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PARODIC AND POST-CLASSIC, BRITISH DECADENT AESTHETICISM RE-APPROACHED

Abstract

Considering the fact that postmodernism may, from a certain viewpoint, be called “neo-Decadence” and Oscar Wilde a “pre-postmodernist,” this essay approaches the affinity between Decadence and postmodernism in terms of their shared *post-classical* and parodist condition. Indicating the insufficiency of the romantic/classicist model, and taking as the point of departure Symons’s description of Decadence as the disfiguring of the “classic,” it looks at Decadent subversions through Linda Hutcheon’s twofold parodist paradigm. It shows how Decadence, which is doubly parodist – in the stylistic sense (as in Max Beerbohm) and in social sense (as in Wilde) – subverts its classical heritage, thus, anticipating postmodernist strategies.

“Jameson’s argument characterizes postmodernism as neo-Decadence. Reversing this equation, it is perhaps equally plausible to describe Wildean ‘decadence’ as pre-postmodern ...”

Andreas Höfele

Postmodernism’s ethics of taste ... seems to be (at least as we shall see in Rorty’s version) largely a rehash of fin de siècle aestheticism ...”

Richard Shusterman

An attempt to authoritatively classify British Decadence would be naivety, or daring. On the scale from neo-romantic to neo-classicist, British Decadence is difficult to place. The romantic view of Decadence – allowing critics to accommodate Walter Pater’s, Oscar Wilde’s, Algernon Swinburne’s, and the Pre-Raphaelites’ engagement with Romantic literature – was famously legitimized by Yeats’s admission: “We were the last romantics” (33). However, a consistently romantic outlook, rather problematically, excludes

the works of Yeats's contemporaries – aesthetes, Arthur O'Shaughnessy and Austin Dobson; satirists, William Henley and G. S. Street; parodists, Beardsley and Beerbohm, as well as other Decadent Rhymers, Richard le Galienne and Arthur Symons – all of whom would invoke the urbane spirit of the Augustan age.¹ Significantly, the purist classification into the neo-classicist and neo-romantic was a source of discontent expressed by the most illustrious representatives of British Decadence and by its early critics, including Pater, Wilde, and Holbrook Jackson.² It was voiced once again, when modernism was teetering into postmodernity, with Irving H. Buchen's stating that Decadence merited the label of "the self-begotten or bastard child of both Classicism and Romanticism" (19). Buchen's graphic description of Decadence puts emphasis on its synthesizing quality; but it introduces yet another significant metaphor: that of Decadence as progeny. In that, Buchen seems to have recaptured the direction of Symons' definition of Decadence, formulated in "The Decadent Movement in Literature," as that which is coming after: an amalgamation of the classicist and romantic – but also a mannerist distortion of the "classic." In the often-quoted definition Symons says: "If what we call *the classic* is indeed the supreme art – those qualities of perfect simplicity, perfect sanity, perfect proposition, the supreme qualities – then, this representative literature of today, interesting, beautiful, novel as it is, is really a new and beautiful and interesting disease" (859; my italics). He understands "classic" as the attribute of art characterized by permanence and universality.³ Decadent, in turn, appears to be an attribute of a latecomer; accordingly, Decadent art is neither neo-romantic, nor neo-classicist, but rather *post-classic*. As Symons has indicated, it is a creative distortion of the classic, a repetition involving a variation; and, as Symons has left for us to infer, it is a process depending on the strategies typical of parody.

1. Stylistic parody: Max Beerbohm's dialogue with forms

The procedures of Decadent parodies anticipate the parodist tactics of postmodernism.⁴ On the force of Hutcheon's theory, parody is a way of coming to terms with the daunting legacy of the inherited aesthetic and political forms. Hutcheon states that parody is a never-ending opportunity for contemporary artists, allowing them to "refunction those forms to their own needs" (*A Theory of Parody* 4). Significantly, in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, by employing examples from postmodernist architecture, Hutcheon indicates that postmodernist parody has a "deferential," rather than destructive, nature. In her words, it is a "loving, if ironic, refunctioning" of the past (34). Within the realm of Decadent literature, and in relation to

Wilde, the centrality of “deferential” parody and its restorative potential is stressed by Andreas Höfele who, similarly to Hutcheon, sees parody as a response “to history, to a heightened awareness of both the burden and the offering of the past” (152). In the context of French Decadence, referring to Jules Laforgue, Michelle Hanoosh explains that, by parodying conventions and particular works, a Decadent generates new forms which are of the same standing as the original ones. In fact, the idea of the original is blurred, and the sense of hierarchy is lost since *paroidia*, in Greek meaning antiphon, is “something sung in imitation but with a difference” (11), with *para* invoking the idea of a parity, or parallelism, not a ladder of authority.

In Decadence parody was a way leading out of the impasse created by the amassing of the finished, or classical, forms.⁵ As poignantly put by John Gordon, “where there is little prospect for original utterance ... the art of parody is ... a logical consequence” (51). Critics agree that Decadence was weighed down with the artistic bounty inherited from the long nineteenth century. In an evocative allegory, Silke Maria Weineck describes Decadence as an epoch suffering from the Laios complex, a father-figure tenaciously holding onto his legacy, coping with a plight opposite to that which plagued Oedipus. Its problem is “the surplusage of (inherited) *forms*” impossible to accommodate (40) – a predicament noted, independently, by Max Nordau, as a “dilemma of accumulation,” and by Nietzsche, who saw the decadent as “buried under the accumulating debris of all times” (qtd. in Weineck 41, 43). Notably, British Decadent Aestheticism was all the more burdened with tradition since, if compared with French Aestheticism and Decadence, it was much belated. Within a short span of a decade – or perhaps within just the first five years of the 1890s, the borderline being drawn by Wilde’s trial – British literature produced works which simultaneously promoted and parodied Decadent sensibility, just as the emblematic *Picture of Dorian Gray* was both a breviary and a parody of Decadence.⁶

The irreducible ambivalence of Decadent parodies – and an anticipation of the post-modernist dialogue of forms – is clearly demonstrable in Max Beerbohm. In “Diminuendo,” for instance, Beerbohm both targets and exploits Walter Pater’s “new euphuism” as a literary style killing all spontaneity of expression. In the first lines of his essay, tongue in cheek, Beerbohm confesses:

I was angry that [Pater] should treat English as a dead language, bored by that sedulous ritual wherewith he laid out every sentence as in a shroud – hanging, like a widower, long over its marmoreal beauty or ever he could lay it at length in his book, its sepulchre. (163–164)

But this mockery is also a perfect imitation, a repetition “with a difference,” down to Pater’s habit of multiplying metaphors (*his book, his*

sepulcher), excessive formality (*marmoreal* rather than marble) and, as in the proleptic reference, the tendency to end long descriptive phrases with just one morbid word (*sepulcher*). On the same playful note, in the biblically solemn and religiously monotonous recitation of the accomplishments of the Prince of Wales, “Diminuendo” provides a parallel to Pater’s purple passage on Mona Lisa, juxtaposing the lengthy chant about the “She” who “is older than the rocks” (*Renaissance* 80) with the mantra focused on the “He” who “has hunted elephants”:

He has hunted elephants through the jungles of India, boar through the forests of Austria, pigs over the plains of Massachusetts ... He has marched the Grenadiers to chapel through the white streets of Windsor. He has ridden through Moscow, in strange apparel, to kiss the catafalque of more than one Tzar...⁷

“Diminuendo” also includes a comical response to Pater’s appeal to live passionately for the sake of the moment: a reply to Pater’s reminder that a “counted number of *pulses* only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life” (*Renaissance* 152; my italics.). In an imitation of Pater’s style, and with a comical reassurance, Beerbohm responds to Pater by setting for himself the task of exploring life through the morning paper: “Humanity will range itself in the columns of my morning paper. No *pulse* of life will escape me (“Diminuendo” 159; my italics).

The same parodist method, extensively described by scholars,⁸ is used in “A Defence of Cosmetics,” where Beerbohm employs the style of Victorian sages (Ruskin and Carlyle; but also of the American sage, Thoreau) to hail the fact that the “Victorian era comes to its end” (2), but also in order to mock Decadent preciousness in appearance. By using inflated style for a trivial purpose, he also burlesques the means (the language), not only the target (cosmetics), of his parody. Effectively, the “deferential” parodist parallelism supersedes his essay’s satiric aim.⁹ It must be said that Beerbohm’s essay was misread by his contemporaries. A Victorian response to “A Defence of Cosmetics,” as indignant as it is unwarranted, in itself is a many-tiered parody. Erroneously taking at face value Beerbohm’s support of make-up, as S. N. Behrman indicates, *Punch* reacted to his essay with a spoof on cosmetics – an anonymous “Ars Cosmetica,” a parody of Isaac Watts’ poem “Against Idleness and Mischief,” written in 1715, which, in 1867, had been parodied by Lewis Carroll as “How doth the little crocodile” (qtd. in Landow). A long chain of parodies ensues. By turning their style into a travesty, Beerbohm parodied the Victorian sages, whose style he apparently used to parody the Decadents; but his parody was misread, and parodied by *Punch* with a spoof which, in itself, was a parody of Isaac Watts’ religious verse. The result is one parody opening onto another in a multiplication of *parallel* lines. Trying to defend himself in a letter included

in the second volume of *The Yellow Book* – by apparently striving to explain the true target of his burlesque – Beerbohm confuses his readers even more. He states that his aim was to parody the style of Decadent literature (not of the sages): “paradox and marivaudage, lassitude, a love of horror and all unusual things, a love of argot and archaism” (284). Cosmetics aside, now Beerbohm claims that he hits the Decadent style, not the hilariously distorted style of Victorian sages, or – more challengingly – suggests that the Victorian and the Decadent, earnestness and perverseness – or the classic and its parodic distortion – run parallel. He shows that the target is ever-shifting, or perhaps, that there is no target to parody, only a formal opportunity.

2. Social parody and the disappearance of the original: Oscar Wilde’s knee-breeches

For social parody, no figure was a more tempting subject than that of Wilde, who more than taunted his parodists.¹⁰ In fact, “an easy, if not eager target” (King), Wilde rose to fame by teasing his American public. The story of Wilde’s choice of the knee-breeches for his American tour – duly mocked by Beerbohm¹¹ – may seem as trivial as it is illuminating by bringing forth the social dimension of parody, stressed by Hutcheon in her *Politics of Postmodernism*. To appreciate the parodic force of Wilde’s frivolous apparel one should recall that, according to Hutcheon, parody also subverts social, political and ideological practices.¹² Hutcheon opposes Frederic Jameson’s (classicist) view of parody, which legitimizes only the parody of the “unique styles” and relegates other forms of repetition to the category of “pastiche’ or empty parody.”¹³ To Hutcheon, postmodernist parody performs a liberating role by resisting any “totalizing model,” any “closure” (*The Politics* 94–95, 99). (In that, it differs from modernist parody which was inclined in the direction of classicism.)¹⁴ The new wine bursting the old wineskins, parody shows that forms and formations – artistic and ideological – live longer than the structures of power and sensibility which they served and by which they had been sustained.

In the light of postmodernist theory of social/political parody, Wilde is the parodist par-excellence. Boldly confronting American audiences with his lectures on Aestheticism, and affronting them with his notorious velvet knee-breeches, the British eccentric assumed the role which one might be tempted to term as that of an *ex-centric*¹⁵: he would de-center authority from the center point, destabilize both the aestheticist and philistine discourses from within.

Wilde toured the United States, introducing Americans to the Aesthetic movement which, at the same time, was being mocked by W. S. Gilbert and

Arthur Sullivan's comical opera *Patience, or Bunthorne's Bride*. A box-office success in London in the spring of 1881, *Patience* repeated its success in New York in Autumn the same year. The opera features two aesthetes, Reginald Bunthorne and Archibald Grosvenor, both modeled on Wilde's mannerisms. A month after the opera arrived in New York, its producer, Richard D'Oyly Carte, invited Wilde-the-arch-aesthete to come to America and give readings on Aestheticism. Displaying great business acumen, D'Oyly Carte used Wilde as a "curtain raiser" (Pine 35). While Wilde's lectures furnished ideas, the opera would provide their ludicrous realizations. The motive was unapologetically economic: parallel profits, in which Wilde had his share, were drawn from both the opera *tournee* and the lecture tour.

Wilde apparently revelled in the ambivalence of the whole enterprise. Not only did he expound on Aestheticism but he also illustrated its tenets by his sartorial eccentricity. While delivering lectures, he would be donning the velvet knee-breeches, with which he alluded to Bunthorne's aesthetic dress. He wore them on the day of his first lecture, 9 January 1882 (156–157).¹⁶ He also used them for self-promotion. Soon after his arrival in New York, he was photographed in his knee-breeches by celebrity photographer Napoleon Sarony. The breeches turned into his trademark. They also became an issue. Ellmann recounts the occasions on which they caused more than a stir. The sight of them outraged Wilde's co-lecturer, Archibald Forbes, the man who would have a gentleman pride himself on his war medals rather than on velvety garments (166–167). Henry James, as Ellmann surmises, was "revolted" by the breeches Wilde wore on the occasion of the party they both attended in Washington (170). Finally, they provoked Boston students into blatant mockery. But Wilde was quicker with his ironic response than they with their scorn, so that the young men seated in the first two rows and wearing the offending breeches, each of them holding a sunflower, were greeted by the conventionally clad Wilde who, having condescendingly pronounced the boys "sincere," nevertheless expressed the wish to be "save[d] from [his] disciples" (173–174). Ultimately, it was left open to question whether Bunthorne's dress was modeled on Wilde's, or whether Wilde copied Bunthorne's dress. Significantly, the relationship between the two was that of postmodern parody as parallelism rather than of classicist parody as criticism.

While Wilde's American audiences were allowed to feel superior in making a connection between Wilde's and Bunthorne's dress, the knee-breeches, as Ellmann indicates, had one more significance of which Wilde's American public would be oblivious: they were part of the official dress of the Apollo Lodge at Oxford (157). Indeed, the picture which Sarony took of Wilde wearing the knee-breeches is currently displayed on the website of the Apollo as an example of how formally the officers of the Lodge should dress.

Given that Wilde was initiated into Oxford free-masonry in the year 1885, that is, three years after his return from America, the knee-breeches he donned in America were a sign of the allegiance that he was yet to make. They were a sign without any legitimate referent. Their status was that of an infinitely malleable sign (or an empty signifier, in the postmodernist idiom): a sign of free-masonry, illegitimately assumed at the time; an emblem of aesthetic rebellion; an index of aestheticist effeminacy, turned into a sign of solidarity with the mocked aesthete and, mischievously, as in the Boston experience, exposed as a sign of grotesque incomprehension of the spirit of aestheticism on the side of its mockers. In a simplified twofold scheme, Wilde's knee-breeches were a sign of the classic – Renaissance, exceedingly formal – attire and of the parodic, aestheticist excess. Or, perhaps, they were all of these at once: a sign of a rebellion against being framed by some totalizing view?

From Symons's point of view, they might have been seen as post-classic, but from the postmodernist perspective, they are also parodist and liberating: marking their owner's refusal to be pinned down, his escape from the nightmare which, some thirty years later, T. S. Eliot would describe as being contained within "a formulated phrase." The modernist reference allows for an introduction of a useful concluding contrast. If, as the examples of Beerbohm and Wilde show, to be a Decadent means to conduct a parodist play with classical forms – be it textual or sartorial – then to be doubly parodist, as in Hutcheon's twofold parodist model – in art and in life – means to be a post-classic Decadent and a harbinger of postmodernism. By way of a postscript, it may not be inapposite to note that postmodernism comes after the epoch which, as in Eliot's and T. E. Hulme's theories – and in contrast to Decadence – expressly allied itself with the classic. In that sense, as well, postmodernism is post-classic and, as Jameson would have it, neo-Decadent.

NOTES

¹ In Britain, the claim of Romantic allegiance is explained by John Stokes and critiqued by Graham Hough; in Poland, it was asserted by Maria Niemojowska. The view of European Decadence as romanticism gone morbid was established, in 1930, by Octavio Praz's *The Romantic Agony*. An alternative tradition – based on the distinction between decadence, decadentism, and decadent romanticism – was established by Walter Binni. See Drake 72–78. On the other hand, the neo-classicist spirit is stressed by Holbrook Jackson (91) and William Buckley (214).

² In the year 1876, Pater argued that Romanticism and Classicism were but two aspects "united in perfect art" (*Appreciations* 260); his disciple, Wilde, claimed that "[s]uch expressions as 'classical' and 'romantic' were [...] often apt to become the mere catchwords of schools"

(“The English Renaissance in Art”). In 1922, Jackson saw Decadents as “romantic in their antagonism to current forms, but ... classic in their insistence upon new” (57).

³ The idea of the classic as going beyond “the classic-romantic antithesis” (22) and implying permanence and universality is explained by Frank Kermode (15-45).

⁴ The context of postmodernist parody has been stressed in the interpretations of Wilde. Andreas Höfele classifies Wilde as a “pre-modernist” on account of his *Poems* (imitative of Romantic tradition), *The Critic as Artist* (parodically related to the Platonic model and Victorian sage style), *Canterville Ghost* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Martin Middeke calls Wilde “proto postmodern,” considering the significance Wilde’s biography had for Peter Ackroyd. John Gordon sees Wilde’s *Poems* as an anticipation of post-modernist pastiche. While Höfele’s, Middeke’s, and Gordon’s concerns are with Wilde’s literary works, the present essay focuses on the interaction between literature and social practice.

⁵ For the critical and creative potential of parody, see Riffaterre (on Lautréamont’s *Maldoror* as parodying and, thus, unmasking romantic clichés); Dowling 28–29 (Decadent “participating” parody as a mode of “self-transcendence”); Thornton 28 (Decadent self-parody as “self-preservation”); Buchen 22 (Decadent parody and self-parody in the service of “cosmic” satire). For the potential of parody in the postmodernist context, see Crapanzano 431–432 (on discourse structured as parody).

⁶ Cf., e.g., Höfele on the novel as “neither clearly parodic nor clearly non-parodic” (158).

⁷ For the complete passage, see “Diminuendo” 154–155.

⁸ See, e.g., Homy King, “Mocking the Victorian Sages: Beerbohm’s ‘A Defence of Cosmetics’”; Ariel Sabar, “Beerbohm’s ‘Defense of Cosmetics’”; Leni Zumas, “Beerbohm as Sage and Aesthete: Difficult Definitions.” *English 137* (1992). *The Victorian Web*. 20 Dec. 2013 <<http://www.victorianweb.org>>.

⁹ An analogous process of parodist self-transcendence is apparent in Aubrey Beardsley’s *Venus and Tannhäuser*. The theme of Wagner’s opera is comically reduced to a theme of a quasi-pornographic prose piece, but only to be cast in the form of mock-heroic epic, so that Beardsley could, eventually, laugh at the reverse of sexual indulgence – the artistic over-refinement and dandyesque preciousness. A satire on the Decadent obsession with sexuality turns into a parody on the myth of Decadent rampant lasciviousness (Dowling 29).

¹⁰ For the satires and parodies of Wilde, see, e.g., Ellmann 128–129, Goldfarb 369–371, Dowling 29–30. The most significant ones appeared in 1894, including Jocelyn Quilp’s *Baron Verdigris. A Romance of the Reversed Direction* (on cruel aestheticism espoused in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*); G. S. Street’s *The Autobiography of a Boy* and Robert Hichens’s *The Green Carnation* (both aimed at Wilde and Bosie). The latter was used against Wilde by the prosecution. However, ironically, as noted by Regenia Gagnier, before he went to trial, Wilde had advertised *The Green Carnation* (37–38).

¹¹ See Beerbohm, *Letters to Reggie Turner* 287.

¹² Hutcheon insistently underlines the social embeddedness of art (e.g., *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 25) and parody’s role in subverting social, ideological and political forms of representations (e.g., *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 34–35).

¹³ For Hutcheon’s polemic with Jameson, see, e.g., *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 27.

¹⁴ Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, e.g., was parodic in the modernist, that is, formalist sense, by employing literary and mythological motifs to evoke a sense of formal fragmentation, but simultaneously, to create a unified satiric effect, or a *closure* – a satire on the contemporary dissociation from myth.

¹⁵ Cf. Hutcheon, “Decentering the Postmodern: The Ex-centric,” *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (57–73).

¹⁶ References to Wilde’s American tour, unless otherwise noted, come from Ellmann’s *Oscar Wilde*.

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