



MOVE
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TYPE

Decadence

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Editor's Foreword

From a neutral term for 'decline', decadence has transformed over the centuries into a laden term invoked to signify decay, as well as a warning against the dangers of excess and the pursuit of pleasure. Perceived as a disruptive force, dangerous to social order and bourgeois normativity, the threat of decadence is invoked in modern political rhetoric to stoke anxieties over shifts in traditional values and social mores, as well as the looming threat of an irretrievable loss of geopolitical power. Yet in spite of the term's connotations, an identifiable decadent ethos has been embraced by writers, artists, and 'othered' individuals as modes of aesthetic expression, as well as rebellion against and liberation from social strictures. Unlike the Romantic sublime, wherein the material self is abandoned in an upward sweep of simultaneous ecstasy and terror, the decadent sublime embraces the downward plunge into materiality. It is this inverse sublime that theorists such as Georges Bataille discuss as an *expérience limite*, or 'limit-experience', a driving, luxurious expenditure of energy that pushes against sensory boundaries. Translated into varying types of physically-infused aesthetic expressions, this decadent limit-experience is a subversive mode that deconstructs and challenges both audience sensibilities and popular standards of taste. Volume



Gustave Moreau, *Jupiter and Semele*, c. 1894-95, oil on canvas, Musée National Gustave-Moreau, Paris.

XI of *Moveable Type* explores this intersection of excess, subversion and deconstruction through various iterations of decadence across different texts and time periods.

We begin with a visual example to demonstrate what is meant by a decadent limit-experience—in this case, the cover image of this journal. Viewing Gustave Moreau's *Jupiter and Semele* is an immersive sensory experience. Confrontational in its excess, yet alluring in its opulence, and unapologetic in its sensualism, Moreau's masterpiece is a visual embodiment of a decadent ethos. Moreau's painterly subjects generally pertain to mythology, and employ static compositions that echo his early education in Renaissance paintings, as well as his immediate Neoclassical forebears such as Jacques-Louis David. Certainly Moreau, a Symbolist, might seek to differentiate rather than align his artistic style with the decadence with which it is so often identified. But regardless of the niche categorizations of fin-de-siècle painters, *Jupiter and Semele* provides a valuable case study in translating decadent energy to cultural artefacts. It is less the type of historicized mythology painting typical of Moreau's oeuvre than it is a uniquely cathartic moment of excess. The chaotic energy of a decadent artistic credo does not quietly pervade, hint, or wink from the background; rather, it revels across the canvas in a cavalcade of extravagant spectacle. Richly hued and indulgent in its abundance, the painting is a cornucopia of luminescent forms. That energy is transmitted to the viewer, disorienting the eye so that it must always move in search of focus, and is never quite certain of where to land. Whenever the eye does rest at any given moment, it is only to discover more and more ornate details emerging from their obscured recesses.

Given Moreau's background in emulating Renaissance masters, it is intriguing and revelatory that he should bypass Doric austerity and Ionic elegance, opting instead for an orgiastic Roman feast for the eyes. To specify but a few elements: Classical allegories and mythological figures abound, not in silent marble friezes as is their traditional wont, but stacked in the dramatic shadows of a stage-like foreground. Corinthian columns form the central architecture of a grandiose, quasi-Baroque set-piece. Luxuriant vegetation, both the organic and the carvings on the columns' capitals pervade the framework of the painting; nature is present, yet moulded by stagecraft. Semele's physicality is highlighted by a pallor that contrasts with the richly hued adornments of the other bodies, and draws attention to a living, breathing sensualism. This contrast draws attention to her upward gaze, which in turn emphasizes the towering excess upon which Jupiter sits enthroned. The vertical composition radiates with potential for upward optical motion; yet, somewhat anticlimactically, the potential is never acted upon. Instead, the visual energy

remains concentrated in the earthy, grounded physical forms below. It is at this location that we come to the decadent moment that underpins this collection of critical essays.

As it has been mentioned, decadence, in both its literal etymological sense as well as a critical term employed in socio-political and artistic contexts, refers to a 'decline'. Distilled from its defining texts such as Joris-Karl Huysman's *À rebours* (1884) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), decadence can be further translated as an active descent that pulls into physicality, away from transcendence, and into earthly embodiment. It is deposition, as opposed to sublimation. Moreau's *Jupiter and Semele* is an invaluable visual illustration of this tension between upward and downward motion; potential and kinetic energy; and bodied and disembodied sensory experiences. This study in excess, with its barrage of visual details, is an endurance exercise on the part of the viewer. The limits of perception are tested as the eye scans for focus and comprehension of the multitude of visual elements presented. Herein lies the locus of the decadent limit-experience, as well as the critical focus of this volume. Through different media and time periods, the essays in this collection set forth diverse perspectives on permutations of the decadent limit-experience through a variety of texts, ranging from literature and film to new directions in academic discourse. Employing diverse interpretations of decadence, this volume sets forth variations on familiar themes, and proposes new possibilities in the application of an evocative critical term that is simultaneously localized to a specific artistic epoch, yet teems with far-reaching ideas and texts beyond its fin-de-siècle associations.

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In a collection of essays discussing limits and excess, it is fitting that the Marquis de Sade should loom large. Rebekkah Dilts' study of sadomasochistic themes in the novels of Rachilde (sometimes called the 'queen of decadence') examines the portrayals of gendered power dynamics and unfettered physicality in *Monsieur Venus* and *La Marquise de Sade*. Drawing from Gilles Deleuze's *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, Dilts delivers a rich close reading of Rachilde's erotic aesthetics and a valuable perspective on amoral (anti-)heroines. Can Rachilde's female libertines, following in the tradition of Sade's *Juliette*, be considered 'feminist', a label that Rachilde herself rejected? Or do Sadean heroines and their descendants present an alternative category that could be useful in a twenty-first century cultural context?

Continuing in a Sadean vein, Ray Huling's fascinating and innovative essay on 'Bataillean ecology' uses Georges Bataille's biography and his writings about consumption, both of surplus food and energy, as a locus for new theories of 'sustainable excess'.

Synthesizing across disciplines, Bataille's biographical fascination with Sade, discussed through accounts of his unconventional dinner parties, is juxtaposed with environmental concerns about achieving a sustainable biosphere. The result is a new perspective on conscious modes of consumption, and a reassessment of how theories of limit-experience and decadent energy can translate to practical applications.

Following these Sadean preludes, we move forward to 1970s cinema. James Jackson's close reading of James Bidgood's arthouse film *Pink Narcissus* (1971) is a fascinating perspective on the surreal story-telling and sumptuous visuals that depict the fantasies and life of a male prostitute named 'Pan' in late-1960s Manhattan. Guiding us through the protagonist's dreamscapes, which feature Classical allegory, vivid colours, and odes to masculine beauty, Jackson posits that Bidgood's filmmaking allies camp imagery with nature, rather than setting them in polar opposition, as a means of rejecting hostile contemporary attitudes toward homoeroticism. Jackson deconstructs the aesthetic contrast between the gritty danger of Pan's real life and the lush world of fantasy in which Pan esconces himself, discussing this in relation to the filmmaker's social context, where the veneer of beauty and dreamlike visuals belie the threats of a hostile urban landscape.

This stateside exploration of spectatorship continues with a leap forward by twenty-five years into a starkly different context—the 1996 Republican National Convention. Dr. Stephen Newton deconstructs the idiosyncrasies of an obscure politician in a wry examination of public spectacle and the performative Americana of political campaigns in the United States. The employment of excess and sensory engagement as a political strategy comes to the fore in this humorous critical account on a surreal moment in American political history.

The preceding foray into decadence within the twentieth-century American cultural context finishes with Dr. Larry Shillock's essay on Raymond Chandler's 1939 novel *The Big Sleep*. An intriguing investigation into the role of the femme fatale and the rampant pursuit of bodily sensation in catalysing characters' mental and physical deterioration, Shillock's interpretation of decadence focuses on the literal sense of the word ('decline'), narrating the trajectory of familial degeneration that Chandler portrays in his seminal hardboiled crime novel. Juxtaposing the novel with works like Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey* and Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À rebours*, the article traces their influence through the plot of the novel, presenting a rich and insightful perspective on the decadent heritage of a crime fiction classic.

Finally, Ali Zamanpour's close reading of Rawi Hage's *Carnival* brings this exploration of decadence up to the contemporary moment, forwarding possibilities for

reading decadent themes in new literary contexts. Zamanpour asserts that Hage's depiction of 'creatureliness' in the dystopian urban landscape of his 2013 novel reimagines the cosmopolitan as a bodied location that breaks down distinctions between humans and animal. Identifying various loci of social critique, Zamanpour takes us through an alternative perspective on decadence within an utterly new location—a postapocalyptic cityscape where marginalized anthropomorphic bodies expend energy to survive, dream of class rebellion, and envision possibilities of physical and mental transport.

This exploration of decadent themes closes with reviews of four recent critical works. These include Katie Arthur's review of *Unwatchable* (2019), an anthology of scholarly writing about viewership and spectacle, and Kimberley Challis on the transnational decadence discussed in Robert Stilling's *Beginning at the End: Decadence, and Postcolonial Poetry* (2018). Dr. Kay J. Walter considers the reclamation of cultural memory in Francis O'Gorman's *Forgetfulness: Making the Modern Culture of Amnesia* (2017), and, in closing, Christopher Webb discusses political economy and idleness in Richard Adelman's *Idleness and Aesthetic Consciousness, 1815-1900* (2018).

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Through this array of texts and critical perspectives from different time periods, media, and cultural landscapes, Volume XI of *Moveable Type* proffers an eclectic perspective on the familiar literary term that is decadence. Unifying these individual points is the bodied aesthetic experience that underpins the decadent ethos—the same luxuriant energy that Moreau so aptly illustrated in *Jupiter and Semele*. This collection of essays shows decadence to be not just a historical moment, but also a site of multiplicity and excess where the senses are tested, sometimes broken, but always marked by stimulation. Within this nexus of physicalized energy, one encounters polarities vibrating with tension and potential motion—fascination coupled with disgust, awe warring with disbelief, and sensory engagement accompanied by synaptic fatigue. Through examining different critical interpretations of decadence, this issue of *Moveable Type* seeks to propel the decadent moment into new regions of aesthetic discourse, from its nineteenth-century home through modern critical frontiers.

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Decadence

‘The Queen of Decadence’:

Rachilde and Sado-Masochistic Feminism

Rebekkah Dilts

In 1884, the novel Monsieur Vénus took the French literary world by storm, and inaugurated its controversial female author, Rachilde, the ‘queen of decadence.’ Many critics did not believe that a young, aristocratic woman could possibly have devised such a salacious story. A literary press which specialized in erotica first published the book, but it was banned regardless, and Rachilde was even condemned to prison for pornographic writing. Subsequent editions therefore required fake male co-authors and introductions by famous male writers that consigned the novel not literature at all, but the case study of a hysterical woman. Rachilde also publicly denounced the feminism of her moment, a proclamation that affected the twentieth-century reception of her writing. Yet, following new French and English editions published in 2004, Monsieur Vénus has been hailed a queer forerunner in contemporary academic circles, even while questions about Rachilde’s feminist affiliations persist. This paper goes beyond the biographical details that have dominated conversation about Rachilde’s writing to closely interrogate the use of sexual violence in Monsieur Vénus, and in her much lesser-known novel, La Marquise de Sade (1887). Based on the definition of sadomasochism Gilles Deleuze outlines in his book, Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty (1991), the respective use of masochism in Monsieur Vénus and of sadism in La Marquise de Sade places its female characters in the unlikely positions of masochist and sadist to offer a provocative critique of the decadent moment, and its representations of sexuality, the body, and even nationalism.

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The same year Joris-Karl Huysmans published his exemplar of decadence, *Against the Grain* (1884), another novel, *Monsieur Vénus*, took the French literary world by storm.¹ A violent and sexually graphic work of literature, it was authored by Marguerite Eymery, who used the pen-name Rachilde. While the novel may have earned her the title, ‘queen of decadence’, many critics could not believe that a young, aristocratic woman devised such a salacious text.² Though a Belgian literary press specialising in erotica published the book, it was banned and Rachilde was subsequently sentenced to prison for pornographic writing.³

In order to deflect questions about the novel’s conception, the 1889 French edition added a troubling preface by Maurice Barrès that claimed the book not as literary

¹ Huysmans’s novel was originally published in French under the title *À rebours*.

² Rachilde claimed sole authorship over the first edition of the book but, because of the narrative’s prurient content, a supposed male co-author, Francis Talman, joined her name on the second ‘first’ edition of the text (it remains unlikely Talman ever existed, however). While subsequent editions did not bear the phantom Talman’s name, questions as to the narrative’s inspiration persisted. In her book, *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship* (2002), Melanie Hawthorne claims that Rachilde became the ‘queen of decadence’ following the publication of *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 76.

³ *Monsieur Vénus* was first published by the Belgian literary press Auguste Brancart. Because Belgium had more flexible publishing laws than did France during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, it was not an uncommon strategy for French writers to publish their salacious works of literature in Belgium to garner more attention for their writing in France. While Rachilde was sentenced to prison, it was essentially a *pro forma* condemnation, and she never saw the inside of a jail cell. See Hawthorne’s book *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship* for further information.

fiction but rather the case study of a hysterical woman: a personal account of Rachilde's mental instability and perversion.⁴ 'Barrès's perspective,' Melanie Hawthorne writes, in the introduction to her translation of *Monsieur Vénus*, 'brings into focus the apparent incongruity of her work within the decadent orientation adopted by other, almost exclusively male, *fin de siècle* writers.'⁵ Keenly aware of her public image, however, Rachilde herself attempted to playfully offer various sensational stories about the narrative's conception, none of which ultimately helped to prevent continued controversy over the novel.⁶

Despite the misogynistic critical reception of her works due to her status as a female author, Rachilde herself been considered a misogynist, in part because, hesitant to affiliate with the political feminist movements of her day, she published an essay in 1928, *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (or *Why I Am Not a Feminist*), that has persisted in affecting the reception of her work.⁷ In the text, Rachilde employs an ironic style characteristic of her literary writing to express ambiguity about the politics of feminism; she ultimately believes it to be a regressive movement beholden to bourgeois morality that has not 'enormously improved existence'.⁸ Regardless, an attempt by the French publisher Flammarion in 1977 to reissue *Monsieur Vénus* was not well received, for reasons some critics have attributed to Rachilde's perceived stance as anti-feminist and the narrative's portrayal of women to be cruel and violent, which did not align with the politics of Second Wave feminism.⁹ Yet following new French and English editions published by The Modern Language Association in 2004, which include portions of the novel that were previously unpublished in English, Rachilde and *Monsieur Vénus* have been hailed queer and feminist forerunners in many academic circles, even while questions about Rachilde's politics continue to circulate.¹⁰

⁴ As Hawthorne details in *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship*, Rachilde herself variously claimed it was based on an obsession with the male writer Catulle Mendès; that it was an autobiographical account of her obsession with a young, working-class man; and that it was written purely for shock value and to make her money. These claims, however, were tongue-and-cheek, and in keeping with the way Rachilde engaged the press and responded to its shock over her writing.

⁵ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*, English edition, trans. by Melanie Hawthorne (MLA, 2004), p. xxxiii.

⁶ Rachilde addresses the extraordinary and unexpected controversy she faced over *Monsieur Vénus* in the lengthy preface to its follow-up novel, *Madame Adonis* (1888).

⁷ Rachilde, *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (Éditions de France, 1928). Nearly all of Rachilde's biographers—Melanie Hawthorne, Claude Dauphiné in *Rachilde femme de Lettres 1900* (1985), and Auriant in *Souvenirs sur madame Rachilde* (1989), for example, claim that this pamphlet sparked much confusion and even outrage on the part of her contemporaries, as did her portrayal of violent and treacherous female characters in her fiction. Many twentieth and twenty-first century literary criticism on Rachilde and her work also discuss the challenge of reconciling her declarations with feminist readings of her novels.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁹ Hawthorne makes this claim in the preface to the English edition of *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 23.

¹⁰ Rita Felski, for example, in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995) writes, 'we do not need to claim Rachilde as an exemplary feminist forerunner in order to appreciate the startling and innovative power of her representations of female sexuality' (206). Melanie Hawthorne in *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship* and

Most contemporary writing about *Monsieur Vénus*, however, and about the few of her other novels that remain in print, tends to focus on Rachilde's biography or the problematic reception of her writing. The misogynistic treatment of Rachilde's books raises important questions about the historical treatment of female authors, yet for the purpose of this paper, I wish to interrogate more closely the use of sexual violence in *Monsieur Vénus* and in her much lesser-known novel, *La Marquise de Sade* (1887). While the violent sexual relationship in *Monsieur Vénus* has been characterised by certain critics as *sadomasochistic*, I argue that it is specifically *masochistic*, based on the concept Gilles Deleuze offers in his book, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*.¹¹ While *La Marquise de Sade* has received notably less attention than has *Monsieur Vénus*, the respective uses of masochism in *Monsieur Vénus* and of sadism in *La Marquise de Sade*, places its female protagonists in the unlikely positions of masochist and sadist and offers a provocative critique of the decadent moment and its representations of sexuality, the body, and even nationalism.

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Masochism and *Monsieur Vénus*

In part a Pygmalion trope, *Monsieur Vénus's* plot centres on the relationships between its bourgeois female protagonist, Raoule de Vénérande, and Jacques Silvert, a working-class artist. Raoule dresses and refers to herself alternately as a woman and as a man, and upon meeting the young and androgynous-looking Jacques, she becomes obsessed with him. Jacques agrees to be her lover and sex slave, and they engage in violent drug-fuelled sexual encounters initiated by Raoule—ones that push the boundaries of gender in distinct and transgressive ways. At first a clandestine relationship, since Raoule is a member of the French aristocracy and Jacques is not, Raoule eventually marries Jacques, eliciting shock from the Parisian bourgeoisie. Following their wedding, Jacques is inadvertently killed, but Raoule finds a way to preserve his corpse for her eternal sexual pleasure.

Rachel Mesch in *The Hysteric's Revenge* (2006) hail the innovative importance of Rachilde's female characters while considering the question of Rachilde's misogyny and political affiliations within the context of her literary work.

¹¹ For example, Janet Beizer characterises Rachilde's writing as sadomasochistic in her introduction to *Monsieur Vénus* in *The Decadent Reader* (1998), p. 239. Romana Byrne also characterises the novel and Rachilde's oeuvre as sadomasochistic in her book, *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism* (2013). Felski too discusses the sadism of Rachilde's characters in the chapter, 'The Art of Perversion: Female Sadists and Male Cyborgs,' in *The Gender of Modernity* (1995). Deleuze's book *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* was first published in French as *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: le froid et le cruel* (1967).

For Deleuze, sadomasochism is a reductive conflation of two distinct sexual perversions, masochism and sadism, that are motivated by divergent responses to social and historical moments, and deploy quite different formal literary strategies. According to Deleuze's definition, a masochist is typically a male subject who seeks a cruel, unsentimental woman to dominate him in order to experience a temporary disavowal of his masculine agency, which is reemphasised following the masochistic encounter. Since a male subject is in the prime position of social power, a masochist desires dominance from a woman so that he can simulate an experience of powerlessness. To do so, he establishes with her a set of rules or contracts by which he can experience temporary submission. Because masochism takes its name from the nineteenth-century author of *Venus in Furs*, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, it is in part a response to the Romanticism of Masoch's day, which was, Deleuze claims, a historical moment that was so sensual, it became anti-sentimental: the very reason the masochist desires a cold, and unsentimental woman. He writes:

Man became coarse and sought a new dignity in the development of consciousness and thought; as a reaction to man's heightened consciousness woman developed sentimentality, and toward his coarseness, severity. The glacial cold was wholly responsible for the transformation: sentimentality became the object of man's thought, and cruelty the punishment for his coarseness. In the coldhearted alliance between man and woman, it is this cruelty and sentimentality in woman that compel man to thought and properly constitute the masochistic ideal.¹²

The sadist, on the other hand, 'professes an essential coldness which Sade calls 'apathy.'¹³ Of all the differences between sadism and masochism there is therefore 'the most radical difference between sadistic *apathy* and masochistic *coldness*.'¹⁴ Literary instantiations of masochism and sadism therefore use formal strategies to convey either anti-sentimentality or apathy. Masochistic literature typically employs suspenseful, decadent descriptions and its scenes are populated by cold statues and art objects. 'Sade's heroes, by contrast, are not art lovers,' Deleuze claims. Sadistic literature instead utilises long descriptions and readings of text, punctuated by apathetic descriptions of sex and murder.

In the masochistic dynamic between the characters Raoule and Jacques, however, the masochist is Raoule, an upper-class woman who often acts like a man, and who initiates the relationship with Jacques, a working-class man who is often described as a woman:

¹² Gilles Deleuze, *Coldness and Cruelty*, trans. by Jean McNeil (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

‘You will not be my lover ...You will be my slave, Jacques....’

‘What? You’re crazy!’

‘Am I the master, yes or no!’ exclaimed Raoule.

‘I’m going to leave...I’m going to leave!’ he repeated, desperate, no longer understanding his master’s desires.

‘I’m sorry!’ she murmured, ‘I forgot you’re a capricious little woman who has *her* right to torture me.’¹⁵

Raoule is both the dominant, gendered female and the dominator – the one who has more social and financial power, and elects to take on a young, lower-class artist to reject the social order of the aristocracy – which she rebukes by not wanting to marry, much to the chagrin of her aristocratic suitor, and to her aunt and guardian. Raoule’s proclamation, that as a woman Jacques has the right to torture her, is an ironic acknowledgement of the prototypical masochistic dynamic, and by extension, the societal male and female dynamic. Since men are ultimately in the primary position of social power, it is only in a masochistic dynamic orchestrated by a man that a woman holds the temporary power to torture him. Yet, because Raoule is also acting as the male subject, she complicates the masochistic paradox and is able to act as both the male and female subject.

In the essay, ‘Masochism: A Queer Subjectivity?’, Amber J. Musser revisits Deleuze’s definition of masochism and Judith Butler’s definition of subjectivity to consider how a reinterpretation of both definitions together can offer a more expansive conception of queerness and of masochism.¹⁶ She insists that the masochist should not necessarily be thought of as a masculine subject or as even an individual: ‘Deleuze’s masochist...s/he requires a symbolic dominator to be complicit in the illusion of powerlessness...the masochist and his/her dominant only exist in their interrelation, neither can be thought as individuals’¹⁷ (2005). Musser’s assertion that subjectivity in

¹⁵ Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus* (MLA, 2004), p. 88. All translations are mine unless otherwise noted. All references are to this edition; further references will be given in the body of the text. Original text in French:

‘Tu ne seras pas mon amant...Tu seras mon esclave, Jacques...’

‘Quoi?... Tu es folle!...’

‘Suis-je le maître, oui ou non!’ s’écria Raoule.

‘Je vais m’en aller... je vais m’en aller!’ répéta-t-il désespéré, ne comprenant plus les désirs de son maître.

‘Pardon!’ murmura-t-elle, ‘moi, j’oubliais que tu es une petite femme capricieuse qui a le droit, chez elle, de me torturer.’

¹⁶ Amber J. Musser, ‘Masochism: A Queer Subjectivity,’ *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, 11/12 (2005) <<http://www.rhizomes.net/issue11/musser.html>> [accessed 8 September 2018]. According to Musser:

[B]oth Butler’s subject and the masochist rely on similar strategies, namely repetition, materiality, and disavowal, but corporeality, desire, and intersubjectivity, the essential components of the masochist/dominant complex, are nearly omitted in Butler’s rendering of subjectivity. Accounting for this difference facilitates comparisons between the two and enables alternative readings of Butler’s theory of subjectivity.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2005.

masochism can be interpreted as symbolic is a useful way to interpret the dynamic between Raoule and Jacques; in fact, it seems that their version of masochism insists on masculine and feminine subject positions precisely in order to render them symbolic – social, performative, and unbound to the biological body. As their relationship progresses, the narrator even claims that they ‘were more and more united in a common thought: the destruction of their sex.’¹⁸ Domination on the part of Raoule as female subject is significant, however, because the violence of her masochism is to humiliate the male subject by placing him in the inferior role of a woman: ‘– Raoule,’ he begged, don’t call me a *woman* anymore, it humiliates me.’¹⁹ Even more effective than physically harming him, Raoule’s ultimate form of torturous pleasure will therefore be to humiliate Jacques by falsely flattering his masculinity:

She did not hit him anymore, she did not buy him anymore, she flattered him, and man, as abject as he can be, always has—even at a moment of revolt—that fleeting virility called *fatuity*.

‘Do you not know, Jacques, do you not know that fresh and healthy flesh is the only power in this world!’...He flinched. The male awoke abruptly in the sweetness of those words pronounced very low.²⁰

Raoule is not mocking Jacques’s femininity to denigrate women or to deem them inferior subjects, but rather to reveal the relationship between gender and sexuality as performative and socially determined. It is significant that the word ‘fatuity’ is italicised in this passage; throughout the novel, the narrator and Raoule alternately use masculine and feminine pronouns to describe the type of behaviours that she and other characters adopt. These alternations often occur within the same conversation and are applied toward the same individual. In a compelling metanarrative move, Rachilde italicises the misgendered adjectives and nouns to call attention to these choices. Yet, the grammatical gender of ‘*fatuite*’ is feminine in French, a choice that perhaps serves to linguistically feminize Jacques and men, while simultaneously calling attention to the way language itself often arbitrarily designates women as weak. Notably, Jacques becomes sexually excited by Raoule’s suggestion that he has ‘healthy flesh’; in Musser’s interpretation of masochism, she claims that ‘flesh [is shown] to be a valuable commodity in and of itself, not

¹⁸ *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 98. Original text: ‘Ils s’unissaient de plus en plus dans une pensée commune, la destruction de leur sexe.’

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 88. Original text: ‘Raoule, supplia-t-il, ne m’appelle plus *femme* cela m’humilie.’

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 88. Original text:

Elle ne le frappait plus, elle ne l’achetait plus, elle le flattait, et l’homme, si abject qu’il puisse être, possède toujours, à un moment de révolte, cette virilité d’une heure qu’on appelle *la fatuité*. ‘Ignorez-tu, Jacques, ignores-tu que la chair fraîche et saine est l’unique puissance de ce monde!... Il tressaillit. Le male s’éveilla brusquement dans la douceur de ces paroles prononcées très bas.’

something excluded by discourse, but a necessary active part of subjectivity; the masochist requires both flesh and desire to attempt a loss/refinding of self.²¹ If the materiality of the flesh can offer potential emancipation in a masochistic dynamic, this possibility is absent from Jacques and Raoule's, as Raoule's flattery of Jacques is actually false, as he does not possess 'fresh and healthy flesh' at all. Rather, Jacques is consistently described by the narrator as having 'marble flesh', and his body is often likened to a Greek statue. The first time Raoule sees Jacques nude, he is compared to a famous statue of Venus:

Worthy of the Venus Callipyge, that curve of his lower back where his spine ran down to a voluptuous plane rose firm, fat, in two adorable contours, and looked like a transparent amber sphere of Paros. His thighs were a bit less thick than women's thighs, and yet possessed a solid roundness that concealed their sex.²²

As the title of the novel *Monsieur Vénus* (and of Masoch's *Venus in Furs*) indicates, there was a veritable obsession in nineteenth-century decadent literature with Greco-Roman marble statues which represented a nexus between the natural and non-natural body. The image of the body conveyed by the statue was typically that of a superior or idealised human form, and yet it was not necessarily sexed, rendering the statue's gender likewise ambiguous. Famously, Théophile Gautier's poem, 'Contralto' and Algernon Charles Swinburne's poem, 'Hermaphroditus' were inspired by their mutual obsession with a real statue, *Sleeping Hermaphroditus*, which is housed at the Louvre.²³ Onlookers were so tantalised and befuddled by its ambiguous gender that, in the words of Anatole France, the statue was 'so worn out by visitors' caresses' that 'the monstrous and charming figure had to be protected by a barrier.'²⁴ It is significant that in the description of Jacques's body, which likens him to the Venus Callipyge, he has the transparency of 'amber', since marble representations of bodies reveal neither veins or blood, and therefore conceal not just sex or gender, but also natural life itself. As if to counter the opacity of marble bodies, the revelatory vividness of blood and bloodlust will become essential to the sadism of Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*.

²¹ Musser, 2005.

²² Ibid., p. 40. Original text:

Digne de la Venus Callipyge, cette chute de reins ou la ligne de l'épine dorsale fuyait dans un méplat voluptueux et se redressait, ferme, grasse, en deux contours adorables, avait l'aspect d'une sphère de Paros aux transparences d'ambre. Les cuisses, un peu moins fortes que des cuisses de femme, possédaient pourtant une rondeur solide qui effaçait leur sexe.

²³ The *Sleeping Hermaphroditus* was purchased by the Louvre in 1807.

²⁴ Patrick Graille, *Les Hermaphrodites aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001), p. 9. Original text: 'Ignorez-vous que le marbre de l'Hermaphrodite du Louvre a été usé par les caresses des visiteurs, et que l'administration des musées a dû protéger par une barrière la figure monstrueuse et charmante?'

Deleuze claims that the preponderance of marble statues in Masoch's writing represents the severity characteristic of nineteenth-century 'repression of sensuality', arguing that the body only 'became human' in the nineteenth century when it was represented as art:

It has been said that...the eye, for example, becomes a human eye when its object itself has been transformed into a human or cultural object, fashioned by and intended solely for man...[I]t is the experience of this painful process that the art of Masoch aims to represent...The lover embraces a marble woman by way of imitation: women become exciting when they are indistinguishable from cold statues in the moonlight. The scenes in Masoch have of necessity a frozen quality, like statues or portraits.²⁵

Unlike the male narrators of Gautier's and Swinburne's poems, Raoule does not bow before the idealised marble image of humanity that her love-slave epitomises; instead of revering its likeness to an art objet, she determines to destroy Jacques's body. Raoule bites his 'marble' flesh, and breaks it apart:

With a violent gesture she tore off the strips of linen bandage that she had rolled around the sacred body of her young male lover, she bit his marble flesh, squeezed it with both hands, scratched it with her sharp nails. It was a complete deflowering of the marvellous beauty that had once made her ecstatic with a mystical happiness.²⁶

Throughout the novel, Raoule is referred to as unsentimental for a woman, or '*froide*', reminiscent of the unsentimental and cold woman Deleuze's masochist seeks. In *Monsieur Vénus*'s vision of masochism, the 'cold' body of the woman therefore finds the cold, marble body of a man and ultimately produces a non-human entity. Her 'deflowering' of his flesh ultimately renders his body available for a non-conventional form of procreation. After Jacques is killed by Raoule's former suitor Raittolbe in a fencing duel gone-wrong, she commissions German engineers to make his corpse into a rubber sex automaton. Jacques's marble flesh is therefore replaced with a new and different unnatural material:

On a shell-shaped bed, guarded by a marble Eros, rests a wax mannequin adorned in transparent rubber skin. The red hair, the blond eyelashes, the golden fluff on its chest are natural; the teeth that adorn its mouth, the

²⁵ Deleuze, p. 69.

²⁶ *Monsieur Vénus*, p. 132. Original text:

D'un geste violent elle arracha les bandes de batiste qu'elle avait roulées autour du corps sacre de son éphèbe, elle mordit ses chairs marbrées, les pressa à pleines mains, les égratigna de ses ongles affilés. Ce fut une défloration complète de ces beautés merveilleuses qui l'avaient, jadis, fait s'extasier dans un bonheur mystique.

fingernails and toenails, have all been extracted from a corpse. The enamel eyes have an adorable look.²⁷

A marble statue is still present but guards the rubber version of Jacques, though it is described as more ‘natural’ than the description of his body, likening it to a marble one. Yet, its transparency reveals not the mysticism of amber or the *vérité* of blood, but rather its synthetic exterior exposes the unnecessary human parts of his body. With the rubber version of Jacques, Raoule is finally able to inhabit either a male or female role depending on her desire:

At night, a woman dressed in mourning clothes, sometimes a young man in black, opens the door. They come to kneel near the bed, and when they have long contemplated the marvellous shapes of the wax statue, they embrace it, kiss it on the lips. A spring placed inside the flanks corresponds to the mouth and animates it at the same time it makes its thighs move apart. This model, a masterpiece of anatomy, was made by a German.²⁸

While the conclusion of *Monsieur Vénus* is often cited in contemporary scholarship as an example of post-humanism, it is also the most critical of the novel’s historical moment: it is indicative of the final stage of the Industrial Revolution, and the conversion of human beings from consumers of manufactured goods to the objects of manufacture themselves.²⁹ Rachilde specifies that the automaton is German-made; historically, nineteenth-century Germany embraced industrialisation more enthusiastically than France. The final chapter of the novel begins by revealing that Raittolbe has left France to

²⁷ Ibid., p. 209. Original text:

Sur la couche en forme de conque, gardée par un Eros de marbre, repose un mannequin de cire revêtu d'un épiderme en caoutchouc transparent. Les cheveux roux, les cils blonds, le duvet d'or de la poitrine sont naturels ; les dents qui ornent la bouche, les ongles des mains et des pieds ont été arrachés à un cadavre. Les yeux en émail ont un adorable regard.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 211 Original text:

La nuit, une femme vêtue de deuil, quelquefois un jeune homme en habit noir, ouvrent cette porte. Ils viennent s'agenouiller près du lit, et, lorsqu'ils ont longtemps contemplé les formes merveilleuses de la statue de cire, ils l'enlacent, la baisent aux lèvres. Un ressort disposé à l'intérieur des flancs correspond à la bouche et l'anime en même temps qu'il fait s'écarter les cuisses. Ce mannequin, chef-d'œuvre d'anatomie, a été fabriqué par un Allemand.

Notably, because of its reference to necrophilia, the final sentence was so controversial that it was censored from the nineteenth-century French editions of the novel (those that followed the problematic Belgian edition that resulted in Rachilde’s arrest).

²⁹ For example, Rita Felski characterises the novel’s conclusion as post-human in the chapter, ‘The Art of Perversion: Female Sadists and Male Cyborgs’ in her book *The Gender of Modernity* (1995). Additionally, the chapter ‘Queer Modernisms,’ in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature* (2014), and numerous recent articles and doctoral theses, such as Elizabeth Anne Carroll’s, ‘Automata, Artificial bodies, Reproductive Futurisms in Nineteenth-Century French Literature,’ (University of Iowa, 2015) and Sophia Magnone’s, ‘The Speculative Agency of the Nonhuman: Animal, Objects and Posthuman Worldings’ (University of California Santa Cruz, 2016), argue the conclusion of *Monsieur Vénus* to be post-humanist.

fight in Africa, signifying the loss of potential sexual procreation, and implying that there will be increasing demand for modes of production that do not require human bodies.

* * *

The Sadism of *La Marquise de Sade*

If in *Monsieur Venus* the idealisation of art in the face of industrialisation leads to the destruction of bodies, in *La Marquise de Sade*, the apathy of the *fin-de-siècle* elicits literal bloodlust. The introduction to the 1981 French edition of the *La Marquise de Sade* continues to characterise Rachilde a ‘*misogyne*’ [a misogynist], while again championing the importance of her literary work.³⁰ Yet, an obscure essay by Rachilde that has yet to be published in English, *Sade Toujours!*, indicates that her literary interest in sadism was at least in part an attempt to separate sadism from the man – from the Marquis de Sade. She argues that he was not in fact insane, that he was not a marquis, and that he did not invent sadism:

Rest assured: I do not want to rehabilitate the Marquis de Sade... Sadism—which was certainly not invented by the Marquis de Sade—is nothing more than the intensification of love at the sight of blood or at the feeling of pain. And sadism and its roots are deeply entrenched in animality, a close relative of humanity.³¹

In the final line of the essay, however, she proclaims its title, ‘Sade Forever!’; we should therefore interpret Rachilde’s invocation of sadism as another form of her non-conventional critique of misogyny.

Despite the title of the novel, the moniker ‘La Marquise de Sade’ is never applied to a specific character within the text. Presumably, the ‘Marquise de Sade’ is the protagonist Mary, the daughter of a French military officer. As she grows up, Mary becomes increasingly violent, her lust for blood ignited when, as a young girl, she accidentally witnesses an animal being slaughtered on the family farm. She marries and subsequently murders her uncle, an older scientist who, sexually abstinent for many years, claims that women are inferior—that is, until he meets Mary. She becomes his *protégée*,

³⁰ Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade* (Mercure de France, 1981). The preface reads, ‘A misogynist, Rachilde proclaimed that she was not a feminist. At a moment that calls for a new reading of her work, we bet that it will provide each and every one with an invigorating lesson in freedom’ [misogyne, Rachilde se défendait d’être féministe. Au moment où s’impose une nouvelle lecture de son œuvre, gageons que chacun saura y prendre une vivifiante leçon de liberté] (p. iv).

³¹ Rachilde, *Sade Toujours!* (Paris: Fourneau, 1992), p. 12. Original text:

Rassurez-vous: je n’ai pas envie de réhabiliter le Marquis de Sade... Le sadisme – que n’a certainement pas inventé le Marquis de Sade – n’est pas autre chose que l’exaspération de l’amour par la vue du sang ou la sensation de la douleur.... Et le sadisme et ses racines profondément enfoncées dans l’animalité proche parente de l’humanité.

capable of wielding the apathetic logic of science better than he can. Upon attending a medical lecture with him, Mary remarks: “their lectures remind me of a slaughterhouse I saw in my childhood...”³² Indeed, as the excerpt from *Sade Forever!* suggests, sadism in Rachilde’s writing wants to expose the innate violence that apathetic practices of modern humanity – like science – have sought to belie.

Toward the end of *La Marquise de Sade*, when Mary has become a full-fledged murderess, she resides in Paris, where her life blossoms into an exaggeration that the philosophers of the century call *décadence*, the end of everything... a period of universal cowardice... She was not of today’s decadence but of Rome’s’.³³ The Imperial decadence of ancient Rome to which Mary identifies was replete with public displays of sexuality and violence: orgies, executions, and blood-letting. While she bemoans that even the most subversive of Parisian nightclubs fail to match the ‘vision of terrible Rome, sexes fighting under veils of blood’, Mary begins killing the male cross-dressers who frequent them, fueled by the banality and horror of *fin-de-siècle* Paris: the nexus of Sadian apathy.³⁴

Notably, Guillaume Apollinaire, who was a friend of Rachilde’s, also explores sadism in his pornographic novel, *Les Onze Mille Verges* (1907), which Pablo Picasso dubbed Apollinaire’s masterpiece.³⁵ The narrative recounts the fictional story of a Romanian prince, Mony Vibescu, as he travels throughout Eastern Europe and Asia committing violent sexual acts and murder. In *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, Scott Baker writes of *Les Onze Mille Verges*:

The characters embark on voyages into areas much in the news in early years of the twentieth century during the Russo-Japanese War. Apollinaire detested Russia and was enthusiastically on the side of the Japanese in that conflict, unlike most of the mainstream French media... it is not a coincidence that Mony Vibescu’s most violent, most nauseating deeds, those involving torture and mutilations, make of him a Russian war hero. Indeed, several of the most violent incidents in the book were taken from

³² Ibid., p. 206. Original text: ‘Leurs conférences me rappellent un abattoir que j’ai vu dans ma petite enfance...?’

³³ Ibid, p. 287. Original text: ‘Sa vie s’épanouit en des exagérations à travers ce que les philosophes du siècle appellent la *décadence*, la fin de tout... une période de lâcheté universelle... [E]lle était de la *décadence* de Rome et non point de celle d’aujourd’hui’.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 286. Original text: ‘La Boule noire, l’Élysée-Montmartre lui fournirent des distractions, piètres d’ailleurs, mais elle allait toujours, espérant trouver dans un coin inexploré et moins voulu que les autres la vision de la Rome terrible se disputant les sexes sous des voiles de sang’.

³⁵ Apollinaire originally published the novel anonymously, under the initials, ‘G.A.’ The title, *Les Onze Mille Verges* is a play on words; Scott Baker explains in *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*:

The title of the work is a pun on *verges* (‘rods’ or ‘scourges’) and *vierges* (‘virgins’) and originates in the medieval legend of 11,000 virgins martyred by the Huns at Cologne. It also relates to a proverbial expression for a would-be womanizer, ‘a man in love with the 11,000 virgins.’ The main character in the book, the wealthy Romanian *bospodar* Mony Vibescu (*Mony* = ‘prick’ in Romanian; *Vibescu* = French slangs for ‘Dickfuckass’), an insatiable priapist, boasts that he can copulate twenty times in a row. His failure to accomplish this heroic feat results finally in his death under the scourges of 11,000 Japanese soldiers! (p. 34)

reports in mainstream newspapers of the time, leading to the conclusion that the novel...is an ironic commentary on the terrible consequences of excessive sexuality and the gratuitous violence of war.³⁶

I invoke Apollinaire and his turn to sadism to suggest that based on the historical moment in France when his novel and Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade* and *Sade Forever!* emerged, there was a renewed interest in sadism that was tied to the solidification of national and colonial borders. These new nationalisms cultivated an environment wherein state violence, murder, and apathy would be fostered in the lead-up to WWI and the postwar rise of fascism. Significantly, Rachilde herself would come to be associated with certain figures aligned with the beginnings of fascism. For example, she had a fan in the Italian futurist and proto-fascist F.T. Marinetti, who sought to translate her work into Italian, and whose controversial novel, *Mafarka The Futurist* (1909), Rachilde reviewed in the *Mercure de France*. In the essay, '(En)Gendering Fascism: Rachilde's "Les Vendanges de Sodome" and *Les Hors-Nature*', which appears in *Gender and Fascism in Modern France* (1997), Melanie Hawthorne argues that 'nationalism is as much a social construction as gender; nineteenth century nationalism is gendered since women were not legal citizens'. Hawthorne reads Rachilde's incorporation of Sodom and Sade in a collection of her short stories as 'evok[ing] the short-lived Italian fascist state know as Republic of Salò, which Pasolini made the setting for his last film, *Salò: 120 Days of Sodom* (1975)...which in Pasolini's story, as in Rachilde's story, combines a vision of the authoritarian state with sexual politics.'³⁷ By this line of thought, Rachilde's controversial rejection of feminism in her literary invocation of sadism and masochism, can be interpreted as a rejection of the French state and its hypocritical principles of liberal democracy – *liberté* and *égalité* for the *fraternité*. It is therefore significant that while Apollinaire's style in his book adheres closely to the Marquis de Sade's and to what Deleuze describes as the Sadian literary technique—long, repetitive and apathetic descriptions of sex and violence—Rachilde's *La Marquise de Sade*, does not.³⁸ Most of the descriptions of violence are in fact deferred until the final third of the novel. In *La Marquise de Sade*, apathetic violence manifest in the banality of daily bourgeois life, and specifically, female life.

³⁶ Scott Baker, 'Apollinaire, Guillaume,' in *The Encyclopedia of Erotic Literature*, ed. by Gaétan Brulotte and John Philips London (Routledge, 2006), p. 33.

³⁷ Melanie Hawthorne, '(En)Gendering Fascism: Rachilde's "Les Vendanges de Sodome" and *Les Hors-Nature*' in *Gender and Fascism in Modern France*, ed. by Richard J. Golsan and Melanie Hawthorne (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), p. 38.

³⁸ It is also relevant that one of the Marquis de Sade's most popular works, *The 120 Days of Sodom*, written in the late-eighteenth century, was not published in France until 1904. Apollinaire participated in editing and printing parts of it.

Sadism and masochism, according to Deleuze, reflect perversions produced by the violence of bourgeois morality. He asks, '[o]ught we to conclude [the language of sadism and masochism] is paradoxical because the victim speaks the language of the torturer he is to himself, with all the hypocrisy of the torturer?'.³⁹ Rachilde's literature further complicates this paradox: the characters Raoule and Mary are simultaneously torturers *and* victims—the former, with their participation in masochistic and sadistic sexual violence, and the latter, due to their status as women in nineteenth-century French society. These atypical formal and thematic instantiations of masochism and sadism are radical— and perhaps contribute to the uneven reception of Rachilde's work (Apollinaire's prototypical invocation of sadism was, by contrast, lauded). Musser believes the masochist can be interpreted as a potential queer subject, one 'that offers new possibilities for understanding subjectivity' and 'enabling empowered, embodied, erotic, and fluid subjects.'⁴⁰

The masochistic and sadistic roles that Raoule in *Monsieur Vénus* and Mary in *La Marquise de Sade* inhabit can indeed be interpreted as queer subjectivities; the victim-torturer dichotomy they blur ultimately allows them alternative modes of relation and desire outside of social structures. These novels suggest that sadistic and masochistic violence at the hands of women is a method with which they too can experience disavowal and perhaps even transcendence. Resistant to the feminist movement and the moralistic literary naturalism of her time, Rachilde's complex, unconventional interpretations of sadism and masochism have led to misunderstandings on the part of readers while heightening the allure of her œuvre, not just within her contemporary context, but also within twentieth and twenty-first century critical discourse. Rather than aligning with clear categories of feminist or sadomasochistic writings, *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Marquise de Sade* offer a 'post-feminism' that persists.

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³⁹ Deleuze, p. 23

⁴⁰ Musser, 2005.

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Bataillean Ecology:

An Introduction to the Theory of Sustainable Excess

Ray Huling

A new ecology and a new environmentalism have arisen from the study of the thought of Georges Bataille. This paper both introduces this scholarship and advocates for environmentalist action based on it. Through both intellectual biography and theoretical inquiry, this paper distills a principle for guiding environmentalism from small-scale communities to the limits of the biosphere, a principle of sustainable excess, a kind of perpetual decadence.

* * *

An Invitation to Excess

Here follows the apex of a dinner party hosted in early December 1937 by Georges Bataille and Colette Peignot, two anti-fascist, anti-communist, anti-capitalist, anti-Christian authors, each the love of the other's life, the latter known best today under the name Laure: 'Odoïevtsova, naked, started to vomit'.¹ A new kind of ecological theory, a Bataillean ecology, finds its image in this crucial moment, a portrait as well of an environmentalism that finds its rule in excess, rather than austerity. Indeed, juxtaposed against both mainstream environmental activism and the business-as-usual of environmental exploitation, practices grounded in Bataillean ecology would seem decadent. This paper both explains this freshly sprung ethic and advocates for it.

Over the past decade and a half, ecologists and Bataille scholars have developed an approach to environmentalism based on Bataille's writings, particularly those texts he devoted to 'general economy', a perspective that holds the fundamental question of economics to be how best to destroy wealth, rather than how best to allocate scarce resources. Bataille worked out his theory and acted in accord with its principles with clear goals in mind: he wanted to stop war and overcome fascism, communism, and Christianity, all of which he saw as servile outcomes of capital growth. At the very core, what environmentally-minded scholars find fruitful in Bataille's thought is his rendering of the problem of over-accumulation as a matter of energy: all life under the sun suffers from an excess of energy, and the manner in which we deal with this suffering must be made sustainable.

¹ Georges Bataille, *Oeuvres Complètes. V. La Somme athéologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 525.

Bataille indicted the sun for causing life on earth to produce too much food. Each organism and every community of organisms acquire more energy than they need to live, grow, and reproduce. Humans stand as grand acquirer in this regard, and both capitalism and its would-be usurper communism intensify the human production of abundance, to such a degree that they press humanity—and other species—against natural limits of growth, at which point society must have either war or collapse. Bataille arrived at these conclusions through his secondary researches in science and ethnography, his participation in cultural and political movements, and his heterological, agiological, or “other-directed” erotic explorations. He found a way out of the dilemma of growth through the same motley of experiences: he recommended practices of a kind with those rejected by modernity as wasteful, irrational, and decadent; he urged a sacralizing movement against the profanity of capital growth.

Today, scholars who apply this thinking to environmentalism argue that humanity must spend wastefully to stunt the material growth that now threatens to crash us against planetary boundaries. This scholarship is new; it has no settled nomenclature, and it offers little in the way of praxis or down-to-earth examples of its ethic. This paper examines not only Bataille's thought, but also his experiences, in order to ground advocacy for environmentalist action, especially that concerning food, in terms of both global-scale policies and ethics at the level of small-scale communities. This approach requires attending to both big traditional feasts and odd little dinner parties, all placed in the context of re-working the unsustainable agricultural system that makes them possible for the moment. The discussion here will begin in the years before the Second World War with Bataille's founding, with a few friends and lovers, of a secret society, called *Acéphale*; it continues with a brief account of current ecological scholarship that draws from Bataille; it concludes with a distillation of a principle both fundamental to Bataillean ecology and easily enacted in daily practice. In short, this paper seeks to introduce “General”, “Solar”, “Sacred”, or “Bataillean” ecology by binding it to a phenomenology of unproductive expenditure.² More precisely, it looks to the experience of communal creative expression—for example, the sort found in a shared meal.

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² For an overview of these terms, see Erich Hörl, with James Burton (eds.), *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), as well as the texts on Bataillean ecology discussed later in this essay.

'Pouring One Out' for Sade

The repast under consideration, the one Odoïevtsova vomited up, capped a festive day. This gathering was likely a celebratory feast in commemoration of the death of the Marquis de Sade. Shortly after the anniversary of Sade's death (2nd December), Bataille and Laure, led by the Sade scholar, Maurice Heine, visited 'the place Sade had chosen to be buried'³, in a grove of oaks, near a pond on Sade's former estate of Malmaison. Heine said the visit took place on 5th December; he did not attend the dinner.⁴ Marina Galletti, in her 'Chronology' of Acéphale, characterizes the event after the excursion as follows: 'On their return, having bid farewell to Heine, Bataille and Laure have arranged a supper and orgy with two guests who are as yet unidentified: "Ivanov et Odoïevtsova"'.⁵ These latter two must be Georgy Ivanov and Irina Odoyevtseva, Russian poets, husband and wife, and long expatriates in France. Galletti's use of the word 'orgy' is suggestive of an evening themed by the day's hike, which harmonized with the themes both couples had long established for themselves in their erotic habits. What would such a thematic suggestion suggest about what that they ate that evening?

A clear Sadean answer comes to mind; indeed, it is a minor question of Bataille scholarship whether he indulged in coprophagy. Bataille himself was sure that Laure had. After her death, Bataille and Michel Leiris, a close friend of his and Laure's, published some of her writings, Bataille writing a truncated biography for Laure in one of these collections. In this 'Life of Laure', he describes her Berlin period in the late 1920s, when she cloistered herself with Édouard Trautner, a German medical doctor and writer. At the end of a litany of Trautner's degradations of Laure, Bataille writes that 'Once, he gave her a sandwich, buttered inside with his shit'.⁶

Bataille has not made it easy to settle the matter. In his *Eroticism*, he offers in a single line a précis of his thinking on Sade: 'I repeat that I prefer to discuss him only with people who are revolted by him, and from their point of view'.⁷ This declaration is found in a section bearing the rubric '*To admire Sade is to diminish the force of his ideas*'.⁸

Yet the lure of the most disgusting things is a major theme in all of Bataille's work, a tension that he explores especially in his two 'Attraction and Repulsion' lectures, delivered

³ Bataille, *La Somme athéologique*, p. 525.

⁴ Maurice Heine, *Le Marquis de Sade*, ed. by Gilbert Lely. (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 353.

⁵ Marina Galletti, 'Chronology' in Georges Bataille. *The Sacred Conspiracy*, ed. by Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 2017), pp. 219-220 (p. 220).

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⁷ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (New York: Marion Boyars, 2006), p. 180.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

in January and February of 1938 to the College of Sociology, which he formed and led with Leiris and Roger Caillois. Bataille speaks of two fundamental experiences here: the call of the disgusting to individuals and the subsequent collective gathering around it. The former lies at the heart of human sexuality: ‘Between the people whose movements are comprised of exuberant life, the theme of reciprocal repulsion focused on sexual parts is present as mediator [...]’.⁹ The latter forms the core of human community: ‘Everything leads us to believe that early human beings were brought together by disgust and by common terror, by an insurmountable horror focused precisely on what originally was the central attraction of their union’.¹⁰ Bataille elucidated these experiences in order to derive from them principles for guiding communal action.

The solution to the mystery of the meal lies here. We know what Odoyetseva's nakedness means, but what does her vomiting signify?

There was a wild wind on the Beauce. Once back, having left Maurice Heine, Laure and I together laid out a supper: we were expecting Ivanov and Odoïevtsova. As planned, the supper was no less wild than the wind. Odoïevtsova, naked, started to vomit.¹¹

Suggestive indeed. Bataille goes on to recount how, a few months later, in March of 1938, he and Laure repeated the trip and the dinner, this time without Heine or the Ivanovs, their guide and their guests all replaced by Leiris and his wife Zette, both during the visit to Malmaison and, all had hoped, into the evening. The plan was the same, and the menu as well, but in providing more detail about the latter, Bataille casts doubt on the Sadean nature of their feast: ‘The supper we bought was deliberately what we had bought before, Laure and I, from the place where we had ordered supper for the Ivanovs’. It seems unlikely that any food service operation would cater to the full Sadean taste.

Another incident, years later, might shed some light. In the late 1930s, Michel Fardoulis-Lagrange and Bataille became friends, at Bataille's instigation after he read Fardoulis-Lagrange's novel *Sebastien* (1939). During the war, both participated in the Socratic College discussion group founded by Bataille. Their friendship lasted several years and Fardoulis-Lagrange wrote a brief memoir of Bataille, *G. B. ou un ami présomptueux*. The middle chapter of this book is titled, ‘The Meal’; it tells of an occasion when the two dined

⁹ Denis Hollier (ed.), *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, trans. Betsy Wing. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p. 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹¹ Bataille, *La Somme athéologique*, p. 525.

together on wild boar, '*sanglier faisandé*' (literally 'pheasanted boar'), meaning boar meat hung until rancid or 'high'. Fardoulis-Lagrange reflects on Bataille's holding forth on the subject of food:

[...] my friend, a true blasphemer, espouses sentiments that whet the appetite for rotten food. God is reconstituted in rottenness in order to be vomited up afterwards, while I have recourse to fasting and purification.¹²

This experience of eating a disgusting lunch with Bataille lies at the heart of the memoir, both physically and thematically: "That's why I would consider my friend presumptuous; because, lacking something better, he digested dubious food while ascribing to it the virtues of communion".¹³

Fardoulis-Lagrange published this account in 1969. In 1987, in an interview published in *Le Magazine littéraire*, he clarified the moment in a way that complicates the image of Bataille's thought:

One day, his butcher had offered him some wild boar (one killed some time previous and already quite rancid. Well, he ate it, going all the way to make his point, saying he was from peasant stock and it was absolutely necessary to eat what he'd paid for. Anyhow, it was eating this rancid boar that gave me a case of jaundice. They had to come get me in an ambulance'.¹⁴

Fardoulis-Lagrange probably suffered a bout of Hepatitis E by partaking in either the pleasures or the frugalities of Bataille's table. It is salient and not contradictory that a case for Bataille's extravagance and a case for his thrift both enjoy a firm grounding in Fardoulis-Lagrange's respective texts: alternating from one to the other, from austerity to extravagance as an act of conscious habit and as an ethic of the gift, especially a poison gift, which is a practice that Bataille both theorized and undertook with important implications for ecology and environmentalism.

Thus, it becomes possible that Bataille and Laure served just this sort of dish as an appetizer to their orgies with the Ivanovs and the Leiris. And just as it matters that such an offering signifies both grand hospitality and good home economics, so it is important that Laure never ate the second meal. In *La Sainte de l'abîme*, her biography of Laure, Élisabeth Barillé places the scene of Laure's second and last trip to Sade's grove on 14 March 1938. After their excursion, they went to see an American film, *One Way Passage* (1932; a doomed romance between a murderer and a dying woman), then headed home for dinner and an

¹² Michel Fardoulis-Lagrange, *G. B. ou un ami présomptueux* (Paris: José Corti, 1996), p. 58.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁴ Fardoulis-Lagrange, Michel, 'Interview' *Le Magazine littéraire* (1987), pp. 49-50, p. 49.

orgy: ‘Hardly had they returned to the rue de Rennes—with a detour to the caterer from whom they’d ordered dinner for the Ivanovs—when she fell ill’.¹⁵ She would never recover. Her death would become death itself for Bataille, colouring all of his thought, especially that on limits, which is to say the thought that would prove most valuable to Bataillean ecology. As he put it in *Eroticism*:

What we desire is to bring into a world founded on discontinuity all the continuity such a world can sustain. De Sade's aberration exceeds that limit. Some few people find it tempting and occasionally some even go the whole way.¹⁶

There is a great sorrow in that last line, because of both the absurdity of any observance of natural limits in the face of the flow of time in nature—the death that will come to all of us, the inevitable extinction of the human animal, the coming swallowing of the earth by the sun—and his personal experience of loving a person who took continuity to unsustainable lengths.

That cold springtime hike to the spot where Sade had willed his body to be laid, there to be “[e]aten by the roots of the oaks, annihilated in a thicket's earth [...]”, as Bataille put it,¹⁷ sparked the recurrence of tuberculosis that would slowly consume Laure over the summer, leaving her dead by late autumn. After recounting their night with the Ivanovs, Barillé asks, ‘What did they hope to find in this organized debauchery?’¹⁸ The answer is right in the title of the book (Bataille’s *Guilty*) that Barillé references, as well as its notes about Odoyetseva and her vomit: the dinner affair was ethical. All of Bataille's affairs were. They were Bataille's attempt to seduce his friends and lovers into his anti-fascist crusade. He had hoped to infect them with the spirit of the monstrous anti-god that gave his small cult the name ‘Acéphale’. And, after several political failures, he saw the project of spreading irreligious sacredness as the only hope to stave off the coming wars. Let Bataille argue for his side, a month before he and Laure would take a step too far into the abyss, in lines he would come to hold culpable without recanting them: “[...] I believe that nothing is more important for us than that we recognize that we are bound and sworn to that which horrifies us most, that which provokes our most intense disgust.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁶ Bataille, *Eroticism*, p. 19.

¹⁷ Bataille, *La Somme athéologique*, p. 524.

¹⁸ Barillé, p. 343.

¹⁹ Hollier, p. 114.

These stories about Bataille and his own reflections upon them make up the folklore, the communal creative expression, that underlies the formal articulations from which Bataillean ecology should unfold. The *acéphaliens* carried out human sacrifices, rumors said, in the years after Acéphale disbanded, when Bataille was writing the texts that Bataillean ecologists now seize upon. If Bataille has one lesson for us, it might be that one ought not discount myth, especially if it is demonstrably false. Indeed, understanding the value of Bataille's thought for ecology means acceding to Bataille's demand for practical consequences: his work is nothing but an ethics, one that directs action in the absence of a moral center, such as God or humanity. It works in the shadow of the void of traditional sacredness. Without this impossible ethic, a Bataillean ecology cannot work. Let us cleave, then, to Bataille's table and table-talk, while considering this perspective and the environmental activism it endorses.

* * *

The Second Bataillean Crusade

The surge in ecological scholarship influenced by Bataille begins with its fullest treatment in Allan Stoekl's *Bataille's Peak*. The most recent major development is Giorgio Kallis's *Degrowth*. Stoekl draws heavily from Bataille's work on literary and religious themes to clarify the wisdom that general economy has to offer in the context of environmentalist action. Through his reframing of environmental crisis, Stoekl lends new meaning to practices that seem like environmentalist asceticism, such as cycling and recycling. '[M]uscles in agony and ecstasy', and reduction of waste both lose their austere sensibility and become extravagant as they respond to the scientific rationale of living within natural limits, a movement that happens only with heightened consciousness of the moment of total loss.²⁰ This and all of Stoekl's work on Bataillean ecology speak with richness of how we would live in accord with such precepts.

Kallis applies these tenets to public policy. His degrowth stance grew out of what one might call the entropic tradition of ecology, founded by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (1971). Degrowth removes itself by one step from the steady-state solutions promulgated by scholars such as Herman Daly (1994) in response to Georgescu-Roegen's recognition that economic development, green or not, can never violate physical laws, as its proponents invariably would have it do. Kallis avers 'that in the long term, a contraction and

²⁰ Allan Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak: Energy, Religion, and Postsustainability* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 202.

transformation of the economy [are] inevitable—the question is how it will happen²¹, and he devotes much of his book to arguing for the necessity of managing this inevitability through a myriad of processes that are neither capitalist nor socialist.

Kallis scrutinizes the strategic problem that bedeviled Bataille across so many failures: the problem of contagion, of renewing sacred experience as a practice, and of drawing people into the movement. In adducing the opportunity-cost equation that lies at the heart of Bataille's argument, Kallis alludes to Bataille's erotic preoccupations with a flippancy that is both thematically and performatively *à propos*:

Life and death are two sides of the same coin of the universe: the life of one being is the expenditure or death of another. [...] from [Bataille] we can see that no matter how little we produce after oil is over, we will always produce more than will be necessary for the mere survival of those who will have survived. And the problem of what to do with this excess will remain. Make love not war, seems a sound principle.²²

A sound principle indeed (and a fine bumper sticker). The complication that sloganeering would elide is not lost on Kallis: Bataille sees sex as no less evil than war, laughter, tears, and sacrifice. They all count as eroticism in Bataille's special sense, each being no less evil than any of the others, and all are infused with death. It comes down to choosing the evil that will keep humanity on the living side of the Sadean line. The central Bataillean ecological question is: Which excess is sustainable? The paradox is that choosing among evils to arrive at sustainable excess amounts to a rational calculation grounded on a scientifically rigorous model of the world.

Bataillean ecology, then, would force a choice conscious of the constraints of opportunity cost: when capital growth touches natural limits, capital burns up, catastrophically. Thus, a society must choose either to endure this burning or set fire to its wealth beforehand. That is, destroying wealth costs a society the opportunity for capital growth. Even though a Bataillean ecology would accept the growth of capital as good and the waste of capital as evil, it would choose evil. There is no transvaluation of values here.

Bataille extended his advocacy of practices of unproductive expenditure from his early writings into his later ones, from prose-poems to rigorous, if not systematic treatises, first as a means of fighting fascism, then as a means of staving off nuclear holocaust. Scholars of Bataillean ecology extend his ideas further still to the task of stunting material growth. This work depends on embracing Bataille's phenomenology of the scientific world

²¹ Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Agenda Publishing, 2018), p. 112.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

(‘I picture the Earth projected into space, like a woman screaming with her head on fire’²³), and his characterization of eroticism as a volcanic sacrifice of excess wealth. One must keep these images in mind when addressing the science of sustainability and the practical programs that such research enjoins, if one wishes to hew to the course of environmental prudence. It is of some benefit that in the very origins of contemporary sustainability research, there already appears a slight reflection of these visions.

* * *

The Wolf in the Systems Model

The pivotal work in contemporary sustainability is the 1972 MIT study funded by the Club of Rome, *Limits to Growth* (*LtG*), which enraged both ends of the political spectrum, from capitalists to communists, for unsurprising reasons. The study consists of the running-through of several computer models of different structures of social relations, and its results predict a slow collapse of population and capital, if the world stays the course of the Standard or ‘do nothing’ model.

From its publication and over the ensuing decades, orthodox capitalists and orthodox Marxists, both of whom reject the notion of natural limits, have rejected the findings of the *LtG* team. However, since the late-1990s, new assessments of this research have found that the world economy has indeed progressed in accord with its Standard model. One set of these reassessments by Graham Turner, observes that, continuing apace threatens the following outcomes: ‘Diminishing per capita supply of services and food cause a rise in the death rate from about 2020 (and somewhat lower rise in the birth rate, due to reduced birth control options). The global population therefore falls, at about half a billion per decade, starting at about 2030’.²⁴ The worst famine in history is Mao’s: 35 million people starved to death in China from 1959 to 1961. Turner suggests that these catastrophic figures will be exceeded if we continue to do nothing, predicting that a yearly average of 50 million people will die, mainly of hunger, for decades.

From almost the beginning of the crystallization of environmental crisis in *LtG*-style models, there lay a splinter of Bataillean ecology. Aurelio Peccei founded the Club of Rome in 1968; in 1973, he co-authored a defense of the *LtG* report. His co-author was Manfred

²³ Georges Bataille, *The Sacred Conspiracy*, ed. by Marina Galletti and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 2017), p. 437.

²⁴ Graham Turner, ‘On the cusp of global collapse? Updated comparison of The Limits to Growth with historical data’ *GALA-Ecological Perspectives for Science and Society* 21.2 (2012), pp. 116-124, p. 121.

Siebker, a physicist and member of the Club. From this point, Siebker would write a series of environmentalist screeds that would culminate with the CADMOS report, *The State of the Union of Europe*, edited by Denis de Rougement, a colleague of Bataille's who lectured at the College of Sociology. All of these writings express a Bataillean sensibility, but it is only in 1978's 'Economania' that Siebker cites Bataille explicitly, frames the ultimate problem in Bataille's terms, and proffers Bataille's brand of solution:

[...] I repeat the words of Georges Bataille—the fundamental problem of human societies is that of *surplus*, of *excess*, human wants can transcend immediacy, and human activities (production, services, rituals, etc.) are not programmed to self-limitation beyond immediacy. [...]

Many different solutions have been applied to the problem of how to get rid of surplus. [...] The most disastrous of all, for the long-term viability of the system, is the modern one which essentially substitutes a relatively mild disequilibrium problem by a snowballing mechanism: re-investment, leading to an exponential acceleration of the economic Machine [...]²⁵

In *The Tears of Eros*, Bataille pleads for a rational ordering of society that would avert catastrophe: '[...] unless we consider the various possibilities for consumption which are opposed to war, and for which erotic pleasure—the instant consumption of energy—is the model, we will never discover an outlet founded on reason',²⁶ a sentiment that Siebker iterates when he claims that the 'real quest is for a sane society'.²⁷

The particular difficulty of these sighs from the ecological deep is that they call for a conscious violation of capitalist and economic virtues at every scale. Only by the living of a new reality, and by the suffering that it entails, can a new value system emerge out of the nihilistic debris left by economania. Citizens' initiatives as well as non-conformist action groups are part of the new living realities by 'real people' (as opposed to the 'non-living' of those immersed in technology as reality) if they communicate and if they open their focus beyond their immediate concerns.²⁸

Siebker wrote with global environmental policy in mind (as well as dinner parties), and with a sensitivity for the anguish inherent in the acts of communally wrenching away from the anxieties of growth as if no limits existed and communally plunging toward the intensity of experience necessitated by the embrace of community within the circle of

²⁵ M. H. Siebker, 'From Economania to Response-Ability: A Plea for an Ecological Society' *Environmental Policy and Law* 4 (1978), pp. 87-90, p. 88.

²⁶ Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros*, trans. Peter Connor. (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1989), p. 149.

²⁷ Siebker, p. 88.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

natural limits, which are always volcanic. His recognition of these calderian emotions takes us to the rim on which Bataille would have had us tip over into a new temple. The fundamental principle of Bataillean ecology itself becomes clear and distinct in this will to imbalance.

* * *

The Biospherical Anus

The way forward lies in the failure of the figure of Acéphale, the Headless One, not only in the overall impotence of its community, but in the particular disaster of Bataille's try at initiating Laure. The great joke of the trip that ended up killing her is that Sade was never buried in that grove. While Heine guided them expertly, with assiduous attention to the details Sade had dictated in his Will, Sade's executors had ignored his last testament and simply buried him beneath a cross in the graveyard at Charenton, the asylum where he died. Even better, some years later, the asylum exhumed Sade's corpse as part of a cemetery relocation, and a young physician in residence at Charenton, J.-L. Ramon, withheld Sade's skull from reinterment so that he might make a phrenological study of it. He then loaned what must have been a dynamite specimen to Johann Spurzheim, a German doctor and popularizer of phrenology, who made off with it. The brainpan of the Marquis de Sade vanished into the depths of a different underground. But Spurzheim made casts of the skull, one of which survived, to be discovered by Thibault de Sade, the current Marquis, in the Musée de l'Homme. It seems that Thibault now hawks bronze replicas of it, in much the same way that his brother Hughes sells Sade-themed wines under the label Maison de Sade, (including organic ones, named for *Justine*). The Maison de Sade cares about the environment!’, exclaims the brand website.

All in the spirits of the times. Laure died as a result of her tramping across a ground that had never tasted Sade's flesh. There, we have illustrated the first principle of Bataillean ecology: there is only void above the myth that breathes life into excess. Bataille never managed to shape a movement that would conform to everyone's palate, one that would show how to savour disgust for waste, regardless of the particulars of the prohibitions and transgressions that would make it appetizing, while whetting a consciousness of the falseness of it all. These are the suasional tasks of the Bataillean ecologist, the work of cultivating practices of sustainable excess, practices that would work because their center has no truth. Humanity must convert from an unsustainable, capital-intensive agriculture to a sustainable one, but humanity must also waste the gains of this conversion: we must

sacrifice in the name of a lie, in order to prevent a truth from luring us into re-investing our energy into growth.

This holds true in the intimacy of our bodies and all the way up the scale to faceless global policy. It is the lesson of the boar: Bataille was no peasant, and so his eating of the rancid meat and, even more, his generosity with it, amounted to an extravagance—a feast of famine food. A host who is generous with rotten boar keeps the old ways, which have neither place nor use anymore. They are folkloric expressions that, in their disgustingly obvious falsity, bind a community. As Bataille himself sums up his generosity, consummation, and gratuity: “If the world insists on blowing up, we may be the only ones to grant it the right to do so, while giving ourselves the right to have spoken in vain.”²⁹

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²⁹ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volumes II & III*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989a), p. 191.

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Decadence, Homoeroticism & the Turn Towards Nature in James Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus*

James Jackson

This essay argues that James Bidgood's Pink Narcissus, a 1971 arthouse film produced in the confines of the director's apartment in the years leading up to the Stonewall Rebellion in June 1969 and released almost two years later in New York when homosexuality had been legalised, responds creatively to the moral and legal restrictions placed upon homosexuals during its production. Bidgood's juxtaposition of the camp, rosy world of the narcissist's apartment, where the character contemplatively fantasises about his natural desires and sexual encounters, with the harsh, animalistic world of the city underground, where gay men go searching discreetly for one-off encounters, taking risks along the way, mirrors the world of the New York underground scene inhabited by Bidgood in the 1960s. The pleasant aroma felt as Bidgood whisks Pan away from the brightly coloured and elaborately decorated apartment to fantastical, dreamlike spaces, illuminates the desire of the character to act in ways he cannot in the outside world, and to distance himself from the harsh realities of life's underbelly. By drawing on historical, cultural, and natural imagery in his depictions of Pan's role-playing fantasies, Bidgood does not merely acknowledge the common assumption — in the time this film was being made — of homosexual acts being socially and morally transgressive, but actively challenges it by giving us a perspective on homosexuality that goes beyond the social and moral and embraces the full beauty of homosexuality in nature. Bidgood though recognises not only the beauty associated with homosexuality but the power of nature in general, hence why he simultaneously reveals to us the fear of the unknown and the potential, animalistic dangers associated with the sexual underworld he was part of in the 1960s. The aesthetic of benevolence, beauty, and homoeroticism, so often seen in clichéd, camp depictions of homosexuality, is used ironically by Bidgood to remind us that it is merely a veneer for those more dangerous encounters. Bidgood then presents a holistic view of homosexuality, with decadence a characteristic showing what lies beneath the homoerotic surface, projected through the fantasies and risk-taking of the film's main protagonist.

* * *

James Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* (1971) is a masterpiece of American art house cinema and a triumph of low-budget filmmaking, aimed firmly at the homosexual community. In the seven years between 1963 and 1970 it took Bidgood to painstakingly film his *chef d'oeuvre*, the Stonewall rebellion had taken place and many gay people were migrating to the cities. Bidgood's search for models in an early 1960s New York where homosexuals spent most of their time 'underground' was a precarious one. Who on the city streets could Bidgood safely ask to go back to his apartment to model for a homosexual film?¹ Bobby Kendall, who plays Pan (alluding to the Greek god of nature and the wilds), was easily approachable, as he shared

¹ Sean Edgecomb, "Camping Out With James Bidgood: The Auteur Of Pink Narcissus Tells All - Bright Lights Film Journal", *Bright Lights Film Journal*, 2019 <<https://brightlightsfilm.com/wp-content/cache/all/camping-james-bidgood-auteur-pink-narcissus-tells/#.XF1YufZ2vmI>> [Accessed 30 January 2019].

an apartment with Bidgood at the time and continued to do so during the production of the film. His sexuality remains mostly in the dark though, unlike Charles Ludlam (one of his co-stars), who was openly homosexual. Aside from Kendall, Ludlam, and their other co-star, Don Brooks, finding suitable models to perform in a homoerotic fashion by just heading out onto the streets would have been unpredictable and volatile, just like the underworld we see in the film itself.

Whilst the need for absolute discretion or anonymity somewhat faded by the time *Pink Narcissus* was finally released in May 1971, Bidgood remained anonymous in the credits due to creative tensions with the editors. The film, which is about the sexual fantasies of a youthful gay prostitute working in the city, alludes to this notion of the homosexual man as an individual who goes forth into the transient city seeking independence and autonomy, in the process transcending the moral constraints of a particular world (such as the Protestantism embedded in so much of American culture in the 1960s), but which began to wane as the decade progressed. Given that the entire film was shot on sets created by Bidgood in his own apartment, and that Bidgood searched the streets for models, the film itself is an allegory on the very process of its making, and a broader commentary on difficulties faced by homosexual people in the underground during the 1960s. However, Bidgood portrays homosexuality not as decadent because it challenges what had up until recently been seen as morally wrong in the legal and social realm per se, but rather as a natural phenomenon, where in the sexual underworld, nature herself unleashes the opposing tenets of benevolent beauty and harsh animalism associated with sexual desire. The film's esoteric and soft-pornographic nature plays to the fantasies of the peripheral, underground audience it was aimed at; the camp, homoerotic aesthetic evoked so potently by Bidgood, and dismissed as outmoded and anachronistic by those who began to find enjoyment in more masculine, hardcore depictions of homosexuality, as in Poole's *Boys in the Sand* (1971), has a doubly ironic effect.² The film was actually mistaken for one of Warhol's. The colour pink, whose connotations at this time were so often tenderness and femininity—often thought to have been popularised by the pink dress worn by Mamie Eisenhower at her husband's presidential inauguration in 1953 ('Mamie Pink'), and used as part of a man's costume or in the décor of his living space to playfully imply his homosexuality—is splashed everywhere in the film and seen by some as a

² When I talk of Bidgood's depiction of camp having a 'doubly ironic effect', I am suggesting two things. The first is that, in accordance with a trait of camp outlined by Sontag in her essay, 'Notes on "Camp"', [Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 275-292], the aesthetic plays on its own artificiality. The second is that Bidgood knowingly acknowledges and pokes fun at this insistence on an artificial depiction of man in the first place.

hangover from the 1960s.³ The colours and tones of the film's world knowingly play on the innocence and sweetness to reinforce that this aesthetic is a veneer under which there are various layers of the homosexual underworld, something that discerning homosexual audiences most likely knew to be true.

Symbols and allegories alluding to the historical representation of sexual experience, not just sexuality, all converge in the protagonist, whose obsession with his own desires are reflected back at him in the hall-of-mirrors-esque images we see throughout this film. Ovid's tale of Narcissus is of a man who falls in love with his own reflection. Narcissus is seen only to really love himself, believing nobody else is worthy of his love; the feeling of being momentarily desired or fleetingly loved by others is for him insignificant. An obsession with the self is a significant part of this film, but within this is the underlying cycle of perceived decadence, which goes from innocence to depravity to innocence. But what of the relationship more generally between decadence, sex, and culture? Paglia argues that decadence can be found most prominently in the mythic objet d'art of the Graeco-Roman world, the humanistic paintings and sculptures of the Renaissance, and in the nature-inspired poems of Romanticism. She sees a schism in life between Apollo and Dionysus (the chthonic world); religiosity and paganism; rationality and chaos.⁴ The three markers of decadence she sets out are an eruption of those things which deviate from rigid moral codes of society and religion.

The Hellenistic period in late Rome embraced a decadent culture: it became secularised, undisciplined, self-indulgent, sophisticated, and liberal towards homosexual encounters.⁵ There is evidence of gay unions in both Ancient Rome and Greece. Emperor Nero married the freedman Pythagoras, as well as the young Sporus. Nero took on the role of bride during his marriage to Pythagoras, and the role of groom to Sporus, whom he had castrated and dressed in women's clothes to represent the bride.⁶ Such unions were modelled on the binary of male as active and female as passive pervasive in Roman civilisation; casual sexual encounters were modelled on the soldier as active and the slave as passive (rarely the other way around).⁷ The Ancient Greeks similarly embraced homosexuality, but did so often as a form of pederasty (male homosexuals penetrating adolescent males).⁸ Outside of

³ Marilyn Irvin Holt, *Mamie Doud Eisenhower: The General's First Lady* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007).

⁴ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Caroline Vout, *Power and Eroticism in Imperial Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.151.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Andrew Lear and Eva Cantarella, *Images of Ancient Greek Pederasty: Boys Were Their Gods* (London: Routledge, 2008).

sexuality, the Greeks were thought of as decadent by worshipping what Nietzsche called ‘the whole Olympus of appearance’, where the forms of visual arts or words were taken as a very serious matter; they ‘were superficial—*out of profundity*’.⁹ The connection between the Greeks’ emphasis on form and decadence is what Kearns describes as ‘the moral force of beautiful forms’, a philosophy ascribed to by the French Parnassian Théophile Gautier.¹⁰ The ‘art for art’s sake’¹¹ movement of the late 19th century, which models itself significantly on Gautier’s sense of ironic detachment, is present in the work of Swinburne, Baudelaire, Pater, Poe, Huysmans, and in the witty writings of Wilde in The Mauve Decade of the late Victorian period. It offered a way of seeing life as an imitation of art, emphasising a strong bond between beauty and form, and a style of decadence that detached nature and sex from moral and social influences.

Art allows us to confront our own moral judgements by emphasising sexual interest as a natural phenomenon. Pornography is one such art form, as Sontag argues in ‘The Pornographic Imagination’, that provocatively encourages viewers to confront their morals in that it knowingly crosses certain boundaries and invites responses that recognise the primitive, the animalistic, and the natural.¹² This is true of both soft and hardcore pornography, or even art which tends towards the erotic. Luis Buñuel’s *L’Age d’Or* (1930), which contains erotica, encourages the viewer to make moral judgements by positioning morality as a conflicting point of interest within the content of the film itself. Towards the end of the film, we see a figure resembling Jesus, and a number of dukes, emerge innocently from the Château de Selliny. They proceed to walk across the drawbridge. From the images alone, we have no reason to believe that there is anything untoward afoot. But through Buñuel’s juxtaposition of these images with the words ‘120 Days of Depraved Acts’ (alluding to Sade’s *Les 120 Journées de Sodome*), it is implied that the dukes have been engaged in orgies. The irony of this sequence is that those figures who preach about never committing a sin of the flesh are often guilty of just that. In many of the film’s other sequences, Buñuel makes a mockery of moral codes (as per the Surrealist tradition) by emphasising instinctive behaviour and natural sexual urges.¹³ What is implied by Buñuel in this film as a whole is that attempts

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science [Die fröhliche Wissenschaft]*, trans. By Josefine Nauckoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.8.

¹⁰ James Kearns, *Théophile Gautier, Orator to the Artists: Art Journalism in the Second Republic* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2007), p.68.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp.35-73.

¹³ Mocking moral codes, emphasising instinctual behaviour, and prioritising automatism over conscious, free will, can be found more broadly in the Surrealist circle of artists, poets, and filmmakers during the 1920s and 1930s in France and Spain. As outlined in Breton’s *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, those operating in this circle were influenced by Freudian notions of the unconscious mind, and the overarching principles of pleasure and

to suppress or restrain this behaviour to extremes is a vain enterprise; decadence, subversion, and a turn towards nature are seen as an unavoidable part of the human condition.

However, challenging a moral order need not only be done through mockery. For instance, Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), a film defended in a testimony by Sontag in 1964 after it was considered in breach of obscenity laws due to its depiction of intersexuality and transvestism, is about the innocence of Eros in all its forms and is not mockingly subversive.¹⁴ *Pink Narcissus* knowingly challenges moral codes present during its production, but it also takes us into a world which goes beyond sexuality, delving into the fundamental practices of sex itself. That is to say, there is a return to nature. Rousseau and Wordsworth had this mindset, but they believed in nature's benevolence and man's inherent virtuousness. Primitive life to them was untroubled; a return to nature would free humanity from burden. However, Bidgood observes that this turn to nature has consequences. Under the sweet, serene surface of natural beauty is a dark undercurrent and a world of violence, chaos, and sadism, as envisaged in the literary works of the Marquis de Sade. Through an appraisal of Pan's role-playing fantasies and his fictitious return to nature, I posit that there exists a romanticised, sentimental view of sex, which is its oneness with the beauty of nature, and its existence as separate from moral codes and social expectations. But in considering the juxtaposition of these sequences with the harsh realities of the city underground, I shall argue that Bidgood sees both the beauty and danger of homosexual encounters in such scenarios, and recognises that whilst homosexuality itself is not decadent, the practices seen in this film are presented in such a visceral way that they would ipso facto be defined as decadent for their dismissal of moral and social conventions.

The world of decadence and sexual liberation that Bidgood portrays addresses a paradox about freedom. He delves into the dominant-submissive fantasies that emerge out of a disdain for the idea that we are completely free. If we are completely free, then what is there left to subvert? Pan fantasises briefly about being a Roman emperor and then a slave to one. This very idea is executed in the cross-cutting between Pan's apartment and the fantasy world of Ancient Rome he has constructed in his mind, although the whole set-up with the waiter is also a fantasy. At the start of the scene, we see Pan lying gracefully on his bed, from which he calls a waiter to his door. When the waiter arrives, Pan opens the door and invites

reality. More specifically, they tap into the drive for sustenance ('Eros') and the human reality of facing death ('Thanatos'). Examples of such works include Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou*, Dalí's *La persistencia de la memoria*, Dulac's *La Coquille et le clergyman*, and Man Ray's *Les Mystères du Château de Dé*.

¹⁴ John Leland, "The Prosecution Resets In A 1964 Obscenity Case", *Nytimes.Com*, 2015 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/01/nyregion/the-prosecution-resets-in-a-1964-obscenity-case.html>> [Accessed 30 January 2019].

him in to place the champagne soaked in a bucket of ice on the table. But before we see him walk over to the table, a juxtaposition occurs: Pan's soft pink room transforms into the interior of an emperor's palace. The slow tempo of a soothing harpsicord is replaced by a sequence of minor chords on the piano. The sound becomes dissonant and disconcerting, evoking an air of melancholy and solemnity, and reflecting the downbeat mood of the laboriously working slave roleplayed by the waiter in Pan's fantasy. The slave/waiter walks through the atrium with a huge plate of grapes (replacing the champagne) to the room where the emperor (imitated by Pan) sits atop his solium. The slave then kneels in deference, offering him the fruits. The film cuts back to Pan's bedroom, where in a two-shot, we see Pan sitting on this bed in the foreground, side-on from the camera, and the waiter placing the champagne down on the table in the background. While Pan does not make eye-contact with the waiter—he looks directly ahead, while the waiter is situated to his right (but to us, the waiter is farthest away in the composition)—the waiter does turn to look at him. In this moment, Bidgood implies that they possibly share each other's fantasises, but are putting on a veil of false decorum to imitate a moral code. Bidgood then cuts back to the Roman palace, where we see Pan seated in a very genteel, unimposing fashion. He has golden locks, a glistening tan, and a very youthful face; here, Bidgood is invoking a Julius Caesar or Mark Antony figure in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. Here, power is not charged with militancy or brutality, but with elegance and sophistication. Thus, Pan's fantasy is a process of acting out of false power where the dominant wilfully seduces the submissive, and the submissive wilfully gives in to the dominant.

The source of power is simultaneously a source of decadence; androgynous men touching and kissing each other sensitively, bathed in a gentle, purple light, adapt themselves effortlessly to an environment that is confident in its power, so much so that pleasure and sex are seen as a matter of routine in the orders of the court. When the emperor summons two heavily-armed and masculine soldiers to bring in a prisoner slave, we find that Pan is now imitating this role too. Despite this aura of discipline, the fantasy Pan has constructed here is one where he knows all too well the decadent lifestyles of the Romans. A composite shot of emperor and slave seen in close proximity bursts with homoeroticism. Beneath the veneer of discipline is the sexual dynamic of giver and receiver. The slave evidently takes as much pleasure being passive as the emperor does in being dominant. Whilst we only see their two faces in this shot, beforehand, they are both shown to be naked, so when the slave slowly closes his eyes and tilts his head back, it evokes sensuality. Given that homosexuality was illegal during most of this film's production, this whole fantasy based on the spirit of a Roman

world where homosexuality could be practiced without shame, and the creation of false hierarchies, boundaries and a new or reinvented moral code, intensifies both the eroticism and decadence of the film. These false hierarchies appear symbolically in allusions to bondage, domination, and sadomasochism. A biker, dressed in leather, revs his bike and is cajoled into riding it towards Pan, who summons him as a matador would a bull. It subtly conveys the thrill of taking risks in the sexual underworld and the willingness to place oneself in danger for pleasure. Cross-cutting between the bike riding towards Pan, and Pan himself, playfully suggests penetration. It is not romantic; the adrenaline of the shot is portrayed as physically driven and lustful.

In presenting the homosexual underworld as lustful and dangerous, Bidgood gives an insight into the culture of meeting strangers for sex and the *a priori* knowledge that these men have of its unpredictable and risky nature. This includes the danger of being caught by onlookers in a time when homosexual sex was illegal. Bidgood's presentation of such images epitomise the precarious world of the 1960s homosexual underground, even in a time before the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. I shall come to this bleak, even disturbing, depiction by Bidgood of this suburban world in the final section of this paper, but firstly one should consider the conflict brought to the fore by Bidgood's embrace of nature. On the one hand, there is the recognition that the world is not inherently safe and that human beings do have the potential to be primitive, animalistic, and dangerous in the face of others. On the other hand, there is the recognition of nature as a force that creates beautiful things, particularly its shaping of the human form, and more specifically to Bidgood, the male body. In viewing nature through both these prisms, Bidgood suggests that the perception of homosexual acts as socially and morally transgressive is simplistic and reductive, especially when considering nature as an all-encompassing power whose effect can be at once delightful and menacing, especially in the realm of sex.

What we get from Bidgood in the following sequence is a romanticised, idealistic, and possibly naïve view of the homosexuality by showing its oneness with nature as something benevolent and inherently agreeable. Bidgood knows this not to be true given what we see before this, but what this does is just add to the irony of clichéd representations. Mussorgsky's score, *Night on Bald Mountain*, reaches its final section in the transition between an abstract representation of a sex scene near a urinal and Pan's apartment; the music becomes serene, tranquil, and fluty, at one with the untroubled, untainted world of his bedroom. This scene emphasises Pan's direct experience of the body and the fantasies which are a most pleasurable thought when seen in relation to nature itself. At the start of the scene, Pan takes off his

clothes in a sensual manner, as if he is seducing the man who appears before him in a dreamy haze. When he removes the clothes, he closes his eyes and fantasises about the pleasurable experience of being softly caressed. A spell of momentary pleasure is implied by a cut to a shot of him lying down and turning his head towards the camera, in ecstasy, in a wild landscape, before it cuts back to his bedroom where he finds a track to play on his record player with a gramophone speaker. The song he chooses is Kay Kyser and his Orchestra's '(I've Grown So Lonesome) Thinking of You', with Harry Babbitt's vocals, from the 1930s.

From the moment Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* fades out, and we hear the initial crackles of the needle touching the moving record, we are presented with a character who is clearly lost in the moment. Nothing matters to him more than a contemplation of his own sensuality and beauty. Hearing the lyrics of the song whilst Pan strolls around is in one sense a form of ironic detachment, in that his habit of indulging narcissistically in his own thoughts seems at odds with a stream of consciousness where he would say such a thing as 'I've grown so lonesome, thinking of you'. But, in another sense, we could argue that beyond the façade of his own narcissism, there is an inner desire to think about those he most fantasises about. He has 'grown lonesome' by virtue of the fact that his proclivities are much more difficult to fulfil in a society forbidding such acts. We are drawn to his own concerns with his beauty, and it appears the client he summons on the phone is nobody, only the fantasy of summoning an image of himself in an external bodily form, and born out of his conception of his own beauty. When he dials the number on his flamboyantly ornamented phone for instance, Bidgood gives us a still, big close-up shot of Pan revealing a homoerotic, even androgynous depiction of his face. The cool, Hollywood-style image of him smoking his cigarette has a masculine edge to it, but the longevity of the take, the softness of the image, the mix of blue and pink light, the youthful, smooth facial features, and the elongated blink showing off his physique, point to the iconic image of the beautiful young man. This shot contemplates the figure of the young man, fixating on his form as the camera is trying to immortalise a beauty that the viewer knows to be transient.

Such a longing for beauty as something distinct from time can be found in Shakespeare's sonnets, and in one of his earliest poems, *Venus and Adonis*, which was influenced by Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, another epic tale of a youthful man. Similarly, in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Basil Hallward and Lord Henry are in absolute awe of the figure of Dorian Gray depicted in Hallward's painting. Wilde describes him as the "young Adonis [...] who looks as if he was made out of ivory and rose-leaves".¹⁵ When Pan lies on

¹⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray And Other Writings*, (London: Pocket Books, 2005), p.7.

the bed and undoes his trousers, he looks into the mirror and finds only himself looking back at him, what he is looking at through the mirror is the reflection of a figure completely immersed in a rustic setting. He is at one with nature— nature is the benevolent force whose power to strip things of their beauty over time is repressed to preserve the myth of eternal beauty. The elevation of beauty above all else speaks to the idea of the expressive and artistic as detached entities from the moral and social restrictions in life; the depth of his appreciation for the senses and for the forms which outline his own beautiful existence distances the moral and social realms and positions him at one with nature, and nature alone.

The contrasts Bidgood makes between the benevolent and dark forces of nature imitate his own experiences from the underground. The domination fantasy outlined above is taken to the extremes in a later scene set on the city streets, extending beyond fantasy to the dangers of reality. The city is a transient space with a hive of activity amongst the dwellers; therefore, some of the intricacies of city life go unnoticed. Bidgood injects into his depiction of city life a feeling of the peculiar and bizarre. We almost get the sense that he is conveying such life as theatre, or more specifically, as carnival performances or side show acts. Erving Goffman describes life as a metaphor for theatre; the series of spontaneous performances are given coherence through Bidgood's dramaturgy of shared aberration.¹⁶ Everything to the audience appears loud, strange, and chaotic, but Bidgood suggests that all of the people in this space are like actors performing on a stage. It is as if each person has been in a rehearsal, knowing how others around them act and behave. The paradox here, and one that Bidgood arguably wanted his homosexual audience to notice, is that an aberration in the city is the norm to those who have been underground. The 'BURLESK' sign seen earlier in the film from Pan's window, the various stalls compartmentalising individual acts, and the radiophonic voice-over offering commentary on what life is like in the city, all allude to the decadence in the city, simultaneously making it matter of fact. A man standing in the telephone box, appearing at first to be merely part of the urban décor, perhaps making an innocent call, is in fact telephoning Pan. Before we were taken to the city, Bidgood showed Pan looking intently at his telephone as if expecting a client to phone through very soon.

A subtle hint is dropped in two juxtaposing visuals, showing Pan preparing for penetration by an unknown man. The first is a shot of the mysterious man on the phone in a glass booth, standing silently and waiting patiently for a response. Behind him is the illuminated nightscape of the city. The lights on the building light up half his face and leaves the other half in shadow. This is an archetypally villainous shot. The viewer is led to question,

¹⁶ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 2008).

who is this man and what does he want from Pan? Does he just want sex, or could he be a less-than-innocent figure who could potentially put Pan in danger? The long shadow that runs across the caller's face, the rain tapping against the glass, and the look of seriousness on his face, adds to the menacing, antagonistic feel of the character. When this shot is cross cut with a long-shot of Pan spread across the bed in his sweet, pink apartment in the prone position, with the back of his legs and buttocks facing us, it is implied that Pan is waiting for a sexual encounter. The mysterious older man, whose sexuality is not obvious even if his desires are, typifies what in the gay community is often termed 'trade', a possible, non-identified gay who wants sexual fulfilment. On the other hand, he could be an older gay man who is willing to reward Pan financially in exchange for sex. What Bidgood reveals in these visuals in this case is the thrilling, dangerous, and discreet nature of casual sex. All of these emerge from a fear of one's sexuality being exposed in a place where such an act is illegal, as well as the uncertainty around the individual one chooses to converse with on the phone and meet in person.

City life in the underground is shown to be a continuous cycle of unpredictability and unrestraint. When the man in the booth is on the phone, he looks across at one point and Bidgood takes this cue to cut to a homeless man searching for food in a bin. Reflected on the glass of the booth for a brief moment also is the text from a lit sign reading 'WE ARE ALWAYS OPEN'. The city never sleeps, and neither do the sexual desires nor erotic fantasies of people who inhabit these spaces. Bataille, in *L'Erotisme*, responded to Sade's claim that 'there is not a libertine some little way gone in vice who does not know what a hold murder has on the senses', with his definition of eroticism as 'assenting to life up to the point of death'.¹⁷ Bataille recognised the paradox in Sade's statement, revealing that 'the sight or thought of murder can give rise to a desire for sexual enjoyment', and that recognising this gruesome fact is necessary in contemplating human existence.¹⁸ This is true of the moment Pan leaves his safe environment and walks out into the dark shadows of the city to fulfil his quest for pleasure. On his quest, we hear innuendos of various kinds from a commentator who comments on what is going on in the scene as if they were performances at a freak show. Bidgood is often very suggestive, as in the following humorous and hyperbolic allusion to oral sex spoken as we see the contrastingly intense cut from Pan lying in the prone position to a frontal shot of the mysterious man (accompanied by the descending, minor scale music):

¹⁷ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality [L'Erotisme]*, trans. by Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), pp. 11-12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

“The chief is going to eat twenty-eight inches [...] I know a great many of you people who don't think that's possible, so I am going to have to show you that over here on platform three”.¹⁹ Bidgood here, and in the many other instances we hear the radiophonic voice, points to a broader trend in the sexual underground: performing sexual acts in the street for pleasure, but often in the shadows of the city so as to minimise the risk of being seen. When Pan heads out on to the streets, and when he uses the urinals, he is stared at and admired in a disturbing manner by the aforementioned client. The client even looks over his shoulder as he urinates. Pan sheds his camp-ness and adopts the masculine image by smoking a cigarette in front of him; he is aware of danger, but acts with decorum to maintain his strength and to give his client what he wants. Bidgood is demonstrating here that the sexual underworld is far from pristine; it is a place full of desire and pleasure, but at the same time there is an underlying sense that searching for these desires and pleasures may have consequences.

The world of *Pink Narcissus* brings together all the elements of the frequently represented aspects of the homosexual male lifestyle, including the extreme antitheses. Bidgood weaves all these strands together in a denouement rich with symbolism and attentive to beauty. The power, which Pan, as a narcissist, sees in nature, is often one that regulates beauty and form. But by the end of the film, when he fully exposes himself to the elements and stands in the pouring rain whilst thunder and lightning rages around him, he also sees it as the true limit. Whilst he is able to detach himself from morality by dreaming about himself as being unified with nature, he recognises that he cannot transcend the power of nature, or indefinitely preserve his beauty. At one point, he stretches his arms outwards, and looks up at the sky as if emulating Jesus or Saint Sebastian, martyrs punished because they were thought to be traitors. Bidgood does not surrender Pan to morality. Pan reinforces the sheer superficiality of morality in the face of nature, but underscores how the homosexual act is often defined as a moral rather than natural act, thus a decadence. With this, Bidgood also suggests that morality is far inferior to the power of nature. In a series of very low-angle shots, Pan walks through the wilderness, but due to the camera position, he towers above like a giant or a godlike figure. Mussorgsky is heard again at this moment—a leitmotif throughout this film which reflects the whole spectrum of the homosexual world, from serenity and beauty, to danger and lust—which in combination with the visuals, brings this film full circle. When Pan undresses at the end of the film, and a client enters in a bowler hat, we learn that this client is also Pan. The Pan in the bowler hat then looks at himself and breaks his sacred

¹⁹ *Pink Narcissus*, James Bidgood. La Folie des Hommes, Pink Pictures Ltd, 1971. The above transcription is mine. This utterance can be heard at 40 minutes, 43 seconds to 40 minutes, 53 seconds.

mirror in displeasure of the sexual experiences he encountered in the city. The cracks of the mirror, through a match cut, transform into the ugliness of a spider's web. Bidgood brings our attention to a moral point here, which is that the closer one is to nature, the more decadent a person is. He is unable to resist temptation. Like the religious imagery mentioned above, Bidgood reinforces the primacy of nature by making a provocative gesture towards morality. He immortalises Pan's fleeting desires through homoerotic images that are rooted in the image of nature. Bidgood's film recognises that beauty is transient, and that decadence is something that can take a harsher form if nature intends, but ultimately, that nature is the homosexual man's salvation from a complex moral and social system.

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‘Born To Be Wild’:

Postmodern Decadence at the 1996 Republican Convention

Dr. Stephen Newton

This article examines the entrance to the 1996 Republican National Convention of Senator Trent Lott, who was riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle with a gray pony-tail stapled to his helmet. The Star Bangled Banner at the convention was the version performed by Jimi Hendrix at Woodstock. This article examines the surrealistic dimensions and potential sociopolitical ramifications of such a cartoonlike juxtaposition of the complexities of class identity, cultural hegemony, and the military-industrial unconscious.

* * *

In a couple of 12 August 1996 *New York Times* articles covering the opening of the Republican Party’s national convention in San Diego, there were two indicators of just how malleable, and bizarre, the protean forms of contemporary politics can be. For an opening salvo, a real bang-up beginning, the gathering revellers used Jimi Hendrix’s version of the Star Spangled Banner, recorded live at the Woodstock Music and Arts Festival in August 1969, to open the convention festivities. Mentioned in *The New York Times*, this musical selection was followed by a description of Senator Trent Lott from Mississippi entering the Convention Center at the head of a phalanx of Republican bikers on Harley Davidsons. Senator Lott’s helmet was festooned with a gray ponytail stapled to the back.¹ Picture the gray tack-on ponytail as a symbol of what Senator Lott could have been doing with his life had he not been serving the great state of Mississippi in the United States Senate. Biker Trent, outlaw heathen scourge, barbarian tattooed leather scum blasting down Main Street, unwashed, unmuffled, unshorn, and unchained, an illicit bad boy terrorizing old maid schoolmarms peeking out tremulously from behind lace curtains as the iron horses thunder past.² Knowing Senator Lott as we do, a rough, barely sketched out, kind of very

¹ ‘Of all the delegates, none arrived making a louder statement than Sen. Trent Lott, who made his Harley-Davidson motorcycle growl and bark as he led a vanguard of hundreds of bikers cresting down from the freeway upon the convention scene. Police cleared their path and wrote not one ticket for the many helmetless bikers riding imperiously beyond the law. Far from the Brando-esque sociopathy of *The Wild One*, the bikers were solid middle-class Republicans proffering PAC money and fealty to the ticket for all the throbbing pistons, flowing beards and overhanging bellies. “We’re the party of harmony -- all the way from the bikers to the corporate world of America,” said Lott, a conventioneer who thoughtfully stroked the gray pony-tail stapled to his bad-looking helmet.’ Francis X. Clines, ‘A Safe Bet: Reagan Will Again Be a Smash’ *The New York Times*, 12 August 1996 <<https://www.nytimes.com/library/convention/0812/gop-diary.html>> [accessed 1 May 2019]

² ‘San Diego--The wine supply was bottomless, the Star Spangled Banner was the wild Jimi Hendrix version and the fireworks exploded in such wild chrysanthemums of light that one young, T-shirted Republican, high-fiving his friends, was simply overcome by what a great party his party could inspire. “If that doesn’t make you feel like a Republican, I don’t know what does!” he declared, punching the air as the fireworks faded. It was that kind of feel-

approximate causality becomes clear out of the murk, as one starts to tease out the complex nuances and contradictions in the description of this weird, anomalous performance. The aging biker image was not—it would seem, at least—meant to be presented as an actual fantasy, as this would contradict the good senator’s image somewhat too severely.

But this is not merely clowning around either, especially considering the august setting and the portentous, serious business that was going to take place there. So it seems clear that, at the very least, there was more here than met the eye, and the insidious, deranged truth at the center of this ideological kaleidoscope might have been—and it’s an important qualification—that the Southern Senator knew very well what kind of powerful symbol-blurring he was mucking around with. Any ascription of motives, though, especially 23 years after the fact, here in February 2019, is bound to be pure speculation—and that, of course, could also be part of the appeal.

Keep the rubes guessing. Step right up! Only one-dollar American for the thrill of a lifetime! She shimmies, she shakes, and she crawls on her belly like a reptile! Step right up! Senator Lott may, of course, on the other hand, have been completely naive as to the effect his biker costume was having, oblivious to the complicated messages he was sending. In this case his ignorance of the potential consequences of his actions would be a story in itself, one where there wasn’t necessarily any conscious effort to be manipulative, or to have a—God Forbid!—conspiracy to deceive the electorate into thinking something, by consciously acting in ways that would elicit a malevolently preordained response.

Given, however, the plethora of spin doctors and media experts who shape contemporary campaigns, it stretches—at least what I might consider to be—the outer boundaries of credibility to imagine that there was not at least a little bit of a conscious design in such a charged, theatrical entrance. But what on earth, we might ask, looking back, lo those many years ago, might the purpose have been?

Why, for example, this image and not another one? Why not a minivan and a pack of Boy Scouts? Must there be oily smoke and an outlaw roar, glistening with a hint of corruption, a

good weekend in convention-time San Diego. From the soak zone at the Sea World dolphin show to the dance floor at Planet Hollywood, from the racetrack reception for \$100,000 donors to the line for free tequila punch at the waterfront fireworks sponsored by The San Diego Union-Tribune, Republican convention-goers engaged in a filibuster of fun this weekend. By convention’s end, the social sideshows are expected to total nearly 1,000. The schedule was so crammed that California Gov. Pete Wilson told a stadium of supporters in the dolphin show stands, “If you can survive a week of all these parties, you’re hardy folk.” Of course, not everyone was invited to everything. The champagne-sipping do at the Del Mar racetrack, where the blue-blazer men and heels-and-hat women watched Cigar miss out on his chance to win \$1 million, was held for the 50 or so corporate and individual donors who contributed \$100,000 or more to sponsor convention events, along with about 25 more who had given \$25,000.” Carey Goldberg, ‘In Rockets’ Red Glare, It’s Party, Party, Party.’ *The New York Times*, 12 August 1996 <<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/12/us/in-rockets-red-glare-it-s-party-party-party.html>> [accessed 1 May 2019]

shade, however small, of the Satanic? Even the faintest gloss of biker sympathies— notwithstanding the broadest of winks to the audience—tends to cast an unsavory light on everything the Republican senator from Dixie stood for. Or so it would seem. But what if Lott's actual sympathies were, in fact, hiding in plain sight?

What if the seemingly harmless aging desperado role was merely a clever way to subliminally advertise a deeper darkness, one too repellent to even utter its own name in the brassy ballyhoo of a convention? Consider an unholy alliance, or at least an unspoken affinity, between the swastika/prison tattoo/house-plant IQ/white-supremacist crowd, on the one hand, and the straight-arrow/church going/fuchsia plaid pants/country club lawyers on the other. Picture Bow Tie Daddy star chamber habitués, the power dudes who make laws in Washington for the benefit of Yuppie investment bankers and multinational corporations, covertly passing greasy, blood-soaked money to Harley scum with bugs in their few remaining teeth.

Nah. Impossible. Too far fetched. Sounds like Oliver Stone after too much Peruvian marching powder. But then again....hmmm.

For example, there certainly are issues in the Republican convention planks that might link conservative, right-wing agendas to biker sympathies—they both are anti-immigrant, anti-affirmative action, and anti-big government, after all. There are some small differences, but we can ignore them, at least for the moment, and can turn a blind eye to the meth labs, gang rape, and business-as-usual murder (just for the record I was referring here to the bikers, not the Republicans).

The main idea informing the Senatorial biker entrance, it would seem—as much as any of this convoluted mishmash can ever really be understandable—is to join seemingly divergent, but not quite oppositional, positions—i.e. bikers and Republican politicians. Style and ideology frequently become unified, however, on some almost entirely unconscious level, and here, as is almost always the case, the tacit message was cloaked, hidden within a surface absurdity, which in this case was a manic carnival of tawdry burlesque posing as innocent fun.

When it's done right, ideology—biker sympathies meeting up with right wing politics—winds up effacing itself, creating an interweaving matrix of buried complexities and resonances. At this point fashion almost inevitably winds up being a potpourri of watered-down, wispy flavors, which are, of course, seemingly innocuous. This is precisely how it winds up being perfectly suited, ironically, to enforcing power and control. The exercise of hegemony is most efficient through a studied banality, which never reveals its own hidden machinery, and this only adds to the scornful “Oh, come on. Lighten up. Can't you relax a bit?” tone when one suggests that there might be more to the L.L. Bean or Orvis or J. Crew or Ralph Lauren catalogues—oh, the heresy!!—than simply selling functional outdoor clothing through the mail.

Iconographic images—cowboy, biker, soldier, fireman, and cop—are frequently used as intensely compact carriers and transmitters of cultural code. Of course, there are also The Village People, but that was a powerful cultural code of a different sort. I think.

Each sartorial choice becomes a concentrated, refined distillation, a kind of cultural hologram, where each minute, discrete part carries an entire corpus of information. Fashion—in this case biker chic—becomes so intricately interwoven with ideology—with conservative Republican politics—that the consumer is, in fact, unwittingly consumed. We are eaten alive from the inside, as it were, by the very ideas we think we are harmlessly ingesting as entertainment. Once the Trojan horse idea virus enters our intellect, or the biker enters our convention, a kind of aesthetic and ideological colonization, an infestation, if you will, takes place.

And if someone gets offended, why, they're just a repressed, lifeless, politically correct prig, a finger-pointing repressed librarian hushing up the kids who are just trying to have some fun. Maybe Mr. Lott really did smear on a fake tattoo for the convention to complete his raffish outfit. It certainly would have fit in with the rest of his fashion statement.

Welcome to the future, all those years ago. Hey, it's all in the spirit of having a good time, right? Wink wink. Picture your favorite politician in a jaunty little black and silver visor cap, with a faded denim vest and rhinestone studded leather chaps, and riding a big old Harley Davidson Electroglide, while the cosmic combat interstellar roar of Jimi Hendrix playing the Star Spangled Banner blares from the loudspeakers. But wait! Trent Lott is already there, replete with a little gray ponytail. I can almost hear him and the other convention planners: "Let's go completely over the top, dish out some pure, undiluted cracker-barrel surrealism, and see if the Big Mac eating rubes out in TV land will notice." The mind-stretching decadence at the heart of the decay of the empire had never been so clear, and it was in plain sight, for the whole world to see. Go Trent, go. You were born to be wild.

* * *

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From Decadence to Degeneration:

The Big Sleep, its forceful plot, and a femme fatale ‘still in the dangerous twenties’

Dr. Larry Shillocke

“She has a beautiful little body, hasn’t she?
. . . . You ought to see mine”¹

Vivian Sternwood

‘All hereditary illnesses are sisters’²

Bénédict Augustin Morel

Tasked with naming an exemplary decadent artist, scholars often turn to Oscar Wilde (1854-1900). In his epigrams, essays, plays, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Wilde calls for an ‘art for art’s sake’ that underscores a broader assault on nineteenth-century lifeways. As his 1895 trial on gross indecency demonstrates, however, British society refused to accept aesthetics as a domain accountable to beauty alone or to condone the new masculine identities that his work championed. A modern novel, *Dorian Gray* anticipates both refusals, insofar as it shows the protagonist’s pursuit of sensation to be intensely compelling while warning that his decadent experience, however wittily expressed or secured by wealth, carries with it the potential for physical degeneration. Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* (1939) has long been treated as a terse, hardboiled novel by readers, and rightly so. Its mean streets—built up from the example of Dashiell Hammett—would therefore seem to be far removed from decadents like Wilde and the airy experiments of *The Yellow Book*.³ But Chandler (1888-1959), a Chicago-born American who came of age in turn-of-the-century London, is no stranger to the decadent movement;⁴ and his dark realism recalls Wilde’s project by depicting a set of characters whose lives of static privilege compel a descent into a criminal underworld. For *Dorian Gray* as well as for the Sternwood family, then, decadent experience leads to dissolution, and dissolution—however much it might resonate with social critique—compels personal and narrative degeneration. In the reading of *The Big Sleep* that follows, I return decadence and the science of degeneration to interpretive prominence so that the force⁵ driving Chandler’s strange double plot and its femme fatale’s criminal designs may be conceived anew.

* * *

¹ Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), p. 73.

² Erwin H. Ackerknecht, *A Short History of Psychiatry*, trans. by Sula Wolff, (London: Hafner Publishing, 1968), p. 56.

³ *The Yellow Book* was a London literary periodical, published quarterly, from 1894 to 1897. Despite its brief existence, artists, writers, aesthetes, decadents, and forward-thinking cosmopolitans of many stripes read it avidly.

⁴ In September 1900, Chandler entered Dulwich College, where he studied Classics and Languages. Aided by his Irish mother and her family, he embraced British life, becoming a British subject in 1907. During the century’s first decade, he demonstrated an uncanny ability to find his way to centers of art and decadence, including Paris, in 1905; Munich; London, in 1907; and Bloomsbury, in 1908. Writing to James Sandoe on 10 August 1947, Chandler recalls hearing George Bernard Shaw ‘give a lecture in London on Art for Art’s sake’. Frank MacShane, *Selected Letters of Raymond Chandler*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 96. Additional letters to Hamish Hamilton (22 April 1949) and Dale Warren (9 July 1949) address his knowledge of Lord Alfred Douglas and Oscar Wilde. Unsurprisingly, these letters are marred by considerable homophobia. See MacShane, p. 171 and p. 185, respectively.

⁵ Responding to Jacques Derrida, Peter Brooks holds out the possibility that the force informing narrative progression may be understood. By so doing, he brings the energy associated with plotting to the forefront, a project I will extend to the causes that inform a femme fatale’s actions. Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Vintage, 1984), p. xiv.

The Space of a Decadent Family

Wealth is both subject and subtext throughout *The Big Sleep*. Its tripartite exposition opens inside the Sternwood residence in West Hollywood. Dressed for a meeting with what he terms ‘four million dollars’⁶—real, metonymic wealth during the depression—Philip Marlowe, 33, surveys the ostentatious household. Chandler is a master of spatial description, even this early in his career, and his first-person narrator-detective takes readers down a two-story hall and, his gaze approximating a painting’s vanishing point, through glass doors, across a manicured yard, and past a garage.⁷ Marlowe’s overview slows but does not stop there: ‘Beyond the garage were some decorative trees trimmed as carefully as poodle dogs. Beyond them a large greenhouse with a domed roof. Then more trees and beyond everything the solid, uneven, comfortable line of the foothills.’⁸ Such a mannered space occupies his internal monologue for good reason, since the constrained estate will serve as counterpoint to its less-constrained inhabitants.

The first of these is Carmen Sternwood, 21, the youngest of two daughters. Small and delicate, she wears slacks and sports short hair, her appearance a curious masculine-femininity that culminates in ‘too taut lips’, ‘little sharp predatory teeth’, and wan features that ‘didn’t look too healthy’.⁹ Freed from a mother’s supervision and emboldened by a father’s allowance, she enjoys considerable personal and social mobility. Readers new to the novel cannot know that Carmen has pride of place in the opening scene because, as a murderer, she instigates the narrative. Despite knowing her background, scholars routinely treat the meeting from Marlowe’s perspective and thereby miss its function as a hardboiled set piece: that is, as the initial encounter of the femme-fatale criminal and her detective adversary.¹⁰ Responding to Carmen’s interest, Marlowe reveals his profession. Once she grows dissatisfied by his patter, she accuses him of being a tease—quite the gender inversion—and then takes her thumb, which is ‘thin and narrow like an extra finger’, and ‘bit it and sucked it slowly, turning it around in her mouth like a baby with a comforter’.¹¹ Taking the measure of a stranger is one thing; intimating fellatio with an older man quite another. Like her femme-fatale predecessors in Depression-era realism,

⁶ Chandler, p. 3.

⁷ In a superb account of literary realism, Brooks argues for the predominance of sight in works that would represent reality. It follows that novels promote the practice of ‘seeing through the roofs and facades of the real to the private lives behind and beneath’. *Realist Vision*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), p. 3.

⁸ Chandler, p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ Hollywood screenwriters, by contrast, often signaled their understanding of such a meeting’s importance in the crime films of the day. See, e.g., *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Murder, My Sweet* (1945) in this regard.

¹¹ Chandler, p. 6.

Carmen seduces the sleuth to misdirect his attention and compromise his understanding. Her double ploy works when he concludes, disparagingly, that thought must be difficult for her. Readers who see as the detective does can easily pass over the issue of whether, as a child-woman, she is undergoing or mimicking regression. Further signs of what will become a narrative-long decline occur when Marlowe, stunned by Carmen's collapsing into his arms, tells the family butler that he "ought to wean her. She looks old enough".¹²

The second person Marlowe encounters, General Guy Sternwood, is the ostensible reason for his visit. Amply foreshadowed, their meeting occurs beyond the garage in a greenhouse with a dramatic domed roof. Its architectural drama is, however, no match for a jungle of orchids sporting "nasty meaty leaves and stalks like the newly washed fingers of dead men".¹³ By intimating wealth and alluding to the decadence associated with such novels as *À Rebours* (1884), Chandler establishes the exposition and threatens to destabilize it.¹⁴ His references to meat, fingers, and death suggest that the space poses threats to species' boundaries, if not also to life. Individually, the wheelchair-bound patriarch recalls the officer, perhaps from the Mexican-American war, whose portrait hangs above a fireplace mantel in the entranceway, but Chandler distinguishes his vitality from the languor of the general by likening the latter's features to 'a leaden mask, with the bloodless lips and the sharp nose and the sunken temples and the outward-turning earlobes of approaching dissolution'.¹⁵ An expert in physiognomy would delight in such symptoms but would see them as signs of actual more so than 'approaching dissolution'. What matters most here are a decadent milieu and the causes of an aristocrat's decline.

As the smell of orchids fill the room—an odor that Sternwood sternly likens to prostitutes—a butler offers Marlowe a late-morning brandy. When the general was able to drink (and, presumably, buy sex workers), he enjoyed his liquor topped by champagne, much as a decadent would. Marlowe reaches for a cigarette, only to stop, but the general insists that he too will enjoy the smoke and 'sniffed at it like a terrier at a rathole'. Data crucial to grasping his precarious health follow: "A nice state of affairs when a man has to indulge his vices by proxy", Sternwood confesses, before adding, "You are looking at a

¹² Chandler, p. 8.

¹³ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁴ *À Rebours* played a prominent role in *Dorian Gray* by inciting Dorian's decadent pursuits, in effect compelling his degeneration. As Wilde wrote in a letter of 15 April 1892, "The book in *Dorian Gray* is one of the many books I have never written, but it is partly suggested by Huysmans's *À Rebours*, which you can get at any French booksellers'. *The Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis, (New York: Harcourt, 1962), p. 313. Aristocratic decline is so prevalent a force in modern novels as to offer an array of uses to later writers.

¹⁵ Chandler, p. 9.

very dull survival of a rather gaudy life, a cripple paralyzed in both legs and with only half of his lower belly”’. The power of vice (i.e., in a ‘gaudy life’) has enduring effects (on a man’s decline toward death).¹⁶ Here, the novel’s account of the marked transition from decadence to degeneration is less personal than discursive.¹⁷ Like evolution, with which it shared a conception of time, the theory of degeneration grew out of a concern with extinction as proposed by the pioneering geologist Sir Charles Lyell. In its early guises, the term signaled variation. By mid-century, after French naturalists used the idea of dissolution in novels and experimental medicine investigated human decline in earnest, the term came to mean atavism or savage regression. At the center of these changes stood Bénédict Augustin Morel, whose studies showed that persons sicken in response to working conditions, poor hygiene, and chemical stimulants. Their illnesses took many forms, including epilepsy, hysteria, imbecility, insanity, and nymphomania. What made *dégénérescence* degenerative was its capacity to impact not only the organism itself, but its progeny as well. A man’s alcoholism, it follows, could compel his son and daughter to become neurotic. Their children, in turn, might display worse symptoms (should the transmissible germ not skip a generation). What was once a healthy stock could thus regress through morbid deviation, extending the defects generationally and, as critics following the Lamarckian logic insisted, socially.¹⁸ Writ large, degeneration was thus a progressive condition with regressive outcomes.

As the general licks his lips over Marlowe’s brandy and cigarettes, the exposition sharpens. Readers learn that the detective once worked for District Attorney Taggart Wilde, a man with ‘the frank daring smile of an Irishman’,¹⁹ and whose chief investigator recommended him to Sternwood. It would be quite a leap to go from D. A. Wilde to Oscar Wilde, from the narrative present in Los Angeles to the London past, if the novel did not itself do so. First, it emphasizes insubordination as an aspect of Marlowe’s and the general’s character. The two daughters, moreover, are initially characterized as “‘both

¹⁶ Chandler, p. 10.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault’s account of how ‘Western man’ changed into ‘a confessing animal’ has received considerable attention from scholars. Less discussed is his subsequent claim that a ‘metamorphosis of literature’ occurred when persons linked identity to spoken sexual secrets, as medico-scientific discourses required. The novel, as arguably the most social of genres, routinely incorporates scientific discourses and insists upon both their characterological and narrative force. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley, (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 59.

¹⁸ For evidence of the hysteria that degeneration theory produced during Chandler’s life, see Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1895). A fine account of the role of degeneration in medicine can be found in Janet Oppenheim’s *Shattered Nerves: Doctors, Patients, and Depression in Victorian England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

¹⁹ Chandler, pp. 137-38.

pretty and both wild”²⁰. For her part, Carmen enjoys the pleasures of class mixing—no small matter at Wilde’s trial—and Vivian produces three failed marriages before turning thirty.²¹ From here, the novel’s decadent tableau expands to encompass blackmail, a pornography business (the owner of which Chandler specifies to be homosexual), gambling, illegal drug use, and more blackmail—all subjects that Wilde made his own in *Dorian Gray* and elsewhere. No Victorian, the general ends the meeting by giving the detective two jobs: the first concerns Arthur Gwynn Geiger, who is the second man to blackmail Carmen; the second, merely implied, involves the puzzling disappearance of Vivian’s husband, Rusty Regan.

The last meeting of Marlowe and a family member occurs after Vivian calls Marlowe to her bedroom. The gaze that observed the landscape now lingers over a seductive drunk who seeks, rather than supplies, information. At issue is Regan’s disappearance, and at the back of it, Carmen’s violent actions. First-time readers of the novel do not know that Regan is one-month dead—a fact obscured from the diegesis until its second climax—and Vivian is anxious to learn if Marlowe is tasked with finding him. He is not, a fact that ends her contentious, and lie-ridden interrogation of him. He leaves the house persuaded that the scornful general’s assessment of his daughters is apt. Outside, he views the hills that first held his gaze. Looking past them, he sees the oilfield from which the family derived its wealth. In the liminal space between the house and his office, between the job and its beginning, he reflects on how the family established a business only to move away, leaving the derricks and their sumps out of sight and, presumably, mind. Readers unfamiliar with the American idiom might miss the point of his movements, whether physical or visual. Specifically, Marlowe ‘heads south’ through the house and ‘goes down’ to meet the general, two phrases evocative of decline. Chandler’s careful setup thus recalls the past—a man’s corrosive appetites and subsequent decline, a family’s source of wealth—only to obscure it, a process of recognition and erasure²² that the Sternwood women experience first-hand. Arrogantly, the detective then misreads his job as being uncomplicated rather than vice-ridden, forgetting that the

²⁰ Chandler, p. 12.

²¹ Wilde’s second son was named Vyvyan, which American audiences might easily pronounce like Vivian.

²² In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida borrows the notion of ‘sous rature’ (under erasure) from Martin Heidegger. As translator Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak recounts, the move enables Derrida to draw attention to the ways that signs, including individual words, account for and, soon thereafter, efface their origins. The traces that persist may be indicated by using crossed-out words. A cross-through shows that a sign is necessary but insufficient both to the process of thought and the problems of being. Spivak, ‘Translator’s Preface’, *Of Grammatology*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. xiv-xvii. With respect to *The Big Sleep*, Chandler introduces the Sternwoods—accounting for their presence—so that he may largely deny their narrative importance in favor of his protagonist-hero’s search for truth amid the traces of their language and decadent behavior.

general compared it to “removing morbid growths from people’s backs”²³, an operation sure to involve the illness of more than one patient.

* * *

At Loose in the City of Angels

Having si(gh)ted the Sternwood estate, with its grotesque patriarch and sex-addled daughters, Chandler turns to places in Los Angeles where other decadents can be found. The first is Rare Books and De Luxe Editions, Arthur Gwynn Geiger’s establishment. Its storefront is unimpressive; its interior, well-appointed. As part of casing the joint, Marlowe assumes a manner of fussy femininity. Geiger is not in, but a customer reveals that the sitting area obscures a door. There is little reason for the detective to feign a homosexual stereotype, beyond seeking a laugh and nodding to the theme of decadence, since neither Geiger nor his assistant know who he is. It is no less necessary to hide books—unless they are pornographic. Concealing them speaks to their influence, a visible power so feared in the nineteenth century that reading causes Emma Bovary’s descent into adultery and Dorian Gray’s pursuit of erotic lawlessness. As these cautionary tales insist, it is a short step from a book’s incitements to pursuing the ecstasy of erotic love, or encamping in a dockside opium den with prostitutes. Marlowe fails to meet Geiger, but he does elicit a description of him from another bookseller. A declining figure, he is forty or so and fat, “goes without a hat, affects a knowledge of antiques and hasn’t any. Oh yes. His left eye is glass.”²⁴

The novel’s set-up in place, Chandler has Marlowe stake out the storefront as men and women—under the eyes of the cops—leave the store. Here, near Las Palmas, city dwellers go about their lives juiced by a book or two; Geiger services their desire; and gambling dens ring with boozy laughter. Historians of hardboiled narrative make much of the corruption that exists when police are bought off and judges spend evenings with bootleggers and criminals. In this respect, they follow Chandler’s elegiac conclusion to “The Simple Art of Murder” (1944).²⁵ But such an approach can conceive of corruption as a fact of modern life—a mere reality effect—rather than as threatening and

²³ Chandler, p. 17.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁵ “The Simple Art of Murder”, *Raymond Chandler: Later Novels and Other Writings*, (New York: Library of America, 1995), pp. 977-92 (pp. 91-92). The best critique of the essay is by David Glover and Cora Kaplan, who argue that it is ‘an attempt to moralize an amoral or lawless public world, keeping intact its genealogies of masculine privilege ... but always discriminating *within* the hyper-masculine demotic, weeding out the degenerates and the truly vicious underclass’. See ‘Guns in the House of Culture? Crime Fiction and the Politics of the Popular’, *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula A. Treichler, (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 213-24 (p. 215).

consequential.²⁶ Chandler's point, even this early in *The Big Sleep*, is darker. He intimates that family, setting, and behavior combine to create character, a process that the Sternwoods individually and collectively exemplify.

In narrative terms, the problem for readers is that stakeouts and a tailing, largely inert parts of the action, will not compel interest much beyond showing a detective at work, and so Chandler reintroduces his femme fatale. Carmen arrives at Geiger's Laverne Terrace residence, eager and alone, having navigated darkness in a pounding rain. Let inside, she ingests ether and laudanum until, slipping in and out of consciousness, she sits naked before a hidden camera, poised to be blackmailed anew. Geiger's flash photograph makes her scream: 'It had a sound of half-pleasurable shock, an accent of drunkenness, an overtone of pure idiocy', Marlowe relates from outside the home, adding, 'It made me think of men in white and barred windows and hard cots with leather wrist and ankle straps fastened to them.'²⁷ In his flash reaction to the flashbulb, the detective grounds a young woman's character in vice—recalling her father's unsolicited confession—and predicts its degenerative and spatial futures.²⁸ The storyline, as if uncomfortable with a woman's decadent experimentation, pivots from her state of mind to a gumshoe's predictions, and what must *truly* matter: a detective's murder investigation. Readers would be wise to exercise less interpretive haste, since Carmen, not Marlowe, is at the scene's center, and it is her role to be its victim and agent.

Having broken into the home, Marlowe sees Geiger three-shots dead. Carmen, sitting motionless in a tall chair, is dissolute; her mask-like demeanor suggests that asylum-life may not be far in the future. Indeed, so great is her drug intake that ether can be smelled on her breath from several feet away. Marlowe investigates the crime now and later, after returning Carmen to the family estate. The novel doubles down on the investigation of the body because 'murder is an act of infinite cruelty'²⁹ that must be redressed, but also because the femme fatale, her contributions to the action done, must return to the domestic sphere. Since Chandler is more comfortable with men than women, and certainly with men like Marlowe more so than men like Geiger, he has his detective-hero erase the femme fatale's plotting and resume control of the action. Alone in the Geiger residence, he comments on its Chinese art and the Japanese prints so prized

²⁶ For an account of the predictive power of realistic description, see Roland Barthes, 'The Reality Effect', *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 141-48 (p. 142).

²⁷ Chandler, p. 39.

²⁸ The word 'flash' can signify 'an association with the underworld'. See the commentary in Raymond Chandler, *The Annotated Big Sleep*, ed. by Owen Hill, Pamela Jackson, and Anthony Dean Rizzuto, (New York: Vintage Crime/Black Lizard, 2018), p. 151.

²⁹ 'The Simple Art of Murder', p. 990.

by fin-de-siècle decadents. Not to be outdone by his character, Chandler demonstrates a command of realistic description by cataloging the household's rugs, cushions, divan, lamps, desk, chairs, more cushions, and discarded clothes—all from Marlowe's perspective.

Complicating this transfer of narrative authority, a second man with ties to Carmen, Owen Taylor, dies that night. Taylor, the family chauffeur, once took her to get married in Yuma. Scorning his offer, she chose to enjoy their illegal travel across state lines and, as Bernie Ohls, the chief investigator for D. A. Wilde, recounts, “to kick a few high ones off the bar and have herself a party”.³⁰ Taylor is thus the romantic in the relationship, and she its hard-living decadent. Such gender inversions extend to Vivian who, dressed in ‘a mannish shirt and tie’, meets Marlowe to discuss her sister on the morning after Geiger's murder. Intent on impeding his search for Regan as she cleans up after Carmen, she surveys his office-apartment thoughtfully: “Well, you *do* get up”, she says, before referring to Marcel Proust, whom she labels “a connoisseur in degenerates”.³¹ Connoisseurship is apparently in no short supply here.

Having opened the meeting by mentioning Regan's disappearance, Vivian asks Marlowe to handle yet another blackmailing of her sister.³² Agreeing, he returns to Laverne Terrace, where Carmen greets him by sucking her thumb. She again tries to seduce him, but drug use and exhaustion cause a loss of focus. Her ‘smile would wash off like water off sand’, Marlowe observes, in a dissolute metaphor, ‘and her pale skin had a harsh granular texture under the stunned and stupid blankness of her eyes.’³³ The detective can perhaps be forgiven for having little patience with an adult who acts like a spoiled child, but readers should take the decadent intent behind the metaphor of having been ‘spoiled’ seriously. Chandler intends that her signs of decline be read as evidence that a quite-young person is neither what she once was developmentally, nor what she should be.

Despite being so sick that she gets likened to a convention-drunk, Carmen returns to the crime scene on her own initiative and in search of the film. Upon arrival, she is savvy enough to bide her time until she learns what Marlowe has uncovered. When he asks who killed Geiger, she changes tactics, as a femme fatale will do, and devolves into a

³⁰ Chandler, p. 59.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 66-67.

³² Eighty years removed from the Great Depression, readers can easily miss the fact that pictures of an influential family's naked daughter would be especially scandalous against the backdrop of largely Catholic California.

³³ Chandler, p. 76.

fit of hysteria that reminds him of ‘rats behind the wainscoting’ and readers of her rat-sniffing father.³⁴ Two aspects of character vie for attention; the first, aptly enough, is physical decline. But more is evident in her presence than that she is coming out of an ether, opium, and alcohol haze. Because readers of hardboiled literature respect the detective’s centrality, they—like Marlowe—misconstrue Carmen as being peripheral to the action. They thus elide the fact that it took willpower—each term being operative—to assemble, from an evening’s broken memories, what she had done and then drive across town. Mobile and smart, she responds to being questioned by Marlowe with three lies of omission and seven of commission, no small accomplishment for someone who watched a man bleed out at her feet hours earlier. Acutely aware of how she will be seen, she then plays up her emotions, acting as if a hysteric, so that the sleuth who threatens her freedom may think she is too far gone to be an adversary. Throughout, Carmen assumes an elusive identity, since she functions, in Marlowe’s too-quick estimation, as the general’s daughter, a degenerate-in-the-making intent upon damaging herself and others. To a detective’s way of thinking, she is largely separate from the crime rather than central to it, and therefore present but absent. Contrary to his as well as readers’ horizon of expectations,³⁵ however, she controls much of the interrogation and so, by withholding crucial information, advances a plot at risk of its own enervation.

The entrance of Eddie Mars means that two sisters, each an impediment and a criminal, will share the action with male antagonists. A wealthy gambler, Mars ‘looked hard’, Marlowe observes, ‘not [with] the hardness of the tough guy. More like the hardness of a well-weathered horseman’.³⁶ Carmen knows the gambler, West Hollywood being a small town, and she gathers her resources and eyes him directly. Hardboiled, he responds with his only smile in the scene and a shrug. The indeterminate signs are resolved when he says she “‘can dust’”.³⁷ Once the men are alone, the plot returns to the crimes at hand. Mars explains that he owns the house; Geiger is its tenant; and the girl is unknown to him. The blood on the floor could be something that a stranger did. Marlowe

³⁴ Ibid., p. 79. Peter J. Rabinowitz contends that ‘Chandler’s vision can be crystallized’ in this twice-used phrase. He adds that ‘the apparent respectability of the world masks a fundamental core of horror: corruption, perversity, death’. It may be more accurate to say that such a ‘fundamental core’ is a causal chain. See ‘Rats Behind the Wainscoting: Politics, Convention, and Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 22.2 (1980), pp.224-45 (p. 231).

³⁵ For the ways that readers are predisposed by genre to read, see Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 23.

³⁶ Chandler, p. 81. Of course, Mars’s contrast case is General Sternwood, an ill-weathered horseman who, late in life, becomes a father, only to be crippled while playing polo.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 83. Carmen leaves Marlowe *in the dust* twice in as many scenes, an idiomatic phrase that speaks to the car culture of California as well as to the femme fatale’s mobility. She is thus to be read as Car-men, which is to say as being fast and in possession of considerable gender fluidity.

suspects that Mars's influence with the cops extends to Los Angeles, but even a well-connected, Lugar-holding racketeer is vulnerable once victimless crimes like pornography and gambling devolve into blackmail and murder. Neither man wants the police alerted, and so they end in a standoff, but not before Marlowe, pressing a point, asks about Mrs. Mars, who is said to have gone missing with Regan. Correctly, he reads the ensuing silence as a threat.

Carmen may have left but she is not home, since servants do its feminine labor, and her father's disdain for his daughters is no secret. Instead, she becomes a detective on the trail of the compromising photos. Readers learn that Carmen and her first blackmailer, Joe Brody, were lovers, which explains how Carmen knows where Brody lives. She enters the apartment by pushing him back, 'a little revolver against his lean brown lips'.³⁸ No society dame, despite having the requisite wealth, she names him as Geiger's killer. Brody reaches for the gun; her shot just misses.³⁹ Carmen may be slight and ill and given to strange oral gestures, but she is deadly. Now, 'giggling and hissing', with 'a little froth at the corners of her mouth', she demands the pictures before, readers presume, an actual fit commences.⁴⁰

By returning Brody, a blackmailer, to the narrative, Chandler does more than bring the first half of his novel closer to its resolution; he brings Carmen closer to the action. Brody knows her as the family's chief liability. Complicating matters, he is African American. Carmen's class mixing with Taylor is thus a variation on real miscegenation, and both express her erotic freedom-cum-decadence, particularly in the context of race relations in early-20thC America, where anti-miscegenation laws were commonplace.⁴¹ Marlowe gets her pictures; Brody, for his part, is killed by Geiger's much-younger lover, whom Marlowe will corral for the police. With these developments, the job that the detective was hired to do is done, and a check for five hundred dollars, sealing the deal, is in the mail.

My abbreviated plot summary notwithstanding, the novel is not done. Chandler goes to considerable length in Marlowe's ensuing meeting with the police and District Attorney Wilde to identify the murderers and their motives, a wrapping-up process that belongs to a mystery's penultimate scene, whether classical or hardboiled. Such scenes

³⁸ Chandler, p. 102.

³⁹ Gruesomely, a 22-caliber bullet goes through a person's skull once, before deflecting about the brain.

⁴⁰ Chandler, p. 105.

⁴¹ Readers can disavow crime and still hold that Brody's attempt to grab the gun from Carmen is correct in an America where lynching of African American men was a real threat throughout the early 20thC, especially in circumstances where any type of relationship with a white woman was even suspected.

affirm a detective's mastery over criminals, right domains that crimes have wronged, and prepare readers for the moral closure of the denouement. Contrary to convention, Chandler turns his detective loose—at the novel's precise midpoint—to commence a second investigation so at odds with readers' expectations as to belie recognition. Marlowe justifies working without a client by noting that the blackmail which led to his being hired is unresolved. In deference to the general, he would make sure that Regan was not in on it, a choice which promises further revelations about the family's decadence and that shifts a detective-narrator to a missing-persons case that the police are content to sit on.

* * *

The Force of a Femme Fatale's Gender Performance

By breaking his narrative in two, Chandler challenges the conventions of detective fiction and compels readers to return to the novel's plot and the energies that move it from complication to reversal to extension to completion. A critical return necessarily recalls its central characters, for their decisions will propel the action, now that the police consider the murders solved. That Marlowe searches for Regan because he feels responsibility to his client must be taken on faith, since Sternwood is a degenerate as repulsive as the rats and spiders that Chandler likens him to. Carmen is herself undergoing a rapid decline. But because she set the narrative in motion by killing Regan; experimented with drugs and sex so often that she became vulnerable to blackmail; and remains tied to Mars and his fellow racketeers—the men paid to dispense with Regan's body—her importance to the diegesis should be elevated, not put under erasure. Thus, an unsatisfied detective, working on his own dime, and a femme fatale eager to inherit a dying father's wealth, face off in what remains of a novel that is increasingly populated by gangsters.

Despite Chandler's intervention, the division of labor informing hardboiled narrative is ongoing, giving antagonists like Carmen and Mars a command of time that representatives of the law lack. Specifically, their function is to imagine, plot, and commit a crime, thereby inciting at least two storylines. The first of these relates to the crime and its aftermath. The police will intervene, as they must, and a second representative of the law often does so as well, interventions that comprise the next storyline. Late to the action, the detective, whether public or private, investigates events beyond his ken. If the femme fatale's approach to time is therefore prospective, a representative of the law sees

and thinks retrospectively.⁴² Looking backwards disadvantages a detective from the first, since his knowing antagonists—working well ahead of him—enjoy considerable mobility and choice in the present. Should the criminal be a woman, she uses these twin advantages to circumvent norms governing domesticity. In other words, while the detective investigates what has occurred, the femme fatale moves to both impede his progress and plan new crimes, if not also her escape. Tactically, she does this by performing femininity—enacting, that is, a changing identity—in much the way described by feminist critics today.⁴³ But, as the examples of Carmen and Vivian show, she does more, at once exaggerating her erotic availability and borrowing behaviors associated with masculinity, making their ends (and guns) her own. Despite spending much of the novel offstage, constrained by her gender and family history, Carmen emerges at key points to frustrate Marlowe’s investigation, an effort Vivian contributes to as well. Her deft counterplotting includes withholding information, lying, investigating independently, naming Brody as Geiger’s killer rather than boyfriend Taylor, attempting murder, and talking her way into a detective’s apartment. The bedroom scene is especially relevant to Marlowe’s grasp of the family’s criminal ties, since it occurs when Carmen misreads his directive to ‘Go on home and wait for me’.⁴⁴ Marlowe meant for her to go to the estate, but she exploits the unintended ambiguity and, days later, breaks into his office-apartment. Sprawled naked across the bed, she promises aggressive, not compliant, sex. Again, her giggling reminds him of rats, a species-degenerating metaphor that itself recalls the family’s jungle of orchids, and she worries her distended thumb in ways that readers have come to expect. Once rejected, she faces him on her hands and knees, animal-like: ‘The hissing noise came tearing out of her mouth as if she had nothing to do with it. There was something behind her eyes, blank as they were, that I had never seen in a woman’s eyes.’⁴⁵ Chandler has diagnosed her atavism, but Marlowe has yet to. Carmen, he

⁴² Prospective thought is an area of considerable scholarly interest in cognitive psychology. For an account of how the femme fatale manages time and perspective, see Larry Shillock, ‘The Global and Local Femme Fatale in *The Maltese Falcon*: A Reappraisal’, *Philological Papers*, 55/56, (2012), pp. 135-52 (pp. 140-41). Fredric Jameson is especially good on the distinction between retrospection in the classic British mystery, which responds to murder by reasserting order, and the American crime novel, where murder is ‘experienced backwards’, giving readers an opportunity to consider time itself, ‘in pure thought, without risks, as a contemplative spectacle which gives not so much the illusion of life as the illusion that life has already been lived, that we have already had contact with the archaic sources of that Experience of which Americans have always made a fetish’. Jameson, *Raymond Chandler: The Detections of Totality*, (New York: Verso, 2016), p. 5. For an adroit analysis of novelistic time more generally, see James Gleick, *Time Travel: A History*, (London: HarperCollins, 2017).

⁴³ On gender as a dramatic performance, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 179.

⁴⁴ Chandler, p. 106.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

insists, looks at him as if ‘peering from behind a barrel’; and the sisters, taken together, ‘were giving me both barrels that night’.⁴⁶

When sex is figured as hardboiled gunplay, and violence drives the plot as well as readers’ investment in it, a question arises: what force acts as a through-line that makes a family corrupt? As if in response to that query, Vivian confesses to Marlowe that she and Carmen share her father’s blood, adding, “‘It was always wild blood, but it wasn’t always rotten blood’”.⁴⁷ The blood became wild in response to the general’s decadent pursuit of sensation. Thus, a father’s gaudy life of vice compromises his development generally until, having taken a much-younger wife, he compromises her and their offspring specifically. A metonym for family and the desires of two daughters—if not also an allusion to a great, fin-de-siècle writer-decadent—wild blood crosses generations. Related in this way, Vivian and Carmen are harmed by the germ that reproduction transmits. Moreover, once enabled by wealth, decadence compels dissolute behavior which, in a kind of causal extension, can produce degeneration in a child-woman ‘still in the dangerous twenties’.⁴⁸ Late Victorians knew all too well that acting decadently is acting critically. As the example of Wilde suggests, decadents name the social so that it may be subverted—by men who would express a love that dare not speak its name, for instance, and by women who, as Carmen shows, pursue erotic pleasure on their own terms, reject class structures, and partake of drugs that are the proper province of medicine. Given such a litany, she may well have been born only 30 years too soon.

Unfortunately, as (Oscar) Wilde’s trial demonstrates, decadent critique provokes personal and social retribution. When Carmen tricks Marlowe into giving her target practice near the oil sump in which Regan’s body lies decomposing, the plot is poised to repeat its traumatic inception. But the detective, as the novel’s narrator-hero, is capable of his own prospective thought at this point in the diegesis; and he realizes that Carmen’s decline is so pronounced that his early sense of her cognitive disabilities has come true. Her gender performances, so erratic even when she is off drugs, show that the clarity of mind enabling the murder of either an officer in the Irish Republican Army or an experienced detective is beyond her. When this second murder attempt fails, undone by blanks substituted for bullets, a blank-faced, dissolute woman lapses into an epileptic fit, much as Bénédicte Augustin Morel might have predicted and that Chandler—insisting upon her familial and experiential histories—has long planned. Thus, unfit, standing at the

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 185-186.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 178.

⁴⁸ Chandler., p. 5.

limits of the estate in the oil field that simultaneously made the Sternwoods wealthy and underwrote its members' far-ranging decadence, Carmen degenerates fully. As Marlowe's narration promised, early-on, atavism like hers requires medical treatment, and so *The Big Sleep* ends with the detective insisting, in a final blackmail, that she be institutionalized before he will turn to the problems that remain with Eddie Mars. Carmen the daughter, the decadent, the sister, the femme fatale is thus put under a final disciplinary erasure that psychiatric institutions—with their men in white and barred windows and hard cots with leather wrist and ankle straps—so often impose. Outside, on the mannered grounds that once so held his attention, Marlowe reflects on the gardens' 'haunted look, as though small wild eyes were watching me from behind the bushes, as though the sunshine itself had a mysterious something in its light', before leaving the Sternwood estate and its daughters behind for good.⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ Chandler, p. 276.

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Creatureliness and Planetary Decadence in Rawi Hage's *Carnival*

Ali Zamanpour

Rawi Hage's illustration of the creaturely interdependence of humans in his 2013 novel Carnival emphasizes the vulnerability of the city's underclass. Hage locates his postmodern subjects by imagining the figures of the displaced as urban insects/ animals, and creating an epistemological shift and a step beyond the traditional engagement with 'cosmopolitanism'. The metropolis in Carnival plays the role of an ecosphere wherein animals and insects crawl, hunt, and survive. Carnival considers the 'creatureliness' of human beings and the human-animal relations as a shared embodiedness. Hage focuses on their mutual vulnerability in the decaying world not by idealizing the appeal to nature, but by imagining an innovative perspective on the city's decadence, its socioeconomic stratifications and the precarious condition of urban marginality. Carnival's setting is a human-disturbed environment, and the story is an original narration into the relation between capitalist destruction and collaborative survival of the underlying pervasive animalistic life within the city.

* * *

Within the context of migrant literature, planetary thinking investigates innovative epistemic forms that are derived from new enunciative positions, and suggests critical reflections on the future possibilities of human subjectivity and actions. In this sense, Rawi Hage's *Carnival* (2013) does not give a new definition to humanity; rather, Hage's third novel is more a reflection on the possibility of living without or beyond such notions when being human—as a distinct form of existence, as a pure form of being—is no longer a possible or preferable option. In the context of Anthropocene, as Neimanis, Asberg and Hedren claim, 'we no longer have the luxury of imagining humanness and culture as distinctly separate from nature, matter, and worldliness'.¹ Hage's investments in the antinomy of human and animal, civilization, and barbarism promise a fusion and re-birth that are also present in Modern Decadence.² Planetary Decadence, in such sense, indexes ironically to the In-between location of the Other in urbanized cosmopolitan spaces—only it does not react to such marginalization. Instead, it waits and prepares for a symbolic inversion to come.

¹ Astrida, Neimanis, Cecilia Asberg, and Johan Hedren. "Four Problems, Four Directions, for Environmental Humanities: Toward Critical Posthumanities for the Anthropocene", *Ethics & the Environment*, 20.1 (2015), p. 68.

² See for instance Renato Poggioli, "Modernism and Decadence", *The Poets of Russia 1890-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1980), p.46-88 for the theoretical frame of reference on the avant-garde and Decadence and the connections between Decadence and modernism.

The revived interest in rhizomatic³ forms of self-representation with regard to *littérature migrante*, *autofiction*, or even the Bildungsroman, reflects on progressive forms of self-realization that is oriented from inside-out, rather than from outside-in.⁴ Nevertheless, such representation moves toward the lived experience of the subject through constant ‘stuttering’, and by avoiding distortion and calcification. Hage’s novels do not have a prescribed wholesale ideology, and do not follow the policy of emancipation through positive image, yet the characters seem real and open to question. In this narrative, the rhizomatic movements enable new mapping models with multiple non-hierarchical entry and exit points. Relevant to this, Judith Butler also addresses the crossing out of the subject’s experience in the traditional forms of knowledge production and the (im)possibility of living with the notion that one’s love is not considered love, and one’s loss is not considered loss, or living an unrecognizable life: ‘If what and how you love is already a kind of nothing or nonexistence, how can you possibly explain the loss of this non-thing, and how would it ever become publicly grievable?’⁵ The subject’s decision to negotiate and to reconcile with the ‘mourning’ experience is a clear territorial attempt to recapture sovereignty over one’s meaning. In this way, Hage’s story-telling simultaneously preserves the agency of his marginalized subjects and evaluates their modes of existence.

* * *

The Circus in *Carnival*, the protagonist’s place of birth and upbringing, can no longer afford to feed its animals and its people. As a result, the strongman of the circus declares: ‘The world has gone mad and our way of life was bound to change’.⁶ The idea of change in the way of life starts with Hage’s revisiting human-animal relations. Agamben’s reading of Heidegger and his notion of ‘creatureliness’ or creaturely life evokes the same sentiment and focuses on ‘the peculiar proximity of the human to the

³ In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari introduce the terms ‘rhizome’ and ‘rhizomatic’ as opposed to root and ‘arborescent’. ‘A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from roots and radicals’ (6). Deleuze and Guattari use the concept of rhizome mostly to describe multiplicities that are heterogeneous and demonstrate movement, becoming, evasion, and breakout (7). Gilles, Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (London: Minnesota UP 1987)

⁴ The grounded Perspective in postcolonial, and migrant literature for instance in the works of V.S. Naipaul, Ravi Hage, Chris Abani, and Édouard Glissant or even indigenous writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, and Thomas King set the tone for a new debate that does not ‘speak for’ or ‘speak about’ the Other’s experience but engages in alternative forms of ‘listening’ that as Bignall and Patton suggest capture the heterogeneity and irreducibility of the lived experience of the subject ‘on its own term’ (Bignall and Patton 3).

⁵ Judith Butler, ‘Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics’, *Revista de Antropologia* (Madrid : 2009), p.13.

⁶ Ravi Hage, *Carnival* (Toronto: House of Anansi. 2012), p.156.

animal at the very point of their radical difference'.⁷ Eric Santner views such decadence into creaturely life not only as 'man's thrownness into the (enigmatic) "openness of being" but as an "exposure to a traumatic dimension of political power and social bonds whose structures have undergone radical transformations in modernity".⁸ The Circus, for Hage, represents a place of refuge for the rejected; its unsustainability suggests a creaturely descent into an underprivileged life. It also exemplifies how the idea of the human/animal binary can be put into question. *Carnival* involves marginal sites in an imaginary metropolis where individuals are depleted or bored from a political existence that distinguishes their humanly existence from animality. Hage uses anthropomorphisms to metaphorize human relations: e.g., he categorizes taxi drivers into spiders who wait for their prey and flies, who are aimless wanderers in search of a passenger.⁹

The cynical first-person narration illustrates urban life from the ironic and reflective distance of an anti-hero called Fly. He is a taxi driver who drives 'the poor, drunk, and unwashables' as well as the drug dealers, and the deviants.¹⁰ He makes his 'own laws to encourage people to flee their confinements and chains'.¹¹ Such an enunciative position draws upon a framework that moves beyond epistemological monoculture and critically engages with the notion of cosmopolitanism. This particular detail about the nature of the protagonist's work reaches into the central concern of the novel, which is a larger philosophical question of being and the ethics of survival. George Buchner, in *Lenz*, depicts such an epistemic shift as a descent 'into the life of the humblest person and reproduce all the twitches, all the winks, all the subtle, barely noticed play of facial features'.¹² It also has 'the eyes and ears' to capture 'the pulse of feeling running through nearly everyone'.¹³ This narrative does not proceed through a neo-platonic transcendence between humans and gods, or an Abrahamic portrait of the human in the 'image of God', a creation ready to consume lesser creatures. Becoming-animal is a form of planetary alliance not only as an aesthetic touch but as a fall from heaven to earth, from

⁷ Eric Santner, L. *On Creaturely life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago and London: Chicago UP 2005), p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁹ It is worth noting that in this contemporary Hage is not the only writer or artist who is uncertain about the frontiers between animals and humans. In the contemporary context of the novel, there would appear to be an anxiety within artistic portrayals of distinctions between humanity and animality. For example, it is the reminiscent of Bêtes Off, the exhibition of the strange animals created by various artists in the Paris Conciergerie on March 2011. The Artists reflect upon the possibility of a harmonious coexistent of the animals and humans, or the troubling mixture of animal, human, and machine or their biological proximity. Some artists capture animalesque affects, or become animals or meet them half way.

¹⁰ Hage, *Carnival*, p. 9

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹² George, Buchner. *Lenz*. Translated by Richard Sieburth (Brooklyn: Archipelago Books 2004), p. 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.8.

Heidegger to Aristotle,¹⁴ human to animal, and from Language to the affective mapping of the body that acknowledges planetary ‘contradictions, variances, and necessary open-endedness’.¹⁵

Through his particularly jaded perspective, Fly describes another scene in ‘the Dungeon of love’: ‘It was dark inside, but at the entrance there was a large cage with a few men, half-naked, with collars around their necks. They were all behaving like dogs’.¹⁶ There, Fly meets another taxi driver, who describes the people inside in distinctly negative terms: ‘Il sont pourris, mon ami. Une société de chiens. Comme des chiens.’¹⁷ By contrast, Fly sees beyond the surface of the scenes of debauchery, and writes a letter wherein he thanks the establishment for the moving experience, ‘for the opportunity to witness it through this communal tunnel of the senses’, describing it in critically analytical terms:

[...] the necessity of the symbolic and if one so chooses, the experiential as well in the enactment of this lesser existence, the degeneration of all that is tangible, the howl of dogs, the chain of entrapment, the need to personify the fate of men in this inferior world.¹⁸

Through such imagery, Hage brings his readers to what Agamben calls ‘a zone of irreducible indistinction’ where ‘borders begin to be blurred’.¹⁹ For Hage, the carnival as an event creates the moment when the bare lives, or creatures that dwelt in the city, free themselves and ‘[become] both subject and object of the conflicts of the political order, the one place for both the organization of state power and emancipation from it’.²⁰ Certainly, there are differing critical perspectives on accounts of the ‘carnavalesque’, and that multiplicity is present in Hage’s portrayal of carnival. *Carnival’s* open-endedness bears similarities to Kristeva’s apocalyptic seeingness and the literature of abjection.²¹ At the same time, for Hage, ‘becoming animal’ also has a Bakhtinian side, and the Carnavalesque affect is sometimes a revolutionary one.²² Such a mosaic quality, even of its embedded

¹⁴ Agamben refers the Aristotelian definition of the polis as the opposition between life (*Zem*) and good life (*eu zen*) and revisits Foucault’s reading of Aristotle’s definition of man as a “living animal with the additional capacity for political existence (*la volonté* 188)”. Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. by Daniel-Rozen (Stanford: Stanford UP 1998), p.10.

¹⁵ Neimanis, p. 68.

¹⁶ Hage, *Carnival*, p.69.

¹⁷ (“They are corrupt, my friend. A society of dogs. Like dogs”). Translation mine. *Ibid.*, p.71.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.72.

¹⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.9.

²¹ In ‘Beneath Lowry’s Carnival: The Abject in *Under the Volcano*’ Andrew McLeod differentiates Bakhtin from Kristeva ‘by understanding Bakhtin’s Carnavalesque to be anchored in the paternal-symbolic, whereas Kristeva’s abject is more concerned with the maternal-semiotic. Andrew McLeod, ‘Beneath Lowry’s The Abject in *Under Volcano*’ *COLLOQUY text theory critique*, 28 (Monash University 2014) p.66

²² In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin reflects on carnival as ‘a kind of safety valve for passions the common people might otherwise direct to revolution’. Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP 1984). (Holquist ‘Prologue’ p. xviii)

critical discourse, serves to underpin the novel's central concern with the difficulty of pinning down strict categories, and emphasises the changeable liminality of a writhing urban landscape.

Through its vivid, visceral imagery and emphasis on physicality, *Carnival* makes concretises and makes visible the ideologies, state biopolitics, and 'where power penetrates subject's very bodies and forms of life'.²³ Hage illustrates the fluctuation of his characters between polarized sensations that accumulate their sense of self in the form of *Jouissance* within the economy of pain and pleasure, between pleasure and pain, between liberty and loss, and between the fact that they either consume or will be consumed.²⁴ In one instance, Fly reflects on the meaning of pain and admits that he 'take[s] pleasure in beating men with big inflated muscles'.²⁵ Even if one does not confront the pain directly, Fly acknowledges the idea that 'the suffering of others is enjoyable to watch' and particularly when 'the winner gets to see the loser suffer'.²⁶ He is also concerned that 'there must be some convictions and pleasures involved' when a man 'willingly consents to pain'.²⁷ Fly observes people as 'products and the victims of our upbringing, until we reflect, refuse, and rebel'.²⁸ Through these interludes of self-reflection, Hage suggests a move beyond self-hood entrapped in binaries, like such simultaneous sensations as 'pain and ecstasy'.²⁹ In this sense, the city for Fly is a theatre of *Jouissance* where nothing is 'personal' and everyone seeks a moment of transcendence:

Here, there is nothing personal. But let me assure you, many of the ruling elites of our time can be found here. There is nothing like seeing a judge asking for forgiveness, an evangelist screaming Oh Mercy, or a doctor opening wide.

Everyone loves a comedy, my dear. It is divine.³⁰

Through this perspective, the 'personal' within an urban context is always communal; individual borders do not exist. This can be interpreted on a larger political scale, with Hage depicting urban life within the context of global environmental issues, and reframing it as interpersonal, social, and human challenges that include the bare life that

²³ Ibid., p.10.

²⁴ Braunstein in 'Desire and Jouissance in the Teachings of Lacan' explains that '[I]f desire is fundamentally lack, lack in being, jouissance is positivity, it is 'something' lived by a body when pleasures stops being pleasure. It is a plus, a sensation that is beyond pleasure'. Néstor A. Braunstein. 'Desire and Jouissance in Teachings of Lacan'. *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan*. Edited by Jean-Michel, Rabaté (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2003), 102- 115 (p.104).

²⁵ Hage, *Carnival*, p.67.

²⁶ Ibid., p.67.

²⁷ Ibid., p.68.

²⁸ Ibid., p.68.

²⁹ Ibid., p.69.

³⁰ Ibid., p.71.

Agamben in *Homo Sacer* locates ‘at the margins of the political order’.³¹ However, it is important to note that the creatureliness in *Carnival* is not merely an attribute of the underclass; the rich also experience another form of transgression, this time through boredom. Kari Løvaas in ‘The Ambiguities of Creatureliness’ investigates the Heideggerian *mood* that comes closest to this muted lamenting of the creature, as profound boredom. In Agamben’s words, ‘the man who becomes bored finds himself in the “closest proximity” — even if it is only apparent — to animal captivity’.³² In a particular example within the novel, a client responds to Fly’s excitement and surprise when he finds a pinball machine in an underground sado-masochistic sex club: ‘That is for the bored, the rejected, those who have become immune to life’s joys.’³³ Hage implies that ‘the bored’, ‘the rejected’, and the marginalized subjects and rebels (including Fly and the other previously mentioned taxi driver) all fail to take the signifier in its liberating function. They move beyond human existence, and therefore find their way beyond the symbolic.

* * *

In an important distinction from the border-blurring cityscape to which Fly belongs, human beings in *Carnival* are world-forming, but always in malicious ways. Fly encounters the CEO of a large mining company, a man who pillages the world, and pollutes villages and rivers with poisonous liquids. His brush with the CEO is permeated with species and class tensions. The CEO sues another taxi driver (a spider) for reckless driving and endangering his spoiled children; Fly attempts and fails to negotiate a deal for his fellow taxi driver. One of the CEO’s guards, a gorilla, escorts Fly out of the building. In this series of events, Fly describes his moment of viewing behind ‘the ruthless gates’, ‘those glass citadels and towering dungeons’, which home the corrupt rulers of the world, and their ‘meek creatures, hunchbacked servants, and diabolic yes-men’ who are conspiring against the planet and ‘carrying out orders to steal the sugar cane from the land and the water from the underground, a murderous waltz that will never stop until they dig out the last meal from the bellies of the poor’.³⁴ In this invective, Fly positions himself in opposition to powerful, monumental capitalist machinery. However, his reactions are

³¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p.9.

³² Giorgio Agamben. *The Open: Man and Animal*. Trans. by the Board of Trustees. (Stanford: Stanford UP 2004), p. 65.

³³ Hage, *Carnival*, p. 70.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.197.

isolated movements and ‘minor gestures’.³⁵ He remains in a state of observation and viewership, presenting images to the reader; larger movements toward a symbolic deterritorialization are slow-going, and contrast with the active body of the impulsive revolutionaries who also populate *Carnival’s* landscape.

By depicting the ineffectiveness of individual action, Hage highlights the embedded nihilism of the world that Fly inhabits. Hage uses the liminality of a professional clown dressed as a giraffe as an enunciative point to express the ‘sadness of being’. The clown acknowledges that ‘it doesn’t fit into low-ceilinged houses or basements. Always bowing its head, always feeling big and small’.³⁶ The metaphoric ‘unfitting’ existence of the marginalized precarious subject in giraffe’s costume illustrates its ambivalent relation with consumption and biopolitics. What follows is a kind of bestialization of man achieved through the symbolic metamorphosis during the city’s carnival. Hage does not divide society into categories of life; he depicts his dystopia as a jungle where the metaphorical consumption of the weaker animals by the strong ones will end up in actual cannibalism. It is also a moment of rebirth with an open-endedness metaphorized in the protagonist’s flying carpet and moments of unchaining and liberation.

For Hage, the acts of cannibalism are not necessarily the end of civilization as we know it—‘[a]ll empires are hungry cannibals’³⁷—, maintaining that ‘cannibalism was an undeniable part of our past’.³⁸ Instead, Hage creates moments of primal fear and invests in his reader’s bodily affect toward moments of escape, moments of refusal, and moments of rebellion. In Kristeva’s terms, he is assuming a double stance between the affects of disgust and laughter, and apocalypse and carnival. Within the novel, the rebellious action of Otto (one of the aforementioned ‘impulsive revolutionaries’ who stands in contrast with Fly) is just futile violence rather than a legitimate means of escape. The problem with impulsive, sudden action is depicted in his angry, animalistic lapse in self-control: Otto accidentally kills a French journalist over a minor dispute regarding Camus and Algeria, while forcing him to repeat: ‘My country is not civilized, my country is not civilized, I am not civilized, I am not civilized, Camus was not civilized’.³⁹ *Carnival* takes an ironic turn and constructs an uncanny enunciative position in an echo of the cold-blooded murder

³⁵ A minor gesture ‘activates the collectivity at the heart of thought effects change. It affects not only what the text can become: it alters to the core what thinking can do. It gives value to the processual uncertainty of thoughts as yet unformed and gives that thought the space to develop collectively’. Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (London: Duke UP 2016), p. x.

³⁶ Hage, *Carnival*, p.143-144.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.208.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.276.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

that takes place in Camus' *The Stranger*. The two extremes of 'primitivism' and modernism create a line of escape from the collapse of a former cultural order and the ruins of capitalism. In this moment, Hage follows 'the task of Decadence' firstly in its 'denial of culture', and secondly, in what Zurbrugg calls 'a kind of re-cultivation of – or from – such ruins'.⁴⁰ As a result, the 'new' emerges from both minoritarian and cosmopolitan limits.

To draw upon Homi Bhabha's terminology, in Fly's world of flux and unclear boundaries, he seems to seek a 'Third Space' for the production of meaning, a space that inhabits 'the hybrid moment of political change'. It is crucial that he seeks it outside the collective experience of nationness and 'ethnic' or religious community interest.⁴¹

The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, minority discourses, even dissident histories and voice–women, the colonized, minority groups, the bearers of policed sexualities...⁴²

For Bhabha, 'vernacular cosmopolitanism' or, as Kristeva puts it, 'wounded cosmopolitanism', involves 'conditions of duress or distress', and activities 'driven by survival—economic, political, cultural—not sovereignty'. It represents 'a subaltern agency of translation'⁴³ that 'measures global progress from the minoritarian perspective'.⁴⁴

Ironically (and somewhat cynically), Fly's desire for escape and movement toward 'the hybrid moment of political change' manifests on a personal level through the self-contained act of masturbation. The image of a flying carpet and masturbation are entangled, and suggest a departure from social descent into moments of euphoria by imagining mobility: '[E]very morning I open my palm towards the sun, lie down on my father's carpet, and happily masturbate'.⁴⁵ Fly's flying carpet, Hage's metaphorical cultural construct, has its own enunciative possibilities and limits. The fictive side of Hage's stories only offers an image of what can be imagined. Fly also masturbates to the thought of his 'father on his camel crossing the world'⁴⁶ on one of his 'non-flying carpets'.⁴⁷

⁴⁰ Nicholas, Zurbrugg. 'Beyond Decadence: Huysmans, Wilde, Baudrillard and Postmodern Culture', *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture*. Ed. by Michael, John St. (New York: Ashgate 1999), p. 212.

⁴¹ Homi K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 6.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁴³ Anthony K. Appiah and Homi Bhabha. 'Cosmopolitanism and Convergence'. *New Literary History*. 49.2. (Spring 2018), p. 188.

⁴⁴ Homi, K. Bhabha. *The Location of Culture*. p. xvi.

⁴⁵ Hage, *Carnival*, p. 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Fly's imagination is another example of what Bryden, Deleuze, and Forster all refer to as '*le mouvement immobile*'.⁴⁸ This distinction between movement and mobility is significant; Fly's father riding a camel (and simultaneously *becoming* camel) suggests that he would never '[survive] his journey back' as 'a camel is a highly visible animal'. Fly observes that 'Camels can't hide, camels are too sluggish to fly, and too patient, too curious, too opinionated, and too stubborn a creature to kneel for robbers, fall to dictators, or flee the cold'.⁴⁹ By contrast, Fly would rather take 'refuge between the monkeys and the dogs'; he immerses himself in masturbatory ideas and refuses to be saved.⁵⁰

The desire for motion and mobility in *Carnival* can be identified in Hage's metaphorical usage of the term 'planemo'.⁵¹ Hage introduces not an imaginary planet, but a rogue and wandering one. He foresees dark biopolitics in every 'imaginary' utopian picture. The professor Alberto Manuel, one of Fly's mentors in *Carnival*, describes the idea of wandering planets. They are exiled bundles of matter that wander the universe. These objects have no orbits and no host stars to orbit around; they are aimless, wandering and lost. One might envision the planemo as the vision of a decadent planet, confusing and chaotic. But most crucially, Hage maintains that freedom (and freedom to wander) is the planet's most essential feature.⁵² Returning to his tendency toward motion and transport, Fly believes that he is here now and that one day he will leave 'just like the butterfly leaves, never demanding anything more than the air it has touched with its own wings'.⁵³ With the juxtaposition of physicality and metaphysical moments that Fly describes, *Carnival* depicts a re-embodiment of the transcendental ego into an other-than-human self.

Ultimately, Hage's liminal world of organisms in a fluctuating, changeable cityscape questions the generic figure of the human and identifies a crisis in conceptualizing a universalized human mode. The importance of questioning such a concept is articulated in Rosi Braidotti's *Nomadic Theory*. Braidotti claims that the idea of universal man is based on the urbanized, heterosexual, European male body who is still

⁴⁸ As Deleuze points out in his essay on T. E. Lawrence, Lawrence's writing itself unfolds like a camel ride, with unpredictable speeds, slownesses, spurts, and stoppages.[...] Citing the reactions of E. M. Forster to the spasmodic dynamic of Lawrence's text, expressed in a 1924 letter, Deleuze observes: 'Forster remarque qu'on n'a jamais rendu le mouvement avec si peu de mobilité, par une succession de positions immobiles' ('La honte et la gloire' 149) Forster remarks that never has movement been rendered with so little mobility, by a succession of immobile positions]. French translated by Bryden. Bryden, Mary. *Gilles Deleuze: Travels in Literature*. (Hampshire: Palgrave 2007), p. 11.

⁴⁹ Hage, *Carnival*, p. 28.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵¹ The term 'planemo' is short for 'planetary-mass object', and was introduced by astrophysicist Gibor Basri.

⁵² Hage, *Carnival*, p. 223.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.175.

the centre of the humanities, and, therefore, the racialized, sexualized, and naturalized others were never fully human in the eyes of the state.⁵⁴ For Hage, the unchaining from this universal mode of ‘man’⁵⁵ happens not in the search of an hyper-individual subject, but in connecting with forms of vulnerability. Hage articulates a voice from dark corners of the city, a voice that finds escape from the material dynamism of the body and its accompanying creatureliness, toward an unimagined future—a creaturely descent that perforates the human-animal binary, and moves toward non-human, and other-than-human epistemologies.

* * *

⁵⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Theory: The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (New York: Columbia UP 2011), p. 133.

⁵⁵ Brian Massumi makes a very similar argument regarding the Deleuzian ‘Molar man’. Brian, Massumi. *A Users Guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviation from Deleuze and Guattari* (Cambridge: The MIT Press 1992), p.121-122.

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Reviews

Bearing Witness

Katie Arthur

Unwatchable.

Eds. Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak and Gunnar Iversen. 2019.

Viii+402p. \$29.95. Rutgers University Press.

ISBN 978-0-8135-9958-8

Spanning a variety of disciplines and social contexts, *Unwatchable* is an anthology that asks ‘what does it mean to proclaim something “unwatchable”: disturbing, revolting, poor, tedious or literally inaccessible?’¹ Rather than attempting to offer a single answer to this far-reaching question, the anthology comprises 54 separate critical pieces. This provides a multitude of perspectives with which one might begin analysing both personal and professional ‘unwatchables’, from Vivian Sobchack’s reflections on looking at offscreen, oblique, or obscene space²; to Alex Bush’s and J. Hoberman’s respective discussions of the bodily limitations that constrain our physical capacity to watch. The act of watching and the designation of certain texts as unwatchable are constituted by the collection as political gestures of ‘witnessing’ for which we can all be held accountable, most elegantly articulated by Danielle Peers in her piece ‘Unwitnessable: Outrageous Ableist Impersonations’.

The idiosyncratic format of the essays reflects the anthology editors’ aims of presenting a collection that is simultaneously ‘intimate and far-reaching.’ Contributors were prompted to write unusually short essays (750 to 1,500 words) to make the “‘small forms’” that constitute the anthology.³ Whilst the shorter length seems to sometimes steer contributors into the anecdotal, the ‘dispensing’ of ‘distanced analysis’ creates space for the personal, the political, and even the humorous.⁴ The 15 chapters rove across terrain as diverse as ‘Reality Trumpism’ and ‘Pedagogy and Campus Politics’, positioning the anthology as a rejoinder to the contemporary political climate in the United States.

The editors’ introduction provides a genealogy of ‘unwatchability’ from Plato and Aristotle’s disagreement over the value of mimetic art, through the iconoclasm of various monotheistic religions, and finally to the inauguration of scholarly studies of visual culture in the 1990s. Whilst the editors’ mapping of the various critical perspectives lends itself to

1 Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, Gunnar Iversen, ‘Introduction,’ *Unwatchable*, ed. by Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Gunnar Iversen (London: Rutgers University Press, 2019), pp. 1-29 (p. 3).

2 Vivian Sobchack, “‘Peekaboo:’ Thoughts on (Maybe Not) Seeing Two Horror Films,’ *Unwatchable*, pp. 201-206 (p. 203).

3 Baer, Hennefeld, Horak, Iversen, ‘Introduction’, p. 19.

4 Ibid.

a cover-to-cover reading, the anthology can also be read rhizomatically. Rather than broadly surveying the multifaceted histories and various cultural uses of the unwatchable, the range of interventions and entry-points are independently useful to the visual studies researcher.

Beginning with ‘Violence and Testimony’, *Unwatchable*’s opening section is its most diverse, starting with a series of theorizations of the unwatchable that span Hegelian aesthetics, Buchenwald, and the television series *Black Mirror*. Exploring how violence defies or is compounded through visual representation, the section cites examples from contemporary political issues such as climate change, race, gender, sexuality, and ability. Emily Regan Willis provides an urgent pause on the arresting images of the refugee crisis in her essay ‘Alan Kurdi’s Body on the Shore’, while Alec Butler considers how one’s unwatchable can become another’s fancy dress costume in ‘Holocausts, Hallowe’en, and Headdresses.’ The anthology gives space throughout to address the intersection of violence with sexist, colonialist, and ableist discourse, particularly in the subsection ‘Spectacularization and Resistance.’

Among *Unwatchable*’s critical attention to race, Jared Sexton’s ‘The Flash of History: On the Unwatchable in *Get Out*’ provides a method to engage with director Jordan Peele’s representations of Black embodiment and modes of seeing. By focusing on the films’ utilisation of the surreal and uncanny the piece creates space for further critical responses to other recent pop-culture examples of a turn to Afro-surrealism⁵ to represent Black American experiences, such as Donald Glover’s television series *Atlanta*⁶ and Boots Riley’s 2018 film *Sorry to Bother You*. Baring those moments that eyes cannot bear to see creates a gaze that is both unflinching and claustrophobic, showing only some of us have the privilege of averting our eyes from the unwatchable.

Part II, ‘Histories and Genres’, offers glimpses into the unwatchable in cinematic history. Covering infamous ‘cine-nasties’ as well as horror classics, this section also explores potentially alternative economies of consumption and (re)production posed by avant-garde film, pornography, and archive film. For instance, Erika Balsom’s ‘Watching Paint Dry’ convincingly weaves a range of avant-garde examples to reflect on duration and spectatorial endurance as resisting notions of productivity under a capitalist structuring of time and leisure.

5 Lanre Bakare, ‘From Beyoncé to Sorry to Bother You: the new age of Afro-surrealism,’ *The Guardian*, 6 Dec. 2018, <[theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/dec/06/afro-surrealism-black-artists-racist-society](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/dec/06/afro-surrealism-black-artists-racist-society)> [accessed 4 February 2019]

6 Evan Higgins, ‘Atlanta’s surrealism and the black experience in America,’ *Slate*, 27 Feb 2018, <[slate.com/culture/2018/02/atlantas-surrealism-and-the-black-experience-in-america.html](https://www.slate.com/culture/2018/02/atlantas-surrealism-and-the-black-experience-in-america.html)> [accessed 4 Feb 2019]

Part III, ‘Spectators and Objects’, shifts critical focus to viewing and reception. The first section, ‘Passionate Aversions’ injects some welcome instances of levity into the collection. Wryly funny entries are Jonathan Rosenbaum’s “‘Sad!’: Why I Won’t Watch *Antichrist*’, which scathingly castigates Lars Von Trier’s’ auteurial nihilism as sadistic, disempowering, and misogynistic; and Nathan Lee’s polemic on the Nietzschean logic encoded in the *Transformers* movie series. However, the sections that follow, ‘Tedious Whiteness’ and ‘Reality Trumpism’, serve as impassioned indictments of the current US political moment, returning the reader to a more serious focus.

Perhaps above all else, the anthology points to the sitting US president Donald Trump as an unreconciled and potentially unreconcilable phenomenon both within the US and beyond. Many essays trace ‘Trumpism’ (shorthand for both growing political polarization, and a growing political and cultural impetus against so-called ‘political correctness’) as lurking beneath the surface of socio-political discourse, rendering itself unwatchable until its stark unveiling in the 2016 US presidential election.

The final essay in the collection, Rebecca Schneider’s ‘Off Watch’, speaks to this point through an account of a small, invisible parasite that renders her young sister blind. Perhaps the unwatchable seems particularly relevant for this political climate not only because of what we cannot bear to see, but for what we choose not to watch.

[I]f we can’t necessarily watch for unwatchables (because they catch us off watch), how do we begin to let them in otherwise? ... If we, *or our sisters*, have (been) failed on our watch, can we still sound an anachronistic alarm and turn that watch into a matter of witness?⁷

Unwatchable asserts that the current political moment was unseen until too late, left unchecked and unexamined until the effect of its cause was already in office. As a whole, the tone of the writing is refreshing—sometimes experimental and at others painfully reflective. Readers embark on deeply personal and highly politicised journeys with contributors, recalling harrowing moments from cinematic, televisual, world, and personal history. Perhaps most crucially it also amplifies the voices of those who have no choice but to be watchful, even during a period of what seemed to some to be political calm.

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⁷ Rebecca Schneider, ‘Off Watch,’ *Unwatchable*, pp. 341-346 (p. 345). Schneider’s italicisation.

Fin-du-Globe

Kimberley Challis

Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry.
 Robert Stilling. 2018. 384p. £31.95. Harvard University Press.
 ISBN 978-0674984431

Most studies of decadence involve a lot of hand-wringing over the difficulties we encounter when trying to precisely fix the boundaries of its period and characteristics. Robert Stilling's *Beginning at the End* sidesteps this entire dilemma by confidently arguing for a more inclusive decadence: a transnational phenomenon not situated in any particular place or time but rather as work produced under 'the tectonic friction between rising and falling empires'.¹

Taking its title from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Stilling's study posits that the artists, poets and thinkers of postcolonial nations and their diaspora risked following what Fanon identified as the West's 'path of negation and decadence without ever having emulated it in its first stages of exploration and invention'.² As such, they necessarily find themselves 'beginning at the end', and run the risk of 'skipping the inventive phase of youth for a premature senility'.³

Stilling argues convincingly, however, that while many anglophone postcolonial artists have deliberately engaged with fin-de-siècle decadent writers in their work, the resultant texts are anything but prematurely senile. Indeed, over five chapters, Stilling demonstrates their use of decadence's most critical tools—wit, satire, paradoxical formulations, resistance to realism, sexual dissidence, and a revisionist approach to history—as a means to critique the failures of postcolonial societies.⁴ While some, notably

¹ Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2018), p. 11.

² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 179. It must also be noted that Stilling is sensitive to concerns regarding the term 'postcolonial', but defends his use of the term by positing that in the texts he examines, 'the relation these poets and artists imagine between their contemporary moment and varying histories of empire, the nation, and art is one of imperial aftermath' (Stilling 26). It is for this reason that this review will also use the term, rather than the broader 'postmodern' or 'global Anglophone'.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴ Stilling, p. 12.

Stilling asserts that historical revisionism is a critical feature of decadence, citing Wilde on the topic: 'The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it' (16). Perhaps he would not stress this as characteristic of fin-de-siècle decadence, however, were it not so central to the postcolonial works he considers here.

Chinua Achebe, Léopold Senghor, and Michael Thelwall, have argued that ‘art for art’s sake’ should have no place in postcolonial literature, arguing the necessity of political engagement, others see aestheticism as a means to express ‘art’s opposition to real-world conditions’.⁵ Indeed, fin-de-siècle tropes, strategies and images allow the artists under consideration to position themselves in relation to the end of the imperial era: ‘sometimes earnestly, sometimes ironically, almost always ambivalently’.⁶

Stilling reads decadent works by J. K. Huysmans, Walter Pater, Henry James, and, above all, Oscar Wilde in tandem with those of early postcolonial writers (Fanon, Senghor, Achebe, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Derek Walcott, and Wole Soyinka), and a some more contemporary authors. These later writers form the primary focus of each of the book’s chapters: Agha Shahid Ali’s re-working of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Kashmir; Walcott’s reimagining of the Caribbean roots of French impressionism; Yinka Shonibare’s use of ‘African’ textiles to critique the nineteenth-century’s leisure class; Bernadine Evaristo’s revisionist history of Africans in Roman Britain; and Derek Mahon’s efforts to place Ireland in the global literary market.⁷ Stilling focuses primarily on poetry precisely because of its associations with elitism and detachment, positing that was a distrusted form during the early period of decolonisation.⁸ Leela Ghandi’s preface to Nissim Ezekiel’s *Collected Poems* perfectly captures this concern: poetry was, supposedly, not suited for ‘the realist work of narrating the nation; a handicap only exacerbated when the verse was executed in the language of the conqueror’.⁹

This tension between artistic expression and cultural responsibility is the central conflict of Stilling’s book. Its resolution, however, is somewhat surprising. Thelwall, a man who proclaimed that ‘any black novelist who is not consciously and purposefully a cultural nationalist is an aberration’, rejects the supposedly ‘earnestly self-indulgent’ modernists in favour of decadence’s most recognisable proponent: Oscar Wilde.¹⁰ Thelwall is by no means alone in this tendency, and Stilling convincingly argues that these writers do not make such strange bedfellows as one might initially think. Wilde, when understood as an Irishman often at odds with late-Victorian English society, and a wit whose epigrams turned received wisdom on its head, does seem quite the natural ally of a movement involved in questioning cultural orthodoxies.¹¹ Stilling also traces the virulently

⁵ Stilling, pp. 6, 19-20, 288.

⁶ Ibid., p. 287.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 229, 289.

⁸ Chapter 3 does also consider drama and fine art; Chapter 4 discusses a verse novel.

⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 12. Of course, Wilde is not always invoked as an icon of rebellion: his ability to distill and memorably communicate the aesthetic debates of the colonial era enable postcolonial writers to merely

racist treatment of the 'native Irish' Wilde during his tours of the United States where portrayals of the 'dandy-as-Negro and Negro-as-dandy' flourished, and were intended to mock the idea that people of colour could be beautiful and that their artworks could be aesthetically valuable.¹² Stilling argues that this, as well as Wilde's subsequent incarceration, has led to Wilde becoming 'a mirror for succeeding generations of readers and artists as they grapple with the relation between art and injustice'.¹³ He goes on to posit that Wilde's presence is so widely felt in postcolonial writing that it seems an incredible oversight that his legacy and ideas have not been often considered in this context before.¹⁴

Stilling acknowledges that his study is only the beginning in what must be an incredibly rewarding field of inquiry. It must be hoped that others will expand further on this critical perspective. After all, who else might consider so perceptively the decline of a civilisation than those who have witnessed the disintegration of empire firsthand?

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allude to Wilde as a shorthand for these issues (Stilling 16). This will be done, in many cases, before proceeding to undermine or criticise the aesthetic positions of which he has become emblematic.

¹² Ibid., p. 296-297.

¹³ Ibid., p. 304.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 290.

Reclaiming Memory

Dr. Kay J. Walter

Forgetfulness: Making the Modern Culture of Amnesia.
Francis O’Gorman. 2017. X + 185p. £14. Bloomsbury Academic.
ISBN 987-1-5013-2469-7

Francis O’Gorman’s new book offers a piercing insight into the modern era’s fascination with newness and the resulting cultural implications. It expounds the recent thoughts of a critically acclaimed author who views contemporary life as decadent because of its abnegation of historical truths and who is wise enough both to predict the outcomes and also to identify cultural evidences of resistance to this trend.

From a professor’s perspective, I know that I have read a book worth my time and effort when I find it transforming how I see my daily life. *Forgetfulness* is such a book; it springs to mind when I respond to students’ questions and is often open on my office desk. *Forgetfulness* begins with a discussion of time periods before a modern age of forgetting. The first chapter, ‘Cultures of Memory’, considers various ancient civilizations and their perspectives on time in contrast with that of modern Western civilization. In the second chapter, O’Gorman discusses the causality of modern forgetting in relation to the advent of Christianity. He goes on to posit that forgetting is a result of modernity’s adoration of consumption, which he discusses at length in the following chapter on consumerism (‘Contemporary Cultures of Amnesia’). Chapter four comprises an exploration of modern narratives and their implications in the loss of history. In the fifth chapter, ‘Learning Pasts’, O’Gorman argues the complicity of academia in encouraging such social tendencies and in promoting its application to literary studies. In the sixth and final chapter, ‘The Problems of Forgetting National and Local Histories’, the cultural evidence of resistance to forgetfulness are traced through gatherings of walkers and explorers who seek to connect with a near-ancient past and redeem the decadence of modernity.

O’Gorman identifies New Age trends in the twentieth-century Western world as examples of these attempts to reconnect with cultural memory. Ironically, to a twenty-first century perspective New Age fascinations may themselves seem a dated decadence, as the majority of the middle class is too mired in a frenetic pursuit of economic survival to participate in such pastimes. Yet O’Gorman points out that remnants remain, and the fact

that they arise in societies which particularly foster individualism reveals that foundational human needs are not being met. Among these needs is the necessity of community, which affirms a duty to support one another in daily battles to exist humanely. These battles are a common calling, transcending time and place in ways that are traceable if we search for them.

Forgetfulness is full of insightful points and crucial discussions of the relationship between lost cultural memory and the modern habit of forgetting. Of particular note, chapter five, 'Learning Pasts', is very much a section about caution when teaching and writing in a culture of amnesia—something that all of academia, not just literary studies, should take under advisement. However, there are some areas in the book that could be better articulated, such as O'Gorman's discourse in chapter three ('Contemporary Cultures of Amnesia') on our 'hyperventilating appetite for change'.¹ Specifically, in a consumerism-driven society, labelling a product as 'new and improved' is often a ploy for marketing the unwanted (and unneeded) to a passive market audience. What O'Gorman says here is certainly true, but he belabours a point which is apparent to readers who already acknowledge it and could be better argued to those who do not.

A further weakness of the book is O'Gorman's uneven use of source material. He frequently refers to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Readers anticipate similar scholarly quality in all his sources, but O'Gorman proceeds to reference trade paperback editions and online texts as well. As a result, it can be puzzling to identify who his target audience really is; it would appear to be a cross-section of academics and the mass market. His frequent discussions of canonical literature suggest an audience of fellow academics; however, I would observe that academic practices necessitate citing the most reliable editions of source texts, as other less rigorously edited versions can easily introduce errors. Readers from outside the university setting may be more willing to indulge such variety of source material and find themselves inspired to investigate authors and books in open-access formats.

O'Gorman's jeremiad against forgetfulness relies on vestiges of the decadence against which he argues. There is a privilege and luxury in choosing to forget or not acknowledge past histories which contrasts sharply with the potential of unelected forgetting from a sudden illness or incapacity that impacts the brain's memory functions. In chapter four, 'Forgetfulness in Contemporary Cultural Narrative', O'Gorman discusses the solemn possibility of this type of forgetfulness, referring to a stroke that he suffered

¹ Francis O'Gorman, *Forgetfulness: Making the Modern Culture of Amnesia*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 82.

(and is recovering from even as he writes) as a necessary catalyst to create his perspective on forgetfulness and its dangers. To O’Gorman, forgetfulness is inextricably linked to ‘the threat of losing [him]self, departing from [his] past’.² The prospect of suddenly losing autonomy and selfhood underlies the urgency of O’Gorman’s discussion of choosing to forget, as well as reminding the reader that a complete understanding for those of us yet unvisited by medical emergencies could quite possibly lie ahead.

Generally, it is the ability to learn and remember which guides people forward, and the search for connections, however unworldly they might seem, keeps us grounded in our human responsibilities to one another and the planet that we share. What may seem at first glance to be a decadent fascination with an unreachable past may instead be an attempt to find a path humanity can follow together. A contemporary awareness of global realities is emerging from post-Postmodernism, and this globalization becomes a way of resisting ennui and, ultimately, annihilation. Resistance of this sort is well worth exploring and may point to a type of decadence that, rather than relying on a nihilistic outlook, can be redemptive in its celebration of longing for a community of common hope. Although the author might lean on some laurels (well-earned for previous books such as *Worrying: A Literary and Cultural History* and scholarly contributions to Ruskin studies), *Forgetfulness* is an insightful exploration of an ephemeral, amnesiac modernity that both warrants careful examination and inspires lingering thought.

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² Ibid., p. 108.

The Stationary State

Christopher Webb

Idleness and Aesthetic Consciousness, 1815-1900.

Richard Adelman. 2018. viii+233 pp. £75. Cambridge University Press.

ISBN 978-1-1084-2413-4.

Richard Adelman neatly summarises his latest study as ‘an attempt to reconstruct and explore the nineteenth century’s many debates over idleness and aesthetic consciousness’.¹ For most readers, this prompts an important question right away: what is ‘aesthetic consciousness’? Although Adelman is reluctant to provide an exact definition of the term (there is no exact definition), he indicates that it is a state of mind brought about by idle contemplation and ‘the free play of imagination’², a state that allows the contemplator to apprehend his or her surroundings (or an object within those surroundings) before they go on to encounter a higher knowledge or truth about their surroundings/that object. For the many Romantic poets who describe this ‘transcendent repose’ in their various writings, it is ‘always [an] obliquely but powerfully and earnestly, political’ (non-)activity because it opposes the burgeoning ideology that belongs to the work-centric, commercial society in which they were writing.³ The Romantic conception of aesthetic consciousness—so tied up with being idle—was a state that would later need ‘to be purged from diligent, ethical, work-based Victorian society at almost all costs’.⁴ It is the development of ideas surrounding idleness and aesthetic consciousness, from their Romantic inception through to their complete dismantlement at the beginning of the twentieth century, which Adelman traces.

Idleness and Aesthetic Consciousness, 1815-1900 comprises eight sections: an introduction, five main chapters, a conclusion, and an epilogue. The first chapter, ‘Idleness, Moral Consciousness and Sociability’ considers the ways in which John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley extend and expand upon a number of first-generation Romantic poets’ conceptions of idleness and contemplation, focussing especially on those espoused by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Cowper and William Wordsworth. Adelman is particularly interested in ‘the extent to which both [Keats and Shelley] frame idle

¹ Richard Adelman, *Idleness and Aesthetic Consciousness, 1815-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018), p. 6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

contemplation as a matter of moral and social utility'.⁵ He shows through careful examination of Shelley's 1816 'Mont Blanc' poem and Keats's letters that, by the first decades of the nineteenth century, idleness is portrayed not only in a positive light but as a 'psychological category of central importance to human life'.⁶ This had not always been the case. In fact, it was Coleridge and Cowper who 'developed the poetic discourse of idleness in the last decades of the nineteenth century' to counterbalance the claims made by political economists like Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson who, were 'strenuously [arguing] that man is a labouring and trading animal above and before all else'.⁷

Adelman proceeds to chart the influence of these Romantic ideas concerning idleness and creativity. In chapter two, 'Political Economy and the Logic of Idleness', he draws attention to the work of three major political economists of the first half of the nineteenth century: David Ricardo, Thomas Malthus, and John Stuart Mill. By the time we reach Mill's 1848 *Principles of Political Economy*, we observe a 'significant flowering of positivity surrounding idle contemplation, not just in economic thought, but in the century as a whole'.⁸ What certain eighteenth-century economists tended to treat as a 'gap in labour—and thus in life', Ricardo, Malthus and Mill regard (like the Romantic poets before them) as an 'intricate bundle of taxing, pleasurable and highly significant activities'.⁹ This treatment of human repose and the desire for leisure, Adelman explains, is introduced in British economic thought for the first time by these economists, 'remarkable in the context of that discourse's history'.¹⁰ This, then, is the high-water mark for Idleness, a time in which repose and passive contemplation is tolerated—and perhaps even valued—within Victorian commercial society. It is 'at this point', Adelman jumps in to remind us, 'that Keats and Shelley's analyses of idleness [...] have now taken on a very direct significance to political economy itself'.¹¹ In other words, 'the nineteenth century's powerfully commercial and industrialized society [was] in need of the corrective that Romantic idleness [...] offer[ed]'.¹²

The 'flowering of positivity' that culminates in Mill's *Principles* is then complicated by the influential output of both Thomas Carlyle and Karl Marx (the latter an anomalous, though justified, deviation from Adelman's otherwise strictly British, chronological development of ideas), as we see in chapter three, "The 'Gospel of Work'". Both men provide 'powerful and far-reaching counter-narrative[s] to the Millite and Romantic positive

⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

⁶ Ibid., p. 47.

⁷ Ibid., p. 49.

⁸ Ibid., p. 7.

⁹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 63.

¹² Ibid., p. 78.

conceptions of idleness¹³, which colours the British viewpoint on idleness and aesthetic contemplation for the rest of the century. The third chapter is divided in two: the first part is taken up with an examination of Carlyle and Marx's take on idealised forms of labour and their critique of idleness before the second part turns to the 'effect of this powerful ideology by considering some of the poetic accounts of idle contemplation that stand in the wake of the "gospel of work"¹⁴. These poetic accounts include the works of Matthew Arnold, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Alfred Tennyson, with the latter being the most critical about the moral worth of idleness and meditative contemplation.

Chapter four, 'Cultural Theory and Aesthetic Failure', considers high Victorian cultural theory in the shape of (the later) Arnold, Walter Pater and John Ruskin. Each of these writers bear the imprint of Carlyle and his contemporaries' 'gospel of work' as they seek to professionalise aesthetic contemplation. This impulse is antithetical to Keats's original, democratic vision of the aesthetic encounter (accessible by anyone). While these theorists all agree on the power and potential transformative effect of aesthetic consciousness, they do so at the same time as they introduce a 'series of practical hurdles to the widespread adoption of that state'.¹⁵ 'Where once idle contemplation was conceived of as a promising instant [129] access to moral consciousness, it has become, for Arnold and Ruskin [by the 1850s and 60s], a life's work that might never end [...] inaugurat[ing] a situation [in] which society requires professional men of culture—or critics of aesthetic objects, as will be the case with Pater in the 1870s—in order to guide and temper its actions'.¹⁶

The final chapter, 'The Gothicization of Idleness', examines the tradition of vampire fiction across the nineteenth century as a means to understand how that ('very conservative') genre handles aesthetic idleness and its social alternatives.¹⁷ Adelman's analysis of Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker's popular vampire narratives illustrates how the poetic idle contemplator is villainized, and how 'a kind of total warfare' is waged against that leisurely (often aristocratic) figure of the vampire, a creature demonised for its refusal to work (and reluctance to become a productive member of society). This forms an appropriate conclusion to Adelman's study because 'this genre's negativity around aesthetic repose is representative of the fate of this category more broadly by the final years of the century'¹⁸, which leads us to the 'Epilogue: Substitutive Satisfaction', Adelman's brief look

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 128-129.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

into ‘the scathing negativity of the early twentieth century around aesthetic consciousness’—the nadir of the Romantic-inspired tradition—which is felt most profoundly in the work of Sigmund Freud.

Like his previous work, *Idleness, Contemplation and the Aesthetic, 1750-1830* (2011), Adelman’s book is judiciously argued and measured in its tone throughout. It is a subtle, important contribution to the growing field of literary criticism that deals with political economy, achieving precisely what it sets out to do: that is, paint a ‘portrait of nineteenth-century culture preoccupied with, and troubled by, the categories of idleness, repose and aesthetic contemplation’.¹⁹

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¹⁹ Ibid., p. 190.

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