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Martin Lockerd, *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism*
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The study of decadence and Christianity generates powerful and difficult contradictions. To focus in detail on any part seems always to risk misrepresentation of the whole. It forces the tradition's major intellectual currents into open (and seemingly unresolvable) confrontation. To stress a Baudelairean aesthetic of original sin and evil is to edge out a Paterian aesthetic of relativism, with which it is almost completely irreconcilable. To stress the framework of Christian beliefs, symbols and rituals on which much decadent literature so clearly draws is to risk ignoring the tradition's equally clear debts to a frequently anti-Christian Hellenism (a relationship for which it is very difficult to find a satisfactory conceptualization, save the old get-out 'paradoxical'). To focus on theology dries decadent Christianity out, makes it too scholarly; but to ignore it makes it not scholarly enough, just another brand of subversive whimsy. And, of course, even to ask the question of whether decadent religion is 'sincere' or 'insincere', 'serious' or 'aesthetic' (and these types of question still unquestionably haunt the roots of this field) lumpenly enshrines the very hierarchies that decadence sets out to destabilize.

Ellis Hanson attempted to solve this problem in his ground-breaking *Decadence and Catholicism* (1993) by focusing these contradictions through a single lens of queer performativity, brilliantly drawing on the shared penchant of both decadence *and* Catholicism to provide spaces for this type of experience. Hanson marshalled the relationship between decadence and religion into coherence, but the way he achieved that was to consider Roman Catholicism as thoroughly decadent already, seemingly just waiting for its literary counterpart to catch up and find it. Hanson's range across the canon of decadent engagements with religious discourse is very comprehensive (it remains the pre-eminent work on the subject nearly thirty years on), but its conceptualization

of religion is a much smaller and more partial thing: exclusively Roman Catholic, and near-exclusively defined by the power of that Catholicism's performativity and the queer potential it unlocks.

Whilst Martin Lockerd's *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism* intermittently uses the lens of queer theory to good effect, it also gives us a more traditional (and arguably more recognizable) account of Catholicism. Indeed, while Lockerd clearly conceives his book as, at some level, the heir to Hanson (he explicitly picks up Hanson's suggestion to give Ronald Firbank and Evelyn Waugh more attention as inheritors of the decadent-Catholic mode), his project mostly eschews the earlier book's methodological radicalism. In fact, for the most part Lockerd's is a relatively traditional study of influence – or, as he puts it, of *anamnesis*, a term originally used by Socrates to denote 'an unforgetting of knowledge lost by the soul in the trauma of rebirth' (p. 2). And while we understand much more of the nature of decadence's 'rebirth' into modernism than we did even ten years ago (via the scholarship of Kate Hext, Kristin Mahoney, Alex Murray, and Vincent Sherry), religion hasn't yet played any significant part in this understanding, as Lockerd correctly contends.

Lockerd's twofold aim is to bolster the status of nineteenth-century decadence as a full-blown Catholic revival in literature – he calls it 'the most substantial Catholic literary movement in Protestant Britain until the Catholic revival of the mid-twentieth century' (p. 23) – and to strengthen the connective tissue around our knowledge of decadence and religion as it manifested *between* those two moments. The focus is thus mainly on high modernism, although Lockerd's sense of both the decadent and the modernist canons is very conservative (Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, Lionel Johnson, and Ernest Dowson the main players for decadence, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce for modernism). The absence of figures like Frederick Rolfe and Michael Field (to name only two/three) somewhat impairs Lockerd's ability to fully advocate for decadence's influential impact as Catholic literature (and I would agree with his overall claim). More seriously, however, it means ignoring much of the recent critical work on decadence which is the primary

context for his study ('Michael Field', for example, only appears in the index as a sub-heading to other entries). Despite this – and I fully acknowledge that the nature of the influence being tracked here means a natural skew towards decadent figures who were well known in the early twentieth century – Lockerd's overall narrative, of a high modernism in which 'decadent Catholicism' is a lively key constituent, is nonetheless impressive, and the connections he makes are well-forged.

The first chapter provides a useful overview of the key encounters between literary decadence and religion in the late nineteenth century, and it acts as an excellent primer and introduction to the topic of decadent religion; even (or perhaps especially) read in isolation, it would be very useful for students coming to the subject for the first time. The second chapter charts the various attempts made by certain modernists to firmly relegate decadence to history – and while this is not really news in headline terms, Lockerd provides a useful guide to 'decadent Catholicism' in the early work of Yeats and Pound. For this reader, it was the analysis of the latter that was more striking: while I was well aware of Yeats's various debts to decadence (and his infamous attempts to write himself out of it as sole 'survivor' in 'The Tragic Generation'), I was intrigued to discover the way in which Pound's poetry from the 1900s also draws from this well. Lockerd provides sensitive readings of Pound's poems like 'In Praise of Ysolt' and 'Night Litany', and overall provides a valuable reassessment of Pound's relation to decadence. The big archival claim in this chapter is based on a particular copy of Lionel Johnson's collected poems which Pound apparently gifted to Eliot. Lockerd sees his sending of the collection (to which Pound wrote a preface) as an attempt on Pound's part to recruit Eliot into the cause of rubbishing the poets of the late 'nineties – and Eliot's subsequent re-publication of Pound's preface as an almost subversive refusal to do so. It's a neat materialization of a particular dynamic within the Eliot/Pound relationship, although I was never quite convinced that the fact of the gift carried the importance Lockerd claims.

The third chapter, 'T. S. Eliot's Decadent (Anglo)-Catholicism' argues that Eliot's later religious poetry 'grows into, not out of, his darkly satirical and overtly decadent work' (p. 77).

Again, the overall thesis is convincing, and some original analyses are made of Eliot's debt to Beardsley in particular. Above all, it is the close poetic links which really succeed here – the comparison of Eliot's and Johnson's 'Ash Wednesday' poems, for example, is excellent. However, the brackets in the chapter title are important, because here, as in the rest of the book, distinctions between different types of Christian belief are made to seem relatively unimportant. This has implications both for individuals like Eliot (who, after all, converted to Anglicanism), but also for the wider issue of how decadent writers engaged with religious discourse. Lockerd's book is a study of British decadence, and while at one point Lockerd states that nineteenth-century Anglo-Catholicism helped British decadence to see Catholicism 'as less a latent cultural force in need of revival or rejection than a foreign entity to which one might defect' (p. 8), it's perhaps a little disappointing that there isn't more than this, given the counter-cultural power of Anglo-Catholicism in decadence's formative years and the very different religious contexts of Britain and mainland Europe in both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Lockerd's next chapter is on the writing of George Moore and Joyce, where he ingeniously shows both writers as participating in the decadent-Catholic discourse even as they reject it – 'the relationship between decadence and Catholicism is not exclusively positive or generative' (p. 117). Much of this chapter focuses on 'decadent' poetry written by Moore's and Joyce's fictional characters (Mike Fletcher, Dayne in *Confessions of a Young Man*, and Stephen Dedalus in *Portrait of the Artist*), a framing which gives a delightfully refreshing take on the fairly well-trodden ground of decadent satire. Sometimes A. C. Swinburne feels a little like the missing link here: Lockerd is right to say that in the *Confessions*, Dayne's poem 'Nostalgia', in which a speaker looks back to an idealized pagan past in favour of the 'grey doubt' of the present-day, recalls Yeats's 'The Song of the Happy Shepherd', but surely Swinburne's 'Hymn to Proserpine' is the common ancestor? Likewise, Stephen Dedalus' poems supplanting the Virgin Mary with a figure of erotic desire may recall Dowson, but seem just as much (if not more) to be reminiscent of 'Laus Veneris' and 'Dolores'.

The final chapter proper, 'Decadent Catholicism Revisited', sees something of a change of tack. Technically on Firbank and Waugh, Firbank is dealt with fairly briskly in order to get to Waugh and in particular to *Brideshead*, where one senses that Lockerd's real enthusiasm lies. Whilst retaining an element of influence-study (there's a convincing argument for the importance of Beardsley's 'Et in Arcadia Ego' on the 'fragile paradise' of Waugh's famous opening (p. 161), and for Wilde as a significant role model for Lord Marchmain's deathbed conversion), it is mostly comprised of an argument that the end of *Brideshead* offers the prospect of celibacy, 'the queerest form of human sexuality', as a viable alternative to the equally undesirable alternatives of fin de siècle decadence and soulless modernity (pp. 173, 175). In Lockerd's reading, the prospect of Charles's lay celibacy, far from being a form of self-denial or a novelistically disappointing refuge in orthodoxy, actually offers a satisfying realization and unification of the aesthetic, erotic, and religious senses. It is perhaps Lockerd's most confident and memorable argument, passionate and convincingly made, although it is quite a different argument in kind to the other chapters (and the one that calls back to Hanson's methodology the most strongly). It is also a reminder that class may play a more important part in the history of decadent religion than we commonly acknowledge: certainly Catholicism in *Brideshead*, which can often seem the figure for a kind of exclusively aristocratic experience which might well be in decay but which is still making a valuable if doomed stand against middle-class materialism, seems to illuminate a class dynamic in decadence not often talked about in relation to religion. This isn't necessarily how Lockerd sees the novel, but his original and thoughtful approach to it is still a reminder of how much analysing decadent religion's impact on twentieth- and twenty-first century writing might encourage us to see it anew. This applies equally well to Lockerd's coda to the book, which brings this approach up to date by examining the strands of decadent Catholicism detectable in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* and D. B. C. Pierre's *Lights Out in Wonderland*.

One final pedantic point, and probably only relevant if recommending the book to students: because of what I presume to be a publisher's error, the reproductions of Beardsley's

‘The Climax’ and ‘The Dancer’s Reward’ are labelled wrongly (i.e., each is given as being the other). It is minor, it will surely annoy Lockerd more than it annoys anyone else, and it certainly does not detract from what is overall a very lively study, which makes its case convincingly and in a prose style which is highly readable, incisive, and memorable. And if some of the omissions niggle, it’s perhaps just a reminder that decadent religion is a field particularly doomed to always be a shadow or two short of the ideal – an irony that certainly would not have been lost on the decadents, or the decadent-Catholic modernists that succeeded them.