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# The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890's

LINDA DOWLING

IN 1888 Ernest Dowson decided to join two Oxford friends in annotating a copy of Olive Schreiner's famous novel, *The Story of an African Farm* (1882). Six years after its publication, Schreiner's book had come to be recognized as one of those that cast, as one reviewer put it, "an electric light" upon women's psychology, a topic that was increasingly absorbing the attention of late-Victorian novelists, journalists, critics, and general reading public. Victor Plarr and Frank Walton, the two young men who thought up the satiric annotation scheme, wanted to adopt the heavily pedantic manner of German commentators on the classics. Dowson, choosing instead the persona of "Anatole de Montmartre," threw himself into the work with enthusiasm. In the Dowson-Schreiner connection, modern literary historians are likely to see another of those striking contrasts—like the histrionic oppositions of luxury and squalor, languor and activism, asceticism and sensuality, art and life—so often found characteristic of the Victorian *fin de siècle*. In particular, the conjunction of feminist author and Rhymers' Club poet brings to mind another pair of apparent opposites: the "decadent dandy" and the "New Woman." These two creatures, by now as

fully enrolled in the fin de siècle bestiary as the sphinx, the androgyne, or the ballet girl, have been portrayed by modern scholars, not simply as antithetical figures in a deeply self-divided decade, but as antagonistic principles intent on each other's destruction.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary Victorian observers of the decadent and the New Woman, however, took quite another view. For the most part antagonistic both to literary decadence and New Woman fiction, literary critics and reviewers persistently identified the New Woman with the decadent, perceiving in the ambitions of both a profound threat to established culture. And the conservative late-Victorian critics who identified the New Woman with the decadent wrote, despite their prejudices and exaggerations, from a perception of real coherence within contemporary avant-gardism that has for the most part been obscure to later students of fin de siècle literature. The sense of similar artistic concerns shared by New Woman fiction and literary decadence eludes us if, for example, we apply the "New Woman versus decadent dandy" model to the case of Schreiner and Dowson.

Although Dowson annotated as "Anatole de Montmartre," there was little satire, little of the dandiacal *boulevardier* in what he wrote.<sup>2</sup> Dowson, who had first read the novel at Oxford the sum-

<sup>1</sup> See Ellen Moers, *The Dandy: Brummel to Beerbohm* (New York: Viking, 1960); and Joseph Stein, "The New Woman and the Decadent Dandy," *Dalhousie Review*, 55 (1975), 54-62. For an informative account of New Woman fiction, see A. R. Cunningham, "The 'New Woman Fiction' of the 1890's," *Victorian Studies*, 17 (1973), 177-86. Cunningham's *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (New York: Harper and Row, forthcoming) will include chapters on New Woman popular fiction, on Hardy, and on Meredith and Gissing. Lloyd Fernando's "*New Women*" in *the Late Victorian Novel* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1977) treats New Woman themes and characters in the works of George Eliot, Meredith, Moore, Gissing, and Hardy. Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), considers Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand, and George Egerton as feminist authors who "had but one story to tell, and exhausted themselves in its narration" (ch. 7). It will be useful to remember that not all New Woman novels were written by feminists. A number of the novels discussed in the following pages were meant by their authors to portray the New Woman's dangerous limitations or self-delusion. Such hostile or qualified characterizations of the New Woman, however, are nonetheless significant expressions of the pervasive cultural anxiety which this essay takes as its subject.

<sup>2</sup> Dowson's annotations were preserved by Victor Plarr and published in his *Ernest Dowson 1888-1897: Reminiscences, Unpublished Letters and Marginalia* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1914). See also *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, ed. Desmond Flower and Henry Maas (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1967), p. 10, hereafter cited as *Letters* in my text.

mer before, admired Schreiner's work profoundly. Its pessimism, its portrayal of isolated consciousness and desire quenched in futility, and most of all, its narrative method—what Schreiner had called the “method of the life we all live”<sup>3</sup>—all earned Dowson's praise. In a vehement marginal aside he wrote: “The time for romance, for novels written in the stage method is gone. In a worldly decaying civilization, in an age of nostalgia like the present—what is the meaning of Mr. Rider Haggard? He is an anachronism. It is to books like *Madame Bovary* & de Maupassant's *Une Vie* to books like these one must go to find the true significance of the XIXth Century.” And a few lines on, when Schreiner, disdaining the pleas of critics like Andrew Lang for wild African adventures, insisted that the modern writer must “squeeze the colour from his brush, and dip it into the grey pigments around him,” Dowson, who would soon become the most skillful English singer of Verlaine's *chanson grise*, paused to underscore “grey pigments” (*Letters*, 10).

Dowson's admiration of Schreiner, had his annotations been published in his own time, would not have surprised his contemporaries. To most late Victorians the decadent was new and the New Woman decadent. The origins, tendencies, even the appearance of the New Woman and the decadent—as portrayed in the popular press and periodicals—confirmed their near, their unhealthily near relationship. Both inspired reactions ranging from hilarity to disgust and outrage, and both raised as well profound fears for the future of sex, class, and race. To Dowson's apprehensive contemporaries, the figures of the New Woman and the decadent, like the artists who created them and the works in which they appeared, seemed to be dangerous avatars of the “New,” and were widely felt to oppose not each other but the values considered essential to the survival of established culture.

From a modernist or “post-modernist” point of view, of course, New Woman fiction and literary decadence may seem like the most pallid of artistic insurgencies. Here, as always, the characteristic impulse of modernism to repudiate its own past obscures an essential truth. Even if critics and observers exaggerated the power to transform contemporary culture that the fin de siècle avant-garde possessed, they rightly estimated its hostile intentions. Though

<sup>3</sup>“Preface to the Second Edition,” *The Story of an African Farm* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 27.

the apocalypse of Victorian civilization they feared was delayed considerably beyond the end of the century, it was to arrive. And late Victorians had correctly identified as its harbingers the decadent and the New Woman, whose quarrel with established culture, however quaintly "fin de siècle" it may now appear, was the first rebellious expression of that disenchantment of culture with culture that Lionel Trilling has taught us to recognize as "modernism."

The commentators who identified the New Woman with the decadent were seldom content merely to denounce the sexual expressiveness in literature espoused both by "decadent" writers (those who imitated or were interested in Continental avant-garde experiments) and by the New Woman novelists (a group which included both men and women). Reviewers felt compelled instead to warn their readers of the evolutionary and worse, the revolutionary dangers to Victorian civilization embodied in the new avant-gardism. When they described their lurid vision of cultural apocalypse, critics of the "New" inevitably adopted what had become a familiar journalistic vocabulary of crisis. Invoking the analogy of the French Revolution, for instance, had by the 1890's become an almost reflexive rhetorical gesture among journalistic writers, one merely signaling a writer's urgent dismay or his sense of inevitable, inevitably disastrous consequences. Thus we hear the Reverend W. F. Barry comparing the New Woman's revolt against sexual authority to the "Insurrection of Women" of October 1789 and arguing that the typical heroine of the "New" fiction was no more than Rousseau's savage.<sup>4</sup> So too, Elizabeth Chapman, reaching a bit farther back for her historical comparison, attacks the heroine of Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894) as "a *frondeuse*, in full rebellion not merely against institutions which she disapproves and dislikes, but as it would seem, against law *quâ* law, against authority *quâ* authority."<sup>5</sup>

Though few heroines of New Woman fiction actually dabbled in revolutionary politics, such alarmed commentators as Barry and Chapman persistently looked beyond specific episodes to read in

<sup>4</sup> "The Strike of a Sex," *Quarterly Review*, 179 (1894), 289-318.

<sup>5</sup> *Marriage Questions in Modern Fiction, and Other Essays on Kindred Subjects* (London and New York: John Lane, 1897), p. 28. Chapman's book was one of three published in a feminist "Eve's Library" series by the *tendenz* publisher John Lane.

the New Woman's insistence on sexual equality and self-development a manifesto of contemporary anarchism. If we smile at the repeated warnings of apocalypse made by critics of the New Woman and the decadent, we nonetheless recognize in their apocalyptic vocabulary a genuinely anguished expression of cultural anxiety, a sense that the "New" might betoken cultural changes even less comprehensible than those which the constantly recurring images of decline, decay, and end were meant to control. To compare the avant-gardist revolt to the French Revolution or to contemporary political anarchism was, to be sure, merely to substitute analogy for explanation. Such analogies at least allowed critics of the "New" to posit order, however threatened, as the essential context for disorder even as the analogy of anarchism itself registered some of their deepest cultural fears.

This is the context, for instance, in which Hugh E. M. Stutfield could warn that "the aesthetic sensualist and the communist are, in a sense, nearly related. Both have . . . a common parentage in exaggerated emotionalism. . . . In these days the unbridled licentiousness of your literary decadent has its counterpart in the violence of the political anarchist."<sup>6</sup> In *The New Antigone*, his anti-New Woman romance of 1887, W. F. Barry dramatized the contemporary view by portraying his anarchists simply as decadent aesthetes, as men who are "gentle almost to effeminacy," whose "out-of-the-way learning contrasted singularly with the mincing, tender tones in which they gave utterance to it" and who "satirised everything that was not sensuous feeling, that did not feed delightful moments."<sup>7</sup> Though we may today wonder how these Buntornes and Postlethwaites of revolutionary change could have seriously alarmed anyone, the loosening of sexual controls apparently encouraged by literary decadence and New Woman fiction was almost universally believed by late-Victorian critics to threaten the vital bonds of state and culture. This is also the context in which we hear *Punch* calling Grant Allen, the social reformer and author of *The Woman Who Did* (1895), a "sans-culotte" and find the writer and advocate of "free love," Richard Le Gallienne, compared by *Punch* to Proudhon.

<sup>6</sup> "Tommyrotics," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, June 1895, p. 841.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Antigone: A Romance*, 3 vols. (London and New York: Macmillan, 1887), III, 183, 184.

Even Madame Sarah Grand, whose vast book *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) became one of the most widely read of the New Woman novels, portrayed her heroine as a woman with a potential for anarchic violence. Angelica, who by masquerading as her own twin brother has enjoyed the sexually disinterested friendship of a handsome young musician, justifies her actions after she is found out by saying, "I had the ability to be something more than a young lady, fiddling away her time on useless trifles, but I was not allowed to apply it systematically, and ability is like steam—a great power when properly applied, a great danger otherwise. . . . This is the explosion,"—glancing round the disordered room, and then looking down at her masculine attire."<sup>8</sup> In fact, Angelica's experiment has fatal consequences, sending her young man into a long decline from which he never recovers; he dies, like Sue Bridehead's unnamed undergraduate in *Jude the Obscure* (1895), a victim of the curiosity and fey experimentalism of the New Woman. Similarly, the heroine of Emma Frances Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman* (1894) yearns for the destruction of society itself. Caught up in her sexual passion for a young peasant, Jessamine Halliday tells herself fiercely that if she could, merely by thrusting out her little finger, "topple down the whole hateful fabric of London society," she would do so in an instant.<sup>9</sup>

In the same way, many late-Victorian critics of the avant-garde used the vocabulary of apocalypse to express their urgent sense of cultural crisis, their fear of imminent besiegement, betrayal, and collapse. Convinced that both literary decadence and New Woman fiction sanctioned and incited an unrestrained egoism, critics repeatedly warned of the threat posed to the macrocosm of Victorian civilization if such dangerously volatile literary tendencies should enter into combination with other forces agitating for radical social and political change. In 1889 the *Westminster Review* predicted that the ego of woman "will yet roll over the world in fructifying waves, causing incalculable upheaval and destruction. The stirrings and rumblings now perceivable in the social and industrial worlds, the 'Bitter Cries' of the disinherited classes, the 'Social Wreckage' which is becoming able to make itself unpleas-

<sup>8</sup> *The Heavenly Twins* (New York: Cassell, 1893), p. 450. "Sarah Grand" was the pseudonym of Frances Elizabeth McFall.

<sup>9</sup> *A Superfluous Woman*, 3 vols. (London: Heinemann, 1894), II, 89.

antly prominent, the 'Problems of Great Cities,' the spread of Socialism and Nihilism, are all intimately connected with the ascent of [this] Ego."<sup>10</sup> Five years later the *Speaker* would identify George Egerton as a "moral anarchist" and hear in her *Discords* (1894) the "voice from a class growing larger and ever more insistent."<sup>11</sup> The same voice, the reviewer noted, spoke from John Davidson's ballads; it was heard as well, as we now recognize, in the poems of Rudyard Kipling, John Barlas, and Francis Adams, and in the fiction of George Gissing, Arthur Morrison, and Thomas Hardy.

To explain why late-Victorian critics proceeded so unhesitatingly from individual literary texts to rather cosmic conclusions about the collapse of their culture, we need only recall the deeply held Victorian conviction that woman was the inspiration and guardian of civilization, that upon the "acquiescent feminine smile," as the heroine of *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) bitterly reminds herself, "the whole fabric of civilisation rested."<sup>12</sup> As the controversy over the New Woman grew, so did the number of apostrophes to this animating and preserving ideal. Here, for example, is *Punch's* address to "A Fair Unknown":

The Militant Daughters, of Key and Club,  
Whose crown is swagger, whose wit a snub,  
They wilt like ghosts at the eye of day  
In the simple charm of your sweet array.  
And yours is the soul that makes men fight  
For the cause that is yours—for the cause of right.  
And the decadent herd may moan and rave,  
And leave the temple to dig the grave,  
But life will blossom, while maids like you  
Will keep men noble and straight and true.<sup>13</sup>

The New Woman, on the other hand, was perceived to have ranged herself perversely with the forces of cultural anarchism and decay

<sup>10</sup> "The Apple and the Ego of Woman," *Westminster Review*, 131 (1889), 377.

<sup>11</sup> "Socio-Literary Portents," *Speaker*, 22 Dec. 1894, p. 684.

<sup>12</sup> Ella Hepworth Dixon, *The Story of a Modern Woman* (New York: Cassell, 1894), p. 166.

<sup>13</sup> *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 2 June 1894, p. 256. Elizabeth Chapman, in *Marriage Questions*, protested the persistent disparagement of women in *Punch*: "in an organ which takes thought for the poor; which champions the down-trodden . . . [woman] sees herself mirrored as harsh and sour and prudish and physically repulsive—a gaunt, ill-dressed, sexless monster *pour rire*" (p. 85).

precisely because she wanted to reinterpret the sexual relationship. Like the decadent, the heroine of New Woman fiction expressed her quarrel with Victorian culture chiefly through sexual means—by heightening sexual consciousness, candor, and expressiveness. It was this fundamental kinship that suggested all the other similarities so frequently described by late-Victorian critics of literary decadence and New Woman fiction.

Critics were convinced, for example, that literary decadence and New Woman fiction both traced their “neuropathic” or “erotomaniac” tendencies to the influence, the lubricious and morbidly analytical influence, of contemporary French literature. W. F. Barry discovered in Mrs. Humphry Ward’s *Marcella* (1894) “the French combination of action and sentiment, the sensuous introspection, the careful Epicurean tasting of life’s flavours, and the doctrine of ‘thrill,’ which . . . are not only decadent in their origin, they bring the taint into the book which describes them.” “Has the New Woman,” asked Barry, “a lesson to learn from that school?” (“Strike,” 307–8). Other critics warned that, from wherever the literary decadent and the New Woman might have derived their inspiration, both had a pernicious effect on contemporary literature. Thus Mrs. Oliphant protested the disposition of New Woman novelists “to place what is called the Sex-question above all others as the theme of fiction,”<sup>14</sup> and Thomas Bradfield wondered, was this dominant note of sexuality “a sign that English fiction has entered upon a stage of decadence”?<sup>15</sup>

Certainly such an emphasis on sex rudely violated the polite norms of Victorian realism. The “fiction of sexuality,” argued James Ashcroft Noble, distorted the true proportions of life in the same way a convex mirror distorted the human face—“the colossal nose which dominates the face being represented by one colossal appetite which dominates life.” To present men and women as merely or mainly conduits of sexual emotion was, in Noble’s eyes, “as ludicrously inartistic as it is to paint a face as a flat, featureless plain, from which the nose rises as a lonely eminence.”<sup>16</sup> What Noble saw as an attack upon “artistic” proportion, as a subordina-

<sup>14</sup> “The Anti-Marriage League,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, Jan. 1896, pp. 136–37.

<sup>15</sup> “A Dominant Note of some Recent Fiction,” *Westminster Review*, 142 (1894), 543.

<sup>16</sup> “The Fiction of Sexuality,” *Contemporary Review*, April 1895, pp. 493–94.

tion of whole to part, is, of course, precisely what more advanced critics like Richard Le Gallienne and Havelock Ellis defined as literary decadence. Writing in much the same Shandyan vein, Le Gallienne noted that it was typical of French decadents like J. K. Huysmans to be more interested in the colors of a tippler's nose than in the state of his soul: "the real core of decadence is to be found in its isolated interests."<sup>17</sup>

If the insistent sexual emphasis of the avant-garde seemed to be making an anarchic chaos of conventions of literary form, its critics believed just as strongly that it would dangerously confuse established assumptions about class. They deplored the sympathy for unsavory topics on the part of "decadent essayists and 'yellow' lady novelists," protesting the tendency to introduce into "New" literary works "unfortunates" and other members of the unsavory lower classes. Though some heroines of New Woman fiction consorted with "unfortunates" because, impelled by revolutionary or socialist principles, they actively sought to right social wrongs, they were, like the decadents, also deeply attracted by what seemed to be the mysterious otherness of the lower classes. Even as Mrs. Ward's Marcella busily concocts straw-plaiting schemes for her cottagers, for example, she is drawn to "their peasant lives, which were so full of enigma and attraction to her, mainly because of their very defectiveness, their closeness to an animal simplicity, never to be reached by any one of her sort."<sup>18</sup>

Nor was the New Woman unmoved by the sexual allure of the lower-class male. She did not, it is true, embrace *déclassé* amours with the same abandon shown by some of Arthur Symons's poetic speakers; but within rather carefully limited fictional circumstances some heroines of New Woman fiction did experience the *frisson* that would later more completely overpower Forster's Helen Schlegel and Lawrence's Lady Chatterley. Thus we find Jessamine Halliday recalling with delight her rescue by the stolid young peasant Colin Macgillvray. Lying in bed, "as bare to feeling as any pagan girl," she imagines that "his rude forceful pressure returned again upon her slender figure with an alluring yet terrifying sweetness." Soon the girl who had once deliberately chosen "dejected

<sup>17</sup> *Retrospective Reviews: A Literary Log*, 2 vols. (London: John Lane, 1896), I, 231.

<sup>18</sup> *Marcella*, 2 vols. (New York and London: Macmillan, 1894), I, 145.

aesthetic hues" of pale primrose, wan yellow, and cream to complement her "melancholic Burne-Jones droop of lips and chin" is dashing off like a village maid to buy cherry-colored ribbons (*A Superfluous Woman*, I, 143, 189, 85).

Picturesque enough when set in a romanticized Scottish glen, the New Woman's experience of lower-class life seldom brought about any change more significant than new ribbons. Typically, the fictional heroine's descent into the world of "unfortunates" was a brief and usually abortive passage in her hegira towards a more fully realized selfhood—that is to say, in most novels at least, marriage. Jessamine returns to London to reinfatuate the biggest catch in Europe, Marcella marries an earl, and W. F. Barry's Hippolyta takes the veil. Nonetheless, the New Woman had compromised both her sex and her class by her experiments, and she was accused of setting a dangerous and hypocritical example. The lower classes could scarcely be expected to demonstrate her own calm passion and sense of responsibility and could never hope to escape, as the New Woman generally did, the heavy sanctions of affronted respectability.

It was even more usual for her critics to portray the New Woman as herself belonging to the lower classes. Indeed, many of the heroines found in George Egerton's extraordinarily successful collections of short stories, *Keynotes* (1893) and *Discords*, did inhabit the indeterminate netherworld of the poorer classes. Yet it was the New Woman's demands for education, for equality, for meaningful work that led critics to identify the feminist agitation of these fictional heroines with the unrest of the poor and disenfranchised. The New Woman's eagerness for education, in particular, seemed to align her and her authors, whose "robust ungrammaticality" was frequently sneered at, with the lamentable products of the Board Schools and working-man's institutes, with all those who labored to "improve" themselves.

Despite the upper-class backgrounds of most New Woman heroines and despite the aristocratic sympathies of decadent writers, we thus find the ambitions of both the New Woman and the decadent meeting accusations of "Cockney impudence"—the customary charge, since Keats, brought against artistic innovation in the realm of sensuous experience. Critics of the avant-garde were convinced that this "Cockney" emphasis on sensation and cheap

self-culture they perceived in both literary decadence and New Woman fiction would not only sap the moral sense of the individual but would undermine the distinctions of class. In an age of sciolism, of “smattering and chattering,” they agreed, half knowledge would clearly prove more dangerous to persons of limited education than to those of wider culture; but the danger ultimately threatened culture itself. Thus many late Victorians felt that women readers, particularly young women, were especially vulnerable to the unwholesome influences found equally in New Woman fiction and literary decadence. At best only half educated, women would undoubtedly pursue the literary fashion for “chirurgical realism” or “redundant sexuality” with the same heedless self-indulgence with which an earlier generation had followed Parisian bonnets. “I do not wish to say anything unfair,” wrote Hugh Stutfield, “but I think it cannot be denied that women are chiefly responsible for the ‘booming’ of books that are ‘close to life’—life, that is to say, as viewed through sex-maniacal glasses.” It was, continued Stutfield, the duty of women to stem the morbid hysteria fed by the “new” art and literature by refusing to buy such books (“Tommyrotics,” 843–44). Six months later, Mrs. Oliphant, aghast at the success of Grant Allen’s *The Woman Who Did*, pleaded with the public to restrain itself—the novel, not yet out a year, was in its twentieth impression and “the conversation of the drawing-room is already most sensibly affected. Things are discussed freely and easily which it would a few years ago have been a shame to mention or to think of” (“Anti-Marriage,” 149).

Yet critics of the avant-garde saw an even more dangerous threat in the twin programs and attitudes of the decadent and the New Woman: they jeopardized the very survival of the race. Max Beerbohm had cheerfully pointed out that the amalgamation of the sexes was “one of the chief planks in the decadent platform,”<sup>19</sup> but if this were true, *Punch* wondered, how would the race perpetuate itself? *Punch*’s “Angry Old Buffer” complained that

a new fear my bosom vexes;  
 Tomorrow there may be *no* sexes!  
 Unless, as end to all pother,  
 Each one in fact becomes the other.

<sup>19</sup> “A Defense of Cosmetics,” *Yellow Book*, 1 (1894), 78.

E'en *then* perhaps they'll start amain  
 A-trying to change back again!  
 Woman *was* woman, man *was* man,  
 When Adam delved and Eve span.  
 Now he can't dig and she won't spin,  
 Unless 'tis tales all slang and sin!

(27 April 1895, p. 203)

*Punch* devoted a good deal of space to the eugenic dangers raised by contemporary male effeminacy and female mannishness; the New Woman “made further development in generations to come quite impossible” (21 July 1894, p. 27), while the “New Man” was, in a word, “Woman” (24 Nov. 1894, p. 249). In a poem entitled “Misoneogyny,” “A. Bachelor” argues that the New Woman is a decadent monster of

no lasting vitality,  
 Only existing in fancy and print;  
 It is just an unlovely abstract personality,  
 Coin from the end-of-the-century mint.

(20 July 1895, p. 35)

And this, of course, was exactly how both the New Woman and the decadent chose to view themselves—as asynchronous creatures, prematurely old or precociously modern, but in either case irretrievably out of phase with their own time. The eponymous heroine of Méné Muriel Dowie's *Gallia* (1895), for example, admits that you “cannot make yourself the old style of woman; you cannot interfere with the clock of evolution that is wound up and goes on in each of us” only to be told by the man to whom she has unsuccessfully proposed that she is “the perfectly hapless kind of modern woman. There is no place in all the world for you. You are not wanted, because you are for no use.”<sup>20</sup>

Though, as we have seen, critics loathed the preoccupation with sex and sexual expressiveness characteristic of literary decadence and New Woman fiction, other commentators, encountering the Baudelairean misogyny of a Des Esseintes or the pathological sexual aversion of a Sue Bridehead, nonetheless became alarmed by what they feared was a profound rejection of procreative sex in the “New” literature. Elizabeth Chapman, discovering that Hadria,

<sup>20</sup> *Gallia* (London: Methuen, 1895), p. 214.

the heroine of Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus*, despised "mother earth" for being pliantly submissive to the dictatorship of men, was moved to exclaim, "What a paradox is here! What a strange inversion of the natural order! How the intellect must have been warped, and the heart embittered, of a woman who could couple such a word as 'uninspired' with such an idea as motherhood!" (*Marriage Questions*, 29).

Inevitably, the revolt of the New Woman and the decadent against what was "natural," their "warped" and "morbid" intellects, their extreme self-consciousness, seemed to their late-Victorian critics to isolate them both in a chilly realm of sterility, asceticism, or cerebral lechery, cut off from the springs of instinctive reproductive life. And yet, though Gwen Waring, the heroine of Iota's *A Yellow Aster* (1894), voids herself of all maternal emotion and exclaims shudderingly, "This one-flesh business, this is a horrid thing,"<sup>21</sup> not every New Woman shrank from procreative sex; indeed many heroines embraced motherhood as the eugenic solution to their quarrel with society. We find the disappointed Gallia, for instance, conquering her unconventional passion in favor of a matter-of-factly procreative union with Mark Gurdon, a fine physical specimen she describes as "keen and gamey and lifey" (*Gallia*, 215). We know, on the other hand, that Jessamine Halliday, in finally preferring the diseased and debauched Lord Heriot to her sturdy Highland peasant, has made a terrible eugenic decision; after bearing Heriot two children, Jessamine lives, albeit just barely, to see her idiot daughter murder her deformed son—an episode that anticipates Hardy's treatment of racial exhaustion and the deadly struggle between old and "New" in *Jude the Obscure*. For New Women like Gallia and Jessamine, bearing children becomes an existentially redeeming act; for George Egerton's heroines, motherhood is a passion as intense as sex itself.

Even so, critics feared that the New Woman, in her hypermodernity, her ambitious attempt to transcend established notions of sexual consciousness and behavior, would irreversibly unfit herself for her essential role as wife and mother—that, in short, she would follow the decadent down the road to personal and, ultimately, racial extinction. Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895) is merely the

<sup>21</sup> *A Yellow Aster*, 3 vols. (London: Hutchinson, 1894), II, 87. "Iota" was the pseudonym of Kathleen Mannington Caffyn.

most famous of the attacks on the new avant-gardism that warned that real dangers were posed to culture and the continuance of the race by specimens as mentally and physically defective as the “decadent aesthete.” Fifteen years earlier, Olive Schreiner’s heroine, Lyndall, had mocked the conventional argument this way: “Go on; but when you have made women what you wish, and her children inherit her culture, you will defeat yourself. Man will gradually become extinct from excess of intellect, the passions which replenish the race will die” (*African Farm*, 194). Other late Victorians worried about more immediate problems: the voluntary sterility of “glorified spinsterhood” and, since they assumed that the New Woman could achieve sexual equality only by controlling her fertility, the unavoidable resort to abortion or infanticide. And they had grounds: Frau Irma von Troll-Borostyani, for one, doubted that the New Woman’s free love unions would produce any considerable increase in illegitimate children, but if they did, recommended chloroform.<sup>22</sup> Thus Laura Marholm Hansson, viewing the New Woman and her ambitions from a contemporary Continental perspective, expressed the feelings of many late Victorians when she concluded that “the many honest people who think they hear in the Woman Movement the memento mori of a race, and the gnawing of the death-worm, are not so far wrong. As it manifests itself outwardly it is a sign of decay and corruption, and where it has produced conditions—or more accurately has grown out of conditions—as in the lauded lands of woman’s emancipation, the decline of a race is clearly shown.”<sup>23</sup>

Critics of the *fin de siècle* avant-garde thus understood a truth that has now grown obscure: in a cultural context of radical anxiety, the decadent and the New Woman were twin apostles of social apocalypse. And they were so not least because they saw themselves that way. This is the truth contained in the central metaphor employed by enemies of the avant-garde to express their urgent dismay: late-Victorian England, as involved in problems of Empire as Imperial Rome in its decline, had entered its Silver Age—English culture, on the analogy with Rome, was threatened from without,

<sup>22</sup> Troll-Borostyani’s *Die Gleichstellung der Geschlechter* (1888) and *Das Recht der Frau, Vermächtniss einer Unglücklichen* (1885) were published in Zurich and reviewed by W. F. Barry in “The Strike of a Sex.”

<sup>23</sup> *Studies in the Psychology of Woman*, trans. Georgia A. Etchinson (Chicago and New York: Herbert S. Stone, 1899), p. 301.

betrayed from within.<sup>24</sup> And though—or perhaps because—they were attempting to overthrow the cultural assumptions of their critics, the decadent and the New Woman both assented to the truth of this metaphor. English decadents had long since learned to say with French *avant-garde* writers like Verlaine, “Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la décadence,” and to portray themselves as languidly awaiting immolation at the hands of huge white barbarians. And in the same way, we find such loyal advocates of the new *avant-gardism* as Havelock Ellis arguing that the New Woman would herald “a reinvigoration as complete as any brought by barbarians to an effete and degenerating civilization.”<sup>25</sup>

An anxious survey of contemporary artistic developments thus convinced late-Victorian critics that the New Woman and the decadent embodied forces at once passively degenerate and actively destructive, and unexpectedly, the partisans of the “New” agreed. The *avant-garde* and its enemies confronted each other over an abyss of cultural anxiety, and both understood that the New Woman and the decadent, in turning against the established culture that might have cherished them as its latest and most nearly perfect creations, were determined to subvert high culture by asserting the claims of the “low,” the “unnatural,” and the “unfortunate.” Anxiety brings with it confusion, and in their anxious confusion of New Woman with decadent, decadent with barbarian, we discover why enemies of the *avant-garde*—like the *avant-gardists* themselves—were able to portray the decadent and the New Woman as at once the corrupt defenders on the walls and as the vulgar encircling hordes below.

As Renato Poggioli has shown,<sup>26</sup> this paradoxical identification of decadent with barbarian, of defender with attacker, grew out of a determination within *fin de siècle* *avant-gardism* to save culture by destroying it. Even if the renovation of the old can only be

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<sup>24</sup> See Raymond F. Betts, “The Allusion to Rome in British Imperialist Thought of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *Victorian Studies*, 15 (1971), 149–59. For an optimistic contemporary view of the analogy, see C. Dale, “The Women of Imperial Rome and English Women of To-day,” *Westminster Review*, 141 (1894), 490–502.

<sup>25</sup> *The New Spirit* (London: George Bell, 1890), p. 9.

<sup>26</sup> *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968) and “*Qualis Artifex Pereo!* or Barbarism and Decadence,” *Harvard University Library Bulletin*, 13 (1959), 135–59.

realized through apocalypse, the decadent spirit, for all its fierce nostalgia for a defunct and greater past, will not hesitate to embrace the "New": "The craving for novelty and notoriety," wrote Hugh Stutfield scathingly, ". . . and a feverish desire to be abreast of the times may be reckoned among the first-fruits of decadentism" ("Tommyrotics," 844). This is the context in which decadence, in the extremity of its reactionary nostalgia, meets the futurist impatience of avant-gardism in a shared hope for a new primitivism. Though the activist program of the avant-gardist may seem to contrast sharply with the morbid passivity of the decadent, the anticipation of renewal through apocalypse is essentially the same.

This is why, as Poggioli reminds us, the decadent at once hoards the choicest fragments of a dying culture and conspires with the hordes without to lay waste to the imperial city; and why, too, critics viewed the embrace of decadent and barbarian, scholar and Cockney, as an apocalyptic embrace. By aligning themselves with the vulgar, the ugly, the forbidden, the outré, the writers of the fin de siècle avant-garde were intent on breaching the constrictive and defensive walls of Victorian aesthetic decorum and building anew. Here we encounter an important paradox: the new world they wished to realize would, they thought, restore nature—an idea of nature enriched by urban tension and complexity, made vibrant by sexual expressiveness, made strange by irony, slang, and archaism.

This is precisely the sense in which the pastoralism of so much Edwardian and Georgian literature is not so much a repudiation as a belated fulfillment of the new primitivism of the fin de siècle avant-garde. For when what we mean by pastoral is less a matter of shepherdesses and sheep than a mode by which the civilized imagination exempts itself from the claims of its own culture, pastoral—from the conventional form we find in the work of Norman Gale or the early Yeats to the "urban pastoral" we meet in the London poems of Wilde, Henley, Symons, Dowson, Le Gallienne, Wratislaw, and Horne—is the characteristic mode of fin de siècle avant-gardism. Pastoral, easily lending itself to the short forms and small effects, the elegance and diminutive grace that so interested "decadent" writers of the period, accommodated equally the exploration of innocence and corruption—especially the corruption of age—that we find in Dowson's poems, in *Dorian Gray*, and in the bitter

conviction of so many New Woman heroines that they stood on the brink of irrevocable sexual obsolescence. Unlike romance, with its extended narrative and its "stage method" coincidences and conclusions, pastoral meant to avant-garde writers image, impression, mood, and vision, and it offered them, with its essentially static mode, a paradoxical means of expressing their obsession with flux and insubstantiality. Thus the note of despair in the voice of Schreiner's Lyndall: "We are sparks, we are shadows, we are pollen, which the next wind will carry away. We are dying already; it is all a dream" (*African Farm*, 217) or the conviction of Dixon's Mary Erle that "Nature—insolent, triumphant Nature—cares nothing for the individual. . . . Summer and winter, seed-time and harvest, will come and go in the ages to come, but I—I shall not be here" (*Modern Woman*, 314).

From Theocritus and Virgil to the present, pastoral has been recognized as a highly conventional mode. This was precisely the source of its attraction for avant-garde writers: as pastoral celebrated a highly artificial view of nature, it could be used to express their own ambition to live and create *à rebours*. This is why, for instance, the New Woman was recognized as a full participant in the fin de siècle revolt against nature. A yellow aster was, after all, nothing more (or less) than the New Woman's green carnation. Whether the irritable dismissal of Nature's inventive power was pronounced by a J.A.M. Whistler or a Hadria, whether the self-consciously experimental life was led by a Dorian Gray or a Gwen Waring, avant-garde writers were seeking to violate established notions of nature and the "natural" in order to recover and legitimize for art precisely that realm of private, self-ironic, and visceral experience which the bawdy of Joyce, the phallic consciousness of Lawrence, and the confessionalism of Lowell and Plath would so fully explore in the next century.

As the fin de siècle revolt against nature was thus at another level a revolt against established culture, this rejection of culture by culture—by the fastidious scholars of literary decadence and by the boldly learned ladies of New Woman fiction—expressed the fundamental desire of the fin de siècle avant-garde: the dream of living beyond culture, the dream of pastoral. Though we may perhaps be surprised to find the decadent, that lingering, overbred flower of culture, rejecting culture, Poggioli reminds us that the

decadent characteristically believes he can overthrow civilization or acquiesce in its overthrow because he himself is all the culture he needs. This fin de siècle ideal of a shapely and fully expressive self-sufficiency is what we encounter in the deep admiration of Whitman and Thoreau voiced by writers like Wilde, Johnson, Symonds, Ellis, and Yeats, and we discover it as well in the powerful appeal that Rimbaud possessed for Dowson: "le grand déclassé," as Dowson called him, "so consistent in his social hatred that he threw away his identity & dropped finally into the crowd just when he was at the zenith of his success" (*Letters*, 144). The words, we now recognize, would come to apply to Wilde as well.

The desire to throw identity away and live beyond culture lies at the center and is the explanation of such obscure longings as are felt in the many utopian novels of the nineties and after, and in the Romany worship of George Borrow and Augustus John. It is at the center, as well, of New Woman fiction, as when it makes Lyndall, finally acceding to her lover's passion, say to him, "I will not go down country . . . I will not go to Europe. You must take me to the Transvaal. That is out of the world" (*African Farm*, 239). It prompts Hippolyta's suburban idyll of anonymity as "Mrs. Malcolm." It makes Gwen Waring say, "Sir Humphrey, I wish quite intensely, we were both of us in another position, in quite a low, unknown one, then we need not marry" (*Aster*, II, 56). It is heard when Jessamine, musing upon her peasant's ignorance of her true social position, says to herself, "I am in a sort his creation. I am just what I would be if he were Adam and I Eve. All the rest seems to fall away" (*A Superfluous Woman*, II, 95). It is the voice from Yeats's little house "of clay and wattles made" and the voice from Johnson's "Morfydd."

In light of the antagonistic relation of the avant-garde to late-Victorian culture, the New Woman's prominence in this catalog is scarcely surprising. Her fierce insistence on a renovation of the sexual relationship becomes, in this context, the very epitome of the fin de siècle desire to live beyond culture. This is why, for instance, Whitman and "Whitmania," though they are scarcely mentioned in New Woman fiction, were so persistently invoked by *Punch* to explain the New Woman phenomenon: not only had the poet of "barbaric yawp" hymned the new primitivism sought by the decadent spirit, he had promised simultaneously that sex—

whether it was the “amativeness” of men and women or the “adhesiveness” of men and men—would be the means by which conventional culture would be transcended.

Among “decadent” writers, the issue was made more complicated by a typical and powerful impulse to self-parody. We are dealing with mockery of the notion that a newly expressive sexual impulse would allow the “decadent” to live and create beyond culture when, for instance, Aubrey Beardsley in his pornographic travesty, *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser*, introduces into an Arcadian valley Sporion and his debauched crew, “hoping to experience a new frisson in the destruction of some shepherd’s or some satyr’s naiveté,” only to have the sophisticates themselves corrupted by the newly instructed peasants who, “full of the new tricks they had learnt that morning . . . played them passionately and roughly, making havoc of the cultured flesh.”<sup>27</sup> In the same spirit, Dowson satirized a new artistic colony proposed by some friends, predicting it would be “à la Thoreau, of ‘Hobby Horse’ people & a few elect outsiders each with a ‘belovèd’—(please mind the accent) where there will be leisure only for art & unrestrained sexual intercourse” (*Letters*, 46).

The typically “decadent” posture of self-parody, however, cannot at such moments obscure the essential seriousness of the attempt to transcend established culture through sex. Even though Dowson, who at this time was trying to recruit a purely “spiritual mistress taken from one of the classes outside Society” (*Letters*, 45), doubted the efficacy of unrestrained intercourse in achieving this end, he firmly agreed that “no ‘belovèd’ is admissible who has breathed the poisonous atmosphere of a drawing-room” (*Letters*, 46). And this desire to transcend established culture by turning to lovers—spiritual or otherwise—from the classes outside accepted society would, of course, intensify in the next century, coloring the imaginations of such figures as Ford’s Tietjens, Forster’s Maurice, Eliot’s Prufrock, Joyce’s Stephen as well as most of the characters of Lawrence.

No less did the heroines of New Woman fiction understand the power of the sexual impulse to alter, or if need be, overthrow

<sup>27</sup> *The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1907), pp. 50, 53.

conventional culture. Lyndall yearns for a world freed from the hateful constriction of sexual identity, a world where she may say, "When I am with you, I never know that I am a woman and you are a man; I only know that we are both things that think" (*African Farm*, 210). Grant Allen's Herminia, in *The Woman Who Did*, immolates the present upon the pyre of the future, fervently believing that if she can sacrifice her own "respectability," her daughters and granddaughters will live free. And for a brief, abandoned moment, Jessamine sweeps everything—even the future—away, crying, "I care for nothing! I care for nothing! There is no meaning anywhere—save *this*. What was I born for if this is wrong?" (*A Superfluous Woman*, II, 190). Jessamine, oblivious to everything but the urgency of her passion, is unaware that behind her there is "an old world in collapse, with faint thunders of falling cities."

An old world in collapse, with faint thunders of falling cities—this is the vision of social apocalypse that impelled the enemies of the avant-garde to identify, with a clairvoyance born of deep cultural anxiety, the New Woman and the decadent as twin avatars of the "New." And it was the vision that animated the New Woman and the decadent as well: thrust by the antinomian claims of their experimental energies into the breach between the apocalyptic ruins of the old and the barely imaginable world of the "New," they saw themselves as the very emblems of the *fin de siècle* avant-garde. If their repudiation of late-Victorian culture, their embrace of the vulgar, the ugly, and the unnatural, finally failed to bring about the new primitivism they so fervently sought, they were not mistaken about the apocalypse they prophesied. Only now, gazing backwards at the *fin de siècle* from a point well beyond the modernist moment, do we glimpse them as apostles of a world they could only imagine.

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