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Introduction

In an iconic exchange taking place in Chapter XV of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde uses the term 'fin de siècle' in a fascinating and somehow disturbing way:

> "*Fin de siècle*", murmured Lord Henry.
> "*Fin du globe*", answered his hostess.
> "I wish it were *fin du globe*", said Dorian, with a sigh. "Life is a great disappointment".[1]

Here the idea of the *fin de siècle* is staged dialogically to convey the complexity of meanings associated with it. In Wilde's incredibly sonorous novel the exchange is 'recorded', as it were, in the house of Lady Narborough, during a terribly boring evening, which also sees the arrival of Lady Narborough's daughter, who, "to make matters worse, had actually brought her husband with her".[2] As Gail Marshall puts it:

> The scene works by typically Wildean paradox and humour to ensnare readers into confronting their own prejudices and limitations, and to confound expectations. In particular, in a scene which immediately follows upon Dorian's murder of the painter Basil Hallward and the disposal of the body by Dorian's one time friend Alan Campbell, the expectation of endings, and the assumption of *ennui*, are confounded. Dorian's desire for a definitive ending, for sterility, a lack of continuity, his refutation of his life so far, the languor of his expressed desire, belie the extent of his visceral engagement with the sensational life which is the counterpart of his role as decadent icon.[3]

In this sense, "the extent of his languor testifies precisely to the extent of Dorian's awareness of his inextricable involvement with life, its continuities and complications".[4] What seems absolutely fascinating is, indeed, the capacity of the term 'fin de siècle' to escape or at least problematise the very idea of *endings*; as Marshall points out, in confronting the end of the century – and, in a way, the ending of the narratives which had emerged in the mid-nineteenth-century period – "a creative energy is unleashed which, in its vitality and multiplicity, becomes the most effective statement against our understanding of this period as the end of anything".[5]

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[1] O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 1891, in Id., *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, London, Collins, 1994, p. 205.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 204.

[3] G. Marshall (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the* Fin de Siècle, Cambridge, CUP, 2007, p. 1.

[4] *Ibidem*.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 2.

Although the decade we associate with the *fin de siècle*, that is the 1890s, was a definitely circumscribed period, its origins go back to the 1880s, or even the 1870s, and its reverberations can still be heard in the first half of the twenty-first century and, very interestingly, in the 1960s and 1990s. In many ways, as we will see, we could say that the *fin de siècle* is still with us.

If the *fin de siècle* is all about inhabiting thresholds and, of course, about exceeding boundaries, a fascinating link can be established between some of its protagonists and the pop icons of our age. Most of the artists and writers of the *fin de siècle*, as Jackson observes, died young, several of them scarcely more than youths: we can refer to Wilde himself, but also to Ernest Dowson, Lionel Johnson and Hubert Crackanthorpe, among others. It seems as though "these restless and tragic figures thirsted so much for life, and for the life of the hour, that they put the cup to their lips and drained it in one deep draught".[6] This generation recalls the *27 Club*, that is, the list of popular musicians, artists, actors, and other celebrities – active from the late 1960s to 2011 – who died at age 27. Suffice it to mention such icons as Jimi Hendrix, Brian Jones, Kurt Cobain and Amy Winehouse, all artists who, like many of the *fin-de-siècle* ones, shared an interest in the art of the pose and in the notion of life as a work of art.

But there is more to that. Other contemporary artists have embraced the *fin de siècle* as a cultural moment and critical perspective and have turned it into an artistic stance. For instance, Divine Comedy's singer and leader Neil Hannon entitled his 1998 masterpiece *Fin de Siècle*. A big fan of Wilde, Hannon not only shares the latter's interest in Dante, but also went to Portora Royal School. There is also something profoundly Wildean about Hannon's wit and his charmingly decadent music; besides, Oscar is one of the protagonists of Divine Comedy's 2004 song *Absent Friends*, in which the songwriter makes reference to Wilde's outsideness, portraying him as a lonely child who fought to conquer that very audience, that very world which sent him to an early grave.

We have focused briefly on popular music to define one of the fields in which the legacy of the *fin de siècle* still stands its ground today. More in general, we can affirm that the closing decades of the nineteenth century were a period in which the arts were strategically instrumental in discussing contemporary issues and concerns where art itself became an object of controversy; hence the centrality given to the arts and the dialogue between different art forms in this 2023 journal issue.

The end of the nineteenth century was the age of artists such as Wilde, A.C. Swinburne, Aubrey Beardsley, Arthur Symons, poet and author of *The Decadent Movement in Literature* (1893), and of Walter Pater, an inspirational figure for Wilde, whose *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) might be considered as the most iconic and influential book of the age. And yet the *fin de siècle* is defined not only by crucial figures, but also by key ideas and concepts. One of them is that of 'degeneration', which was notoriously turned into a socio-medical category by Max Nordau in his *Degeneration* (1892). That term had a (pseudo-)scientific basis and was actually used to address and condemn artists such as Henrik Ibsen, Richard Wagner, the Impres-

[6] H. JACKSON, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century*, London, Cape, (1913) 1927, pp. 157-58.

sionists and Wilde himself as belonging to the realms of the insane and criminals. A more relevant and recurrent label, which often becomes almost a synonym for the *fin de siècle*, is 'decadence'. After pointing to the complex genealogy of the term, starting from its connection with the decline of the Roman Empire and with ideas of social or artistic decay, David Weir stresses how

> in the modern era, just about every manifestation of decadence owes its origins, either directly or indirectly, to a loosely affiliated group of artists who lived and worked in Paris […]. Paris produced the first poet (Baudelaire) to be retrospectively described as decadent by the first critic of decadence (Gautier). Paris also boasts the first novelist of Decadence Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) whose novel *À rebours* had enormous influence on the next generation of decadents. That generation was mostly British, so one can say that decadence in the nineteenth century 'travels' from Paris to London […]. The best known of these London decadents is undoubtedly Oscar Wilde.[7]

Wilde's complexity and his very *decadence* are investigated in various articles of the present collection. Jane Desmarais and Weir insist on how for some people and critics "decadence is simply negation. It is *not* moral, *not* tasteful and so on", while "for others, such negation is necessary as a critique of social norms or as a creative alternative to artistic conventions".[8] This is exactly the sense and meaning of Wilde's personal and artistic parable. Desmarais and Weir suggest that "the way decadence functions, conceptually, allows for some remarkably dynamic reversals of meaning, such that the idea of decay or decline becomes or can become generative, inventive, creative, even progressive".[9] In this perspective, the artistic decadence experienced during the *fin de siècle* can become a site to give voice and shape to what is *other*, multiple and multiform. It can turn into the originator of a revolution taking place at many different levels simultaneously. The two critics conclude that "not only is the concept of decadence still a part of contemporary life, but also that it may be, in some sense, necessary to an informed understanding of the anxieties and uncertainties that beset us today".[10]

In the opening article of this special issue, "Confederates in Cool: Oscar Wilde and Jack Johnson", Neil Sammells insists on how Wilde and the famous boxer Jack Johnson took their pleasures dangerously and, in so doing, exposed the hypocrisy and prejudice of the society they both fascinated and angered. They did so with a shared understanding of the power of the pose and of style and attitude. Johnson, according to Sammells, was quite conscious of the politics of the impudence he cultivated, which he saw as a necessary 'artistic' response to a philistinism that valued utility above beauty. Dandyism was for each of them a way of freeing themselves, of 'possessing' themselves. "Attitude is everything", said Wilde, and Johnson recognised this too. They were, as Sammells concludes, "confederates in Cool".

Journalism played a key role in the decade. The emergence of the New Journalism in the late-Victorian period saw the birth of such newspapers as the *Daily Mail* in 1896, and paved the way for a journalistic style filled with celebrity sensation and gossip. It

[7] D. WEIR, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, OUP, 2018, pp. 3, 6.
[8] J. DESMARAIS and D. WEIR (eds), *Decadence and Literature*, Cambridge, CUP, 2019, p. 4.
[9] *Ibidem*.
[10] *Ibidem*, p. 10.

also pioneered the celebrity interview, which, as is known, helped Wilde achieve his fame. Yet, this was also the age of the iconic periodicals *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*. In his article "Yellow or Savoy? An Introduction to the Nineties", Gino Scatasta shows how, while the debate around the Eighteen-Nineties in England has often led to considering the decade as characterised by the widespread dissemination of ideas, attitudes and works related to Decadence and Aestheticism, the analysis of some aspects of these two magazines might offer a different and illuminating introduction to the period, with all its contradictions and complexity. The yellow colour, a connoting feature of the decade which also gave the name to its most famous magazine, was actually only one of a series of colours that tinged the period, and *The Yellow Book* and *The Savoy*, while trying to find a difficult balance among different trends and goals, reflected more than a single current or attitude, testifying to a more composite and complete picture of that historical phase.

In "A *Fin-de-Siècle Stilophagus*: Aubrey Beardsley Between Originality and Originarity", Giuseppe Virelli focuses on Aubrey Beardsley, an artist whose name is strictly connected with *The Yellow Book*. Although his artistic career spanned little more than five years, it was characterised by a hectic exploration of different modes of aesthetic expression in pursuit of a new and original modern style. The young English artist sought, selected and sampled a wide range of figurative vocabularies from very different sources and set out to extrapolate their essence, thereby creating an artistic language that was entirely personal but also attuned to the spirit of his day. From his revival of the Pre-Raphaelite figurative tradition to his reinterpretation of stylistic traits belonging to distant cultural spheres in terms of both time and space (ranging from Greek vase painting to Japanese prints and Rococo imagery), he distilled a unique and instantly recognisable language grounded in a 'synthetic' approach.

According to some critics, the *fin de siècle* 'ended' in 1895, with Wilde's arrest and imprisonment. The title of Laura Giovannelli's paper – "'It is not the prisoners who need reformation. It is the prisons': Oscar Wilde's Path towards Civic Engagement in his (Post-)Prison Years" – comes from a quotation of the author's letter to the *Daily Chronicle* of 27 May 1897. In this analysis the focus shifts away from such *topoi* as the Irish dandy's brilliant rhetoric and aphoristic wit; emphasis is placed instead on the human profile of an artist who, in the wake of his condemnation for 'acts of gross indecency', was to come to grips with two harrowing years of imprisonment with hard labour. The article sheds light on various issues as well as medico-scientific, sociocultural and political contexts, ranging from the notions of 'Decadence', 'regression' or 'degeneration' to the penitentiary regime in late nineteenth-century England. Particular attention is paid to Wilde's trials, conviction and prison writings and to an awareness-raising campaign through which he exposed the physical and psychological punishments that were routinely inflicted on inmates, including children. From the Clemency Petition to the Home Secretary (2 July 1896) to the two letters to the *Daily Chronicle* (1897 and 23 March 1898), Giovannelli shows how the disengaged artist's stance left room for a deep sense of moral and civic commitment.

In the series entitled *Oscar Wilde Murder Mysteries* (2008-2019), Gyles Brandreth imagines a close collaboration between Wilde and Arthur Conan Doyle. In her "Aestheticism

and Degeneration: Echoes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Adventure of the Illustrious Client'", Camilla Del Grazia further looks at these parallels by investigating possible points of contact between Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Conan Doyle's "The Adventure of the Illustrious Client" (1924), one of Sherlock Holmes's final exploits. When considering the portrait motif and its metaphorical meanings, it is clear that, in Wilde's novel, Dorian's picture is imbued with connotations that are deeply associated with the author's aesthetic beliefs as well as with a decadent parable. In the case of Holmes's adventure, a detailed characterisation of Baron Adelbert Gruner, the evil antagonist, seems to similarly work as a kind of portrait where 'surface' and 'inner truth' are strictly interconnected. In line with *fin-de-siècle* theories such as those of degeneration and criminal anthropology, the villain exhibits physical marks that soon denounce his inner corruption (as does Dorian's picture). Moreover, in the final resolution of the case, the criminal's face is deformed by vitriol and explicitly described as a painting losing its original shapes and colours. This 'liquefaction process' further highlights, as Del Grazia points out, the increasingly pervading link between inner and outer decadence, in a way that unveils similarities between Dorian and Baron Gruner, the two corrupt aesthetes.

In "*Fin de Siècle*, *Fin du Globe*: Mars Invaders and the End of Beauty as a Transatlantic Phenomenon", Alessandra Calanchi focuses on H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*. Having been serialised in 1897 in both *Pearson's Magazine* in the UK and *Cosmopolitan* in the USA, this novel is seen as an early example of a text circulating in a globalised market. Through *The War of the Worlds*, Western imagery had to cope with the fear of a concrete threat coming from other worlds and capable of destroying the 'civilisation' that Europe and America had painstakingly built. The narrator becomes the symbol of a crepuscular phase of Western society that is already on its way to turning into a wasteland. Thanks to a *deus-ex-machina* device consisting in a powerful coalition between God and biology, he eventually survives the 'end of beauty', not only in an aesthetic sense, but also as a cultural heritage that should be preserved. As such, he is one of the most interesting and controversial characters of dystopian fiction. Calanchi deals with both the profile of the narrator as a transmedia character and the American reception of Wells's novel in the phase of transition from the Gay Nineties to the Progressive Era.

In "Writing the Occult: A Reading of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race*", Lorenzo Santi examines the rhetoric of the occult in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1871 novel, placing it in the context of the late nineteenth-century Occult Revival. A writer, aristocrat, politician and Secretary of State for the Colonies when Benjamin Disraeli was Prime Minister, Bulwer-Lytton was one of the most eminent occultists of the Victorian age and a firm believer in the redemptive power of magic. As such, he supported the idea that occult practices could provide access to the deepest mysteries of the universe, freeing man from the constraints of materialism and of the positivist episteme. Moreover, Bulwer-Lytton had direct contacts with the vast panorama of occultism thanks to his personal acquaintance with Eliphas Lévi, the leading esotericist of the day. From a literary point of view, this was to find telling reverberations in *The Coming Race*, one of the author's most enduring works and possibly his spiritual testament.

In “Hyacinths and Narcissi: The Flowers of Uranian Poetry from Decadence to Modernism”, Paola Di Gennaro shows how the Uranians – the group of English poets and artists who shared a common love for boys and poetry in a period that went from about 1880 to 1930 – resorted to a set of symbols and imagery as a mode to conceal the object of their writings, appropriating *fin-de-siècle* Decadence and modelling a real ‘fashion’, an artistic attitude that might well be defined as ‘Decadent Neoclassicism’. Di Gennaro examines the uses and functions of flowers in Uranian poetry, more specifically two specimens often associated with male-male love as from the late nineteenth century: hyacinths and narcissi. One of the reasons behind their employment exceeds the realm of aesthetic choices, as they are part of a strategy adopted to conceal – or, simultaneously, highlight – the Uranian theme. Di Gennaro also investigates possible Uranian influences on the works of the authors who, at least in their explicit intentions, would flee from their poetics, namely the Modernist poets.

In “When the Novel or the Play’s the Thing – *Fin de Siècle* Meets Sex, Class, and Literary Ambition”, Jocelynne A. Scutt illustrates how E.M. Forster’s and John Galsworthy’s lyrical style allowed them to explore what the Victorians had hidden, that is to say, the disparities between the working-class and upper-crust circles in England, along with women’s subjugation to the Empire’s demands. Forster and Galsworthy showed an ability to partially cover class cleavages, deception, deceit, and unlawfulness, as though beguiling their readers into a state of unwariness only to dramatically confront them with the truth. In *Howards End*, Forster can be said to explore class, subterfuge, and social borders so as to incorporate into his ‘lyricism’ the crushing of a last will and testament, theft of property, unmarried motherhood, murder or manslaughter, all the while painting a picture of bucolic charm and purportedly happy families and marriages. Galsworthy’s *Man of Property* (from *The Forsyte Saga*) was published shortly before *Howards End* and similarly combined the poetic with the practical, the idealism that generated hope for a new world in a new century with the expectations resting with the pragmatism of a certain type of Englishman: ‘my property’, ‘my own’, ‘my wife’, ‘my life’, ‘my family’, the ‘my’ being foremost, and yet bound to be called into question by the *fin-de-siècle* context.

In his important book *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, David Weir argues for the transitional role of Decadence within the cultural modulation of Romanticism into Modernism. The link between Wilde and Modernist icon James Joyce has been at the centre of recent academic research, as confirmed by the study “‘Se solo Wilde fosse vivo per vederti’: la lunga ombra di Oscar Wilde sull’opera di James Joyce”, in which Elisabetta D’Erme shows how Joyce drew on Wilde not only to talk about the fate of Irish art – as he did in the article he dedicated to him in Trieste’s *Piccolo della Sera* on 24 March 1909 – but also to allude in his writings to various themes, including homosexuality. As a matter of fact, Joyce’s entire work overflows with more or less explicit debts, references, allusions and quotations from Wilde’s texts, and their very common condition of exiles/artists would be enough to read their output and biographies in the light of some parallelism. D’Erme therefore problematises Joyce’s statement – through Buck Mulligan in “Telemachus” – that “We have grown out of Wilde and paradoxes”. Indeed, Wilde inhabits not only *Ulysses*, but also – and

especially – *Finnegans Wake*, where Joyce thematises the topic of the 'fall' and traces the ultimate 'portrait' of a long series.

In "Wilde, Beardsley and Beyond. *Salomé* in the Cinema: From Charles Bryant to Al Pacino", Pierpaolo Martino investigates how cinematic versions of Wilde's works and life span the entirety of cinema history from the silent era to the present age. *Salomé* is undoubtedly the most *decadent* of Wilde's plays, one in which the author's debt to the Symbolist poets clearly emerges through the disturbing music which characterises his 'literary score'. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the play had an enormous influence on cinema and popular music. In the 1923 silent version directed by Charles Bryant, the highly stylised costumes, exaggerated acting and minimal sets created a screen image that was much more focused on atmosphere and on conveying a sense of the characters' heightened desires than on conventional plot development. The film was shot completely in black and white, matching the illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley in the printed edition of Wilde's play. On the other hand, the most recent filmic version of *Salomé* – the 2011 celebrated docufilm *Wilde Salomé* by iconic director and actor Al Pacino – documents a period in which Pacino performed in a production of *Salomé*, directed by actress and theatre director Estelle Parson at Los Angeles' Wadsworth Theatre while he was also making a movie relating to the mounting of the show and shooting a narrative film version of the play. Martino shows how the film is for Al Pacino, and of course for the audience, a journey, and, most importantly, a *process* in which Pacino re-writes not only the play, but Wilde himself. Indeed, *Wilde Salomé* stages his 'love affair with Oscar Wilde' and his desire to explore the latter's legacy in contemporary culture.

Taking a cue from this last comment, we could say that the present collection stands out as an attempt to stage the 'love affair' or critical dialogue of the authors analysed – as well as of the authors of the articles – with the *fin de siècle*, pointing to its important legacy in our modern and contemporary culture. The (British) *fin de siècle* represents, indeed, a unique and extremely fertile intellectual moment in cultural and social history we are all indebted to.

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