TRANSATLANTIC DECADENCE IN ART AND LITERATURE SYMPOSIUM

PANEL 1: DECADENT CROSSINGS

Matthew Mitton (University of Hull), ‘The Curious Case of Trumbull Stickney’

One of the most enduring cultural icons of the fin de siècle is that of the male Decadent poet. What W. B. Yeats termed the ‘Tragic Generation’ can seem a uniquely European affair with writers such as Verlaine; Rimbaud; Laforgue; Wilde; Ernest Dowson; Lionel Johnson and John Davidson being the most typical examples of the 1890s Decadent poète maudit. It has, therefore, been easy for critics to overlook the close alliances and interchanges between European and American poetry at the fin de siècle, and the existence of the American Decadent poet. The person who most purely embodies these issues is the scholar and poet [Joseph] Trumbull Stickney (1874 - 1904).

Born into a privileged New England family, Stickney lived a nomadic childhood in Europe. When he entered Harvard in 1891 he was essentially a cultural outsider. Nevertheless, he formed a close friendship with his tutor George Santayana and became a member of a small coterie of Harvard poets such as William Vaughan Moody and George Cabot ‘Bay’ Lodge. He was more comfortable in Paris from 1895 to 1903 when he studied for his Doctorate on Greek poetry at the Sorbonne. He returned to Harvard as a teacher of Classics in 1903 and died suddenly a year later from a brain tumour at the age of thirty.

Stickney’s poetry—he published just two volumes in his lifetime—exhibits many of the stock Decadent styles and tropes which were prevalent in European writing from the period, as well as an intensely realised neo-Classicism which foreshadows the aesthetic and thematic concerns of high Modernism. Stickney—as man and artist—is a curious, enigmatic figure, with a foot in two very different literary and political cultures, never wholly at home in either. What I aim to do in this paper is to analyse Trumbull Stickney and his poetry in relation to his European influences—Pater, Dowson, Symons et al—while looking also at the formal dexterity and range of the verse; his engagement with aestheticism and ekphrasis; the expression of latent homosexual desires, and assessing the extent to which he was part of an identifiably Decadent ‘school’ at Harvard. Stickney is the prime example of transatlantic cultural interchange at the fin de siècle and a rare case-study in how Decadence—as a
formalist style, a world-weary aesthetic poise—truggled to realise itself in a more hardy American atmosphere during the 1890s.

Alex Murray (University of Exeter), ‘“The Majesty of that Unknown”: Edgar Saltus, Decadent Historiography and the Future of American Fiction’

Perhaps the most oft-cited difference between American and European literatures of the 1890s is tradition. America, it seems, was denied the ennui of European civilization, nor, like the British could they yet fear that the decline of the Roman Empire would be repeated in the present. Indeed one could claim that whereas Europe’s anxiety was of a decline from a once great past, America’s was the fear of failing to achieve a great future. For Edgar Saltus it was precisely the lack of a great past that allowed the “Future of Fiction” in America to take a different turn. In his short review essay of 1889 he claims that the American lack of tradition, combined with ambition, marks it out as the space in which ‘the coming novelist’ can produce a work that will emerge from the space bordered on one side by ‘the corpse still warm, in whose features he recognises Romanticism; on the other is that silk stocking filled with mud which is the emblem of the Naturalists’. However, paradoxically, Saltus is primarily remembered today for his great work of ‘history’, Imperial Purple, a wild account of the Caesars and the Decline of the Roman Empire, incongruous it may seem with his calls for an American fiction of the future. In this paper I will trace the relation between Saltus’ works of history and his calls for a new American fiction, arguing that Saltus’ implicit rejection of both Gibbon’s and the providentialist accounts of Roman history in favour of something like a more scientific account of Roman decline – however far away that may seem at times from his liberties with historical record – is essential in his understanding of Decadence and why America was not in decline, and therefore why its literature must emerge as an untimely challenge to its coming civilization, rather than an index of its exhaustion.

Katy Masuga (University of Washington, Seattle), ‘Decadent Sensibilities of American Modernists in Europe’

While David Weir provides an account of the American counterparts to European decadents in his Decadent Culture in the United States (2008), this paper explores decadent qualities in American modernist writers in Europe, specifically Paris and London, during the second and third decades of the 20th Century. American expatriate writers like Henry Miller, who lived
in Paris from 1930-1939, were heavily influenced by their decadent predecessors. In Miller’s case, specific influences include Huysmans, Saltus, Mencken and Spengler. Indeed, he includes these writers on his list of “The Hundred Books that Influenced Me Most” along with other figures such as Nietzsche, Nostradamus and Rimbaud. Many modernist writers, like Miller and his circle of literary friends including Lawrence Durrell and Anaïs Nin, as well as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot and others, partook in the resurgence of ‘little magazines’ that originally began in the 1850s and were later prominent in decadent America and Europe. The Yellow Book serves as the model for future little magazines that flooded the modernist literary circles after the first decade of the 20th Century. Several to which Miller contributed include Seven, which developed so-called ‘psychic fiction’; The Phoenix, which includes Miller’s piece ‘The Universe of Death’, a critical work on Proust, Joyce and Lawrence; Death, a tribute to Michael Frankel; and New Road, which featured many Surrealist pieces as well as figures of the ‘Apocalyptic Movement’ in literature, which focused, literally, on the impending collapse of Western civilization. Noting the similarities and paths of the American decadent little magazines such as The Chap-Book, The Ghourki and M’lle New York, this paper draws attention to the perhaps surprisingly decadent interests of several, modern little magazines, specifically those surfacing overseas that were developed by American expatriate writers. In this way, the focus is upon the significance of these little magazine for the American modernist writer abroad to mimic, in certain ways, a fin-de-siècle decadent perspective.

Kirsten MacLeod (University of Alberta), ‘Decadence in the Jazz Age: Carl Van Vechten, Exquisite’

The high Modernists, with their “Make it New” Modernism, have overshadowed another important school of this era: the “exquisites,”¹ whose motto might well have been, “Make It Old,” and who promoted what was sometimes called, “the new Decadence.” These writers appropriated and adapted fin-de-siècle Decadence for a jazz-age audience, situating themselves in opposition to, and vying for cultural authority with, proponents of other forms of Modernism, notably those who have fared better in canonical terms. Carl Van Vechten (1880-1964) was a leading figure of the “exquisites.” Though largely forgotten now, Van Vechten was the novelist of the “speakeasy intelligentsia,” whose seven novels (written

¹ In On Native Grounds, originally published in 1942, Alfred Kazin devotes a chapter to this literary school (New York: Harvest, 1995).
between 1922 and 1930) “meticulously charted the perversions, domestic eccentricities, alcoholism, esthetic dicta, and social manners of ladies and gentlemen who did nothing, nothing at all.”

This paper focuses on Van Vechten’s first novel, *Peter Whiffle* (1922), a fake memoir of a failed writer, indebted in its style and themes to George Moore’s *Confessions of a Young Man*, Max Beerbohm’s “Enoch Soames,” Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* and the fantastic tales of Arthur Machen and Robert Hichens. At the same time, published in 1922, that famous *annus mirabilis* of high Modernism, the novel was compared, in contemporary reviews, with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and it functioned, also, as a *roman à clef* of Mabel Dodge’s New York literary salon. The novel, then, weaves a number of worlds together – it is at once *fin-de-siècle* and jazz age, Anglo/Hiberno-philic and yet very cosmopolitan New York. The paper considers how Van Vechten brings British Decadence across the Atlantic and into a new era in order to construct a particular form of Anglo-American Modernism. The paper considers not only Van Vechten’s construction of a jazz-age transatlantic Decadence, but also its reception in relation to other forms of Modernism both Britain and America.

PANEL 2: DECADENCE AND THE VISUAL ARTS

**Peter Gibian (McGill University, Canada), ‘Sargent’s “Travelling Culture”: Transatlantic Crossings, Expatriate Experience, and the Workings of a Cosmopolitan Aestheticism’**

John Singer Sargent is a fascinating example of a seemingly paradoxical type: the Cosmopolitan American. Born overseas into a privileged yet nomadic family of international wanderers, traveling incessantly throughout his entire life, and fluent in multiple languages, Sargent could strike many who met him as an “accidental American,” or, even, as un-American—in fact dangerously lacking the solid ground of attachment to any nation, culture, language, or people. But what is the specific nature of Sargent’s personal experience as a nomadic international traveler, and what stance toward the world does it imply? One critical line sees Sargent as “an intellectual tourist permanently on holiday,” an aristocratic spectator and Decadent aesthete content to appreciate the surfaces of picturesque foreign forms and

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2 Kazin, 245.
exotic “others” while resolutely “detached from personal, moral involvement with the subjects of his art.” But paintings from the formative 1878-84 period suggest an alternative understanding of the workings of his cosmopolitan aestheticism. In portraits of other Americans abroad—such as Madame Gautreau or the Boit sisters—Sargent does not celebrate aristocratic ease but, rather, presents poignant images of isolation and dislocation within the expansive world of aesthetic expatriates who have left behind the security of a traditional home. Neither was he a disengaged spectator content to remain on the surfaces of foreign lives. What distinguishes Sargent from many such Irvingesque or Jamesian tourists is that he wanted to identify with the local workers and artisans he encountered in his wanderings—fisher folk in Brittany; glass workers in Venice; water carriers in Egypt; quarry-men in Carrara; dancers in Capri and Spain—studying them as foreign reflections of his own self-image and aesthetic engagements. In making these picturesque figures central to his self-reflexive works about the making of art, Sargent puts them forward to his viewers as models for the full experience of his paintings: workers of the world toiling in the underground workshop of art.

**Jerzy Kutnik & Ms. Edyta Frelik (Maria Curie-Sklodowska University), ‘Artistic Responses to Fin-de-Siècle Decadence in the Work of Marsden Hartley and Thomas Hart Benton’**

In this paper we want to show how the art and thought of Marsden Hartley and Thomas Hart Benton, two major American painters of the first half of the 20th century, was shaped by their European experiences. Both spent their formative years overseas at the time when the 19th century came to its belated end around 1910. Like thousands of aspiring artists, writers and intellectuals who at the turn of the century flocked to Paris, London and Berlin, they absorbed and responded to the aesthetics of the fin-de-siècle, which, as Holbrook Jackson puts it, was “a transitional point between the rule-bound certainties of Victorian society and the revolutionary ethos of modernism.” There are two reasons why we think the case of Hartley and Benton is unique and worth exploring. As far as we can tell, there is a tendency in American art criticism to overlook the impact European decadence had on American modernism, which, on the other hand, seems particularly odd given that, as we see it, Hartley and Benton are two glaring examples of generically American artists whose restless curiosity about Europeans’ refinement and sophistication left an indelible mark on their esthetic and intellectual sensibilities. Both became fascinated with decadent perspectives when they came
to Europe to study art, but while Hartley welcomed the “infection” with the fin-de-siècle spiritual malaise and fully embraced its symptoms, Benton, by contrast, cherished the fact that he was able to develop an immunity to its “degenerate” legacy. Thus, while Hartley became one of the most original champions of modernist aesthetics in America, Benton proudly turned his back on the European avant-garde and developed an antimodernist style that moved so-called Regionalism into the realm of national art in the 1930s.

Catherine Wynne (University of Hull), ‘Transatlantic Gothic: Bram Stoker and Henry Irving in North America’

In Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving (1906), Bram Stoker describes the actor-manager’s final North American tour of 1899-1900 with his Royal Lyceum Company. Irving, who preferred using limelights or calcium lights to generate softer effects in his productions, transported gas-tanks on his American tours. When he arrived in Kansas City some of the tanks were left on the sidewalk outside the Opera House where the company was performing. An account duly appeared in the local press that Irving was dying and had to be “re-invigorated” with oxygen after his performances, and that even the key-hole of his dressing-room was blocked up to prevent oxygen from escaping. Bram Stoker, Irving’s business manager and public relations figure, dismissed the rumours in an interview with a rival newspaper, the Kansas City Star: “They must think he is about to die. They’d better learn what a calcium can is.” Given that Irving cultivated a Gothic atmosphere on stage during his dominance of the late Victorian theatrical world, it is unsurprising that such a sensational story emerges in the press. On his North American tours, Irving transported his late-century Gothic predilections across the Atlantic. This paper examines the plays Irving performed for North American audiences and their reception, and further explores how America or American figures transform Stoker’s early twentieth-century fictions to produce new Gothic and quasi-Gothic romances The Mystery of the Sea (1902) and Lady Athlyne (1908).

Anne Anderson (University of Exeter), ‘Transatlantic Aestheticism: Material Men and Immaterial Girls or the “Fearful Consequences of Collecting”

Sarah Cheang identifies ‘masculine collecting’ as ‘informed and serious’, while ‘feminine shopping, while requiring certain skills of selection and communication, is uninformed,
trivial and can never lead to greatness without stepping outside of gender roles’. But aesthetic cultures of collecting fractured this binary division as antiques were acquired as home furnishings, to enhance the ambience of the House Beautiful, as sign of superior taste or ‘distinction’. With female taste undermined, male aesthetes reclaimed the domestic sphere, fashioning it as they had in the 18th century on the basis of their superior taste and knowledge, establishing masculine preserves in the study, library and dining room. But aesthetic tastes were invariably deemed perverse, particularly the valorisation of antiques and the obsession with bric-a-brac. In the search for new sensations, the antique offered ‘new forms of art’, attaining their value outside the circulation of commodities. For the aesthete, antiques offered exquisite moments, becoming ‘congealed actions, passionate acts of seeking, selecting and situating’.

By the 1870s critics had identified a ‘bric-a-brac mania’; James Grant Wilson, writing for an American audience, noted that ‘the tulip mania of Holland and the bibliomania of the nineteenth century are insignificant when compared with the existing madness for bric-a-brac’. The term bric-a-brac acquired a currency that Russell Belk argues charged it with an evaluative connotation that ‘delegitimizes the collector’s pursuit as one of indulgent pleasure rather than scientific or artistic merit’. Aestheticism allowed men on both sides of the Atlantic to surround themselves with beautiful things, to enable them to project different facets of their identities or to use ‘things to make a life with them’. This paper explores the literature that underpinned the transatlantic cult of collecting, including advice manuals and novels. It will be argued that Aestheticism ushers in the modern utilization of antiques, as a means of embodying Individuality. Moreover, it will be posited that under the auspices of Aestheticism, American and Britain share a unique culture of collecting.

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5 Brown, A Sense of Things, p.146.
In an essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne published in 1879, Henry James characterised America as void of ‘the items of high civilization as it exists in other countries’:

No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools – no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class – no Epsom nor Ascot!

Writing from England, James, like Oscar Wilde, perceived that the sphere of culture in the United States was increasingly driven by populist, feminised tastes and that the same pattern was in the process of emerging in the mass culture of a democratising Britain. For James, the principle of aesthetic discrimination was necessarily an aristocratic, rather than democratic one: a matter of a select few objects, resonant with history, against the mass. Democracy was itself inseparable from a social world of publicity and personal interest, in which the frank marketing of artistic ‘personalities’ to the casual newspaper reader was of more importance than any disinterested sense of the aesthetic value of works in themselves. If, as James suggested, life was ‘all inclusion and confusion’ and art ‘all discrimination and selection’, how would art and culture prosper in nations that repudiated such aristocratic tendencies on all levels?

In James’s *The American Scene* (1906), written after his first visit to the United States in over 20 years, he encountered a far less Anglo-Saxon nation that the one he had last seen in the early 1880s. In this late work, I argue, James reconsiders the cultural consequences of ‘the democratic consistency’ – a great white brush that paints everything the same – and concludes that the function of the critic in his present time is to be an alien rather than an
aristocrat: a restless, displaced, analyst who alone can give form to the complexity of history and nation in the face of the ‘printless pavements of the [democratic] State’.


Focusing on Henry James’s *The Sacred Fount*, this paper offers a new critical methodology of the text that confounded readers and critics alike since its publication in 1901. Regarded by James himself ‘a ‘consistent joke’, the *Sacred Fount* is undoubtedly subject to the greatest degree of critical sniping and division; yet, as I will argue, it offers a meta-critique of the decadent subject that has been largely ignored by critics.

In theorizing a hazardous relationship between individual and society, James re-imagines ‘vital’ larceny or vampirism as financial appropriation in this text. The novel not only lampoons James’ own inability to schematize the parallel operations of *fin de siècle* economic and social decadence, but significantly it castigates what he regarded as the inelegant tropes of European and American decadent literature. I further argue that the novel, an abortive predecessor of critically acclaimed work *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), operates as a sandbox for what I term James’s ‘economies of correlative being’, that is: the economies of interpersonal acquisition and loss that predominate in his later work. Whilst the text is regarded a blemish in the James canon –reflected in his decision not to include the text in the New York edition – I demonstrate that it produced a catharsis that enabled James to realize these conditions of economic relation in a way that had previously alluded him.

**Kate Hext (University of Exeter), ‘The Silence of Decadence: Henry James’ writers in the yellow “90s”’**

Henry James does not believe much in transatlantic decadence. For, within his dichotomy between the Old World and the New, decadence is a European disease and he ignores or forgets the decadent movements of the East Coast.

This paper will consider James’ presentation of the decadent writer as it becomes insistent in his short stories of the 1890s. The decadent writer engenders a peculiar variation on the constant threat of decadence that shadows James’ stories. After all, the disease of decadence is fatal to the imperatives of beauty, truth and sincerity which, for James, define aesthetic
creativity. Yet he is drawn again and again in the 1880s and ‘90s to consider the literary artist who has become decadent and the would-be artist inhibited by the decadent excesses of their surroundings: Hyacinth Robinson, Fleda Vetch, Henry St George and Frank Saltram, amongst them.

Whilst gesturing to broad patterns in James’ treatment of decadence, this paper concentrates on ‘The Lesson of the Master’ and two of the stories he published in The Yellow Book: ‘The Coxon Fund’ and ‘The Death of the Lion’. With examples from these works, it suggests that Jamesian decadence contrasts with Havelock Ellis’ definition of the fragmented decadent, on one hand, and with Arthur Symons’ assertion that decadence is ‘a new and interesting disease’ that brings forth a new art form, on the other. Decadence is engendered in James’ works, rather, when the artist enters society -- fawning, superficial society -- and it results in artistic silence. It is thrown into relief by the American ingenue who stands in Emersonian abstraction from the trappings of the Old World.

As this paper argues the decadent silence pervades these stories and becomes infectious, it attempts to define the shadowy significance of decadence in James’ conception of literary art and to account for his own ambivalent attitude to it.