

**Zeitschrift:** SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature  
**Herausgeber:** Swiss Association of University Teachers of English  
**Band:** 20 (2007)  
  
**Artikel:** American decadence : a new field for research  
**Autor:** McCormack, Jerusha  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-100062>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 15.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## American Decadence: A New Field for Research

Jerusha McCormack

Over the last thirty years, a great deal of attention has been paid to the English 1890s as a decade during which artists branded as "decadent" revolted against the values of late Victorianism to usher in the new aesthetics of modernism. Yet little or no attention has been paid to a cognate development in America – ironic since the great modernists, such as Pound and Eliot, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens – were literally grounded in the American 1890s. In America this was expressed less as a coherent movement than as an aesthetic shift that in many ways resembled the syndrome of English "decadence." Oscar Wilde's visit to America in 1881 provided a rallying point for the incipient aesthetic movement, particularly in East Coast America. After his return to America, Wilde took on much of the resident American painter J. M. Whistler's aestheticism and turned it, by a kind of psychic ju-jitsu, into a public weapon with which to satirize the middle class. Meanwhile in New England – that home of the Puritan – Ralph Ellis Cram (1863 – 1942) initiated new aesthetic standards in the architecture of Gothic revivalist churches such as St. Thomas on Fifth Avenue in New York. Identified as part of "Boston Bohemia," Cram became the centre of an artistic circle which included the poets Richard Hovey, Bliss Cameron and Louise Guiney, the book designer Bernard Goodhue, and the photographer Fred Holland Day who discovered, in turn, Khalil Gibran. Given its wide range of influence and espousal of "decadent" values as a way of asserting aristocratic style against a rising tide of vulgarity, Cram's circle offers a useful focus for analyzing the new aesthetic values of the American 1890s which were instrumental in ushering in artistic modernity.

"It is true that we are in the last years of a definite period, on  
that decline that precedes the opening of a new epoch."

*Ralph A. Cram*

Over the last thirty years, a great deal of attention has been paid to the English 1890s. It is now regarded as a decade during which artists, often branded as “decadent,” staged a revolt which in turn ushered in the new aesthetics of modernism.

Yet little or no attention has been paid to a cognate development in America – ironic since the great modernists, such as Pound and Eliot, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens – were literally grounded in the American 1890s. Yet I believe that in America, during this decade, there emerged an artistic/cultural movement that in many ways resembled the syndrome of English decadence. But as the category has not been identified as such – in fact, its existence has been actively denied, both at the time and since – it is only now becoming possible to establish to what extent this phenomenon has existed in turn-of-the-century America.

The purpose of this essay is to map out this movement as it in fact appears in America and to propose how a fresh category, called *American Decadence*, provides a promising focus for researchers working in American Studies.

Of course, identifying such a cultural movement depends on how you define it. Over the last thirty years, much energy has been expended by academics studying 1890s England in arguing about what exactly “decadence” might mean (Bristow 7-13). The difficulty appears to be that those attempting such a definition often do not recognize that decadence – despite a variety of manifestos and dedicated media outlets – manifests itself less as a movement *for* than a movement *against*. Once one acknowledges decadence as a countercultural phenomenon, then it becomes more easily identifiable not only in England and Europe but also as a powerful cultural presence within turn-of-the century America.

The denial of its presence in America began in the earliest months of Oscar Wilde’s notorious visit from 1881-1882, as evidenced by a cartoon in *The Daily Graphic* (Boston) dated 19 January 1882. Here the Old Lady of fashionable Beacon Hill is shown at her doorstep refusing entry to a young Oscar Wilde, resplendent in velvet jacket and knickerbockers.

Die Bildrechte sind nicht freigegeben

Le droit à l'image n'est pas approuvé

The publication rights are not released



Oscar Wilde had been sent to America by Richard D'Oyly Carte, as a living advertisement for his production of Gilbert and Sullivan's newest comic opera, *Patience*. Despite the success of *Patience*, currently running in New York, D'Oyly Carte was anxious that an American audience would not recognize in its hero, Bunthorne, the stereotypical English Aesthete. So he hit on the idea of sending its living embodiment, Oscar Wilde, as a way of educating the transatlantic audience – and at the same time publicizing his play. Thus, in the cartoon, *The Old Lady* is simply sending Wilde back to the city which had already welcomed Bunthorne. But she does so in the name of a natively Bostonian aestheticism – one, she asserts, of “our own.” What I will try to show is that, in fact, the kind of “aestheticism” that flourished in Boston around this time did in fact have much more in common with the sub-culture evolving around the figure of Oscar Wilde than the Old Lady is willing to acknowledge.

This needs to be argued, for what is really startling is how *The Old Lady*'s dismissive gesture continues to represent a position maintained even up to this day. Confronted with similarities between artistic practices and preoccupations in late nineteenth-century England and America, academics are still apt to characterize the English as “decadent” and the American as “aesthetic” or “bohemian.” In so doing, they have missed a valuable opportunity to connect this incipient countercultural movement in America with the more visible, and disturbing, events in London and Paris.

It takes the publication of an anthology such as *Decadents, Symbolists, and Aesthetes in America* (2000) to call attention to the many valuable, if minor, American writers and critics writing during this period – and how many of them were, in the years around the turn of the century, to look overseas to exactly such figures as Wilde, Verlaine, and Mallarmé as models to imitate (Forster 3). But why were such writers virtually ignored during the time of the formation of the canon of American art during the 20s and 30s, and later, in the Cold War aesthetics of the 50s and 60s? One can only account for this neglect as one more instance of an over-riding commitment to American Exceptionalism – an approach that has surely, by this decade, become recognized as almost totally bankrupt.

As already noted, one key obstacle to exploring similarities between the American and the English 1890s has been the problems of defining “decadence.” If one defines “decadence” less as an organized, self-conscious artistic revolution – and more as a disparate yet distinct

counter-cultural trend – then it is possible to recognize many parallels between the English 1890s and turn-of-the century American artistic trends. In both countries one finds, for instance, a movement of minor writers/artists, who tended to publish in “little magazines” (in America, one would cite *The Chap-Book* and *M’lle New York*). In America, these artists looked self-consciously to Paris and London in their effort to create a new aesthetic. That aesthetic involved a new style: one that kept to the surface, that reveled in its allusion to other arts, aiming to be consciously artificial while exploring subjects that challenged the boundaries of the conventional. But most of all, for these artists, decadent style was understood as one extending beyond the mere aesthetic object into questions of life-style itself.<sup>1</sup>

In these terms, decadence in America can best be understood as a syndrome, not as a coherent intellectual project. But as a syndrome, this movement becomes so pervasive that, as it plays out over succeeding generations in American culture, one might regard it as nothing less than the beginnings of a larger paradigm shift, one which challenges the boundaries of every major category: whether of gender, religion, class or nationality. Repudiation is not revolt: in essence what decadence seeks to do is to play with conventions, not destroy them. It is by nature transgressive, but its very transgressiveness is in itself a kind of back-handed endorsement of the boundaries it crosses. In this sense, “decadence” may be distinguished from “modernism” as revolt is distinct from revolution. In effect, what the decadent paradigm sought to do is to replace the moral with the purely aesthetic as a primary cultural reference point.

What renders the “decadent” distinct from the merely “aesthetic” or “art-for-art’s” sake movements is that decadence carries this agenda out of the merely artistic realm into considerations of life-style itself. As Oscar Wilde so succinctly put it: “Manners, not morals, are the important thing.” Within this context, decadence seeks to replace morality with “the artistic” as a guide to living: art-style, in the sense of attitude and address, finds its origins and outcome in life-style itself. That might be what is implied by the preference, among American art-historians and critics, for the adjective “Bohemian” – in the sense that “Bohemia” itself originates in a French novel, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème* (1845-49), by Henri Murger, which depicts the “romantic” or unconventional way

---

<sup>1</sup> For a further development of this argument, see McCormack, in Bristow 2005.

artists are supposed to live (poor, consumed by love – ideally hopeless – and dying young). The decadent propensity toward such life-styles can be charted in America generation by generation, from that of the Gilded Age to “The Lost Generation.” To reinforce this point, one only has to read the short, potted biographies of those writers chosen to represent *Decadents, Symbolists, and Aesthetes in America* – an anthology of writers publishing from the late Victorian to the early modern period. So many of these lives are prose-poems of dislocation, despair, early death and suicide that one is tempted to wonder whether they might be fabricated (Foster 157-163).

But from the 1890s onwards, in both Europe and America, perhaps the most visible manifestation of the decadence would have been in terms of the performance of gender. Both in the States and in England, the revolt against prevailing gender stereotypes took the form of the creation of new categories. One, which was first given its name by an obscure German psychologist in 1869, Karl Maria Kertbeng, and popularized by the work of Kraft-Ebing’s book *Psychopathia Sexualis* in 1886, was that of the *homosexual*. Previously, homosexuals were defined (in particular, by the Roman Church) by their actions, not as having a separate and distinct sexual identity. As a book such as Chris White’s *Nineteenth-Century Writings on Homosexuality: A Sourcebook* (1999) makes clear, what was emerging in the 1880s was a new sexual identity which served to redefine masculinity, in part, by its aesthetic and more specifically, homoerotic, qualities.

In common with all the transformations initiated by what became known as “decadence,” the emergence of this new gender category was an international phenomenon. A crystallization of this new identity in the last decades of nineteenth-century English culture used the poetry of Walt Whitman as a catalyst – thus ironically evolving a sub-culture of homoerotic masculinity which would eventually be re-imported to the United States. Legal penalties existed beforehand for acts of sodomy; but as yet no one, stable name existed in the late 1880s to identify “the homosexual” (a term that became professional parlance in England only about a decade later). Thus it might be argued that the official recognition of this category of sexual identity was (ironically) brought about by the UK 1885 Criminal Amendment Act, which rendered all sexual acts between males, public or private, consensual or not, now subject to the provisions of criminal law. It is this legislation that sent Oscar Wilde to jail nine years later for “acts of gross indecency.”

While Wilde, during his trials, was quite eloquent in his defence of "the love that dare not speak its name," the new homosexual subculture of puritanical America tended to be far more guarded and discreet. Yet, as Blanchard makes clear, there was a distinct and observable gay underworld in America at the time, one that publicly resonated to the kiss given to Wilde by Whitman (Blanchard 10-19). Because it was an underworld, and one more fugitive and muted in end-of-the century America than in England, one might argue that the emergence of the homoerotic on that side of the Atlantic tended to be more visible in those arts other than literature. Thomas Eakins's paintings, for instance, have often been cited as evidence of this new aestheticising of the young male body. But, as a manifestation of this trend in America, I would concentrate on the work of the photographer, F. Holland Day, whose portraits of young male nudes are astonishing in their erotic qualities.

A case in point is Day's "The Marble Faun" dated 1896 [<http://americanhistory.si.edu/1896/i13.htm>]. It is a portrait of the pre-adolescent son of a family friend, but its title is taken from Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1860 novel, *The Marble Faun*. Its central character is Donatello, Count of Mount Beni, whose startling resemblance to the statue of the Faun by Praxiteles becomes a metaphor for his strange mingling of human and animal qualities, for amoral attitudes derived from living a simple life of the senses. In this photograph, Day pictures the startlingly white-skinned boy against a forest background, emphasizing his animal-like innocence. The sheer incandescence of his body speaks of its purity. This is the Donatello of the early part of Hawthorne's novel, before he is plunged into the sin which is to humanize him, even as he is punished for it. This is the body purged by its sheer aesthetic beauty from even the taint of homoerotic desire.

As it stands, this photograph is clear evidence of the way American moral categories (which would forbid nudity) are subverted by invoking the aesthetic, by reference not only to ancient Greek art but also to a novel by an esteemed American writer. In addition, by invoking *The Marble Faun*, the photographer could deny its own amorality by implicitly invoking Donatello's *felix culpa* at the close of the story. As such, the photograph represents a clear endorsement of Wilde's description of how, in an inartistic age, the arts borrow from one another. This self- and cross-referencing of art-objects becomes here not merely protective, by insulating the aesthetic object from moral stricture, but also removes such objects into a realm of their own, where they become, as W. B.



Yeats predicted, images which "more images beget": self-inseminating, self-perpetuating, and self-sustaining in terms of their own self-referencing rationale. The arts, in short, have become self-consciously artificial.

Such sophisticated escape routes are not available, however, for others of Day's nude boy-portraits, for which he employed young Italian immigrants he discovered among the Boston East-end slums. However, despite their subtle erotic qualities, or maybe because of them, these photographs are clearly within the soft-focus of the "beautiful." Nor, as Day's biographer, Estelle Jussim, is careful to point out, was there ever any suggestion that Day himself was involved with his models, except as an artist and, occasionally, a mentor (8-10). This assertion does not mean, however, that these pictures are removed in any radical way from Holland's actual life or preoccupations. Day was himself involved with a group of companions, which included Ralph Adams Cram, Herbert Copeland, Bertram Goodhue and Louise Guiney. They considered themselves part of a "Bohemian" Boston; that is, of unconventional society, whose relations, sexual and otherwise, are still a matter of speculation. What is clear is that they saw themselves as the final arbiters of true style, an artistic avante-garde opposed to what they believed to be a rising sea of aesthetic mediocrity, the result of a newly-moneyed middle class – the rising Silas Laphams. While some, if not all, undoubtedly were part of a gay underground culture, what makes them "decadent" (as we will see) is their sustained challenge to the paradigm that art must serve "morality" – in a society where "morality" was defined as prevailing middle-class norms. In contrast, they constituted themselves as a kind of artistic aristocracy, fighting a last losing (but noble) battle against the vulgarities of a new mass society.

In terms of gender, the public redefinitions of categories would also include the increasing visibility of the "new woman." One thinks immediately of the women now entering professions previously closed to them, such as Henry James's Miss Birdseye (a medical doctor) or Henrietta Stackpole (a journalist) – or of those strong-willed women who gained independence through inherited wealth: Isabel Archer, Olive Chancellor. What is startling in some ways is how the New Woman is articulated as another instance of a reaction, as a throwback to Ancient or at least Medieval goddess. Most memorably, perhaps, this new gender prototype emerges as the figure of the Virgin of *The Education of Henry Adams*, in a chapter in which he envisages her as symbolizing an ancient

force offering wholeness to a world being taken into thrall by the new energies of the machine, or Dynamo.

Henry Adam's image of the Virgin represents not merely a protest, but a repudiation of the modern age – and a fine example of T. J. Jackson Lears's analysis how antimodernism transformed American culture between 1880 and 1920. Again, in terms of decadence, this is an instance of reaction, not revolution. Adams clearly positions himself as one living through an age that was coming to an end: the Age of the Virgin – but also the end of the hegemony of the Boston Brahmin. In common with the architect Ralph Cram, Adams understood intuitively how the decline of this old world was to usher in a new era.

One of the fascinating facets of this new trend is the way challenges to one stereotype, such as gender, lead to transgressions in another, such as religion. Consider, for example, how the image of the goddess/Virgin comes to empower the transgressions of the New Woman. As one instance, one might cite the images of the Virgin in murals painted by John Singer Sargent for the Boston Public Library between 1895 and 1919 [[http://sargentmurals.bpl.org/site/imagessection/18\\_images.html](http://sargentmurals.bpl.org/site/imagessection/18_images.html)].

These murals, entitled *The Triumph of Religion*, were intended to represent religion as part of the progress of Western (especially American) civilization.<sup>2</sup> But far from relying on standard images of the patriarchy, this epic “progress of civilization” grants key roles to the feminine. On inspection, Sargent is creating really quite controversial icons symbolizing the new power of women. For instance, in one of the very last pictures to be painted, that of *The Church* (1919), Sargent represents the institution in almost the same terms as that of Henry Adams: as a powerful, mysterious woman holding a veil over the broken body of Christ, which is placed between her thighs in a position suggestive of his crucifixion on the cross – or, perhaps more adventurously, as if emerging from the Church in childbirth (although as a fully grown man). The transgressiveness of this icon has, to my knowledge, never been remarked on. Nor has that of the earliest panel, representing the pagan gods. Here a whole panel is given over to *Astarte*. Radiantly beautiful and bedecked with crown and elaborate headdress, Astarte emerges from a black silhouette of the goddess Neith, described by Sargent as “the vault of heaven, the origin of things, the Mother of gods . . . who spans the entire arch. . . .” [<http://sargentmurals.bpl.org/site/image->

---

<sup>2</sup> Sally M. Promney, *Painting Religion in Public*.

section/01\_images.html] Significantly, this panel was painted in 1895 – and in London – during the period of the trials of Oscar Wilde: another highly public moment when sexuality was being radically redefined.

Sargent's image of empowered women gods in this series culminates in his gorgeous *Madonna of the Sorrows* (1916). [[http://sargentmurals.bpl.org/site/imagessection/09\\_images.html](http://sargentmurals.bpl.org/site/imagessection/09_images.html)]. Here Sargent created a kind of Christian Astarte, giving each her own crescent moon and placing the two female figures diagonally across the room from one another: an example of how artists such as Sargent challenged the notion of "progress of civilization" by invoking images of a past and "decadent" civilization. Their literary equivalent may be found in the poems of another descendent of Massachusetts blue-blood families, George Cabot Lodge, whose "Sonnets of Ishtar" was published in 1902.<sup>3</sup> For both, the Mother-Goddess represents the pinnacle of a civilization that they now see as in decline or (in Sargent's case) as Roman Catholic and therefore as European and "decadent." In the spirit of Lear's analysis of turn-of-the century America, this regression to the ancient prototypes was not itself modern but a way, ultimately, of initiating the modern. In both England and America, "decadence" is one way of describing this kind of back to the future movement in the arts.

Certainly, all three of these paintings must have proved startling to the public of puritanical Boston. One must ask what was a Madonna (and such an extravagant Madonna at that) doing in the Boston Public Library at all? Given the city's long history of anti-Catholic feeling, exacerbated by its resistance to the tides of Irish and Italian immigrants over the last half of the nineteenth century, such a representation must raise questions. Part of a response as to why the Madonna is there, in the heart of Puritan Boston, is that (again) it is one of the emerging prototypes of a new American and "decadent" sensibility. As is well documented (most recently by Ellis Hanson's *Decadence and Catholicism*, 1997) many English decadents became converts to the Roman Catholic Church. In some sense this was part of their counter-cultural protest against what they regarded as "moral" and Protestant norms. As they perceived it, the Roman Church had preserved an unbroken aesthetic tradition which had been lost to the reformed churches. Both the Oxford Movement in 1840s Britain and its outgrowth in the newer Anglo-

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 16. In another passage, Promey describes the influence on Sargent's iconography of James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (first published in 1890).

Catholic movement in the United States emphasized the aesthetic appeal of Catholicism – not merely in “bells and smells” (bells and incense), but in the elaborate rituals which allied beauty with holiness – or, for some, emphasized the holiness of beauty.

Often represented as fascinating and dangerous in earlier nineteenth-century American literature, Roman Catholicism had a distinct counter-cultural appeal. One only has to read Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* to witness the dark fears which besiege the New England Protestant mind confronted by European Catholicism. But in these fears lies the attraction of the forbidden. When this kind of exotic Catholicism becomes allied, as it was in Sargent's *Madonna*, with a “new paganism,” its erotic qualities became undeniable. Thus in such a novel as Harold Frederick's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), it is Celia, the beautiful (and artistic) Catholic daughter of the local Irish builder, who proved his downfall. Her spiritual seduction of Theron Ware, then a Methodist minister, into the religion of the aesthetic, undermines the stability of his mainline Protestant vocation. Significantly, his damnation is seconded by the intellectual seduction of an atheistic scientist. Unable to exorcize the questions now posed by both mind and body, Theron Ware breaks down, only to seek solace in a new kind of evangelical Christianity which promises to heal him.

In Harold Frederick's novel Cecilia's aestheticized Roman Catholicism is clearly shown as an importation. But what this “importation” did was to actually widen a rift already present in nineteenth-century American culture. As D. H. Lawrence so acutely observed after the turn of the century in *Classic American Literature*, America was never a truly “new” society – but one that was born with an “old head on young shoulders.” Thus, inevitably, with at least part of its collective psyche, Americans would take on the European preoccupation with “decadence” as marking the end of an epoch, perhaps even the end of a civilization. There were then two paths Americans would take. Either they would repudiate the Old Europe by emphasizing the robust, the strenuous, the *young* nature of American society, in the manner of Theodore Roosevelt. Or they would, in Ezra Pound's words, “make it new” – and integrate the Old Europe into a new, evolving American aesthetic.

Take, for an example, the alliance, particularly in late-Victorian England, of Roman Catholicism with the homoerotic: emerging as nothing



less than what we might now call “gay spirituality.”<sup>4</sup> It tended to operate by translating both the religious and the sexual into a realm which was primarily aesthetic. After all, since the Greeks, the icon of the beautiful nude boy has been considered not merely sexual, but the basis for that love (*eros*) which leads to higher spiritual development. Insofar as the Roman Church was seen as the home of beauty, it took over this translation of sexual into spiritual desire at a time when the artist was elevated to a kind of god-like status in European culture.

Given the extensive contacts between American artists and the Continent, it should come as no surprise that the new emerging gay culture in turn-of-the century America effected the same translation. This spiritualizing of the boy-nude is most overtly illustrated in the photographs of F. Holland Day. The subject of *Saint Sebastian* (1906) [[www.veredart.com/janet\\_lehr\\_photography.html](http://www.veredart.com/janet_lehr_photography.html)], for instance, clearly authorizes the use of a beautiful young boy, stripped to the waist, depicted in the throes of a religious/erotic death ecstasy. In fact, Saint Sebastian was regarded as virtually the patron saint of the newly emerging gay community (Wilde, having written a poem on Guido Reni’s painting of the saint, took on his actual name in his last incarnation as “Sebastian Melmoth”). Once again, Day protects himself by emphasizing the artificiality of his photograph through its many analogies to paintings such as Reni’s. But if the *Saint Sebastian* would seem challenging to public taste, *The Crucifixion* (1898) goes even further. Here Day pictures his own body, completely naked, as the subject, emerging from deep shadow as both pitifully vulnerable and powerfully mysterious. In style, as in subject, this picture acts as a startling vindication of the power of the artist to become his own god, his own victim.

That kind of power – essentially from the erotic rendered as the ecstatic – also infuses the work of one of F. Holland Day’s closest companions, Ralph Adams Cram. Cram was a polymath: an architect, book designer, writer and aesthete, almost singularly responsible for the revolution in church architecture known as “gay Gothic.” Such works as St. Thomas’s and St. John the Divine in New York City transformed the ecclesiastical landscape as did his designs for the core buildings of West Point and Princeton University. By invoking the high medieval era, Cram was not only identifying it as the pinnacle of Western civilization, but also the moment at which one moved and lived in an aesthetic-cum-

---

<sup>4</sup> *Poems, 1899-1902*. New York: Cameron, Blake & Co., 1902.

spiritual world, in which every gesture or word had its symbolic resonance. It was also a relentlessly hierarchical world, in which male aristocratic culture reached a dominance never again to be found in subsequent Western culture. In revitalizing the medieval, Cram is following Henry Adam's apotheosis of the Virgin as an image of a dying civilization. "It is true we are in the last years of a definite period," Cram wrote; "on that decline that precedes the opening of a new epoch."

The nostalgia for this fading world may be identified with another embodiment of the decadent syndrome: that is, the dandy, exemplified in Cram's own short story "The Decadent, or the Gospel of Inaction" (privately printed, 1893). One of the finest examples of a direct importation of Oscar Wilde's aesthetics into America, Cram's tale documents a revolt against "busyness" (and business) in favour of the leisured life. For Cram, as for Oscar Wilde, the dandy was not merely a gentleman; he was an artist, and, specifically, the artist of his own life. Thus to *be*, not to *do*, was his creed; his style embodied his own epiphany.

To adopt this stance is to adopt (as Charles Baudelaire points out in his famous essay on dandyism) an aristocratic manner as a kind of political protest against the new and rising tide of democracy. If the dandy is a kind of revolutionary, his revolution is reactionary: one of protest against the new mediocrity which threatens to sweep away the high art of the past. As such, the dandy understands himself as personifying the highest values of his culture as against the degraded standards of the crowd. Finally, not only is such a figure highly political, he is indisputably male. An aristocrat is a creation of Empire, and, whereas a woman might personify a subject nation or one in revolt, she cannot bear the symbolic weight of representing a triumphalist imperial culture. For this reason, although the New Woman might seek to appropriate the status of a dandy, she was not able to do so. Her path, in art as in politics, actually lay in not *being*, but *doing*: specifically in exploring new frontiers, particularly in opening up new subjects for art and writing. Or in opening up new vocations, new public platforms for women, as did Jane Addams in opening Hull House in 1890.

By way of contrast, as a male, in relation to his nation, the dandy regards himself as representing an aristocracy of taste. He constructs himself as an aesthetic object. As such, he becomes a living protest against the increasing pressure of the utilitarian/moral views of the middle class. Although he himself may, as a kind of free spirit, move freely across class barriers, he identifies with the style of the aristocracy, even

if he himself was not born into it. In terms of the translation of these class values into those of American democracy, it is fair to point out that Ralph Adams Cram and F. Holland Day both came from the moneyed upper classes of Boston. As such, they were often painfully aware that they were, like Henry Adams, at the end of an era. In their work, as in their life-style, they defined themselves as champions of Europeanized, aristocrat taste as against that increasingly dominated now by ones of a mass society. Yet, although born into privilege, they were not against those who sought to be initiated into it.

In translating the criterion of class from one of birth to one of life-style, the American dandy came into his own. An early example might be Henry James's Gilbert Osmond in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), an American who had become sufficiently Europeanized to understand that creating himself in his own image gave him a kind of power. For those who continue to ignore the phenomenon of the American dandy, perhaps they should begin with looking at the (sorely neglected) poetry of Donald Evans – or that of the man he inspired, Wallace Stevens. Perhaps they should reread Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or be sentenced to repeated viewings of Fred Astaire putting on the Ritz in that great film, *Top Hat* (1935). Finally, they should ask themselves why, every year, that doyen of writerly style, *The New Yorker*, features on its cover a tall, thin gentleman in a top-hat and tails, peering out at the reader (half-contemptuously) through a monocle. From these examples, they should conclude that not only is and was the American dandy alive and well, he constitutes yet another figure that can be called to evidence the decadence in America as a revolt against modernity – which, paradoxically, helped to usher it in. For the dandy is, as Cram understood him, not only upper-class but a throwback to the courtly values of the mock-medieval which he himself exemplified in his architecture.

It is only in these kinds of translated medieval/aristocratic/esoteric terms that one can interpret Day's photograph *The Vigil* (c. 1898). This pictures an adolescent boy seated on a chair and clothed in flowing white robes. As a symbol he is on sacred ground, his feet are bare; across his lap he holds the bared sword of his initiation into knighthood. It is not altogether off the point that Cram's literary magazine was called *The Knight Errant* or that he himself sought initiation into the esoteric Order of the Golden Dawn. As Shand-Tucci's biography (*Boston Bohemia, 1881-1900*) makes abundantly clear, Cram saw himself as an aristo-

crat with a mission, dedicated to seeking the Holy Grail in the desert of what was becoming a mass culture society.

However his public reacted – in a relatively new democratic republic – to such medievalist fantasies, they recognized in Cram's architecture a reprise and ultimately an appropriation of their European heritage. For decadence, was to become, ultimately, an international movement – and Americans were beginning to reckon themselves as among the heirs of the ages, particularly in relation to England. One does not have to count the number of wealthy and well-born American girls who married into the British aristocracy around the turn of the century to appreciate this new alliance. Or recall the fortunes that, during this period, were dedicated to collecting the best of European art in order to bring it into American custody.

And, if America was reaching into the world, the world was also coming to America. The tidal waves of immigrants that flowed to American shores represented, around the turn of the century, one of the largest peaceful mass-migrations in recorded history. It is among these migrants that F. Holland Day sought out his models. Partly, they represented for him the exotic – so removed from context that these boys could only be regarded as aesthetic objects. Partly, too, they must have served as icons of the primitive, in the sense that their origins were more “backward” and therefore in some sense more “pure” than those of sophisticated Boston aesthetes. Ironically, therefore, they also came to represent the future of America and of modernity itself: as part of a growing international culture. One only has to identify the subject of Day's photograph of an exotically beautiful Arab boy to foreshadow the future of decadence. His name was Khahil Gibran [<http://www.absolute1.net/gibran-sand-and-foam.html>]. Snatched from the slums of East Boston, he became a protégé of Day, later going on to write and illustrate the book known as *The Prophet*: a sensation in the 1920s and 30s which emerged again in the later hippie counterculture as an emblem of 60s spirituality.

Given this growing international movement, it is clear that scholars who work only within the walls of national boundaries will often overlook the extensive involvement of America with the rest of the world. Consider, for instance, the implications of that bible of decadence, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, being first published in the American *Lippincott's Magazine* (1890). Or, as one of their many enterprises, the co-publication by F. Holland Day and his partner Herbert Copeland of



Wilde's notorious play, *Salomé* in 1894. They also published an issue of the even more notorious *Yellow Book* – whose editor was, surprisingly, an American named Henry Harland. On the other side of the exchange, one might cite the career of Sadakichi Hartmann (1864-1944). Born in Nagasaki and reared in Hamburg, the son of a Japanese mother and a German diplomat, Hartmann's wanderings led him to friendships with Whitman, Mallarmé, and King Ludwig of Bavaria. Ultimately settling in the United States, Hartmann became one of America's most flamboyant Bohemians. A noted art historian as well as a formidable essayist, dramatist, and poet, he was much admired by Ezra Pound (Foster 159).

Finally: just as a whole generation of American painters and writers between 1880 and 1900 trained and worked in Paris, so an array of writers and artists sought to import European (and particularly French) aesthetics into the States during this period. Although their work still remains largely invisible – perhaps because it has never been recognized as part of a coherent movement – many of the great American modernists are indebted to them. T.S. Eliot acknowledged his debt to G. S. Viereck ("the high priest of the Wilde cult in America");<sup>5</sup> Ezra Pound to Stuart Merrill and Sadakichi Hartmann. Less obviously, Hart Crane admired Samuel Greenberg and Wallace Stevens drew inspiration from the doomed poet Donald Evans. And no one who has read the early Scott Fitzgerald attentively can miss the resonances of Oscar Wilde.

To sum up: *Decadence in America* may most accurately be invoked as a cultural movement in which style becomes a primary emphasis, displacing merely "moral" concerns. It may be distinguished from previous "aesthetic" movements, both in England and America, by its emphasis on the extension of style into life-style, and defining life-style in terms of protest, not revolt. What decadence protested was the policing of such categories as gender, religion, and nation in terms of coercive middle-class norms, loosely deployed as "moral." What American decadence tried to accomplish was a conscious return to a repudiated aesthetic past as a reaction against what was seen as the aesthetic mediocrity of the present. In these terms, it succeeded in opening up, in the name of art, new ways of understanding these categories, and so helping to usher in the new paradigms of modernism.

Although the trials and conviction of Oscar Wilde in 1895 effectively killed the movement in England, it had a longer life in America, emerg-

---

<sup>5</sup> For an exploration of this phenomenon in England, see Hanson. For that in Boston, see Shand-Tucci.

ing after the turn of the century in the work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens, Hart Crane, and Scott Fitzgerald among others. Malcolm Cowley, for instance, recalls in his memoirs "the type of aestheticism very popular during my own college years [when] the Harvard Aesthetes of 1916 were trying to create in Cambridge, Massachusetts, an after-image of Oxford in the 1890s."

They read the *Yellow Book*, they read Casanova's memoirs and *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, both in French, and Petronius in Latin; they gathered at teatime in one another's rooms, or at punches in the office of the *Harvard Monthly*; they drank, instead of weak punch, seidels of straight gin topped with a maraschino cherry; they discussed the harmonies of [Walter] Pater, the rhythms of Aubrey Beardsley and, growing louder, the voluptuousness of the [Roman Catholic] Church, the essential virtue of prostitution. They had crucifixes in their bedrooms, and ticket stubs from last Saturday's burlesque show at the Old Howard. They wrote, too; dozens of them were prematurely decayed poets, each with his invocation to Antinoüs [the beautiful boy lover of the Emperor Hadrian], his mournful descriptions of Venetian lagoons, his sonnets to a chorus girl in which he addressed her as "little painted poem of God." In spite of these beginnings, a few of them became good writers. (*Exile's Return* 35)

Later in the century, it might be argued, American decadence became subsumed into new configurations of transgressive style – particularly when these involved diabolism or blasphemy (think of the work of Madonna, for instance, or of Robert Mapplethorpe). The creation of celebrity through notoriety occurs whenever art is being used to challenge boundaries of taste as dictated by morality. Displacing merely "moral" concerns, the decadent aesthetic in fact tends to become, in our own age, quickly incorporated into mainstream, late-capitalist culture. Precisely because America now exemplifies this culture, its origins in what may be identified as *American Decadence* can provide a rich field for scholarly exploration in the work of American artists at the turn of the last century.

## References

- Alder, Kathleen, Erica E. Hirshler and Barbara Weinberg (eds). *Americans in Paris, 1860–1900*. London: National Gallery Company Ltd., 2006.
- Baudelaire, Charles. "The Painter of Modern Life: IX. The Dandy." *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972. 419–22.
- Blanchard, Mary Warner. *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.
- Bristow, Joseph, ed. (Introduction). *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005. 1–46.
- Cowley, Malcolm. *Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas*. Revised edition. New York: 1951.
- Foster, Edward, ed. *Decadents, Symbolists, and Aesthetes in America: Fin-de-Siècle American Poetry, An Anthology*. Jersey City, New Jersey: Talisman House Publishers, 2000.
- Hanson, Ellis. *Decadence and Catholicism*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Jussim, Estelle. *Slave to Beauty: The Eccentric Life and Controversial Career of F. Holland Day, Photographer, Publisher, Aesthete*. Boston: David R. Godine, 1981.
- Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- McCormack, Jerusha. "Engendering Tragedy: Toward a Definition of 1890s Poetry." *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*. Ed. Joseph Bristow. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005. 47–68.
- Promey, Sally M. *Painting Religion in Public: John Singer Sargent's Triumph of Religion at the Boston Public Library*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Shand-Tucci, Douglass. *Boston Bohemia, 1881–1900. Ralph Adams Cram: Life and Architecture*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995.
- White, Chris, ed. *Nineteenth-Century Writings on Homosexuality: A Sourcebook*. London: Routledge, 1999.