Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment

CHRISTINE FERGUSON

DECADENCE HAS LONG BEEN VIEWED AS AN IMPOVERished radicalism, a flawed and potentially embarrassing flirtation with "deviant" themes and styles that ultimately deflated its own subversive ethos through an unintentional affirmation of the high Victorian values—morality, optimism, and scientific positivism—that it attempted to overthrow. Critics tend to talk about literary decadence in the same way one might about a youthful dalliance with a radical social movement: a well-intentioned but rather futile and self-conscious attempt to resist the dominant culture that would later give way to a more mature, complex, and productive political subjectivity.[1] As R. K. R. Thornton writes:

> Decadent literature is a literature of failure: of a failure to provide a literary synthesis for the disintegration of life; of an expression of that disintegration and failure in elegant cadences; of a fleeing into an artificial world or an ideal world to escape from the consciousness and consequences of that disintegration; of a somewhat indulgent melancholy at the contemplation of that failure; and of a wistfully gay self-mockery at the beauty and vanity of the attempt to escape that failure. (188)

Five "failures" in one sentence are a fairly damning indictment but certainly not out of character with the way that we as scholars have become accustomed to talking about decadent style. After all, so many of the texts that custom has placed in the decadent canon—J. K. Huysmans's *Against the Grain* (1884), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), Aubrey Beardsley's *Under the Hill* (1898)—end with some sort of destruction and negation, either of the subject or of the subject's subversive ambitions. It is easy to see how decadence

CHRISTINE FERGUSON is a doctoral candidate in the Department of English at Tulane University, where she is completing a dissertation on language and popular fiction in Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. In the fall of 2002 she will become a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council postdoctoral fellow at the University of British Columbia.

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quickly earned the mantle of failure, futility, and pretension.

Yet it seems that the ease of this negative characterization might not continue to act as proof of its accuracy much longer. Recently, the depiction of decadence as sulky, black-clad teenager to modernism's articulate intellectual has received scrutiny. Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Polotsky's collection *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (1999) is an encouraging example of an emergent move to reevaluate literary decadence and eradicate the tired old critical paradigms in which it has frequently been inscribed. The editors write in their introduction that "the critical study of decadence should not be confined to its traditional association with, for example, morbidity, a cult of artificiality, exoticism, or sexual nonconformism. [. . . D]ecadence [. . .] can and should be understood as something more than the mere compendium of transgressive themes and images by which it is usually identified" (2). In the essay that follows, I argue that this reappraisal can properly be accomplished only through a radical new understanding of decadence, not as an antagonist of mainstream values or even a liminal force that disrupts the barrier between the outside and inside, but rather as the fulfillment and logical conclusion of one of the most fundamental of all Victorian values, scientific positivism. This positioning of decadence in the nineteenth-century cult of science is not another attempt to expose the style as conventional and thus culturally harmless but an effort to reveal the dominance of positivistic science in the nineteenth century as a more volatile and problematic social force than typically imagined, one that, far from opposing decadence, formed the necessary preconditions of and impulse to it. When we recognize decadence as realization instead of disavowal of a historically specific scientific ethos—and the collapses that frequently feature in the conclusions of decadent texts as a particular type of fulfillment rather than as failure—we can go beyond the movement's sterile pejorative connotations.

An understanding of how decadence and science converge requires a sense of what they meant to late Victorians. Decadent style, particularly in its British form, has always evaded easy scholarly definition, perhaps, as Thornton suggests, by virtue of the "lack of any coherent group of writers who accepted the name and fought for it" (34). Critics have pointed in frustration to the contradictions and paradoxes that thwart attempts to label certain tropes and features as exclusively decadent rather than symbolist, aesthetic, or naturalist; some scholars have suggested that paradox should be the movement's defining feature (Riffaterre 66). Such subtleties of distinction posed no apparent problem for the movement's contemporary critics, however, who routinely condemned decadence in the press. In an article for Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine (1895), Hugh Stutfield attacked decadence as "an exotic growth unsuited to British soil" and listed as its most pernicious exponents a diverse group of writers whose radically different styles ranged from naturalism to aestheticism to the new-woman genre: Mrs. George Egerton, Henrik Ibsen, Emile Zola, Grant Allen, George Moore, and Oscar Wilde (834). The Westminster Gazette's pseudonymous critic "The Philistine" indicted many of the same artists in a similarly haphazard manner in his 1895 series of anthologized articles entitled The New Fiction (A Protest against Sex-Mania).

What allowed writers as apparently and self-consciously different as, for example, Zola and Wilde—the one claiming to be the voice of scientific realism and the other of aesthetic hedonism—to be linked so easily in the popular imagination as decadent? The Scottish journalist and woman of letters Marie Blaye de Bury offers one solution in her 1889 description of French decadence.

> Ten years ago the representatives of the latest "school" of literature in France were called "les

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> Jeunes," at the present moment they call themselves "les Decadents": the offspring of decay—thus associating two ideas which apparently exclude each other, the ideas of decomposition and youth. We all know quite well what is the kind of life born out of putridity, and we turn from it in disgust; we do not like to rest our thought upon it; they do; there is the difference. From this foul element they have not only founded a "school," they have fabricated a new sort of humanity, the "man of the laboratory." (395)

De Bury's association of decadence with decay and pathology is fairly standard in contemporary descriptions,[2] but her final proposition seems baffling. If decadence, a movement linked to the celebration of disease and sterility, is a progenitor, surely the "man of the laboratory" cannot be the end product. On the contrary, is not the typical decadent protagonist the sensual aristocrat of the secluded country chateau or the effete, neurasthenic artist of the urban parlor? The man of the laboratory may have been a relatively new figure on the fin de siècle cultural scene, made prominent by the new professionalization and rising prestige of experimental science, but one expects his allegiances to lie with the utilitarianism and teleology that decadence vehemently rejected. While the experimental clinician cures disease, the decadent artist simply studies it with a cultured amorality, hoping that it might reveal a glimpse of beauty in the path of its destruction. The unexpected alliance of these two apparently separate orders of knowledge, decadent and scientific, reveals a unique late Victorian way of knowing that has been neglected. Naturalism and decadence unite in the cultural imagination not because they evidence similar techniques or traits but because they appear as the troubling results of nineteenth-century scientific orthodoxy when carried to its logical limits.

This metamorphosis of scientific orthodoxy into decadence, of the experimental idealist into the amoral and enervated observer, is clarified by the late-century debates surrounding the social function and responsibility of science. By the final decades of Victoria's reign, the fortunes of science in Britain had prospered significantly since 1850, when Charles Babbage complained bitterly, "In England, particularly with respect to the more difficult and abstract sciences, we are much below other nations, not merely of equal rank, but below several even of inferior power" (86). The success of innovators such as Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Thomas Henry Huxley fueled the growing belief that science was separate from and superior to the humanities and thus should take dominion over the latter. Science, particularly scientific positivism, emerged in the discourse of the seventies and eighties as the cool and rational antithesis to the alleged childish mysticism, emotionalism, and falsehood of the liberal arts. Growing numbers of scientific advocates called for a replacement of the old educational curriculum of classics and mathematics with a program of study based on the physical sciences, arguing that only such training could help the student navigate the complexity and confusion of modern life without descending into hysteria. Where art deals in half-truths and illusions, the argument ran, science offers immutable and absolute laws by which subjects might know themselves and the world around them.

The most famous proponent of a purely scientific education was the French positivist Auguste Comte, whose influential *Cours de Philosophie Positive* ("Lecture in Positivist Philosophy"; my trans.) received its first English translation in 1853, by Harriet Martineau. Here he calls for the development of "a new class of students, suitably prepared, whose business it shall be to take the respective sciences as they are, determine the spirit of each, ascertain their relations and mutual connection, and reduce their respective principles, in conformity with the fundamental rules of the Positive method" (209). Positivism, by endeavoring to subsume all the natural order under the governance of a single, as yet undiscovered scientific principle, envisaged a utopian future where all doubt would be eliminated and all phenomena knowable, where the

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antagonism and strife of the first half of the nineteenth century would give way to social harmony.

> The great political and moral crisis that societies are now undergoing is shown by a rigid analysis to rise out of intellectual anarchy. [. . .] Till a certain number of general ideas can be acknowledged as a rallying point of social doctrine, the nations will remain in a revolutionary state, whatever palliatives may be devised; and their institutions can only be provisional. But whenever the necessary agreement on first principles can be obtained, appropriate institutions will issue from them, without shock or resistance; for the causes of disorder will have been arrested by the mere fact of the agreement. (212)

Comte, like many commentators before and after, is arguing for a vision of science as socially ameliorative. However, this vision is based not on the potential results of particular scientific experiments—the discovery of a deterrent for smallpox, for example, or of a quicker and more efficient mode of transport—but on the subjects it will produce. The greatest result of positivism, he suggests, will be the formation of a class of individuals whose absolute faith in a determined and uniform set of values, regardless of the results of particular experiments, will ensure social stability. Not the findings of science but its abstract principles will save humanity from ruin.

Throughout the sixties and seventies, Comte's emphasis on the stabilizing effects of scientific study on the student was mimicked by Anglo-American commentators, anxious, no doubt, about the growing access to education of women and working-class men, both typically said to be more susceptible to fancy, superstition, and insurgency than their male middle-class counterparts. E. L. Youmans, science popularizer and the founder of the *Popular Science Monthly*, argues in *The Culture Demanded by Modern Life* (1867) that "it is a matter of notoriety that the so-called liberal culture is no adequate protection against the numerous fallacies and impostures which are current in society; and to so great an extent is this true that it is common to question, whether, after all, education is better than ignorance" (36). What is required, he argues, is an "economic" model of education, which would use and "wisely expend" the most valuable of human faculties, mental power, while eliminating the wasteful, half-formed truths of literature and metaphysics (15, 24). Some critics even suggested that such a forcible replacement would soon no longer be necessary, unscientific literature being already so decayed and exhausted that it faced imminent extinction. In an 1879 contribution to Youmans's magazine, William Brackett says of literature that "[t]raveling in the same old circle, and treating us perpetually to the same round of entertainment without change or variety, it must gradually cease to interest, and eventually die a natural death" (177).

Yet while innovators such as Comte and Youmans hailed the utopian potential of the scientific model of subject formation, others feared that antimetaphysical zeal might eliminate morality and produce social disintegration. In this fear the potential for science to become decadent is first realized. If science is revered purely for the exquisite logic and perfection of its form, then the practicality and, indeed, ethicality of its experimental designs might become of secondary concern to its practitioners. In 1888 the antivivisectionist and feminist Frances Power Cobbe warned of what might ensue when science penetrates into "regions where it has no proper place," such as emotions and ethics. Of the youth trained exclusively in the study of nature, she writes, "[H]e will view his mother's tears—not as expression of her sorrow—but as solutions of muriates and carbonates of soda, and of phosphates and limes; and he will reflect that they were caused—not by his heartlessness—but by cerebral pressure on her lachrymal glands." The veneration of observation and facts (the prime feature of the scientific method) over sentiment and feeling, in Cobbe's analysis, can only lead to a disruption of "the deepest foundation of morality" (128, 130, 134). A science absolved of its obligation to metaphysics must become dehu-

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manized, for the idea of the person—or, as the antivivisectionists would add, the animal—as a vessel for a soul is profoundly metaphysical.

This possibility for scientific orthodoxy to displace and even violate human nature is suggested by Matthew Arnold's 1882 response to the curriculum debate. "It seems to me, that those who are for giving to natural knowledge, as they call it, the chief place in the education of the majority of mankind, leave one important thing out of their account—the constitution of human nature" (223). Human nature, argues Arnold, is constituted by the instinct not only for knowledge but also for beauty. An individual devoid of either one of these instincts becomes exiled from the realm of the human, occupying the shadowy territory between humanity and bestiality. Arnold concludes, "If then there is to be separation and option between humane letters on the one hand, and the natural sciences on the other, the great majority of mankind, all who have not exceptional and overpowering aptitudes for the study of nature, would do well, I cannot but think, to choose to be educated in humane letters rather than in the natural sciences" (228–29). The fight in which the exclusive study of the arts battles against the exclusive study of nature translates into a fight against dehumanization.

By indicting science for destabilizing and perhaps corrupting the conventional formation of human nature, commentators such as Cobbe and Arnold reached a strange agreement with one of the leading experimental scientists of the day. The French physiologist Claude Bernard, bane of the English antivivisection movement for his work on living animals and inadvertent father, according to Zola, of literary naturalism,[3] defends postmortem autopsy and animal experimentation in his curiously amoral *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale* ("Introduction to the Study of Experimental Medicine"; my trans.) on the grounds of the practices' unique defetishizing qualities.

> When we examine a higher living organism, that is to say, a complex being, and when we observe it carrying out its different functions in the general cosmic environment common to all phenomena of nature, the organism seems independent of the environment up to a certain point. [. . . I]f we limit ourselves to the examination of the total phenomena visible from the outside, *we might falsely believe that there is a unique force in living beings* which violates the physicochemical laws of the general cosmic environment, in the same way an ignorant person could believe that there is a special force which violates the laws of gravity in a machine which mounts into the air or runs along the ground.
>
> (320–21; my emphasis)

By cutting into and opening the body, the experimental physiologist lets out the sense of the sacred clinging to it since the beginnings of human culture and shows it to be devoid of any divine difference from the other functioning systems, animal or human, that surround it. In Bernard's essay, the human being is an organism bound by a series of determined laws and restrictions that superstition has hitherto prevented the active mind from discovering rather than a creature of unique sentiment and moral disposition. Surgeons need no longer resort to a moralistic or utilitarian defense to justify their intrusion into the living flesh. At no point in the *Introduction* does Bernard lapse into the common defenses of vivisection circulated by contemporary physiologists, such as animals' supposed insensibility to pain or the awesome life-saving potential of the practice. Indeed, the closest he comes to affirming the usefulness of animal experimentation is his statement that after lengthy injection of curare into rabbits, one "would perhaps be able to study a lesion peculiar to this poison" (327). Regardless of the benefits to medicine offered by Bernard's work, his rhetoric throughout this piece reveals a marked reluctance to evaluate the worth of experimental physiology exclusively on its positive results.

While some commentators may have interpreted Bernard's refusal of conventional utilitarian defenses of surgical experimentation as evidence of his typically Gallic sadism, his

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attitude reveals a sophisticated understanding of the nature of scientific progress—namely, that it is impossible to be useful without first being useless, that a science can only be progressive when freed from the imperative to fulfill practical purposes and confirm moral truisms. A medical science that is bound to be merely useful must repeat itself, relentlessly applying the same time-proven salves and solutions to new diseases until a happy accident introduces an unsuspected innovation. Experimenters cannot under these conditions personally endeavor to find a new truth unless they know that the end result will be a positive improvement, lest they be charged with the sins of wastefulness and wanton destructiveness.

The science that emerges, not only in Bernard's rhetoric but also in that of progressive British physicians such as Morell Mackenzie, prizes knowledge for its own sake and seeks fulfillment in the destruction of old conventions and fears that have hidden fundamental truths. Truly innovative scientists, Mackenzie points out in an article entitled "Is Medicine a Progressive Science?" (1886), must be willing to divorce their work from the priority of usefulness attached to the discipline throughout the century. "The art [of medicine]," he argues, "must not be judged solely, or even chiefly, by crude statistics of recoveries and deaths" (854). He then suggests that much eventual good might derive from abandoning the redundant sentimentalism that forbids medical experimentation on capital felons. In Mackenzie's argument, medicine can move forward only by assuming many of the qualities that competing social science discourses frequently allied with the primitive, such as amorality, uselessness, and an indifference to the sufferings of its experimental subjects that reads as cruelty.[4] In other words, medicine must embrace the ethic of uselessness and become decadent.

I use *decadent* here not simply to project the traits subsequently associated with literary decadence—excessive morbidity, the celebration of useless artifice, hedonism, disease, cruelty, and insanity—onto the scientific philosophy of the fin de siècle but to suggest that these definitive traits derived from a specific epistemiphilic ethos shared by late-century experimental science and art. Indeed, the canonical features of the decadent text are not causes of decadence—where they exist, decadence emerges—but rather secondary symptoms of a fascination with the acquisition of forbidden knowledge and experience. And, in the teleological and rational climate of the nineteenth century, the most forbidden knowledge of all was that which had no clear use or moral purpose, that which, far from fixing and stabilizing identity, functioned to dissolve the way the subject had been envisioned, to seek the truth behind the self, regardless of the costs of this unveiling. For this reason, I shall argue, many literary representations of decadence conclude with the literal or symbolic destruction of their central protagonists—not because the decadent pursuit is sterile and bound to fail but because the collapse of the self fulfills a certain project of knowing. Instead of forming opposite poles of the late Victorian cultural scene, science and decadence represent different incarnations of a desire for freedom from usefulness. While the scientific rhetoric of the period still clung to the belief that the temporary abandonment of the useful might eventually lead to its reinstatement—that is, that the ability to perform amoral or seemingly marginal experiments might result in the discovery of a socially beneficial cure—imaginative literature had no similar compunction and thus affords perhaps the fullest exploration of the limits and results of obsessive epistemiphilia.[5]

The alliance of artistic and scientific development was made not only by moralistic critics such as de Bury but also by the writer most frequently associated with the propagation of literary decadence in England, Oscar Wilde.[6] In "The Soul of a Man under Socialism" (1891), he anticipates the realization of social utopia as a direct result of the liberation of the artist and scientist from the dictates of social responsibility and

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practicality. The scientist, he suggests, has thus far made the greatest strides toward this freedom, and it is now up to the artist to follow this lead:

> If a man of science were told that the results of his experiments and the conclusions that he arrived at, should be of such a character that they would not upset the received popular notions on the subject, or disturb popular prejudice, or hurt the sensibilities of people who knew nothing about science [. . .] well, nowadays the man of science [. . .] would be considerably amused. (35)

Of course, this statement is not strictly true; men of science too frequently received such demands, particularly from the antivivisection movement, to find them humorous. Nonetheless, Wilde claims that "when scientific men are no longer called upon to go down to a depressing East End and distribute bad cocoa and worse blankets to starving people, they will have delightful leisure in which to devise wonderful and marvelous things for their own joy and the joy of everybody else" (33). Wilde comes here into a bizarre agreement with one of the new art's most violent critics, Max Nordau, who also believed that leaving radical outsiders to their own devices would be beneficial—not because the populace would gain "wonderful and marvelous things" but because the outsiders' innate deviance would result in self-destruction and thus leave the healthy to thrive.[7]

Yet just a year before the appearance of "The Soul of a Man under Socialism," Wilde published a different meditation on the consequences of decadent self-indulgence. In the scandalous *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), the young protagonist is freed from social and moral accountability through his representation in Basil Hallward's painting. No longer forced to bear the physical markings of his own compromised soul, Gray indulges in a series of increasingly vile acts that culminate in murder and suicide. The absolute autonomy and pursuit of beauty that augur social regeneration in Wilde's utopian essay bring mayhem and death in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This unknowability of the consequences of the quest for experience for its own sake—whether they are social destruction or amelioration—routinely forms the source of horror in various late-century representations of decadent subjectivity. Gray's homicidal mania is no less likely, or even less appropriate, a response to the freedom from usefulness than is the benevolence of Wilde's East End surgeons.

There has long been a tendency to read the conclusion of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a return to conventional Victorian morality in which Gray is punished for his misdeeds and the order of body-soul mimesis is restored; indeed, Wilde promoted this interpretation in his response to the vicious press allegations of the book's immorality.[8] But there is an alternative to this reading of Gray's demise as proof of the futility and inevitable failure of the decadent quest. If the aim of decadence, whether in science or art, is to challenge the limits that mark some forms of knowledge as permissible and others as forbidden, regardless of the results, then one might see in Gray's act a brave attempt to fulfill this mandate, not by simply adopting habits and behaviors that typically signify amorality and deviance but rather by destroying the order by which all meanings, whether negative or positive, are constructed. Gray's death results from an attack not on himself but on an order of representation that asserts a connection between morality and physiognomy, between visibility and being. The fact that Gray is destroyed in his attempt does not necessarily suggest the failure of the project.

While failing on one register, the decadent subject achieves a dark success on another—the futility of self-destruction is countered by the context of triumphant experimentalism in which the act occurs. When we recognize the decadent script as positivistic bildungsroman in which the subject develops by mastering approved forms of knowledge and then challenging the order of meaning in which subjectivity is articulated, it is no longer possible to view the suicides that frequently mark its conclusions as clumsy failures.

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Rather, such conclusions logically culminate an attempt to master, dissect, and transcend conventional modes of epistemology. Wilkie Collins's *Heart and Science: A Story of the Present Time* (1882) and Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894) support the reading of decadent self-destruction as the fulfillment of a particular approach to knowledge and experience. Collins's novel has never been linked with the traditional canon of British decadence, primarily because its author is generally associated with an earlier phase in Victorian literary history and never self-consciously allied himself with decadence or indeed with literary experimentalism of any kind. Collins was a fierce populist whose courtship of mass appeal was decidedly antithetical to the ambivalent individualism of the decadent artist; nonetheless, *Heart and Science* presents a fascinating prototype of the experimental decadence that would come to fruition in later, more recognizably decadent texts such as Machen's *The Great God Pan*. Both novels trace the progress of the decadent subject to death and suicide, while disrupting the semantic framing of these events as failures.

Heart and Science, as its title suggests, calls for a rebalancing of the disciplinary divide between artistic emotionalism and scientific objectivity in the healthy subject. The novel's villains are the lugubrious vivisectionist Dr. Benjulia and the fanatical Mrs. Galilee, both of whose excessive and often humorous devotion to scientific objectivity harms others and themselves, while the hero, Ovid Vere, is, by contrast, a brilliant yet moderate man of science who escapes the dehumanizing ravages of his profession only through continual self-banishments from the laboratory. As the narrative opens, Vere is preparing to make just such an escape from his study to stroll through the sunny streets of London and pick up some notes from the Royal College of Surgeons. The world into which he escapes is, like Vere, tottering on the edge of exhaustion; the nineteenth century is described as a "weary, old" entity "advanced in the last twenty years of its life" (45). As he strolls, he reflects on the lengthy Mediterranean yachting trip on which he is about to embark in hopes of restoring his overwrought nerves, which, despite his tender age of thirty-one, have already been shattered by the demands of his successful medical career. A respite from the confines of the laboratory, he hopes, will renew his ability to make the distinction, argued for by Cobbe, between the scientific and the emotional.

Vere is not the only figure in the neurasthenic world of *Heart and Science* to suffer from intense nervous debilitation. With the significant exception of those from the lower classes, most of the novel's characters struggle with fainting fits, periods of aphasia, uncontrollable hysteria, and occasional fits of homicidal rage. Vere's love interest, the beautiful young Italian Carmina, who has come to London to be his mother's ward, displays her suitability for Vere's nervous affections by collapsing from shock when she and Vere first meet. Later she is driven into a deathly coma by the cruel machinations of Mrs. Galilee (her guardian and Vere's mother), who, in a decidedly silly plot to shock Carmina to death and thus inherit her fortune, calls her ward an "impudent bastard" (249). In a world as strained and hysterical as this, one does not need to inflict extreme physical violence—mere language suffices. After falling into a coma at Mrs. Galilee's insult, Carmina is restored when Vere returns from Canada, where he found the cure for her unique affliction in a dying mulatto doctor's manuscript.

While the novel's romantic lead avoids the fate of decadent epistemology by escaping from the laboratory and pursuing truly useful knowledge—the knowledge that will save the life of his lover—Mrs. Galilee and Dr. Benjulia gain no such reprieve. Immured in the laboratorial confines of educated London society, they acquire in the cause of science all the traits that Wilde, in his preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, demands of the artist: amorality, a disregard for usefulness, and the devotion to an ideal—in this instance, science—above all lesser

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idols (21–22). While listening to a program of Italian music, Mrs. Galilee lectures not on its beauty but on the acoustics of sound, and on viewing a blooming pansy in her lawyer's office she exclaims, "[T]here is a flower which defies criticism! I long to dissect it!" (192). This longing, like the later desire to dissect Carmina's delicate mind, is purely solipsistic, aimed neither at the establishment of practical knowledge nor at the improvement of social conditions. Science acts for Mrs. Galilee purely as a vehicle for a sort of narcissistic gratification. True, financial motivations lend a touch of philistinism to her engineering of Carmina's collapse, but the baroque plotting by which she pursues her aim bespeaks something more than plain murder for profit.

The nature of this "something more" is best articulated by Collins's most fully developed decadent character, the vivisectionist Benjulia. When confronted by his brother Lemuel about the cruelty of his live-animal experiments, Benjulia makes the following reply, which, like Bernard's *Introduction*, makes no concessions to utility or sentiment.

> I labor at [the experimental project] all day. I think of it, dream of it, all night. It will kill me. Strong as I am, it will kill me. What do you say? Am I working myself into my grave in the medical interests of humanity? *That*, for humanity? I am working for my own satisfaction—for my own pride—for my own unutterable pleasure in beating other men—for the fame that will keep my name living hundreds of years hence. Humanity? I say with my foreign brethren—Knowledge for its own sake is the one god I worship. Knowledge is its own justification and its own reward. [. . .] Knowledge sanctifies cruelty. (190)

Knowledge sanctifies cruelty, but, perhaps more significant, cruelty sanctifies knowledge; in inflicting pain (on the battered dogs and beleaguered monkeys he has rescued from the Royal Zoological Society), Benjulia marks his difference from and superiority to the philistine masses. Through the infliction of pain for pain's sake rather than for the sake of mass humanity, Benjulia attempts to forge a self-identity of absolute, unassailable difference much as real-life decadents like George Moore professed sadism as a sign of evolved superiority. In his provocative artistic autobiography, *Confessions of a Young Man*, Moore declares his "readiness to decapitate all the Japanese in Japan and elsewhere to save from destruction one drawing by Hokee" (123). The worth of the pursuit, whether artistic or scientific, and of its decadent instigator grows in proportion with the cruelty and wastefulness of its techniques.

In *Heart and Science*, the decadent destroys to establish his own identity. While the primary victims of this process are his animal subjects, he occasionally makes attempts on higher prey. In one of the text's many comic episodes, Benjulia torments his dreamy working-class cook, whose passion for romantic novel reading continually interferes with her duties. Summoning her to his study and gently interrogating her about her latest reading material (which happens to be Richardson's *Pamela*), Benjulia asks her if she thinks a situation like the one she relates could occur in real life. Imagining him about to make a declaration of love, she throws her arms around the doctor, and he permits them to remain for several seconds before firing her. He hopes that the shock will produce in her a complete mental collapse. "A violent moral shock sometimes has a serious effect on the brain—especially when it is the brain of an excitable woman. Always a physiologist, even in those rare moments when he was amusing himself, it had just struck Benjulia that the cook—after her outbreak of fury—might be a case worth studying" (217). This foray into psychological vivisection fails, and, much to Benjulia's dismay, the cook gets her relief by crying rather than by indulging in extravagant hysterics or catatonia. Nonetheless, the experiment is pleasing, and Benjulia concludes, "This has been a holiday!" (216).

Ultimately, Benjulia's horrific project of identity formation through the abandonment of utility and through the subjection of the whole of

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humanity to his dispassionate experimentalist gaze is thwarted by suicide, that most familiar of decadent endings. On learning that Ovid Vere has discovered the solution that Benjulia had been in search of, Benjulia torches his laboratory and shoots himself. Most enraging about Vere's discovery is that it came not from experimenting but from the manuscript of a deceased antivivisectionist doctor who obtained his results from purely humane methods. In the manuscript's introduction, the doctor noted, "Whatever faults and failings I may have been guilty of as a man, I am innocent, in my professional capacity, of ever having perpetrated the useless and detestable cruelties which go by the name of Vivisection. Without entering into any of the disputes on either side [. . .] I declare my conviction that no asserted usefulness in the end, can justify deliberate cruelty in the means" (308). Of course, this rebuke is clearly intended to miss the point. Collins has suggested that usefulness is never a basis for experiments of the decadent scientist; men like Benjulia labor only that their names may be immortalized by the public they despise. When renown is granted instead to a scientist who embodies the mundane virtues, hackneyed practicality, and bourgeois humanism of the surrounding mass culture, Benjulia must destroy himself.

The professional despair and humiliation that surround Benjulia's final, desperate act separate his suicide somewhat from those featured in later, more self-consciously decadent texts; one could argue that his death represents a retreat from, not an apogee of, his devotion to useless experimentalism. While such a conclusion might be shortsighted—ignoring the act's support, rather than contradiction, of the obsessive quest for agency that characterized Benjulia's work—it is tempting in the context of the novel's genre and plot. The potential for the decadence-as-failure hypothesis is less evident in the accounts of decadence delivered by artists such as Arthur Machen who were popularly identified with the movement.

The Great God Pan seems more obviously decadent than Collins's novel, despite Machen's frequent denials of affiliation with the style. Machen preferred to present himself as a struggling journalist instead of a hedonistic rebel, claiming that he had written the novel on a lark after hearing one of Wilde's stories described by its author and thinking, "I did not see why I should not think of a plot as good or almost as good" (22). Notwithstanding these claims, *The Great God Pan* became one of the nineties' most common targets for antidecadence criticism, no doubt as a result of its intense enactment of the epistemiphilic plot. While moderate science and moderate subjects replace the decadent at the end of *Heart and Science*, no such potential for recuperation exists in Machen's work. Even after its titular villain, the Great God Pan, has been put to ground, the surviving witnesses remain deeply traumatized, unable to return to and trust the familiar conventions of Victorian morality and meaning. From this standpoint, critics were right to recognize the novella as an example of decadence; some labeled it the epitome of the style. The reviewer for the *Westminster Gazette* said of it:

> It is an incoherent nightmare of sex and the supposed mysteries behind it, such as might conceivably possess a man given to brooding over these matters, but which would lead to insanity if unrestrained. I imagine, however, that Mr. Machen's desire has simply been to emulate certain French practitioners in this line; indeed, the fact that he is so often reduced to gasping negatives proves that he has not made it clear even to himself what he is after. His work is innocuous from its absurdity, but the type is most truly decadent. (Philistine 101)

These comments are gentle in comparison with those of the *Manchester Guardian* reviewer who deemed the work "the most acutely and intentionally disagreeable we have yet seen in English" and of W. L. Courtney, in the *Daily Telegraph*, who wrote of it that "there are some kind of maladies which are not mentioned outside of medical treatises" (qtd. in Machen 25). Response to Machen's dark little tale of a shapeshifting pagan life force unleashed in London

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high society ranged from bemusement to outrage. In other words, it gained all the typical accolades awarded by popular opinion to decadence in the final decades of the century.

Courtney's medicalization of *The Great God Pan* mimics Machen's ascription of clinical origin to decadence. The plot opens in Dr. Raymond's isolated laboratory, buried deep in the rural Welsh countryside. Raymond has summoned his friend Clarke to witness the end result of years of study, the surgical unleashing of the Great God Pan into the brain of Raymond's teenage protégée, Mary. Having rescued Mary from the harsh city streets years before, Raymond feels justified in using her as subject for his untested experiments. "As you know," he says to Clarke, "I rescued Mary from the gutter, and from almost certain starvation, when she was a child; I think her life is mine to use as I see fit" (35). The purpose of Raymond's project is unclear: certainly, he wants Mary to see Pan—that is, the chaotic life force that lies beneath the surface of civilization—but he seems remarkably unconcerned with the effect or purpose or function of such an unveiling. He wishes to breach the limits of perception simply because they exist. Like Bernard, he cuts into living flesh to unleash the primordial truth of existence from its last hiding place. Unfortunately, something goes terribly wrong. The sight of Pan turns Mary into a lolling idiot, and the god impregnates her with a bizarre life force that later, in the personage of Helen Vaughan, threatens to destroy the social and psychological order of London's West End.

In adulthood, Vaughan moves to the city and becomes amorphous, shifting names and identities to attract the wealthy male suitors she subsequently drives to insanity and suicide. Her seductions deviate substantially from those of the typical fictional adventuress, seemingly having neither money (although she accumulates wealth in the process) nor social status as explicit goal. These objects are coveted because they confer stability on the individual—wealth assures food and shelter, status offers access to beneficial social contacts. However, Vaughan seeks the antithesis of stability. She aims to induce the same type of ontological collapse that accompanied her birth in all those who look on her. She is largely successful in this aim; casual onlookers describe her as "at once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they had ever set eyes on" (64), and her lovers mentally collapse. After each death, Vaughan remakes herself and continues, neither progressing nor degenerating but continually becoming something that is never quite finished enough to be absorbed into the logic of her surrounding culture.

Vaughan's ultimate refutation of the imperative to be semantically stable and socially useful—to, above all else, mean something—comes, ironically, when she confronts the greatest of all limitations placed on the subject: death. Clarke, friend of Raymond and witness to the surgery on Mary, confronts Vaughan in her boudoir. He brandishes a hemp cord with which he hopes to persuade her to strangle or choke herself. Strangely enough, she consents, and Clarke witnesses her death throes. He describes them:

> I was [. . .] privileged or accursed, I dare not say which, to see that which was on the bed, lying there black like ink, transformed before my eyes. The skin and the flesh, and the muscles and the bones, and the firm structure of the human body that I had thought to be unchangeable and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve. [. . .] I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then reunited. [. . .] I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. (114)

Vaughan's relentless transformation makes a mockery of the finitude associated with death; indeed, such a mockery is arguably the main reason for her compliance with Clarke's laughably feeble threats. (After all, why would the child of an immortal pagan deity, able to drive people mad on sight, fear a man with a rope?)

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At the moment when the product of the decadent experiment seems poised to become fixed, finished, and classed under the genus of dead things, it scatters into a myriad of incomplete identities. This metamorphic flight from a stable order of meaning represents the ultimate fulfillment of decadent experimentalism.

Returning to the object of decadent scientific inquiry can clarify the nature of this fulfillment. As I argued earlier, decadence transformed mainstream scientists' desire for useful, utopian knowledge into a lust for abstract, amoral truth, for the murky, horrifying stuff at the center of being, regardless of the consequences of that pursuit. Once science has exhausted the realm of the practical, then in theory it must turn to the useless, the esoteric, and perhaps the cruel. The aim of such an exploration is to aggrandize and center the subject, to differentiate the decadent subject from the homogeneous mass, where identities are trademarked and uniform. But this endeavor always carries the danger that the subject will be destroyed or at least decentered. This scenario is played out on a small scale in many nineteenth-century scientific dramas, most notably in the controversy over Darwin's findings. Not a decadent scientist by any means, Darwin nonetheless provoked charges that in contradicting the separate-speciation thesis, he had destabilized humanity's position in the universe by suggesting its kinship with the lower animals. Of course, such an iconoclasm was not Darwin's project, and his theories were quickly, if not wholly, assimilated into the era's conventional social values and mores. Evolutionary theory was ultimately recuperable, as Gillian Beer has demonstrated, because it was useful to many conflicting agendas, from laissez-faire capitalism to socialism and anarchy.[9] But decadent science, by its nature, seeks knowledge that is not recuperable, that has no use and is in fact pure waste. Such a knowledge cannot exist in the world of everyday, symbolic reality—everything is appropriable in the cultural field of late capitalism—but becomes an object of decadent fantasy whose successful realization in fiction is figured as the collapse of the subject.

Unlike Darwin, the decadent scientists of Machen's novel seek not a description of being—a chart of humanity's beginnings, growths, and endings—but a glimpse of the moment when being emerges from nonbeing, of the stuff of nonbeing on which being is later founded. They refer to this object as Pan, and it is epitomized by Helen Vaughan, alias Mrs. Beaumont, alias Mrs. Herbert, dissolving on the bed into phantasmagoric shapes as her petrified accusers look on.[10] This dissolution is markedly different from the instances of devolutionary dissolution in other contemporary texts, such as H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), in which the beautiful and tyrannous Ayesha is turned to dust by the Fire of Life. Helen Vaughan does not, as Ayesha does, devolve into the familiar Darwinian specter of the monkey; instead, she encompasses all imaginable life forms at once.[11] She continues to disintegrate when put into the language of Dr. Robert Matheson's frantic account, and thus the document remains vague and sometimes, as the editor of the surrounding manuscript notes, illegible.[12] Her death brings no comfort to the writer of the framing narrative, for he realizes that Pan continues to haunt the periphery of existence, threatening to dissolve all who look on the life force. He concludes, "When the House of Life is thus thrown open, there may enter in that for which we have no name, and human flesh may become the veil of a horror one dare not express" (120).

If the ultimate object of scientific decadence is the source and simultaneous antithesis of meaning and knowledge, then the self-destruction that frequently accompanies decadent narratives must be seen as homage to rather than retreat from this object. What emerges from decadent disintegration is not an ethic of futility and waste but the fulfillment of a particular kind of epistemological idealism. But a horribly troubled form of fulfillment it is: at the moment subjects grasp the ineffable or make the final foray against established identity, they cease to be.

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The nihilism of this result forestalls premature attempts to romanticize decadence. By declaring decadence a success in terms of its epistemological framing, I by no means suggest that the fin de siècle accounts of decadent subjectivity examined here are a pure and radical site of insurgency from which a triumphant attack against the status quo might be launched. The implications of scientific decadence are more interesting than that. Instead of simply providing an ideal model of radical identity, decadence exposes the deep contradictions and schisms inherent in all models of pure identity, whether that of the subversive artist, the libertine, or the conservative middle-class Victorian. The price of wholeness, decadence suggests, is disintegration: therefore, the only course is to accept partialness. The survivors at the end of the decadent text are typically moderates who, like Ovid Vere, lack the desire to push the limits of experience to their extreme or to obsessively assert individuality. The moderates' survival, finally, must be interpreted no longer as proof that decadence reinstates the norm and fails to disrupt social conventions but as a meditation on the necessary incompleteness of mundane existence.

Notes

[1] This trend of dismissal dates from the popular inception of the movement in the late nineteenth century (when Nordau characterized decadence as derivative and idiotic [299] and Symons, after an initial endorsement, described it as the work of "lesser men" [*Symbolist Movement* 4]) and has endured with admirable persistence up to the present day. More recent representatives of this view include Carter's *Idea of Decadence in French Literature* (1958), Smith's "Concepts of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century France" (1953), Gilman's *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (1979), Reed's *Decadent Style* (1985), and Gagnier's "A Critique of Practical Aesthetics" (1994).

[2] Symons, one of the first and (initially) most approving critics of decadence, calls the style "a new and interesting disease" (859) in his seminal "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893).

[3] In "The Experimental Novel" (1880), Zola claims that, in forming his narrative style, "I really only need to adapt, for the experimental method has been established with strength and marvelous clearness by Claude Bernard in his *Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale*. This work, by a savant whose authority is unquestioned, will serve me as solid foundation. [. . .] This will then be but a compiling of texts, as I intend on all points to entrench myself behind Claude Bernard" (1).

[4] Lombroso's *L'uomo delinquente* (1876) and Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1888), for example, ascribe to the atavistic being cruelty, frivolity, and insensitivity to moral and physical pain.

[5] While the examples of decadent epistemiphilia examined here feature scientists as central characters, the same experimentalist approach to experience can be found in decadent texts that do not have a scientist as protagonist, such as Huysmans's *Against the Grain*. Here the effete aristocrat Des Esseintes devotes himself to the relentless pursuit of pleasant and unpleasant sensory experience with all the fervor of a fanatic Linnaeus, obsessively collecting and taxonomizing new sensations for no apparent purpose.

[6] I do not wish to suggest that Wilde can be labeled simply a decadent artist—such a tag fails to do justice to the complexity of his art. Indeed, Wilde's work is characterized more by its frequent contradictions and evasion of easy classification than by adherence to any particular set of principles or school.

[7] In *Degeneration* (1892) Nordau concludes, "Those degenerates, whose mental derangement is too deep-seated must be abandoned to their inexorable fate. They are past cure or amelioration. They will rave for a season, and then perish" (551).

[8] For a full account of the press allegations about *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and of Wilde's response to them, see Mason.

[9] In her introduction to *The Origin of Species* Beer writes, "Different readers can find their hopes and fears confirmed by extending the implications of Darwin's thought in one direction or another; and, it would later prove, those readers might be individualists, Fascists, Marxists, imperialists, or anarchists—or indeed, quietists. There is something fascinating and perturbing in a text [that] can generate such a variety of ideological potentialities" (viii).

[10] It is significant that the female monster in Machen's story constantly changes names and identities, never becoming any one person. As Charles Herbert, one of her doomed lovers, notes, "The name she passed under when I met her was Helen Vaughan, but what her real name was, I can't say. I don't think she had a name. No, no, not in that sense. Only human beings have names" (59).

[11] Ayesha's disintegration is founded on the familiar script of degeneration, in which the deviant subject reverts to an atavistic, usually simian, form. On witnessing her transformation, Job shrieks, "*Look!—Look!—Look!* She's shriveling up! She's turning into a monkey!" (293). Such a transformation, however horrific, does not challenge the foundation of meaning in the manner I have attributed to

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decadent science; it confirms rather than violates an increasingly popular model of the subject's evolution from primate to human. While this order of evolutionary development is reversed in *She*, its meaning remains intact. Ayesha's degeneration merely confirms on her flesh the truth of her soul—that she is ancient and primitive.

[12] A similarly contrived illegibility afflicts Beardsley's notorious *Under the Hill*, in which the plot is continually interrupted by avowals of the narrator's, or perhaps of language's, inability to describe all the happenings in Venus's underground grotto. "I wish I could be allowed to tell you what occurred around table fifteen, just at this moment," laments the narrator at a high point in the festivities. "[F]or deplorable reasons, by far the greater part of what was said and done at this supper must remain unrecorded and even unsuggested" (41).

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