

*The Demonstrable Decadence
of Modernist Novels*

This chapter presents a range of writing that comes under the general heading of the novel of the historical present. This fiction works overtly to the purpose of representing its current circumstance, which is defined imaginatively as well as chronologically by the (lengthening) turn of the century. For the historical content of the novel as genre, it claims the temporal imaginary of late days as the present condition of England. This is the establishing circumstance of the “decadence” this literature represents as a matter of imagined contemporary fact.

These books are written by novelists who are not identifiable in any ready-made way, however, with the traditions of literary decadence, either individually or, certainly, as a group: Henry James, Joseph Conrad and G. K. Chesterton, D. H. Lawrence, Frederic Manning and Rebecca West. Not as the tag attached to the more infamous of the Nineties writers, the “decadence” in these books works in a more complex and important way. It provides a record of end feeling as an established, if uneasily assimilated, understanding, one that has already generated a set of literary conventions and so needs to be taken as the record of an essential stage in literary history. These novels complement the historical content of late or last days with a broad and resourceful implementation of those literary techniques we established in “Afterward: A Poetics,” which, all in all, demonstrate the historical condition of decadence in a sort of poetics in prose.

Not that demonstrating decadence is the whole story in this prose, poetic or not. This is a literature that also often remonstrates with “decadence,” either as a specific name or a presumed view. This resistance witnesses something different from an otherwise understandable challenge to the historical pessimism with which decadence is identified. It manifests a more interestingly unspecified anxiety. Beyond a demonstrable quality, that is, this decadence registers a presentiment of the contemporary that is

edged with menace as well as fascination and so locates the growing points of a literary sensibility in this highly charged dimension of current unease.

The timeliness of this sensibility accords with the conventional sense of “modernism,” which is the heading under which several of these authors are usually grouped. Like Hardy and Wells and Stoker, however, these writers also tend to attract the somewhat apologetic wobble of the hyphenated proto-, para-, semi-, or pseudo-. What I am proposing is that we come to understand them as radical modernists and the sensibility of decadence they demonstrate as one of the primary – earliest, most important – constituents of modernism. In this sense, modernism is marked not by the easier (and later) understandings of the “make it new” variety, but by the more timely, novel awareness that decadence centers in its historical unease, which includes and even features the elusively new, sometimes fearful but usually exciting, aspects of the time it apprehends. The novels to be discussed in this chapter reveal this sensibility in formation, not in the ready-made formulas of literary history but in the historical force fields of the long turn of the century, which the First World War will bring to a climactic.

One of the values of the range of modernist novelists in the catalogue just provided is its breadth of coverage. The figures missing from this list, however, include writers as significant, in the context of modernist literatures in English, as Virginia Woolf and Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce and William Faulkner, and, in continental locations, Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann. For reasons specific to each of these authors, which include issues of national tradition, political affiliation, and the literary cultures of various individual interests, their engagements with the legacy of decadence show variations on the attitudes and practices that stem from the mainstream developments I have laid out in the previous chapter. The war tetralogy *Parade's End*, for example, shows Ford representing a general sense of historical decline in the “last of England” feeling he centers in his *déclassé* aristocrat Christopher Tietjens, but the sense of decadence in the imaginative experience of this war finds a more specific and intense focus in the imaginative temporalities and literary styles of the war novels of West and Manning. Such variations are important and are indicative of the ramifying power of decadence within modernism, but the constraints of space compel a focusing on novels that best illustrate the concerted work of this sensibility within British literary fiction specifically. This material also prepares the ground for the major work of the second half of this book, where I discuss the poetries of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot separately, and at major length; in their representation of the London experience of the First World War, they bring a specifically British tradition of decadent

modernism to a definitive expression. The extent as well as the coherence of the sensibility they are extending is demonstrated through the range displayed in this chapter.

As a poetics in prose, indeed, this literary fiction witnesses the preponderance of poetry in the formation of the technical sensibility of decadence. Poems occupy the largest share of the literary space in the first chapter of this book, and not incidentally. The temporal imaginary that is fundamental to decadence may find its most explicit presentation in poetic tempo – and in its allied tonalities, which include the integration of rhythmic schemes and imaginative figures, so to coalesce the sense of affective time that is essential to this sensibility. Essential to the genre of poetry, yes, but not restricted to it. For a poetics of decadence is demonstrable in the prose of these early modernist novels. This sensibility emerges sometimes as a comprehensive whole, as in the works of Lawrence, Chesterton, and Manning, novelists who were also poets, and sometimes in modular parts, as in the works of James and Conrad, who were not poets; and while West was not a poet, her novella *The Return of the Soldier* presents a poetic compression that makes it an exemplary demonstration of this literary sensibility.

The compositing of genres stands in itself, moreover, as a record of the extensive connection between these two eras, these two sensibilities. After all, in the avowed practice by artists as well as the dismayed protest by critics, “decay” in generic purity was observed in literary decadence as the aim and consequence of some of its most experimental work. This sensibility extends into the novelistic poetry as well as the poetic novels of modernism, as, here, into the decadent poetics of these early modernist prose fictions.

1. Henry James

In the same year in which Symons published *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, Henry James models the possibility of an alternative prosody for the modernist literature of the subsequent century in *The Awkward Age*. He offers this sensibility out of the record of the decade now ending. Awkward, uncomfortable, disquieting: these qualities appear as the most intense register of change in the “Age” of this novel, which brings the sense of an ending so extensively conventionalized in the fiction of the turn of the century into configurations at once familiar and unsettling. These are the now recognizable conventions of literary decadence, which James arranges in ways that produce the impact of the difference they represent in a constant provocation of unease.

The most conspicuous of these is the Nineties figure of elderly youth, which reflects the feeling of a late age most powerfully where it touches the young. It occurs in this story in the unsettling connection between the older man Mr. Longdon, who in his own words lives “in the twilight of time,” and Nanda, who is little more than a girl.¹ The strangeness between them is intensified as an experience of the uncanny, a weird and more than weird familiar, where Nanda’s face presents the image of her grandmother Lady Julia, who was the romantic interest of Longdon’s own youth. This is a double exposure that he appreciates as he delectates, emphatically if ghoulishly, “that she has just Lady Julia’s expression. She absolutely *has* it . . . She’s much more like the dead than the living.”² The older “age” of Mr. Longdon may be the most obviously “awkward” point of relevance for James’s title, but it is the steady effort of this book to generalize this awkwardness as a condition of the historical “age,” which, as the last decade of the last century before the last century of the millennium, grows into a steadily more awkward strangeness in its lateness.

The historicity of this particular sense of time may be appreciated through a comparison with the novel from which James has obviously taken his “romantic” plot: Hardy’s 1897 novel *The Well-Beloved*, which represents a rewriting of a work he had serialized in 1892 as “The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved.” If this novel is little known now, it was widely read in its own day, especially after the public *débauché* of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895 had charged its appearance with a considerable pressure of advance attention. Hardy models the May-December liaison of Nanda and Longdon for James, but in even odder form. Hardy’s male protagonist is represented in a progression of chronological ages – 20, 40, 60 – in which he pursues women of increasingly younger years who are revealed not only to be related but, in series, to be grandmother, mother, and daughter.³ Here lies one source of the image of Julia, Nanda’s grandmother, which Longdon sees with amorous awkwardness in the young girl’s visage. The successive configuration of increasingly odder couplings, however, is not set up in any revealing way as a representation of the times in which they occur. Even if Hardy might be credited in the earlier 1892 piece with an augury of the figure of the elderly youth of the Nineties, his interest does not lie in historicizing this figure, since, in his novel’s chronology, the protagonist’s behavior begins a good deal earlier in the century.

The sense of historical location is well pointed in James’s novel, considering the historical reference in its title. Consider further this exchange between Mr. Mitchett and Mrs. Brookenham, where the dialogue invokes a

bibliography of contemporary decadence with a reference to two of its recently published “French books.” One of these is now singled out:

“I rather liked the one in the pink cover – what’s the confounded thing called? I thought it had a sort of something-or-other.” He had cast his eye about as if for a glimpse of the forgotten title, and she caught the question as he vaguely and good-humouredly dropped it.

“A kind of morbid modernity? There *is* that,” she dimly conceded.

“Is that what they call it? Awfully good name.”⁴

Whether or not any color can be striking *après le débauche* of *The Yellow Book*, the “pink cover” of the more scintillating of these novels serves as a marker and blazon of the really interesting thing, which focuses this otherwise undirected conversation. This image of “morbid modernity” matches and exaggerates the familiar Nineties type of the elderly young man in a figure of decrepit dynamism. The ingredients of this figure comprise but exceed any individual reference and, whether or not the dim-witted Mitchett gets the implication (his incomprehension accentuates our interest), offer these as the distinguishing constituents of the awkwardness of James’s own age.

Further, the phrase “morbid modernity” recurs nearby for a person (if that is what she is) of identifiably modern recurrence, the fashion-plated *ingénue manqué* “Beach Donner.” She is “that charming child, who looks like one of the new-fashioned bill-posters, only, in the way of ‘morbid modernity’, as Mrs Brook would say, more extravagant and funny than any that have yet been risked.”⁵ The saying that Mrs. Brookenham has repeated from Mr. Mitchett is now being repeated with the diminishing return that Beach Donner represents. This figure’s “more extravagant and funny” version is the humorous extreme of the witless reiterative, all in all, an involuntary parody of a mass type. Here we see an intersection between the age of mechanical reproduction and the interest in fading repetition in the poetics of decadence. The production of images and commodities en masse in the public culture of urban modernity may be seen as the fundamental and fostering analogue of the repetition that fades. This perception takes the status of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, as discussed by Walter Benjamin, into an historically informed understanding of decadent repetitiveness. The loss of the aura in the reproduction of the original artistic work is an effect which is reiterated in the repetition that fades in the poetics of decadence.⁶ An original now lost is being reiterated in a way that reveals not only its own diminishment, the effect now recognizable as standard in the poetics of decadence, but, in the circumstances in which

it is recurring, something of the historical significance of the technique it features as it recurs for that figure of mass-produced culture. In the critical turn James is taking on these circumstances of commercial modernity, and in the self-consciousness he is demonstrating about this consequently “awkward age,” he is claiming the condition of his own radical modernism in the “morbidity” that stands as the signal figure of cultural decadence.

Wings of the Dove (1902) is a novel that demonstrates the thematic aspects and technical conventions of decadence in a more extensive fashion. The plot is driven by a motive and stratagem that belong in that zone of moral dubiety readily identifiable with decadence as a custom of reprobate behavior: Kate Croy persuades her lover Merton Densher to befriend and woo a wealthy young American heiress, Milly Theale, a one-time friend now dying of consumption, in hopes of an inheritance. Our response to the ongoing provocation of this plot is the target of James’s constant complication, which he stirs relentlessly through the aesthetic conventions of the decadence he is also demonstrating on the behavioral stage. He moves this discomfiting complexity toward critical mass as the novel approaches its close. In this climactic action, he takes the plot to the site that qualifies in any literary Baedeker as the isle of decadence perennial and, so, as the scene of its most exemplary demonstration: that ever-sinking city, Venice.⁷

In an early, establishing shot in the Venice section in the book, James sets up the figures of Milly and Kate in the prospect of a decadence equally comprehensive and self-conscious. The atmosphere in this ever-decaying city is of late and dying day. The two characters are staged explicitly as personages in a Maeterlinck drama, where the costumes and props of an assignably decadent theater, accentuated with the lighting and tone of the lengthening sunset, provide the atmospheric dimension of a sensibility that is working more deeply and influentially. The dying light of this late hour overshadows not just the visual prospect but the ethical question, which is engaged in a language whose opacity serves to obscure – and so accentuate – the moral problem in the plot motive:

Certain aspects of the connexion of these young women show for us, such is the twilight that gathers about them, in the likeness of some dim scene in a Maeterlinck play; we have positively the image, in the delicate dusk, of the figures so associated and yet so opposed, so mutually watchful: that of the angular pale princess, ostrich-plumed, black-robed, hung about with amulets, reminders, relics, mainly seated, mainly still, and that of the upright restless slow-circling lady of her court who exchanges with her, across the black water streaked with evening gleams, fitful questions and answers . . .

. . . It may be declared for Kate, at all events, that her sincerity about her friend, through this time, was deep, her compassionate imagination strong; and that these things gave her a virtue, a good conscience, a credibility for herself, so to speak, that were later to be precious to her. She grasped with her keen intelligence the logic of their common duplicity, went unassisted through the same ordeal as Milly's other hushed follower, easily saw that for the girl to be explicit was to betray divinations . . .⁸

The ethical questions are being deflected through an art of perspective where, in free indirect speech, the self-exculpating motives of Kate are parleyed into the narrative voice. Its authority is suspended in a revealing propensity for assertions in the conditional mood or conjectural tense – “might well have,” “it may be declared.” In this grammar, issues of moral responsibility are reckoned in the “so to speak” fashion James's narrator names; they are being turned into questions of phraseology. So, by the end of this extraordinary verbal performance, where the beautiful shades of sunset are refracted in a language of moral opacity, the “duplicity” that is originally and actually Kate's alone (with Densher) is somehow “common” with these others, that is, normative; given the syntactical ambiguity here, it is shared even with Milly, who is otherwise its target and victim. The decorous presentation of the subject has tested and even contested its ethical reprehensibility.

The performance exemplifies the central premise of aesthetical ethics in *The Decay of Lying*. In this hallmark inscription of a poetics of decadence, Wilde proposes that an ingenuity of deception is the essence of art and so of beauty. No less archly than Wilde, but more boldly because more specifically, James is demonstrating the premise of the poetics of decadence in practice. It comes in an instance so particular that its aesthetic idea is not just disturbing, it is excruciating. This pain registers the acuter consciousness of a novelty, a disturbance that records a way of feeling as new as it is disconcerting and, in its very subtlety, more disconcerting once it is recognized. Here then is another discomfort of the same awkward age, where a decadence that is demonstrably in extremis causes an awkwardness that enforces this acuter self-consciousness of novelty, of the difference such novelty signifies.

This understanding of modernism – as the novelty of a decadence being demonstrated at an awkward extremity, thus with a specially heightened consciousness of its novelty – waits at the end of a reading of James's two novels, and especially near the end of *The Wings of the Dove*. Here the consummation of the plot presents the ultimate extension of the poetics of decadence he is demonstrating. Densher approaches and completes his

emotional connection with Milly – to his otherwise unspeakable purpose – in a manner that takes the aesthetical ethics of Wilde to subtle extremes, to the extremes of Densher’s (James’s) own subtlety. “He had however only to cross again the threshold of Palazzo Leporelli,” James’s narrator motions to put Densher on the track of his pursuit, which, as he continues, puts him most suggestively in the role and attitude of a visual artist: “to see all the elements of the business compose, as painters called it, differently.”⁹ The “elements of the business,” that extraordinarily coarse piece of mercantile verbiage for the scheme underway, effects another one of those (now none too) subtle discomforts that are special to the awkwardness of this age. This discomfort comes from the all too obvious realization in practice (in narrative) of that chief conceit of a decadent poetics, an aesthetical ethics, as the phrase also enacts in language the capacity, as painters “compose” their prospects, to see this business “differently.” This is the difference aesthetics can make in the ethics of the “business,” which is transfigured in this prospect into the last of all beautified views:

This spectacle had for him an eloquence, an authority, a felicity – he scarce knew by what strange name to call it – for which he said to himself that he had not consciously bargained. Her welcome, her frankness, sweetness, sadness, brightness, her disconcerting poetry, as he made shift at moments to call it, helped as it was by the beauty of her whole setting and by the perception at the same time, on the observer’s part, that this element gained from her, in a manner, for effect and harmony, as much as it gave – her whole attitude had, to his imagination, meanings that hung about it, waiting upon her, hovering, dropping and quavering forth again, like vague faint snatches, mere ghosts of sound, of old-fashioned melancholy music.¹⁰

As a character in voice compounded of his monologue and the monitor of the narrator, Densher is talking his way into beautifying the objectionable. In doing so, he is offering in evidence a most radical instance of the aesthetical ethics James is identifying, demonstrating, as such. The “disconcerting poetry” that Densher attributes to Milly is “disconcerting,” after all, insofar as its aim and motive obviously go in the opposite direction: to a soothing poeticizing of the alarming, distressing thing he is actually up to. Once more, the somewhat subtle discomfort of his aesthetical ethics comes in the disconcerting rightness of that adjective. In another signal word – “as he made *shift*” to call it – James’s narrator stirs our unease about the shifty interest being served. But the ethical mess that is left by the cleansing attempts of the aesthetics of decadence is being demonstrated for no morally censorious purpose; there is no supporting framework of value or attitude. The residue of some formally normative moral order serves mainly or only

to register and intensify the discomfort, the difference (it is the signifying difference of modernism), which the sensibility of this new, discomfiting age presents.

Far from moral censoriousness, the demonstration of decadence in this passage includes a poeticizing of James's own. It comes not just in the rhythmical filigree he achieves with the fining of stress and pace through his signature pauses in punctuation. It shows in a descriptive decoration that reflects his reciprocity with the methods and effects of the most particularized poetics of decadence. The repetition that fades, that serves the impression of lost originals and foregone originality, is invoked in the troping of the "harmony" of Milly's demeanor as "ghosts of sound," the haunting of a "music" that is "melancholy" but most of all "old-fashioned" – the vibrations of her person are as sounds, which, outdated as music and disembodied as echoes, are lost now: the fade is the strength of this poetics. Thus the muse of the decadence being demonstrated is also the victim of its distortions of moral norms. The compound is as ethically unbearable as it is aesthetically irresistible. Not censure then but displeasure or, better, the guilty pleasure of enjoying a wrong, of enjoying awkwardly and so being involved self-consciously in the convention-disrupting novelty it presents: this is the awkwardness that James constitutes and reconstitutes, across the two major novels of his own turn of the century, as the special condition of this age.

"[A] pair of the children of a supercivilised age making the best of an awkwardness":¹¹ so James's narrator situates Kate and Merton historically and characterizes them attitudinally, repeating a conventional understanding of decadence as the later phases of an overripe culture. He is also indicating the discomfort that comes – with his special assistance – from the novelty it represents. Discomfort or not but mainly discomfort, the consciousness of novelty as a painful awareness operates to heighten self-awareness in the experience of this unprecedentedly specific circumstance. An identifiably modernist awareness is forged thereby.

2. Conrad and Chesterton

One of the primary sites in cultural history on which the sensibility of decadence may be demonstrated is the turn-of-the-century European phenomenon of anarchism. The unlikelihood of this connection turns on the stereotyped figure of the decadent as a languorously bored, inactive character. This preconception appears routinely in the scholarship that studies the subject of anarchism in relation to the literary history of this period.

What is striking in this criticism is the tendency to associate the aims and effects of anarchism with the sensibilities of the groups variously attached to or confused with decadence, but not with this temperament specifically. In “Anarchist Dandies, Dilettantes and Aesthetes of the *Fin de Siècle*,” for example, Ali Nematollahy focuses on the literary and political culture of Nineties France, taking the artistic personalities named in this title and documenting their otherwise unlikely affinities with the emergent temper of anarchism. The decadents enter this calculus as peripheral figures, and then only as “Symbolists.”¹² Where this counter performs its now predictable work of euphemizing an unacceptable temperament, this example provides a most striking indication of that general tendency: after all, “aesthetes” or “dandies” or “dilettantes” invoke artistic orientations no more readily mobilized in the anarchist effort; decadence is unacceptable, it seems, even to anarchists. Especially to anarchists, goes the argument in another study of Nineties France: Christopher Forth’s “Nietzsche, Decadence, and Regeneration in France, 1891–95”; following the traditionally one-sided view of Nietzsche’s opposition to *décadence*, Forth identifies that sensibility with the remnants of an older French order, against which the energies of a Nietzschean anarchism are directed.¹³

An exception to this general tendency and an opening for critical reconsideration comes in Adam Parkes’ *A Sense of Shock: The Impact of Impressionism on Modern British and Irish Writing* (2011), which documents the synergies between impressionist aesthetics and the anarchist event. Parkes leaves decadence out of his account, though not to disclaim its connection to anarchism. He directs attention instead to the intricate linkage between the stated aesthetics and implicit politics of impressionist writing, which, he maintains, has been wrongly overborne by some facile associations with decadence.¹⁴ This sensibility indeed needs to be separated from impressionism, and, in this wise, it may be reconnected to anarchism – through an imaginative understanding of history in which these two sensibilities are complicit.

A sense of late, last, and lost days tells the time of this linkage. Not that the poetics of the echoing fade shows up on the anarchists’ placards. Nor that a program for declamatory action may be read into decadents’ scripts. Instead, there is a representation of anarchism in the historical fiction of this period that demonstrates its connection to the imaginative apprehension of time winding down; this understanding is demonstrated extensively through the themes and techniques of literary decadence. Recovering this connection for decadence also adds an historical content and political depth to its sensibility; it gives warrant to decadence as a representation of the

most urgent and consequential aspects of the contemporary historical imaginary. The linkage with anarchism also reinforces the shock of the novel that has already been consolidated for decadence, and, in the acuter consciousness of the modern day that this comprehension registers, it offers new ways of reading the modernist quality of these works.

The decadence that Conrad demonstrates in *The Secret Agent* (1907) begins with the initial depiction of his main character, Mr. Verloc

generally arrived in London (like the influenza) from the Continent, only he arrived unheralded by the Press; and his visitations set in with great severity. He breakfasted in bed, and remained wallowing there with an air of quiet enjoyment till noon every day – sometimes even to a later hour He left it late, and returned to it early – as early as three or four in the morning; and on waking up at ten addressed Winnie, bringing in the breakfast tray, with jocular, exhausted civility, in the hoarse, failing tones of a man who had been talking vehemently for many hours together. His prominent, heavy-lidded eyes were rolled sideways amorously and languidly, the bedclothes were pulled up to his chin, and his dark smooth moustache covered his thick lips capable of much honeyed banter.¹⁵

An “exhausted civility,” which represents both a civilization at its end and a stylization of this extremity; a voice that recalls a more vigorous original and rustles now as the echo of that lost sound; the counterclockwise habits of a character who operates *contra naturam*; and a presence that is registered as an infection, an “influenza” that has ostensibly come “from the Continent” but that may be traced, with its more specific literary source, to France: Mr. Verloc is the rumpled double of Des Esseintes, protagonist of Huysmans’ *À Rebours* (*Against Nature*), the novel that Symons famously cited as “the breviary of the Decadence”¹⁶ and that reappears in Conrad’s abridgement with a special concision. This opening vignette presents an extended image of the conventions he will proceed to demonstrate in detail and at length.

An especially dense concentration of these motifs appears in the figure of Stevie, the mentally impaired brother of Verloc’s wife Winnie and, in a pattern characteristic of the infertility theme in decadence, the only child of this otherwise unproductive couple. Stevie appears clearly as an example of “degeneration,” a word that recurs in several synonyms and cognates throughout the novel,¹⁷ but in the richer mixture already of this introductory portrait: “He was delicate and, in a frail way, good looking too, except for the vacant droop of his lower lip” (*TSA*, 13). This “delicate” trait is at one with an artistic proclivity, an aesthetic quality that Conrad depicts with a complementary physiognomy. “[A] growth of thin fluffy hair had come to

blur, like a golden mist, the sharp line of his small lower jaw . . . His spare time he occupied by drawing circles with compass and pencil on a piece of paper. He applied himself to that pastime with great industry” (*TSA*, 14): Stevie’s visage is given the nimbus of an artist look with that growth of facial hair, which also soft-focuses the lineaments of his degeneration. He appears at once as the Caliban of the degeneration typology that was modeled by Nordau and the Ariel of the decadent artist who is exemplified in Beardsley, whose “frail way” is also Stevie’s. This combination may not be resolvable into any demonstrable attitude on the part of Conrad, but it does provide an index of the comprehensiveness with which the conventions of decadence are being extended in his representation.

It is, all in all, the representation of one apprehension of contemporary history; as in this prospect of London in the first encompassing shot of his opening chapter:

The very pavement under Mr Verloc’s feet had an old-gold tinge in that diffused light, in which neither wall, nor tree, not beast, nor man cast a shadow. Mr Verloc was going westward through a town without shadows in an atmosphere of powdered old gold. There were red, coppery gleams on the roofs of houses, on the corners of walls, on the panels of carriages, on the very coats of the horses, and on the broad back of Mr Verloc’s overcoat, where they produced a dull effect of rustiness. But Mr Verloc was not in the least conscious of having got rusty . . . His idleness was not hygienic, but it suited him very well. He was in a manner devoted to it with a sort of inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a sort of fanatical inertness. (*TSA*, 15–16)

The “old-gold tinge” presents the burnished surface of a dusky time with an internal rhyme, which harmonizes the atmosphere of the dying day in the usual ways of the death beautiful in decadent aesthetics. The recurrence of the phrase in “powdered old gold” shows an artist working the verbal stock-in-trade of an existing convention, demonstrating it as such. The end-of-days feeling that is focused and intensified in this prospect represents a decadent atmospheric in general but also, in particular, the chronological imaginary of the Nineties (the action of the novel is set in the middle of the decade), that last decade of the last century before the last century of the millennium. This presentiment of endings is felt most acutely where it touches the young, who are depicted in Nineties typology as elderly before their time, and Conrad encapsulates that special conceit of ruined youth in this particular antinomy of “a sort of inert fanaticism, or perhaps rather with a sort of fanatical inertness.”

This chiasmic reversal of terms includes a peculiar sense of exactitude as the alternative conjunction produces that qualification of sense. The effect

goes to a general knowingness in the demonstration of these conventions of decadence. This is also the sagacity of foreshadowing, for the controlling consciousness of the novel is predicting the specific turn that the story will take in the plot on the Greenwich Observatory. The inertia of the decadent is being mobilized and fanaticized and weaponized in anarchist programs. And it is Conrad's special interest to script the figures of contemporary political positions and the events of recent English history – the action of the novel is modeled on an actual attack by an anarchist on Greenwich in 1894 – into the attitudes and practices of decadence, which are demonstrated so obviously in these opening pages of the novel. The story that follows is framed accordingly as a history coincident with a literature.

It is a history pitched most particularly in that condition of lateness, even of aftermath, which Conrad is representing through his extensive demonstration of the conventions of decadence. Take this representation of the British Empire as a grand systemic organization. In line with general precedent in the conventions of decadence, this is a global and historical imaginary that, in its decline, registers the presentiment of downturn in history in its most indicative and consequential measure. Conrad records this condition as a function of a language otherwise deployed to support or celebrate its institutions. Here, in this vignette in the imperial capital, he plays with and overplays the idiolect of imperial order:

The Assistant Commissioner, driven rapidly in a hansom from the neighbourhood of Soho in the direction of Westminster, got out at the very centre of the Empire on which the sun never sets. Some stalwart constables, who did not seem particularly impressed by the duty of watching the august spot, saluted him. Penetrating through a portal by no means lofty into the precincts of the House which is *the House, par excellence* in the minds of many millions of men, he was met at last by the volatile and revolutionary Toodles. (*TSA*, 162)

The intensives which Conrad scores into this passage and underscores on his own – “the very centre,” “*the House, par excellence*” – raise the level of esteem in a mock-hyperbolic way and so destabilize the verbal surface as a record of credible value. The linguistic ritual of empire, which the narrative language seems to be serving so assiduously, is a verbal ceremony that goes wrong in the actual words. “The higher the slavery,” Shaftesbury once aphorized, “the more exquisite the buffoonery.”¹⁸ The more strenuous the service to authority, Conrad is demonstrating in this verbal burlesque, the more authority is clowned and undone. A constantly sardonic verbal comedy, there is also a special entropic quality: a pomposity hollowing

itself out in a tonal prosody of inflation and diminishment. In “the volatile and revolutionary Toodles,” for most conspicuous instance, the polysyllabic Latinity dovetails into the diminutive name in a rhythm of expansion and contraction that also mimics the sense of a great political institution in decline. It is, all in all, an august inanity. Or, an Augustan inanity, insofar as the “august spot” provides a memory of the dynasty most closely associated with the turn in Roman history from Republic to Empire, the process that Marx memorializes as the first turn toward the decadence being replicated in mid-nineteenth-century France. That long story may be witnessed as a British history in miniature in this passage, where the linguistic wit formalizes the obsequies of imperial ambition in its extension and distention, swelling up and breaking down.

The global dominion of this imperial order is invoked by the Greenwich Observatory, which locates the Greenwich Meridian as the defining site of a new world order: a modern temporal rationalism.¹⁹ So, the anarchists who have in view the primary site of Greenwich Mean Time are targeting not only the values but the measures by which those values of the rational are being implemented in a system of global modernization. All in all, they are attacking the Progress mythology for which the imperial plan was the promissory agent. Anarchism may be read in this novel then as a most vivid and specific instance of a crisis of modernization, which, in turn, defines the moment and opportunity of modernism. This, in a word, is a modernity that has become conscious of itself as such – here, at the special extremity of the threat being presented to it. The primary time of this novel is the imperiled time of modernity.

This is a circumstance inhabited and claimed by the sensibility of decadence. And so the difference anarchism and decadence and modernism make to the normative temporal order of modernity is realized in this novel, not in the success or failure of the anarchist plot itself, which implodes with the “degenerate” Stevie unwittingly carrying the bomb, but in the aftermath, which registers the temporal dispossession of a lost modernity. It is the primary imaginative tense of literary decadence. And Conrad fixes aftermath as the prime condition of contemporary time, in the closing motions of the novel, as he centers his representation in the signal tempo of decadent poetics: the repetition that fades.

In the long winding down of the story, Winnie murders Verloc in outrage at the death of her brother and enters a spontaneous liaison with Verloc's anarchist companion, Comrade Ossipon, who promises her an escape to France and a new life but, deserting her on the way (having pocketed the savings she and Verloc had accumulated), leaves her to take

her own life on the boat. Here, in the representations of Ossipon's reading and rereading of the newspaper account of her death, Conrad initiates a reiterative rhythm of his own:

Before returning it to his pocket he stole a glance at the last lines of a paragraph. They ran thus: "*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair.*"

Such were the end words of an item of news headed: "Suicide of Lady Passenger from a cross-Channel Boat." Comrade Ossipon was familiar with the beauties of its journalistic style. "*An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever . . .*" He knew every word by heart. "*An impenetrable mystery . . .*" And the robust anarchist, hanging his head on his breast, fell into a long reverie. (*TSA*, 228)

The words emphasized by Conrad (the ellipses are also his) will be reiterated insistently across the closing sequence of the book – mostly as Ossipon's ruminations take over the narrative voice:

Ossipon lowered his head slowly. He was alone. "*An impenetrable mystery . . .*" It seemed to him that suspended in the air before him he saw his own brain pulsating to the rhythm of an impenetrable mystery. It was diseased clearly . . . "*This act of madness or despair.*" . . . and the paper with the report of the suicide of a lady was in his pocket. His heart was beating against it. The suicide of a lady – *this act of madness or despair.* (*TSA*, 230–31)

The refrain phrases are positioned tellingly in the dramatic fiction of reading. These reiterated words come from what is designated in the initially spare description of Conrad's narrative as "the last lines of a paragraph," then as "the end words of an item." We learn of an event through words that emerge first as an endpoint in an otherwise conventional, beginning-to-end process of finding out about the instigating event. The words surface in a moment of aftermath; they occlude their provocation from view as these phrases interlace with Ossipon's increasingly obsessive reiteration in the subsequent redaction. It is the original that goes missing in the repetitions of the poetics of decadence, a practice for which this finale provides a revealing example.

"An impenetrable mystery": what this "mystery" consists of becomes sufficiently clear, just as Ossipon's "much-folded newspaper" suggests he has pored over the story, remorsefully or not, and knows full well what has happened. And so the word "mystery" seems increasingly meaningless in its reiterative insistence, fading out of signifying presence in just the same way that the refrain phrases go in the poetics of repetition in decadence. It is a fade that is charged, if that is the word, with every implication and

consequence of a novel positioned at the pivot point of a literary history of two centuries. In one direction this prosody echoes ironically back against the attitudes and practices in the poetics of Wordsworthian romanticism, which reclaim an original moment in the “mystery” of its poetic reiterations, in the rituals of a memory whose repetitions give it an ongoing, comprehensive, deepening significance. In the other direction, Conrad calls sardonically ahead to the circumstances of an urban modernity as the conditions of Ossipon’s repetitions, which, in their increasingly automatic quality, are keyed to one of the instruments of art in the age of mechanical reproduction: “The mechanical piano near the door played through a *valse* cheekily, then fell silent all at once, as if gone grumpy” (*TSA*, 231). Grumpy but compulsive, Ossipon is running to the rhythms of a public culture typified by the mass production machine of the newspaper itself, whose phrases he has memorized and is now repeating in the mechanical fashion characteristic of that source:

It was ruin. His revolutionary career, sustained by the sentiments and trustfulness of many women, was menaced by an impenetrable mystery – the mystery of a human brain pulsating wrongfully to the rhythms of journalistic phrases. “. . . *Will hang for ever over this act . . .* It was inclining towards the gutter . . . *of madness or despair . . .*” (*TSA*, 231)

Keying these repetitions so clearly to the machine of modern public culture, Conrad enjoins on his readers the kind of heightened self-consciousness of modern circumstance that is the occasion and opportunity of modernism, which he constitutes especially by those prosodies of diminishing repetition in the poetics of decadence. He is fixing the special, defining time of modernism in the late times and temporal dispossession of decadence.

A novel sometimes supposed to be “Conrad’s reactionary satire of the late Victorian anarchist movement in London,”²⁰ written from the value standards of the British merchant seaman, thus reads very differently when, on the evidence of its textual practices, we understand its complicity with the materials and means of those reputed adversaries – an anarchism that finds its fellow traveler in the sensibility of decadence. While complicity on the level of textual practice is obviously not conscious partisanship, one consideration to emerge from this analysis involves the possibility of a specifically textual politics. How does the demonstrable decadence of this novel of early modernism position itself in relation to the political history of its own moment, and how may this negotiation inform our understanding of the relation between modernist aesthetics and modern politics in other modernist work?

Reading *The Secret Agent* with these questions of political position in mind, James English follows the operation in the text of Conrad's adaptation of the "joke," as understood in the more complex and ambitiously Freudian formula of "Witz," which usually involves combinations of contradictory quality. In English's formulation, this joke-work is typified and concentrated in the figure of "the fat anarchist," which, as "a witty construction," is "a complex and contradictory figure that is not reducible to the anarchist as such." This unlikely figure is "unthinkable outside the processes of joke-work" and so provides "not an alternative comic version or translation of a political thought but a particular moment within a politics that is itself, precisely, a witty negotiation of internalized but inassimilable contradictions in the social order."²¹ These "inassimilable contradictions" include in particular the tensions between the residual allegiance of the man who had served in the British mercantile empire, as complicated as that memory may be in its fictional representations, and the intensifying pressure of the recognitions of the end-of-empire days. These tensions are released in the joke-work specific to this figure of a fat anarchist, which shifts the center of imaginative gravity in the novel from the framework of received political understandings and their otherwise single and restrictive ideologies. This joke-work provides a reprieve and so opens a dimension of possibility, where these otherwise antithetical political positions may coexist. This condition of possibility registers the novel shock of the awareness that produced it, that forced the otherwise pragmatic morality of the merchant mariner to adapt to it. This is the formative force that the sensibility of decadence represents in the historical imaginary of Conrad, who, in turn, is presenting the special-time consciousness of modernism through it.

A similar configuration appears just one year later in another novel of London anarchism, G. K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare*. As a work of social record, like Conrad's, this novel associates the anarchist movement with the sensibility of decadence, but in a more insistently juridical and vindictive way. While Chesterton's politics show a complexity of their own, offering a sort of vertical socialism in the neo-medievalism of his distributist economics, the rhetorical fiction of this novel features an authorial voice of Tory authority, which is committed ostensibly – and, from the range of Chesterton's other political writings, predictably – to a critique of anarchist activity and its fellow travelers in decadence. His novel evidences then a politics of explicit intention – a conservative's proscription – far more intense and directed than Conrad's. Like Conrad's, however, the political imagination of this book cannot be contained by a uniform political ideology. Like Conrad's, it is registering the immense

pressure of the antithetical understanding that anarchism, as an extension of decadence, is presenting. And where Conrad releases this pressure through joke-work, using unlikely combinations as a means of exceeding the conceptions of fixed ideology, Chesterton's novel produces unlikely binaries of the same kind. These come from his favored genre of fable.

Chief among these is the pattern in which the supposed anarchists are in fact disguised authorities. With or without Chesterton's advocacy as an ideologue, and more significantly without it, his narrative gives the consciousness of its ideological opposite the right to exist, and so opens the verbal surface of the novel to an alternative idiom. In this created zone, the conventions of decadence demonstrate their validity in contemporary history as a language of equal if not greater explanatory power. The textual politics of this novel generate a force field of reorganized authority, of trivialized legitimacy, or, indeed, of legitimized triviality. Here political history submits to a new rule of reality as fundamentally strange and, as such, a place where the formerly alien and forbidden may assume a local habitation, a name. "Involuntary modernism": even if this term appears to be bound by its own impossible combination, its wit invokes the immense and seemingly irresistible pressure of the new reality that the conventions of decadence are encoding, which other authors are acknowledging self-consciously as the material of their early modernism.

The decadence Chesterton will be demonstrating in this novel is framed as its chief concern in a prefatory, dedicatory poem to Edmund Bentley. Here, ahead of fictional time, Chesterton draws the lines of moral order firmly, putting himself at declamatory odds with the cultivation of "decay" as he recalls the early moments of the *fin-de-siècle* world in which he and Bentley grew up:

A cloud was on the mind of men
And wailing went the weather,
Yea, a sick cloud upon the soul
When we were boys together.
Science announced nonentity
And art admired decay;
The world was old and ended:
But you and I were gay
This is a tale of those old fears,
Even of those emptied hells,
And none but you shall understand
The true thing that it tells – . . .

“And I may safely write it now, / And you may safely read,” goes the closing motion in the poem that ends with the promise of a necessary corrective to decadence in the novel that follows.²²

Given the intensity of conviction in this framing piece, at least some of the decadence being demonstrated in the novel will be remonstrated with – and usually in the form of a moralized binary. In its first chapter, for instance, “The Two Poets of Saffron Park,” Chesterton opposes the persons of Lucian Gregory and Gabriel Syme as the angels of good and bad poetry in a political psychomachia of his own. These two poets demonstrate respectively the conventions of decadence as anarchism and the consensus of tradition as order: the first “serves up the old cant of the lawlessness of art and the art of lawlessness” and the other serves as “a poet of law, a poet of order . . . a poet of respectability.” And where Lucien combines in his profile the outline of “a pre-Raphaelite picture” and the “dark red hair” that recalls the burning menace that caricaturists such as Max Beerbohm fixed as the blazon of Swinburne’s famous locks (*MWT*, 8–10), this representative of decadence is identified readily with its political extension in anarchism. Thus Lucian joins his fellow travelers in “The Anarchists’ Council of Days,” where the decadent temper of anarchism is depicted vividly in the presiding figure. He is “a very old man,” this

Professor de Worms, who still kept the chair of Friday, though every day it was expected that his death would leave it empty. Save for his intellect, he was in the last dissolution of senile decay. His face was grey as his long grey beard, his forehead was listed and fixed finally in a furrow of mild despair . . . For the red flower in his buttonhole showed up against a face that was literally discoloured like lead; the whole hideous effect was as if some drunken dandies had put their clothes upon a corpse. (*MWT*, 57–58)

Where the totem animal of decay provides the name for this figure of decadence, Chesterton dresses this “de Worms” as one of its “dandies,” but in a way that shows the morbidity of the sensibility as the subject of his moralized cartoon.

The principle of binary construction in the fabulous narrative begins to break down soon enough, however. The authorized agent of London law impersonates the agent provocateur of London anarchism, or, as it is the intention of narrative suspense if not authorial ideology to suggest, the opposite. These patterns of mutable opposition afford the recognition that decadence, like anarchism, is a quality that exists fundamentally in a condition of interdependent relation. If it needs its opposite to exist, so, in the wit or Witz of Chesterton’s fable, its opposite needs it in order to exist

itself. Under the glass shield of fantasy fiction, which is also a magnifying lens on historical reality in the contemporary imaginative understanding, Chesterton is admitting the otherwise inadmissible figures and ethics of decadence as a power equal to conventional law. The space he gives it appears in representative instance in this picture of a London sky at sunset. The declining time of day is the favored moment of decadence. Its ideological opponent should be lowering the atmospheric and imaginative pressure and not, as here, poetically heightening it:

Over the whole landscape lay a luminous and unnatural discoloration, as of that disastrous twilight which Milton spoke of as shed by the sun in eclipse; so that Syme fell easily into his first thought, that he was actually on some other and emptier planet, which circled round some sadder star. But the more he felt this glittering desolation in the moonlit land, the more his own chivalric folly glowed in the night like a great fire . . . The swordstick and the brandy-flask, though in themselves only the tools of morbid conspirators, became the expressions of his own more healthy romance. (*MWT*, 48)

Master of the crafty paradox, Chesterton deploys some “witty” antitheses to serve the purpose of his ideological opposition to the decadence emanating through this depiction, but the stronger force of a Freudian Witz is organizing a demonstration of decadence that gives it an equal if not greater status. The entropic process is scaled to a cosmic order of magnitude. Even as the dying light of the earth’s sun is displaced in the comparative of “some sadder star,” it is registered in the profounder power of its affective pathos. And the poetry of “desolation” that this perception generates is “glittering” with the incandescence of that other light, “a luminous and unnatural discoloration” in the juridical idiom of the ideologue but a “twilight” whose “disastrous” aspect glows with the power of a sublimity at least as strong as the force of this countermanding crusader. This “chivalric” character cannot avoid the “folly” of his own foolish company, just as the “tools of morbid conspirators” are made to work as the “expressions of his own more healthy romance,” where the comparative degree of the value adjective carries the burden of an ideological will that has been met if not mastered otherwise in the passage by its opposite. The costume changes are of course the prop structure and mechanism of the fabulous adventure narrative, but the resistance that the Tory authority is offering as a forceful antithesis to the decadent temper is breaking down. It is coming undone under the power of a structure of representation whose organizational binary accords equal imaginative status to decadence. If this equity provides advantage to neither side in any objectively calculable fashion, it shows its

greater import and consequence in the allowance it extends to the previously disapproved character.

This process is not just a function of some mechanical law within the grammar of ideas or the syntax of language: it is registering the pressure of a very heavy presence in the political history and historical imaginary of turn-of-the-century Britain specifically. This is the pressure of an end-of-empire-days feeling. Chesterton registers this presentiment in the codes of a spatial imaginary, in this visionary characterization of Syme's reaction to the Anarchist Council of Days:

The sense of an unnatural symbolism settled back on him again. Each figure seemed to be, somehow, on the borderland of things, just as their theory was on the borderland of thought. He knew that each one of these men stood at the extreme end, so to speak, of some wild road of reasoning. He could only fancy, as in some old-world fable, that if a man went westward to the end of the world he would find something – say a tree – that was more or less than a tree, a tree possessed by a spirit; and that if he went east to the end of the world he would find something else that was now wholly itself – a tower, perhaps, of which the very shape was wicked. So these figures seemed to stand up, violent, and unaccountable against an ultimate horizon, visions from the verge. The ends of the earth were closing in. (*MWT*, 59)

Fredric Jameson has written on the effects of colonialism in the modern imperial metropolis, where the displacement of the main source of economic activity from the First to the Third World eventuates in a kind of ramifying absence in the imaginative apprehensions of urban modernity.²³ Chesterton is registering this condition in figures drawn from the lexicon of literary decadence, that is, in images depicting the critical state of empire. This final sentence images the shrinking dominion of imperial space. The failing command of distant places in the empire is apprehended in a presentiment of collapsed distances, warped proportions, erratic rationality (drawing on the etymon of *ratio*, scale or proportion), as here of “reason” on its “wild road.” The prospect records a loss of the forming, ordering, and portioning authority of an imperial episteme, of British reasonableness supremely, as the means and scheme of mapping the world.

This is the pressure of an historical eventuality, which is registered also in the collapse of the moralized binaries otherwise asserted as the working force in the novel. Thus, while the negative prefix in “unnatural” invokes a structure of binary opposition, which is intended to express a moral preference for the negated quality, this word serves instead as the tuning fork for a poetry of antithetical power. It sounds unmistakably through this passage in its depiction of the unnatural, the odd, the extreme. Its specific work

shows most notably where this “wild road of reasoning” leads to the twin extremes of eastern and western “ends of the world.” While an ideologue would use a binary of moral opposition to express a preference and not an equivalent distinction, the intellectual structure of that duality has lost its substance in this prospect. The “wicked” shape of the object on one side invokes a moral antithesis, but this judgment suffers the reduction of its admittedly conjectural existence – “perhaps” – and, besides, it is not borne out by any obvious quality of its opposite and complement on the other end. The wit of an ideological antithesis turns thus to the Witz of a poetic complexity.

Similarly, in Chesterton’s representation of this extremity of London space:

This particular evening, if it is remembered for nothing else, will be remembered in that place for its strange sunset. It looked like the end of the world. All the heaven seemed covered with a vivid and quite palpable plumage . . . towards the west the whole grew past description, transparent and passionate, and the last red-hot plumes of it covered up the sun like something too good to be seen. The whole was so close about the earth as to express nothing but a violent secrecy. The very empyrean seemed to be a secret. It expressed that splendid smallness which is the soul of local patriotism. The very sky seemed small. (*MWT*, 9)

As a metonym for the imperial domain that its capital city centers, the London sky registers the pressure on the normative ideals of empire, here in equally spatial and temporal dimensions. Obviously apocalyptic in quality, this prospect represents a rushing ahead of the sense of destiny that has attended the extension of the imperial will into the world, which has turned back upon itself in the predominant feeling of spatial compression. This extremity of empire days, whether it is the establishing circumstance or expressive metric for the end feeling that is conventional to decadence, prompts a language as luridly heightened as any in the lexicon of poetic decadence.

Not that the ideological wars are called off. In the two concluding sentences, for example, the authorial will redeems the diminished space of the British Empire with that compensatory, vigorously insistent claim of the smaller, English, nation. What makes the verbal surface of the novel the accurate register of the realities of political history is the record of the struggle of ideologies that it reflects – with a complication that comprises and exceeds the unitary will of single ideology and belies the intention of any ideologue. This discrepancy measures the greater pressure of the new temporal imaginary of decadence, which, contested as it is, registers the

power of the novelty of the consciousness it constitutes. Where this recognition constitutes the self-conscious novelty of modernism, its force and import may be shown all the more clearly where it comes to Chesterton inversely, involuntarily.

These tensions are resolved all too voluntarily in the finale to the novel. Here, as dawn breaks, Gabriel “saw the sister of Gregory, the girl with the gold-red hair, cutting lilacs before breakfast, with the great unconscious gravity of a girl” (*MWT*, 182). It is now revealed that the “nightmare” of the novel’s subtitle is the occasion of its fiction. The erstwhile friendship of Gabriel and Lucian has been recovered; the contest of anarchism and order has passed with the other unrealities of the previous night. In this will to traditional order in the story, there is an ideology of plot, whereas, to the side of the mainstream account, a poetry of history speaks in a series of expansive asides. This is the poetry of a time out of conventional time. This sense of time is instinct with the feeling of an exceptional Present. It is the crisis and opportunity of modernism, and if Chesterton needs as it were to be backed into this vantage from his contrary position, the strain of that motion also shows something of the novel force of this new imaginative understanding.

The pressure of this imaginative apprehension cannot be assigned to or resolved into a politics as specific as anarchism. The major import of this recognition lies in its otherwise unresolved quality: it represents a menace that is, variously, quickened with and resisted. In all respects, as the shifting indicators of resistance and complicity indicate in Chesterton’s fiction, it remains more powerful than the will to control its disturbance.

What is the economy of political ideology within which decadence exerts these disturbing effects? The literature of historical record that we are considering in this chapter provides the context and rationale for setting this question. To respond, it is necessary to turn from the representations of novelistic imagination to the writings of explicit politics. In this frame of reference, the word “decadence” may recover its power as a counter of profoundest disruption.

3. The Political Chronicles of “Decadence”

Two books, published in the successive years of 1908 and 1909, may sample the work of the word “decadence” in the discourses of British political culture at this time. They are taken from opposing sides of the conventional political spectrum. Tory and Liberal interests alike present their antipathy to the references and implications of this fraught word. In the

comprehensive opposition that "decadence" generates, a broad consensus center of resistance provides the most indicative measure of the present threat. In the public debate that "decadence" spurs, moreover, the censure being levied on the word helps indeed to sharpen its attraction. This is a fascination of the forbidden. And this is the context within which the particularly modernist novelty of decadence will assume the significance of its resistant shape.

From the conservative side of the political divide, the work of record is Arthur Balfour's *Decadence*, delivered on 25 January 1908 as the Henry Sidgwick Memorial Lecture at Newnham College, Cambridge, and published later that year at the university press. This is a full-dress event in print no less than in vive. Balfour, now the grey eminence of the Tory party (Chief Secretary for Ireland from 1887 to 1891, Prime Minister from 1902–1905), offers a view that has been taken from on high (if more than slightly to the right) on British life, looking retrospectively now across the chronological span of his political career. This is the period in which "decadence" will have emerged as the troubling word it still is. He looks prospectively, too, charting the relevance to the future of its expected references. For a political speaker as seasoned as Balfour, the instability the talk witnesses in relation to its title word is remarkable. In diagrammatic outline, this lecture follows a sort of parabolic curve, beginning and finishing with a resistance to the necessity of "decadence" as a descriptor for current conditions but succumbing in the middle to the powers and indeed the poetry of a counter whose relevance he is otherwise bound to challenge.

"My subject," the talk opens, "is Decadence," where the capitalized form of the noun sizes the referent to a dimensionality he sets out immediately in the second sentence to restrict, lowering the case of this "decadence" to its recognizably lesser representatives:

I do not mean the sort of decadence often attributed to certain phases of artistic or literary development, in which an overwrought technique, straining to express sentiments too subtle or too morbid, is deemed to have supplanted the direct inspiration of an earlier and a simpler age. Whether these autumnal glories, these splendours touched with death, are recurring phenomena in the literary cycle: whether, if they be, they are connected with other forms of decadence, may be questions well worth asking and answering. But they are not the questions with which I am at present concerned. The decadence respecting which I wish to put questions is not literary or artistic, it is political and national. It is the decadence which attacks, or is alleged to attack, great communities and historic civilisations: which is to societies of men what senility is to man, and is often, like senility, the precursor and cause of final dissolution.²⁴

Predictably, Balfour denigrates the poetics of decadence as he applies these judgmental adjectives to the now stereotypical traits of “overwrought technique” and “sentiments too subtle or too morbid.” His representation of that morbidity is tinged nonetheless with no small portion of the “inspiration” he would otherwise deny his subject. He presents that sensibility with an inspired poetry of his own polysyllabic Latinity and English assonance: “these autumnal glories, these splendours touched with death . . .” If he begins this talk with a predictable resistance, he already seems to be reciprocating with his expected enemy. This kind of resisted complicity will dominate the middle portions of the talk, which speaks against itself in strikingly particular ways.

As is evident from the overture, the effort to negate the reality of decadence as the destined end of British history goes to the truth of the biological cycle as a model for political and national life. This is the model he questions rhetorically and emphatically: “But why *should* civilisations wear out and great communities decay? and what evidence is there that in fact they do?” (*D*, 8). He then rejects this model in considering the fall of empires, the Spanish first of all: “There are misfortunes which in the sphere of sociology correspond to accident or disease in the sphere of biology” (*D*, 12). This “accident or disease” scheme is meant to intervene in the explanatory paradigm of the life cycle, where a once waxing and now waning imperial domain lives out its biological destiny. Subsequently, however, as he considers the long fall of the Roman Empire, his earlier words question themselves as an answer to the issues that “decadence” centers: “we are ignorant of the inner character of the cell changes which produce senescence. But should we be better fitted to form a correct conception of the life-history of complex organisms if we refused to recognise any cause of death but accident or disease?” (*D*, 32). More than rhetorical, this question reverses the current of his earlier objection as he reverses the sense of its signal words, so indicating the power of an imaginative understanding that is stronger than his will to resist it.

This instability around “decadence” and its attendant references increases measurably through the middle passages of the talk, especially when Balfour attempts (again) to discount the connection between the declining fortunes of the Roman Empire and the gathering gloom of a gradual, apparently natural process of decay: “Nor yet can we find an explanation of [the social decline] in the discouragement, the sense of impending doom, by which men’s spirits were oppressed long before the Imperial power began to wane” (*D*, 24). The keyword is “discouragement.” It recurs moments later with a striking reversal of contextual sense, which includes his openness now to

"decadence" as a descriptor for an apparently natural and inevitable process of decay:

And when through an ancient and still powerful state there spreads a mood of deep discouragement, when the reaction against recurring ills grows feebler, and the ship rises less buoyantly to each succeeding wave, when learning languishes, enterprise slackens, and vigour ebbs away, then, as I think, there is present some process of social degeneration, which we must perforce recognise, and which, pending a satisfactory analysis, may conveniently be distinguished by the name of "decadence." (*D*, 33–34)

Totalizing the scope of decline in late Rome, he uses "discouragement" as keynote and keyword for this whole symphony of concerted falls. He is taking the process of organic dissolution as tenor for the metaphors of the "decadence" he now also claims as a word and declaims indeed as a poetry of his own, which, like Chesterton's, is the more powerful poetry of the opponent, which he expresses through a poetic anaphora of palpable power. And could the poetry of the "decadence" Balfour intones really be written off to the utility "conveniently" invokes for his appropriation of the word? He is resisting its validity by belittling it even – or especially – when he is caught up most demonstrably in its evocative powers. This inconsistency witnesses a conflict between permissible ideas and impermissible words, a conflict that registers the darker power of the forbidden idiom.

This contradiction is all the more indicative insofar as it is framed by a high degree of self-awareness, on Balfour's part, about the character of political language. Just ahead of the last passage, in fact, he engages in a critique of official political lingo; he indicts that language specifically for the way it papers over the emergent recognition of an empire in decline. "The facile generalisations with which we so often season the study of dry historic fact; the habits of political discussion which induce us to catalogue for purposes of debate the outward signs that distinguish (as we are prone to think) the standing from the falling state, hide the obscurer, but more potent, forces which silently prepare the fate of empires" (*D*, 33). This hidden condition of decay (recalling the "secret work of the instinct of decadence" that Nietzsche so memorably phrased), which is a biological "fate" as "silent" as the verbiage of official record, may be understood as the truth that flows forth as an untrammelled power in the poetry of the subsequent sentences. How striking, then, as the parabola of the lecture swings upward (if that is the direction) and the political will of the career politician reasserts itself, to find the language of the talk turning a deaf ear to the eloquent cautions he has just expressed. This language is the blah blah of

the policy wonk. It speaks the verbal absurdity of a mind taken over by the sheerest abstractions of schematic language:

The flexible element in any society, that which is susceptible of progress or decadence, must therefore be looked for rather in the physical and psychical conditions affecting the life of its component units, than in their inherited constitution. This last rather supplies a limit to variations than an element which does itself vary But though the advance of each community is thus limited by its inherited aptitudes, I do not suppose that those limits have ever been reached by its unaided efforts. In the cases where a forward movement has died away, the pause must in part be due to arrested development in the variable, not to a fixed resistance in the unchanging factor of national character . . . (*D*, 46–47)

Searching for an alternative to the “fate” of the “decadence” he has spoken in the earlier poetry, the official optimist returns to his designated senses (if that is the word). He seizes upon the saving “variable,” that magic abstraction, which would make the equations of “progress” work in a model of society as highly abstracted as it is linguistically laughable. The involuntary comedy of this usage may stand as a grimly risible testament to the power of a conventional ideology to dominate the public culture of language. The stronger point, to be taken from the whole performance of the lecture, is the antithetical power which prohibition exerts, creating the contrary force and poetic import of the counter it outlaws; of “decadence.”

The record of censure on “this dreadful word”²⁵ continues – with a variation that demonstrates the extent of suppression – in a book that comes from a public intellectual on the Liberal side in the next year (1909): C. F. G. Masterman’s *The Condition of England*. Where Balfour worried most about the loss of imperial dominance, Masterman is troubled mainly by the deteriorating “condition” of English social life. As with Balfour, however, there is a fundamental struggle in the book to enunciate the causes of this condition. Does it come from “forces without” or “forces within”? One of the most vivid figures in the book – “seeds of futility and decay” – suggests that decline is indeed the growing point of the English condition, which is running down just as a function of its own life cycle.²⁶ More important as a question than an answer, however, a struggle for understanding in this book focuses most notably on one word, which, in his account of the English condition, is the word scanted: “decadence.”

The virtual absence of this word is more remarkable in view of the fact that its cognate “decay” saturates the verbal fabric of this book. Out of those “seeds” of “decay” there grows “so tragic a decay” in British social life; “a kind of internal collapse and decay” is witnessed within the political

infrastructure of the country, leaving behind "every day's record of that long autumn of decay" (*TCE*, 29, 62, 46). Then there is this mournful litany of decay in just one chapter, "The Countryside" (chapter VI), where the referent of the title word is seen

... everywhere hastening to decay. (*TCE*, 190)

The houses tumbling into decay, no new houses built, apathy settling down like a grey cloud over all ... (192)

Village after village, in which no new cottages have been built for a hundred years; crumbling walls, falling into decay ... (193)

[There was] a richness and variety almost incredible to those who to-day see but the last guttering flame of parochial life, the attempt by parish councils, guilds of village players, and all the enterprise of occasional vigorous resistance, to combat the spreading atrophy of decay. (200)

Here the estates are encumbered or falling into decay. (203)

Over all which vision of a secular decay Nature still flings the splendour of her dawns and sunsets upon a land of radiant beauty. (208)

The expressive power in these passages, where "decay" is augmented in its descriptive force by a virtual thesaurus of available synonyms, suggests a level of linguistic self-consciousness that makes the omission of "decadence" all the more striking and significant.

In the then current *OED* entry for "decadence," there is this primary meaning: "1. the process of falling away or declining from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity etc; decay; impaired or deteriorated condition." Not much different, it would seem, from "decay": "1. the process of falling off from a prosperous or thriving condition; progressive decline; the condition of one who has thus fallen off or declined." A change in connotation comes with the suffix "ence," however, an addition that also brings with it a difference of referential sense. As this same *OED* notes, "ence" forms abstract substantives, usually of quality, rarely of action, but its examples also show how often "ence" turns verbs of action into words of quality – no more strikingly than when "decay" becomes "decadence," that is, when the action of decaying, which is understood as a concrete phenomenon in a local and specific instance, leads to a "decadence" that is the consequence of that action and the quality of a far more comprehensive "condition." In managing the content of that title word, Masterman is obviously choosing to keep the decaying of the state local, keep it specific. For him, the process of decay is still underway and so is probably not irreversible to Liberal intervention. Decay may be as vivid and particular as it is to the presentiments of his social conscience, but he will not admit it as the finished condition and qualitative state which "decadence" suggests.

His aversion to “decadence” as the term for the social condition of England opens as an absence, too, in his account of a contemporary decadence in English literary culture.

The change is becoming manifest as comfort increases and wealth accumulates, which has been manifest in all similar transformations. Literature loses its ardour and its inspiration. It becomes critical rather than invigorating: sceptical, questioning, sometimes with an appearance of frivolity, sometimes torturing itself with angers and despairs. The note to-day is that of a time of disenchantment . . . a conviction that the zest and sparkle has gone from a society which suddenly feels itself growing old. (*TCE*, 230)

“Decadence” is the one word missing in this record of a sensibility already clearly identified with it in England by 1909 – its attitudes and mannerisms are as clearly established as this catalogue of disreputable traits is apparently ready-made. That word has been often deployed in the summary judgments Masterman is recycling in the practices he inventories here, and their targets have also taken the term of attack as the badge of their own defiant value. Predictably, but tellingly, “decadence” surfaces in his account in reference to a “decadent French play” (*TCE*, 45), where the condition is placed at that alien distance, and only twice more (150, 232), each time in distancing quotations. As the word estranged in his story of “the condition of England,” “decadence” demonstrates again its power as a counter for the unspeakable, centering a range of omissions as irrepressibly evident as they are interesting and indeed compelling in being forbidden.

From their respectively conservative and liberal vantages, the accounts of Balfour and Masterman may take exception to each other even as they provide a unified view on the state of the public language in England. This is an economy in which “decadence” centers a range of evocations as powerful as they are unwanted. Unspoken, or spoken against itself in a poetry as unanticipated and uninvited as it is significant, the word “decadence” serves as a tuning fork for a poetics that registers the pressure of the previously impermissible and unsaid on the language of available record. “Decadence” opens thus into a zone of novelty as important as the defining qualities of a modernism whose special self-consciousness about this novelty is demonstrable, too, in the friction exhibited around it.

4. D. H. Lawrence

The special poetic powers which “decadence” exhibits in the public record of political England turn us back to the critical heuristic of poetry and plot

that we followed in Chesterton's novel. This formula provides a way of understanding the imaginative and ideological work in several more novels of major record of this time. Here the contrary provocations of decadence are negotiated in relation to the conventional forms of narrative fiction. To a Progress mythology and its imaginative analogue in the progressiveness of novelistic plot, the sense of an ending already realized in the temporal sensibility of aftermath presents a manifest challenge. The poetic aside abides thus in a kind of time-out-of-narrative time. It pronounces an alternative temporality in a tempo of exception, which registers a sense of modernity lost now as a living current. It speaks a poetry of antithetical power to the ideological will of the conventional story, which requires it thus to be sidelined from the progressive destination. This critical heuristic opens up an understanding of the struggle to enunciate an awareness whose self-conscious novelty is evidenced in the exceptional present, the modernist moment, of its poetic intervention in a normative order of plot time.

These tensions are brought to an exemplary demonstration in D. H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*, which represents a defining extension of the methods and patterns evident in the novels of an earlier modernism. The contributing conditions of this sensibility have been brought to critical mass in the historical circumstance of the novel's composition. Although not published until 1920, it was written and finished in the first half of 1916, that is, in the dead middle of the Great War. This already long moment of the national ordeal is evident in no explicit reference to the war but elsewhere and everywhere in an historical pessimism, a temperament Lawrence grounds in those conventions of decadence he is demonstrating so extensively. He puts it categorically and emphatically in a letter of November 1915, responding to the suppression of *The Rainbow* (1915) in particular but evoking the circumstance of the Great War in general: "I think there is no future for England: only a decline and fall. This is the dreadful and unbearable part of it: to have been born into a decadent era, a decline of life, a collapsing civilisation."²⁷

In the more textured representation of this apprehension of "a decadent era" in literary form, Lawrence generates a poetry of history that operates in a special tension with the plot of his story, which involves a version of romantic comedy that is as complex as Lawrence's notions of heterosexual love. This story moves, if not to the marriage conclusion of generic convention, at least toward the perfection of Lawrence's own version of a normative union. In this wise, he refashions the pattern manifest in Chesterton's novel, since the comic resolution is more complicated now. The "decadence" so evident in contemporary history, in wartime, is too

substantial to be so manipulated by imaginative fiction, and, in this augmented condition, provides a newly powerful resistance to any traditional will toward a former order. Those plot motives are blocked, the perfection of the heterosexual relationship is stalled. The friction of resistance to this comic plot comes as it were from the sidelines of the story, where it is voiced as the poetry of history in the poetics of decadence, which echoes and augments the demonstration of decadence in the historical fiction.

This demonstration of decadence also provides a parable of the circumstances of a developing modernism. The self-conscious novelty of modernity, which is the establishing awareness of modernism, comes with the blunt-force trauma of this unprecedented, this conspicuously modern, war. So intense is its impact, as I have suggested, it is deflected and diffused through the tonal atmospherics of the book. It is the novelty of this horror that this book marks as its chief point of difference to its erstwhile companion volume, *The Rainbow*, from which Lawrence detached the material of *Women in Love* early in 1915 for an autonomous work.²⁸ This separation indexes formally some of the difference the war made. It involves a novelty of awareness so awful in its historical as well as imaginative circumstance that it establishes its own literary reality.

This is the condition for which the book may be read, in every sense of a complex phrase, as an apology for modernism. Like its early contemporaries, it is a modernism that is constituted by the sense of its special present. This condition has been raised to the climactic state of an utterly unprecedented war. Its daily atrocities (spelled out in the casualty lists of the *London Times*) constitute the awful novelty of its every day and, as an apocalypse of modern technology especially, also provide the final but daily disproof of the Progress mythology of the modern. This is the special day of a modernism to which Lawrence responds with an apology that forgives little, or nothing, insofar as it is constituted by those conventions of decadence that are new, too, in the intensity and extensiveness of the deathliness they reflect. This is the extreme context in which the decadence he is demonstrating prompts a sort of appalled fascination, where the novelist is drawn most powerfully to the novelty that he also, with equal intensity, deplors and resents.

There is, to begin with, the force field centered in Hermione Roddice. This is the figure with whom the artist Rupert Birkin, Lawrence's sometime double in the novel, is fixed in a contested but long-unshakeable liaison. The relationship bespeaks Lawrence's fixated interest in the deadly novelty she represents. Modeled on Ottoline Morrell, patron and convener at Garsington Manor of some of the most "advanced" painters and writers

of the day (including T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey and Bertrand Russell), Hermione is depicted by Birkin as “more decadent than the most hide-bound intellectualism” (*WIL*, 40). This “intellectualism” situates the “decadent” temper of Hermione on the advanced-guard end of the contemporary cultural identity spectrum. Accordingly, Hermione exemplifies this decadence as a demonstrative novelty, which is identifiable in every evident way with the self-conscious novelty of modernism. This is the compound Lawrence depicts reiteratively in the figure of the fashionable cadaver. As in this next passage, where he dresses “decadence” on her person in the color that *The Yellow Book* had raised as the blazon of decadence and the hue of extreme chic, though, as one would expect, here overlabeled. Hermione

came along, with her head held up, balancing an enormous flat hat of pale yellow velvet, on which were streaks of ostrich feathers . . . She wore a dress of silky, frail velvet, of pale yellow colour . . . she drifted along with a peculiar fixity of the hips . . . She was impressive, in her lovely pale-yellow and brownish-rose, yet macabre, something repulsive . . . Her long, pale face, that she carried lifted up, somewhat in the Rossetti fashion, seemed almost drugged . . . she was a woman of the new school, full of intellectuality, and heavy, nerve-worn with consciousness. She was passionately interested in reform . . . (*WIL*, 13–14)

Combining the reference to the Pre-Raphaelite Rossetti with a “woman of the new school,” Lawrence is projecting a character who compounds a figure of the New Woman, who is intent on the “reform” of women’s social and marital roles and so exemplifies the temper of some of the major movements of social modernization, with one of the chief antecedents of “decadence” in cultural as well as literary history. Here then is the femme fatale of European *décadence*, turned toward the work of progressive modernity. Whether or not these efforts represent one of the offshoots of the change in consciousness that decadence also embodies, as subsequent commentators such as Gillian Beer would argue for the women in Hardy’s world, none of these possibilities is going to be realized as social consequence in Lawrence’s fiction. The modernizing impulse is subordinated always in Lawrence’s representations to its place in the double structure of a particularly modernist decadence. For the self-conscious novelty Hermione embodies, variously in costume and politics, is inseparable from the decay he fixes in her person and intensifies in the aspects of fashion as well as physiology.

The conception of Hermione as a figure is compounded of the same stuff as a modernism constituted by the conditions of decadence in earlier novels,

but this book provides an instance of that idea at a revealing extreme. For Lawrence's response to this concept is informed and intensified by the extremity of the current historical circumstance he is depicting through her. His antagonism to the "new woman" represents a displacement of apprehensions enjoined on him by the current war. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have pointed out so thoroughly, the war economy reversed former roles of women and men in making the males the passive sufferers on the front and the females the industrious agents of work at home.²⁹ More than an expected resentment, however, is reflected in Lawrence's representations of Hermione. The novelty of the horror of technological apocalypse is traveling into the grimly thrilling aspect of this female character. Here the conventions of decadence are reflecting a decay that has been raised to an order of magnitude that the page-after-page display of the names of the war dead on the London *Times* was daily registering – even, in the sort of diptych one could see so often on these pages, in close juxtaposition to the images of the most contemporary fashion. Hermione is a reflection in extremis of the historical imaginary of decadence as modernism. As a historically constituted figure, she realizes that conceit of "morbid modernity" which James's turn-of-the-century phrase had echoed ahead of this time so presciently.

Hermione's character also represents a sensibility adversely disposed to the proposed interest of the plot of the novel – the perfection of the union of Rupert and Ursula. She is thus sidelined from the working out of the plot ideology. Even as the interest of this romantic story is privileged consistently in the manipulation of readers' sympathies, however, its advance in the narrative is challenged from the margins, as in Chesterton's novel, by a poetry of history and a poetics of decadence.

The division between the romantic plot of the story and the decadent poetry of history is working most clearly in the relationship between Ursula and Rupert. The conflict is hypostatized as erotic tension, sublimated as romantic attraction. Expressing belief in the purest form of Lawrence's sexual mythology, Ursula provides a binary complement for the dramatizing of ideas. She represents the interests of the normative order of romantic comedy, which, in the dramatic fiction of their exchange, serves as the spur to stimulate the resistance that Rupert voices into the story as the poetry of history, in the poetics of decadence, which, in consummate effect, owns the deeper truth of a reality borne into the story by the circumstances of the current war.

In this sequence, then, Ursula defends the presumptions of the highest kind of natural romance and so resists the conditions of decadence, which Rupert intensifies in a demonstrably poetic response:

“We always consider the silver river of life, rolling on and quickening all the world to a brightness, on and on to heaven, flowing into a bright eternal sea, a heaven of angels thronging. – But the other is our real reality –”

“But what other? I don’t see any other,” said Ursula.

“It is your reality, nevertheless,” he said, “the dark river of dissolution. – You see it rolls in us just as the other rolls – the black river of corruption. And our flowers are of this – our sea-born Aphrodite, all our white phosphorescent flowers of sensuous perfection, all our reality, nowadays.”

“You mean that Aphrodite is really deathly?” asked Ursula.

“I mean she is the flowering mystery of the death-process, yes,” he replied . . .

“And you and me –?” she asked.

“Probably,” he replied. “In part, certainly. Whether we are that, in toto, I don’t yet know.”

“You mean we are flowers of dissolution – *fleurs du mal*? – I don’t feel as if I were,” she protested.

He was silent for a time. (*WIL*, 177)

The passage reveals a knowledge of the poetry of decadence on the part of its author that is both obvious and recondite: the reference to Baudelaire’s *Fleurs du Mal* by name should not obscure Rupert’s more knowing allusion to the “phosphorescent” glow that is the most favored shade for that premier poet of *décadence*. And while Rupert admits to not knowing if the condition of decadence that he is poeticizing represents an existence “in toto,” it is worth noting the especially heavy pressure that the sensibility of decadence is exerting on the work of its poetry here.

This is the chapter (XIV, “Water-Party”) in which two young people, following an annual party that Rupert and Ursula are also attending, die by drowning in the lake of the girl’s familial estate. Ruined youth, as the signature image of Nineties decadence, has registered the sense of a century then ending most intensely where it touched the young. This imaginative concept has been transferred en masse from the more exquisite and specialized conceit of the young artists of Nineties decadence to the circumstance of this modern mass war, whose dead included an especially high census of youth, and whose heavy presence in the imaginary of contemporary history Lawrence is refracting throughout his novel. Dying young is a narrative of counter-natural aspect that also carries the inverted values of decadence most ostensibly and, in this passage, locates the apparent point of tension with the sensibility Lawrence locates in Ursula. It carries the most powerful impact of difference to the naturalistic myths that the references to Aphrodite otherwise suggest – Ursula seems ready to defend the goddess of natural love against this unnatural, this unexpected,

deathliness. If, in the imagery of the “flowering mystery of the death-process,” Rupert seems to be recuperating a naturalistic understanding of human mortality, his language is otherwise heightened in a way that measures its very contemporary reference and valence: it evokes the whole phenomenon, the process as well as the end and aim, of the Freudian death drive – a concept powerfully reinforced in the context of the same war which Lawrence is refracting so expansively through this book.

In Lawrence’s novel, this poetry of history is sidelined by the plot of a story that turns its interest away from the decadence of contemporary England and toward a continental setting that works as a pastoral alternative. This is an alpine retreat which, in a composition of symbolic space, offers aloft a potential refuge from the lower turmoil of the otherwise unnamed Great War (the same composition of symbolic space appears in Hemingway’s later war novel, *A Farewell to Arms*). Lawrence registers some of the heavier pressure being exerted by the conditions and sensibility of decadence in the counter-pressure he applies to it. In a compensatory and evidently self-defensive gesture, he impacts its poetics in parody. The *disjecta membra* of its literary conventions strew the path of ascent to the Alps. Turning the poetics of decadence into the zoology of degeneration is one of the favored tactics in projects of this kind, and Lawrence follows that familiar plan at the first turn of the climb, in the town that outfits his characters for the ascent. He populates the Pompadour Café with a “menagerie of apish degraded souls” (*WIL*, 396); in this topos of degeneration, the poetics of decadence is performed at its original, or aboriginal, worst. One of the habitués of this café thus offers his demeaning version of Rupert’s earlier apologia for the poetics of decadence – “We’re all flowers of mud – *Fleurs – hic! du mal!* – It’s perfectly wonderful, Birkin harrowing Hell – harrowing the Pompadour – *Hic!*” (*WIL*, 400). The indignity to which the poet laureate of *décadence* is submitted here includes the antic excitement with which the French poet’s favored shade is presented:

“Do let me go on! Oh, this is a perfectly wonderful piece! But do listen to this. ‘And in the great retrogression, the reducing back of the created body of life, we get knowledge, and beyond knowledge, the *phosphorescent* ecstasy of acute sensation.’” (*WIL*, 399)

The ridicule in Lawrence’s remonstrations with decadence mounts to a final focus in the German artist Loerke, whom the English couples meet at the top of their climb in the ski chalet. This is the figure whom David Trotter has accurately characterized as “Lawrence’s best shot at a degenerate,” one who fulfills “to an almost parodic degree the requirements of stereotype.”³⁰

Here the symbiotic quality of the relationship between “degeneration” and “decadence” is most obvious, as in Conrad’s compounding of the image of the decadent artist Beardsley in the simian lineaments of Stevie’s lip and chin: the fear that is evidenced in response to decadence as a regression from progressive norms is taken to a ridiculing extreme in the degenerative type, as, here, in the degenerate artist Loerke. And although Herr Loerke was already one of Lawrence’s characters in the draft he was working on when *Women in Love* and *The Rainbow* were one book, that is, before the war, the German identity now provides a timelier side to the negativity he is directing through the caricatures of decadence he is assembling in the closing motions of the book.

Loerke serves the purposes of the novel’s discursive work in typifying most vividly the conditions of contemporary history, whose degenerative direction the war is all too strongly reinforcing in the decadent sensibility to which Lawrence otherwise objects. These are the historical circumstances that the plot of the story intends to leave behind, for the sake of the perfection of the union between Rupert and Ursula. This promissory ideal, however, is not realized. Attention is distracted at the end to the complications of the romantic subplot, which follows the wayward intentions of Ursula’s sister Gudrun, who runs off with the otherwise despised Loerke and whose former lover, the wealthy industrialist Gerald Crich, dies of despair in the snows. This confusion comes out of a profounder impasse between the intention of the romantic story and the poetry of a circumstantial history, which, despite the plot to demean and disable it, reveals the power of the historical imaginary of the poetics of decadence even – or especially – in this frustration.

This impasse is visualized in the closing paragraphs of the novel in Rupert’s double-turning view of the Alps. Upward, the direction of escape is no longer available. Downward, Rupert

might have gone on, down the steep, steep fall of the south-side, down into the dark valley with its pines, on to the great Imperial road leading south to Italy.

He might! And what then? The Imperial road! The south? Italy? What then? Was it a way out? – It was only a way in again. Birkin stood high in the painful air, looking at the peaks, and the way south. Was it any good going south, to Italy? Down the old, old Imperial road? (*WIL*, 496)

The route “down” follows a road that would lead Rupert back into history – to a history that Lawrence images in the condition of decadence. This relict of the now long-gone Roman Empire, which is seen in an image of the expansion that brought Rome down, presents in the example of a fallen

greatness the prime instance of an original and in fact perennial decadence. Its conditions are as present and impending as the obsession Lawrence registers in the reiteration of that iconic phrase, “the Imperial road” – as present indeed as the memory of the poetry of history and the poetics of decadence that have been spoken from the sidelines of the story, whose romantic plot is now stalled.

This is the poetry whose closing notes sound the interment ceremony for Gerald’s body, now removed to the lodge. Rupert

went into the room, and sat down on the bed. Dead, dead and cold!

“Imperial Caesar dead, and turned to clay
Would stop a hole to keep the wind away.”

There was no response from that which had been Gerald. (*WIL*, 497)

These verses from the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* (V.1) put Rupert in the position of a Hamlet reflecting on the skull of Yorick. Where the doggerel prosody in the Shakespearean original echoes the forced indifference of Hamlet to the death with which he has been obsessed throughout the play, so too for Rupert, who can be heard to be defending against the homoerotic attachment to Gerald, which has run as a narrative parallel in the novel to the straighter line development of his romantic union with Ursula. Where the queer interest associated with decadence has been sidelined by the plot, it is emerging again at the end in a poetry whose contorted form reflects all of the pressure that the ideology of the romantic plot has brought to bear on the sensibility of decadence. This roughing up of the verbal surface, however, should not obscure the special poignancy of the poetics of decadence in its dying fall. Indeed, the reference to the “*imperial* Caesar” – it is “*imperious*” in the folio version of the play, and so Lawrence’s choice goes to a more explicitly historical frame of reference³¹ – transfers the mantle of the figure of the emperor in an original decadence to this industrial baron; across the two historical eras, he is keeping the metric of decadence consistent in the conditions of great things lost. Indeed, Gerald is a figure of the social and economic establishment of a nineteenth-century progressivism now in spiritual and emotional dissolution. This downfall includes the remains of a Fabian socialism, which his father has preserved in the form of a noblesse oblige with his workers, but which Gerald has disclaimed in the interest of a new efficiency; his economic rationalism has proven only as economically successful as it is interpersonally ruthless and personally ruinous. Gerald’s family enterprise offers an image in miniature and in particular of a new industrial imperialism that has lost moral authority even as it has

gained terrain. These are the conditions of the decadence that has proven more enduring in the poetry of historical despair than the wishes of the plot in the romantic comedy, from which the novel has now so obviously absconded.

The circumstances of the war still going on have brought the demonstrations of decadence in the novels of an early and developing modernism to this state of exemplary tension and revelation. The destructive novelty of an altogether modern war is being received, recycled, and represented in Lawrence's book in the images and sentiments of literary decadence, which provides as it were a dark mirror or negative space of that event's extreme modernity. In his moments of poetic exception, in this otherwise sidelined poetry of decadence, Lawrence is representing the exceptional moment of a modernity against itself and so providing for a more self-conscious relation to the circumstance of modernity. He is writing out the poetics in prose of his own radical modernism.

5. **The Middle Parts of Modernism: Manning and West – Wartime**

The fiction that deals explicitly with the war reveals a similar difficulty with the force of conventional story. The war challenges the narratives of personal development that go into story and plot. In fact, it attacks the establishing rationales for these narratives, for the stories of progressive development in characters and between characters stand as micro-narratives of the grander progressions of national time in the ideologies of English liberalism. This is the myth that was given the lie to in the war – most profoundly, in the plot of perfectibility in English liberal historiography, which was hardly resounding in triumphant coda in these years. The technology hitherto associated with Progress was coming to its appallingly inverse apocalypse and revelation in the day-by-day mayhem of the several fronts. The stalemated progress of armies, where the technology of each side provided the obstacle to that of the other, represented the failure of that idea in staggering human toll. These are the circumstances which help to explain why the narratives that suborn their representations of the war to some order of consecutive end-driven event, as some continuous fiction of motive and consequence, appear so forced and false. There were a good number of these, in a war where so many things were undone.³²

Those increasingly untenable fictions of continuous time leave the temporal remnant as the most indicative record of wartime. This is the moment remaindered, the interval left out of the series of sequence and consequence.

In fiction that registers this temporal apprehension most directly, we can find the consciousness of modernism performing its most exemplary, definitive work. Modernism, I am saying, works most indicatively within an imaginative concept of time interrupted – whether this interruption is the end of consecutive and progressive temporality in the finality of last days, as in the representations of James and Conrad, Lawrence and Chesterton, or, as in the fiction representing the temporal imaginary specific to wartime, of historical pause. Stalled, registered with a self-consciousness about the difference this time out of time represents: here is the definitive moment, the signal condition, of modernism. This difference has been demonstrated already in the interventions that the poetry of decadence has entered into the progressive plots of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century fiction. So, the literary history of decadence provides some of the most important writing of the war with an interior history, a literary memory, a resonating form. In this exacting sense, where the war is the manifestly central and generative event of the narrative fiction, there are two great modernist novels of the war. And the representation of the war in each of these reveals a powerful recycling of the sensibility of literary decadence.

Frederic Manning's *The Middle Parts of Fortune*, or *Her Privates We*, shows the situation of the temporal stalemate already in the punning bawdry of its alternative titles. These are drawn from the phrases Rosencrantz and Guildenstern trade off in *Hamlet* to locate themselves in their relevant parts of the goddess Fortuna's body.³³ Life in the midst is the condition of the stalled story of this war; on page after page, Manning offers a ruefully humorous vision of the non-eventuating events of infantryman's time. The story begins *in medias res* and ends *per medias res* (the death of its protagonist marks no conclusion) and continues with remarkable adequacy to the absent eventuality of this experience, to the sheer plod of the chronically indeterminate plot. Instead of any consecutive story, the writer occupies the stopped moment, where he offers a poetry of philosophical content and implication as profoundly moving as the plot itself seems unmoved, even inert. For the following passage, representatively, Manning has taken the chronicle of inconsequence that is the daily story of the war and, as a trained and published philosopher as well as an accomplished poet, converted this state of suspension into the metaphysical void he poeticizes so finely. His human subjects are suspended in a condition he takes over as the moment of philosophical poetry:

These apparently rude and brutal natures comforted, encouraged, and reconciled each other to fate, with a tenderness and tact which was more

moving than anything in life. They had nothing; not even their own bodies, which had become mere implements of warfare. They turned from the wreckage and misery of life to an empty heaven, and from an empty heaven to the silence of their own hearts. They had been brought to the last extremity of hope, and yet they put their hands on each other's shoulders and said with a passionate conviction that it would be all right, though they had faith in nothing, but in themselves and in each other.³⁴

The repetition that fades in the poetics of decadence is replicated in this emotional fiction in the call for an answer that is not answered. More concretely, in the language of this passage, the pattern of the fading repetition shows in the lengthened and increasingly fainter echoes of submerged rhymes, internal assonances: “rude and brutal,” “natures . . . fate,” “wreckage . . . empty . . . empty . . . extremity.” This is the highly refined register of a vintage poetics of decadence, which poets have been fining down over the long turn of the century into this representation, where, in effect, the poetics of remnant temporality emerges in these personages as the human remains of some former ideal time. Leftovers, moments of exception to the prevalent conceptions of progressive modernity, these figures have no faith in any destiny of time and so bespeak the feeling of the middle parts of history. They exist in the perpetual midst of a story that has lost the sense of its aim and end as well as origin but, just so, in Manning's hands, provided the defining occasion of modernism in a sense of time as acutely self-conscious as its expression here is heightened, stylized, poeticized.

The status Manning enjoyed in the coterie modernism of prewar and postwar London – an elusive personage, this independently wealthy Australian was often regarded as a fellow traveler and companion talent, sometimes in fact as a leading-edge figure – may help to frame the attitudes and practices of his book as an example, even a parable, of modernism in its time.³⁵ This signature moment of poetic pause, at once the acutest form of temporal self-consciousness in modernism and sharpest instance of Progress Interrupted in decadence, provides the defining occasion of the other great modernist novel of the war, which may be read now as its complement: Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*.

In West's story, a shell-shocked infantry officer returns from the present mid-war years (West wrote it in winter 1916–1917) to the year 1901, which, in his dissociated condition, he has reentered as current reality and is attempting to recover in the form of a romantic relationship from that earlier day. The experience of dissociation or fugue (flight from reality) was extensive among the officer class in the war, as recorded in the exploratory research and experimental therapy of W. H. R. Rivers, who followed a number of cases

and catalogued the alternative identities they forged, often out of fantasy, sometimes out of past experiences.³⁶ This design of psychological time, where the present folds back into the past, provides a version of the suspended temporality in Manning's fiction, but the pause is backward-oriented in West's novel in a way that is historically specific and, accordingly, significant.

It is the last year of Queen Victoria's life and reign that her protagonist takes as his point of return and moment of solace. This was also the first year of the new and, in the promissory calculus of that chronological day, ever more progressive century. The nineteenth-century mythology of historical Progress finds its pivot point in this instant, swinging forward into the year 1916 as its moment of forward proof. The difference this interval of 1901–1916 marks in any conventional reckoning of political time, however, is one of loss and fall. And as the narrative fails to conform to fictions of Progress, it tells the story of a decadence that West builds into a sense of British history, shaping the narrative fiction and back story for her protagonist Chris Baldry.

The dimension of national mythological history in this account appears in the public status of the family estate, Baldry Court. Familiar in this fiction from pictures in popular magazines, it establishes its picturesque perspective on Albion's green and pleasant land. This is the "dear old place" from which "the eye drops to miles of emerald pastureland lying wet and brilliant under a westward line of sleek hills blue with distance and distant woods," which has provided the "matter of innumerable photographs in the illustrated papers."³⁷

Into this larger dimension of national history West fits the change that this specifically "modern" war has meant. It coincides with the shift in register in the narrative language of this next passage. West's narrator turns from the ingenuous domesticity of her usual report into a range of different tonalities, beginning with a formed rhetorical question about the difference between 1901 and now:

Why had modern life brought forth these horrors that make the old tragedies seem no more than nursery shows? Perhaps it is that adventurous men have too greatly changed the outward world which is life's engenderment. There are towns now, and even the trees and flowers are not as they were; the crocuses on the lawn, whose blades showed white in the wide beam let out by the window Chris had opened, should have pierced turf on Mediterranean cliffs; the golden larch beyond should have cast its long shadows on little yellow men as they crossed a Chinese plain. And the sky also is different. Behind Chris' head, as he halted at the open window, a searchlight turned all ways in the night like a sword brandished among the stars. (*RS*, 30)

The former world order, where things were somehow held in their proper places, has been defamiliarized now – under the strange light that Chris has brought home as his own war-related estrangement and that the war has shed on the Baldry Court (and Britain) of the present. The remains of an imperial imaginary are also estranged, insofar as the material brought in from abroad appears now to have forsaken its proper place in Britain. Its landscape has lost a sense of customary order, in the same way that Chesterton's London prospects recorded a loss of world-geographical proportion and so provided the incipient sign of empire under stress. It is now in manifest and expressive distress. The main grammatical mood and dominant imaginative tense lies in the reiterated "should have," emphasizing what is missing, now, in what is left behind. Recalling the remaindered time of Manning, the remaindered moment of this altered and evacuated present locates the point of expressive poetic power, which registers its difference in the shift of idiom in this passage, in the manifestly heightened quality of its imagery and diction.

Again, in the descriptive positioning of Baldry Court in a dusky twilight time: this public English place appears in the atmospheric time of a decadence that West complements by shifting her narrator's voice into poetically heightened diction:

I was left alone with the dusk and the familiar things. The dusk flowed in wet and cool from the garden as if to put out the fire of confusion lit on our hearthstone, and the furniture, very visible through the soft evening opacity with the observant brightness of old well-polished wood, seemed terribly aware. Strangeness had come into the house and everything was appalled by it, even time. For the moments dragged. It seemed to me, half an hour later, that I had been standing for an infinite period in the drawing-room, remembering that in the old days the blinds had never been drawn in this room because old Mrs Baldry had liked to see the night gathering like a pool in the valley while the day lingered as a white streak above the farthest hills . . . (RS, 25–26)

The feeling of the old place, sponsored by and associated with Mrs. Baldry, Chris's mother, provides the memory of the conventionally languorous prosperity of late Victoriana. The new influence comes as the *terrible awareness* associated with Chris's return from the war, which makes the formerly comfortable and familiar into something strange and unknown. The discomfiting force of the war occurs on the level of fundamental awareness: it has changed "even time," that is, it has altered the conventional understanding of cultural temporality as it has voided it of its assurances and continuities. The present thus concentrates a poetry of loss in the *dragging*

time, the suspended temporality, of decadence, which, in the affective register Manning will have likewise poeticized, has dilated into the experience of an “infinite period.” It is an interval charged with the emptiness of the fugitive infinity Baudelaire, following De Quincey, has inscribed as the emptying of the fullness of the romantic spot of time and registered as the temporal imaginary in the poetic *tempus* of decadence, in these dregs and drags of time. It is a condition whose historical import grows out of this passage into the one examined before it, which follows it in narrative series in West’s book.

The inwardness West reveals with the historical imaginary of decadence may be evidenced in the special connection she demonstrates with the novel that stands as one of the hallmark works of its literary tradition: Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Most obviously, there is the reminder through the married name of Chris’s former paramour, now Mrs. Grey.³⁸ The graying that Wilde fables in the fall of his title character is certainly redoubled in Chris’s loss of the green world of romantic youth. The mixing of color symbols in West’s depiction of the varying shades in Chris’s hair – “I cried out, because I had seen that his hair was of three colours now – brown and gold and silver” (RS, 23), in the changed aspect of Chris’s return from the war – also strongly recalls the *chiaroscuro* Wilde paints into the changing aspect of Dorian’s. Most of all, the double panel of Dorian’s person and picture reappears as the dual coordinates of Chris’s psychic life: one the unchanging aspect of a youth whose sempiternity is an illusion and the other a *memento mori*, made no less gruesome in the work of war in West’s novel than it is in the aging of Wilde’s protagonist’s picture. In historicizing Wilde’s fiction so explicitly, moreover, West extends those premonitions of “fin-de-globe” into the contemporary reality of this first world war.

The historical truth of decadence is being perceived and represented within a specific, identifiable sense of modernist narrative time. The fall from the illusion of 1901 to the disillusion of 1916, when the “soldier,” now cured, will “return” to the war: those two temporal coordinates in the longer story are present as a constant simultaneity of feeling. From the endpoint of 1916, we as readers experience the appeal of the foretime of 1901, which, for the reader, is no forgotten circumstance. This compound moment might be seen as a version of the palimpsest that Hugh Kenner has appraised as the characteristically modernist apprehension of instantaneous time, where, as a function of increasing speed in the machines of information storage and retrieval, present and past are taken into a single manifold, as one layered imaginative totality.³⁹

These modern conditions are as important in being resisted as reciprocated with, however. The experience of an increasing swiftness of change and its replication in the concentrated times of the aesthetic present may include the pleroma of an expanded and intensified moment. As determined in our earlier consideration of de Man's understanding of the imagination of modern temporality, however, it just as surely adduces a second-by-second feeling of kenosis, of depletion – the sense of a present ever emptying itself into the next instant and, with that feeling of loss, an equally chronic experience of regret. As in the quickening tempo of a modernity whose “accelerated grimace,” in Pound's livid depiction, “demanded an image” of its “age,” of itself.⁴⁰ This condition leaves the poet to work within the cadence of a fugitive and decaying Now, a decadence, which, as the register also of that special modernist instant, leads us back to an understanding of modernism as the representation of a modernity constantly sought, always lost.

How wartime charges this particular compound of decadent and modernist sensibilities may be illustrated through a comparison of West's narrative with an earlier representation of the idea of declining time, H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. Even as fantastical scientific experiment, Wells's novel follows the history of entropy, or entropy as history, through a strict regimen of regulated temporal progression. It is a vision of the disintegration of history, but this is occurring on the old, linear, gradual, rationalistic calendar of time: on the chronometer the novel follows, the years fly by – and back – in numerical series. If Wells and West are both responding to and representing the reversal of the Progress mythology of high Victoriana, the difference the war made in this respect shows in their different ways of telling the imaginative time of its undoing. The earlier novel delivers its theme in a linear narrative of consecutive representation, whereas the later book speaks the truth of historical feeling in a concentrated apocalyptic present, in a revelatory poetry of loss. The fact that West was living in 1916 with (the much older) Wells puts the fine point of biographical parable on this difference, which, in the end, is not a discontinuity. In the longer story of cultural and literary history that this lengthened turn of the century comprises, we may find an underlying continuity between the phenomena we know under the headings of decadence and modernism – not as types or slogans, not as old perversions or new tricks, but as one sensibility developing in two of its acutest registers.

Whether or not the representatives of the decadent sensibility of the English fin de siècle could be credibly understood as prophets of the war of 1914–1918, this is the historical location in which the literature of Anglo-

American modernism will take the legacy of decadence to its consummate expression. I will be following this trajectory into the war poetry of Pound and Eliot in the next two chapters. This is not an ad hoc accomplishment, however; it is not some appliqué version of decadence for the moment. These are writers whose experience of historical loss begins in family histories of lost dominance and extends to the ordeal of that Great War, which both underwent in London. The depth and drive of this work comes as well from a literary history that is more or less continuous. One episode may be singled out for consideration in an inter-chapter, where an identifiably nineteenth-century poetic decadence turns into a discernibly modernist poetics.