with some slight changes which bring it closer to my original meaning. I have dealt more fully in* Marius the Epicurean *with the thoughts suggested by it.*

Pater was indeed far less decadent than his disciples. When someone once tried to convince him of the excellence of Huysmans and his style, he is reported to have said, "Beastly man!" One of Pater's unwelcome disciples was George Moore, who in 1888 sent Pater a copy of his *Confessions of a Young Man*, a semi-autobiographical account of his adventures in Paris during the 1870's, which Moore seems to have envisioned as the English equivalent of Huysmans' *A Rebours*.[15] In a letter to a friend, Moore referred to his *Confessions* as "satiric," but whether it is a satire of the Decadence or of himself he does not say. Pater, too, re-

[15] In the French edition of the *Confessions*, Moore declared: "I am effeminate, morbid, perverse. But above all perverse. Everything that is perverse fascinates me."

garded it as satirical, but he subtly perceived in a letter to Moore, who published it in a preface to the *Confessions*, that the pretense was too thin to escape detection: " 'Thou com'st in such a questionable shape!' I feel inclined to say on finishing your book; 'shape' morally, I mean; not in reference to style . . ."

Moore, though a professed Paterian, was more bewitched by the French. Staggering under the influence of Gautier and Baudelaire, Moore had published *Flowers of Passion* in 1878, which included among its "pale passion flowers" [16] the "Ode to a Dead Body," containing the memorable line: "Poor breasts! whose nipples sins alone have fed . . ." Attacked as immoral, the volume was withdrawn by the publisher. In 1881, he published *Pagan Poems*, which contained—not unexpectedly—"The Hermaphrodite" (after Gautier and Swinburne) and "Chez Moi":

> *My white Angora cats are lying fast*
> *Asleep, closely curled together, and my snake,*
> *My many-coloured Python,*[17] *is awake*
> *Crawling about after a two-months' fast.*

Characteristically, Moore assumed the appropriate poses which he thought might startle his readers—and perhaps himself. Having been dazzled by the "grand barbaric face" of Gautier, he was then attracted to the satanic Baudelaire, whom he little understood:

> *"Les Fleurs du Mal!" beautiful flowers, beautiful in sublime decay, What great record is yours, and were Hell a reality how many souls would we find wreathed with your poisonous blossoms. The village maiden goes to her Faust, the children of the nineteenth century go to you, O Baudelaire, and having tasted of your deadly delight all hope of repentance is vain. Flowers, beautiful in your sublime decay, I press you to my lips . . .*

[16] See Olive Custance's "Candlelight" and Wilde's "The Decay of Lying," which talks of a club of "Tired Hedonists" who wear faded roses in their button-holes. The weariness of the Decadent is his mark of sophistication and moral superiority: it is both cause and effect of his quest for new experiences, preferably abnormal.

[17] The pet Python—named "Jack"—appears in the *Confessions*.

By the late eighties he had abandoned his fastidiously cultivated decadence, his devotion to Pater, and had become a disciple of Zola.[18]

The Rhymers' Club, Yeats tells us in his autobiography, "looked consciously to Pater for [its] philosophy"; elsewhere, Yeats, paraphrasing Pater, says that the Rhymers "wished to express life at its intense moments and at these moments alone." [19] Among the Rhymers, Lionel Johnson was perhaps the only poet who grasped Pater's intent, for, in temperament, he had many affinities with the "Sage" at Oxford. As an undergraduate, Johnson had met Pater and had spent much time in his company. Writing to a friend in 1889, he reported that he "lunched with Pater, dined with Pater, smoked with Pater, walked with Pater, went to mass with Pater, and fell in love with Pater." Johnson later wrote that Pater—far from being the poseur or the effeminate Aesthete depicted by popular journalists and satirists—was "never more characteristically inspired than in writing of things hieratic, ascetic, almost monastic." On Pater's death in 1894, Johnson wrote:

> *Stern is the faith of art, right stern, and he*
> *Loved her severity.*

Johnson shared Pater's attraction to church ritual, which for both was an intensely aesthetic though not unreligious experience, for ritual provided order and symbol.[20] Whether in religious ritual or in a work of art, as Ian Fletcher states in his monograph, Pater sought "through intense experiences the unification of personality" and ultimately moral perfection.

Few of these qualities are to be found in Pater's most

[18] Zola and other realists of the period were habitually referred to as "Decadents" because of the subject matter of their fiction and their insistence that it be free of moral judgment.

[19] In *The Romantic 90's*, Richard Le Gallienne recalls that the young men of the time were urging one another "to burn with a hard gem-like flame."

[20] Johnson's "favorite phrase," Yeats says, was "Life is ritual," which he conducted with "great dignity of manner."

vocal and perhaps most unwelcome disciple, Oscar Wilde, who sought fame by offering himself as a willing object of satire. When Wilde published *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)—part of which had been serialized the year before—it provided Pater with an opportunity to publicly disavow himself from the extreme aestheticism expressed in the Preface and in the novel itself. In the Preface, Wilde had listed—whether seriously or whimsically—such apothegms as "No artist has ethical sympathies" and "All art is quite useless." In the novel, which the London *Daily Chronicle* called "a tale spawned from the leprous literature of the French Décadents, a poisonous book," Dorian Gray is the extraordinarily beautiful young man, an *homme fatal* who attracts others—both male and female—and destroys them. "Made out of ivory and rose leaves" with lips of scarlet, Dorian is counseled by Lord Henry Wotton, his aristocratic, dandified, evil genius: "Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing. . . . A New Hedonism—that is what our century wants. You might be its visible symbol." Filled with such distortions from Pater and familiar motifs from Huysmans (Dorian, fascinated by *A Rebours*, attempts to emulate Des Esseintes' love of artifice), Wilde's novel owes its curious tenets and its conventional ending to the flawed sensibility of its author. In reviewing it, Pater wrote:

> *Clever always, this book seems intended to set forth anything but a homely philosophy of life for the middle-class—a kind of dainty Epicurean theory, rather—yet fails, to some degree, in this, and one can see why. A true Epicureanism aims at a complete though harmonious development of man's entire organism. To lose the moral sense therefore, for instance, the sense of sin and righteousness, as Mr. Wilde's heroes are bent on doing as speedily, as completely as they can, is to lose, or lower, organisation, to become less complex, to pass from a higher to a lower degree of development.*

Pater's "hedonism"—aesthetic, intellectual pleasure—was concerned with the "expansion and refinement of the power of perception." This, Wilde never grasped, nor did he attempt to, for in the isolation of his own genius, he was concerned with the expansion of his public personality. His originality—aside from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which

is his masterpiece—lay in his clever manipulation of other men's ideas rather than in his personal vision and voice.

The term "Decadence" is commonly associated with the 1890's, but it is an error to assume that the decade was "yellow"; indeed, the color white—symbol of purity, which, despite their protestations, the Decadents yearned for—dominates the literature of the period. Though the English Aesthetes and Decadents were a relatively small group, they were vocal and colorful. Many of the Rhymers, for example, were reviewers for some of the leading periodicals and newspapers, in some cases capturing the literary pages of the publication for the purpose of logrolling.[21] Many Aesthetes and Decadents actively contributed to the numerous aesthetic or semi-aesthetic periodicals with such titles as *The Hobby Horse, The Rose Leaf, The Butterfly, The Dome, The Pageant*, and *The Chameleon*—the forerunners of our "little magazines" today—presenting for an interested public the new trends in art and literature.

Early in the Nineties, there developed simultaneously with the fad of Decadence a counter-decadent movement centered chiefly in the editorial offices of *The National Observer*, where Henley, its editor as well as Parnassian poet,[22] gathered about him a number of energetic young men whom Max Beerbohm dubbed "the Henley Regatta." The activist pose in turn became as frenetic as its decadent counterpart. Another counter-trend to the Decadence, though not conceived as such, was the Irish literary renaissance, given impetus by Yeats and his fellow Irishmen in the Rhymers' Club who emphasized the use of Irish myth and legend in litera-

[21] Debates over the practice of logrolling culminated in a series of articles which appeared in the *Westminster Gazette* at the end of 1894.

[22] Henley, like Robert Louis Stevenson, dabbled in French fixed forms but had only scorn for *l'art pour l'art*. His experimentation with new subject matter convinced Symons that he was part of the Decadence (see "The Decadent Movement in Literature"). Henley's Parnassianism and aggressively masculine pose are discussed in Hoxie Neal Fairchild's *Religious Trends in English Poetry*, v. 5 (1962), in a chapter wittily entitled "Chiefly Hearty, Slightly Arty."

ture to revivify Ireland's great heritage and divorce itself from English culture. Though Yeats, in the Nineties, urged his fellow Rhymers to write "pure poetry"—suggesting an adherence to *l'art pour l'art*—he himself wrote verse with strong political overtones and entered the Irish revival with the purpose of transforming existing poetic practice. Both Aesthete and Activist, Yeats tirelessly organized and reorganized Irish literary societies in both London and Dublin to advance the national cause.[23]

The publishing house which achieved fame in the decade as the publisher of *The Yellow Book*, the anthologies of the Rhymers' Club, the works of Le Gallienne, Wilde, and John Gray was the Bodley Head, founded by the enterprising John Lane and Elkin Mathews. Named after Sir Thomas Bodley, the famed founder of the library at Oxford University, whose head appeared on the sign over the entrance of the shop in Vigo Street, the Bodley Head published its first book—Le Gallienne's *Volumes in Folio*—in 1889. Lane and Mathews found that by purchasing "remainders" of fine paper and printing small editions they could make profits out of poetry. The slender, elongated shape of John Gray's *Silverpoints* (1893) with its exquisite cover design, was a typical example of the economical use of available paper for which the Bodley Head was noted. As the leading publisher of well-known Aesthetes and Decadents, it figured prominently in the satires of the period, and indeed the Bodley Head wisely drew attention to itself by publishing such volumes as Owen Seaman's *Battle of the Bays* (1896), a collection of satires and parodies of the Bodley Head poets. Though many respectable authors were also on the publisher's list, the Decadence and the Bodley Head were synonomous in the public mind. Thus, one satire began:

Tell me, where is Fancy bred?
Certes, near the Bodley Head.

[23] The apparent paradox of the Aesthete who is also an Activist is not uncommon in the period; though some wrote of ennui, lassitude, disillusionment, and disengagement, at the same time they might praise the virtue of energy, the glory of nationalism, or the mystique of manhood. Few writers committed themselves to only one cause.

In the Vigo Street domain,
In the shadow of the Lane.

And when *The Yellow Book* appeared, *Punch*, to the annoyance of some Bodley Head authors, scoffed, "Uncleanliness is next to Bodliness."

The Yellow Book, the inspiration of Henry Harland, its literary editor; Aubrey Beardsley, its art editor; and John Lane of the Bodley Head, is unquestionably the most famous of the aesthetic magazines of the Nineties, though not the best. Though Wilde was a "Bodley Head poet," Lane agreed with Harland and Beardsley, who grew to dislike Wilde intensely, that he should be excluded from participating in the venture. Rumors concerning his behavior had grown alarmingly, and Lane knew of one young boy in his own office who had become the object of Wilde's attentions. But Wilde, excluded from *The Yellow Book*, was ironically to be the cause of that journal's eventual death, for in 1895, when he became the object of prosecution after dropping his libel suit against Lord Alfred Douglas' father, the Marquis of Queensberry, who had called him a sodomist, he took with him to the arraignment a copy of a French novel in the traditionally suspect yellow paper cover. One newspaper ran the headline: "Arrest of Oscar Wilde: *Yellow Book* under his arm."

Katherine Mix, in her book *A Study in Yellow: The Yellow Book and Its Contributors* (1960), has told the story of the pressure on Lane to discharge Beardsley, who was, in the public mind, associated with Wilde, since he had done the shocking illustrations for *Salomé*. Concerned more with profits than with loyalty, Lane fired Beardsley. Harland, kept on, selected material calculated not to offend anyone. In April, 1897, exactly three years from the appearance of the first volume, *The Yellow Book* expired.

In London, during and after the Wilde debacle, the literary taverns where many Aesthetes and Decadents habitually met—the Café Royal and the Crown, where Dowson, Symons, Beardsley, Wilde, Lord Alfred Douglas, Beerbohm, Gray, and Wratislaw might be seen almost nightly—were now under the cloud of suspicion. It was said that "every suitcase in London was packed for instant flight." Many who

knew Wilde went to Dieppe, a popular resort in the Nineties, to escape the unpleasantness of the entire proceeding.

In the summer of 1895 in Dieppe, Leonard Smithers, a former solicitor who had acquired a reputation as a publisher of erotica and who had had the courage to publish Arthur Symons' *London Nights* when no other publisher would touch it,[24] proposed to Symons that he edit a magazine that would be the rival of *The Yellow Book*, which, as Symons has written, "had by that time ceased to mark a movement and had come to be little more than a publisher's house magazine." Smithers, who had a keen eye for sensationalism, persuaded Symons, widely known as a spokesman for the Decadent Movement, to become literary editor; in turn, Symons suggested that Beardsley, in low spirits since his dismissal from *The Yellow Book*, be its art editor. The new magazine, named by Beardsley, was to be *The Savoy*. The title, accepted after considerable discussion, was a daring one, since the fashionable hotel of that name in London had been prominently mentioned in some of the most damaging testimony against Wilde in his trial for homosexuality.[25]

Symons managed to solicit contributions from such writers as Bernard Shaw (whose essay "On Going to Church" appeared in the first number), Joseph Conrad, and Ford Madox Hueffer,[26] while persuading many *Yellow Book* authors, such as Dowson, Yeats, Moore, and Crackanthorpe, to contribute to *The Savoy*. In the first number, which appeared in January, 1896, Symons, determined not to have the magazine, despite its title, associated in the public mind with Wilde, stated in the opening editorial comment:

[24] Symons referred to him as "my cynical publisher with the diabolical monocle."

[25] In 1897, after both *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy* had ceased publication, Leonard Smithers, publisher of the latter journal, approached Beardsley with a proposal that he participate in a new journal to be called *The Peacock*. Beardsley wrote in December: "By all means bring forth the *Peacock*. I will contribute cover and what you will, and also be editor, that is if it is *quite agreed that Oscar Wilde contributes nothing to the magazine, anonymously, pseudonymously or otherwise.*"

[26] Hueffer later changed his name to Ford Madox Ford.

> *We have no formulas and we desire no false unity of form or matter. We have not invented a new point of view. We are not Realists or Romanticists or Decadents. For us, all art is good which is good art. We hope to appeal to the tastes of the intelligent by not being original for originality's sake, or audacious for the sake of advertisement, or timid for the convenience of the elderly minded.*

The Savoy, which had a far less sensational debut than *The Yellow Book*, was received by the press with generally favorable notices.[27] (The *Sunday Times*, for example, called it a *Yellow Book* "redeemed of its puerilities.") Its success seemed assured: Beardsley was contributing his most striking and mature illustrations, and the literary contributions were consistently high. (From Pont Avon, France, Dowson wrote to Smithers: "It is a great and admirable institution the 'Savoy' and held in high esteem here and elsewhere. . . . May the hair of John Lane grow green with Envy!") Smithers decided to publish monthly instead of quarterly.

The death of *The Savoy*, however, came rapidly, the result of late Victorian prudery and the lack of adequate public support. Smith and Son, the company which controlled distribution of most magazines in railway book stalls, objected to an illustration, previously unpublished, by William Blake, *Antaeus Setting Virgil and Dante upon the Verge of Cocytus*, which appeared in an article by Yeats. Largely because the company banned the magazine, Smithers found himself cut off from a major outlet. The concluding number of *The Savoy*—its most famous, perhaps—appeared in December, 1896, entirely written by Symons and illustrated by Beardsley. In "By Way of Epilogue," Symons concluded the magazine's career:

[27] *Punch*, as might be expected, parodied *The Savoy*, referring to it as *The Savoloy* (a kind of sausage) and introducing such contributors as Simple Symons, Mr. Weirdsley, and Max Mereboom: "There is not an article in the volume that one can put down without feeling the better and purer for it." And elsewhere in the parody: ". . . every mother should present it to her daughter, for it is bound to have an ennobling and purifying influence."

On the other hand, Richard Ellmann has recently written: "[*The Savoy*] was the first and only English magazine to expound and illustrate [the Symbolist] movement."

> *We are obliged to retire from existence on account of the too meagre support of our friends. Our first mistake was in giving so much for so little money, our second, in abandoning a quarterly for a monthly issue. The action of Messrs. Smith and Son in refusing to place "The Savoy" on their bookstalls . . . was another misfortune. And then, worst of all, we assumed that there were many people in the world who really cared for art, and really for art's sake.*

The American *Chap-Book*, noting its end, referred to Symons as "playing the Hindoo widow and entombing himself with the sad remains."

In the advertisements at the back of the final issue of *The Savoy*, there appeared an announcement of a forthcoming book to be published by Smithers, *The Decadent Movement in Literature*, by Arthur Symons, who was in the process of expanding his 1893 essay into book form. When the book finally appeared in 1899, its title was changed to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. In the latter part of the decade, Symons had been clarifying his thinking on Symbolism and Decadence, perhaps under the influence of Yeats, who had been his close friend since 1895. In the introduction to *The Symbolist Movement*, which is dedicated to Yeats, Symons attempted to rescue the term "Decadence" from the journalists and satirists who had used and abused it to refer to a way of life rather than to a style of literature:

> *It pleased some young men in various countries to call themselves Decadents, with all the thrill of unsatisfied virtue masquerading as uncomprehended vice. As a matter of fact, the term is in its place only when applied to style, to that ingenious deformation of the language, in Mallarmé, for instance. . . . No doubt perversity of form and perversity of matter are often found together, and, among the lesser men especially, experiment was carried far, not only in the direction of style. But a movement which in this sense might be called Decadence could but have been straying aside from the main road of literature. Nothing, not even conventional virtue, is so provincial as conventional vice, and the desire to "bewilder the middle classes" is itself middle class. The interlude, half a mock-interlude, of Decadence, diverted the attention of the critics while something more serious was in preparation.*

This attitude had appeared earlier in an essay on George Meredith (1897), in which Symons wrote: "What Decadence, in literature, really means is that learned corruption of language by which style ceases to be organic, and becomes, in the pursuit of some new expressiveness or beauty, deliberately abnormal." But the confusion between the use of the term decadence to refer either to an artist's behavior or to his art persisted throughout the decade. In 1900, Andrew Lang, with some levity, described the typical Decadent:

> *By kicking holes in his boots, crushing in his hat and avoiding soap, any young man may achieve a comfortable degree of sordidness, and then, if his verses are immaterial, and his life suicidal, he may regard himself as a Decadent indeed.*

The blurring of the term was, to some extent, part of Symons' own doing, for he used it for both literary characters and authors: in his essay on the Decadent Movement, he describes Des Esseintes, hero of *A Rebours*, as "a typical Decadent." In another essay, Symons somewhat erroneously refers to Dowson as one who "without a certain sordidness in his surroundings was never quite comfortable, never quite himself," adding that the "curious love of the sordid" was a "common affectation of the modern decadent."

Yeats, however, looking back to his youth and recalling the unfortunate ends to which some of his friends came (early death, madness, and suicide), preferred to designate them as the "Tragic Generation." Le Gallienne, also recording his memories, called the decade "romantic." Both views account for the legendary quality of the period, for in the midst of the posing,[28] the epigrams, and the calculated shock, the dark shadow of self-destruction moves across the decade to claim a number of lives. Though Wilde impresses us not only as a symbol but also a cipher by which the Nineties may be read, to Yeats the youthful Dowson and Johnson, in their splendid, terrible isolation, most vividly characterized

[28] Towards the end of the Nineties, W. P. Ryan, in *Literary London*, wrote: "One grows tired of their pipings about mean sins and timid indecencies. We agree with Max [Beerbohm] that they are not strong enough to be wicked."

the "Tragic Generation." They lingered in his memory, indeed haunted him and enriched his life, for they described the trajectory of a tragic but stunning waste of talent. In the pantheon of Yeats's poetic imagination, they took their place in his hieratic mysteries as his saint-poets. It is in telling a story of the two poets from hearsay that Yeats reveals—as late as 1936 in a broadcast over the B.B.C.—the strange effect that these two minor figures had on his life:

> *Some friends of mine saw them one moonlight night returning from The Crown public house which had just closed, their zigzagging feet requiring the whole width of Oxford Street, Lionel Johnson talking. My friend stood still eavesdropping, Lionel Johnson was expounding a Father of the Church. Their piety, in Dowson a penitential sadness, in Lionel Johnson more often a notable ecstasy, was as, I think, illuminated and intensified by their contrasting puppet shows, those elegant, tragic penitents, those great men in their triumph.*

Yet most of the Aesthetes and Decadents survived the Nineties, leaving behind them the protests against a society reluctant to grant importance to the artist but seeing in the following century the development of a more mature Aestheticism—though the term would fall into disrepute—aware that the Nineties were not so much a climax as a transition.[29] One critic has remarked that while the French Aesthetes and Decadents were explorers of the human spirit, the English were merely tourists. Like most epigrams, this has partial truth. But the English Aesthetes and Decadents command our attention by their determination to transform their lives into works of art, to center the meaning of life in private vision in order to resist a civilization intent on debasing the imagination and thus making man less human. The courage to do this was considerable—then, as it is now—and the danger of failure made life a perilous, though extraordinary, adventure.

[29] The Imagist Movement (launched before World War I by T. E. Hulme, Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, and others), the work of James Joyce and T. S. Eliot, and the development of the New Criti-