

# **Decadent Threshold Poetics**



**A Comparative Study of Threshold Space in  
Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans,  
Ernest Dowson, and Arthur Symons**

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I declare that all of the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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## ABSTRACT



The Decadent literary tradition in England and France in the nineteenth century is characterized by compartmentalized, interiorized, and curated spaces, which, typically, are retreats from urban life evoking subjective states of mind and strange sensations. As Jean Pierrot (1977) and Jan B. Gordon (1979) have argued, Decadent retreats have much in common with the ‘locked room’, but on closer analysis, as this thesis aims to show, Decadent spaces are much more than just places of entrapment. Decadent spatiality, rather like the literary tradition itself, defies clear definition. It is complex and polyvalent, cutting across and calling into question the notions of borders and boundaries. The private and public spaces that we encounter in both Decadent poetry and fiction – from the perfume bottle to the desk drawer, from the attic bedroom to the metropolitan music-hall – are invariably threshold spaces, portals to other non-physical realms.

Drawing on the models of spatiality in the work of Gaston Bachelard (‘l’immensité intime’), Walter Benjamin (*Schwelle*), and Subha Mukherji (‘threshold poetics’), this thesis examines the significance of threshold space in the work of four Decadent writers and offers four complementary case studies. Focusing on *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) and *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), Chapter One explores the model of Decadent threshold poetics in the work of Charles Baudelaire, exemplified by his prose poem ‘La Chambre double’. Chapter Two offers a new interpretation of Joris-Karl Huysmans’s classic Decadent novel *À rebours* (1884) through a consideration of the room spaces in the house at Fontenay as experiments in dynamic compartmentalization, and traces the threshold motif of the hothouse through his Durtal tetralogy. Chapters Three and Four focus on contrasting notions of threshold space in English Decadent poetry, Ernest Dowson’s Poésie Schublade Notebook poems, included in *Verses* (1896) and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (1899), and Arthur Symons’s *Silhouettes* (1892) and *London Nights* (1895). While Dowson’s poems represent a Decadent minimalism, describing diminished, ascetic interspaces like the drawer and the cloister, Symons’s early verse collections are preoccupied with expansive urban and rural threshold spaces that encapsulate the mental and physical restlessness of the poet.

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## NOTE ON TRANSLATION



All references to Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits poèmes en prose* are taken from the first volume of *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Claude Pichois (Gallimard, 1975-76). While there are many excellent translations of Baudelaire's poems, for reasons of consistency I have used James McGowan's translation of *The Flowers of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 1998), preceded by references to Baudelaire's original. *Le Spleen de Paris* has not been as extensively translated, and the two most widely accessible are Louise Varèse's outdated version (New Directions, 1947) and Edward Kaplan's slightly Americanized translation (University of Georgia Press, 1997). The translation that I have used is Michael Hamburger's *Twenty Prose Poems* (City Lights Books, 1988), but due to its incompleteness I have supplemented this with Martin Sorrell's more recent *Paris Spleen* (Alma Classics, 2010).

All references to the novels of Joris-Karl Huysmans are taken from Lucien Descaves's eighteen-volume edition of the *Œuvres complètes* (Crès, 1928-34). In the case of *À rebours*, I have examined numerous translations of the novel, notably John Howard's adaptation (Liber and Lewis, 1922), Margaret Maulden's rendering (Oxford University Press, 1998), and Brendan King's version (Dedalus, 2008). For its closeness to the original, however, I have used Robert Baldick's definitive translation *Against Nature* (Penguin, 1956) throughout. Reference to this translation follows the original French. Instances where the French translations are my own are indicated in the footnotes.



## INTRODUCTION



*Il faut rester sur le seuil*  
(Remy de Gourmont, 1894)

This thesis examines the significance of the concept of threshold space in the Decadent literary tradition through selected works of Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907), Ernest Dowson (1867-1900), and Arthur Symons (1865-1945). In the case of each writer, we find a complex engagement with *thresholdness*. Rather like the Decadent literary tradition itself, *thresholdness* is difficult to define. Applied to the abstract notion of space, the concept of the threshold is ambiguous, signifying a number of different but related experiences. To be in a threshold space, to be ‘on the threshold’, can describe: a transformative, even enhancing experience (that involves moving from being in one state to another); an integrative experience (that involves correspondence, bringing different aspects together); a liminal experience (that involves being in an in-between state, in limbo); or a combination of two or three of these.

The representation of physical spaces that we encounter in the work of Decadent writers in the second half of the nineteenth century are invariably shifting, interiorized and urban.<sup>1</sup> Unlike other literary representations of enclosed, urban interiors, such as we find in Gothic literature, Decadent writers tend to focus on spaces that suggest and symbolize imaginative correspondences between physical reality and other realms of experience. At the risk of generalizing to make the point, while in French Decadent writing there is more emphasis on the materiality of the (sub)urban interior, like Baudelaire’s attic rooms and perfume bottles, or Huysmans’s house at Fontenay, in English Decadent writing there is a greater preoccupation with space as a metaphor for personal experiences and feelings. In Dowson’s poems we are invited to contemplate the reduced and minimalist spaces of the drawer and the cloister which reflect his

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis I refer to the literary and artistic tradition of ‘Decadence’ in upper case and ‘decadence’, meaning moral or cultural decline as characterized by excessive indulgence in pleasure or luxury, in lower case.

conversion and retreat to an ascetic life. In Symons's writings, by contrast, the reader is encouraged to wander and travel, to move between different spaces – from solitude into multitude, from the city to mountains and beaches, from the stillness of day to the *thresholdness* of urban nightlife. His restlessness is a symbol of the transformations of modern culture at the *fin de siècle*.

Decadent *thresholdness*, for want of a better term, has its roots in Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* [*The Flowers of Evil*] (1857, revised 1861) and *Le Spleen de Paris* [*Paris Spleen*] (1869), in which he explores the experience of living in the changing cityscape of Haussmann's Paris during the Second Empire (1852-1871) and its effect on the individual sensibility. In his prose poem, 'La Chambre double' ['The Double Room'], I suggest, we find the most explicit description of *thresholdness* in Decadent literature, articulated in the transformative terms of asymmetry and contrast. The dynamic relationship in Baudelaire's prose poem, between the poet's drug-induced high and the reality he is forced to confront with the knock on the door, expresses a Decadent preoccupation with the relationship between Art and Life. This becomes a central theme of Huysmans's Decadent novel, *À rebours* [*Against Nature*] (1884), in which the decoration of the rooms in Duc Jean Floressas Des Esseintes' house at Fontenay correspond to his peculiar fantasies and desires.

In English Decadent writing a decade later, we find a similar preoccupation with threshold spaces, but whereas French writers are mainly interested in experiential thresholds, capturing the sensory experience of intoxication or the sensation of moving around the physical spaces of an apartment or house, English Decadents, such as Dowson and Symons, use threshold space to articulate spiritual, moral, and personal concerns. In Dowson's *Verses* (1896) and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (1899), diminished interspaces, such as the drawer and the cloister, are intense ascetic evocations of the paradoxes related to his spiritual dilemmas. In Symons's early verse collections from the 1890s, *Silhouettes* (1892, revised 1896) and *London Nights* (1895, revised 1897), we find a continued Baudelairean preoccupation with urban threshold spaces – pavements, doorways, and back-alleys – symbols of the restless and unstable borders and boundaries of illicit libidinal desire.

Using the theoretical and critical perspectives about threshold spatiality by Gaston Bachelard (1958), Walter Benjamin (1982), and Subha Mukherji (2011), this thesis aims to establish the significance of the notion of threshold space for reading and

understanding the complex and polyvalent literary tradition of late nineteenth-century Decadence in France and England. In this comparative study I draw on texts that are rarely considered together (such as Huysmans with Dowson, Dowson with Symons, Symons with Baudelaire), with the aim of suggesting new interpretations of more well-known Decadent works (such as Baudelaire's fluctuating city spaces and the recurrence of the hothouse metaphor in Huysmans's novels). Putting French and English Decadents in dialogue offers a new perspective on Decadence studies. In this thesis I begin with a discussion of Baudelaire's poetry and argue that his *thresholdness* offers a model for understanding other Decadent writers of the *fin de siècle*.

Decadent literature from Baudelaire through to Symons is characterized by interiorized and curated spaces which, typically, are retreats from urban life evoking subjective states of mind and strange sensations. This peculiar characteristic was noted by the two early critics of Decadent spatiality, Jean Pierrot and Jan B. Gordon, in order to foreground the similarities between Decadent retreats and the Gothic 'locked room'. In "'Decadent Spaces': Notes for a Phenomenology of the *Fin de Siècle*' (1979), Gordon concentrates on the thematic parallels between Decadence and the Gothic, which, he argues, are due in part to their common interest in withdrawal. He goes on to claim that, like the 'circular, reflective life of the drifting dandy', the spaces in Decadent literature are 'all "middle"'.<sup>2</sup> In *L'Imaginaire décadent (1880-1900)* [*The Decadent Imagination (1880-1900)*] (1977), Pierrot similarly refers to the shared qualities of entrapment and enclosure between Decadence and the Gothic, but he affirms the connection in Decadent writing between experiential and imagined spaces. Gordon's and Pierrot's studies are important interpretations, but I contend that Decadent spaces are much more than spaces of entrapment although they share some features with the representation of space in Gothic literature.

The evocative qualities of threshold space in Decadent literature substantiate some of the impressionistic notions of Gaston Bachelard in *La Poétique de l'espace* [*The Poetics of Space*] (1958), and his use of Baudelaire as a central figure in his ground-breaking study clearly expresses the importance of Decadence to the study of spatiality in literature. My conception of Decadent threshold spatiality originates with Bachelard and his examination of domestic and reduced spaces. As Bachelard

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<sup>2</sup> Jan B. Gordon, "'Decadent Spaces': Notes for a Phenomenology of the *Fin de Siècle*", in *Decadence and the 1890s*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 31-58 (p. 36).

recognizes in relation to *Les Fleurs du mal*, Baudelaire depicts the evocative potential of small spaces and the unlimited possibilities of unopened objects. ‘L’espace habité transcende l’espace géométrique’ [Inhabited space transcends geometric space], he concludes, and it is Bachelard’s distinction between space and place that I use in this thesis.<sup>3</sup> Place is located, fixed and defined by boundaries. Cities, houses, and rooms are all places, as are sites of imagined occupancy, bottles, boxes, nests. If a place is a location defined by human experience then, in comparison, spaces are felt, sensed, and perceived. Bachelard describes this kind of space as evoking an ‘l’immensité intime’ [intimate immensity], and this idea serves as a foundation for his description of the perceived intensity of experiences in private, domestic realms.<sup>4</sup>

Threshold spaces are associated with liminal states in Decadent writing, and the relationship between transitional emotional states and geographical thresholds is further established by Walter Benjamin in *Passagen-Werk* [*The Arcades Project*], published posthumously in 1982, in which he critiques the idea that the threshold refers to physical space. Instead, he proposes that the term encompasses subjective experience. This is central to my argument. As I maintain in this thesis, the threshold relates to the metaphor of physical thresholds (such as doorways) and in-between emotional states. Like Bachelard, Benjamin underpins his study with an analysis of Baudelaire, but Benjamin’s focal point is external city spaces and the effect of the alleyways, passages, streets, and boulevards encountered in newly Haussmannized Paris on the private experiences of the *flâneur*. Benjamin expresses how the ‘interpenetration of street and residence’ evokes the porosity of the spatial and the experiential.<sup>5</sup> In Decadent writing, as this thesis illustrates, we encounter a series of compartmentalized spaces and states. What initially appears as a Bachelardian series of nested and permeable realms is also, in Benjamin’s terms, a space of partial retreat from the city. Threshold experiences (waking up, falling asleep, waiting) take place in threshold spaces (balconies, bedrooms, alleyways). The concept of the threshold appears to undergo a shift in emphasis from French to English Decadence. Whereas for Baudelaire and Huysmans,

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<sup>3</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *La Poétique de L’espace* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1957) p. 58 / *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 47.

<sup>4</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de L’espace*, p. 178 / *The Poetics of Space*, p. 183.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The *Flâneur*’, in *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), [M3a, 5] p. 423.

more focus is on the threshold space itself, in the poems of Dowson and Symons it is the feeling of *thresholdness* that becomes most prominent.

Thresholds mark a transition, a point of entry or exit, but at the same time, they can be read as crossing points. Architecturally, the threshold is an organizing feature of space that signals transitions and connections. It is both a static place, the plank stamped upon in a doorway, and a space that evokes the idea of moving from one space/state to another; airport lounges or hallways, for example. In her introduction to the collection of case studies and theoretical investigations into threshold space, *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces* (2011), Subha Mukherji offers a useful contemporary approach to the ambiguous concept of the threshold. While her study does not concentrate on Decadence, her definition of the threshold as a zone of transition is of particular conceptual significance to this thesis. Like a bridge between the banks of a river, the threshold implies separation as much as joining together.<sup>6</sup> My study, as in Mukherji's analysis, argues that threshold spaces in art and literature can be used as starting points through which to consider intermediate and indeterminate states of mind. In relation to literary texts, the treatment of threshold space provides significant insights into an understanding of the perception of the writer and their receptivity to 'how categories are constructed and how they can be destabilized'.<sup>7</sup>

I argue that a study of threshold spatiality in Decadent literature helps us to understand the *thresholdness* of Decadence itself. Decadence is a notoriously slippery concept, and this thesis asserts that this dynamism is a distinctive characteristic of both the Decadent literary tradition and its spatiality.<sup>8</sup> As Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky (1999) contend, Decadence is engaged in a 'perennial decay' that 'highlights the conventional nature of boundaries themselves'.<sup>9</sup> It insists on 'at

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<sup>6</sup> This is an idea shared with Georg Simmel in his article 'Brücke und Tür' ['Bridge and Door'] (1957), in which he writes of the boundaries imagined by humans in order to connect and separate spaces. This boundary is a threshold, a way of both entering one space and exiting another. See *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. by David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage Publications, 1997), pp. 170-73.

<sup>7</sup> Subha Mukherji, *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces* (London and New York: Anthem Press, 2011), p. xviii.

<sup>8</sup> The mapping and defining of Decadence has been extensively discussed. Most famously, Richard Gilman (1979) refers to it as a 'portmanteau stuffed with emptiness' and R. K. R Thornton (1983) warns that 'Attempts to define Decadence, like Decadence itself, must end in failure'. Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), p. 180, and R. K. R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), p. 188.

<sup>9</sup> Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, 'Introduction' to *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1999), pp. 1-32 (p. 21).

once mobilizing and undermining' clearly defined borders.<sup>10</sup> My study of the threshold poetics of Decadent literature foregrounds this complexity and draws attention to the important destabilizing effect of manipulating and challenging boundaries in this literary tradition. In this thesis I use 'poetics' not just in reference to poetry but for its broader theoretical meaning. Poetics refers to how linguistic, spatial, and/or formal elements come together to form an impression of a text and I base my use of 'poetics' on Bachelard's *La Poétique de l'espace* and Mukherji's 'poetics of transitive spaces'.<sup>11</sup> From perfume bottles that evoke vast dream-like vistas, to restless urban spaces that retract around the anxieties of the poet, the private and public places that we encounter in both Decadent poetry and fiction act as points of connection between physical and non-physical realms.

### Notes for a Study of Decadent Spaces: Pierrot and Gordon

The cluttered and claustrophobic settings and spaces we encounter in Decadent fiction and verse suggest a Gothic fascination with opulent interiors and secret enclosures.<sup>12</sup> However, while (en)closed space in Gothic fiction has been a focus of scholarly interest since the 1970s, the representation of space in Decadent writing has gone relatively unnoticed. Predominantly, critics of the Gothic have drawn attention to the motifs of enclosure and confinement in the works of Edgar Allan Poe and the ways in which his

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For more contemporary discussion of defining 'Decadence', see Julian North, 'Defining Decadence in Nineteenth-century French and British Criticism', in *Romancing Decay: Ideas of Decadence in European Culture*, ed. by Michael St John (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), pp. 83-94; Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy and Culture of the Fin de Siècle in Europe*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002); and Matthew Potolsky's 'Introduction. "Workers of the Final Hour"', in *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2013), pp. 1-19.

<sup>10</sup> Constable, Denisoff, and Potolsky, *Perennial Decay*, p. 21. Italics in original.

<sup>11</sup> See also Jason David Hall and Alex Murray's use of the term 'poetics' in their editors' 'Introduction: Decadent Poetics', in *Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-25.

<sup>12</sup> Of the many considerations of Gothic space, three studies are particularly noteworthy. Manuel Aguirre argues that while the Victorian settings of the haunted house and castle have been replaced by more modern buildings, such as terraced houses and apartment blocks, the fundamental tropes of retreat, escape and secrecy remain, and Robert Mighall posits that we should use this shift in setting to apply a geo-critical approach to the Gothic. Most recently, Carol Davidson has expanded this approach. In her essay on Gothic space, she demonstrates how the closed setting of the home, a site of private meditation and expression, is transformed by Gothic writers into a space of personal horror and fear. Manuel Aguirre, *The Closed Space: Horror Literature and Western Symbolism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); Robert Mighall, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Carol Davidson, 'Gothic Architectonics: The Poetics and Politics of Gothic Space', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 46 (2010), 136-63.

settings indicate subjective states of mind.<sup>13</sup> In Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), for example, the sickness of Usher's body and soul is reflected in his crumbling house, which collapses after his death. Similarly, Huysmans's self-absorbed and ailing Des Esseintes, and Monsieur de Phocas, the eponymous hero of Jean Lorrain's novel (1901), are effete bachelors, symbolic of a worn-out nobility, who take refuge in museum-like settings that provoke dreams and hallucinations. In both literary traditions, enclosed spaces are often used as signifiers of subjective states, where familiar and worldly experiences initiate or open on to supernatural and fantasy spaces.

In *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology* (2012), Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick acknowledge '[t]he indebtedness of Decadent fiction to Poe's Gothic formula'; drawing attention to the motifs of curses, sexual perversions, 'elements of lurid eroticism and of glamorous "high-society" setting and characterisation'.<sup>14</sup> This Gothic inheritance can be traced back to Baudelaire's admiration of Poe and his enthusiasm for the American writer's work, in particular his use of physical spaces as portals to imaginative realms.<sup>15</sup> In 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1842), for example, Prince Prospero's imperial suite is composed of seven colour-themed rooms that symbolize his unconscious states of mind. The revellers in Poe's tale are both guests at the masque and figures in the Prince's unconscious, suggesting 'a multitude of dreams' moving 'to and fro in the seven chambers'.<sup>16</sup> Baudelaire was interested in Poe's exploration of the connection between physical enclosures and the expansive realms of dreaming and the imagination, and this influence is apparent in the first title of his collection of prose poems, *Le Spleen de Paris*, which he originally called *Un Monde (Univers) de rêves [A World (Universe) of dreams]*.<sup>17</sup> For Baudelaire, as for Poe, the landscape of dreaming is an important element of his treatment of contemporary urban space and he was

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<sup>13</sup> Richard Wilbur was one of the first critics to draw attention to domestic space in Poe's short stories. For further discussion, see his article 'The House of Poe', *Anniversary Lectures 1959* (Washington: Reference Department of the Library of Congress, 1959) reprinted in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Eric Carlson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), pp. 255-77.

<sup>14</sup> Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick, 'Decadent Fiction', in *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 149.

<sup>15</sup> In 1847, Baudelaire first encountered Poe's fictions in a series of translations by Isabelle Meunier, which were published in *La Démocratie pacifique* between January 1847 and May 1848, and he published the first of his translations of Poe in 1848. For more discussion of this influence, see Brian Stableford, *The Decadent World-View: Selected Essays* (Rockville, MD: Borgo Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Masque of the Red Death', *Graham's Magazine*, XX, no. 5, May 1842, 257-59 (p. 257).

<sup>17</sup> In a letter to Alphonse de Calonne (16 December 1859), Baudelaire lists this title as a possibility. *Correspondance*, vol. I, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 387-38.

inspired by Poe's amalgamation of oneiric settings and physical landscapes. In 'Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe' ['New Notes on Edgar Poe'] (1857), Baudelaire explains the transcendental qualities of Poe's works alongside an application of his 'Poetic Principle'.<sup>18</sup> While Poe does not explicitly mention the theory of correspondences that Baudelaire develops in 'Correspondances' ['Correspondences'], in *Les Fleurs du mal*, there are clear analogies between Baudelaire's poems and Poe's theories regarding the connection between reality and the imagination.

Both Decadent and Gothic writing share an interest in depicting intangible sensations of fear and desire, but in Decadent literature the supernatural is not always a replacement for real-life experiences. In "'Decadent Spaces": Notes for a Phenomenology of the *Fin de Siècle*' Gordon elucidates how in Decadent texts there is a correspondence between the setting and the ego development of the main character – Decadent places become Decadent spaces because of the way in which they mirror the experiences of the private, interior world of the individual. In Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890; revised 1891), for instance, a mirror effect is created between Dorian living his life as art and the picture becoming more realistic. The inhabitable places in the novel, like the old school room that houses the painting, become spaces of perceived threat and horror. As Gordon summarizes, Decadent spaces are 'a species of prison', which is epitomized by the images of the locked room or the labyrinthine corridor.<sup>19</sup> In his analysis, Decadent space emerges as 'a sort of Chinese-box diagram: words and spaces lead us into a confrontation with other words and spaces'.<sup>20</sup> This image of tessellation is reminiscent of the confined rooms in Huysmans's description of Des Esseintes' villa, which has connected chambers like 'boîtes du Japon' [Japanese boxes].<sup>21</sup> Decadent spaces are characterized as multifaceted but they are also in an endless pattern of return which is itself entrapping. However, as the title of Gordon's essay implies, he presents only 'notes' and, rather than deliberating

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<sup>18</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe', in Edgar Allan Poe, *Nouvelles Histoires Extraordinaires*, trans. by Charles Baudelaire (Paris: M. Lévy frères, 1857), pp. v-xx (p. xix).

<sup>19</sup> Gordon, 'Decadent Spaces', p. 51.

The locked room is a recurring trope in both detective fiction and the Gothic, as discussed by Mark Madoff, 'Inside, Outside and the Gothic Locked-Room Mystery,' in *Gothic Fictions: Prohibition/Transgression*, ed. by Kenneth W. Graham (New York: AMS, 1989), pp. 46-62, and Michael Cook, *Narratives of Enclosure in Detective Fiction: The Locked Room Mystery* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

<sup>20</sup> Gordon, 'Decadent Spaces', p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours, Œuvres complètes*, vol. VII, ed. by Lucien Descaves (Paris: Crès, 1928-34), p. 29 / *Against Nature*, trans. by Robert Baldick (1956; London: Penguin, 2003). p. 19.



their subtle differences, he retains the assumption that Decadent spaces are in fact a type of Gothic space. This is apparent in the variations between the nested Chinese boxes outlined by Gordon, and the Japanese boxes evoked by Huysmans. Chinese boxes are layered spaces that are enclosed, delineated, and locked, whereas the Japanese puzzle box is an interconnecting space designed to hide and reveal a secret chamber. Gothic spaces represent a total withdrawal and contraction, whereas Decadent spaces are often threshold spaces, positioned astride the boundary of interior and exterior.

In his study, *L'Imaginaire décadent, 1880-1900*, Pierrot uses the metaphor of the labyrinthine maze to articulate the complexities of Decadent space and its relationship to urban place. Pierrot proposes that Decadent spaces and places are like complex urban puzzles, in which the main character is 'risque à chaque instant de se perdre' [perpetually in danger of becoming lost].<sup>22</sup> Rather than an interconnected realm of possibilities, his interpretation of Decadent settings is that they are puzzles that are meant to be solved. This is particularly true, Pierrot declares, in relation to urban settings that are often reflections of the artist's desire to escape from reality. On the one hand, Decadent spaces are grounded in present reality, and, on the other, they signify the more intangible spaces of memory and desire.

Pierrot's sixth chapter, 'Paradis Artificiels', a direct reference to Baudelaire's collection of essays published in 1860, is the first attempt at establishing a typology of spatiality in Decadent fiction.<sup>23</sup> It examines three types of Decadent spaces – synthetic settings in which mechanical constructions overtake the workings of nature; the cityscape as connected to the labyrinth; and the drug-induced dream space.<sup>24</sup> However, Pierrot explores these settings through some French examples that are not typically considered Decadent. For instance, he uses Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's Symbolist science-fiction novel *L'Ève future* [*The Future Eve*], partly serialized in *L'Étoile française* (13 December 1880 – 4 February 1881), as an example of the Decadent preference for the synthetic.<sup>25</sup> Hadaly's underground residence, in which a mechanical globe in the main hall simulates the vault of the sky, exemplifies how the

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Pierrot, *L'Imaginaire décadent, 1880-1900* (Paris: Les Presses universitaires de France, 1977) p. 212 / *The Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900*, trans. by Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 172.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Baudelaire's *Les Paradis artificiels, opium et haschisch*, a study of the effects of opium and hashish on the imagination was published by Poulet-Malassis et De Broise in 1860.

<sup>24</sup> Pierrot, 'Paradis Artificiels', *L'Imaginaire décadent*, pp. 205-36 / 'Paradis Artificiels', *The Decadent Imagination*, pp. 166-90.

<sup>25</sup> Pierrot, 'Paradis Artificiels', pp. 207-28 / 'Paradis Artificiels', pp. 168-69.

setting of the novel serves both to mock nature and demonstrate the power of human ingenuity and technology. This, Pierrot affirms, is a similarity of design shared with Huysmans's *À rebours*, as Des Esseintes also shuts himself away from reality in a house designed around the imagination. Yet, while he acknowledges that *À rebours* is an interesting setting, he dismisses it as a place of trickery and deliberate hallucinations, ignoring that the house at Fontenay is a carefully curated space for pseudoscientific experiments into artifice and nature.

While Pierrot's attention to the importance of setting in a selection of French texts is useful to my study of Decadent space, his focus on artificiality is limiting. His categories highlight the otherworldly aspects of Decadence but fail to evoke more familiar, worldly settings. The performative environments of the theatre and the music-hall; the gendered rooms of the bedroom and boudoir; and spaces that are an amalgamation of nature and artifice, such as the hothouse, bell-jar, and aquarium, all defy his categorizations. The tendency towards artificiality, for instance, can be interpreted as a rejection of nature, what Des Esseintes terms his 'penchant naturel vers l'artifice' [natural inclination towards artifice].<sup>26</sup> However, as exemplified by Des Esseintes' collection of hothouse flowers, Decadent literature blurs the line between real and fake. Initially preferring artificial flowers over real ones, Des Esseintes purchases real flowers that look synthetic. The sentiment expressed in this paradoxical inversion is both a contempt for and a dependence upon the natural world.

In Decadent literature, the desire for spaces of retreat is undercut by a fascination with the modern world. Arguably, Pierrot's three types of Decadent spaces are not just 'artificial' places of dream or fantasy but retain a connection to materiality. Des Esseintes attempts to regain control over his body and mind through withdrawing into his carefully controlled villa-space, but this location is not one of complete solitude, independence, or release. This is typical of Decadent spatiality. Instead of being purely fictional realms designed to draw out the anxieties of the protagonist, as we find in the Gothic tradition, Decadents use space to suggest a point of interconnection between intimate, private, physical realms and vast sensory and imaginative possibilities.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 186 / *Against Nature*, p. 73.

<sup>27</sup> The interpretation of space as constructed in relation to physical place and architecture is most famously discussed by Henri Lefebvre. Through exploring the notion that as soon as space becomes inhabited it becomes dependent on its occupants and historicized, Lefebvre develops the conception that space is socially produced. He argues that every society develops its own type of space and that

In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales* (1992), Chris Baldick describes the Gothic as ‘a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration.’<sup>28</sup> Baldick clearly defines the spatiality of Gothic fiction as something which is centred around claustrophobia and entrapment. Suffocating spaces, ‘the dungeon, the locked room, or simply the confinements of a family house closing in upon itself’ suggest physical and psychological constriction.<sup>29</sup> In this thesis I demonstrate that the spatial parameters of the Gothic are different to the sense of vastness and interconnection implied by Decadent spaces. Rather than being considered as a subsidiary to the Gothic, Decadent spatiality requires its own study that pays attention to its dynamism and elusive complexities. As David Weir argues in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (1995), ‘the very elusiveness of the notion of decadence is significant; that is, elusiveness signifies meaning.’<sup>30</sup>

### **The Spatial Turn in *Fin-de-Siècle* Studies**

Over the last forty years the ‘spatial turn’ in literary criticism, a term introduced by Edward W. Soja (1989), has promoted the idea that certain literary spaces or places are of great cultural interest.<sup>31</sup> These spatial readings, which include the studies by Gordon and Pierrot mentioned previously, draw attention to the architectural dynamics of privacy and enclosure, physical and imaginary displacement, and spatial hierarchies that demarcate class and gender.<sup>32</sup> In the last decade, studies of space have begun to concentrate more specifically on the spatiality of Victorian and *fin de siècle* literature, but to a great extent scholars of literary space have focused on Romantic and pre-Modernist literature, sidestepping Decadence, which is often regarded as a minor

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place emerges as a particular form of space that can be altered and adapted. See, ‘La Production de l’espace’, *L’Homme et la société*, 31 (1974), 15-32.

<sup>28</sup> Chris Baldick, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, ed. by Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. xi-xxiii (p. xix).

<sup>29</sup> Baldick, ‘Introduction’, p. xix.

<sup>30</sup> David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> The ‘spatial turn’ is used to refer to the increase in studies of space, in both the social sciences and literary criticism, from the late 1980s. Edward W. Soja uses ‘spatial turn’ to describe the importance of not just discussing time but also spatiality in *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (New York: Verso, 1989).

<sup>32</sup> The history, cultural context and various meanings of the ‘spatial turn’ are explored by Joachim Frenk in *Spatial Change in English Literature* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2000).

literary tradition. Indeed, the fact that many Decadent texts have been subsumed into the wider categories of Romanticism, Modernism, and the Gothic has much to do with its own threshold status as a literary tradition that grows and flourishes between other larger, more significant movements.

There is a tendency among critical works on space in nineteenth-century literature to ignore Decadent writing, as exemplified in ‘Space’, Issue 17 (2013), a special issue of the journal *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* dedicated to the study of spatiality. In ‘Theories of Space and the Nineteenth-Century Novel’, Isobel Armstrong, the guest editor for this issue, considers the philosophical and theoretical underpinning of the concept of space and its application to the Victorian novel. In the first half of her essay, Armstrong outlines the epistemology of spatiality, as established by Immanuel Kant, in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), and Bachelard’s *La Poétique de l’espace* and Henri Lefebvre’s ‘La Production de l’espace’ [‘The Production of Space’] (1974) in relation to George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1853).<sup>33</sup> While Armstrong examines only English Realist novels of the mid nineteenth century, she illustrates how paying attention to spatial experience and an application of theoretical models of space, such as Bachelard’s conception of how we ‘read a room’, brings out elements of well-known works of Victorian literature that we perhaps would not see so clearly otherwise.<sup>34</sup> She discusses, for instance, how time and place are reshaped around the intentions of the author, the relationship between perception and setting, and how spatiality reflects the evolving cultural landscape of the nineteenth century. This is the central conceit of other spatial readings of nineteenth-century literature, such as Hsin Ying Chi’s *Artist and Attic: A Study of Poetic Space in Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing* (1999) and Tom Bragg’s *Space and Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century British Historical Novel*

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<sup>33</sup> Isobel Armstrong, ‘Theories of Space and the Nineteenth-Century Novel’, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 17 (2013), 1-21.

As Armstrong acknowledges, her argument, that Kant’s a priori categories of understanding (space and time) are enhanced by Hegel’s theory that we experience space dynamically, is a development from her essay ‘Spaces of the Nineteenth-Century Novel’ in ‘Part V: Spaces of Writing’ in *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Kate Flint (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 573-97.

<sup>34</sup> Armstrong, ‘Theories of Space and the Nineteenth-Century Novel’, p. 15.

(2016), both of which use space to re-read familiar works of Victorian fiction.<sup>35</sup> The ‘poetic dynamics of spatial descriptions’, as Bragg writes, enables an interrogation of how described spaces in literary works relate to characterization, narrative, history, and place.<sup>36</sup>

Most recently, the critical material on nineteenth-century literary spatiality has taken a distinctively global turn, focusing on place in relation to political and cosmopolitan networks. In *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature* (2012), for instance, the fourth section, ‘Matters of Debate’, includes a discussion of the cityscape and an examination of the change to space and time caused by technology, and the fifth section, ‘Spaces of Writing’, explores the politics of national and regional literature, the relationship between Britain, Europe, and the rest of the Empire, and the redefinitions of place necessitated by global migration.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, ‘Part II: Place’, in the collection of essays *The Fin-de-Siècle World* (2015), examines the period in global terms and identifies the prominence of transnational networks.<sup>38</sup> Regenia Gagnier’s opening chapter to this volume, ‘Global Literatures of Decadence’, connects the broadening of our understanding of the *fin de siècle* to Decadence.<sup>39</sup> She argues that Decadence is related to instability and the factors that instigated the rise of the Decadent movement in France and England (such as the increase of urban living, migration, and a greater sense of the permeability of cultural borders) had similar effects in other places around the world.<sup>40</sup> My study offers a contribution to this conception of Decadence by providing a comparative and detailed consideration of the cross-continental reactions

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<sup>35</sup> Hsin Ying Chi, *Artist and Attic: A Study of Poetic Space in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Lanham, MD and Oxford: University Press of America 1999), and Tom Bragg, *Space and Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century British Historical Novel* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> Bragg, *Space and Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century British Historical Novel*, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> Franko Moretti’s *Atlas of the European Novel* (London: Verso, 1998) and Hsuan Hsu’s *Geography and the Production of Space in Nineteenth Century American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) are two general works on the geography of literature, the process of mapping literary spaces, and how the architecture of settings relates to social mobility, which are heavily drawn upon in this collection of essays. See Kate Flint’s introduction to *The Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, pp. 1-12.

<sup>38</sup> Each essay in this section ‘Spaces of Writing’ is named after a country or continent, beginning with France and Britain and ending with India and Africa.

<sup>39</sup> Regenia Gagnier, ‘Global Literatures of Decadence’, in *The Fin-de-Siècle World*, ed. by Michael Saler (London and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 11-28.

This is an idea previously argued by Regenia Gagnier in *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relation of Part to Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Global Decadence beyond the nineteenth century is discussed by Kristin Mahoney in *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and the complexities and revelations of situating Decadence in a wider cultural landscape was the subject of the conference ‘Cosmopolitanism, Aestheticism, and Decadence, 1860-1920’, University of Oxford, 17-18 July 2014.

to urban spaces. From Baudelaire's experiences of the rebuilding of Paris in the 1850s through to Symons's interactions with the crowded streets of 1890s London, I assert that the Decadent depiction of urban threshold spaces is a reflection of a broader, more subjective feeling of uncertainty and restlessness. This thesis is more than just the first close, comparative reading of these authors; it proposes that Decadent texts create meaning through their interaction with their cultural and physical contexts.

In *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (2016), Alex Murray addresses the oversight of scholars examining spatiality in nineteenth-century literature through his consideration of physical place in Decadent landscape writing. His study predominantly addresses the unique and universal qualities of outdoor spaces and argues for a transnational reading of Decadence (from Naples, Paris, Oxford, Wales, to Manhattan). Using the conception of Decadence as a stylistic practice, as developed by Richard Gilman (1979) and John Reed (1985), Murray employs a study of place to add to a broader definition of Decadent style that is characterized by reimagining, what he terms 'the textual politics of writing about place at the *fin de siècle*'.<sup>41</sup>

Murray begins his investigation of Decadent landscapes with an examination of Symons's 'At Carbis Bay', from the 'Intermezzo: Pastoral' section of *London Nights*, and contends that Symons's rural poem bears out many of the impressionistic tropes of his city verses. This substantiates his claim that Decadent landscape writing is more concerned with a certain style than an accurate rendering of place. My study similarly draws attention to the artifice of writing Decadent space, but unlike Murray who argues that Decadent place is related to a broader cultural interest in cosmopolitanism and aestheticism, I suggest that a closer analysis of threshold space reveals a complex inward turn in Decadent writing. Decadents favour spaces of withdrawal from the world, spaces that evoke private anxiety and express a desire for escape. While Symons's poems retain a cosmopolitan and urban outlook, he maintains an interest in natural spaces that evoke introspections. Symons's landscape poems, particularly in the 'Intermezzo: Pastoral' section, explore the elemental thresholds of weather – wind, rain, and mist – and, in an image that recalls his poems of urban edgelands, he relates littoral

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<sup>41</sup> Alex Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 9.

See also Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* and John Reed, *Decadent Style* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985).

spaces, such as the margin of the sea and the mist of the mountains, to a sense of hidden mysteries and dangers.<sup>42</sup> Symons is not just moving from one place to another, but illustrating how the city and the countryside share a threshold spatiality that elicits private anxieties, moods, and memories.

### **The City as Threshold**

Late nineteenth-century literature reflects and reimagines a variety of public and private spaces, as Nicholas Freeman's *Conceiving the City: London, Literature and Art 1870-1914* (2007) illustrates in relation to the different ways writers perceived the cityscape and the unknowability of London.<sup>43</sup> This emphasis on physical place and its representation as a literary space is also central to Joseph McLaughlin's reading of London through the lens of Empire, in *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (2000), Lawrence Phillips's interpretation of the city as a site of Gothic imagination, in *London Gothic: Place, Space, and the Gothic Imagination* (2012), and Julian Brigstocke's discussion of the relationship between culture, life, and the streets of Montmartre in *The Life of the City: Space, Creativity and the Aesthetics of Revolt in Fin-de-Siècle Montmartre* (2014).<sup>44</sup>

Uniting these studies of the literary representation of London and Paris at the *fin de siècle* is a sense of the city as simultaneously an organized and distorted, and familiar and unsettling, space. Paris and London are cities that are both in a state of transition and this creates a shared sense of alienation and disconnection.<sup>45</sup> Lucy Huskinson expounds on this important sense of urban duality in her introduction to *The Urban*

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<sup>42</sup> In a much later poem, 'The Woman in the Moon', Symons returns to this image. Drawing on Aubrey Beardsley's 1894 illustration of the same name for Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1900), Symons writes, 'Upon the margin of the moonless sea | What shall be the end of their agony?' Symons, 'I. The Woman in the Moon' in 'Studies in Strange Sins', *Love's Cruelty* (London: Martin Secker, 1923), p. 15.

<sup>43</sup> In his chapter "'That Untravell'd World': Symbolist London', Freeman provides an overview of the depiction of London as a setting through which 'to transcend ordinary reality' in a range of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Decadent and Symbolist writing. See Nicholas Freeman, "'That Untravell'd World': Symbolist London', in *Conceiving the City: London, Literature and Art 1870-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 147-205 (p. 203).

<sup>44</sup> Joseph McLaughlin, *Writing the Urban Jungle: Reading Empire in London from Doyle to Eliot* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000); Lawrence Phillips, *London Gothic: Place, Space, and the Gothic Imagination* (London: Continuum, 2012); and Julian Brigstocke, *The Life of the City: Space, Creativity and the Aesthetics of Revolt in Fin-de-Siècle Montmartre* (London: Ashgate, 2014).

<sup>45</sup> As Jonathan Conlin explains, through a discussion of the similarities between physical aspects of the two cities (street layouts, restaurants, entertainment, and cemeteries), Paris and London were in a cultural dialogue between 1700 and 1900. Jonathan Conlin, *Tales of Two Cities: Paris, London, and the Birth of the Modern City* (London: Atlantic, 2013).

*Uncanny: A Collection of Interdisciplinary Studies* (2016), and describes the connection between the familiar and the unfamiliar in all modern cityscapes as like a

doorway within the fabric of the city that cannot be discovered by our concerted efforts of will, but can appear suddenly and without warning, rupturing the city's carefully laid plans, and in the process revealing to us a more imaginative cityscape.<sup>46</sup>

Huskinson's image of the doorway, which connects the reality of urban life to repressed, hidden, or even imaginary, realms recalls, for example, the door to Mr Hyde's Soho house in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) or Octave Mouret's initial impression of the bourgeois doorway to the apartment block in Émile Zola's *Pot-Bouille* [*Pot Luck*] (1882).<sup>47</sup> In both of these literary depictions, the unsettling reality of urban life is used to shape the action of the protagonists and doorways are used to demarcate a point of transition – the cross-over from exterior to interior, appearance to reality, or, from the commonplace to the unfamiliar.

While there are numerous studies of the treatment of space in the writing of the *fin de siècle* and the representation of London and Paris in nineteenth-century poetry and prose, no one has yet attempted a study of interior and exterior urban spaces in Decadent literature.<sup>48</sup> It is the aim of this thesis to address this omission. It is not intended as a study of Paris or London at the *fin de siècle* but as an examination of the representation of urban spaces in a selection of Decadent works. Decadent writers represented their lived environments in some detail, using these spaces to evoke private anxieties and fantasies as well as to express unfulfilled desires for an escape to another world. As I will discuss later, French and English Decadent writers depict the city as a

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<sup>46</sup> Lucy Huskinson, 'Introduction: The Urban Uncanny', in *The Urban Uncanny: A Collection of Interdisciplinary Studies*, ed. by Lucy Huskinson (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1-17 (p. 6).

<sup>47</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1886), pp. 40-41, and Émile Zola, *Pot-Bouille* (Paris: G. Charpentier de cie, 1882), p. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Anthony Clayton provides a historical overview of the city in the 1890s and Matt Cook considers *A rebours* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in relation to degeneracy, sexuality, and class. These studies of Paris and London are focused more on a sense of "decadence", in reference to cultural notions of excess and depravity at the turn of the century, than on Decadence as a literary and artistic tradition. See Anthony Clayton, *Decadent London: Fin de Siècle City* (London: Historical Publications, 2005), and Matt Cook, 'The Decadent City', in *London and the Culture of Homosexuality, 1885-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 95-121.



series of interconnecting real and imaginary spaces, and this is interestingly described by Bachelard and Benjamin.

The spaces that we encounter in Decadent literature have their origins in recognizable urban places. Echoes of the lavish apartments that Baudelaire designed for himself in the Hôtel Pimodan, where he lived from May 1843 to July 1845, are apparent in his poems, as are the more squalid hotel rooms that he lived in after the bankruptcy of his publisher Poulet-Malassis in 1862 increased his financial difficulties. Similarly, photographs of Huysmans, taken in his apartment at 11 Rue de Sèvres, depict him surrounded by artefacts in the manner of *Des Esseintes*. This Parisian neighbourhood, in the 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, is one of enclosed gardens, courtyards, and private spaces behind closed walls. It has a monastic atmosphere, due in part to being the former centre of the Catholic Church in Paris. As I examine in Chapters Three and Four, English Decadent writers were also inspired by their surroundings and were fascinated by French writers' rooms. The vogue in England and France for personalized interior spaces that reflected the bohemian lifestyle of their occupants had an effect on Decadent writers living in London in the 1890s. Symons rented his apartments in Fountain Court, located in the Middle Temple (south of Fleet Street and east of the Strand in Central London), and in a similar way to Huysmans's apartment, this quiet, medieval courtyard surrounded by twisting streets and walled gardens functioned as a sanctuary from the bustle of the modern city. It was a space of withdrawal and contemplation, but one that was situated in the heart of the metropolis. Symons describes this in *Silhouettes*, in which the poet is a threshold figure wandering through and between the countryside and the city. The relationship between the poet and the city (particularly in liminal twilight hours) becomes a striking motif in *London Nights*, a collection in which the multi-coloured lights and sounds of the city are punctuated by the 'intermezzo' sections set in the English and Welsh countryside and on the Continent.

Decadent writers position themselves on the peripheries of the modern world. However, while they privilege the outsider's isolated viewpoint they also retain an insider's perspective. This insider-outsider paradox, and the sense of partial retreat that

it illuminates, is implicit in descriptions of Decadent literature and what R. K. R. Thornton (1979) calls the ‘Decadent dilemma’.<sup>49</sup> Thornton explains that:

The Decadent is a man caught between two opposite and apparently incompatible pulls: on the one hand he is drawn by the world, its necessities, and the attractive impressions he receives from it, while on the other hand he yearns towards the eternal, the ideal, and the unworldly. The play between these two poles forms the typical Decadent subject matter and is at the root of much of the period’s manner and particularly its mannerisms.<sup>50</sup>

These contrary ‘pulls’, and the productive and challenging environment that is created between them, are depicted in the threshold spaces and states in Decadent literature. Decadent writers unconsciously return to the source of their anxieties, which provide both the motivation and stimulus for withdrawal.

Patrick McGuinness, in *Poetry and Radical Politics in Fin de Siècle France: From Anarchism to Action française* (2015), illuminates the concept of paradox in relation to Decadence and claims that spaces of retreat are partial; they remain connected to the world. In the development of this theory, McGuinness uses Théophile Gautier’s *Émaux et Camées* [*Enamels and Cameos*] (1852) and his poetic image of the isolated craftsman who seals himself off from the world in order to write. As Gautier expresses in the ‘Préface’ to the collection:

Sans prendre garde à l’ouragan  
Qui fouettait mes vitres fermées,  
Moi, j’ai fait Émaux et Camées.

[Without paying heed to the storm  
That whipped my closed windows,  
Me, I made *Enamels and Cameos*.]<sup>51</sup>

McGuinness attests that we may read this as ‘a sort of manifesto of retreat’ but, I would argue, it also implies a kind of struggle.<sup>52</sup> The window is forced shut against the outside

<sup>49</sup> Thornton focuses on the difficulties of defining Decadence. R. K. R. Thornton, “Decadence” in Later Nineteenth-Century England”, in Fletcher, ed., *Decadence and the 1890s*, pp. 15-30.

<sup>50</sup> Thornton, “Decadence” in Later Nineteenth-Century England”, p. 26.

<sup>51</sup> Gautier, ‘Préface’, quoted in and trans. by Patrick McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics in Fin de Siècle France: From Anarchism to Action française* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics*, p. 9.

world but we imagine that we can still hear the wind outside. McGuinness notes that rather than being sealed off from outside influences, ‘the world must be known; its pressures felt, its attractions toyed with, for its rejection to work’.<sup>53</sup> Gautier’s poems appear to be perfectly constructed works of art, fashioned and polished, like the jewellery he refers to in the title, but they are also hard, elemental, and crafted from things he has found in the world. ‘Even in retreat’, McGuinness writes, ‘one is bound to one’s pursuer, since retreat is always defined by what one is retreating from’.<sup>54</sup>

Decadent texts invariably draw attention to what they are withdrawing from, which means that it is difficult to discuss Decadent spaces as perfectly sealed retreats. In Séverine Jouve’s important study of the parallels between writers’ rooms and fictional spaces, *Obsessions & perversions dans la littérature et les demeures à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle* [*Obsessions & Perversions in Literature and Residences at the End of the Nineteenth-Century*] (1996), she observes that there is a correspondence between real and fictional spaces. She proposes that Decadent writers favour spaces that are a rejection of reality, nature, modern civilization, and progressivism. Away from the demands of the real world, the Decadent protagonist becomes like a hermit, ‘occupé à des quêtes purement cérébrales, dans son horreur d’être dérangé par autrui . . . La solitude devient son ambition’ [occupied in purely cerebral quests, in horror of being disturbed by others . . . Solitude becomes his ambition].<sup>55</sup> Jouve considers Dorian Gray, Jean des Esseintes, Roderick Usher, and Monsieur de Phocas as hermetic characters whose houses deliberately echo ‘le corps malade’ [the sick body].<sup>56</sup> However, both the protagonists and the spaces they inhabit exist in a precarious equilibrium that extends beyond the sickness/health dynamic in the texts.

Jouve’s analysis of physiognomy and architecture recognizes the connection between interior decoration and personality, as epitomized by Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac. In ‘Intus’ [‘Inside’], from his collection of poems *Les Hortensias bleus* [*Blue Hydrangeas*] (1896), Montesquiou describes the illusory and evocative properties of curios and books inside a home and explains how they create a house that feels more

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<sup>53</sup> McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics*, p. 10.

<sup>54</sup> McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics*, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> Séverine Jouve, *Obsessions & perversions dans la littérature et les demeures à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Hermann, 1996), p. 117.

<sup>56</sup> Jouve, *Obsessions & perversions*, p. 61.

like a museum.<sup>57</sup> The connection between the museum-house and the mind of the collector is especially apparent in *À rebours*, where the house becomes like a theatre of the mind, resulting in an exploration of the threshold between authenticity and performance, the corporeal and the dream.<sup>58</sup> Jouve's reading of *À rebours* is based on her theory that real residences (including the Hôtel Goncourt, the apartments of Guy de Maupassant, the house-studio of Fernand Khnopff, the home of Jean Lorrain, and the residences of Robert de Montesquiou) become fictional spaces of retreat in Decadent texts. Memories, dreams, and hallucinations are depicted as if they are part of the architecture of a building. Jouve's interpretation aligns enclosed spaces with hidden obsessions and perversions, and her study exposes one of the issues that my thesis investigates: the fundamental duality that we encounter in Decadent writing derives from an experimentation with opposites, contradictions, and paradoxes. Jouve comments, for example, on the Decadent retreat from Modernity while also acknowledging that French Decadents were not divorced from the cultural preoccupations and technical achievements of the late nineteenth century. The house at Fontenay, she maintains, is as much an experiment in modern technology as it is an expression of withdrawal from contemporary life. Decadent writers struggle to reconcile their interest in the tempting realms of sexuality and modernity with their desire for retreat. Hence, instead of creating simple spaces of removal, they design spaces that articulate a more complex and ambivalent relationship to the world.

### **Decadent Threshold Space**

'Il faut rester sur le seuil' [One must remain on the threshold], wrote Remy de Gourmont in his short story 'Sur le seuil' ['On the Threshold'] from *Histoires magiques* [*Studies in Fascination*] (1894), a collection of stories about repressed desires and tantalizingly close sexual experiences.<sup>59</sup> Gourmont places his explorations of sex and death in evocative threshold settings, such as the Château de la Fourche haunted by the

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<sup>57</sup> Robert de Montesquiou, 'Intus', *Les Hortensias bleus* (1896; Paris: Georges Richard, 1906), p. 152. This poem and his influence on Huysmans is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. For Jouve's analysis of this poem, see *Obsessions & perversions*, p. 69.

<sup>58</sup> We find this image in other Decadent prose fiction. Remy de Gourmont's 'Le faune' ['The Faun'] (first published in *Le Journal*, 2 January 1893), for example, depicts a young woman's encounter in her bedroom with a self-summoned incubus. It is both a supernatural tale and a fevered erotic encounter that takes place on the threshold between dreaming and reality. Remy de Gourmont, 'Le faune' in *Histoires magiques* (1894; Paris: Mercure de France, 1912), pp. 201-08.

<sup>59</sup> Gourmont, 'Sur le seuil', in *Histoires magiques*, pp. 95-110 (p. 103) / 'On the Threshold', *The Angels of Perversity*, trans. by Francis Amery (Cambridge: Dedalus, 1992), pp. 62-68 (p. 65).

funereal heron, Remorse.<sup>60</sup> The presence of this creature is a physical reminder of Monsieur de la Hogue's decision to refrain from seducing his cousin Nigelle, as he would rather keep their relationship in his imagination than cross the literal threshold of her room and the sexual threshold that it represents. He comments that no matter how much one desires women 'il ne faut pas les cueillir' [one must not pluck them].<sup>61</sup> Gourmont uses the chateau as a setting for this transitional moment of unfulfilled yearning. With the death of Nigelle, the house becomes a space of neither death nor life, a waking dream in which the guardian of the threshold, Remorse, is a constant tormentor and companion. In Decadent threshold spaces of partial retreat, it is difficult to demarcate the line between reality and the imagination.

The sense of a clear but crossable boundary that we find in Gourmont's short story is suggested by the word 'seuil' in French, the etymological root of which is from the Vulgar Latin 'solium', a blend of 'solum' [flat ground] and 'solea' [a flat object]. These connotations of flatness are shared with the English word 'threshold', which refers to the level piece of timber or wood that forms the bottom part of a doorway that has to be crossed in entering a building.<sup>62</sup> Gourmont emphasizes how the threshold signifies an architectural and a metaphorical division as well as a sense of interconnection and physicality. The threshold between the private and public space, the door to Nigelle's bedroom, for example, is particularly evocative. It is tangible and physical (it can be stepped on), but it also symbolizes new beginnings and new relationships. Gourmont illustrates how this physical threshold is an ambiguous space – a flat, marginal zone that enables a gradual transition from, or temporary suspension of, his otherwise conflicting desires.

In *Thinking on Thresholds*, Mukherji describes the threshold 'not only as a space or a metaphor but also as a constitutive term, a category of experience that organizes thinking and feeling, in lived reality and in art.'<sup>63</sup> Tangible borders and boundaries are

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<sup>60</sup> The name of the heron alludes to Baudelaire's description of remorse in 'L'Irréparable' ['The Irreparable'] as 'l'Être aux ailes de gaze' [the Being with gauze wings]. Baudelaire, 'L'Irréparable' in *Les Fleurs du mal, Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 54-55 (p. 54) / my translation.

<sup>61</sup> Gourmont, 'Sur le seuil' p. 103 / 'On the Threshold', p. 65.

<sup>62</sup> The definition for 'threshold' given in the OED explains that the first element of the word is connected with the verb 'thresh' – to trample or tread. The earliest use of 'threshold' is in English Anglo-Saxon, but the ritual and symbolic associations of 'crossing the threshold' date to antiquity. For example, the ancient tradition of the groom carrying the bride over the threshold to indicate their entry into a new stage of life. See OED, 2nd edn, vol. XVII, p. 1008.

<sup>63</sup> Mukherji, *Thinking on Thresholds*, p. xxvi.

akin to the thresholds between physical and mental realms, and so an examination of transitive space is, Mukherji argues, an analysis of the interconnection between matter and mind. Her study, which predominantly discusses twentieth-century poetry and prose, divides the threshold into four types. These are: i) real thresholds as represented in art and literature, for instance, doors, windows, and doorsills; ii) thresholds that exist between self and world and which can be encountered, crossed, or dwelt on, such as those between the personal and the political, territorial borders, and boundaries; iii) the permeable relationships between the sensing body and the mind, such as waking and sleeping; and iv) writing and reading, playing and hearing, which are rendered as threshold processes as they connect two different sensory experiences. The threshold as defined by Mukherji emerges as much more than just a space or a metaphor. It is, instead, a category of experience.

Mukherji's collection of essays from 2011 anticipated a resurgence of interest in the concepts of the 'in-between' and the threshold in literary criticism. As the combined titles of Bjørn Thomassen's *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-Between* (2014) and the edited collection of essays *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* (2016) indicate, concepts of limits, borders, and boundaries offer opportunities to rethink our accepted ways of interpreting space and place in literature.<sup>64</sup> In *Andrew Marvell's Liminal Lyrics: The Space Between* (2012), for example, Joan Faust uses 'liminal' to investigate the in-between nature of Marvell's work in relationship to the boundaries of word and image, and the collection *Women in Transit through Literary Liminal Spaces* (2013), edited by Teresa Gómez Reus and Terry Gifford, aligns threshold spatiality with the changing private lives of women in Anglo-American literature from the Victorian period to the Second World War.<sup>65</sup> Both these volumes use the terms 'threshold' and 'liminal' interchangeably to describe transitional moments which are a point of exchange or development. Rather than discuss the

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<sup>64</sup> Drawing on the premise of Yi-fu Tuan, that 'place' is distinguished by a sense of stasis and security and 'space' is somewhere of movement and freedom, both of these volumes focus on locations that are transitional, temporary, and predominantly associated with the modern world – hotel lobbies, chain hotels, business parks. See Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); Hein Viljoen and Chris N. Van der Merwe, *Beyond the Threshold: Explorations of Liminality in Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern: Living through the In-Between* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014); and Dara Downey, Elizabeth Parker, and Ian Kinane, eds, *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place* (London and Washington: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> Joan Faust, *Andrew Marvell's Liminal Lyrics: The Space Between* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2012), and Teresa Gómez Reus and Terry Gifford, eds, *Women in Transit through Literary Liminal Spaces* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

threshold nature of the texts themselves, in these studies the ‘threshold’ is used as an overarching term to present the nature of a whole body of work or historical period.

The notion of the threshold is often associated with the concept of liminality, a psychological term which draws on the mid seventeenth-century Latin word ‘limen’, meaning threshold. The origins of liminal space can be traced to back to the ethnologist Arnold van Gennep in *Les Rites de passage* [*The Rites of Passage*] (1909) and his classification of ritual spaces. In his work, Gennep considers tribal rituals and societies, and his appraisal of the rites of passage in various cultures exemplifies how individual and communal life consists of crossing a variety of thresholds, such as birth, adulthood, parenthood, and death, and that each rite of passage is associated with a particular ritual.<sup>66</sup> The novice enters a liminal state, hovering between two worlds – the incomplete or orphaned status they had pre-ritual and ‘l’acquisition de l’esprit protecteur’ [the acquisition of a protective spirit] they have post-ritual.<sup>67</sup> The ritual is not a permanent state but one that leads to some sort of transformation, and during this middle period the novice engages in some kind of journey or transition. Gennep’s study articulates the difference between these two terms (liminality describes a state of partial understanding and threshold describes a transitional zone that is passed through during this process of acquiring knowledge) and his study provides a basis for thinking about how threshold states, experiences, and spaces are related.

Gennep’s theory of the threshold as a transformative space was developed by Victor Turner in *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967). In the chapter ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*’, Turner considers different rituals (coming of age, marriage ceremonies, and religious ceremonies) as liminal rites-of-passage. Like Gennep, he divides these ceremonies into stages (separation, liminality, and incorporation), but also acknowledges that these stages are restrictive. His attention is on the transition and the relationship between one stage and the next, particularly on the way that boundaries are dissolved and reinstated. In this pioneering investigation into threshold space, Turner cites Baudelaire’s theory of correspondences, as indicated by the title of his work, *The Forest of Symbols*. Turner quotes the whole of ‘Correspondances’ as a preface to his introduction and this poem

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<sup>66</sup> These rituals involve three distinctive but successive stages: separation (pre-liminal), marginal (liminal), and incorporation (post-liminal). During the ritual, the novice undergoes a transformation and they are no longer what they were pre-ritual or what they will become post-ritual.

<sup>67</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de passage* (Paris: Nourry, 1909), p. 110.

is used as a model for his understanding of liminality. Baudelaire writes, ‘L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles’ [Man passes there through forests of symbols].<sup>68</sup> This sentiment is echoed in Turner’s description of a liminal individual – ‘neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony’.<sup>69</sup> Turner’s study posits that the threshold is a transitional sphere, full of symbolism and suggestion, and his use of Baudelaire’s poem as the primary example in his monograph suggests that literary threshold spatiality has origins in nineteenth-century Decadence.

The threshold has enchanting qualities as it transforms what passes from one side to the other. In ‘Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’ (1938), Benjamin contends that Baudelaire separates himself from other French writers of the nineteenth century through ‘guard[ing] this threshold’, especially that which separates the individual from the crowd.<sup>70</sup> This depiction of Baudelaire associates the poet with the recurring archetype in Decadent writing of the threshold guardian, as exemplified by the Sphinx or Cerberus. In the poem ‘Le Cygne’ [‘The Swan’], in *Les Fleurs du mal*, for example, Baudelaire depicts a series of threshold figures, such as Andromache who lives her life in the past, mourning for her dead husband Hector, and the swan who escapes from captivity only to find himself dislocated from his natural environment on the streets of Paris. Baudelaire likens himself to all these exiles. As Benjamin writes in his posthumously published essay ‘Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ (first written in May 1935), the ‘*flâneur* still stands on the threshold’ but he is not a static figure.<sup>71</sup> Instead, the poet moves from one experience or state to the next. Like the spaces he occupies, the Decadent poet is a shifting and amorphous threshold figure.

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<sup>68</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘Correspondances’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 11 / ‘Correspondences’, in *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du mal)*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), p. 95.

<sup>70</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire’, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Baudelaire*, trans. by Howard Eiland, Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingston, and Harry Zohn, ed. by Michael William Jennings (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap, 2006), pp. 46-133.

Benjamin’s essays on Baudelaire and the figure of the *flâneur* are published together in *The Writer of Modern Life*. In the introduction to this collection, Jennings observes that after translating individual poems from *Les Fleurs du mal*, published by Benjamin as *Tableaux parisiens* (1923), Baudelaire became a ‘subterranean presence’ in Benjamin’s work. See Michael William Jennings, ‘Introduction’, in *The Writer of Modern Life*, pp. 1-25 (p. 7).

<sup>71</sup> Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, in *The Writer of Modern Life*, pp. 30-45 (p. 40).



In *Passagen-Werk* (a title that evokes passages, thresholds, and borders), Benjamin's exploration into *Schwelkenkunde*, or the science of thresholds, is conducted through an inquiry into the metropolitan motifs and Parisian figures in Baudelaire's works.<sup>72</sup> In his interpretation of Baudelaire's poetry, he draws a clear line between *Grenze* (limit, boundary, or border) and *Schwelle* (often translated as 'threshold').<sup>73</sup> Unlike the secure and stable *Grenze*, the *Schwelle* is a place of transition and it is used by Benjamin to portray the experiences of the amorphous figures of the prostitute, the gambler, and the *flâneur*, who haunt the threshold spaces of the city streets and the arcades. They are all restless and roaming figures and the spaces that they occupy reflect this in-betweenness. Benjamin relates the blurred boundaries of the city to the major historical changes in the late nineteenth century. The passages, boundaries, and thresholds encountered in newly Haussmannized Paris inspired modern thinking regarding urban experiences and encounters. Haussmann created 'arcades and *intérieurs*, the exhibition halls and panoramas.'<sup>74</sup> The arcades – glass passageways between two street spaces that sometimes contained shops – were a source of inspiration to Benjamin due to their complex architecture and atmosphere. As well as being contained, interior spaces, 'having no outside', they were also glazed spaces that retained a connection to their environment.<sup>75</sup> In 'The Exterior as *Intérieur*: Benjamin's Optical Detective' (2003), Tom Gunning explains:

By their very nature of enclosing an alleyway, or, rather, forcing a passage through a block of buildings, the arcades present a contradictory and ambiguous space that allows an interpretation – not only of spaces, but of ways of inhabiting and using space.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Critics such as Winfried Menninghaus and Azade Seyhan have discussed Benjamin's threshold theory in relation to his ways of perceiving urban spaces. See Winfried Menninghaus, *Schwelkenkunde: Walter Benjamin's Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), and Azade Seyhan, 'Visual Citations: Walter Benjamin's Dialectic of Text and Image', in *Languages of Visuality: Crossings Between Science, Art, Politics, and Literature*, ed. by Beate Allert (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), pp. 229-41.

<sup>73</sup> See Benjamin, 'First Sketches', in *The Arcades Project*, [M<sup>o</sup>, 26], p. 856.

In German, 'Schwelle' [threshold] is similarly related to a notion of a beam or plank, like the English 'sill' which is like 'seuil'.

<sup>74</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 45. Emphasis in original.

<sup>75</sup> Benjamin, 'Dream House, Museum, Spa', in *The Arcades Project*, [L1a,1] p. 406.

<sup>76</sup> Tom Gunning, 'The Exterior as Interior: Benjamin's Optical Detective', *boundary* 2, 30 (2003), 105-30 (p. 106).

Benjamin's understanding of space is shaped by a consideration of how interiors and exteriors are connected. He describes this quality of movement across and through a barrier or border as 'threshold magic'.<sup>77</sup>

Philip Rosen (2003), in his introduction to a collection of papers on Walter Benjamin, ruminates on the transformative and unfixed qualities of the threshold. He rationalizes that the *Schwelle* is 'a zone of transition, change, movement, where the edges of a place are inflated, such that inside and outside spaces overlap and the division between them breaks down.'<sup>78</sup> The threshold, he argues, can be found on the street and inside a bourgeois dwelling as both are spaces in which people can reside or remain. Rosen's ideas have their origins in Bachelard's *La Poétique de l'espace* and his descriptions of the liminal spaces of the home, such as corridors, windows, and stairs, and their connection with architecture and the dream world. Bachelard's study is not focused on Decadence, but in his representation of the oneiric house he draws on Baudelaire in order to demonstrate how a sense of the 'vast' can be created through a developing and deepening representation of details.<sup>79</sup>

Bachelard's theory of 'l'immensité intime' is based, in part, on Baudelaire's depiction of vastness. In 'Élévation' ['Elevation'], in *Les Fleurs du mal*, the poet describes his agile spirit soaring in 'l'air supérieur' [superior air], high above the 'miasmes' and 'par delà les confins des sphères étoilées' [Beyond the borders of the starry spheres].<sup>80</sup> His focus on 'par delà', particularly in the first stanza, is continued in the following poem, 'Correspondances', where the poet makes explicit the connection between the concrete physical world and the profound metaphysical 'beyond'. In 'Correspondances', he refers to the limitless connections between perfumes, sounds and colours as 'infinites' and 'vaste':

Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté  
Les parfumes, les couleurs, et les sons se répondent.

[. . .]

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,

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<sup>77</sup> Benjamin, 'The Interior, The Trace', *The Arcades Project*, [I1a,4] p. 214.

<sup>78</sup> Philip Rosen, 'Introduction', from *Benjamin Now: Critical Encounters with the Arcades Project*, ed. by Kevin McLaughlin and Philip Rosen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 1-15 (p. 9).

<sup>79</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace*, p. 174-79.

<sup>80</sup> Baudelaire, 'Élévation', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 10 / 'Elevation', in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 17.

Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,  
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

[Vast as the night, as sunlight's clarity,  
So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond.

[. . .]

Having dimensions infinitely vast,  
Frankincense, musk, ambergris, benjamin,  
Singing the senses' rapture, and the soul's.]<sup>81</sup>

Correspondences intensify the senses. As a result, the poet's mind is transported to another, larger realm situated beyond the confines of the city and the room. However, as Baudelaire suggests and Bachelard explores in his study of spatial poetics in the home, it is not enough to just try and imagine another space in time. Conceptual 'forêts de symboles' are elicited by physical spaces, bodily sensations, and objects.

Using Baudelaire's metaphor of small receptacles that contain larger spaces, Bachelard explains the attraction of objects that have not yet been opened. In the poem 'Le Flacon' ['The Flask'] in *Les Fleurs du mal*, for example, Baudelaire describes the effect of opening an antique perfume bottle. Opening the vial releases an intoxicating memory of a long-dead lover which is redolent of another space and time.<sup>82</sup> Instead of being tightly locked boxes, Decadent threshold spaces are half-open and half-closed, poised between real-world desires, anxieties and experiences, and fictional fantasies, dreamscapes and otherworldly landscapes. For Baudelaire, as for Bachelard, walls and boundaries are permeable and indicate a point of connection and division. The threshold becomes a metaphor for the creative process. As Bachelard writes: 'Le poète parle au seuil de l'être.' [The poet speaks on the threshold of being.]<sup>83</sup>

In *La Poétique de l'espace*, Bachelard's interest in the correspondence between small spaces and vast thoughts is supported by his ruminations on miniatures – a model, copy or smaller version of a normal sized object. In these condensed spaces, ideas and feelings become enriched. Using the example of the seed within an apple, for instance,

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<sup>81</sup> Baudelaire, 'Correspondances', p. 11 / 'Correspondences', p. 19.

<sup>82</sup> Baudelaire, 'Le Flacon', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 96-98. In Chapter Three, I discuss this poem in more detail in relation to Dowson's diminished interspaces.

<sup>83</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace*, p. 2 / *The Poetics of Space*, p. xvi.

he argues that it contains all the essence of the fruit as well as the potential to make a new plant.<sup>84</sup> The relationship between microcosm and macrocosm predicates his notion of ‘l’immensité intime’, and is apparent in the diminishing domestic spaces he discusses; from the universe to the house, and from the room to wardrobes, chests, and drawers. These functional objects are places in which ‘l’homme, grand rêveur de serrures, enferme ou dissimule ses secrets’ [human beings, great dreamers of locks, enclose or conceal their secrets].<sup>85</sup>

Bachelard’s study of the immensity of intimate space underpins my thinking about Decadent threshold space. In the second of the four poems entitled ‘Spleen’ in *Les Fleurs du mal*, for example, Baudelaire uses the image of the cluttered and crowded drawer as less of a symbol for past experiences that have been neatly filed than a metaphor for interconnecting and overwhelming memories:

Un gros meuble à tiroirs encombré de bilans,  
De vers, de billets doux, de procès, de romances,  
Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans des quittances,  
Cache moins de secrets que mon triste cerveau.

[A giant chest of drawers, stuffed to the full  
With balance-sheets, love-letters, lawsuits, verse,  
Romances, locks of hair rolled in receipts,  
Hides fewer secrets than my sullen skull.]<sup>86</sup>

He depicts a bedroom drawer where sentimental and practical items are kept side by side. Some of the objects in the drawer appear to spill over – verses and ballads, balance sheets and receipts, love-letters and locks of hair are intermingled. These physical and metaphysical ‘correspondances’ are a recurring feature in Baudelaire’s poetry and function as gateways to non-physical realms of memory and desire.

Critical writing on space can be impressionistic, and in *La Poétique de l’espace*, Bachelard attempts to counteract this imprecision by relating his philosophical ideas to physical objects and places. Predominantly, these are familiar, simple images that

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<sup>84</sup> In this chapter on microcosmic spaces, Bachelard quotes from Edmond Rostan’s *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897), where Cynaro describes the apple as ‘un petit univers à soi-même’ [a little universe in itself]. Edmond Rostan, *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897), quoted in *La Poétique de L’espace*, p. 142.

<sup>85</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de L’espace*, p. 79 / my translation. Jolas uses the less evocative (especially for this thesis) ‘keeps’ instead of ‘enclose or conceal’.

<sup>86</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Spleen (II)’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 73 / ‘Spleen (II)’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 146.

evoke broader, imaginative correspondences. The half-open drawer or the door left ajar is ‘un cosmos de l’Entr’ouvert’ [an entire cosmos of the Half-open].<sup>87</sup> It is both a site of suspended states and, paradoxically, limitless potential. This image in which the familiar and the transcendental are united implies something that is essentially Decadent. Symons, for example, exploits the image of half-openness in ‘Variations Upon Love, II’, in *London Nights*. He ruminates, ‘what close thing is hid | Between the half-way lifting of a lid?’<sup>88</sup> Positioned on the threshold between seduction and repulsion, the speaker is drawn towards the unfamiliar and the momentarily glimpsed, but he dreads what might be revealed if he looks too closely. ‘L’Entr’ouvert’ arrests attention.

The paradoxical qualities of threshold spaces have been emphasized by twentieth- and twenty-first century critics. The threshold is dynamic, associated with flux and movement. Yet, it is also used as a device for slowing down thought processes and raising awareness of transitional situations. As prior studies of threshold spaces attest, various artists and writers examine the concept of threshold space. However, the fact that Benjamin accentuates the importance of Baudelaire in his philosophy of nineteenth-century materiality is significant. Threshold spatiality, as articulated by Baudelaire, is used to convey experiences of uncertainty caused by the modern city. As Bachelard acknowledges, threshold experiences and threshold spaces are interlinked and, as I hope to show, this is best expressed through the literary imagination.

### **Chapter Outlines**

In Chapter One, ‘Rooms and Reverie: Charles Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*’, I examine two kinds of threshold space in Baudelaire’s poetry: the threshold between exterior/interior that resonates with his reputation as a city-poet, and the threshold between reality and imagination. Using the prose poem ‘La Chambre double’ as a model of Decadent threshold poetics, I describe how Baudelaire was both excited and anxious about Haussmann’s modifications to the streets and buildings of Paris and demonstrate how his poems articulate newly realized feelings of marginality and displacement. He depicts the city as a threshold space of integrative experiences,

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<sup>87</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de l’espace*, p. 200 / my translation.

<sup>88</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Variations Upon Love, II’, *London Nights*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Leonard Smithers, 1897), p. 81.

and this understanding of the city is embodied by the figure of the *flâneur* and articulated by Benjamin through his idea of the *Schwelle*. However, a sense of *thresholdness* is present not just in Baudelaire's representation of the external cityscape, but also in his depictions of bedrooms, attics, and writers' rooms.

While Baudelaire's exterior city spaces have been the subject of extensive scholarly attention, there has been relatively little study of his interior spaces. In *Baudelaire's Poetic Patterns* (1999), Peter Broome provides a detailed consideration of the poetic architecture of *Les Fleurs du mal*, claiming that in his poetry Baudelaire aspires towards an ideal retreat that is both introspective and contained.<sup>89</sup> However, Broome's classification of Baudelaire's interior spaces is problematic. While they may represent some of the qualities of withdrawal that Broome enumerates, I maintain that Baudelaire's *chambres* appear intimate and closed but are situated in and affected by the urban flux. In order to show how Baudelaire articulates this correspondence between interior and exterior I turn to 'Le Balcon' ['Balcony'] and 'Les Fenêtres' ['Windows'], two poems which conjure images and sensations of the flux of the city in private spaces.

Decadent interiors are invariably in correspondence with the cityscape, and while Benjamin's *Schwelle* is useful for describing the threshold relationship between the city and the room, I assert that the recessed nature of Decadent interior spaces is more precisely described by Bachelard's concept of 'l'immensité intime'. Within the interior spaces of the poems of Baudelaire, alcoves and perfume bottles evoke vast imaginative realms. All of these ideas (the leakage between interior and exterior, the compartmentalized and recessed *chambre*, and the immensity of intimate spaces) are brought together in 'La Chambre double', a prose poem in which Baudelaire provides us with a model of Decadent threshold space. Through the symmetrical structure of the poem and his description of waking, Baudelaire shows how the two states create a third space, in effect a crossing point between dreaming and awakening, past and present, fantasy and reality. As I demonstrate in the following chapters, the types of threshold spaces that we find in Baudelaire are quintessentially Decadent.

In Chapter Two, "“Things worldly and things spiritual”: Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* and the House at Fontenay', I focus on Huysmans's adoption of Baudelaire's

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<sup>89</sup> Peter Broome, *Baudelaire's Poetic Patterns: The Secret Language of Les Fleurs du mal* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p. 119.

threshold stance in *À rebours* and his depiction of the relationship between different interior spaces. Rather than providing Des Esseintes with a quasi-spiritual space of retreat from modern life, I argue that the entire house at Fontenay is a threshold space which evokes memories of the physical world. I begin this chapter with a discussion of the dynamic compartmentalization of *À rebours*. The house is a suburban sensorium, built around Des Esseintes' desire to experiment with the threshold of reality and imagination, and the novel is a record of his experiences and attempt to find spiritual salvation. The rooms of the house and the chapters of the book are correspondent spaces. This is articulated well by Séverine Jouve in her work on Huysmans in *Obsessions & perversions* in which she establishes that architecture and writing are 'le nœud même de la conscience décadente' [the very crux of decadent consciousness].<sup>90</sup> While there is an emphasis on organization and cataloguing in *À rebours*, the spaces in the novel cannot be read discretely. There is a correspondence between the novel's chapters and the rooms of the house, between the perimeters of these rooms and the sensory limits of Des Esseintes' body, and between the memories evoked by his material collection and the association of ideas and thoughts in his mind. In the novel, Huysmans deploys a threshold spatiality that enables him to explore fusions and correspondences between rooms, objects, and sensations.

Reminiscent of Baudelaire's 'La Chambre double', infused with 'des sensations de serre chaude' [hothouse sensations], Huysmans's house at Fontenay replicates the organization of a hothouse, in which plants from different geographical zones are grown together in one space.<sup>91</sup> This threshold spatiality reaches an apex in Chapter Eight, where the inclusion of Des Esseintes' collection of exotic plants exemplifies the connection between sensory perception and memory. With reference to Angela Nuccitelli's '*A Rebours's* Symbol of the Femme-Fleur' (1975), I explain how the bodily descriptions of the plants spill over into Des Esseintes' nightmare-fantasy of the *femme-fleur*. The house is designed to provoke the imagination, yet the only dream Des Esseintes has in the novel offers him no escape from reality. The villa is a hothouse space where the worldly and the spiritual are amalgamated. In Huysmans's subsequent

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<sup>90</sup> Jouve, *Obsessions & perversions*, p. 4.

<sup>91</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', *Le Spleen de Paris (Petits poèmes en prose)*, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 280-82 (p. 280) / 'The Double Room', in *Twenty Prose Poems*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), pp. 15, 17, & 19 (p. 15).

novels, *En rade* (1887) and the Durtal tetralogy, which traces his journey from Satanism to Catholicism, Huysmans uses the hothouse as a metaphor for the intensified relationship between mankind and God as experienced in the space of the church. Durtal retreats into what I call ‘cathedrals of the strange’ in an attempt to achieve spiritual salvation.

Having established the ways in which Baudelaire and Huysmans use space in a correspondent and dynamic way, in Chapters Three and Four I turn to threshold space in the works of two English Decadent writers, Ernest Dowson and Arthur Symons. In their use of contemporary and correspondent settings, Dowson and Symons handle interiorized spaces in a similar way to Baudelaire. However, they are less fixated on the materiality of space and employ it more metaphorically in order to articulate moral and personal preoccupations, such as a desire for self-purification or the feeling of restlessness.

In Chapter Three, ‘From the Drawer to the Cloister: Ernest Dowson’s Poésie Schublade Notebook, *Verses*, and *Decorations*’, I demonstrate how Dowson’s diminishing threshold spaces symbolize his increasing desire for spiritual purity. Dowson coins the term ‘Poésie Schublade’ [drawer poetry] to refer to his early notebook of poems written between 1886 and 1891, many of which are included alongside newer poems in *Verses* and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, collections that create an impression of Dowson’s obsession with unrequited love. The structure and themes of the Poésie Schublade Notebook, however, reveal a process of poetic refinement, as exemplified by the poet’s treatment of the figure of the *jeune fille*. Beginning with the embowered garden, his Poésie Schublade poems retract into the Decadent cell, a private drawer-like space situated between the realms of internal and external reality. Nick Freeman (2013) refers to the combination of excess and restriction in relation to Dowson’s recurrent preoccupations and narrow lexical range, and I show how this is also immanent in his use of space.<sup>92</sup> Through his treatment of reduced threshold spaces Dowson creates, what we might call, Decadent minimalism. This is exemplified in the ‘Sonnets – of a Little Girl’ sequence from his Notebook. In the fourth sonnet, Dowson describes the small, hollow inside of a sea-shell as a space of, to use Bachelard’s term, ‘l’immensité intime’. It is a diminished interspace that expresses the

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<sup>92</sup> Nick Freeman, “‘The Harem of Words’: Attenuation and Excess in Decadent Poetry”, in Hall and Murray, eds, *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, pp. 83-99 (pp. 88-97).



poet's desire to retract from the immorality of the world into complete purity and total emptiness.

In the Catholic verses at the end of the Poésie Schublade Notebook, Dowson explores diminishing spiritual spaces of retreat: the charterhouse, cloister, and relic. These reduced spaces, situated between the world and God, are inaccessible to the poet who is unable to relinquish his worldly desires. He remains on the threshold between the outside world of the city and the inside world of stillness and ritual. In the concluding section of this chapter, I explain how after his conversion in 1891 Dowson takes his attempt at purification to a Decadent extreme. With reference to Joseph Salemi's argument in 'The Religious Poetry of Ernest Dowson' (1987), that in Catholicism physicality is used as a portal to spirituality, I explore the poet's threshold position in 'Extreme Unction'.<sup>93</sup> Dowson's pursuit of religious sanctity results in an accentuation of his profane desires and he refers to the sanitizing aspects of this Roman Catholic ritual as sensual and aesthetic. The image of the moribund body in this poem perfectly exemplifies his situation 'betwixt' the worldly and the spiritual.

In Chapter Four, 'Urban and Rural Thresholds: Arthur Symons's *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*', I explore how Symons's threshold spatiality is an integral part of his restless, peripheral perspective. In contrast to the idea of Dowson as a 'drawer' poet, I present Symons as a 'border' poet who is fascinated by crossings, margins, and boundaries. In his early verse collections we encounter a familiar sense of *thresholdness* – between interior and exterior, between night and day, between memory and desire. In this chapter my focus is on two particular types of threshold in Symons's early poems – thresholds between urban and rural spaces, and the threshold space of the music-hall, where the poet/speaker is positioned on the outside looking inwards and where life transitions into art.

*Silhouettes* and *London Nights* contain variations of types of spaces that we encounter in other Decadent works, and I begin this chapter with a consideration of how Symons creates a Baudelairean sense of threshold poetics in his portrayal of the flux and stillness of the city. In *Silhouettes*, Symons depicts the *Schwelle* of London and, in poems such as 'Nocturne', a sense of travelling between different urban spaces. In particular, the music-hall and Symons's apartment in Fountain Court are presented as

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<sup>93</sup> Joseph Salemi, 'The Religious Poetry of Ernest Dowson', *The Victorian Newsletter*, 72 (1987), 44-47.

spaces of oscillation and retreat. In *London: A Book of Aspects* (1905), he describes Fountain Court as a still space nestled in the heart of the city and – borrowing Baudelaire’s words – as a launch-pad into ‘a bath of multitude’.<sup>94</sup> Symons’s observations of moods, sensations, and experiences of place are reflected in the city streets and, in a way that recalls the transition between interior/exterior in Baudelaire’s poems, in the ambiguous and transformative space of the music-hall. Symons lingers on the threshold of this performance space. He frequently watches from the wings or waits for performers to emerge from stage-doors onto the street. With reference to Petra Dierkes-Thrun’s concept of ‘Dancing on the Threshold’ (2011), I discuss how the music-hall is a space of desire and longing which the poet never fully enters.<sup>95</sup> He stays on the peripheries of his own experience, looking in.

*Silhouettes* and *London Nights* are also characterized by a sense of roving and wandering, however in the last two sections of this chapter I show how Symons’s threshold perspective extends beyond the bitter-sweet atmosphere of Fountain Court and the morally ambiguous spaces in and around the music-hall to include the countryside and the coast. At the beginning of *Silhouettes*, Symons transports his reader to the seaside resort of Dieppe to provoke comparisons between the sea and the city, and in the Intermezzo sections of *London Nights*, the pastoral verses reveal a personal sense of restlessness and seeking which underpin his experiences of London. These rural landscapes and seascapes take prominence in his later works, but in his early verses, I suggest, they foreground how his vagabond perspective unites various types of threshold spaces.

A distinctive thematic focus on threshold spatiality connects the Decadent writing of Baudelaire, Huysmans, Dowson, and Symons. Decadent literature concentrates on hybridity, precarious positions, and opposite extremes – the real and the imaginary, freedom and imprisonment, composition and de-composition – and I argue that these interstitial concerns are expressed through spatial imagery. My rationale in this study is to examine Decadent threshold poetics comparatively and along a continuum, and I consider key figures of the French and English tradition: from Baudelaire’s seminal poetry collections in mid nineteenth-century Paris, to Huysmans’s Decadent novel *ne plus ultra*, *À rebours*, Dowson’s Poésie Schublade Notebook poems, and Symons’s

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<sup>94</sup> Arthur Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects* (London: Privately printed, 1909), p. 22.

<sup>95</sup> Petra Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome’s Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011), pp. 15-55.

1890s verse collections in which he offers a slightly different perspective on threshold poetics. Prior to this project, the spaces and settings in Decadent literature have been interpreted as resting places or complete retreats from the world. However, by focusing on the connection between threshold experiences and threshold spaces, I aim to offer a more nuanced understanding that addresses the relationship between Decadent writing and Decadent space.

## CHAPTER 1



## Rooms and Reverie

### Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*

In *Les Fleurs du mal* [*The Flowers of Evil*] (1857, revised 1861) and his posthumously collected volume of prose poems *Le Spleen de Paris* [*Paris Spleen*], titled *Petits poèmes en prose* in Volume IV of the 1869 edition of his *Œuvres complètes*, Charles Baudelaire articulates many provocative ideas about threshold space, particularly in relation to contemporary Parisian life and urban spaces.<sup>1</sup> The modern city is a source of poetic inspiration. In ‘De l’héroïsme de la vie moderne’ [‘Of the Heroism of Modern Life’], the last section of *Salon de 1846*, he writes that all forms of life contain elements of the ‘éternel et quelque chose de transitoire – d’absolu et de particulier’ [eternal and of the transitory – the absolute and the particular].<sup>2</sup> When the poet views the city he sees both the familiar, pre-industrial, old Paris and the modern landscape of new Paris. The poet is part of the crowd and yet, like the *flâneur*, remains on the threshold of modern urban experience, retaining both his distance and his autonomy.

Some of the most well-known portraits of Charles Baudelaire depict him as a marginal figure. In Gustave Courbet’s *L’Atelier du peintre* [*The Painter’s Studio*] (1855), for example, Baudelaire is portrayed to the right of the canvas reading a book [Fig. 1.1]. Set back from the rest of the scene and seated rather than standing, he fades into the background.<sup>3</sup> His slightly removed position in this image interestingly reflects the perspective adopted in his poetry. As he articulates in the prose poem ‘Les Foules’ [‘Crowds’], ‘Comme ces âmes errantes’ [Like those wandering spirits] he observes in the streets, he is an interstitial figure inhabiting in-between spaces.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In 1917, the prose poems were published separately under the familiar title of *Le Spleen de Paris: Petits poèmes en prose*. This title has been translated as *The Parisian Prowler* by Edward K. Kaplan (1989), *Paris Spleen* by Martin Sorrell (2010), and *Paris Blues* by Francis Scarfe (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, ‘De l’héroïsme de la vie moderne’, in *Salon de 1846, Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 493-96 (p. 493) / my translation.

<sup>3</sup> This marginal perspective is also apparent in Édouard Manet’s *La Musique aux Tuileries* [*Music in the Tuileries Gardens*] (1862) in which Baudelaire’s face is smudged, as if not in focus.

<sup>4</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Foules’, in *Le Spleen de Paris, Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 291-92 (p. 291) / ‘Crowds’, in *Twenty Prose Poems*, pp. 27 & 29 (p. 27).

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Fig. 1.1. Gustave Courbet, *L'Atelier du peintre. Allégorie réelle déterminant une phase de sept années de ma vie artistique et morale* (1855), oil on canvas, 3590 x 5980 mm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Since the exhibition *Baudelaire/Paris*, held at the Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris (16 November 1993), Baudelaire's reputation as a city-poet has been firmly established.<sup>5</sup> There are numerous critical studies of Baudelaire's cityscapes in the 1990s, the majority of which are inspired by Walter Benjamin and his essays on Baudelaire from the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> For Benjamin, Baudelaire's poetry is unique in its sensitivity to the abstract meanings and connections in the material world. He argues that Baudelaire's representation of the effect of modern life on the human psyche transformed the city into a subject for lyric poetry. In my study of Baudelaire's threshold poetics, I also begin with Benjamin and his description of the city as *Schwelle*, a threshold space of permeable borders. In 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', Benjamin discusses the *Schwelle* of the city streets and gaze of the *flâneur*.

<sup>5</sup> The catalogue for this exhibition contains numerous examples of Baudelaire's relationship with, and rendering of, Paris. See Claude Pichois and Jean-Paul Avice, *Baudelaire/Paris* (Paris: Éditions Paris-Musées, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Some notable studies not mentioned elsewhere in this chapter are William Sharpe, *Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot, and Williams* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1990); Richard Burton, *Baudelaire and the Second Republic: Writing and Revolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); and Lois Boe Hyslop, *Charles Baudelaire Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1992).

‘The crowd’, Benjamin writes, ‘is the veil through which the familiar city beckons to the *flâneur* as phantasmagoria – now a landscape, now a room’.<sup>7</sup> As Benjamin establishes, Baudelaire treats both public and private spaces in a shifting way and his experience of the defamiliarized city is also apparent in his depiction of interior realms. These two spaces combine to create a tableau of the city on the threshold of complete transformation. It is an unfixing space, not unlike the ‘forêt[t] de symboles’ [forest of symbols] that Baudelaire describes in ‘Correspondances’.<sup>8</sup>

The response of the media to the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Baudelaire’s death (31 August 2017) focused on his reputation as a curious chronicler of modernity.<sup>9</sup> Baudelaire is considered a poet of the city streets and yet an equally distinctive characteristic of his poetry is a focus on more private and interiorized urban spaces. Of the one hundred and forty poems in the definitive third edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* (published posthumously in 1868) and the six condemned poems from the 1857 edition, fifty-six are evocative descriptions of bedrooms, balconies, alcoves, and perfume bottles. In *Le Spleen de Paris*, referred to by Baudelaire in a letter to the publisher Hippolyte Garnier as ‘un pendant’ [a companion piece or hanging part] to *Les Fleurs du mal*, eleven of the fifty-prose poems are explicitly set in interior spaces.<sup>10</sup> Many of the prose poems are reworked versions of poems in *Les Fleurs du mal* and in this chapter I consider them as useful parallel texts to his seminal collection.<sup>11</sup> In both

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, in *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Correspondances’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 11 / my translation.

<sup>9</sup> For example, the exhibition at the Musée de la vie romantique, ‘L’œil de Baudelaire’ (Paris, 2016-17) celebrates the literary and artistic landscape of the 1840s and its contribution to an aesthetics of modernity; the evening of discussion and poetry organized by the Rimbaud and Verlaine Foundation, ‘Baudelaire: Botanist of the Sidewalk’ (London, 2017), is centred around Baudelaire’s impact on psychogeography; and the republished articles in the virtual commemorative issue on Baudelaire by the editors of *French Studies* and *French Studies Bulletin*, which spans five decades of scholarship on the poet, are united by their consideration of Paris as a new source of poetic inspiration. ‘Virtual Issue on Baudelaire’, *French Studies* (2017) <<https://academic.oup.com/fs/pages/Baudelaire>> [Accessed 04 September 2017].

<sup>10</sup> Charles Baudelaire, letter to Hippolyte Garnier (6 February 1866), *Correspondance*, vol. II, p. 591.

Prose poetry was a form that Baudelaire worked on throughout his life, and while the collection as a whole was published posthumously, forty-five of the prose poems had already appeared in print with the other five found in Baudelaire’s effects after his death: Two of the earliest examples, ‘Le Crépuscule du soir’ [‘Evening Twilight’] and ‘La Solitude’ [‘Solitude’], predate *Les Fleurs du mal* appearing in an 1855 submission to the literary anthology titled *Fontainebleau*.

<sup>11</sup> There have been a number of French studies that have investigated the relationship between *Le Spleen de Paris* and *Les Fleurs du mal*, such as J. B. Ratermanis, *Étude sur le style de Baudelaire* (Bade: Éditions Art et science, 1949), and Jacques-Henry Bornecque, ‘Les Poèmes en prose de Baudelaire’, *L’Information littéraire*, 5 (1953), 177-82. Margery Evans brings together many of these French critics in her study of the prose poems, *Baudelaire and Intertextuality: Poetry at the Crossroads* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

volumes, interior threshold spaces symbolize and suggest imaginative correspondences between physical reality and other realms of experience – fantasies, dreams, and nightmares. However, unlike the spaces of withdrawal in Gothic fiction, which to a certain degree are an escape from the chaos of the real world, Baudelaire proposes that a space of privacy, ‘Any where out of the world’, is impossible to achieve in a modern context.<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire’s interiorized *chambres* are spaces of partial retreat from the city. In these unfixed threshold realms (positioned between public and private spheres, reality and dreaming, connection and withdrawal) Baudelaire establishes an essential *thresholdness* that underpins the Decadent depiction of space. Baudelaire observes the *Schwelle* of Paris in the exterior streets, and this experience of space as shifting and transitory is carried through into his depiction of interior spaces like the *chambre*.

### **Benjamin’s *Schwelle* and the Modern City**

In his introduction to *The Complete Poems of Lionel Johnson* (1953), Ian Fletcher comments on how ‘according to some critics, the failure of the poets of the Nineties was due not to want of intelligence in charting “the voyage without”, but rather to timidity in pursuing “the voyage within”’.<sup>13</sup> Rather than a physical rebellion, the Decadent ‘revolt against the Victorian moral order took the form of a retreat into the interior life’.<sup>14</sup> The prevalence of private spaces, combined with the recurring portrayals of dreaming and drug-taking, reinforces the sense that Decadence is an escape from the materiality of the outside world. However, an investigation into the spaces in Decadent literature reveals an engagement with and a reflection of contemporary life. This has its origins in Baudelaire’s poetry. First published in June 1857, *Les Fleurs du mal* articulates the perturbation and excitement generated by Haussmann’s reconstruction of Paris. The focus on urban life becomes even more explicit in Baudelaire’s second edition, published in 1861. His addition of thirty-five extra poems and inclusion of a new section ‘Tableaux parisiens’ [‘Parisian Scenes’], after the opening section ‘Spleen et Idéal’ [‘Spleen and Ideal’], emphasizes the modernization of Paris and the effect that this had on Baudelaire’s poetic imagination.

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<sup>12</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Any where out of the world’, *Le Spleen de Paris*, p. 356-57.

The separation of ‘any’ and ‘where’ is Baudelaire’s translation of his sub-heading ‘N’importe où hours du monde’.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Fletcher, ‘Introduction’, to *The Complete Poems of Lionel Johnson*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Unicorn Press, 1953), pp. xi-xliv (p. xiii).

<sup>14</sup> Fletcher, ‘Introduction’, p. xiii.

In the Introduction to this thesis I discussed how Benjamin links threshold space – *Schwelle* – to modern urban experience. In particular, he ascribes the idea of *Schwelle* to nineteenth-century Paris, and is careful to distinguish it from the concept of *Grenze* [boundary]. He writes: ‘A *Schwelle* <threshold> is a zone. Transformation, passage, wave action are in the word *Schwellen*, swell, and etymology ought not to overlook these senses.’<sup>15</sup> Applied to Baudelaire’s poetry, Benjamin’s concept of the threshold reveals something essential about Baudelaire’s approach to space, both real and imagined. Rather than a line to be crossed, the threshold is ‘a zone of transition’; a space that suggests movement from one side to the other and back again.<sup>16</sup> Marshall Berman evokes the *Schwelle* of the city in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982), when he acknowledges, in reference to Baudelaire’s depiction of Paris, that ‘the burgeoning street or boulevard knows no spatial or temporal bounds’, instead it ‘transforms the whole modern environment into a “moving chaos”’.<sup>17</sup> For Baudelaire, the sensation of being unfixed in time and/or place is not just limited to the city streets, but is a part of the whole experience of existing within an urban context. In the eighteen poems in ‘Tableaux parisiens’, for example, Baudelaire portrays Paris as a space of dislocated dreams and phantoms, transitional moments and points of suspension.<sup>18</sup>

In *Repressed Spaces* (2002), Paul Carter also uses Berman’s comments to reflect on the human experience of Baudelaire’s ‘moving chaos’, and argues that being ‘rushed off one’s feet’ instigates a desire to slow down.<sup>19</sup> In ‘Tableaux parisiens’, Baudelaire depicts movement and stillness in both exterior and interior spaces. In this sense, the section encapsulates Baudelaire’s threshold perspective on the city – a balance between looking *out from* windows on to the street, and looking *in to* rooms, hallways, and bedrooms. The poems are divided by setting; ten are predominantly exterior poems and eight are set in interior spaces.

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<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, ‘Prostitution, Gambling’, in *The Arcades Project*, [O2a, 1] p. 494. Italics in original.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, ‘First Sketches’, in *The Arcades Project*, [M°, 26], p. 836.

<sup>17</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (1982; New York: Verso, 1983), p. 159.

The phrase ‘chaos mouvant’ is from ‘Perte d’auréole’ [‘Loss of a Halo’], a prose poem which recounts, in the form of a conversation, the narrator-poet’s loss of his halo while crossing the street through busy traffic. Baudelaire, ‘Perte d’auréole’, in *Le Spleen de Paris*, p. 352.

<sup>18</sup> Eight of these poems had been previously published in the 1857 edition in the section ‘Spleen et Idéal’; ‘Le Soleil’, ‘À une mendiante rousse’, ‘Le Crépuscule du soir’, ‘Le Jeu’, ‘Je n’ai pas oublié . . .’, ‘La servante au grand cœur . . .’, ‘Brumes et pluies’, and ‘Le Crépuscule du matin’.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Carter, *Repressed Spaces: The Poetics of Agoraphobia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), pp. 18 & 19.



In the first Parisian scene, ‘Paysage’ [‘Landscape’], Baudelaire explains his intentions for the ‘Tableaux parisiens’ and, arguably, for the whole of *Les Fleurs du mal*. The poet is overlooking the city from his ‘mansarde’ and from his attic room he can both survey the city and lock himself away from it.<sup>20</sup> In an echo of Gautier’s ‘Préface’ to *Émaux et Camées*, the poet proclaims that: ‘L’Émeute, tempêtant vainement à ma vitre, | Ne fera pas lever mon front de mon pupitre’ [Riot, that rages vainly at my window glass, | Will never make me raise my forehead from my task].<sup>21</sup> The speaker rejects the conventional stance of the ‘man of the crowd’, caught up in the flux of the streets, and prefers to view the city from a distance.<sup>22</sup> He is interested in the changing beauty of the panoramic scene outside the window and, like a Romantic landscape painter, detects fluctuations in light and the movements of the sky. He notices the beauty of the light from other rooms, babbled tunes drifting up from the street, grey pillars of smoke, and describes how his task is to change his ‘penses brûlants’ [burning thoughts] into ‘une tiède atmosphère’ [a warm atmosphere].<sup>23</sup> The ‘atmosphère’ in his room is created by the seepage of the poet’s experience of the city into his imagination.

Baudelaire observes Paris from both a macroscopic and microscopic viewpoint. ‘His living room’, to use Benjamin’s words, ‘is a box in the theatre of the world’.<sup>24</sup> He watches the city from his attic but also up-close from within the crowd. In the second tableau, ‘Le Soleil’ [‘The Sun’], the poet descends into the ‘vieux faubourg’ [old suburb] in order to find inspiration.<sup>25</sup> The effect of moving from the all-encompassing view of the cityscape to this close encounter with the reality of modern Paris is discussed in further detail in ‘À une mendiante rousse’ [‘To a Red-Haired Beggar Girl’] in which the poet praises the girl’s simple peasant attractiveness and imagines her as a sixteenth-century beauty.<sup>26</sup> Peter Nicholls uses this poem in his literary guide to

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<sup>20</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Paysage’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 82. ‘Mansarde’ can refer to either an attic room, a loft, or a small artist’s garret.

<sup>21</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Paysage’, p. 82 / ‘Landscape’, p. 167.

<sup>22</sup> Barbara Wright provides some interesting context for the poem and argues that the ‘riots’ outside the poet’s window are ‘generally taken to be a reference to the deep disillusionment of those *quarante-huitards*’ during the 1848 Revolution in France. Barbara Wright, ‘Baudelaire’s poetic journey in *Les Fleurs du Mal*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire*, ed. by Rosemary Lloyd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 31-50 (p. 42).

<sup>23</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Paysage’, p. 166 / my translation.

McGowan translates the last line of the poem as ‘Transmuting furious thoughts to gently breathing air.’ ‘Landscape’, p. 167.

<sup>24</sup> Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, in *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Le Soleil’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 83 / ‘The Sun’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 169.

<sup>26</sup> Baudelaire, ‘À une mendiante rousse’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 83-85 (p. 83) / ‘To a Red-Haired Beggar Girl’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 169, 171 & 173 (p. 173).

*Modernisms* (1995) to draw attention to the use of different perspectives in early modern literature. Two contradictory views are expressed through two voices: ‘one which sympathizes with the girl and expresses admiration for her “natural” charms and another which simply takes her as an occasion for a poem’.<sup>27</sup> This interpretation of the poem foregrounds the distance of the poet from his subject and the way in which the girl is objectified. However, while Baudelaire projects his desires onto the girl, he also acknowledges that there is a parallel between the princess/beggar and the dandy/poet. Both are liminal figures. From up-close he can see how she remains ‘Au seuil de quelque Véfour’ [On the threshold of some Véfour], a reference to the first grand restaurant opened in the arcades of the Palais-Royal.<sup>28</sup> The beggar girl on the threshold of fashionable Paris simultaneously reflects the poet’s own position on the edge of the renovated city. ‘The *flâneur*’, Benjamin writes, ‘still stands on the threshold – of the metropolis as of the middle class’.<sup>29</sup>

Baudelaire’s Paris is a transitional space that consists of different types of thresholds, crossing points, and interactions. In ‘Tableaux parisiens’, as the title of the section conveys, Baudelaire evokes a series of scenes or frames through which different aspects of new and old Paris are foregrounded. The places and streets that the speaker used to visit have now become, almost literally, his old haunts and this section articulates a sense of exile and a failed search for refuge through his descriptions of diverse Parisian figures. In ‘Les Petites Vieilles’ [‘The Little Old Women’] and ‘Les Sept Vieillards’ [‘The Seven Old Men’], dedicated to Victor Hugo and originally grouped as a pair under the title ‘Fantômes parisiens’ [‘Parisian Phantoms’], Paris is described as ‘pleine de rêves | Où le spectre en plein jour raccroche le passant!’ [full of dreams | Where ghosts in daylight tug the stroller’s sleeve!]<sup>30</sup> After his almost supernatural encounter in the street, the *flâneur* staggers back to his house, ‘comme un ivrogne qui voit double’ [like a drunk with double vision], and shuts his door on the

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The House of Valois was the royal house of France from 1328 to 1589.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 1-3.

<sup>28</sup> Baudelaire, ‘À une mendicante rousse’, p. 85 / my translation. McGowan has ‘alley door’ instead of threshold.

<sup>29</sup> Benjamin, ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’, in *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 40.

<sup>30</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Sept Vieillards’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 87-88 (p. 88) / ‘The Seven Old Men’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 177, 179 & 181 (p. 177).

Victor Hugo was forced to leave Paris in 1851, finally taking up residency in Guernsey in 1855. The ‘Fantômes parisiens’ were published in the *Revue contemporaine* (15 September 1859).

city.<sup>31</sup> This double vision, however, continues in the last two stanzas. The poet crosses the threshold of his house, but he does not escape the uneasy feeling created by the outside. His ‘l’esprit fiévreux et trouble’ [feverous and troubled spirit] is not comforted, but further tormented.<sup>32</sup> For Baudelaire, the sensation of being unfixed in time and/or place is not just limited to the city streets, but is a part of the whole experience of existing within an urban context. Like the eponymous ‘les petites vieilles’, in the following poem, the speaker feels displaced. The old women are a lingering reminder of the dilapidated and beautiful old Paris and, like the poet, they are unable to feel settled in the new spaces of the city. The speaker exclaims: ‘Ruines! ma famille! ô cerveaux congénères!’ [Ruins! My family! My fellow-minds!]<sup>33</sup>

In the later prose poem, ‘Les Veuves’ [‘Widows’] (1861), which is similar in theme and setting to ‘Les Petites Vieilles’, the poet’s gaze is more voyeuristic. The public gardens are ‘une pâture certaine’ [guaranteed feeding grounds] for the poet and the philosopher.<sup>34</sup> They watch the people ‘qui reculent loin du regard insolent des joyeux et des oisifs’ [who retreat far back from the insolent gaze of laughing wasters] but are, ironically, unable to escape the gaze of the poet.<sup>35</sup> Baudelaire uses the verb ‘reculer’, meaning to step back or to retreat, to suggest that this space is one of shared removal, a space of pause and contemplation. The poet admits that he is drawn to figures who appear both connected and displaced. For instance, the widows remind him of the crowd outside a theatre or concert hall. He admits: ‘Je ne puis jamais m’empêcher de jeter un regard, sinon universellement sympathique, au moins curieux, sur la foule de parias qui se pressent autour de l’enceinte d’un concert public.’ [I can never resist casting an eye, curious if not always sympathetic, over the human flotsam that throngs around the entrance to a concert place.]<sup>36</sup> As I will go on to discuss in Chapter Four, three decades later Arthur Symons articulates a similar interest in relation to the London theatre crowd which, in a comparable way to the Parisian concert-goers, are fascinating for the Decadent poet as they stand on the threshold between life and art. Symons’s crowd, however, has just been released into the turmoil of the streets, whereas

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<sup>31</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Sept Vieillards’, p. 88 / ‘The Seven Old Men’, p. 181.

<sup>32</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Sept Vieillards’, p. 88 / ‘The Seven Old Men’, p. 181.

<sup>33</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Petites Vieilles’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 292-94 (p. 292) / ‘The Little Old Women’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Veuves’, in *Le Spleen de Paris*, pp. 292-94 (p. 292) / ‘Widows’, in *Paris Spleen*, trans. by Martin Sorrell (London: Alma Classics, 2010), pp. 24-26 (p. 24).

<sup>35</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Veuves’, p. 292 / ‘Widows’, p. 24.

<sup>36</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Veuves’, p. 293 / ‘Widows’, p. 25.

Baudelaire's crowd is in the street looking inwards. They are pressed against the railings and long to be a part of 'l'étincelante fournaise intérieure' [the scintillating glow within].<sup>37</sup>

The poet is an occupant of the city but also aligns himself with the marginalized people who haunt the new streets of Paris. Richard Burton in *The Context of Baudelaire's "Le Cygne"* (1980) posits that this is particularly apparent in 'Le Cygne' ['The Swan'] as Baudelaire's dedication of these poems to Victor Hugo foregrounds the position of the poet as a social outcast. However, he also notes that 'a crucial distinction needs to be made: Hugo's exile is actual, physical, while that of Baudelaire is no more than psychological, spiritual, or moral.'<sup>38</sup> Unlike Hugo, who was able to find a refuge from France in Guernsey, Baudelaire's feeling of exile is more difficult to resolve. As Baudelaire articulates in 'Le Cygne', the swan is like the other exiles in the city who are tormented by feelings of 'désir sans trêve' [endless longing] due to searching for a past that they cannot regain.<sup>39</sup> Old Paris is depicted as timeless and beautiful, in contrast to the modern and progressive Haussmannized streets. The city changes more rapidly than 'le cœur d'un mortel' [the mortal heart], and this makes the new spaces of the city unsettling as they are merely 'allégorie'.<sup>40</sup> The streets evoke previous encounters, memories, and stories from the past. Burton remarks on Baudelaire's 'pattern of stratification' in 'Le Cygne' that imitates the context of nineteenth-century Paris as 'an ever changing palimpsest of old and new, shifting, mobile and complex'.<sup>41</sup> This echoes Benjamin's comments in relation to 'Le Cygne', that the poem 'has the movement of a cradle rocking back and forth between modernity and antiquity.'<sup>42</sup> The depiction of the streets of Paris and the 'négresse' combined with Andromache and the swan reflect the indeterminate and marginal position of the speaker situated in a moving and destabilized space.

In 'De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne', Baudelaire discusses how the city is full of different aspects and peripheral figures who we do not usually see as we tend to overlook those who surround us too closely: 'La vie parisienne est féconde en sujets

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<sup>37</sup> Baudelaire, 'Les Veuves', p. 294 / 'Widows', p. 25.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Burton, *The Context of Baudelaire's "Le Cygne"* (Durham: Durham Modern Languages Series, 1980), p. 17.

<sup>39</sup> Baudelaire, 'Le Cygne', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 85-87 (p. 86) / 'The Swan', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 173, 175, & 177 (p. 177).

<sup>40</sup> Baudelaire, 'Le Cygne', pp. 85 & 86 / 'The Swan', p. 175.

<sup>41</sup> Burton, *The Context of Baudelaire's "Le Cygne"*, pp. 32 & 90.

<sup>42</sup> Benjamin, 'Baudelaire', in *The Arcades Project*, [J72,5] p. 356.

poétiques et merveilleux. Le merveilleux nous enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l'atmosphère; mais nous ne le voyons pas.' [Parisian life is rich in poetic and marvellous subjects. The marvellous envelopes and saturates us like the atmosphere; but we fail to see it.]<sup>43</sup> Enclosed in what Benjamin refers to as the 'phantasmagoria' of the city, Baudelaire constructs a new way of relating to the city and experiencing its atmosphere.<sup>44</sup> This is most clearly exemplified in 'Les Foules', which begins with the declaration that fully experiencing the city is not something that comes naturally but is a cultivated art: 'Il n'est pas donné à chacun de prendre un bain de multitude' [It is not given to everyone to take a bath in the multitude].<sup>45</sup> In the threshold zone of the city streets, there is a fluid interchange between experiences and emotions, places and states.

Samuel Weber, in "'Streets, Squares, Theatres": A City on the Move – Walter Benjamin's Paris' (2003), notes that in the modern city there is 'not a linear transition from one state to another'.<sup>46</sup> Experiences are 'no longer mutually exclusive but rather overlap'.<sup>47</sup> This is epitomized by the crowd, where the poet becomes both 'lui-même et autrui' [himself and another].<sup>48</sup> The poet crosses between bodies, perspectives, and characters in a fluid manner, 'il entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun' [he enters, when he likes, into the person of any man].<sup>49</sup> 'It is', in Weber's terms, 'this experience of the *Schwelle* as overlapping and as superimposition' that Baudelaire describes in the street poems.<sup>50</sup> In the interchangeable space of the crowd, where there are no fixed identities, the *Schwelle* enables him to lose himself in the multitude. The speaker passes across and through the throng, inhabiting different bodies and spaces. Due to the increased speed of life and the sensory overload related to modern city living, he experiences a feeling of 'mystérieuses ivresses' [mysterious drunkenness].<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Baudelaire, 'De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne', in *Salon de 1846*, p. 496 / my translation.

<sup>44</sup> 'Phantasmagoria' (meaning a shifting series of images like that produced by a magic lantern) is used by Benjamin throughout *The Arcades Project* to describe how the experience of nineteenth-century Paris, the arcades, and the crowd, appears like an optical illusion or projection. For specific reference to Baudelaire and phantasmagoria, see 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> Baudelaire, 'Les Foules', p. 291 / 'Crowds', p. 27.

<sup>46</sup> Samuel Weber, "'Streets, Squares, Theatres": A City on the Move – Walter Benjamin's Paris', *boundary 2*, 30 (2003), 17-30 (p. 28). Italics in original.

<sup>47</sup> Weber, 'Streets, Squares, Theatres', p. 28.

<sup>48</sup> Baudelaire, 'Les Foules', p. 291 / 'Crowds', p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> Baudelaire, 'Les Foules', p. 291 / 'Crowds', p. 27.

<sup>50</sup> Weber, 'Streets, Squares, Theatres', p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> Baudelaire, 'Les Foules', p. 292 / 'Crowds', p. 29.

The material environment is a complex assemblage, suggesting what Elizabeth Grosz (1995) terms, ‘a two-way linkage that could be defined as an *interface*’ between bodies and cities.<sup>52</sup> Of especial importance to Baudelaire is the degree to which the space of the city and the perceptions of the poet are interrelated. Inspired by Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Man of the Crowd’ (1840), Baudelaire’s essay ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’ [‘The Painter of Modern Life’] (1863) depicts the crowd-watcher as in communion with the crammed, shifting, and enigmatic crowd:

pour l’observateur passionné, c’est une immense jouissance que d’élire domicile dans le nombre, dans l’ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l’infini.

[for the passionate spectator it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite.]<sup>53</sup>

Unlike Poe’s unnamed narrator, who retains a distance from the crowd and the old man he follows through the streets, Baudelaire’s *flâneur* becomes a part of the *Schwelle*. In ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (1939), an essay which is the culmination of Benjamin’s thoughts on Baudelaire’s urban poetics, he discusses Baudelaire’s interpretation of Poe’s story and proceeds to argue that the ‘amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the streets’ are not a model for Baudelaire but are ‘imprinted on his creativity as a hidden figure’.<sup>54</sup> In a similar way to the poet concealed in the crowd, Benjamin articulates the effect of modern Paris on the psychology of the poet. His poems often adopt the movement and seeming intoxication of exterior city-life even when describing solitary experiences in interior spaces.

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<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Grosz investigates the relationship between space, time, and the body in relation to geography, urban planning, and architecture. Her postmodern reading of the city emphasizes new technology and the ways in which it leaves traces on the body. Elizabeth Grosz, ‘Bodies-Cities’, in *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 103-10 (p. 108). Italics in original.

<sup>53</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, pp. 683-724 (p. 691) / ‘The Painter of Modern Life’, in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1964), pp. 1-40 (p. 9).

‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’ was originally published in *Le Figaro* in three parts (26 and 29 November, and 3 December 1863).

<sup>54</sup> Benjamin, ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’, in *The Writer of Modern Life*, pp. 170-212 (p. 180).

### Spaces of Partial Retreat: *Chambres, Balconies, and Windows*

Baudelaire's exterior city spaces have been the subject of extensive study, but fewer critical works focus on his treatment of interior spaces.<sup>55</sup> Accompanying the street poems that I discussed in the previous section, the last five poems in 'Tableaux parisiens' are verses that evoke interiority. For example, Baudelaire's speaker in 'Je n'ai pas oublié . . .' ['I have not forgotten . . .'], an early poem addressed to his mother but not published until 1857, longs for the simplicity of the past and the 'blanche maison, petite mais tranquille' [white house, small but peaceful] which is associated with a sense of calm and innocence.<sup>56</sup> It is both a house of memory, suspended in a dream-like state, and a description of the real house which he shared with his mother in the village of Neuilly, near Paris. In *Baudelaire's Poetic Patterns: The Secret Language of Les Fleurs du mal*, Peter Broome comments on the importance of the retreat in Baudelaire's poetry: 'In its ideal form, the retreat is a place of contemplative tranquillity and spiritual containment'.<sup>57</sup> The private retreat is an important space for Baudelaire as it is a 'fertile location for reverie, where self and spirit, poet and imagination, embrace each other, free from restraint'.<sup>58</sup> However, Broome's classification of the interior spaces in Baudelaire's poems is slightly problematic. While they may represent the qualities of the ideal retreat that Broome describes, Baudelaire's interior spaces are not closed rooms or even truly sanctuaries from the world outside. As he explains in 'Je n'ai pas oublié . . .', his spaces of withdrawal remain 'voisine de la ville' [close to the city].<sup>59</sup> The memory may transport him to another place in time but it does not displace the anxieties and complexities of the present.

As in the city poems, the speaker remains on the threshold between observer/observed and as a result the boundary between public and private becomes challenged. For example, alongside a quasi-religious sense of 'cierge' [calm] and 'silencieux' [silence], in the last line he illustrates how 'la nappe frugale et les rideaux

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<sup>55</sup> Baudelaire's interest in intimate, interior spaces can be traced back to his early novella, *La Fanfarlo* (1847). The protagonist Samuel Cramer is enchanted by the claustrophobic space of the woman's bedroom, and this leads him to comment that 'Les sentiments intimes ne se recueillent à loisir que dans un espace très étroit' [Intimate feelings can only be enjoyed at leisure within a very confined space]. *La Fanfarlo, Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, pp. 553-80 (p. 576) / *La Fanfarlo*, in *Paris Blues/Le Spleen de Paris: The Poems in Prose with La Fanfarlo*, trans. by Francis Scarfe (London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2012), pp. 226-329 (p. 319).

<sup>56</sup> Baudelaire, 'Je n'ai pas oublié . . .', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 99 / 'I have not forgotten . . .', in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 203.

<sup>57</sup> Broome, *Baudelaire's Poetic Patterns*, p. 119.

<sup>58</sup> Broome, *Baudelaire's Poetic Patterns*, p. 119.

<sup>59</sup> Baudelaire, 'Je n'ai pas oublié . . .', p. 99 / 'I have not forgotten . . .', p. 203.

de serge' [the frugal tablecloth and serge curtains] are changed by the refracted evening light, filtered through the man-made glass, 'ruisselant et superbe' [streaming and superb].<sup>60</sup> The sun takes on the role of the observer-*flâneur* and like a 'grand œil' [big eye] it appears to watch the poet and his mother as they eat. Ross Chambers (2008) remarks on the relationship between interior and exterior urban spaces in Baudelaire's poetic imagination and he draws attention to the repositioning of 'Je n'ai pas oublié . . .' as the fourteenth poem in the 'Tableaux parisiens', as opposed to its original position as the seventieth poem in the 1857 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Chambers writes that 'No longer "voisine de la ville", the house that was the erstwhile focus of nostalgia is now part and parcel of the contemporary urban jumble'.<sup>61</sup> Baudelaire's relocation of this poem to the 'seemingly incompatible poetic space of "la rue étourdissante" [the deafening street]' illustrates his perception of the city as a layered space that consists of overlapping public and private experiences.<sup>62</sup>

On the surface, 'Je n'ai pas oublié . . .' and the following poem about his childhood nursemaid, 'La servante au grand cœur . . .' ['That servant with a kind heart. . .'] appear to be very different to the other 'Tableaux parisiens'. However, they draw attention to the personal, and often overlooked, experiences of day-to-day living. In the first stanza of 'La servante au grand cœur . . .', for example, the poet directly addresses his mother in his general consideration of the sorrows 'les pauvres morts' [the poor dead] must 'feel' and in the second stanza his rumination on death becomes much more personal.<sup>63</sup> He imagines his nurse back in her armchair by the fire, watching him with her 'œil maternel' [maternal eye].<sup>64</sup> Through imagining peering in at the corpses in the privacy of their graves, Baudelaire manipulates the presupposed border of public/private, present/past. His memories draw forth the nursemaid like a revenant from the past, reconstituting the clear line between the remembered and the forgotten. The themes of haunting, dreaming, and recollecting are characteristic of both internal and external spaces and in these Parisian scenes Baudelaire suggests that Paris is not just a collection of streets and boulevards but it is also composed of the diverse and

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<sup>60</sup> Baudelaire, 'Je n'ai pas oublié . . .', p. 99 / 'I have not forgotten . . .', p. 203.

<sup>61</sup> Ross Chambers, 'Heightening the Lowly (Baudelaire: "Je n'ai pas oublié . . ." and "A une passante")' *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 37, 1-2 (Fall-Winter 2008-2009), 42-52 (p. 45).

<sup>62</sup> Chambers, 'Heightening the Lowly', p. 45.

<sup>63</sup> Baudelaire, 'La servante au grand cœur . . .', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 100 / 'That kind heart you were jealous of . . .', pp. 203-04 (p. 203).

<sup>64</sup> Baudelaire, 'La servante au grand cœur . . .', p. 100 / 'That kind heart you were jealous of . . .', p. 204.



intimate experiences of the city dwellers. This is made most explicit in the concluding poem of the sub-section, ‘Le Crépuscule du matin’ [‘Dawn’], sixty-eighth in the 1857 edition, where the poet spies on his fellow Parisiens in their most intimate moments (sleeping, giving birth, and dying). More than any other feature of Baudelaire’s poetry it is the urban *Schwelle* which implies spatial mobility. This unfixity, that combines the senses and the imagination in a way that challenges an idea of containment, is not just limited to the ‘Tableaux parisiens’ but is a trait of all the interior poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*.

In ‘Digesting *Les Fleurs du mal*: Imaginative Spaces and Liquid Modernity in Baudelaire’ (2008), Joseph Acquisto remarks on the different representation of interior spaces in the 1857 and the 1861 editions. In the original edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, Acquisto argues, ‘a different set of spaces dominates the text, at once more private or restricted, and yet more expansive, than the city street.’<sup>65</sup> In the first section, ‘Spleen et Idéal’, for example, expansive, exotic landscapes and seascapes are imagined from within enclosed domestic spaces, which Baudelaire refers to as *chambres*. In French, this word evokes a variety of different types of ‘chamber’ including, but not limited to, bedrooms, hotel rooms, garrets, attic-spaces, and studios.<sup>66</sup> These are also composed of various adjuncts and smaller spaces: alcoves, balconies, wardrobes, chests of drawers, and perfume bottles, to name just a few. Acquisto maintains that, like the movement in the city streets, Baudelaire’s *chambre* poems

perform a circulation among spaces of various kinds that is not unlike the procedure of the *flâneur* and the poet of urban life who would become manifest in the 1861 “Tableaux parisiens.” Both involve evoking and transforming a set of spaces, and negotiating between lived reality and a set of mythical references.<sup>67</sup>

Acquisto considers these interior poems as an expression of Baudelaire’s “pre-urban” sense of a poetic self.<sup>68</sup> He acknowledges how the fluidity between the body and the imagination is a quality of Baudelaire’s interior poems that becomes manifested in the street poems. ‘Fluids’, as Zygmunt Bauman who coined the term ‘liquid modernity’

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<sup>65</sup> Joseph Acquisto, ‘Digesting *Les Fleurs du mal*: Imaginative Spaces and Liquid Modernity in Baudelaire’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 37, 1-2 (2008-09), 30-41 (p. 30).

<sup>66</sup> The English ‘chamber’, originates from the Old French, *chambre*, meaning room, chamber, or apartment.

<sup>67</sup> Acquisto, ‘Digesting *Les Fleurs du mal*’, p. 33.

<sup>68</sup> Acquisto, ‘Digesting *Les Fleurs du mal*’, p. 38.

puts it, ‘travel easily [. . .] they pass around some obstacles, dissolve some others and bore or soak their way through others still.’<sup>69</sup> Rather than passing just from the street to the *chambre*, or vice versa, Baudelaire’s urban spaces are in a dynamic relationship, positioned astride interior and exterior, reality and imagination, body and mind. They are threshold.

In the section ‘Spleen et Idéal’, the title image of ‘Le Balcon’ [‘The Balcony’] is one of the most striking examples of a space of partial retreat. Unlike some of the other poems set above the city streets, such as ‘Paysage’, the balcony is both an aerial and grounded space.<sup>70</sup> It is a suspended space of romantic enclosure that is simultaneously an extension of and separate from the room.<sup>71</sup> The poem begins with a direct address to his lost love and muse, ‘Mère des souvenirs, maîtresse des maîtresses’ [Mother of memories, mistress of mistresses], as he looks out across the city.<sup>72</sup> On the one hand, ‘l’espace est profond’ [space is limitless] and on the balcony his thoughts are ‘voilés de vapeurs rose’ [veiled in pink vapours].<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, the poet is turned inwards, towards the bedroom and the ‘gouffre interdit à nos sondes’ [gulf we cannot sound].<sup>74</sup> As well as conveying an extended moment of contemplation, it is also a space of compartmentalized memories. In the middle stanza, Baudelaire contrasts the openness of the balcony with the image of ‘une cloison’, a partition or a screen used to divide a bedroom into smaller, more private spaces. The surrounding darkness makes the balcony like a cloister, derived from the French ‘cloison’. As the night draws in, shutting out the exterior world of memories and secluding the poet from the city, his focus moves inwards and he begins think about his own mortality.<sup>75</sup> The small space of the balcony elicits wider associations and contradictory memories of his lover, such as her eyes and breath which both poison and delight. This culminates in the sixth stanza in a multisensory exclamation of infinity and rebirth, expressed in terms of sound,

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<sup>69</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>70</sup> Baudelaire contrasts the dirt of the city streets to the clear air occupied by the poet in his bedroom garret in ‘Élévation’, the third poem of ‘Spleen et Idéal’. ‘Élévation’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 10 / ‘Elevation’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 17.

<sup>71</sup> This representation of the balcony as a place where lovers meet is somewhat of a cliché. Some balconies, for example, are called ‘Juliet balconies’ after the famous balcony scene in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

<sup>72</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Le Balcon’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 36-37 (p. 36) / ‘The Balcony’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 73 & 75 (p. 73).

<sup>73</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Le Balcon’, p. 36 / ‘The Balcony’, p. 75.

<sup>74</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Le Balcon’, p. 36 / ‘The Balcony’, p. 75.

<sup>75</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Le Balcon’, p. 36.

smell, and touch: ‘Ô serments! ô parfums! ô baisers infinis!’ [O vows! O sweet perfumes! O kisses infinite!]<sup>76</sup>

In his extended analysis of ‘Le Balcon’, Broome discusses the layered sensory symbolism of the balcony. He theorizes that its ‘harmony’ originates in its ‘fusion of illumination and obscurity, definite and indefinite, descriptive and symbolic, literal and figurative, real and ideal.’<sup>77</sup> For example, the connection between ‘Mère’ and ‘maîtresse’ in the first line, creates an impossible female ideal as it combines a sanctified sexuality with a perverted maternity. There is also a connection between the form of the poem, six envelope quintets in which the first line of the stanza is the same as the last, and the reduced space of the balcony. Both are restricted spaces in which the poet recalls, and expresses, ‘infinis’. Broome interprets this poem as an exercise in poise, equilibrium, and the correspondence of opposites.<sup>78</sup> As in ‘Je n’ai pas oublié . . .’, the poem is written at sunset, a threshold moment between day and night and which serves as a metaphor for the meeting of the present and the past. The reduced space of the balcony becomes a vast imaginative vista where the real world and memory combine.

Enclosure and restriction in Baudelaire’s works enable a sense of imaginative freedom, especially when combined with the *Schwelle* of the city. In ‘Le Balcon’, it is external life that stimulates the reconstitution of his cherished memories.<sup>79</sup> Amid the urban chaos, he turns inward and expresses his inner turmoil through the creation of imaginative, sensual, fantasy realms in which his repressed desires and anxieties are played out. This representation of interiority leaves a lasting impression on later Decadent writers. For example, there are echoes of ‘Le Balcon’ in the last line of Paul Verlaine’s ‘Sur le balcon’ (1867), when the lovers turn from watching the swallows outside into the room and towards the unmade bed, and, as I discuss in Chapter Two,

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<sup>76</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Le Balcon’, p. 36 / ‘The Balcony’, p. 75.

<sup>77</sup> Broome, *Baudelaire’s Poetic Patterns*, p. 124

<sup>78</sup> Broome provides a detailed interpretation of Baudelaire’s prosody in order to exemplify his ideas regarding duality and balance in ‘Le Balcon’. He writes of how ‘[t]he syntactical symmetry, the anaphoric echoes, the repetitive rhythmic movements, the division of *hémistiches* into equal breaths, the even intonational patterns of rise and fall, the unwavering central *cæsura* which acts throughout as the supporting pivot, all combine to set dualities at rest and suggest their reconciliation.’ *Baudelaire’s Poetic Patterns*, p. 127.

<sup>79</sup> ‘In 1855, pursued by creditors, in the space of a single month Charles Baudelaire changed hotels five times. His long liaison with Jeanne Duval, which had been interrupted for a number of years, was renewed about this time. During the year 1856, in all probability, Baudelaire wrote *Le Balcon* which recreates the setting of an earlier happiness.’ Neal Oxenhandler, ‘The Balcony of Charles Baudelaire’, in *Yale French Studies*, 9 (1952), 56-62 (p. 56).

in *À rebours* ‘Le Balcon’ is used as an example of the intoxicating power of Baudelaire’s interiorized poetic spaces on the mind of Des Esseintes.<sup>80</sup>

This focus on interiority also characterizes Baudelaire’s prose poems, and in *Le Spleen de Paris* he conveys his experience of the threshold nature of modern Paris in his depiction of, and experiences within, interior *chambres*.<sup>81</sup> The unpredictable and transitory elements of the city are the most complex yet the most beautiful to the poet. In his introduction to *Paris Spleen* Martin Sorrell comments that this is reflected in Baudelaire’s original plan for the collection which he intended to consist of over one hundred poems organized into five sections, ‘Parisian themes, dreams, symbols and moralities, and “other possible headings”’.<sup>82</sup> These sections evoke the Parisian context of the poems and Baudelaire’s vast experiences of the city. David Scott reaches a similar conclusion in ‘Settings and Contexts of “Le Spleen de Paris”’ (1984) and provides the fullest analysis of space and setting in the prose poems. He categorizes Baudelaire’s collection of fifty prose poems into three types – inner worlds, confrontation of inner and outer worlds, and outer worlds.<sup>83</sup> His grouping ‘inner worlds’ includes settings that are imagined, such as the idealized version of the North Pole in ‘Anywhere out of the world’, and settings that offer a distinction between poetic and prosaic interiors, such as the house, the slum and the bedroom. Scott’s categorizations of the prose poems are useful in illustrating the interplay between internal and external spaces in the collection. Twenty-three of the poems, according to his framework, explore the threshold space between ‘inner and outer worlds’. However, this approach, as Scott also acknowledges, is rudimentary. As a system it does not take into account

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<sup>80</sup> In the sequence ‘Les Amies’ [‘Female Friends’], ‘Sur le balcon’ is the first sonnet (in a sequence of five) on the subject of lesbian love. Under the pseudonym Pablo de Herlagnez, they were published as a small book by Auguste Poulet-Malassis (Brussels, 1867), before being included in *Parallèlement* [*In Parallel*] (1889). See Paul Verlaine, ‘Sur le balcon’, *Parallèlement, Œuvres complètes de Paul Verlaine*, vol. 2 (Paris: A. Messein, 1907), p. 220.

<sup>81</sup> Many critics have commented on Baudelaire’s intentions in his use of the prose poem form. In ‘An Open Conclusion’ to his analysis of the prose poems, Kaplan argues that due to its contemporary form, *Le Spleen de Paris* ‘stands at the threshold of our modernity, as it depicts ways of thinking and living beyond ideologies’. This is an idea developed by Sonya Stephens who comments on the connection between ‘Baudelaire’s consciousness of boundaries and of the contours of different literary landscapes’ and his exploration of ‘the boundary between genres’ in the prose poems. See Edward K. Kaplan, *Baudelaire’s Prose Poems: The Aesthetic, the Ethical and the Religious in The Parisian Prowler* (Athens, GA.; London: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 167, and Sonya Stephens, ‘Thresholds’, in *Baudelaire’s Prose Poems: The Practice and Politics of Irony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 1-19 (p. 1).

<sup>82</sup> Martin Sorrell, ‘Introduction’ in Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen*, p. vii.

<sup>83</sup> See Fig. II ‘Settings and Contexts of “Le Spleen de Paris”’, in ‘Le Spleen de Paris’, *Baudelaire: La Fanfarlo and Le Spleen de Paris*, ed. by Barbara Wright and David Scott (London: Grant and Cutler, 1984), pp. 37-92 (p. 82).

the various shifts that take place within the poems. These shifts complicate the ‘symmetry of the inner/outer world polarity’.<sup>84</sup> Like the spaces of retreat in *Les Fleurs du mal*, in *Le Spleen de Paris* internal spaces are shimmering thresholds between interior/exterior, real/imaginary.

The movement of Baudelaire’s speaker between interior and exterior spaces, and in and out of the crowd, the room, and his imagination, reveals his interpretation of the city as a space in which the barriers between outside and inside have been altered. This is exemplified through Baudelaire’s depiction of windows, architectural details that, like the balcony, are both outside and inside. While windows are not exactly threshold spaces, as the window sill cannot be physically occupied, they are worthy of note in this thesis as they clearly depict, in Scott’s terms, the ‘confrontation of inner and outer worlds’.<sup>85</sup> Windows are explicitly mentioned in three poems in *Les Fleurs du mal* and in eleven in *Le Spleen de Paris*.<sup>86</sup> In Scott’s categorizations of the prose poems, five of these are grouped under ‘Café, Balcon, Fenêtre’. Each of these are threshold spaces, between the ‘mysterious interior world and the banality of the street, or alternatively, an infinite vista of sky and the drabness of a banal interior’.<sup>87</sup> In ‘Les Fenêtres’ [‘Windows’], for example, the speaker describes the real view from his apartment, a vista of undulating roofs and closed windows, and what he imagines is taking place in these other rooms. Baudelaire does not evoke just his own window but, as the title of the prose poem indicates, many windows that become more visible at night and that recall the Haussmann façade of equally sized and spaced windows with Juliette balconies.<sup>88</sup> Baudelaire’s representation of the framed views of private spaces, each illuminated by shadowy candle light, illustrates the important connection in his work between material spaces and the imagination. The window serves as a demarcation of interior and exterior spaces, as Scott proposes, but also a point where public and private, subjective and objective, reality and fantasy meet. The poem begins: ‘Celui qui regarde du dehors à travers une fenêtre ouverte, ne voit jamais autant de choses que celui qui

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<sup>84</sup> Scott, ‘Le Spleen de Paris’, p. 83.

<sup>85</sup> Scott, Fig. II ‘Settings and Contexts of “Le Spleen de Paris”’, p. 82.

<sup>86</sup> In *Les Fleurs du Mal*: ‘Le Crépuscule de soir’, ‘Le Gouffre’, and ‘Paysage’. In *Le Spleen de Paris*: ‘La Chambre double’, ‘La Femme sauvage et la petite-maitresse’, ‘L’Invitation au voyage’, ‘Le Mauvais Vitrier’, ‘Le Crépuscule du soir’, ‘Les Yeux des pauvres’, ‘Les Projets’, ‘Les Fenêtres’, ‘Les Bienfaits de la lune’, ‘La Soupe et les nuages’, and ‘Any Where out of the World’.

<sup>87</sup> Scott, ‘Le Spleen de Paris’, p. 84.

<sup>88</sup> In ‘Paris Change!’, Pichois and Avice describe Haussmann’s alterations to Paris in some detail and provide an evocative image of the Haussmann façade with its rows of symmetrical and equally spaced windows. See ‘Paris Change!’, in *Baudelaire/Paris*, pp. 149-65 (p. 150).

regarde une fenêtre fermée.’ [Someone who looks from the outside of an open window, never sees as much as one who looks from a closed window.]<sup>89</sup> The speaker proposes an inversion of the typical qualities of ‘open’ and ‘closed’ windows. Paradoxically, the window does not really relate to the physical act of seeing, but instead serves as an imaginative frame into and from which his private thoughts and memories are projected. As Gillian Beer (2011) puts it, ‘[w]hen the realist separation of inner and outer yields, the suggestion is of dream’.<sup>90</sup>

For Baudelaire, the window symbolizes private revelations. It is a space where the speaker self-consciously reflects on life and art. Through mediating thresholds like the window, we enter into the mind of the poet. In *Baudelaire’s Media Aesthetics: The Gaze of the Flâneur and 19th-Century Media* (2015), Marit Grøtta asserts that the prose poem describes ‘the transformation that takes place in the urban landscape after dark. At night, Parisian windows turn into a gallery of still images offering themselves up to the gaze of the *flâneur*’.<sup>91</sup> Grøtta notes that the ‘window-image serves as a point of departure for a poetic *rêverie*’.<sup>92</sup> In the second paragraph, the speaker imagines a poor, old woman permanently stooped due to a life spent indoors working and to the reader who may question the reality of this reverie he responds with a rhetorical question; ‘Qu’importe ce que peut être la réalité placée hors de moi, si elle m’a aidé à vivre, à sentir que je suis et ce que je suis?’ [But why should I care what the reality is outside myself, so long as it has helped me to live, to feel that I am, what I am?]<sup>93</sup> Looking out into the world paradoxically suggests a turn inwards. His gaze invents and constructs the world around him in a similar way to the *flâneur* in the street. Equally, the smells, textures, and sensations of the city, as exemplified in ‘Le Balcon’ and ‘Les Fenêtres’, relate closely to the multisensory experiences and vast thoughts elicited in small, interior spaces. The balcony and the window connect life with writing, the internal with the external, the past with the present.

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<sup>89</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Fenêtres’, in *Le Spleen de Paris*, p. 339 / my translation. Sorrell translates this opening line much more simply as ‘An open window never reveals as much as one closed’. *Paris Spleen*, p. 76.

<sup>90</sup> Gillian Beer relates this comment to children’s literature, in which the window is often used as a portal between fantasy and reality. For example, the entrance of Peter Pan and Mary Poppins. See Gillian Beer, ‘Windows: Looking In, Looking Out, Breaking Through’, in Mukherji, ed., *Thinking on Thresholds*, pp. 3-16 (p. 9).

<sup>91</sup> Marit Grøtta, *Baudelaire’s Media Aesthetics: The Gaze of the Flâneur and 19th-Century Media* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 55.

<sup>92</sup> Grøtta, *Baudelaire’s Media Aesthetics*, p. 58.

<sup>93</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Fenêtres’, p. 339 / ‘Windows’, p. 79.

### Bachelard's 'L'immensité intime': Alcoves and Perfume Bottles

In Baudelaire's poems, the *chambre* is a compartmentalized space that consists of a range of even smaller, and more intimate, objects, and spaces. As I discuss in this thesis, we find many references in Decadent literature to threshold spaces like the bedroom and the alcove, spaces that are intimate and closed, and yet situated in and affected by the urban flux.<sup>94</sup> They are not completely sealed spaces and, as Benjamin's concept of the *Schwelle* describes, the relationship between interior and exterior spaces in the modern urban environment is dynamic. Benjamin stresses that 'an alcove does not jut out, but – as a niche – tucks in. The street becomes room and the room becomes street. The passerby who stops to look at the house stands, as it were, in the alcove'.<sup>95</sup> In other words, we should not imagine inside and outside spaces in the city as separate, but interrelated. The alcove is both a feature of the city streets and the *chambre*, but while Benjamin's comments on the alcove are illuminating, his focus on exterior city spaces and the moving and wandering figure of the *flâneur* relates to only part of Baudelaire's depiction of urban spatiality. Instead, the recessed nature of his interior threshold spaces is, I propose, more precisely described by Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of small spaces, outlined in Chapter Eight of *La Poétique de l'espace*, 'L'immensité intime'.

In his account of the depth and poetic detail of Baudelaire's imaginative realm, Bachelard poses an important question about Baudelaire's 'l'immensité intime':

Ce n'est pas trop dire que le mot vaste est, chez Baudelaire, un véritable argument métaphysique par lequel sont unis le vaste monde et les vastes pensées. Mais n'est-ce point du côté de l'espace intime que la grandeur est le plus active? Cette grandeur ne vient pas du spectacle, mais de la profondeur insondable des vastes pensées.

[It is no exaggeration to say that, for Baudelaire, the word vast is a metaphysical argument by means of which the vast world and vast thoughts are united. But actually this grandeur is most active in the realm of intimate space. For this grandeur does not come from the spectacle witnessed, but from the unfathomable depths of vast thoughts.]<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup> One example of this spatiality, not mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, is Stéphane Mallarmé's 'La Pipe' (1864). In this prose poem, the poet is transported back to the homely interior of his London apartment through the taste of his pipe tobacco. He evokes the complexity of remembered experiences and recalls glimpses of London as seen through a window, possibly Bedford Square where he lived during his time in the city in 1863. Stéphane Mallarmé, 'La Pipe', *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2003), pp. 89-90.

<sup>95</sup> Benjamin, 'Dream House, Museum, Spa', in *The Arcades Project*, [L1, 5] p. 406.

<sup>96</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace*, p. 175 / *The Poetics of Space*, p. 192. Jolas turns Bachelard's question into a statement. A more useful translation is, perhaps, 'But actually is it in the realm of intimate space that this grandeur is most active?'

Vast thoughts, not grand scenes, create a sense of immensity, and Bachelard argues that we should connect small, enclosed spaces with imaginary expansion. There are, he argues, two types of correspondent grandeur – inner and outer – and intensity of sensation occurs in reduced and controlled interior spaces. In particular, the evocative space of the *chambre* amalgamates the senses and the imagination in a way that challenges an idea of containment. In Baudelaire's work, Bachelard claims, the poetic relationship between self and world is exemplified in the domestic interior, specifically the *chambre*, and its adjuncts, such as alcoves and niches, perfume bottles and jewellery boxes. Through the small, the mundane, and the familiar we glimpse the vast interior life of an individual.

Baudelaire's depiction of recessed and partially hidden spaces within the *chambre* is a response to the Haussmannization of Parisian life. In *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (1993), Richard Terdiman proposes that by altering the space of Paris Haussmann intended to alter perception. The Haussmann façade was organized around horizontal lines and buildings were treated as blocks, rather than separate structures. This changed the streets of medieval Paris into a series of straight lines, reducing the number of backstreets or alleyways. As Terdiman remarks, 'Haussmann's opponents were not alone in perceiving a connection between urban topography and the character of social existence in the city. Haussmann himself believed strongly in such relations.'<sup>97</sup> Through creating new, open streets, he attempted to create a physically cleaner, more morally hygienic way of existing in the city. In particular, Haussmann's modification of the city consisted of the removal and regeneration of a number of small streets (*ruelles*), especially those frequented by lower-class Parisians, tramps, and prostitutes, to make way for *percements*, wide avenues that pierced their way through the existing city. The photographs by Charles Marville, commissioned by Haussmann, illustrate this change. The dark corners, niches, and hidden doorways of the *Rue Tirechappe, de la Rue de Rivoli* (1866) [Fig. 1.2], for example, are in stark contrast to the large and well-lit boulevard, the Rue du Pont Neuf, that replaced it. However, rather than creating new experiences, Baudelaire suggests that the Haussmannized city is made up of resonant layers of memory and meaning which can never be fully erased. Façades, by definition, both conceal and reveal, and he imagines

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<sup>97</sup> Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 123.



that a multitude of secrets are hidden in the intimate interior spaces that remain in the *chambre*.

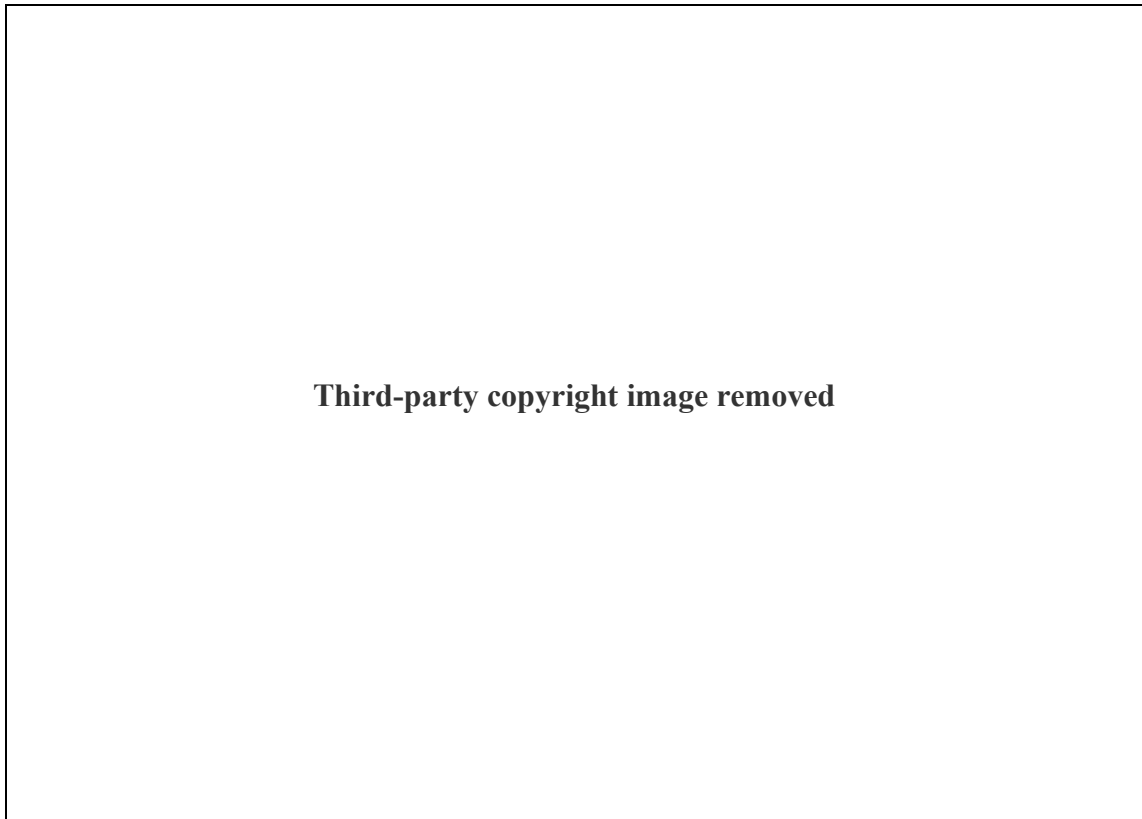


Fig. 1.2. Charles Marville, *Rue Tirechappe, de la Rue de Rivoli* (1866), print on albumen paper, 279 x 356 mm. Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

In ‘Tu mettrais l’univers entier dans ta ruelle’ [‘You’d entertain the universe in your bed’], for example, Baudelaire intimates that while Haussmann may attempt to rid the exterior city spaces of human vice or erotic encounters they can still be found in hidden interior spaces. Like the woman in the bed, who is simultaneously a violent animal and a beautiful Goddess, the *ruelle* in her bedroom elicits feelings of torment and salvation. As he exclaims in the devotional last line, ‘Ô fangeuse grandeur! sublime ignominie!’ [O filthy grandeur! O sublime disgrace!]<sup>98</sup> Baudelaire uses the double meaning of *ruelle*, which means a narrow street or alleyway and the space between the bed and the wall, and this punning play on words suggests that sexuality and vice cannot

<sup>98</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Tu mettrais l’univers entier dans ta ruelle’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 27-28 (p. 27) / ‘You’d entertain the universe in bed’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 53 & 55 (p. 55).

be completely effaced by altering the streets of Paris.<sup>99</sup> These activities will still take place in the private space of the bedroom. The secrets of the city become the secrets of the bedroom, the intimate *ruelles* of the prostitute, mistress, and poet. In the recesses of the *chambre*, fantasy and reality meet. In particular, the alcove, a partly enclosed extension that forms part of a room and normally contains a bed, recurs in Baudelaire's work as a space for erotic and imaginative encounters. Like the *ruelle*, the external alcove (often filling a gap between buildings) was also a part of the effaced architecture of the Parisian streets.

The alcoves in Baudelaire's poems reflect his lived environment. The exterior alcove was a secret meeting place for lovers, and, in the mid nineteenth century, the interior alcove became a fashionable addition to French bedroom design, coinciding with a vogue for orientalist interiors.<sup>100</sup> Beds in alcoves were also an intrinsic element of French brothels as they provided private spaces for women to take their clients.<sup>101</sup> Baudelaire draws on this public/private dynamic in his description of alcoves as both a familiar part of the *chambre* and a temporary space of erotic retreat. In 'Le Revenant' ['The Ghost'], for instance, the poet visits his lover's 'alcôve' like a spectre or incubus to bestow on her 'Des baisers froids comme la lune' [Kisses as frigid as the moon].<sup>102</sup> There is a sense that he is a brief visitor to this world of pleasure, like a man who uses a prostitute. In the morning, he writes, she will find no one in his place.

In *Charles Baudelaire* (1868), Théophile Gautier refers to Baudelaire's bedroom-study in the Hôtel Pimodan as a 'retraite dérobée et cachée à tous, qui semble attendre l'âme aimée' [a private and hidden retreat which seems to await the beloved] and that it was furnished with 'confort poétique, un luxe bizarre' [poetical comfort, bizarre luxury].<sup>103</sup> As Charles Asselineau also recounts in his biography of Baudelaire (1869),

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<sup>99</sup> There is a third meaning in French. In the 1620s, the intellectual gatherings in Catherine de Vivonne-Savellie's famous 'chambre bleue' [blue room], in which participants were seated or stood around the bed, came to be known generically as *ruelles*, with the more widely used *salon* dating from the nineteenth century.

<sup>100</sup> The popularity of the alcove in French bedroom design can be traced to Marie-Antoinette's inclusion of a curtained alcove in her bedroom in the Grand Apartment in Versailles.

<sup>101</sup> These alcoves were designed around different scenes and scenarios, with the intention to heighten the exoticism of the encounter and enable an imaginative escape for the client. Laure Adler gives a detailed description of some of these nineteenth-century French brothel designs in *La Vie quotidienne dans les maisons closes: 1830-1930* (Paris: Hachette, 1990).

<sup>102</sup> Baudelaire, 'Le Revenant', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 64 / 'The Ghost', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 131 & 133 (p. 131).

<sup>103</sup> Théophile Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', in *Œuvres complètes de Baudelaire*, vol. 1 (Paris, Michel Lévy frères, 1868), pp. 1-75 (p. 62).

the alcove-bed, luxurious textiles and rugs, paintings and beautiful editions of books, added to the opulence and orientalism of this main room.<sup>104</sup> Between the alcove and the fireplace hung a portrait of the poet, painted by Émile Deroy in 1844, and on the opposite wall a copy of Eugène Delacroix's 1834 painting, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* [*The Women of Algiers in their Apartment*] [Fig. 1.3]. Delacroix visited Morocco in 1832, and this painting depicts the private curtained recess that was popular in the bedrooms of Arabic women. In Baudelaire's analysis of Delacroix, in *Salon de 1846*, he considers the provocative atmosphere of this painting. It is an interior space of silence and repose, but permeated with an indefinable 'haut parfum' [high perfume] that guides him to 'les limbes inondés de la tristesse' [flooded limbos of sadness].<sup>105</sup> He focuses on the irresolvable conflict of the image, which is poised between being aesthetically pleasurable and sadly mundane. This is intensified through the threshold imagery in the painting, such as the partially open doors, the half-pulled curtains, and the mirror. The *vastness* of the alcove is less related to its physical dimensions but, in a Bachelardian way, its intimacy conjures an immense imaginative realm.

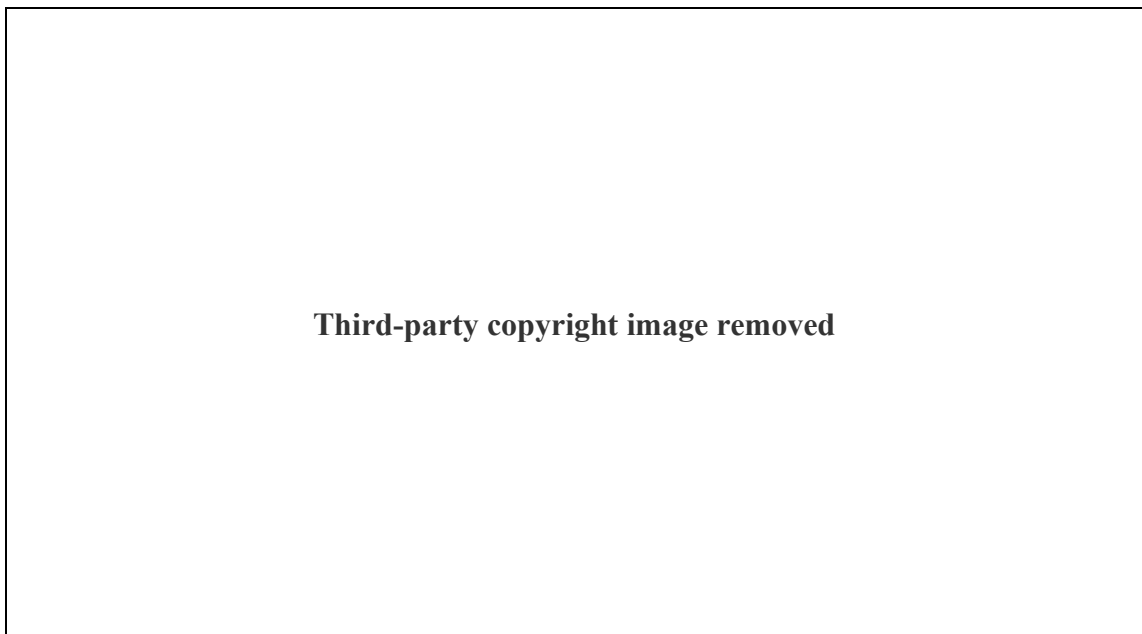


Fig. 1.3. Eugène Delacroix, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1834), oil on canvas, 1800 x 2290 mm. Département des Peintures, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

<sup>104</sup> Charles Asselineau, *Charles Baudelaire, son vie et son œuvre* (Paris: Imprimerie L. Toinon et cie, 1869), p. 9.

See also Félix Nadar's description of Baudelaire's room in *Charles Baudelaire intime: le poète vierge* (Paris: A. Blaziot, 1911), p. 39.

<sup>105</sup> Baudelaire, 'IV. Eugène Delacroix', in *Salon de 1846*, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 440.

In *Les Fleurs du mal*, we are presented with dark alcoves, hidden niches, and curtained recesses that are suggestive of seduction and retreat, sex and death. In *Charles Baudelaire: A Study* (1920), Arthur Symons reflects on this use of space and comments on how the poems in *Les Fleurs du mal* have ‘the strange, secretive, haunting touch and taint of the earth’s or of the body’s corruption’ as they evoke ‘the heated air of an alcove or the intoxicating atmosphere of the East’.<sup>106</sup> For Baudelaire, sex and death are inseparable. As he articulates in ‘Les Deux Bonnes Sœurs’ [‘The Two Good Sisters’], ‘Le Débauche et la Mort’ [Debauch and Death] can be found in ‘la bière et l’alcôve’ [the coffin and the alcove], the smallest spaces and the final resting places in the tomb and the brothel.<sup>107</sup> The similarities between the tomb and the alcove, the coffin and the bed, come into focus in this poem. Together they offer ‘De terribles plaisirs et d’affreuses douceurs’ [Terrible pleasures and horrifying sweetness].<sup>108</sup> The oxymorons evoke neither pleasure nor pain but rather the threshold between them both.

Baudelaire’s ‘Une martyre’ [‘A Martyr’] further illustrates the interconnection between sex and death in the *chambre*. The poem is based on a ‘Dessin d’un maître inconnu’ [Drawing by an unknown master], and describes a decapitated woman in a bloodstained bed surrounded by sumptuous objects and artefacts. The imaginative space of the poem is another enclosed, recessed setting and the poem clearly draws inspiration from the orientalist paintings of Delacroix.<sup>109</sup> The poem begins:

Au milieu des flacons, des étoffes lamées  
 Et des meubles voluptueux,  
 Des marbres, des tableaux, des robes parfumées  
 Qui traînent à plis somptueux,

Dans une chambre tiède où, comme en une serre,  
 L’air est dangereux et fatal,  
 Où des bouquets mourants dans leurs cercueils de verre  
 Exhalent leur soupir final,

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<sup>106</sup> Arthur Symons, *Charles Baudelaire: A Study* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1920), pp. 32-33.

<sup>107</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Deux Bonnes Sœurs’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 114-15 (p. 114) / ‘The Two Good Sisters’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 247 & 249 (p. 249).

<sup>108</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Les Deux Bonnes Sœurs’, p. 115 / my translation. McGowan retains the rhyme, ‘As two good sisters would, offer as treats / Terrible pleasures, horrifying sweets’, p. 249.

<sup>109</sup> Lisa Downing argues that the image alluded to in this poem is possibly Delacroix’s *Madeleine dans le désert* (1845) which Baudelaire commented on in *Salon de 1845* using similar imagery of necrophilia and murderous desire. See Lisa Downing, *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-century French Literature* (Oxford: Legenda, 2003), p. 87.

[Surrounded by flasks, and by spangled lamés,  
 All manner of sumptuous goods,  
 Marble sculptures, fine paintings, and perfumed peignoirs  
 That trail in voluptuous folds,

In a room like a greenhouse, both stuffy and warm,  
 An atmosphere heavy with death,  
 Where arrangements of flowers encoffined in glass  
 Exhale their ultimate breath,]<sup>110</sup>

While the alcove is not mentioned explicitly, the opening stanzas evoke a similar hothouse sensuality of enclosure, exoticism, beauty, and death. Like the flowers on the verge of deliquescence, the woman's blood pumps out onto the sheets with her last heartbeats and her head is displayed 'comme une renoncule' [like a ranunculus] on the bedside table.<sup>111</sup> The room is, as Debarati Sanyal (2006) puts it, a space which collapses 'the distinction between the organic and the inorganic (hair mingles with jewelry), the organic and the synthetic (a flesh-colored stocking clings to the victim's leg), and between the vegetal and the human (the victim's head is a "renoncule").'<sup>112</sup> Essentially, it is a poem about *thresholdness* – the moment when one thing becomes mingled with its opposite. As intimated by the choice of rhyming words ('voluptueux' and 'sompptueux', 'fatal' and 'final'), the exquisite bedroom is a paradoxical 'tombeau mystérieux'.<sup>113</sup>

It is clear that, in spite of the emphasis on the corpse, the speaker's focus is on the small details of the painting and his imagination settles on the conflicting pleasures that are more or less concealed in the hidden recesses of the room. 'Nageant dans les plis des rideaux' [In the folds of the draperies], he imagines that a universe of strange desires and 'baisers infernaux' [devilish intimacies] can be found.<sup>114</sup> The luxurious atmosphere of the room and its suggestion of morbid pleasures is emphasized by the objects that adorn her body. The pink stockings decorated with gold coins and the jewels entwined in her hair inspire the speaker to ruminate on her last moments and the erotic intentions

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<sup>110</sup> Baudelaire, 'Une martyre', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 111-13 (pp. 111-12) / 'A Martyr', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 229, 231 & 233 (p. 229).

<sup>111</sup> Baudelaire, 'Une martyre', p. 112 / 'A Martyr', p. 231.

A ranunculus is a many-petalled, peony-like flower from the same family as the buttercup.

<sup>112</sup> Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 106-07.

<sup>113</sup> Baudelaire, 'Une martyre', p. 113.

<sup>114</sup> Baudelaire, 'Une martyre', p. 112 / 'A Martyr', p. 231.

of the murderer. In the twelfth stanza, the speaker identifies himself with the killer and the immensity of desire that led him to this act. Like the murderer, the speaker's unanswered questions also lead to a violent outburst – 'Réponds, cadavre impur!' [Tell me, cadaver!] – before he takes a step back to contemplate the whole scene again.<sup>115</sup> In the last two stanzas, he simultaneously addresses the cadaver while thinking about the reception of this controversial image. For instance, in the penultimate stanza he alludes to the taunts of the mob and the prying critics that will not be able to ignore the murdered woman nor the subject matter of necrophilia. The imaginative journey from the contemplation of the beautiful room, to the eroticized corpse, to the hidden pleasures in the recesses of the drapes in the room, to, finally, a contemplation of the whole image, provides a provocative example of the immensity of small spaces.

The expansive realm of the poet's desires is stimulated by a painting in 'Une Matryre' but more typically Baudelairean vastness is inspired by physical encounters and tangible experiences. In particular, the *chambre* and alcove are central settings in the section of nineteen poems relating to Baudelaire's lover and muse Jeanne Duval, which in the 1868 edition begins with 'Parfum exotique' ['Exotic Perfume'] and ends with 'Je te donne ces vers . . .' ['I give to you these verses . . .'].<sup>116</sup> In 'Les Bijoux' ['The Jewels'], the poem directly preceding the Duval cycle, the poet contemplates the naked woman on his bed, while the light from the fire illuminates the room and glints seductively off her jewellery. As in the subsequent poems in the cycle, Baudelaire makes an explicit correlation between exoticism and eroticism. In the first stanza, she reminds him of a concubine, 'les esclaves des Mores'.<sup>117</sup> She is 'très-chère', his 'dearest', but this also has connotations of expense and prostitution. In the hushed atmosphere of the room, he is able to ruminate on his desires, one by one. Like a prostitute, or an artist's model, she remains professionally detached from the descriptions of slow, swan-like movements that are ascribed to her by the poet. The stillness of the room and her controlled movement intensifies his gaze, and as each part of her anatomy is held in view, his eyes become 'clairvoyants'.<sup>118</sup> This anatomization

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<sup>115</sup> Baudelaire, 'Une martyre', p. 113 / 'A Martyr', p. 233.

<sup>116</sup> In his notes to 'Les Bijoux', McGowan comments on what critics sometimes call 'the cycle of the *Black Venus*', and notes that 'Jeanne's cycle runs from no. 22 to no. 39, but probably excludes no. 25.' No. 25, 'Tu mettrais l'univers entire dans ta ruelle', was most likely inspired by his first mistress, Sara. See James McGowan, *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 358.

<sup>117</sup> Baudelaire, 'Les Bijoux', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp 158-59 (p. 158) / 'The Jewels', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 47 & 49 (p. 47).

<sup>118</sup> Baudelaire, 'Les Bijoux', p. 158.

of Duval's body under his gaze makes her into an *objet d'art*. In the penultimate stanza, he moves beyond the sensual world and into a pictorial realm. She reminds him of a painting of Antiope, often depicted as being gazed upon unknowingly by Jupiter. Similarly, the poet looks but does not touch and the poem ends in an image of dissipating lust. Each time the fire crackles, it utters 'un flamboyant soupir' [a blazing sigh] and appears to stain 'de sang cette peau couleur d'ambre' [with blood her amber skin].<sup>119</sup> Baudelaire uses the half-light from the flickering fire to evoke a sense of insatiable desire. This room offers a false idea of paradise.

Like doors and windows, jewels, perfume, and hair suggest a threshold transformation. Baudelaire uses these objects and scents to create spaces which open up onto other more imaginary realms. For example, in 'Parfum exotique', the poet explains how the scent of the woman's breast evokes 'des rivages heureux' [inviting shorelines].<sup>120</sup> Perfume is a key element in Baudelaire's depiction of the threshold between the room and reverie. In particular, the smell that is associated with Duval, and is representative of her exotic femininity, is used as a vehicle for the poet's partial transcendence and damnation. In '*Sed non satiata*' [*But not satisfied*], a reference to the unquenchable sexual appetites of the Roman Empress Valeria Messalina, the odour that emanates from her body creates a fluctuating fantasy world of pleasures and pains.<sup>121</sup> 'Au parfum mélangé de musc et de havane' [Perfumed of fine tobacco smoke and musk], she is both a demon and a goddess, and her body is a torment and a comfort.<sup>122</sup> Pleasure and pain, like the alcove and the tomb, are united in the interior threshold space where decadent paradoxes co-exist.

In *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity* (2001), Elissa Marder regards Baudelaire's interiorized spaces 'as *defensive* places – the poet retreats into them because the noise, activity, and general reality of the external world is unbearable.'<sup>123</sup> For Marder, the poem that reflects this notion of spatiality most

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<sup>119</sup> Baudelaire, 'Les Bijoux', p. 158 / 'The Jewels', p. 49.

<sup>120</sup> Baudelaire, 'Parfum exotique', in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 25-26 (p. 25) / 'Exotic Perfume', in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 49.

<sup>121</sup> 'Lassata, sed non satiata' is a phrase attributed to Valeria Messalina in Juvenal's *Satire VI*. It translates as 'tired, but not satiated'. See McGowan's notes to '*Sed non satiata*', p. 358.

<sup>122</sup> Baudelaire, '*Sed non satiata*', in *Les Fleurs du mal* p. 28 / '*Sed non satiata*', in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 55.

<sup>123</sup> Elissa Marder, *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 40. Italics in original.

explicitly is ‘La Chevelure’ [‘Head of Hair’], in which the poet recounts the effect of being consumed by the smell and texture of his lover’s hair:

Ô toison, moutonnant jusque sur l’encolure!  
 Ô boucles! Ô parfum chargé de nonchaloir!  
 Extase! Pour peupler ce soir l’alcôve obscure.  
 Des souvenirs dormant dans cette chevelure,  
 Je la veux agiter dans l’air comme un mouchoir!

[O fleece, billowing even down the neck!  
 O locks! O perfume charged with nonchalance!  
 What ecstasy! To people our dark room  
 With memories that sleep within this mane,  
 I’ll shake it like a kerchief in the air!]<sup>124</sup>

Baudelaire depicts space as diaphanous, like curtains.<sup>125</sup> However, this hair-enclosed realm is not merely a defensive place, as Marder argues, or a place of purification and escape. Instead, it is filled with memories and desires, transporting the poet to a notion of paradise that cannot be otherwise accessed. Like the city-crowd, the smell fills ‘l’alcôve obscure’ and this scent conjures up vast images of ‘La langoureuse Asie et la brûlante Afrique’ [Languorous Asia, scorching Africa].<sup>126</sup> The unfurling of memory is connected with images of the sea and sky – her hair, a ‘mer d’ébène’ [sea of ebony], recalls ‘un éblouissant rêve | De voiles, de rameurs, de flammes et de mâts’ [a dazzling dream | Of sails, of oarsmen, waving pennants, masts].<sup>127</sup> However, even when trying to fully retreat from the world, the writer remains partially connected to reality and physicality. The permeable curtain of hair that falls around and encloses their faces enables him to escape into a fantasy realm, but he is in total reliance on her physical body for this temporary reverie.

Framed by her hair, her face contains a universe of contradictions, repulsions and attractions and this connection is also prominent in the prose poem ‘Un Hémisphère

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<sup>124</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chevelure’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 26-27 (p. 26) / ‘The Head of Hair’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 51 & 53 (p. 51).

‘La Chevelure’ is linked to ‘Parfum exotique’. Both describe the exotic dream as stimulated by the body of Jeanne Duval and her scent.

<sup>125</sup> As Bachelard suggests, it is as if ‘Baudelaire ne sait s’enfermer que dans des rideaux.’ [Baudelaire knew of nothing to shut himself in with but curtains.] Bachelard, *La Poétique de l’espace*, p. 53 / *The Poetics of Space*, p. 40.

<sup>126</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chevelure’, p. 26 / ‘Head of Hair’, p. 51.

<sup>127</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chevelure’, p. 26 / ‘Head of Hair’, p. 51.



dans une chevelure’ [‘A Hemisphere in a Head of Hair’], which contains a very similar image of the alcove created by hair and the correspondences it evokes.<sup>128</sup> In an echo of the transformation in ‘La Chevelure’, the poet describes how:

Tes cheveux contiennent tout un rêve, plein de voilures et de mâtures; ils contiennent de grandes mers dont les moussons me portent vers de charmants climats, où l’espace est plus bleu et plus profond, où l’atmosphère est parfumée par les fruits, par les feuilles et par la peau humaine.

[Your hair contains an entire dream, full of sails and masts; it contains vast seas whose soft monsoons bear me to delightful climates, where space is deeper and bluer, where the atmosphere is perfumed with fruit, with foliage and with human skin.]<sup>129</sup>

It is the texture and scent of the hair that conjures up images of paradise, and the exotic dream world is both a recollection of Baudelaire’s sea voyage in 1841 and a colonial fantasy.<sup>130</sup> The atmosphere is perfumed with smells of opium, sugar, tobacco, and human skin. In the prose poem, the hair becomes slightly more dislocated from the person it is attached to and like a fetishized object, imbued with magical and spiritual powers. This is an image that is used later by Symons in ‘Perfume’, in *Silhouettes*. The speaker asks her to take down her hair so that he ‘may feel the stir and scent | Of those vague odours come and go’.<sup>131</sup> Symons’s use of scent, however, is slightly different. Rather than imagining a whole universe from her hair, the smell lingers in the room, filling the vacant space with scent even as her physical presence fades. Symons’s poem alludes to the sillage of her perfume, the fragrance that lingers in the air when she is gone, while Baudelaire describes how the scented trail given off by a physical woman leads him to a different imaginary space.

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<sup>128</sup> ‘La Chevelure’ was first published in 1859, and, according to Leakey, ‘Un Hémisphère dans une chevelure’ is a reworking of the earlier poem. See Felix Leakey’s note on ‘La Chevelure’ in *Baudelaire and Nature* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), p. 31.

<sup>129</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Un Hémisphère dans une chevelure’, in *Le Spleen de Paris*, pp 300-01 (p. 300) / ‘A Hemisphere in a Head of Hair’, in *Paris Spleen*, p. 32.

<sup>130</sup> In 1841, Baudelaire was forced by his step-father to take a long sea voyage to Calcutta. Contemporary critics debate whether Baudelaire actually made it all the way to India. See Evelyne Ender, ‘Homesickness in an Expanding World: The Case of the Nineteenth-Century Lyric’, in *French Global: A New Approach to Literary History*, ed. by Christie McDonald and Susan Rubin Suleiman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 110-26.

<sup>131</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Perfume’, in *Silhouettes*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 41.

In *Les Fleurs du mal*, the alcove is both an enchanted space, as in ‘La Chevelure’ and a vault of ‘insondable tristesse’ [unfathomable sadness], as in the penultimate poem of the Duval Cycle, ‘Un Fantôme’ [‘A Phantom’].<sup>132</sup> In the second section of this poem, ‘Le Parfum’ [‘The Perfume’], the post-coital ‘tristesse’ is imagined as ‘Un spectre fait de grâce et de splendeur’ [a splendid ghost, of a surpassing charm] and her presence, symbolized by her scent, fills the *chambre*.<sup>133</sup> In this cramped crucible, even the most subtle of smells becomes intoxicating. The sensual odour of her hair has the same power as a censer in a religious shrine – ‘De ses cheveux élastiques et lourds, | Vivant sachet, encensoir de l’alcôve’ [Out of her dense and elastic locks, | Living sachet, censer of the alcove].<sup>134</sup> In a confined space, senses and emotions are intensified like ‘Ce grain d’encens qui remplit une église, | Ou d’un sachet le musc invétéré’ [That grain of incense which fills up a church, | Or the pervasive musk of a sachet].<sup>135</sup> The private bedroom is infused with memories, and, like a church, provides a temporary place of contemplation and reflection.

Baudelaire’s sensitivity to the vastness of small spaces, the fluctuations of particular moods, and the correspondences between states of mind and sensation, create a sense of unfixity. The four poems in ‘Un Fantôme’ illustrate how these different elements create an impression of a series of *aide-mémoires* that come together to form a frame for the overarching memory of his lover within her room. As explicitly indicated in the third section of the poem ‘Le Cadre’ [‘The Frame’], the setting ‘ajoute à la peinture’ [adds to the painter’s art].<sup>136</sup> Similarly, the room is made up of smaller, devotional objects and offerings. Its ‘bijoux, meubles, métaux, dorure’ [jewels, metals, gildings, furnishings] accentuate the woman’s presence.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Baudelaire, ‘II. Le Parfum’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 39 / ‘II. The Perfume’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 77 & 79 (p. 77).

<sup>133</sup> Baudelaire, ‘II. Le Parfum’, p. 39 / ‘II. The Perfume’, p. 77.

Tryst, meaning a secret meeting between lovers, is a variant of triste, meaning wretched and depraved.

<sup>134</sup> Baudelaire, ‘II. Le Parfum’, p. 39 / ‘II. The Perfume’, p. 77.

<sup>135</sup> Baudelaire, ‘II. Le Parfum’, p. 39 / ‘II. The Perfume’, p. 77.

<sup>136</sup> Baudelaire, ‘III. Le Cadre’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, pp. 39-40 (p. 39) / ‘III. The Frame’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 79.

<sup>137</sup> Baudelaire, ‘III. Le Cadre’, p. 39 / ‘III. The Frame’, p. 79.

### **‘La Chambre double’: A Model of Decadent Threshold Poetics**

The leakage between interior and exterior spaces and ‘l’immensité intime’ of the *chambre* are united with extraordinary lyrical power in ‘La Chambre double’, a prose poem that serves as an exemplar of Decadent threshold poetics [see Appendix A]. Originally published in the first instalment of the prose poems in the journal *La Presse* on 26 August 1862, ‘La Chambre double’ evokes both an idealized version of Baudelaire’s apartment in the Hôtel Pimodan and a typical cheap double bedroom in a Parisian hotel.<sup>138</sup> Françoise Meltzer (2011) comments on how Baudelaire ‘sees his life as doubled’.<sup>139</sup> She maintains that in ‘La Chambre double’ the first room ‘responds to Baudelaire’s fantasy of calm and secrecy; the second room is a return to reality – to the seedy furnished apartments he loathed and to which his debts condemned him.’<sup>140</sup> This double vision is implied by the title of the prose poem which reflects the reality of his *chambre* and his fantasy room. In 1862, the bankruptcy of his publisher, Auguste Poulet-Malassis, increased the poet’s financial difficulties and he was forced to live in a series of rundown apartments. At this time, he was living in a room in L’Hôtel de Dieppe on the Rue d’Amsterdam, and the dual function of this room as both a bedroom and a study is evocatively depicted in the second part of the prose poem.

In ‘La Chambre double’, Baudelaire begins by evoking the infinite beauty and possibilities of a bedroom from a dream-like, or drug-induced, perspective. The verb ‘rêve’ (to dream) is used eight times, and at the beginning the *chambre* appears to be a space partially dislocated from time where he can ruminate on the nature of art and beauty. It begins with a statement about the threshold qualities of the room and how it is a space that is poised between reality and the imagination. It is ‘Une chambre qui ressemble à une rêverie, une chambre véritablement *spirituelle*’ [A room that is like a reverie, a room truly soulful].<sup>141</sup> In this room that resembles a dream, there is a sense of release from real-world distractions. In the first part of the prose poem, ‘L’âme y prend un bain de paresse’ [The soul bathes in idleness] and this enables the poet to

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<sup>138</sup> Twenty of Baudelaire’s ‘Petits poèmes en prose’ were originally published in *La Presse* in three instalments. The first series (26 August 1862) contained the preface ‘À Arsène Houssaye’ and nine poems in prose, including ‘La Chambre double’. Eleven other prose poems are included in the *La Presse* of 27 August and 24 September 1862.

<sup>139</sup> Françoise Meltzer, *Seeing Double: Baudelaire’s Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), p. 1.

<sup>140</sup> Meltzer, *Seeing Double*, p. 162.

<sup>141</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 17. Italics in original.

reminisce of a better time and place.<sup>142</sup> The dream appears to provide him with glimpses of past pleasures and pains. The feminine figure on the bed, ‘l’Idole’, emphasizes the dual qualities of the room – a longing for the past and a dream of the future. The muse is identifiable as Jeanne Duval who has been temporarily restored to her idealized place in the poet’s mind.<sup>143</sup> Baudelaire refers to her as hazy and imaginary and, in this way, she is not unlike his manuscripts that are ‘raturés ou incomplets’ [effaced or incomplete].<sup>144</sup> The *chambre* is multifunctional – a bedroom, a study, and the poet’s office – and the dream is interrupted by a reminder that his work is unfinished.

In the second part of the prose poem, indicated by the sound of the knock on the door in the eleventh paragraph, the dream begins to collapse and time appears to return. This initially feels like another nightmare, ‘les rêves infernaux’ [some infernal dream] which he experiences as his own death.<sup>145</sup> As he comments, ‘il m’a semblé que je recevais un coup de pioche dans l’estomac’ [it seemed to me that my stomach received a blow struck by a pick-axe].<sup>146</sup> With the knock, the room appears to contract around him and time expands, signalling the beginning of the poet’s mental shift back to the real world. The threshold guardian, ‘la souveraine des rêves’ [the sovereign of dreams], has vanished and ‘le Spectre’ who enters the room asking for money or the next part of his manuscript, becomes her replacement, as emphasized by Baudelaire’s use of capitalization.<sup>147</sup> The poet begins to recognize the objects in the room, ‘l’almanach où le crayon a marqué les dates sinistres [the almanac in which my pencil has marked sinister dates], and they serve to fix him back in the real world. Ironically, his familiar sense of apathy is described as strangely comforting, as it is only when boredom returns that he distinguishes where he is and feels a sense of belonging: ‘Oui! ce taudis, ce séjour de l’éternel ennui, est bien le mien.’ [Yes! this hovel, this dwelling place of eternal boredom, is, after all, my own.]<sup>148</sup> Baudelaire’s ‘La Chambre double’ is a poem

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<sup>142</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 17.

<sup>143</sup> In a letter to his mother on Christmas Day 1861, Baudelaire describes Duval as a ‘femme toujours malade’ [woman who is always sick] and she is in a state of ill-health in ‘La Chambre double’, mummified in muslin which ‘pleut abondamment devant les fenêtres et devant le lit’ [flows abundantly from the windows and from the bed]. *Correspondance*, vol. II, p. 205. Duval’s sickness is also captured in Édouard Manet’s painting *La Maîtresse de Baudelaire allongée* [Baudelaire’s Mistress Reclining], completed the same year that ‘La Chambre double’ was published.

<sup>144</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 17.

<sup>145</sup> Running out of time is a recurring nightmare for Baudelaire. See ‘L’Horloge’ in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 81, and the prose poem of the same name, p. 299.

<sup>146</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 17.

<sup>147</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 17.

<sup>148</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 17.

which describes a threshold space between exterior reality and the interior world of dreams.

In her biography of Baudelaire (1958), Enid Starkie evokes ‘La Chambre double’ when she explains the extent of his financial difficulties in 1862. She writes how when ‘the bell rang, a spasm of terror would seize him, for he always imagined that it must be another creditor coming for repayment, someone who had managed to track him down.’<sup>149</sup> However, to interpret this prose poem in strictly biographical terms overlooks the interesting structural and linguistic parallelisms in ‘La Chambre double’. A more complex reading, I assert, is achieved by interpreting the room as one of Baudelaire’s correspondent and threshold spaces. It is not merely two rooms adjoined in the mind, but an expansive threshold space that suggests the transition between dreaming and awakening, past and present, fantasy and reality.

The stylistic and structural symmetry of ‘La Chambre double’ is akin to a diptych, two flat plates attached at a hinge that mirror each other. The knock on the door is the point of reflection and marks the moment that the reverie is interrupted. In the prose poem this is indicated by the restrictive conjunction ‘mais’ [but], which indicates not only the collapse of the dream but also the collapse of the ideal. In his analysis of ‘La Chambre double’, Kaplan comments on this symmetry and notes that the ““realistic” description’, which comes after the knock on the door, ‘contains the same number of lines (in the Kopp edition) as the “magic” one and retranslates the décor point by point’.<sup>150</sup> This ‘magic line’ occurs in the eleventh paragraph (of twenty). Kaplan defines the first section of the prose poem as ‘a presurrealistic metamorphosis of the artist’s living quarters; part two [. . .] depicts the dread awakening’.<sup>151</sup> This is a typical description of the prose poem as dual or doubled but, while it accurately depicts the states of the room, it too clearly divides them. The peak of the dream occurs just before the knock on the door, when the poet begins to hope that time has disappeared and has been replaced by eternity; ‘c’est l’Éternité qui règne, une éternité de délices!’ [it is Eternity that reigns now, an eternity of delights!]<sup>152</sup> Rather than the dream being instantly broken by the knock, he comprehends the onset of reality slowly. The true realization of waking occurs fifteen lines later, and is marked by the exclamation, ‘Oh!

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<sup>149</sup> Enid Starkie, *Baudelaire* (1958; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 523.

<sup>150</sup> Kaplan, *Baudelaire’s Prose Poems*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>151</sup> Kaplan, *Baudelaire’s Prose Poems*, p. 27.

<sup>152</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 18.

oui! le Temps a reparu' [Oh yes, Time has returned now].<sup>153</sup> This truthfully depicts the groggy feeling of waking up, but also enables Baudelaire to show how the two aspects of the room contain elements of each other. The poem is, in effect, a description of a third space, the crossing point between dreaming and waking in which reality and dreams, life and art, merge.

The complexities of Baudelaire's fluctuating dream-like spaces have been examined by critics but not in relation to Decadent threshold poetics. Bettina Knapp (1977) coins the concept of the '*oneirosphere*', a reference to Baudelaire's planned cycle of poems on dream interpretation provisionally titled 'Onéirocrite', to refer to 'that area in which dreams and images become discernable to the individual'.<sup>154</sup> In connection to the multifaceted images and sense of restriction in 'Rêve parisien' ['Parisian Dream'], the penultimate poem in 'Tableaux parisiens', Knapp comments that his use of the language of dreams as a 'hieroglyphic script' anticipates Freud, but also evokes a sense of lucid dreaming. When he is asleep, the poet is aware that he is the 'Architecte' [Architect] of his dreams.<sup>155</sup> I agree that Baudelaire's poems are descriptions of lucidity – in 'La Chambre double' the dreamer is aware that he is dreaming. However, I disagree that the poet is completely transported to an imaginary 'sphere'. Through his depiction of threshold consciousness Baudelaire depicts the connection between internal thoughts and external stimuli, but he does not lose contact with the physical world.<sup>156</sup> It is not only the poet who is in a space of semi-conscious transition but the space of the room also appears to be in flux. He uses threshold imagery, associated with the in-between and transitory, to depict how the extended pivotal moment of waking up is reflected in the room – 'C'est quelque chose de crépusculaire' [It is a thing of twilight], or 'une rêve de volupté pendant une éclipse' [a dream of voluptuous pleasures during an eclipse].<sup>157</sup> Baudelaire's reference to the rare cosmic event of the eclipse adds an extra transcendental element to this dream, implying

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<sup>153</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 281 / 'The Double Room', p. 19.

<sup>154</sup> Bettina L. Knapp, *Dream and Image* (New York: Whitston, 1977), p. 5. Italics in original.

This term was used by Baudelaire a letter to Charles Asselineau on 13 March 1856, in which he describes a dream of the museum-brothel. *Correspondance*, vol. II, pp. 338-41. The series of disparate images that constitute Baudelaire's dream has been previously analysed in detail by Michel Butor in *Histoire extraordinaire, essai sur un rêve de Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961).

<sup>155</sup> Baudelaire, 'Rêve parisien', p. 102.

<sup>156</sup> The threshold moment between sleeping and waking up is a Romantic conceit which Modernists adopt. See Jeremy Lane's article 'Between Sleep and Waking: Montaigne, Keats and Proust', which traces the developing interest in this threshold and the hypnagogic state, in Mukherji, ed., *Thinking on Thresholds*, pp. 141-54.

<sup>157</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 280 / 'The Double Room', p. 15.

a pathway to ‘the beyond’, and his multiple use of similes reinforces this sense of correspondence and interconnection. The fabrics, for example, are ‘comme les fleurs, comme les ciels, comme les soleils couchants’ [like flowers, like skies, like setting suns].<sup>158</sup>

In ‘Le Poème du Hashish’ [‘The Poem of Hashish’], part of his study of wine and hashish, *Les Paradis artificiels* (1860), Baudelaire refers to two types of dream, the natural and the hieroglyphic (a more lucid type of dream that is the creative outcome of intoxication). He compares the hieroglyphic dream to poetry as both contain symbols or objects that represent a larger idea. However, in the natural dream, the dreamer’s ‘vie ordinaire, de ses préoccupations, de ses désirs, de ses vices, se combinent d’une façon plus ou moins bizarre avec les objets entrevus dans la journée’ [ordinary life, his preoccupations, his desires, his vices, combine more or less bizarrely with objects seen in the day time].<sup>159</sup> This is apparent in Baudelaire’s linear and orderly narration of the two states of the room. He gives a double description of the idol, the furniture, and the smell – how they appear when he is waking up and then, after the knock on the door, how they appear when he is back in reality.

In the beginning of the prose poem, the residues of the dream leave an impression on the objects around him. The physical form of the furniture, for example, is attributed with a ‘vie somnambulique’ [somnambulistic life], an image that is used in ‘Les Aveugles’ and suggests a focus on feeling and sensing rather than looking.<sup>160</sup> It is only when the poet fully awakes that he sees the furniture more clearly. In the second part of the poem, it is described as ‘poudreux, écornés’ [dirty, chipped] and becomes explicitly fixed and physical, like the room it now occupies.<sup>161</sup> The shift is also reflected in the smells in the room which express his displaced desire for escape. The ‘parfum d’un autre monde’ [perfume of another world], and its associations with release and escape, is replaced with fetid human odours, such as an ‘odeur de tabac’ [odour of tobacco], when he returns to reality.<sup>162</sup> The constituents of the earlier half of the poem are not perfectly mirrored in the latter half, however. Instead, they appear refracted and multiplying. Scent and humidity become a more overpowering moist stench, a

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<sup>158</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 280 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 15.

<sup>159</sup> Baudelaire, ‘Le Poème du Hashish’, in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, p. 408 / ‘The Poem of Hashish’, in *On Wine and Hashish*, trans. by Andrew Brown (London: Hesperus, 2002), p. 41.

<sup>160</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 280 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 15.

<sup>161</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 17.

<sup>162</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 17.

‘nauséabonde moisissure’ [nauseating mustiness]. The idol, a figure of dreams and femininity, becomes the spectre, representative of three figures: a bailiff, a concubine, and an errand-boy sent by his publisher. The sensations in his dream are connected to his memories and fears.

In ‘La Chambre double’, Baudelaire demonstrates how spaces can open up or contract into intimate dimensions. In the first part of the poem, Baudelaire’s threshold space is underpinned by unconscious desires. This is particularly apparent in the initial dream stages of the poem, which have an eroticized and sensual nature. The room is ‘aromatisé par le regret et le désir’ [made fragrant by regret and desire] and these emotions permeate the whole poem and transform his perception of the *chambre*.<sup>163</sup> From the first line, the room only resembles ‘une rêverie’. He is aware that this sensuous space is a product of his unconscious desires and that it will be lost later. His faint recognition of awareness is a sign that the poet is in a hypnagogic state, and this creates a prospective and reflective tension in the poem. Within the first two paragraphs the atmosphere, ‘légèrement teintée de rose et de bleu’ [lightly tinted with rose-colour and blue] is diluted, becoming ‘bleuâtre et rosâtre’ [blueish and roseate].<sup>164</sup> The threshold experience is epitomized in the moment of falling asleep or waking up – the instant when our conscious external life and unconscious inner life meet. In his annotated edition of the prose poems, Henri Lemaître (1962) observes that ‘La Chambre double’ is a synthesis of the Baudelairean dialectic of the ideal-dream and splenetic-reality.<sup>165</sup> Elements of the dream impress themselves on reality and in the dream the poet cannot escape his anxieties about his work or his unfulfilled sexual desires. The dream of ‘une éternité de délices’ [an eternity of delights] lingers and perfumes the room with ‘regret et le désir’ [regret and desire].<sup>166</sup>

The *chambre* is a space of partial retreat in which there is no absolute release from reality and the financial burdens of the modern world. These ‘external’ waking fears seep into his ‘internal’ dream-room. Most poignantly, the difficulty he has in writing and creating new work is inescapable. In the fifth paragraph, he experiences a moment of clarity and notices that there are no paintings on the wall. He comments that ‘l’art

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<sup>163</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 280 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 15.

<sup>164</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, p. 280 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 15.

<sup>165</sup> Henri Lemaître’s notes on ‘La Chambre double’, in Baudelaire, *Petits Poèmes en prose (Le Spleen de Paris)*, avec Introduction, notes, bibliographie, et choix de variantes par Henri Lemaître (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1962), p. 23.

<sup>166</sup> Baudelaire, ‘La Chambre double’, pp. 280 & 281 / ‘The Double Room’, p. 15 & 17.



positif' [positive art] is blasphemous in comparison to 'rêve pur, à l'impression non analysée' [pure dream, to the impression left unanalysed].<sup>167</sup> As well as describing the threshold between dreaming and waking, 'La Chambre double' is also a poem that evokes the threshold between life and art. In this collapsing dream room he briefly experiences a moment of perfect artistic balance. 'Ici, tout a la suffisante clarté et la délicieuse obscurité de l'harmonie.' [Here all things possess the required clarity and the delicious vagueness of harmony.]<sup>168</sup> This constant longing for transcendence manifests itself, Jean-Paul Sartre argues in his essay on Baudelaire (1947), in Baudelaire living his life in search of the unreachable and unrealizable.<sup>169</sup> In 'La Chambre double', artistic perfection appears tangible but his glimpse of this 'délicieuse obscurité' is transformed into 'le ranci de la désolation' [the rancid air of desolation] after he is reminded of the concrete realities of time and work.<sup>170</sup> 'Ranci' also suggests 'gamey', and the taste of rotteness seems to permeate the smell of the musty air.<sup>171</sup>

In 'Scents and Sensibility' (2013), Catherine Maxwell observes that scent in Decadent literature provides 'a powerful set of connections between the material and the immaterial, the body and the spirit.'<sup>172</sup> It is this space of interconnection that we encounter numerous times in Baudelaire's poems, as I have previously discussed, and scent is frequently used in later Decadent writing in a similar way, as a demarcation of threshold sensations and to indicate the correspondence between real and fantasy realms. Notably, synaesthetic correspondences are used by Huysmans to imply transcendence and interconnection. In his short story 'Le Gousset' ['The Armpit'] (1880), he describes how 'l'odeur du gousset pourrait se diviser à l'infini; nul arôme n'a plus de nuances; c'est une gamme parcourant tout le clavier de l'odorat' [the odour of the armpit could be analysed ad infinitum; no aroma has more nuances, its range

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<sup>167</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 280 / 'The Double Room', p. 15.

In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Baudelaire describes a similar difficulty in relation to artistic expression in the context of modernity, and praises the fleeting qualities and the riot of details depicted by Constantin Guys. *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, pp. 1413-30.

<sup>168</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 280 / 'The Double Room', p. 15.

<sup>169</sup> This interpretation of the poet's personality forms part of the conclusion to Sartre's study. See Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire*, trans. by Martin Turnell (London: Horizon, 1949), pp. 174-78.

<sup>170</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 281 / 'The Double Room', p. 17.

<sup>171</sup> In his 'Afterword' to *Decadence and the Senses*, Weir discusses 'gamininess' as a key feature of Decadent taste. See David Weir, 'Afterword: Decadent Taste', in *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), pp. 219-28.

<sup>172</sup> Catherine Maxwell, 'Scents and Sensibility: The Fragrance of Decadence', in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Jason David Hall and Alex Murray, pp. 201-25 (p. 222).

traverses the whole keyboard of the sense of smell].<sup>173</sup> The musky scent of a woman's armpit is multifaceted and complex. Similarly, in 'Parfum exotique' and 'Un Hémisphère dans une chevelure' feminine smells enable a moment of departure to a paradisiacal and sexual realm. In 'La Chambre double', the changing smells exemplify the drifting movement, out of the dream and into reality, and scent enables the poet to resurface from the dream and return towards consciousness. At the beginning of the poem, scent is dislocated from its source, and yet still permeates the air. Baudelaire writes that 'Une senteur infinitésimale du choix le plus exquis, à laquelle se mêle une très-légère humidité, nage dans cette atmosphère' [An infinitesimal odour most exquisitely chosen, which is mingled with a very slight dampness, floats in this atmosphere].<sup>174</sup> His use of 'senteur' evokes a pleasing, feminine perfume, but it is underpinned by a dampness and humidity. This floral and bodily scent is overwhelming as it is reminiscent of the smell of women and the smell of opium.<sup>175</sup> The room is like a sensorium, or, to use Steven Connor's term from 'Intersensoriality' (2004), 'a mansion of the senses'.<sup>176</sup>

The mood of tantalizing impermanence combined with a sense that the everyday has been distorted leads to an interpretation of 'La Chambre double' as a drug-induced fantasy. Felix Leakey (1969) observes that the poem transcribes 'first a hallucination induced by opium, and then its painful aftermath'.<sup>177</sup> Baudelaire contrasts the world of sensuality and dreams with dull reality, and towards the end of the poem familiarity causes boredom to return. The images of sleep, extenuation, and trance, which permeate the first section of the poem, are replaced by feelings of eternal ennui and nausea. These move beyond the physical realms of the body to reveal themselves in the interior. He is attracted to 'le fiole de laudanum; une vieille et terrible amie' [the phial of laudanum; an old and terrible friend], which tempts him like a lover, 'féconde en caresses et en traîtrises' [liberal of caresses and treacheries], to re-enter the dream world.<sup>178</sup> It offers a return to the Idol of the first section, to his lost past, and a fulfilment of his unsatisfied

<sup>173</sup> Huysmans, 'Le Goussset', in *Croquis Parisiens* (Paris: Léor Vasler, 1880), pp. 125-28 (p. 127).

<sup>174</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 280 / 'The Double Room', p. 15.

<sup>175</sup> Peter Lee compares the smell of opium to the scent of a woman, describing it as 'both bitter and sweet, pungent and musky'. Peter Lee, *Opium Culture: The Art and Ritual of the Chinese Tradition* (Vermont: Park Street Press, 2005), p. 205.

<sup>176</sup> Steven Connor, 'Intersensoriality: A talk given at the conference on the Senses', Thames Valley University, 6 February 2004' <<https://www.stevenconnor.com/intersensoriality>> [accessed 22 November 2014].

<sup>177</sup> Leakey, *Baudelaire and Nature*, p. 168.

<sup>178</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 281 / 'The Double Room', p. 17.

desires. However, this release is not realized. The sight of the bottle triggers an imagined fragrance, and this perfume is unable to elicit a true sense of escape because it is seen and not smelt. The smell of the woman's perspiring skin is a fantasy, and the only real smell in the room is the 'atmosphère stagnante' [stagnant atmosphere], a reminder of the empty bedroom space.<sup>179</sup>

In the prose poem, the transition out of the threshold space is not smooth. Instead there is a sense of anxiety related to waking up, the incursion of time and the demands of his life. However, the space of retreat is a productive space for the imagination and the poet is only in the real world for a moment before he begins to daydream. Arguably there is a third section to this prose poem, which begins with the return of time before drifting back into a daydream. These final four paragraphs are often considered as part of the 'waking' state of the room, but they can also be read as the beginning of another daydream, this time characterized by images of upheaval, uncertainty, change, and conflict. He imagines time as a hideous old man surrounded by a diabolical procession of human neuroses; 'de Souvenirs, de Regrets, de Spasmes, de Peurs, d'Angoisses, de Cauchemars, de Colères et de Névroses' [of Memories, Regrets, Spasms, Fears, Anguish, Nightmares, Rage and Neuroses].<sup>180</sup> The use of repetition at the end of the poem, as in the first lines at the beginning, creates a sense that we are situated in another in-between space, just prior to the regaining of time or at the beginning of another dream. He directly addresses the reader, assuring them of the onslaught of time, reality, and life – 'Je vous assure que les seconds maintenant sont fortement et solennellement accentués' [I assure you that the seconds are strongly and solemnly accentuated].<sup>181</sup>

Unlike boundaries, which evoke a sense of limitation, thresholds are compelling to Baudelaire as they suggest transformation and innovation. The interior spaces in his poetry are not solely manifestations of a desire for withdrawal but also reflect the impact of modern life on his literary imagination. Baudelaire's *chambres* integrate two thresholds: 1. exterior and interior (the city and the room), and 2. physical and mental (the body and the mind). Firstly, the interior spaces in Baudelaire's poems expose the previously hidden interrelatedness between the flux and uncertainty of modern urban life and its leakage into reduced interior spaces. Secondly, correspondences between the smaller spaces within the room, the sensory experiences contained within them, and

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<sup>179</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 280 / 'The Double Room', p. 15.

<sup>180</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 282 / 'The Double Room', p. 19.

<sup>181</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 282 / 'The Double Room', p. 19.

the vast realms of the imagination, evoke the poetic experience of reverie and illustrate how spaces can appear to expand out to vastness and contract into intimate dimensions. Within these complex threshold spaces of partial retreat, there is a correspondence between the room and the psychology of the occupant. In the next chapter I explore this further, in relation to Des Esseintes and his dwelling space in Huysmans's *À rebours*. Like Baudelaire's *chambre*, the house at Fontenay is a space of partial withdrawal from the city rather than a completely sealed refuge. At the heart of Des Esseintes' architectural design is an acute awareness of reality, and the house appears to function like a hothouse for his desires and anxieties.

## CHAPTER 2



## ‘Things worldly and things spiritual’ Huysmans’s *À rebours* and the House at Fontenay

The private home of Joris-Karl Huysmans, on the fifth floor of 11 Rue de Sèvres, was a reflection of his singular taste and style.<sup>1</sup> Elevated from the noise of the street, his apartment was described by ‘One Who Knows Him’ in *The Academy* (1898) as a space where ‘[t]hings worldly and things spiritual lie side by side, marking the two extremes of his life.’<sup>2</sup> Huysmans’s study was a modern hermitage, in which old bibles and religious artefacts were mingled with contemporary literature and works of art [Fig. 2.1].<sup>3</sup> Rather like the anti-hero of his Decadent novel *À rebours*. Huysmans appears to be a contrarian monk embedded in an aesthetic retreat full of *objets d’art* and artefacts.

In his preface to the 1903 publication of *À rebours* Huysmans confesses that at the time of writing the novel he had no religious inclination (his religious awakening and Catholic conversion occurred eight years later, after the publication of *Là-bas* [*Down There*] (1891)). Instead, he comments on his organization of the novel around the sensual and physical worlds, and layered descriptions of ‘pierreries, de parfums, de fleurs, de littérature religieuse et laïque, de musique profane et de plain-chant’ [jewellery, perfumes, flowers, religious and secular literature, of profane music and plain-chant].<sup>4</sup> Huysmans’s focus on sensory pleasures rather than on the actions of the protagonist underpins the structure of the novel. *À rebours* can be read as an inventory of decadent pleasures and experiences, each carefully selected and contained within the individual rooms of the villa. As Huysmans points out, ‘chaque chapitre devenait le coulis d’une spécialité, le sublimé d’un art différent’ [each chapter became the

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<sup>1</sup> Photographs of Huysmans in his apartment form part of the pioneering series of famous figures by Dornac (pseudonym of Paul Cardon), *Nos contemporains chez eux* [*Our Contemporaries at Home*], c. 1887 to 1917. Three albums of these photographs are held by the Bibliothèque nationale de France and illustrate the fashion for photographing writers and artists in their homes.

<sup>2</sup> The ‘Academy Portrait’, written by ‘One Who Knows Him’, was published in the 22 October 1898 issue of *The Academy*, 131-32 (p. 132).

<sup>3</sup> Many critics have seen thinly veiled autobiography in his work. In *En Ménage* [*Married Life*] (1881), in which André Jayant leaves his wife and creates a miniature museum house for himself, Huysmans’s friends recognized a description of his flat on Rue de Sèvres. See Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), pp. 59-60.

<sup>4</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. ix / *Against Nature*, p. 208.

sublimate of a specialism, the refinement of a different art].<sup>5</sup> Like the rooms of the house, the chapters of the novel emphasize a different obsession or collection. David Weir, in his analysis of Huysmans as an innovator of the novel form, notes that Des Esseintes

disappears from the text for pages at a time, while this or that aspect of decadent taste is explored – the Latin of Petronius, the philosophy of Schopenhauer, the artificiality of exotic plants, the nuances of strange combinations of colors and odours, and so on.<sup>6</sup>

Huysmans describes a collector's paradise and positions Des Esseintes as both the curator of the space and its principal artefact.

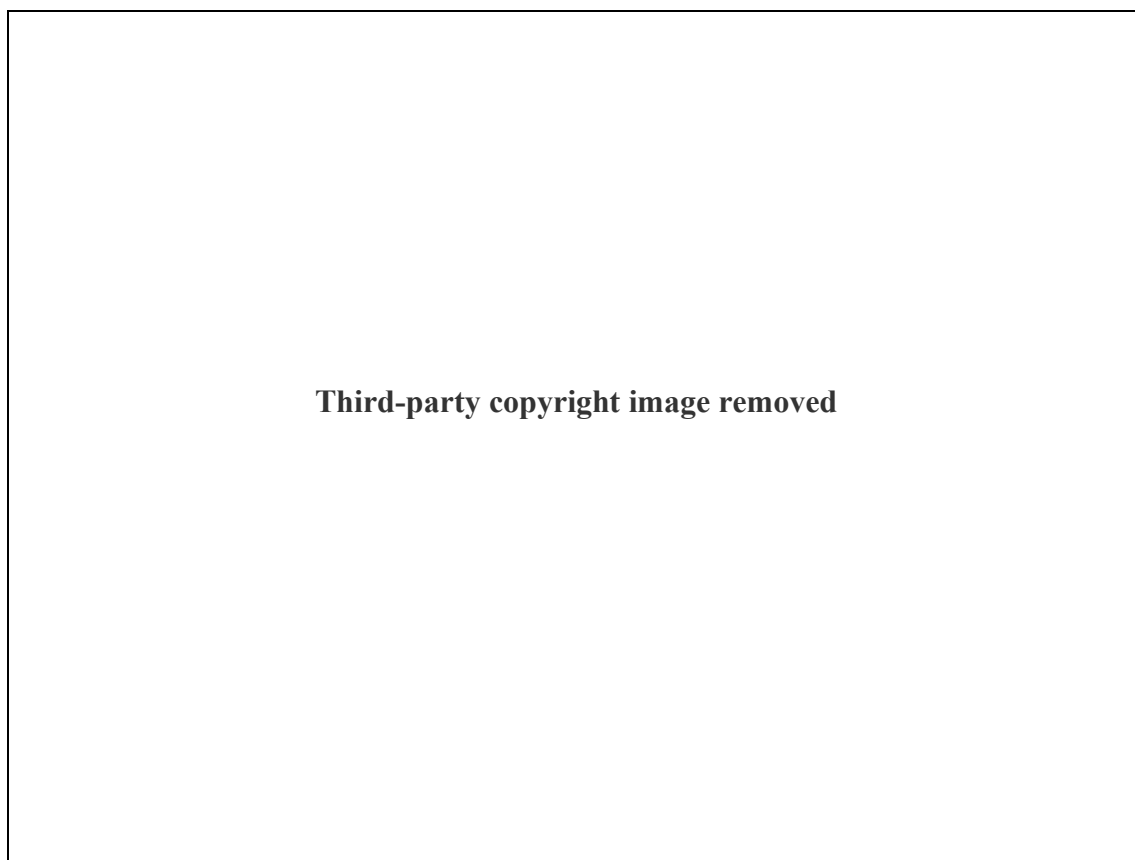


Fig. 2.1. Joris-Karl Huysmans in his study. Dornac, 'Nos contemporains chez eux', fol. 1, photograph. Département des Estampes et de la photographie, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris.

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<sup>5</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. ix / *Against Nature*, p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, p. 96.

S  verine Jouve acknowledges the emphasis on cataloguing and configuration in *   rebours*, and she claims that in the novel Huysmans explores a new literary genre that consists of ‘les inventaires de propri  taires ou les r  veries    propos de la r  sidence.’ [inventories of owners or reveries about the residence.]<sup>7</sup> Using Jouve’s study of the relationship between architecture and Decadent writing, I begin this chapter with a discussion of the dynamic compartmentalization of *   rebours*. Despite the emphasis on the process of collecting and the room-by-room / chapter-by-chapter structure of the novel, I argue that Huysmans is less concerned with creating the unified atmosphere of a well-curated collection than using the house as a setting for psychological and physical exploration into the connection between the worldly and the spiritual. Despite Des Esseintes’ attempt to keep his collections separate, sensations and memories caused by one room seep into and permeate the other spaces in his house. The leakage described by Benjamin in relation to the *Schwelle* of Baudelaire’s Paris is apparent in Huysmans’s depiction of the threshold between rooms and objects, Des Esseintes’ body and his mind. The house is a material and mental space which reflects his own interests and desires, but it is also a space that creates fusions and correspondences that he cannot control. Paying attention to the spatiality of the novel, I argue, reveals how the rooms in the house defy the idea of compartmentalization and challenge the episodic nature of the novel.

### **Dynamic Compartmentalization**

In *   rebours*, Des Esseintes retreats to Fontenay-aux-Roses, a suburb of Paris, to escape from his tedious life in the city and to stimulate his flagging senses.<sup>8</sup> The villa is located outside the urban centre, where

il   prouvait une all  gresse d’autant plus vive qu’il se voyait retir   assez loin d  j  , sur la berge, pour que le flot de Paris ne l’atteign  t plus et assez pr  s cependant pour que cette proximit   de la capitale le confirm  t dans sa solitude.

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<sup>7</sup> Jouve, *Obsessions & perversions*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Fontenay-aux-roses is situated 5.3 miles from Paris and was connected to the city by tram in 1877. Mary Elizabeth Curtin discusses the importance of this geographical location to the novel. She writes that ‘the suburb, neither city nor country but a created space between, becomes the only place in which Des Esseintes can land his “immovable ark”.’ See Mary Elizabeth Curtin, ‘“Like Bottled Wasps”: Beerbohm, Huysmans, and the Decadents’ Suburban Retreat’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39 (2011), 183-200 (p. 184).

[he felt a glow of pleasure at the idea that here he would be too far out for the tidal wave of Parisian life to reach him, and yet near enough for the proximity of the capital to strengthen him in his solitude.]<sup>9</sup>

The villa is a meticulously designed haven of peace and tranquility in which he can indulge his extravagant tastes without distraction. However, the house at Fontenay does not offer him an escape from the world. In the threshold space of the villa, his collections become an inescapable reminder of his past and of the limitations of his body. Rather than providing a refuge from the overstimulating effects of the city, the interior of the house reflects Des Esseintes' mind. It is a 'chambre mentale'.<sup>10</sup>

In preparation for writing the novel, Huysmans undertook research into the subject of hysteria and other nervous illnesses, consulting textbooks such as Alexandre Axenfeld's *Traité des Névroses* [*Treatise on the Neuroses*] (1883). This interest in the newly emerging body of knowledge – *psychologie nouvelle* – is reflected in his depictions of Des Esseintes' hypersensitivity and obsessive-compulsive tendencies. These neuroses are taken to a decadent extreme and lead to disorders of sense and motion that manifest themselves as physical symptoms. Huysmans recounts how Des Esseintes already suffers from certain symptoms of neurasthenia before he enters the house – pains in the back of the neck and shaking hands.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, Fontenay is designed as a restorative space and the architecture of the house replicates the division Des Esseintes wishes to create between his ailing body and overstimulated mind.

In her discussion of 'La demeure métaphore' [The house metaphor] in *À rebours*, Jouve provides a graphical representation of the ground floor of the house at Fontenay [Fig. 2.2]. The house is divided into two, with Des Esseintes' four rooms on one side of the house (a dressing-room, bedroom, library, and dining-room), corresponding to four more practical rooms on the other side (his closets, boudoir, entrance hall, and kitchen). Jouve remarks that it is no coincidence that this structure 'coïncide parfaitement avec le projet de ce livre' [coincides perfectly with the project of this

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<sup>9</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 13 / *Against Nature*, p. 10.

Des Esseintes' retreat echoes Huysmans's relocation to Fontenay in 1881 in order to convalesce. For three months, Huysmans commuted from the pseudo-countryside of Fontenay-aux-Roses to Paris and during this period he worked on *À Vau-l'eau* [*With the Flow*] (1882).

<sup>10</sup> Jules Bois first used this phrase in 'Les Guérisons par la pensée', *La Revue*, 35 (1900), 16-33 (p. 29).

<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Zola, Huysmans explains how he used medical textbooks throughout *À rebours* in order to be exact in his descriptions of Des Esseintes' symptoms – 'J'ai pas à pas suivi les livres de Bouchut et d'Axenfeld sur la névrose.' [I followed step by step the books of Bouchet and Axenfeld on neurosis]. Huysmans, letter to Zola, 25 May 1884, in *Lettres inédites à Émile Zola*, ed. by Pierre Lambert (Geneva: Droz, 1953), p. 103 / my translation.



book], however she limits this to ‘l’histoire du rangement d’une bibliothèque et celle d’une anorexie’ [the history of the storage of a library and that of anorexia].<sup>12</sup> Two of the rooms that Des Esseintes takes particular care in furnishing are the library and the dining room, but the focus of the novel is on the organization and positioning of all the rooms. As is suggested by the compartmentalized arrangement of the house, which recalls the graduated arrangement of a set of boxes, each room contains a particular setting and associated narrative episode within the larger space of the villa.

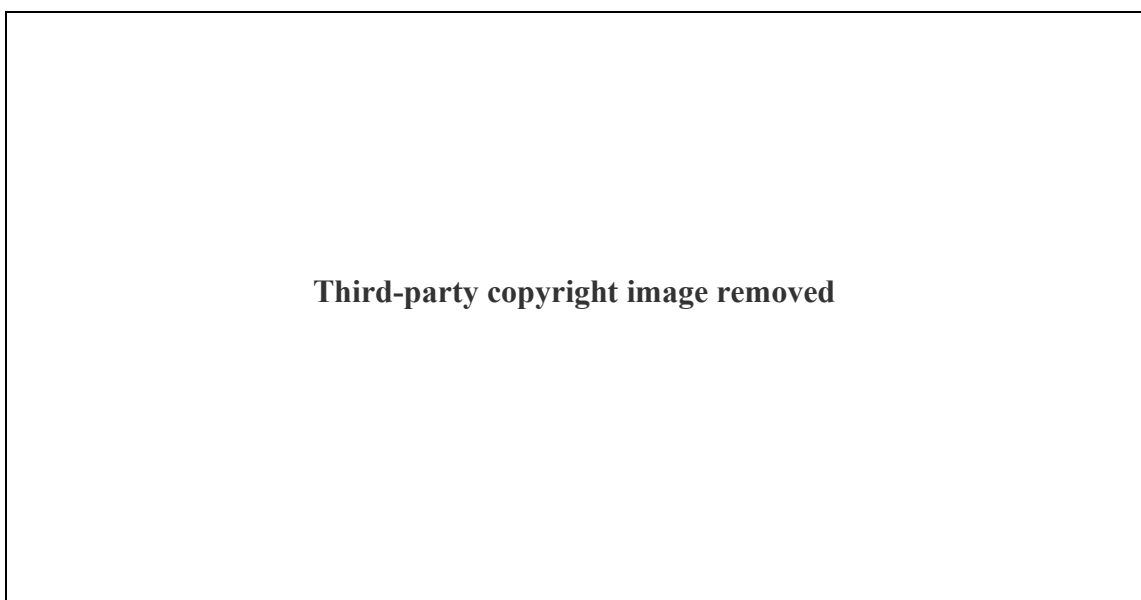


Fig. 2.2. Séverine Jouve’s graphical representation of the ground floor of the house at Fontenay, *Obsessions & perversions dans la littérature et les demeures à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Hermann, 1996), p. 83.

Huysmans makes a distinction between private and public space in the two halves of the building, but the structure of the house also recalls the relationship between the mind and the body as described by René Descartes in his philosophy of dualism.<sup>13</sup> The mental processes on one side of the house run parallel to the material functionalism on the other. For instance, he fills his boudoir with ebony-framed prints by the seventeenth century Dutch poet, illustrator and engraver Jan Luyken, images that depict human suffering at the hands of religious fanatics by which Des Esseintes is both repelled and

<sup>12</sup> Jouve, *Obsessions & perversions*, p. 83.

<sup>13</sup> René Descartes’ famous discussion of the division between the body and the mind was first outlined in *Meditationes de prima philosophia* [*Meditations on First Philosophy*] (1641).

fascinated. The boudoir and adjoining vestibule, hung with works by the contemporary artists Rodolphe Bresdin and Odilon Redon, are the counterpoint to his bedroom – a facsimile of a monastic cell that is separate from but adjacent to his boudoir. Within his calming and almost minimalist bedroom, he attempts to recover from the overstimulation of his environment. However, as the interconnections and correspondences of his physical living spaces suggest, there is no clear division; the mind and body are inseparable.

In *À rebours*, Huysmans focuses on sensory experiences, and these are compartmentalized in the rooms of the house. Joseph Halpern discusses this in ‘Decadent Narrative: À Rebours’ (1978), where he explains that ‘the heart of the book is the house as museum’ and we are encouraged to see the chapters as like a series of display cases.<sup>14</sup> This annexing of rooms, in which associated objects are aesthetically placed, creates a repository of Decadent taste. The interior of Des Esseintes’ villa consists of interconnected rooms, each representative of an aspect of his mind or body. The individual rooms are ‘capitoné, hermétiquement fermé’ [padded, hermetically sealed] so that smells or sounds are unable to filter from one room to the next.<sup>15</sup> This creates the impression that the different parts – or rooms – of the house are more significant than the house in its entirety. The emphasis is on the part rather than the whole.

We can trace historical connections between this compartmentalized interior design and the location of the villa. In the seventeenth century, Fontenay-aux-Roses was the centre for the cultivation of rose varieties, and it specialized in growing the intensely perfumed Bengal rose for the perfumers at the court of Versailles. This process is suggested in Des Esseintes’ architectural design. In the extraction of a fragrance from a flower, one sense (smell) becomes disconnected from the other senses (touch and sight). In a similar way to the distillation of a perfume from a flower, Des Esseintes also tries to separate and manipulate the senses. He groups objects by their sensory properties in order to amplify their intensity and to try to gain some control over their evocative potential. Similarly, each chapter focuses on a different obsession or collection. For example, Chapter One describes the colour of his rooms, in particular his library and bedroom, Chapter Four focuses on his aesthetic and physical tastes,

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph Halpern, ‘Decadent Narrative: À Rebours’, *Stanford French Review*, 2 (Spring 1978), 91-102 (p. 95).

<sup>15</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 29 / my translation.

particularly in relation to jewels and liquor, Chapter Eight concentrates on the visual and textural properties of his hothouse-flower collection, and Chapter Ten describes his assortment of perfumes.

Huysmans's writing invokes all the senses but like Baudelaire he was particularly interested in olfaction and the evocative power of scent. In Chapter Ten, Huysmans describes Des Esseintes' attempt, prior to entering the villa, to master 'la grammaire, comprendre la syntaxe des odeurs' [the grammar, to understand the syntax of odours].<sup>16</sup> Scents are described like music and poetry, and he analyses the construction of a scent like the structure of a text. Des Esseintes argues that the language of scents had 'avancée parallèlement avec les autres arts' [advanced side-by-side with the other arts] and he creates perfumes that stimulate correspondent thoughts, directly drawing on the poems of Baudelaire.<sup>17</sup> For instance, he recounts how he used to base some of his 'accords en parfumerie' [scented harmonies] on the envelope rhyme scheme, used by Baudelaire in 'Le Balcon' to allude to the closed space of the balcony.<sup>18</sup> This carefully controlled structure was replicated in the structure of Des Esseintes' recollections when he experimented with scent in Paris. 'Il s'égarait dans les songes qu'évoquaient pour lui ces stances aromatiques, ramené soudain à son point de départ' [He used to roam haphazardly through the dreams conjured up by these aromatic stanzas, until he was suddenly brought back to his starting point].<sup>19</sup>

Yet, in the house at Fontenay, Des Esseintes' intention is slightly different. Within the controlled space of the villa, he uses perfumes to open up a vast and 'sonore' [sonorous] countryside scene.<sup>20</sup> His perception of strong perfumes as deep sounds, or olfactory notes, enables him to compose an imaginary landscape. The objects in Des Esseintes' interiors are the vehicles for his fantasies and synaesthesiac experiences. Through attempting to contain and control the senses, Des Esseintes makes their synaesthetic effects stronger; when one sense is separated from another its associations become clearer. Rather than being carefully controlled, the villa becomes a space of mixed sensations. Scents evoke music and memories and, similarly, in Chapter Four, his collection of liquors, the 'orgue à bouche' [mouth organ], create imaginary musical

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<sup>16</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 171 / *Against Nature*, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 173 / *Against Nature*, p. 207.

<sup>18</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 177 / *Against Nature*, p. 109.

<sup>19</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 177 / *Against Nature*, p. 109.

<sup>20</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 177 / *Against Nature*, p. 109.

compositions.<sup>21</sup> Traditionally, synaesthesia is viewed as a random association between separate senses. However, through Des Esseintes' explorations in space and sensation, Huysmans anticipates contemporary research suggesting that synaesthesia can be shaped by environmental associations.<sup>22</sup> The objects when positioned in the rooms of the villa become the catalyst for Des Esseintes' hypersensitivity and developing nervous disorders.

Des Esseintes' confinement within his suburban sensorium leads to wild thoughts. Within the intense threshold space of the house at Fontenay, correspondences between sensations and memories are cultivated. In *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830-1900* (1958), Alfred Carter proposes that Des Esseintes' 'neurosis develops in the hot-house atmosphere of his retreat at Fontenay like a melon under a bell-glass'.<sup>23</sup> He is both protected and imprisoned in his house and this is perfectly illuminated by the metaphor of the glass enclosure. In this heated space, the growth of delicate rare breeds is artificially accelerated. Unlike conservatories in which plants are placed in moveable pots, in a hothouse the plants are permanently planted inside and forced to acclimatize to the artificially created conditions.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the villa space is not a static display case with collections arranged neatly and gathering dust. It is crammed with objects that suggest shifting moods and the growth of unconscious desires and fears.

Previous studies of the novel have tended to consider Des Esseintes' villa as an example of an aesthetic museum house, or a cabinet of curiosities. In *The Breviary of the Decadence* (2001), George Cevasco describes the structure of *À rebours* as 'essentially a log book of a young aristocrat's response to, and sensations about, the world'.<sup>25</sup> This notion of the novel as a 'log book' is emphasized by Des Esseintes' meticulous attention to aesthetic details when collecting for and organizing the villa space. However, it does not accurately reflect the kind of space represented by the threshold poetics of the house. It neglects the fact that the collections are not as

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<sup>21</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 70 / *Against Nature*, p. 45.

<sup>22</sup> For a contemporary discussion of synaesthesia, see Richard E. Cytowic, David M. Eagleman and Dmitri Nabokov, *Wednesday is Indigo Blue: Discovering the Brain of Synesthesia* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Alfred Carter, *The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830-1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), p. 85.

<sup>24</sup> The hothouse was still a relatively new construction at the end of the nineteenth-century and it gained popularity through the vogue for public hothouses in the 1850s, particularly in Paris and London where some of the earliest were built, such as the Mexican Conservatory in the Jardin des Plantes (Paris, 1834-36) and the Palm House in the Royal Botanical Gardens (Kew, 1844-48).

<sup>25</sup> George Cevasco, *The Breviary of the Decadence: J.-K. Huysmans's A Rebours and English Literature* (New York: AMS Press, 2001), p. 5.

contained, and the rooms are not as sealed as Des Esseintes intends. As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, although Des Esseintes' rooms are 'Ainsi que ces boîtes du Japon qui entrent, les unes dans les autres' [Like those Japanese boxes that fit, one inside the other], they are both interlocking, like neatly nested Japanese boxes, and interconnected, like threshold spaces.<sup>26</sup> As is apparent from Jouve's diagram, Huysmans imagines the interior of the villa as a set or series of complex and contrasting spaces, which sometimes contain smaller hidden chambers and secret recesses. The rooms of the villa, and the chapters of the novel, are not separate but connected and embedded spaces.

Contrary to the views of some critics, the rooms in the house are not discrete and contained; they are dynamically compartmentalized. The villa is a threshold space and the collections within it, like the rooms that open onto other rooms, spark imaginative correspondences. Rather than being a hermetically sealed laboratory for sensory experimentation, the rooms in the house, and the chapters of the novel, are connected by Des Esseintes' neurotic associations and memories. In the prologue, Huysmans describes these mental desires as like a physical craving for 'les joies déviées' [perverse pleasures].<sup>27</sup> Des Esseintes designs the villa in order to escape this hunger, but his tastes for the perverse are amplified by his surroundings. For instance, the only full meal that Des Esseintes eats is in Chapter Eleven, when he visits an English tavern in the Rue d'Amsterdam. On his return to Fontenay, Des Esseintes is still obsessed with his stomach. In the following chapter, he distinguishes his tastes for different books through gustatory adjectives. For example, he refers to Baudelaire as 'charnue' [fleshy], and compares reading Pierre Nicole and Blaise Pascal to tasting 'ces moelles condensées en de sévères et fortes phrases' [the pith and the marrow of stern, strong phrases].<sup>28</sup> He chooses his favourite writers like dishes on a menu, foregrounding the connection between his refined literary and culinary tastes. This refinement continues in Chapter Thirteen when he awakes with nausea and has a longing for everyday peasant food. In the final chapters, his eating habits become increasingly *à rebours*. He begins consuming food passed through a digester and eventually his diet consists of enemas created by his physician. Initially, Des Esseintes is excited by this gastronomical reversal. It is an insult thrown in 'la face de cette vieille nature' [the face

<sup>26</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 29 / *Against Nature*, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 10 / *Against Nature*, p. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 129 / *Against Nature*, p. 134.

of old Mother Nature].<sup>29</sup> However, this final amplification of his neurotic impulses is one of the factors that cause his return to Paris at the end of the novel.

Des Esseintes' aim when creating the villa space was to escape from the ravages of time and sickness. He creates a fake death, symbolic of his attempt to remove himself from his old life, only to be constantly reminded of it. However, Des Esseintes' uneasy relationship with his body and desires is intensified within the rooms of the villa. The house is not an extension of the outside world but, as Benjamin describes, the occupant's *étui* – a small protective cover or case designed to shield its contents.<sup>30</sup> This image of a tight-fitting shelter suggests proximity and evokes a feeling of claustrophobia. The house is both containing and safe, and yet imprisoning to the collector. It is 'the asylum of art', to use Benjamin's description, in which the collector 'makes his concern the transfiguration of things.'<sup>31</sup> Des Esseintes' villa is designed to restrict sensory stimulations from the outside world, but he cannot control the visual, aural, and olfactory connections that come from within the house in the form of the objects he collects. The intrusion of the exterior life, as we saw in relation to Baudelaire's *chambre*, is inescapable. The security of Des Esseintes' house is actually an illusion. Thus, enclosure in the novel is a paradox. Des Esseintes voluntarily imprisons himself within a space of involuntary memory.

Huysmans demonstrates how Des Esseintes creates and constructs his Decadent universe at Fontenay, and yet it is both within the limits of his house and the limitations of his mind. Huysmans first called the novel *Seul* [*Alone*] and his intention was to tell the story of an individual in retreat from the world. Gail Finney (1986) associates Des Esseintes' aloneness with artifice and refers to the novel as an 'aesthetic hermitage', an image that suggests a simple monastic retreat devoted to sensory experiences and beauty.<sup>32</sup> This almost contradictory description reflects Des Esseintes' decoration of his bedroom in the manner of 'une loge de chartreux qui eût l'air d'être vraie et qui ne le fût, bien entendu, pas' [a Carthusian monk's cell which would have the air of being

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<sup>29</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 319 / *Against Nature*, p. 194.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin writes: 'The interior is not just the universe but the *étui* of the private individual. To dwell is to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated. Coverlets and antimacassars, cases and containers are devised in abundance; in these traces of the most ordinary objects of use are imprinted. In just the same way, the traces of the inhabitant are imprinted in the interior.' Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in *The Writer of Modern Life*, p. 39.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', p. 39.

<sup>32</sup> Gail Finney, 'In the Naturalist Grain: Huysmans' "À rebours" Viewed through the Lens of Zola's "Germinal"', *Modern Language Studies*, 16:2 (Spring 1986), 71-77 (p. 73).

real, without, of course, actually being so].<sup>33</sup> He combines ecclesiastical objects with opulent materials to create a luxurious bedroom in which he can imagine that he is in the depths of a cloister. The irony of this is that this monk's cell, while it has all the trappings of the monastic life, is only superficially a renunciation of worldly pleasure in that it is also 'une chambre confortable et tiède' [a pleasant and comfortable bedroom].<sup>34</sup> This small room exemplifies his increasing obsession with 'worldly' sensual extremes and belies his search for religious fulfilment. The interior in which Des Esseintes places himself is not a soothing or regenerative escape from the chaos of the modern world. Instead, the house becomes a virtual replica of his past life in the city. Des Esseintes brings his desire for overstimulation and exhausting contradictions with him to his retreat. He is unable to create a hermetically sealed environment in the villa space as the external world is still evoked through the objects that he has collected.

It is as much the exchange between the objects, as it is the exchange between the objects and the rooms they are located in, that fosters imaginative thought in *À rebours*. Thus, the environment of the villa is shown to be overwhelming for Des Esseintes as it acts as an uncontrollable aide-mémoire, reflecting his concerns and desires as well as illustrating the important connection between items and their surroundings.<sup>35</sup> The objects in Des Esseintes' interiors are the vehicles for his fantasies and synaesthetic experiences. However, it is these same objects that are the catalyst for his hypersensitivity and developing nervous disorders. This is commented on by Pierrot who remarks that the depiction of the self-entrapped Decadent is symptomatic of a negative depiction of life in which many 's'enfermera dans la sphère de l'univers intérieur' [shut themselves away inside their inner worlds] and as a result were 'souvent effrayé par les sentiments étranges ou monstrueux qui soudain surgissent au jour; et dans cette quête anxieuse, ou découvrira, avant Freud même, les réalités de l'inconscient' [often terrified by the strange or monstrous feelings that could suddenly

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<sup>33</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 100 / my translation. Baldick has 'to fit up a Trappist's cell that would look like the genuine article, but would of course be nothing of the sort'. *Against Nature*, p. 62.

<sup>34</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 100 / my translation. Baldick has 'warm, luxurious bedroom'. *Against Nature*, p. 63.

<sup>35</sup> In a precursor to his thoughts on 'The Collector' in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin states in his essay 'Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting' (1931), that the process and meaning of collecting links directly to memory, 'every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories'. It is this link to the unconscious which, when combined with personal acquisition, creates value. Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting' in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 59-67 (p. 60).

erupt into the light of day; and in this anguished quest many were to discover, even before Freud, the realities of the unconscious].<sup>36</sup> The house at Fontenay is space in which worldly sensations and inner desires are fused.

### **Correspondences and Fusions: Baudelaire and Huysmans**

As Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac, the real-life dandy and model for Huysmans's protagonist, stated of his own apartment, it is 'le groupement des objets, dans une association, presque dans une conversation ingénieuse, et parfois saisissante, qui réveille l'appétit des yeux, et se communique à l'âme' [the grouping of objects, in association, almost in ingenious and sometimes striking conversation, which awakens the appetite of the eyes, and communicates with the soul].<sup>37</sup> In his villa, Des Esseintes attempts to augment the effects of his collections on his senses. This is apparent in his bedroom, but it becomes most obvious in his adjacent library-study, the walls of which he has bound 'comme des livres, avec du maroquin, à gros grains écrasés, avec de la peau du Cap' [like books, in large-grained crushed morocco, skins from the Cape].<sup>38</sup> The leather-lined library is a feature adopted from Montesquiou's library-study in his attic apartment on the Quai d'Orsay. In 'Unpacking His Library: Robert de Montesquiou and the Aesthetics of the Book in *Fin-de-siècle* France' (2004), Willa Z. Silverman gives a detailed description of this room and proposes that '[w]ith its glistening, lacquered leather walls and peacock-eye motif, this library was meant to stimulate the intellectual work and inspiration associated with writing and reading.'<sup>39</sup> The library in Montesquiou's apartment not only fostered intellectual activities but also served, as Silverman claims, 'as their emblem'.<sup>40</sup> In a similar way to Des Esseintes' study, the library in Montesquiou's apartment was meant to serve as an intellectual emblem, in which the environment of the room is as important as the objects within it. The decoration of the room is more than just an aesthetic choice. It echoes the function of the room and multiplies its intensity.

Des Esseintes manipulates the correspondences between an object and its location. On the one hand, the room intensifies sensory or material objects and, on the

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<sup>36</sup> Pierrot, *L'Imaginaire décadent*, p. 19 / *The Decadent Imagination*, p. 10.

<sup>37</sup> Robert de Montesquiou, *Les Pas effacés: Mémoires*, vol. 2 (Paris: Émile-Paul Frères, 1923), p. 94.

<sup>38</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 24 / *Against Nature*, p. 16.

<sup>39</sup> Willa Z. Silverman, 'Unpacking His Library: Robert de Montesquiou and the Aesthetics of the Book in *Fin-de-siècle* France', in *The New Bibliopolis: French Book-collectors and the Culture of Print, 1880-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), pp. 141-64 (p. 155).

<sup>40</sup> Silverman, 'Unpacking His Library', p. 155.



other, the interior design appears to be at odds with the functionality of the space. For instance, his dining room resembles a ship's cabin, with one window rendered useless by an aquarium that 'occupait tout l'espace compris entre ce hublot et cette réelle fenêtre ouverte dans le vrai mur' [occupied the entire space between the porthole and the real window in the real house-wall].<sup>41</sup> Instead of being designed around social conviviality and gustatory desires – as we might expect from a dining room – Des Esseintes creates a room that is a feast for the eyes, not the stomach. The aquarium, filled with mechanical fish and artificial seaweed, is an experiment in colour. By dissolving pigments in the water, he manipulates the refracted light from the outside window. These visual effects are enhanced by the other senses, such as the infusion of the room with the smell of tar and the nautical apparatus piled by the door. Des Esseintes designs the space to permanently capture a sense of movement. The dining room is a journey for the senses as it gives the destabilizing, even nauseating, impression of being both on top of and under the water. This potential of creating a *mal de mer* is the opposite of what is usually desired from a dining room, and corresponds to Des Esseintes' eating habits, the limited time he spends on his meals, and their sometimes sickening effects. The deliberate disorder and impermanent appearance of the dining room is purposefully in contrast to the permanent and orderly study that is connected to it. This gives the effect of travel, of moving from one place to a different one, but without the annoyance or fatigue of a long voyage.

Huysmans's Decadent novel-space is a retreat, a space of escape, but it is also a work full of reference to recollections, memory and dreams. These correspondences recall Baudelaire's poem 'Correspondances', which illustrates, as I discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, the relationship between different realms of experience, physical and metaphysical. Through his depiction of sensory correspondences, Baudelaire expands on the writings of the philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg and his suggestion that everything in nature has a spiritual counterpart.<sup>42</sup> The relationship between the physical and metaphysical realms becomes a preoccupation of Huysmans

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<sup>41</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 30 / *Against Nature*, p. 19.

<sup>42</sup> Baudelaire, in his essay 'Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains' ['Reflections on some of my contemporaries'] (1861) articulates the notion that the spiritual is imminent in the natural world, not just transcendent of it. He writes that 'qui tout, forme, mouvement, nombre, couleur, parfum, dans le *spirituel* comme dans le *naturel*, est significatif, réciproque, converse, *correspondant*' [everything, form, movement, number, colour, perfume, in the *spiritual* as in the *natural*, is significant, reciprocal, converse, *correspondent*]. See, 'Réflexions sur quelques-uns de mes contemporains', *Œuvres complètes*, vol. II, pp. 129-181 (p. 133). Italics in original.

in *À rebours* and his admiration for Baudelaire is apparent throughout the novel, culminating in Chapter Twelve where Des Esseintes praises Baudelaire's poetic style. Des Esseintes describes writers who depict typical human behaviour as like botanists who watch closely 'le développement prévu de floraisons normales plantées dans de la naturelle terre' [the expected development of ordinary flora planted in common or garden soil].<sup>43</sup> In comparison, Baudelaire explores the more morbid psychology of the mind. As Des Esseintes comments, it was Baudelaire who found 'couvant sous la morne cloche de l'Ennui, l'effrayant retour d'âge des sentiments et des idées' [hatching in the dismal forcing-house of ennui, the frightening climacteric of thoughts and emotions] and on closer study we can see this Baudelairean idea played out in fictional form.<sup>44</sup> The house at Fontenay is also an inter-sensory and claustrophobic environment that is a breeding-ground for diseases of the mind. Like the description of the bedroom space in 'La Chambre double' as infused with 'des sensations de serre chaude' [hothouse sensations], Huysmans explores the 'végétations monstrueuses' of human nature grown within a hothouse environment.<sup>45</sup>

In the final pages of the opening chapter, the central room of Des Esseintes' villa is depicted. Baudelaire's poems are a central component in this library-study, a room which can be seen as the pinnacle of Des Esseintes' obsession with the threshold of the worldly and the spiritual. The study is a hothouse space, recalling Montesquiou's glass library in his apartment on the Rue Franklin (where he lived from 1889-94), and the association between collection and display stimulates reflections on the placement of the object and the preferences and values of the collector.<sup>46</sup> As Huysmans states, 'le seul luxe de cette pièce devant consister en des livres et des fleurs rares' [the only luxuries he intended to have in this room were rare books and flowers] but he also fills it with furs, furniture and curtains made of ecclesiastical material.<sup>47</sup> Above the fireplace in Des Esseintes' study, in the same position as Huysmans's crucifix in his Rue de

<sup>43</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 215 / *Against Nature*, p. 132.

<sup>44</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 216 / *Against Nature*, p. 133.

<sup>45</sup> Baudelaire, 'La Chambre double', p. 280 / 'The Double Room', p. 15, and Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 216 / *Against Nature*, p. 133.

<sup>46</sup> Montesquiou's glass library housed his most favoured and unique books that were placed under glass to be displayed and exhibited, seen and studied, alongside exotic plants. Cornelia Skinner briefly describes this as a 'glass conservatory where the works of his favourite authors, Baudelaire, Swinburne and his friend Goncourt, were displayed on low shelves as a background for a small forest of Japanese dwarfed trees, a rare collection of miniature oaks, century-old pines, and tiny delicate maple [. . .] all no bigger than cabbages.' See Cornelia Otis Skinner, *Elegant Wits and Grand Horizontals* (London: Michael Joseph, 1962), pp. 49-50.

<sup>47</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 25 / *Against Nature*, p. 17.

Sèvres apartment, he hangs ‘un merveilleux canon d’église’ [a magnificent triptych].<sup>48</sup> On these panels are three poems by Baudelaire that exemplify the essential components of the villa space:

à droite et à gauche, les sonnets portant ces titres ‘a Mort des Amants’ – ‘l’Ennemi’; – au milieu, le poème en prose intitulé: ‘*Any where Out of the World*’.

[right and left, the sonnets ‘The Death of the Lover’ and ‘The Enemy,’ and in the middle, the prose poem bearing the English title *Anywhere out of the World*.]<sup>49</sup>

‘Any where Out of the World’, in *Le Spleen de Paris*, describes the poet in conversation with his reticent soul, and reflects the initial purpose of the villa as an escape from the monotony of everyday life into a man-made world of art and artifice. However, in ‘L’Ennemi’, from *Les Fleurs du mal*, the poet expresses his fear that he has reached ‘l’automne des idées’ [the autumn of ideas].<sup>50</sup> Huysmans includes the poem in the triptych to illustrate the similar fears and desires of his protagonist but, unlike Baudelaire, Des Esseintes does not have a desire to regain the lost time of his misspent youth. Instead of evoking correspondences and points of connections to other times and spaces, the villa is a space that fuses past and present, reality and fantasy. For example, in ‘L’Ennemi’, Baudelaire only contemplates what ‘mystique aliment’ might give his ideas vigour.<sup>51</sup> Whereas in *À rebours*, Des Esseintes attempts to actually create a perfect environment in which to grow these new ‘flowers’. Des Esseintes hopes that within his villa he will be able to cultivate the new sensations and experiences that will cure his ennui.<sup>52</sup> In the context of *À rebours*, this poem articulates the fusions created and amplified in the house at Fontenay between the sensual physical world and spiritual transcendence.

The house at Fontenay is not a refuge. It is a hothouse for his mental aberrations and the novel is a multisensory experiment with Des Esseintes at the centre. Everything,

<sup>48</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 26 / *Against Nature*, p. 17.

<sup>49</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 26 / *Against Nature*, p. 17.

<sup>50</sup> Baudelaire, ‘L’Ennemi’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 16 / ‘The Enemy’, in *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 29.

<sup>51</sup> Baudelaire, ‘L’Ennemi’, p. 16 / ‘The Enemy’, p. 29.

<sup>52</sup> Baudelaire’s ‘La Mort des amants’ [‘The Death of Lovers’] also contains in the first stanza the description of ‘d’étranges fleurs’ [‘strange flowers’] that blossom under the ‘cieux plus beaux’ [most beautiful heavens]. In this harmonious and redolent environment there is a correspondence between colour and scent that enables the lovers to be united in the moment of death. ‘La Mort des amants’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, p. 126 / ‘The Death of Lovers’, *The Flowers of Evil*, p. 339.

from the collections in the villa to the colour of the walls, is centred around the effect they will have on his mind. For instance, in his choice of red, yellow and orange for his villa, Huysmans replicates contemporary ideas about colour stimulation that were first commented on by Grant Allen in *The Colour-Sense: Its Origin and Development* (1879). Allen argues that the ‘red and orange end of the spectrum is decidedly the most pleasurable: while the central colours, green and blue, are decidedly the least so.’<sup>53</sup> Des Esseintes observes that there is a correspondence between ‘la nature sensuelle d’un individu vraiment artiste et la couleur que ses yeux voient d’une façon plus spéciale et plus vive’ [the sensual make up of that person with a truly artistic temperament and whatever colour that person reacts to most strongly and sympathetically].<sup>54</sup> Ultimately, he settles on a colour palette consisting of mostly orange, a colour that Huysmans describes as attractive to characters of feeble constitution because of its ‘irritante et malade’ [irritating and morbid] effect on the eye.<sup>55</sup>

In *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (1991) Judith Ryan observes that Huysmans was one of the first writers to depict ‘the psychology of sense perception. Throughout the novel, the words “sensation” and “impression” – hallmarks of the new psychologies – are used’.<sup>56</sup> This creates an impressionistic view of space, not limited by linear time and with an emphasis on subjective reactions to sensory (predominantly visual) stimuli. Huysmans constructs a villa space that is an experiment with the limits, or the threshold, of sensory perception.<sup>57</sup> Fontenay is, in effect, a house of sensory fusions as well as correspondences. There are correspondences between the physical and mental realms, in the manner of Baudelaire, and the more we study the novel, the more we see that the narrative is powered by a modern preoccupation with the effect of different sensory combinations on his body and mind, such as his synaesthiac experiments with the

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<sup>53</sup> Grant Allen, *The Colour-Sense: Its Origin and Development: An essay in comparative psychology* (Boston: Houghton, 1879), p. 226.

<sup>54</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 24 / *Against Nature*, p. 15.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Baudelaire discusses the connection between colour and sensuality, particularly in the paintings of Delacroix.

<sup>55</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 24 / *Against Nature*, p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> Judith Ryan, *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 49.

<sup>57</sup> In *Outlines of Psychology* (1884), James Sully developed an early theory of sensory perception which was based on subjective perceptions and limits of intensity. He writes that ‘Every stimulus must reach a certain intensity before any appreciable sensation results. This point is known as the threshold or liminal intensity of sensation.’ James Sully, *Outlines of Psychology* (1884; New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1888), p. 144.

‘orgue à bouche’. This sensory self-experimentation is particularly evident in Chapter Eight, when the villa becomes a more literal hothouse for Des Esseintes’ neuroses. The whole villa is a conceptual hothouse space, but in Chapter Eight Huysmans takes this idea further. The strange growths of Des Esseintes’ imagination are manifested in real plants. The hothouse is a quintessentially threshold space; it blurs the boundary between nature and artifice and, due to its transparency, between subject and object.<sup>58</sup>

Prior to *À rebours*, Huysmans used the hothouse as a metaphor for exotic sensations and perversities. In ‘Similitudes’ (first published in *République des Lettres*, 6 August 1876 and included in *Croquis parisiens* (1880)), for example, he makes direct reference to Baudelaire’s use of the hothouse space from earlier in the century, and Huysmans’s description of the ‘évoqueries d’un autre monde’ [evocations of another world] is an echo of Baudelaire’s ‘parfum d’un autre monde’ in ‘La Chambre double’.<sup>59</sup> In *À rebours* he takes the metaphor of the hothouse further, and uses it to amplify the interconnections between the worldly and the spiritual, reality and the imagination. Before the plants even arrive Huysmans hints at the effects that these ‘folies de végétation’ [floral follies] are having on the unconscious mind of Des Esseintes, as, after arriving home, he is ‘hanté sans trêve par des souvenirs de corbeilles magnifiques et bizarres’ [haunted all the while by the memories of bizarre and magnificent blooms].<sup>60</sup> The visual and textural qualities of these plants remind him of the physical symptoms of venereal disease. The chapter is mostly set in Des Esseintes’ mind and narrates his sexual adventures of the past. However, he is unable to control these exhausting memories and his neurosis begins to take on new forms.

In Chapter Eight, Huysmans suggests the process of walking along the avenues of a hothouse, where specimens are positioned to attract the eye. As the plants are unloaded by the gardeners into the entrance hall, Des Esseintes surveys and groups them in terms of their physical similarities. This is exemplified in relation to the *Alocasia metalica*, which he describes as ‘un modèle similaire à celui des Caladiums’ [a type similar to the Caladiums].<sup>61</sup> While both plants share the characteristic of flat foliage, the tropical *Alocasia* requires hothouse conditions for survival whereas other

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<sup>58</sup> The glazed transparency of the hothouse and its use as a metaphor for associated intellectual processes is mentioned by David Gullentops, in ‘L’espace poétique dans Serres chaudes de Maeterlinck’, *Études littéraires*, 30:3 (Summer 1998), pp. 93-106.

<sup>59</sup> Huysmans, ‘Similitudes’, in *Croquis parisiens*, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. VIII, pp. 171-76 (p. 174).

<sup>60</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 134 / *Against Nature*, p. 83.

<sup>61</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 136 / *Against Nature*, p. 84.

species of *Caladiums* can be grown outdoors. In a hothouse, plants are traditionally grouped into topographical zones, both so that their origins can be understood and their requirements easily catered for (so they can in effect receive the correct amount of sunlight, heat and water). In *À rebours*, the typical hothouse arrangement of plants into topographical zones is undercut by Des Esseintes' predominantly aesthetic considerations. This turns out to have disastrous consequences. Like the death of his bejewelled tortoise, crushed by the weight of its shell, Des Esseintes' hothouse plants die from lack of proper care.

### **Des Esseintes' Dream: Sensory Perception and Memory**

As I have illustrated, the dominating influence of sensory perception is apparent from the beginning of *À rebours*. However, it culminates in Chapter Eight with the descriptions of the hothouse flowers that enter the villa and are no stranger than Des Esseintes himself. In his description of the *Albane* and *Aurora borealis*, which 'présentait les deux notes extrêmes du tempérament, l'apoplexie et la chlorose de cette plante' [represented two temperamental extremes, apoplexy and chlorosis, in this particular family of plants], the contrast between the red blood and the green tinge of anaemia sets the focus in the rest of the chapter on the physical and temperamental extremes recognizable in both people and plants.<sup>62</sup> Des Esseintes' sexual peculiarities become particularly discernible in the description of the *Anthurium*, which, Huysmans comments, 'faisait partie d'un lot de cette famille à laquelle appartenait aussi un *Amorphophallus*' [belonged to a section of the same family as a certain *Amorphophallus*].<sup>63</sup> Huysmans combines the description of the *Anthurium*, which has 'une queue charnue, cotonneuse' [a fleshy, downy tail], with the name of the *Amorphophallus*, translated as 'misshapen phallus', in order to create a sense that the aroid is the epitome of both strange eroticism and diseased sexuality.<sup>64</sup> Des Esseintes is exultant before this abnormal beauty and is delighted when a fresh batch of monstrosities is unloaded from the carts. He examines every plant with such reverence that the irritated gardeners begin to read out for themselves the labels on the plants. Des

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<sup>62</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 135 / *Against Nature*, p. 84. In this instance Huysmans's sentence structure, which leads the reader to connect *Albane* with apoplexy and *Aurora borealis* with chlorosis, is incorrect. It is the *Albane* that appears bloodless and the *Aurora borealis* that is deep red in colour.

<sup>63</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 137 / *Against Nature*, p. 85.

<sup>64</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 137 / *Against Nature*, p. 85.

Esseintes listens in amazement to this list of ‘les noms rébarbatifs des plantes vertes’ [forbidding names of the various herbaceous plants] that are in turn recited by Des Esseintes like the repeated phrases in a formulaic vocal prayer.<sup>65</sup>

The opening of the chapter is concerned with the pseudo-religious fanaticism with which Des Esseintes accumulates and documents the hothouse flowers that he has purchased. The chapter begins with a discussion of his prior infatuation with artificial flowers, in line with the fashion for silk flowers in France at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Huysmans explains that Des Esseintes’ ‘penchant naturel vers l’artifice l’avait conduit à délaisser la véritable fleur pour son image fidèlement exécutée’ [inborn taste for the artificial had led him to neglect the real flower for its copy].<sup>67</sup> However, his contemporary interest in hothouse flowers demonstrates his desire to distance himself from the parochial tastes of the public. ‘Après les fleurs factices singeant les véritables fleurs, il voulait des fleurs naturelles imitant des fleurs fausses’ [Tired of artificial flowers aping real ones, he wanted some natural flowers that looked like fakes].<sup>68</sup> It is the combination of the illusory beauty of the plants and the synthetic environments that they have been grown in that creates the artificial beauty of Des Esseintes’ hothouse flower collection. The hothouse represents both the height of technological advancement and the epitome of artificial cultivation. This is in line with the fundamental purposes of the villa to provide an escape from outside influences and a space for controlled, aesthetic and sensory experimentations.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 138 / *Against Nature*, p. 86.

<sup>66</sup> Artificial flowers were used to decorate clothing, for hat trimmings and in artistic hairstyles. This industry spread around the world with flower makers such as T. J. Wenzel, the royal flower maker for Marie Antoinette, solidifying the fashion from the end of the eighteenth century. See Andrew Graciano, *Visualising the Unseen, Imagining the Unknown, Perfecting the Natural: Art and Science in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), p. 25.

<sup>67</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 133 / *Against Nature*, p. 83.

<sup>68</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 134 / *Against Nature*, p. 83.

<sup>69</sup> Critics make passing comment on the hothouse in Decadent literature but the fullest treatment of the hothouse motif is given by Michael Riffaterre in his article ‘Decadent Features in Maeterlinck’s Poetry’ (1974) which is focused on Maurice Maeterlinck’s collection of Symbolist poems, *Serres chaudes* [*Hothouses*] (1889). Riffaterre acknowledges that, for Maeterlinck, the hothouse is suggestive of the claustrophobic environment that he found himself returning to after visiting Paris in 1885, the year he met Huysmans. In *Serres chaudes*, Maeterlinck uses the hothouse as a symbolic starting point that allows a focus on other glazed spaces that are equally suggestive of an atmosphere of enclosure, artifice and sickness, such as the aquarium and bell jar. However, due to Riffaterre’s focus on Maeterlinck and his use of a variety of glazed spaces, he does not explore in his article the particular qualities of the hothouse space, and how it is distinct from these other spaces that can only be looked at. Michael Riffaterre, ‘Decadent Features in Maeterlinck’s Poetry’, *Language and Style*, 7 (Winter, 1974), 3-19 (p. 6).

Considering the dominance of scent throughout the novel, Chapter Eight is notably lacking in olfactory sensations. The carrion plants, of which the *Amorphophallus* is a significant example, are mentioned for their visual, rather than their scented, properties. However, the final plant that is almost omitted from Des Esseintes' list is the fragrant *Cattleya* orchid of New Granada which completes the sensory experience of the hothouse. The pale lilac orchid described by Huysmans is the *Cattleya trianae*, native to Colombia. This winter flowering species, also known as the 'Christmas orchid', has a fetid perfume that is reminiscent of mothballs or damp wood. Huysmans writes that it smells like cheap varnished wood – a 'boîte à jouets' [toy box] aroma that is evocative of Des Esseintes' childhood and 'les horreurs d'un jour de l'an' [the horrors of a New Year's Day].<sup>70</sup> It is the only time a flower's scent is described in the chapter and, for Des Esseintes, the smell of the orchid evokes 'les plus désagréables des souvenirs' [the most unpleasant memories].<sup>71</sup> Scented flowers, as Huysmans illustrates, evoke unwanted recollections, and the small orchid not only serves as the catalyst for the hallucinatory dream section that follows but it also evokes the memories of childhood from which Des Esseintes wishes to remove himself. The plants evoke a state of liminality in Des Esseintes and convey a disorientating and ambiguous threshold where present/past, awake/dreaming, conscious/unconscious meet and interconnect.

In "The Scenery of the Torrid Zone": Imagined Travels and the Culture of the Exotics in Nineteenth-Century British Gardens' (1999), Rebecca Preston argues that scent and perfume conjure 'other worlds' and make 'tangibly domestic boundaries elastic, transporting its subject elsewhere in space and time.'<sup>72</sup> The flower's scent, something that is not artificially created like the perfumes in Chapter Ten, leads him into deeper levels of introspection. The troublesome associations of the childhood smell emanating from the orchid are revisited in the dream as the nostrils of the horse ridden by Syphilis personified are described as 'soufflant deux jets de vapeur qui puaiant le phénol' [breathing twin jets of vapour that stank of phenol].<sup>73</sup> The smell of phenol has

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<sup>70</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 140 / *Against Nature*, p. 86.

<sup>71</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 140 / *Against Nature*, p. 86.

<sup>72</sup> Rebecca Preston, "The Scenery of the Torrid Zone": Imagined Travels and the Culture of the Exotics in Nineteenth-Century British Gardens', in *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity*, ed. by Felix Driver and David Gilbert (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 194-221 (p. 200).

<sup>73</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 146 / *Against Nature*, p. 90.



connections to perfumery, in which it is used as a substitute for the musty odour of orchids and ferns. Thus this scent is also an amplification of the mothball smell of the *Cattleya* orchid from earlier in the chapter. Angela Nuccitelli, in ‘*A Rebours’s* Symbol of the *Femme-Fleur*: A Key to Des Esseintes’ Obsession’ (1975), makes the connection between the smell of phenol exhaled by the horse and Des Esseintes’ memory of a visit to the dentist for a tooth extraction. Having teeth pulled, she argues, is a common symbol of castration and phenol would also have been used as an antiseptic in the nineteenth century.<sup>74</sup> The scent has a manifest association (his childhood) and a latent meaning (his fear of women). This is significant as it demonstrates an engagement with contemporary debates about the unconscious and dreaming, in particular pre-Freudian theories of dream interpretation such as Louis Alfred Maury’s *Le sommeil et les rêves* [*Sleep and Dreams*] (1865) and his experiments with self-induced sensory dreams. Maury theorizes that the images that arise when dreaming or hallucinating come from memory. The imagination only serves to combine these reminiscences in a new form or order.<sup>75</sup> As Huysmans exemplifies in Chapter Eight, the fragrance of a particular flower could conjure a visual memory or resurrect a dead moment.

In the first of his seven-volume series, *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] (1913-27), Proust borrows the lascivious properties of the *Cattleya* orchid found in Huysmans’s novel for the private code between Charles Swann and the courtesan Odette de Crécy. The *Cattleyas* that Odette wears during a carriage journey are dislodged when her horse suddenly shies at an obstacle. Swann restores the *Cattleyas* to Odette’s bodice and subsequently uses the coded phrase ‘faire catleya’ for making love.<sup>76</sup> Proust believed that the past is concealed in sensations that a material object can give us – the taste of ‘petites madeleines’ is the famous example. Similarly, Bettina Knapp in ‘Huysmans’s *Against the Grain*: The Willed Exile of the Introverted Decadent’ (1991) argues that Des Esseintes’ ‘exaggerated sense of smell (*hyperosmia*) has the power of bringing on hallucinations and dreams. Perfumes and other aromas are

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<sup>74</sup> Angela Nuccitelli, ‘*A Rebours’s* Symbol of the “*Femme-Fleur*”: A Key to Des Esseintes’ Obsession’, *Symposium*, 23 (1975), 336-45.

<sup>75</sup> For more discussion of Maury’s dream theories and his influence on Freud, see Adrianna M. Paliyenko’s ‘Margins of Madness and Creativity: Nineteenth-Century French Psychiatric and Literary Discourses on Dream’, in *Dreams in French Literature: The Persistent Voice*, ed. by Tom Conner (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 173-98.

<sup>76</sup> Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swan* (Part II), *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. II (1913; Paris: Gallimard, 1919), p. 28.

able to lead him into ever-profounder levels of introversion.<sup>77</sup> It is both a nourishing space, which encourages growth and development, and Knapp suggests, a closed space that appears to enclose and imprison the mind and body. His introspections, for example, are an amalgamation of moods and anxieties, rather than an actual manifestation of Des Esseintes' memories.

The two-part structure of Chapter Eight enables Huysmans to depict the correspondences between the thoughts of the day and their distorted expression in the unconscious. In a way that recalls Baudelaire's 'La Chambre double', his physical environment (in this case the hothouse plants) seep into his dream. In the prologue, Des Esseintes is described as dreaming of 'une thébaïde raffinée' [a refined Thebaïd] and the villa is an attempt to make his dreams a reality.<sup>78</sup> The French verb 'rêver' [to dream] is used forty-five times in *À rebours*. However, the only actual dream depicted in the novel is the one stimulated by the hothouse flowers. Ruth Antosh explains, in *Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J.-K. Huysmans* (1986), that even though Des Esseintes purposefully fills his house with nightmarish art in order to flee from reality, 'the only truly personal nightmare he undergoes offers him anything but an escape'.<sup>79</sup> Instead, the associations that are created while he is awake become actualized in the visual narrative of the dream.

According to Bachelard, the chief benefit of the house is that 'la maison abrite la rêverie, la maison protège le rêveur, la maison nous permet de rêver en paix.' [the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace.]<sup>80</sup> However, while Des Esseintes' villa may give him the space to dream, he is unable to control what he dreams about. This is manifested in the villa through a frustrating relationship between present sensations and past memories. He is able to recall a time of virility and sexual adventure but he is unable to take an active part in these recollections or even control when or how they occur. Des Esseintes is overpowered by the reveries created by the overstimulation of his senses, and the diseased characteristics attributed to the hothouse flowers provide an insight into his fears and desires. As they enter the villa the ways in which these sickly growths appear

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<sup>77</sup> Bettina L. Knapp, 'Huysmans's *Against the Grain*: The Willed Exile of the Introverted Decadent', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 20 (Fall-Winter, 1991-92), 203-21 (p. 217).

<sup>78</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 10 / *Against Nature*, p. 8.

<sup>79</sup> Ruth Antosh, *Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J.-K. Huysmans* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986), p. 89.

<sup>80</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace*, p. 26 / *The Poetics of Space*, p. 6.

to parallel human perversions, especially those associated with prostitution and sexual diseases, is made explicit. For example, when the gardeners bring in more varieties of Caladium, Des Esseintes describes them as looking as if they have been ‘rongées par des syphilis et des lèpres’ [ravaged by syphilis or leprosy].<sup>81</sup> He then attributes the visual and textural elements of these diseases, such as chancres, ulcers, scabs and scars, to the hothouse plants, describing the usually smooth leaves of the perennials as ‘épidermes poilus, creusés par des ulcères et repoussés par des chancres’ [hairy surfaces pitted with ulcers and embossed with chancres].<sup>82</sup> Des Esseintes admires the hothouse plants for their unhealthy appearance and selects them for their fleshy properties. He remarks how the leaves of his exotic blooms have ‘une apparence de peau factice sillonnée de fausses veines’ [the appearance of a factitious skin covered with a network of counterfeit veins].<sup>83</sup>

In his descriptions, Huysmans fuses the medical and aesthetic realms. Like patients in a hospital, the plants are placed side by side, and encompass a range of pre and post-operative disfigurements. Many of the plants appear as if they have been mutilated by syphilis or leprosy, while others seem to have just have had their wounds ‘plaquées d’axonge noire mercurielle, d’onguents verts de belladone, piquées de grains de poussière, par les micas jaunes de la poudre d’iodoforme’ [coated with black mercurial lard, plastered with green belladonna ointment, dusted over with yellow flakes of iodoform powder].<sup>84</sup> The description of the skin diseases and medical cures correspond to the preliminary stages of syphilis – characterized by, firstly, small chancres on the skin and, secondly, rashes and wart-like skin growths.<sup>85</sup> However, the markings on the plants are described in an aesthetic way. They are ‘marbrées de roséoles, damassées de dartres’ [marbled with roseola, damasked with darte].<sup>86</sup> This description connects skin with paper through its evocation of the rose-coloured rash and the eczema-like skin condition, as well as suggesting techniques used in papermaking in the nineteenth century.<sup>87</sup> Like the scent of the *Cattleya*, the texture of

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<sup>81</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 135 / *Against Nature*, p. 84.

<sup>82</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 135 / *Against Nature*, p. 84.

<sup>83</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 135 / *Against Nature*, p. 84.

<sup>84</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 136 / *Against Nature*, p. 84.

<sup>85</sup> In 1838, the French dermatologist Phillippe Ricord defined the different stages of the disease – primary, secondary and tertiary.

<sup>86</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 135 / *Against Nature*, p. 84.

<sup>87</sup> Marbled endpapers were common in book binding at the end of the nineteenth century. Damask is a rich decoration of elaborate patterns on silk or paper, originating from Damascus. By the 1700s, weavers in Lyon, France, made the design and process popular with French aristocrats. See Dard

the flowers is emphasized and distorted in the dream and, as he imagines during the day, the leaves become the skin of the flower woman. He notices ‘l’effrayante irritation des seins et de la bouche, découvrit sur la peau du corps des macules de bistre et de cuivre’ [the frightening irritation of the mouth and breasts, discovered on the skin of the body spots of bistre and copper].<sup>88</sup> In the dream space the descriptions of first-stage syphilis are developed, and the plant woman has the syphilitic rash of the second stage of the disease.

Women are a source of attraction and repulsion for Huysmans, and the dominant image of the diseased flower-woman is stirred by Des Esseintes’ overarching fear of syphilis. In his thesis on the representation of women in Huysmans (2004), Brendan King foregrounds the connection in the dream between the fear of syphilis and the image of woman as the carrier of disease, and he comments that in the final stages of his dream Des Esseintes begins to come to the same conclusion.<sup>89</sup> His ‘manie raisonnante persista dans le cauchemar, dérivait de même que pendant la journée de la végétation sur le Virus’ [reasoning mania persisted even in his nightmare; and as in the daytime, it switched from vegetation to the Virus].<sup>90</sup> Des Esseintes’ dominant fear is of the tertiary stage of syphilis, which can occur years after initial infection and can lead to madness and death. However, he is more concerned with the potential of the virus to cause sexual dysfunction, all the more significant given that he is the last of his hereditary line. In the dream, this is imagined through castration imagery. He is drawn towards the figure of Syphilis, and is almost touching her when ‘noirs Amorphophallus jaillirent de toutes parts, s’élancèrent vers ce ventre qui se soulevait et s’abaissait comme une mer’ [black Amorphalli sprang up on every side and stabbed at her belly, which was rising and falling like a sea].<sup>91</sup> The ‘farouche’ [savage] Nidularium begins blossoming from under her thighs and has, as described previously in the chapter and repeated at this point in the dream, leaves like ‘des lames de sabre’ [sword blades].<sup>92</sup>

Earlier in the chapter carnivorous plants are described as a species which particularly fascinate Des Esseintes, and the *Nepenthes* is the only flower from his

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Hunter, *Papermaking: History and Technique of an Ancient Craft*, 2nd edn (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).

<sup>88</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 147 / *Against Nature*, p. 91.

<sup>89</sup> Brendan King, ‘Iconic Representations of Female Sexuality in the Work of J.-K. Huysmans’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Birkbeck, University of London, 2005), pp. 116-22.

<sup>90</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 148 / *Against Nature*, p. 91.

<sup>91</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 148 / *Against Nature*, p. 91.

<sup>92</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 149 / *Against Nature*, p. 92.

collection that adorns the manifestation of the pox in his dream; the pitchers of this plant ‘pendaient à ses oreilles’ [hung at her ears].<sup>93</sup> This reminds the reader of Des Esseintes’ earlier reflections that from the end of each leaf of this plant there hung ‘un cordon ombilical supportant une urne verdâtre, jaspée de violet’ [an umbilical cord carrying a greenish-coloured pitcher dappled with purple markings].<sup>94</sup> These reflections are strongly associated with women, with adornment (earrings), childbirth (umbilical cord), and destructive feminine forces. The leaf-pitchers full of water in which insects die, for example, evoke the womb-tomb previously alluded to by Knapp, while the purple colouring of the leaf pitcher alludes to the bruising associated with secondary stage syphilis. In *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990) Camilla Paglia analyses this dream as part of her discussion of the representation of women in *fin-de-siècle* literature. She proposes that the women in the dream have the power of destruction and creation, and comments that ‘Des Esseintes builds a palace of art against nature, but in his dreams nature comes to reclaim and devour him.’<sup>95</sup> As a result, the dream is as an example of the virus increasing its hold over him, and the true beginning of his physical decline. The villa intensifies, rather than cures, his illness.

Huysmans suggests that the unnatural villa creates an unhealthy atmosphere for Des Esseintes. Rather than enabling him to escape from the anxieties created by the outside world, the threshold space of the villa, in which his fears and obsessions interact, increases and enhances his neurotic impulses. He attempts to impose a linear order on the dream but the structure is more akin to a series of associations, in which an element of the previous image triggers the next one. Elements appear and disappear like ‘un changement à vue, par un truc de décor’ [a transformation scene, some theatrical illusion] and the images in the dream, like the flowers that initiated it, have been imported from strange places.<sup>96</sup> The villa has theatrical properties and the dream becomes the stage on which Des Esseintes’ fears are performed. For example the image of ‘immenses et blancs pierrots faisaient des sauts de lapins, dans des rayons de lune’ [enormous white pierrots jumping about like rabbits in the moonlight], seemingly draws

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<sup>93</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 147 / *Against Nature*, p. 91.

<sup>94</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 139 / *Against Nature*, p. 86.

<sup>95</sup> Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 434.

<sup>96</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 147 / *Against Nature*, p. 91.

on Redon's nightmarish Symbolist images that are greatly admired by Des Esseintes in Chapter Five.<sup>97</sup>

In *À rebours*, Huysmans creates a space that is real and imagined, intimate and performative. The villa space encourages impressionistic thoughts that relate to the house as a site of correspondences. Des Esseintes is the catalyst for the correspondences in the text, resulting in a novel that focuses on the threshold between experiences in the real world and their manifestation in the unconscious. In her essay 'Structural Techniques in *À rebours*' (1975), Ruth Weinreb comments on the symbiotic relationship that is developed between the spiritual and the material world in the novel. She argues that 'Huysmans materializes the spiritual world through Des Esseintes. Des Esseintes spiritualizes the material world through art and his artificial life.'<sup>98</sup> Ultimately, Des Esseintes fails in his experiment to isolate the senses; they cannot be experienced as discrete. Rather, the senses permeate one another, creating a threshold space of interconnections, fusions, and correspondences that he cannot control. In this way, his retreat does not cure him, but makes him worse. In the breeding-ground of his villa that resembles a hothouse, sensations exacerbate Des Esseintes' nervous illness. He is forced, at the novel's conclusion, to return to his old life in the city. Huysmans's investigation into the effect of artistic and sensory experiments takes on a pseudo-religious quality in the novel. As exemplified by the collection of hothouse plants, reactions to sensory stimulations are involuntary, causing uncontrollable mental associations. The rooms of the villa are not sealed and separate, but are permeated by the sense-impressions Des Esseintes carries with him from room to room. In Des Esseintes' retreat, the worldly and the spiritual are united in the realm of the senses.

Des Esseintes' 'thébaïde raffinée' makes his dreams a reality in all the wrong ways and he is faced with two choices at the end of the novel; to cure the effects of his experiment through returning to society or turning to God. In the following section, I will examine how Huysmans depicts this movement away from sensory

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<sup>97</sup> Huysmans, *À rebours*, p. 146 / *Against Nature*, p. 90.

Huysmans's presentation of dreaming in Chapter Eight suggests the connection, taken up by later Symbolists, of the correspondent relationship between the mind and the body, and anticipates twentieth-century psychoanalytical theory related to the manifestation of daytime experiences in dreams. The connection between Symbolism, Freud, and dream imagery is discussed in more detail by Donald Kuspit, 'From Vision to Dream: The Secularization of the Imagination', in *Dreams 1900-2000: Science, Art, and the Unconscious Mind*, ed. by Lynn Gamwell (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 77-88.

<sup>98</sup> Ruth Weinreb, 'Structural Techniques in *À rebours*', *The French Review*, 49:2 (1975), 222-33 (p. 223).

experimentation and aesthetic excess, and towards an exploration of religious salvation and the realities of a monastic lifestyle in his novels after *À rebours*. In particular, in his Durtal tetralogy, and in line with his increasing interest in Catholicism, Huysmans appears to break away from the Decadent themes of his earlier works and depict his journey to faith in more naturalist terms. However, I maintain that the hothouse space of *À rebours* lingers in his work, even if it does become a more literal symbol for the threshold between the worldly and the spiritual. Tracing this spatial metaphor forward illustrates Huysmans's commitment to depicting threshold spaces and states.

### **Cathedrals of the Strange: The Spiritual Hothouse in Huysmans's Tetralogy**

In Huysmans's 1903 preface to *À rebours*, he comments that all the novels he had written since 'sont contenus en germe dans ce livre' [are there in embryo in that book].<sup>99</sup> This is particularly true of Huysmans's use of the senses to evoke threshold spaces, depictions of which evolve alongside his developing Catholicism. In *En rade* [*Stranded*] (1887), the use of dreams as an echo of the unconscious mind can be seen as an extension of the structure of Chapter Eight of *À rebours*, which is divided into the events of the day and the subsequent nightmare. The title of *En rade* suggests a temporary home, a refuge rather than just a retreat. The ambiguity of this space of withdrawal is evoked in the translations of the title as *Becalmed* (1992), *A Haven* (1998) and *Stranded* (2010).<sup>100</sup> In reality, the collapsing chateau is not a space where Jacques and Louise Marles can rest and reconnect. Instead, it is an external manifestation of what they were trying to cure by moving away to the country. The chateau, like their life in Paris, is falling apart. The dilapidated retreat is a repository of dreams and an external depiction of the crumbling mind of Jacques who, like Des Esseintes, is on the verge of lunacy.<sup>101</sup> Unlike *À rebours*, in which Des Esseintes attempts to turn his

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<sup>99</sup> Huysmans, 'Préface: Écrite vingt ans après le roman', in *À rebours*, pp. vii-xxviii (p. xiv) / 'Preface, Written Twenty Years After the Novel', trans. by Patrick McGuinness, in *Against Nature*, pp. 205-18 (p. 209).

<sup>100</sup> *Becalmed*, trans. by Terry Hall (London: Atlas Press, 1992); *A Haven*, trans. by Rachel Ashton, in *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin-de-Siècle France*, ed. by Asti Hustvedt (New York: Zone Books, 1998); and *Stranded*, trans. by Brendan King (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2010).

<sup>101</sup> In *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté* [*Earth and Reveries of Will*] (1948), Bachelard makes a direct reference to *En rade* and claims that in this novel each sense has its own dream. For instance, the fifth chapter, in which Marles dreams of walking on the moon, is related to hardness and the sense of touch. See Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté, essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1948), pp. 205-10.

surroundings into a redolent and escapist space, the chateau is a vacant ruin, devoid of objects. Significantly, the rooms in which Marles begins to notice the extent of the decay are the bedroom and the library; the same rooms which Des Esseintes takes particular care in furnishing at the beginning of *À rebours*.

Huysmans commented in a letter to Zola in May 1884 that he regretted not setting the whole of *À rebours* in a dream world, and his increasing interest in dreams is reflected in the centrality of the dreamscape in *En rade*.<sup>102</sup> The novel is structured around the events in the chateau, and the surrounding countryside, and their appearance in Marles' dreams recalls the structure of Chapter Eight in *À rebours*. Perhaps most notably, the themes of diseased growths and dangerous *femme-fleurs* are further developed. This 'vegetal violence', to use Hannah Scott's term from her essay 'Vert Versus Verre' (2015), is amplified in Marles' fantasy world and is typified by the dream of fevered exoticism that occurs in Chapter Two.<sup>103</sup>

The vegetative dream of the biblical character Esther is infused with floral imagery, scent and precious jewels to create a dream-like version of Des Esseintes' villa. The hothouse is evoked inside the dream palace. 'Partout grimpaient des pampres découpés dans d'uniqnes pierres; partout flambait un brasier d'incombustibles ceps' [Everywhere climbing vine branches were carved into unique stones; around blazed a fire of combustible vines].<sup>104</sup> In the dream the strange growth is again the figure of the dangerously exotic female and while Huysmans does not make a direct reference to Gustave Moreau, the exoticized description of Esther is reminiscent of Salome in Chapter Five of *À rebours*. In Marles' dream there is a similarity in the inclusion of painterly imagery. However, there is also a shift away from the synthesis between writing and art that is attempted in *À rebours* and towards a depiction of the altering effect of the unconscious on waking experiences. As proposed by Natasha Grigorian, in 'The Writings of J.-K. Huysmans and Gustave Moreau's Painting: Affinity or Divergence?' (2004), these nightmares 'are inspired by Odilon Redon's paintings and drawings, with their near-surrealist emphasis on "cauchemar" rather than on any kind

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<sup>102</sup> See Huysmans's letter to Zola, May 1884, in *The Road from Decadence: From Brothel to Cloister. Selected Letters of J.-K. Huysmans*, trans. and ed. by Barbara Beaumont (London: Athlone Press, 1989), pp. 54-56.

<sup>103</sup> Hannah Scott, 'Vert Versus Verre: Vegetal Violence in Huysmans's *En rade*', *French Studies*, 69:3 (2015), 305-17.

<sup>104</sup> Huysmans, *En rade, Œuvres complètes*, vol. IX, p. 30 / my translation.



of visual beauty'.<sup>105</sup> In *En rade*, Huysmans expands on his sense of a retreat as constant reminder of and return to external anxieties. Rather than being a cluttered and overcrowded space, the decaying setting and Marles' decreasing hopes are commingled in the dream space, becoming increasingly strange and empty until neither waking nor sleeping offers him a reprieve.

After *En rade* the explicit features of the hothouse motif subside. However, in *Là-bas*, Huysmans's novel about satanic mysticism, both the character of Hyacinthe Chantelouve and the spaces she occupies suggest the connection between the hothouse, scent, and gendered female space. Durtal visits her apartment in Chapter Twelve and comments on her surroundings which 'sentait l'eau des tombes, mais elle exhalait aussi une odeur cléricale' [smelt of damp tombs, but also exuded a clerical odour].<sup>106</sup> As with the flower-women of the previous novels, Durtal finds Hyacinthe more desirable due to her environment, with its green iron railings and strange smells. She is a physical embodiment of the threat of female sexuality that is imagined in *À rebours* – the self-seeded hothouse flower removed from its confines. In a possible continuation of this allusion, the Black Mass takes place on the Rue Olivier de Serres, a street named after the inventor of the first French greenhouse.<sup>107</sup>

The connection between physical spaces and corruption is commented upon by Robert Ziegler in *Beauty Raises the Dead: Literature and Loss in the Fin de Siècle* (2002). The debased church, in which the Black Mass is held, embodies Durtal's desire to escape from the mundane nature of everyday existence. However, like Huysmans's other spaces of retreat, this space is also a disappointment. Durtal's quest for the glorious ceremonialism of Satanism and, as Des Hermies reflects, the hatred of mediocrity and 'l'exécration de l'impuissance' [abhorrence of powerlessness] that is implied by the satanic ritual is not found in the desecrated holy space.<sup>108</sup> Ziegler proposes that this is due to the emptiness present in the ritual; 'it is all about physicality, the body, sex and appetites'.<sup>109</sup> Rather than offering Durtal an escape from the physical world, the occultists 'impoverish the spiritual realm by lowering it to the level of the

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<sup>105</sup> Natasha Grigorian, 'The Writings of J.-K. Huysmans and Gustave Moreau's Painting: Affinity or Divergence?' *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 32 (2004), 282-97 (p. 294).

<sup>106</sup> Huysmans, *Là-bas*, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. XII (Part II), p. 24 / *Là-bas*, trans. by Brendan King (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2001), p. 171.

<sup>107</sup> Huysmans, *Là-bas* (Part II), p. 146.

<sup>108</sup> Huysmans, *Là-bas* (Part I), p. 85 / *Là-bas*, p. 63.

<sup>109</sup> Robert Ziegler, *Beauty Raises the Dead: Literature and Loss in the Fin de Siècle* (London: Associated University Presses, 2002), p. 217.

material.’<sup>110</sup> As Durtal states earlier in the novel, this sanctified space is crammed with both ‘esprits et de larves’ [spirits and bacteria].<sup>111</sup> The chapel is hazy with smoke from the incense-burners but also with an air of corruption that is reminiscent of the microbial worlds depicted by Redon.<sup>112</sup> ‘Excédé de dégoût, à moitié asphyxié’ [Overcome by disgust, almost suffocating], Durtal is affronted by the reality of satanic infection and debasement.<sup>113</sup> In *Là-bas*, the imagined horrors of *À rebours* become manifest in real people and experiences. For instance, the ‘odeur du sabbat’ [smell of the sabbath], a scent of incense and coupling bodies, is reminiscent of Des Esseintes’ remembered perversities.<sup>114</sup> However, in *Là-bas*, the smell is overwhelming as it is no longer a part of a controlled, imaginative space. As Durtal runs outside for a breath of air, the reader is reminded of Des Esseintes when he opens the window at the end of Chapter Ten. In both *Là-bas* and *À rebours*, this craving for fresh air marks the beginning of their return to the world outside of their obsessions.

In his most recent article on Huysmans, ‘Huysmans’s Flowers’ (2015), Ziegler comments on the multifaceted symbolism of flowers throughout Huysmans’s œuvre. The rest of Huysmans tetralogy depicts the spiritual progress of Durtal from Satanism to Catholicism in line with his developing personal interest in religious purity. It begins with *Là-bas* and is followed by *En route* (1895), *La Cathédrale* (1898), and *L’Oblat* (1903). This final novel is set in the Benedictine monastery of Ligugé, near where Huysmans lived from 1899-1901. In each of these Catholic novels, the threshold space of the hothouse reflects the vast beauty and timelessness of the church, and it becomes more explicitly related to Catholicism and spirituality. As Ziegler writes,

For des Esseintes, there is the hothouse, estheticized nature that shelters the self but leaves no place for God. Then after *En route*, when the Thébaïde is torn down, there is the vegetal Basilica that Durtal raises up in its place, prompting him to imagine constructing ‘complètement un sanctuaire avec des arbres et des plantes’ [a complete sanctuary with tree and plants].<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ziegler, *Beauty Raises the Dead*, p. 217.

<sup>111</sup> Huysmans, *Là-bas*, I, p. 216 / *Là-bas*, p. 200.

<sup>112</sup> See, for example, Redon’s ‘Sur le fond de nos nuits dieu de son doigt savant dessine un cauchemar multiforme’ [On backdrop of our nights God with His knowing finger traces a multiform implacable nightmare] (1887), which takes its name from a line in Baudelaire’s ‘Le Gouffre’ [‘The Abyss’], or ‘Polype de Rêve’ [‘Dream Polyp’] (1891). Both of these images are included in Jodi Hauptman, *Beyond the Visible: The Art of Odilon Redon* (New York: New Press, 2005), pp. 244 & 218.

<sup>113</sup> Huysmans, *Là-bas*, II, p. 168 / *Là-bas*, p. 255.

<sup>114</sup> Huysmans, *Là-bas*, II, p. 168 / *Là-bas*, p. 255.

<sup>115</sup> Robert Ziegler, ‘Huysmans’s Flowers’, *Romance Quarterly*, 62:1 (2015), 50-57 (p. 54).

This progression in the tetralogy is also commented on by Elizabeth Emery in her study of religious architecture during the *fin de siècle*, *Romancing the Cathedral* (2001). She notes that, in the Durtal cycle, ‘descriptions of cathedrals at stages of his journey reflect the character’s spiritual evolution.’<sup>116</sup> In *En route*, for example, Durtal’s religious awakening is reflected in his spiritual, rather than purely aesthetic, admiration of churches. In Chapter Two, the hothouse is used to describe the Church of Saint-Séverin which Durtal favours for High Mass. Huysmans describes the central pillar in the church, which is shaped like a palm tree, and how this creates a space which is like ‘un jardin d’hiver’ [a winter garden].<sup>117</sup> However, Emery does not explore the Decadent roots of this image. The winter garden recalls the conservatory space, and the church is also described like a desiccated hothouse; ‘une serre d’essences mortes’ [a conservatory of dead specimens].<sup>118</sup> The atmosphere of the church, which has absorbed the prayers, songs, and lamentations of the years, is combined with Huysmans’s previous experiments with the senses and the imagination. He presents a ‘cathedral of the strange’, another type of threshold space which is the point of connection between the world and God.

Ziegler foregrounds a similar threshold position in reference to Durtal in *En route* and his inability to completely cut himself off from his previous life. This struggle is reminiscent of Baudelaire’s longing for a ‘blanche maison’, in ‘Je n’ai pas oublié . . .’, which, as discussed in Chapter One, remains tantalizingly out of reach.<sup>119</sup> In Ziegler’s opinion, ‘What Huysmans’s characters had always been cut off from was an oasis of silence’.<sup>120</sup> Des Esseintes appears to retreat from the din of modern, urban life, but the sounds of human activity are suspended in books and objects and bought back to life when Des Esseintes reads out loud or reflects internally on his collection. Huysmans’s intentions in *En route* to write ‘un livre blanc, l’à rebours de *Là-Bas*’ [a white book, the

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<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth Emery, *Romancing the Cathedral: Gothic Architecture in Fin-de-Siècle French Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 98.

<sup>117</sup> Huysmans, *En route, Œuvres complètes*, vol. XIII (I), p. 47 / *En route*, trans. by W. Fleming (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2002), p. 24.

<sup>118</sup> Huysmans, *En route* (I), p. 48 / *En route*, p. 25.

<sup>119</sup> It is beyond the scope of this thesis to chart the significance of sanctified spaces and white rooms across French literature. However, it is interesting to note that Montesquiou’s *Les Hortensias bleus* (1896) has a similar architectural design. It is divided into *Introït* (after the Latin for ‘inside’ and meaning the entrance for a priest approaching the altar for the Eucharist), *Chapelle blanche*, and *Chambre obscure*.

<sup>120</sup> Ziegler, *Beauty Raises the Dead*, p. 246.

reverse of *Là-Bas*] originated in his experiences of silent contemplation in the Trappist monastery of Notre-Dame d'Igny and where he received absolution and Holy Communion in 1892.<sup>121</sup> His taste of the monastic life had an influence on his attempt to create a new, clean fictional style, reflective of the clarity of thought that he experienced in his monastic cell. Durtal, however, is tormented by his interior monologue. As Ziegler comments, 'this compulsive self-address becomes a form of torture'.<sup>122</sup> Huysmans reflects on the difficulty of a meditative silence, in which the inner noise evaporates so that the sound of God can be heard. Returning to his cell, Durtal wonders, 'comment s'empêcher d'entendre des ergotages qui sortent d'on ne sait où? J'ai beau me crier: tais-toi! — l'autre parle!' [how could he help hearing the cavils which rose he knew not whence? He almost shouted aloud: "Be silent! Let the other speak!"]<sup>123</sup> This monastic space emphasizes the paradox of escaping within a physical dwelling. Escape from the world is impossible, as is escape within that world. For Durtal in his monastic cell, this paradox extends to the space of his body, a vehicle that traps the soul on the physical plane.

In his study *Decadence and Catholicism* (1997), Ellis Hanson reflects on Durtal's problematic relationship with Catholicism. He writes:

Durtal is attracted to monasticism, but it is clear to him, as it was to Huysmans, that monastic life does not lend itself to the freedom of the imagination he requires to write well. He focuses, therefore, on the liminal figure of the oblate, a sort of monk manqué who is connected to the monastery but is free to pursue certain secular interests, such as literature.<sup>124</sup>

The enclosure in Huysmans's novels is always completely voluntary and with an escape route. Even in the Catholic-conversion novels, he remains on the threshold of complete submission to the church. For instance, in the opening chapter of *La Cathédrale*, Durtal walks through the cathedral of Notre-Dame de Chartres and observes the people entering the cathedral in the early morning who are bent double against the wind. From his enclosed viewpoint, he feels that he has entered into 'une serre coiffée d'un dôme

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<sup>121</sup> Huysmans, letter to Arij Prins, 27 April 1891, in *Lettres inédites à Arij Prins, 1885-1907* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1977), pp. 219-20 (p. 219) / my translation.

<sup>122</sup> Ziegler, *Beauty Raises the Dead*, p. 246.

<sup>123</sup> Huysmans, *En route* (II), p. 188 / *En route*, p. 243.

<sup>124</sup> Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 154.

de verre noir' [a hothouse topped with a dome of black glass].<sup>125</sup> The protective qualities of the church are akin to the hermetically sealed atmosphere of the hothouse. Durtal remains on the inside looking out. The stillness that he encounters in the cathedral is indicative of the timelessness of God and the sanctuary that is provided against the external world, but he is unable to stop contemplating the outside. He describes the church as a 'bizarre forêt', an image that conveys the unusual growth of Durtal's religiosity.<sup>126</sup> Like the threshold hothouse spaces in the earlier novels, the cathedral retains the potential to evoke memories of women, and it encourages Durtal to remember a pilgrimage he made to La Salette and the divine beauty of the Virgin Mary. However, the purpose of these recollections is changed. Rather than stimulating an erotic memory, they now serve to develop an awareness of the presence of God.

In *L'Oblat*, Durtal's retreat into a semi-ascetic religious life is almost complete. His attempt to live an austere life, next to the monastery of Val-des-Saints, is steeped in self-discipline and the renouncement of materialism.<sup>127</sup> This both evokes and negates the self-enclosure and retreat of Des Esseintes. The final novel can be read as almost a complete rejection of the desires implicit in the Duke's aesthetic hermitage. *À rebours* demonstrates the connection between aestheticism and artificiality, while *L'Oblat* foregrounds asceticism and nature. However, in both novels the motivation behind the retreats are similar. As Antosh articulates, 'all of Huysmans's protagonists are in search of a refuge of some sort which will afford them an escape from the outside world'.<sup>128</sup> In Chapter Three, Durtal's musings on the monastery as a microcosm of human society are reminiscent of Des Esseintes' reflections on the microcosmic properties of the horticulturalist's shop in Chapter Eight. Durtal states, in reference to the novices in the monastery, that they

ne savent rien de l'existence, pour la plupart; ils fleuriront, tout doucement, abrités dans une admirable serre, sur un terreau préparé, loin des gelées et à l'abri du vent; ça n'empêchera, parbleu pas, le démon de les attaquer, tel qu'un ver, dans leurs racines, mais les horticulteurs d'ici sont habiles

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<sup>125</sup> Huysmans, *La Cathédrale, Œuvres complètes*, vol. XIV, p. 11 / *The Cathedral*, trans. by Clara Bell (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2006), p. 18.

<sup>126</sup> Huysmans, *La Cathédrale*, p. 11.

<sup>127</sup> For more comment on the 'prose du cloître' in *L'Oblat* (1903), see Jérôme Solal, *Huysmans avec Dieu: aise et disgrâce* (Paris: Éditions Classiques Garnier numérique, 2015), pp. 161-63.

<sup>128</sup> Antosh, *Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J.-K. Huysmans*, p. 52.

[know nothing of life; they will come gently into bloom, like plants housed in a conservatory, embedded in a suitable mould, where neither frost nor wind can touch them. Of course, that cannot prevent Satan from attacking them, like a worm that gnaws their roots; but the gardeners here are clever men].<sup>129</sup>

Unlike the hothouse in which plants are permanently housed in conditions artificially created, the conservatory is a temporary home in which potted plants can be nurtured, then placed outside when they are more established or the climate is more temperate. This slight shift in the horticultural metaphor signals a development from Huysmans's use of the motif in *À rebours*. Rather than evoking a hermetically sealed realm of distorted growths and cloying atmosphere, in *L'Oblat* the conservatory is a place of safety and light in which the horticulturalists are the protectors of the plants, in this case from spiritual disease. Durtal's dream to create a community of Catholic artists does not reflect a total isolation. Instead, as Antosh explains, it is an attempt to create an 'elite fellowship of kindred spirits brought together in a common desire to serve God and art'.<sup>130</sup> This mirrors Huysmans's planned artistic community at Ligugé, where writers and artists could experience a monastic environment in which to produce art. However, Durtal does not find solace in his refuge. At the end of the novel, like Des Esseintes, he is forced to return to Paris where he finds himself, once again, in conflict with modern society. Ironically, instead of a quiet house of solitude and contemplation Durtal predicts that in the summer his new room will be a 'la chambre de chauffe'; literally a boiler room evocative of the stove in a hothouse.<sup>131</sup> In this final novel, the spatial metaphor of the conservatory is deployed to describe not the spiritual retreat but the outside world.

In *The Road from Decadence: From Brothel to Cloister. Selected Letters of J.-K. Huysmans* (1989), Barbara Beaumont uses Huysmans's letters to chart his movement out of what she terms 'the dark side of spiritual life' and into salvation.<sup>132</sup> He was, she claims, 'haunted by a feeling of uncleanness', and in his Durtal tetralogy religious salvation is aligned with atmospheric clarity.<sup>133</sup> As he moves out of the threshold space

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<sup>129</sup> Huysmans, *L'Oblat, Œuvres complètes*, vol. XVII (I), p. 90 / *The Oblate of St. Benedict*, trans. by Edward Perceval (Sawtry: Dedalus, 1996), p. 45.

<sup>130</sup> Antosh, *Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J.-K. Huysmans*, p. 50.

<sup>131</sup> Huysmans, *L'Oblat*, II, p. 276.

<sup>132</sup> Barbara Beaumont, '1885-19 *Carbolic for the Soul*', in *The Road from Decadence*, pp. 62-65 (p. 64).

<sup>133</sup> Beaumont, '1885-19 *Carbolic for the Soul*', p. 64.

between the worldly and the spiritual, symbolized by the hothouse, a different set of spaces comes to characterize his novels. Cathedrals, cloisters, and monastic cells illustrate a different engagement with sanctity, cleanliness, and purity. Huysmans's *Durtal teratology* depicts an unrelenting search for a space of absolute silence and solitude.

The notion of olfactory sensations circulating within Decadent spaces and corrupting those who experience them is not limited to Huysmans's work and French Decadence. The unique qualities of *À rebours*, in particular, were attractive to Francophile English Decadent writers, such as Oscar Wilde. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde borrows from *À rebours* in a sensory way. For instance, in the opening paragraphs, time is compressed and this stillness is permeated by 'the rich odour of roses, the heavy scent of lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink flowering-thorn.'<sup>134</sup> The artificial studio is infused with seductive scents in order to create the impression of a carefully curated space. However, it is Wilde's construction of Chapter Eleven that provides an insight into the lasting influences of Huysmans's novel. This chapter recounts the liminal period of Dorian's self-corruption and it is like a miniature version of *À rebours*, with sections on senses that blend into one another. Like Des Esseintes, Dorian studies perfumes and their effects on the psyche, 'seeking often to elaborate a real psychology of perfumes', then devotes himself to music, studies jewels and tapestries, and collects ecclesiastical garments in an array of colours.<sup>135</sup> Wilde conveys the detrimental effects that these sensory pleasures have on Dorian's psyche and, at the end of Chapter Ten, the narrator gives an impression of the 'yellow book' (thought to be *À rebours*) as 'a poisonous book. The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain.'<sup>136</sup> *À rebours*, 'the breviary of the decadence' as Symons termed it, leaves a corrupting legacy, and this corruption is described evocatively in terms of the sensory and spatial correspondences which we can trace forward into the work of the English Decadents.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 149.

<sup>135</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pp. 150-56.

<sup>136</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 140.

This 'poisonous book' is not simply an intertextual reference to *À rebours*, however. As Dierkes-Thrun discusses, Wilde is also alluding to Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884). See Petra Dierkes-Thrun, 'Decadent Sensuality in Rachilde and Wilde', in *Decadence and the Senses*, pp. 51-65.

<sup>137</sup> Arthur Symons, 'The Later Huysmans', in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899; New York: E. P. Dutton, 1919), pp. 262-79 (p. 265).

Unlike the similarities between Wilde's novel and *À rebours*, there has been relatively little critical attention given to the connections between Huysmans and Dowson, but it is apparent from Dowson's letters that he was very familiar with the older writer's works. Cevasco, for example, mentions Dowson only in passing but writes of the overarching influence Huysmans had on the spiritual life of Dowson and other poets and painters of the *fin de siècle* who converted to Catholicism.<sup>138</sup> For example, in a letter to Conal O'Riordan on 11 December 1895, Dowson recalls a visit to Notre Dame des Victoires 'at the fag end of the sermon before Benediction'.<sup>139</sup> This church, he acknowledges, is described by Huysmans in *En route* as a refuge and a sanctuary. In Huysmans's novel, all aspects of the church are examined, alongside an analysis of the congregation and the details of the sermon, liturgy and benediction, and Dowson similarly focuses on how these culminate in an all-consuming atmosphere of devotion 'which thrills through the whole crowded congregation'.<sup>140</sup> Dowson professes that:

It makes me almost afraid to go back there, for fear it might move me too much. Because – although I know sooner or later I must put on the dust & ashes, there are things I care about so much, which I want to do first. And I am afraid, or rather certain, that after all this long time of abstinence, when I once do bring myself to the point of reconciliation, it will be so horribly serious, and it will be all up with my work and so on . . .<sup>141</sup>

In his reaction to this space, Dowson articulates his spiritual and moral concerns. As I will demonstrate in the following chapter, although Dowson is interested in the physical attributes of the church, it is also representative of his tormented threshold position 'betwixt' the world and God.

In *À rebours*, Huysmans creates an image of threshold space as compartmentalized and correspondent. The senses are used to generate connections between worldly and spiritual realms. The conception of *À rebours* as a philosophical or pseudo-religious text draws upon Paul Valéry's comment in 1889 that the novel was his 'Bible et son livre de chevet' [Bible and his bedside book], and this is demonstrated

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<sup>138</sup> Cevasco, *The Breviary of the Decadence*, p. 142.

<sup>139</sup> Dowson, letter to Conal O'Riordan, 11 December 1895, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, ed. by Desmond Flower and Henry Maas (London: Cassell, 1967), pp. 326-28 (p. 327).

<sup>140</sup> Dowson, letter to O'Riordan, p. 327.

<sup>141</sup> Dowson, letter to O'Riordan, p. 327.



in the religious fervour of Des Esseintes' collecting.<sup>142</sup> However, the house at Fontenay is not a moral nor a truly spiritual space. The villa is a vessel for strange and complex bodily experiences which take on a ritualistic quality, rather than a monastic space for religious contemplation. Huysmans is attracted by purity and penitence and I argue that in Dowson's poetry we can discern a similar trajectory. *À rebours* is a pertinent example of a failed attempt at withdrawal from past desires. Des Esseintes designs the house at Fontenay around his desire for control, over both his body and his memories. Similarly, in *Verses* and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, Dowson's increasing interest in reduced, ascetic spaces of withdrawal and religious contemplation are an attempt to control his own moral dilemmas related to sexuality and idolatry. My study complicates a reading of Dowson's threshold spaces as akin to interspaces (liminal realms dislocated from reality), and I suggest that the spatiality in his poems is more like a half-opened drawer – part open to the world and part closed against it. From Baudelaire's city/bedroom, to Huysmans's dynamically compartmentalized rooms, through to Dowson's poems of withdrawal, there is a sense of space reducing and retracting in Decadent literature.

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<sup>142</sup> Paul Valéry, *Lettres à quelques-uns* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), p. 11.

## CHAPTER 3



**From the Drawer to the Cloister**  
**Ernest Dowson's Poésie Schublade Notebook, *Verses*,**  
**and *Decorations***

In a letter to Victor Plarr, dated 5 March 1891, Ernest Dowson refers to the notebook in which he kept transcriptions of his early poems.<sup>1</sup> Regarding an intended publication of a collection of both their work, Dowson writes: 'I have been looking over my "Poésie Schublade" as represented by a small MMS book and it will be with difficulty that I shall find ten worthy of the company of the least of yours.'<sup>2</sup> Dowson coins the interlinguistic term 'Poésie Schublade' (a mixture of the French for 'poetry' and the German word for 'drawer') to refer to his notebook of poems written between 1886 and 1891. In studies of Dowson, this notebook is more commonly referred to as the Flower Notebook, after its previous owner Sir Newman Flower. However, Dowson's original term is a more accurate description of this collection of private and intimate poems.

In their introduction to *The Collected Poems of Ernest Dowson* (2003), R. K. R. Thornton and Caroline Dowson refer to Dowson's Notebook as a 'serious repository for his poems'.<sup>3</sup> 'Drawer poetry', they remark, 'especially in that protective covering of two languages, suggests something of the way in which Dowson viewed his poems'.<sup>4</sup> 'Poésie Schublade' [Drawer poetry] has connotations of intimate boudoir poetry: verses that have been written in private without a prior commitment to publishing. In German, a 'Poesie-Schublade', refers to a poetry drawer, a physical repository where work is deposited. However, as a French term that includes a German word, it takes on a different meaning. 'Poésie Schublade' is poetry written into a notebook regarded as an

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Plarr would later become Dowson's biographer, publishing a monograph on the poet in 1914. See Victor Plarr, *Ernest Dowson, 1888-1897: Reminiscences, Unpublished Letters and Marginalia. With a Bibliography Compiled by H. Guy Harrison* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1914).

<sup>2</sup> Dowson, letter to Victor Plarr, Thursday night [5 March 1891], in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 186-87 (p. 187).

<sup>3</sup> R. K. R. Thornton and Caroline Dowson, 'Introduction' to *Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, ed. by R. K. R. Thornton and Caroline Dowson (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 2003), p. xix.

<sup>4</sup> Thornton and Dowson, 'Introduction', p. xx.

imaginary drawer in which precious objects are hidden.<sup>5</sup> The threshold space of the half-opened drawer – part open to the world and part closed against it – describes the confessional nature of the Poésie Schublade poems and their spatiality. The Notebook contains poems which are admissions of love and portrayals of little girls in embowered spaces, but they are also poems of withdrawal, retraction, and expressions of Catholicism as an escape from desire. Despite the emphasis by some critics on the presence of the *jeune fille* in Dowson's writings, there is compelling evidence to show that the image of the drawer, rather than the embowered maiden, is typically Dowsonian and articulates a threshold spatiality that we encounter in the work of French Decadents like Baudelaire and Huysmans.<sup>6</sup> In Dowson's poems, spaces that reflect the threshold between the worldly and the spiritual are used to create a sense of restriction and containment, and the movement from the drawer to the cloister can be mapped onto his personal and spiritual concerns.

Several of the Notebook poems were published in the little magazines and journals of the 1890s, such as the *London Society*, *The Savoy*, and *Temple Bar*. However, thirty-one of the sixty-nine Poésie Schublade poems are included by Dowson in his two collections, *Verses* (1896) and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (1899).<sup>7</sup> Previous critical studies of Dowson's works have tended to consider his earlier and later poems together. However, paying particular attention to the chronology and themes of the Poésie Schublade poems, I argue, reveals an increasing focus on spaces of retreat and on the symbolism of the material artefact. Unlike the cluttered spaces of Des Esseintes' house, in which objects and sensory experiments correspond to vast realms of dream and fantasy, we do not find the same sense of material excess or spatial unfolding in Dowson's poetry. As Linda Dowling comments in *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (1986), there is instead a 'poetic reductionism' which can also be applied to the spaces in his poems that suggest withdrawal, retraction,

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to Professor Frank Krause for his help with the translation 'Poésie Schublade' and his insightful comments on the connotations of 'Schublade'.

<sup>6</sup> Dowson refers to the nineteenth-century cult of the little girl in French terms. In his letters, for example, he comments on 'the most excellent cult of la Fillette' and refers to Adelaide Foltinowicz as an 'enfant gâtée and jeune fille coquette' [spoilt child and coquettish young girl]. See Dowson's letters to Victor Plarr, 26 September 1890 and 23 February 1892, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 163-64 (p. 164) and pp. 242-75 (p. 275).

<sup>7</sup> In Appendix B, I have provided a collation of the Poésie Schublade Notebook poems and their inclusion in *Verses* and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, along with details of prior publication and revised titles.

and, ultimately, complete bodily and sensory negation.<sup>8</sup> Diminished interspaces (the shell, the drawer, the cloister), I suggest in this chapter, encapsulate Bachelard's concept of 'l'immensité intime' in a Decadent way.

The neat Poésie Schublade Notebook, which Dowson carried with him until his death in Catford on 23 February 1900, complicates the typical view of Dowson, perpetrated by Symons, as an itinerant figure in disorder and decline. In 'A Literary Causerie: On a Book of Verses' (1896), Symons's obituary notice of Dowson in *The Athenæum* (3 March 1900), and in his preface to a posthumous volume of Dowson's collected works, *The Poems of Ernest Dowson* (1902), he depicts Dowson as a 'demoralised Keats' surrounded by poverty and vice yet writing refined verses inspired by his religious devotion and unobtainable love.<sup>9</sup> This 'Dowson legend', as it has come to be known, is responsible for many later critical readings of his poetry which emphasize disorder, infatuation, and obsession.<sup>10</sup> However, as I argue in this chapter, a close study of the spatiality of Dowson's works offers a new perspective on his poetry, one that prioritizes the qualities of reading of his poetry in terms of *betwixtness*, minimalism, and negation.<sup>11</sup>

Reading the Poésie Schublade Notebook poems separately from the other poems in *Verses* and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* reveals the significance of Dowson's use of threshold spaces. This is important as it enables us to consider Dowson's poems in different terms. It distracts attention away from the (im)moral aspects of 'the cult of the little girl' and notions of childhood and towards a search for purity which, in Dowson's poems, becomes just as extreme as Des Esseintes' search for new sensations.<sup>12</sup> In the following section, I consider the chronological order of the Poésie

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<sup>8</sup> Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 207.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Symons, 'A Literary Causerie: On a Book of Verses', *The Savoy*, 4 (Aug 1896), 91-93 (p. 91). Later published as 'Ernest Dowson', in *The Poems of Ernest Dowson: Verses, The Pierrot of the Minute, Decorations in Verse and Prose* (Portland, Maine: Thomas B. Mosher, 1902), pp. xvii-xxxvii.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Dowson Legend' is the title of a study by John Gawsworth in *Essays by Divers Hands: Being the transactions of the Royal Society of Literature of the United Kingdom*. ed. by E. H. W. Meyerstein, XVII (London: Humphrey Milford, 1938), pp. 93-123.

<sup>11</sup> I return to this notion of the 'betwixt' later in this chapter as it is a significant word which describes Dowson's threshold stasis. It is first used by Dowson in 'Hymn to Aphrodite' (1886), later published as 'Libera Me', in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (1899).

<sup>12</sup> Adams puts Dowson's interest in the *jeune fille* into historical context through a consideration of Dowson's friendship with William Clarke Hall and the 'cult of the little girl' at Oxford in the 1880s. See Jad Adams, "'Slimy trails and holy places": Dowson's strange life in context', in *Betwixt the bounds of life and death: Selected Essays on Ernest Dowson*, ed. by Alice Condé and Jessica Gossling (Oxford: Peter Lang, Forthcoming).

Schubblade Notebook poems and their inclusion in *Verses* and *Decorations*, and argue that the most obvious aspects that emerge in these early works are the poet's conflicting and ambiguous anxieties related to his feeling of being 'betwixt' purity and corruption.

### **The Poésie Schublade Notebook: Organization and Themes**

Dowson's Poésie Schublade Notebook is a black, leather-bound jotter with marbled endpapers (17.8 x 11.4 cm) held in the Dowson archive in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Considering that it was found among his very few personal effects after his death, it is surprisingly unmarked with the only substantial damage being the impression of a clip on the top left of the back cover, possibly used to hold the loose poems kept inside [Fig. 3.1]. Rather than being a working notebook, it is an object that has been kept as a precious repository of potential work. Inside, the poems are transcribed in Dowson's neat handwriting, with the first twenty-one pages copied out in black ink, and the poems are almost exclusively written out on the rectos with the versos used for annotations, possible changes, and to record the dates of publication or rejection [Fig. 3.2]. There are at least two sets of annotations to the poems – pencil amendments to the poems included in *Verses* and bolder changes in purple ink on the poems included in *Decorations*.

The sixty-five Notebook poems, and the four on loose pages, not only chart Dowson's development as a poet but also span an informative period in his life. The first poems, from October 1886, coincide with the beginning of his university life at Oxford and the last poems, concluding in December 1891, were written just after his reception into the Catholic Church on 25 September 1891. 'To Cynara', the poem on the front-end paper of the Poésie Schublade Notebook, establishes the secretive, confessional tone of the poems:

Ah take these songs my love, long time forgiven,  
Songs thou shalt never see,  
Yet let them stand as a token that I am shriven,  
As thou by me?<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dowson, 'To Cynara', in *Poésie Schublade, Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, p. 9.

R. K. R. Thornton and Caroline Dowson's edited volume of Dowson's poems, *Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, contains the Poésie Schublade Notebook poems which he chose not to publish.

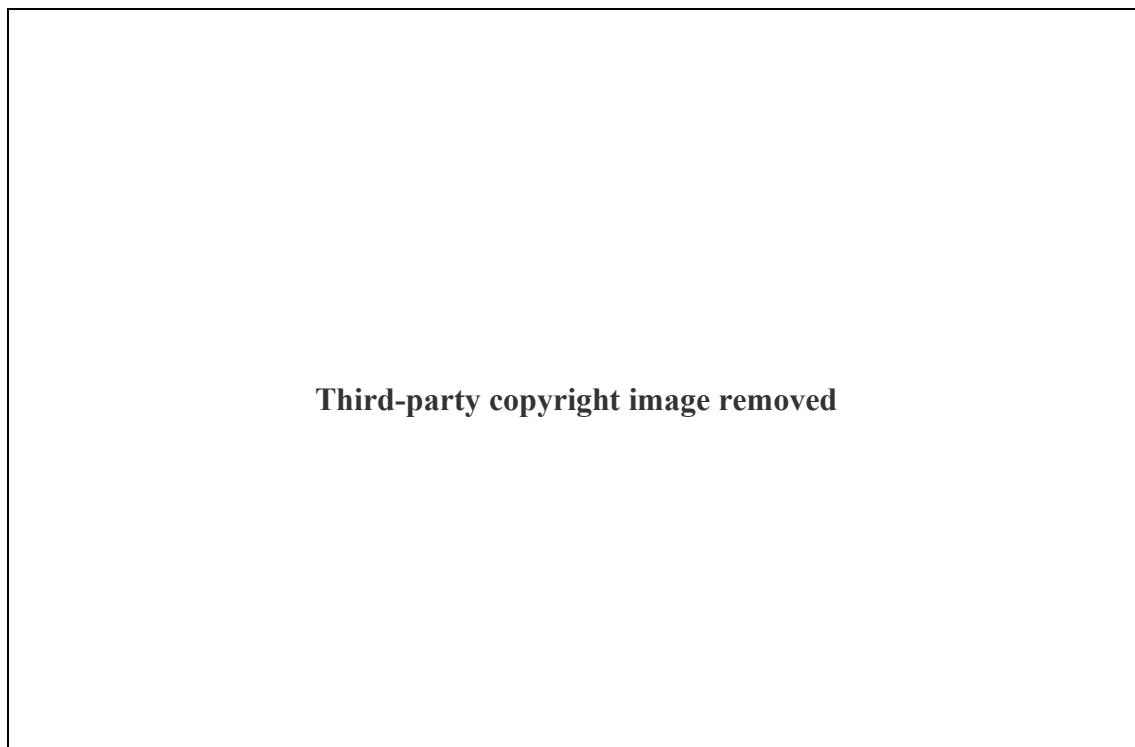


Fig. 3.1. Back of Ernest Dowson's *Poésie Schublade* notebook. Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Manuscript 1480.

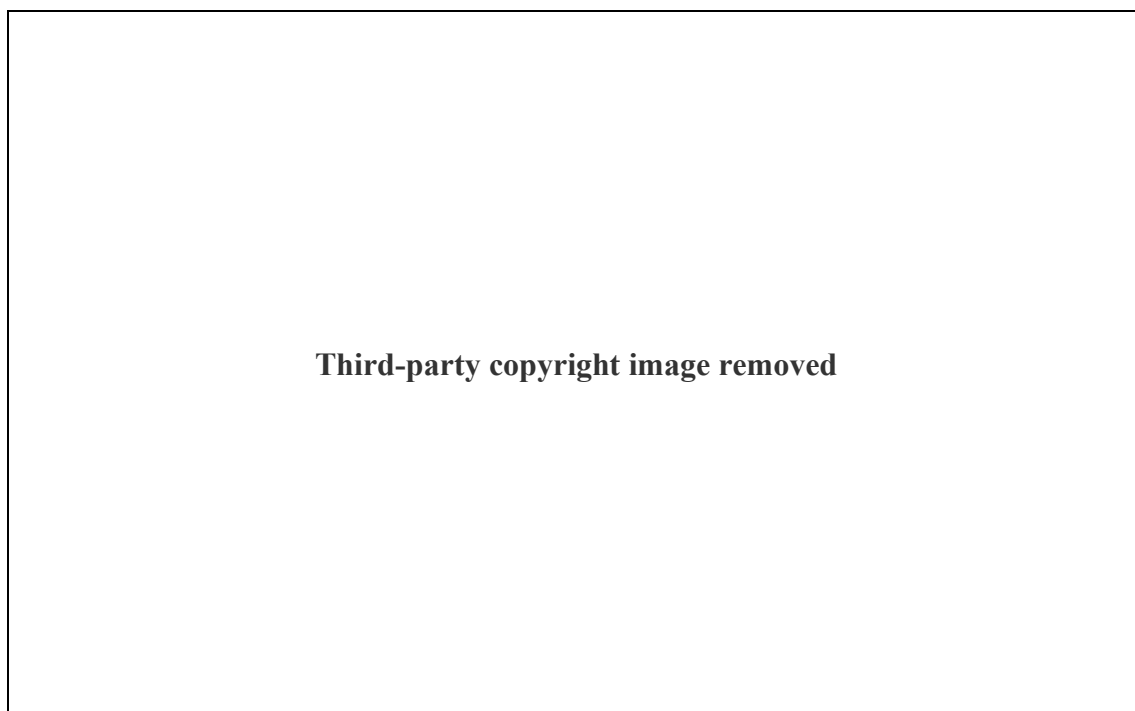


Fig. 3.2. Annotations and amendments to 'Amor Umbratilis'. [Pencil note on the verso reads 'Rejected "English Illustrated" / Accepted "Century Guild Hobby Horse" / Oct 10<sup>th</sup>. 1890 / Pub. C. G. H. H. Oct 1891 & Book of Rhymers Club 1891'.] Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, Manuscript 1480.

The poet compares himself to a penitent, declaring his sins in order to obtain sacramental forgiveness. Rather than suggesting an oral confession to a priest, however, in ‘To Cynara’ he evokes the Latin origins of ‘shriven’, *scribere*, meaning to write. The poems are physical keepsakes, and the Poésie Schublade Notebook has an air of hiding something precious and private. In ‘To Cynara’, he expresses a longing for stasis, stillness, and moments that are quiet and contained. However, he is unable to separate himself from his memories or real-world experiences. As Dowson describes in this first poem, he will always be on the threshold of love and loss, purity and corruption, and will remain Cynara’s lover, ‘Fain of thee as of old’, even as she ages and her mouth and hair appear to shift ‘Twixt brown and gold’, symbolic of womanhood and a sanctified notion of childhood.<sup>14</sup> ‘[T]hese songs’, an allusion to the other poems in the Notebook, express his desire for purity alongside a sense of loss that originates in the transition out of the untainted state of childhood into adulthood.<sup>15</sup> The Poésie Schublade Notebook poems articulate liminal threshold experiences, indeterminate states, and moral ambiguities, and the Notebook itself is like a drawer into which memories and confessions of these fleeting moments and thoughts are placed. While Baudelaire uses the drawer in ‘Spleen II’, in *Les Fleurs du mal*, as a metaphor of correspondence – the point of crossover from mundane reality to the expansive realms of the imagination – Dowson uses it to imply enclosure and secrecy.

The opening poems of the Poésie Schublade Notebook are set in Romantic garden spaces and bowers. In these imaginary interspaces that have their origins in Biblical and medieval literature, Dowson experiments with tropes that are developed in his later verses, such as a search for love and the fixing of innocence in death.<sup>16</sup> In the first four poems, ‘To Cynara’, ‘A Mosaic’, ‘Hymn to Aphrodite’ (later published as ‘Libera Me’ in *Decorations*), and ‘Requiem’, natural, outdoor spaces metaphorically connect his longing for purity and fear of ageing with an anticipation of spiritual salvation. In ‘A Mosaic’, the second poem in the Notebook, for example, the speaker associates his love, ‘Who came and went as a child’, with the unchangeable Italian landscape.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dowson, ‘To Cynara’, p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Dowson, ‘To Cynara’, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> For more comment on the interspace in Victorian literature, see Norman A. Anderson and Margene E. Weiss, *Interspace and the Inward Sphere: Essays on Romantic and Victorian Self* (Macomb, IL: Western Illinois University, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> Dowson, ‘A Mosaic’, in *Poésie Schublade, Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, p. 10.

Dowson spent some of his childhood in Italy, and the poem evokes a nostalgic view of ‘a day gone by’.<sup>18</sup> His depiction of a picturesque landscape scene also recalls the brilliant colours used in early Italian religious art; pink (‘rosebud mouth’), azure (‘Blue skies’), and gold (‘gleaming gold is her waving hair’).<sup>19</sup> Dowson’s use of classical imagery is also apparent in ‘Requiem’, a eulogy for a dead child who is in the process of being covered in wild flowers, lilies, and roses. The poet asks for her to be commemorated with bright colourful flowers from all seasons, ‘For her life was a garden and she the pale | Queen lily that ruled all that fair emprise’.<sup>20</sup> The flowers that he lists are symbolic of his love (roses), innocence (violets), purity (lilies), and finally, her youth (primroses). This alludes to the floral imagery of Pre-Raphaelite painting, particularly John Everett Millais’s *Ophelia* (1851-52). In this painting, which appears to be a very accurate rendering of nature, flowers that bloom at different times of year are painted next to each other. They are included for their symbolic implications. As in Millais’s representation of the beautiful and dead Ophelia, Dowson’s speaker cannot resist the girl’s framed and frozen innocence. He places ‘one last long kiss on her beautiful hair, | And one last long look at her shapely head’.<sup>21</sup> Dowson’s conception of himself as an admirer of beauty and youth is established in these early poems. His contempt for the modern world, shared with the Pre-Raphaelites, and his study of Classics at Queen’s College, draws him to the figure of the little girl.<sup>22</sup>

The following thirty-one poems in the Notebook, ending with ‘Sonnet, to nature’, were written in 1886 and 1887, just before Dowson left Oxford without obtaining his degree in March 1888. Predominantly, these poems are experiments in classical form and metre. They contain two variations of the rondeau, a form of medieval and Renaissance French poetry, and twelve sonnets, including the ‘Sonnets – To a Little Girl’ sequence which I discuss in the next section of this chapter. While the majority of

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<sup>18</sup> Dowson, ‘A Mosaic’, p. 10.

<sup>19</sup> Dowson spent much of his youth in Europe with his mother and father. He became fluent in French by the age of 15 and in Italy he had an Italian priest engaged as a tutor. See Jad Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine: The Life of Ernest Dowson, Poet and Decadent* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Dowson, ‘Requiem’, in *Poésie Schublade, Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Dowson, ‘Requiem’, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup> There are two possible influences on Dowson’s use of the little girl in his poetry. Firstly, young girls feature heavily in Classical literature, especially the archetypal figure of the maiden, embodied as Artemis. Secondly, Dowson may have been inspired by the ‘cult of little girls’ at Oxford University, which began in the 1850s. Dowson’s university friend Edgar Jepson wrote about ‘the little daughters of dons and residents’ in the 1880s and how ‘men used to have them to tea and take them on the river and write verses to them.’ Edgar Jepson, *Memories of a Victorian* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), p. 219.



these poems were not included in *Verses* and *Decorations* [see Appendix B for details], they contain many of Dowson's recurrent themes, in particular suspended states, such as sleeping or purgatory. For example, in 'A Lullaby', he entreats the child to keep sleeping 'Unknowing of sorrow', and in 'Spleen', he portrays 'the dull dark days' of pointless wandering 'thro' the Hopeless land'.<sup>23</sup> Dowson's early fantasy of the embowered maiden has already faded, and his speaker oscillates between two states: desire and fear. Although the 'liege lady' is emblematic of an inaccessible sexuality, she is eroticized. For Dowson's speaker, this leaves him in an indeterminate situation. Either he taints the figure of purity with his presence or annihilates himself. Kostas Boyiopoulos makes this point in 'Tropes of Tainted Medievalism: Ernest Dowson's Recasting of *Fin'Amor*'.<sup>24</sup> The Dowsonian girl, he argues, is both virginal and dangerously seductive. She both is and is not accessible. The poet is a Janus-faced character, trapped between both an inaccessible past and a disappointing future. Dowson expresses this in 'The Old Year' (31 December 1888), a poem he wrote 'On the threshold' of the year he left Oxford.<sup>25</sup> Even 'if we find fresh faces | In the young new year that dawns' the poet argues that 'There are sweeter things in the old years | Than ever come with the new.'<sup>26</sup>

From the earliest *Poésie Schublade* Notebook poems, it is apparent that Dowson's impossible ideal is the virginal figure of the little girl situated in a pure, clean space, symbolic of a time 'before' and removed from the sordid nature of reality.<sup>27</sup> His admiration of childhood has led critics such as Christine Roth in 'Ernest Dowson and the Duality of Late-Victorian Girlhood: "Her Double Perversity"' (2002) to associate Dowson with the 'Cult of the Little Girl', begun at Oxford University in the 1880s. However, Roth considers Dowson's admiration for the *jeune fille* as at odds with the idealized figure of youth and wonderment as embodied, for instance, by Lewis Carroll's Alice. Instead, Dowson presents girls as indeterminate and inaccessible figures: '[a]t one end of the spectrum, the girl figures as a corruptible (and corrupting) agent of transgression and sexual vice. At the other, she possesses an invulnerable chastity that

<sup>23</sup> Dowson, 'A Lullaby', in *Poésie Schublade*, p. 28, and 'Spleen', in *Poésie Schublade*, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Kostas Boyiopoulos, 'Tropes of Tainted Medievalism: Ernest Dowson's Recasting of *Fin'Amor*' in *'Betwixt the bounds of life and death'* (Forthcoming: unpaginated).

<sup>25</sup> Dowson, 'The Old Year', in *Poésie Schublade, Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, pp. 45-46 (p. 45).

<sup>26</sup> Dowson, 'The Old Year', p. 46. Italics in original.

<sup>27</sup> 'Before' is another of Dowson's recurrent words. It is used thirteen times in *Verses* and *Decorations*.

aligns her with domesticity and a sense of moral duty.<sup>28</sup> Rather than being an idolized figure, she is in a paradoxical state and Dowson's attraction to this threshold figure is a representation of his own struggle to relinquish the pleasures of the world and attempt to regain spiritual and sexual purity.

The twenty-one Poésie Schublade Notebook poems written after Dowson met Adelaide Foltinowicz in November 1889 exhibit an increasing awareness of his physical surroundings and a sense of religious piety in relation to his personal feelings of sinfulness. Dowson met Adelaide, his real-life model of innocence and youth, in her parents' restaurant (nicknamed 'Poland') when she was 11 years old, and while the figure of the little girl on the cusp of maturity featured in Dowson's poetry before he met her, afterwards there is a clear intensification of his use of the *jeune fille* motif.<sup>29</sup> 'To His Mistress' (2 December 1889), later published in *Decorations*, is the first poem recorded in his notebook after their meeting and it expresses the worldly reality of what Roth refers to as the 'tension between vice and virtue'.<sup>30</sup> He entreats her to 'kiss when kissing pleases, | And part when kisses pall' but also confesses that this pure ideal is not achievable: 'Life is a masque that changes', love and youth quickly fade or become corrupted.<sup>31</sup> The little girl is in a threshold position, temporarily suspended in two states, and the poet watches as she transforms.

Dowson's focus at the end of the Poésie Schublade Notebook is directed inwards. The final thirteen poems in the Notebook, including three that were composed after his conversion in September, exemplify how he looked to the church as a space of sanctuary. In 'Ad Domnulam Suam' ['To His Dear Little Mistress'] (18 October 1890), the girl and the poet are both situated amid the worldly and the spiritual, and the speaker compares the sacred space of childish innocence to the profane adult world.<sup>32</sup> He

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<sup>28</sup> Christine Roth, 'Ernest Dowson and the Duality of Late-Victorian Girlhood: "Her Double Perversity"', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 45 (2002), 158-75, p. 159.

<sup>29</sup> Adams comments that she was a figure of torment and rejection for Dowson throughout his life. Their relationship culminated in her rejection of his proposal of marriage in April 1893, but he continued to visit and write about her. For more comment on this relationship see Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, pp. 141-42.

<sup>30</sup> Roth, 'Ernest Dowson and the Duality of Late-Victorian Girlhood: "Her Double Perversity"', p. 168.

<sup>31</sup> Dowson, 'To His Mistress', in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1899), p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> In Dowson's notebook he illustrates a difficulty with this title and in choosing between 'Ad Dommulae Meae' or 'Ad Domnulam Suam'. In their notes to this poem, Thornton and Caroline Dowson comment that the first of these titles indicate that it originates from Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*. However, Dowson's final decision to use the diminutive Latin 'To his little lady' places emphasis on the youth of the child. See, *Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, p. 228.

expresses an awareness that their pure, platonic love will fade when she reaches maturity:

Soon thou leavest fairy-land,  
Darker grow thy tresses:  
Soon no more of hand in hand;  
Soon no more caresses!<sup>33</sup>

Dowson considers his inspiration for ‘Ad Domnulam Suam’, later included in *Verses*, alongside a draft of the poem in a letter to Moore the day after its composition (19 October 1890). With his friend and fellow convert Lionel Johnson, he recounts his experience watching his ‘Special Enfant’ (Adelaide) in ‘a procession after Vespers of the Enfants de Marie’ in the Notre Dame de France, a French Roman Catholic church in Leicester Square that was less than a ten-minute walk from the restaurant owned by Adelaide’s parents. Dowson describes Communion:

It was a wonderful & beautiful situation: the church – rather dark the smell of incense – the long line of graceful little girls all with their white veils over their heads – banners –: a few sad faced nuns – and last of all the priest carrying the Host – vested in white – censured by an acolyte who walked backwards – tossing his censer up ‘like a great gilt flower’: and to come outside afterwards – London again – the sullen streets and the sordid people & Leicester Square!<sup>34</sup>

Incense, Latin, miserable nuns, and a contrast between the rich, ornate inside world of the church and the dull, dirty streets outside are recurring tropes of Decadent writing, as exemplified in Huysmans’s Catholic novels and Johnson’s ‘The Church of a Dream’ (1890). Johnson’s poem, in which he imagines saints in golden vestments wafting incense in the ruins of a church, emphasizes sensuality and sweetness: ‘In gray, sweet incense clouds; blue, sweet clouds mystical’.<sup>35</sup> In comparison, Dowson’s focus is less on the external reality of this religious space and more on its personal suggestiveness. He comments on simplicity and pureness of the church, relating the whiteness of the

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Ad Domnulam Suam’ was first published in the *Book of the Rhymers’ Club* (1892), p. 53, before being included in Ernest Dowson, *Verses* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 19 October 1890, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 172-73 (p. 172).

<sup>35</sup> Lionel Johnson, ‘The Church of a Dream’, in *Poetical Works of Lionel Johnson* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1915), pp. 97-98.

girls' veils to the whiteness of the Host. However, while it offers the poet an opportunity to escape from 'sordid' reality, the ritual of Communion is inaccessible to Dowson at this stage of his conversion. He recognizes that, as novices (neither Catholic nor heathen), he and Johnson will 'continue outside the portal for some time to come'.<sup>36</sup> The state of purity within the church is temporarily inaccessible.

In 'Ernest Dowson's Aesthetics of Contamination' (1983), Chris Snodgrass elucidates the 'paradigmatic structure of Dowson's art' and how it is centred around nuns, madmen, and little girls imagined in sequestered, aestheticized refuges.<sup>37</sup> He considers Dowson's use of spaces of retreat as a manifestation of the 'world-view of the Victorian Decadence: a calm, virginal sanctuary of aestheticized "lily time"'.<sup>38</sup> However, the aesthetic refuges imagined by Dowson are only temporary and the organization of the *Poésie Schublade* Notebook directs attention to the way his spatiality shifts in relation to his intensifying need for purity and salvation. His early use of the interspace of the bower develops into an interest in the threshold space of the church, both of which share an atmosphere of sanctity. They are private spaces in which the little girl is carefully preserved and where the poet attempts to find some kind of solace. However, they are half-open refuges that are besieged and, as Snodgrass acknowledges, contaminated by the world. From the enclosed garden space of the bower to the protective spaces of the cloister, 'the loss of innocence, happiness, purity, is seen to be the result not so much of a single, sinful act as of the "defiling" process of life itself.'<sup>39</sup> The poet in both these spaces is an adulterated entity, and only through 'aesthetic renunciations' can he attempt to purify himself.<sup>40</sup>

The development in the *Poésie Schublade* Notebook poems, from imaginary drawer-like realms to the physical religious cloister, is obscured by Dowson's published collections. Fourteen of the forty-five poems in *Verses* and seventeen of the thirty-six in *Decorations: In Verse and Prose* derive from the Notebook. However, in both collections they are rearranged and reordered to form a dedication to his muse, Adelaide. In his preface to *Verses*, written at Pont-Aven in 1896, Dowson imagines her as a divine figure: 'I have no silver tongue', he writes, 'such as it were fit to praise

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<sup>36</sup> Dowson, letter to Moore, 19 October 1890, p. 172.

<sup>37</sup> Chris Snodgrass, 'Ernest Dowson's Aesthetics of Contamination', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 26:3 (1983), 162-74 (p. 162)

<sup>38</sup> Snodgrass, 'Ernest Dowson's Aesthetics of Contamination', p. 162.

<sup>39</sup> Snodgrass, 'Ernest Dowson's Aesthetics of Contamination', p. 164.

<sup>40</sup> Snodgrass, 'Ernest Dowson's Aesthetics of Contamination', p. 172.

you'.<sup>41</sup> As Thornton and Caroline Dowson argue, the one-sided relationship between Adelaide and Dowson is central to the arrangement of his poetry collections, and 'his shaping of the books to comment on it seems deliberate.'<sup>42</sup> Her influence becomes explicit if one considers the publication record of the Poésie Schublade Notebook; nineteen of the twenty-one Poésie Schublade Notebook poems that Dowson wrote after meeting Adelaide are included in *Verses* and *Decorations* compared to only eight of the forty-three Notebook poems that he wrote before they met [see Appendix B]. The Notebook poems that he uses in his published collections emphasize two main themes: his presentation of the *jeune fille* as a divine figure and the poet as an unworthy penitent, and a depiction of the threshold space 'betwixt' corruption and purity, the worldly and the spiritual.

With the exception of 'My Lady April' ['Sonnet: April' (April 1888)], the Poésie Schublade Notebook poems that Dowson includes in *Verses* were written in 1890 and 1891 [see Appendix C].<sup>43</sup> In the context of *Verses*, 'My Lady April' appears less as an experiment in the sonnet form and about the woman in the bower, and more of a representation of isolated innocence. Like an icon in a religious painting, the robed figure is presented in a fantasy land associated with purity and detached from the natural process of ageing:

Dew on her robe and on her tangled hair;  
Twin dewdrops for her eyes; behold her pass,  
With dainty step brushing the young, green grass<sup>44</sup>

It is a space that, like the church, appears closed off from outside influences; no sounds of the city or of her surroundings penetrate it. Dowson sets up a comparison with the poet's situation in the subsequent poem, 'To One in Bedlam' (first published in *Albemarle*, August 1892), which describes the enclosed space of the prison cell in which the 'delicate, mad hands' of the Bedlamite turn straw into 'moon-kissed roses'

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<sup>41</sup> Dowson, 'In Preface: For Adelaide', in *Verses*, p. ix.

<sup>42</sup> Thornton and Caroline Dowson, 'Introduction' to *Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, p. xxi.

<sup>43</sup> Where the Notebook poems have been retitled and revised for publication, I will be referring to them by their much more familiar published titles and forms. If applicable, after the title in brackets I will include the original Poésie Schublade Notebook title and date. In Appendix C, I have included the contents of *Verses* and *Decorations: In Verse and Prose*, with the poems from the Poésie Schublade Notebook indicated in bold.

<sup>44</sup> 'My Lady April' was first published in *Temple Bar*, vol. LXXXV, part 341, April 1889, p. 541, before being included in *Verses*, p.4.

in the limited space of the cell.<sup>45</sup> The enclosed madman is like a monk, a lone figure ‘far from men who sow and reap’, untainted by sinful thoughts and closer to God.<sup>46</sup> On earth, the deific can be found in simplicity and minimalism; the ‘strait, caged universe’ enables ‘dreams divine’.<sup>47</sup> The Poésie Schublade Notebook poem evokes an inaccessible fantasy space that holds his ‘Lady April’, while in contrast the poet/monk/madman is trapped in a space of punishment and self-purification.

In *Decorations*, the themes of female inaccessibility and the relationship between self-purification and withdrawal continue. This collection includes seventeen Poésie Schublade Notebook poems, and begins with ‘Beyond’, a revised version of ‘To Hélène: A Rondeau’ (August 1889) which recounts the aftermath of a love affair [see Appendix C]. While the poet aspires to a state of perfect containment and enclosure, he is unable to relinquish his own desires and the sense of lost innocence that this generates. The poet gathers in the fruitless ‘crops’ of love, sorrow and loss.<sup>48</sup> Like the encircling of the flowers around the ‘Queen lily’ in ‘Requiem’, Dowson imagines a deathly grove, a type of tomb in which picked flowers have been left to wilt.

Dowson recasts his rondeaus, written before he met Adelaide, as reflections of his lost love and this is suggested in his revision to ‘Rondeau’ (24 August 1889) as ‘Jadis’. The revised title refers to the archaic French, ‘ja a dis’ [days before], and is translated in the first word and refrain of the rondeau, as ‘erewhile’. In this space that existed ‘before the world was old’, the poet is a sanctified figure on whose breast the little girl lies as if it was a ‘shrine’.<sup>49</sup> The physicality in this poem, the girl’s head and the poet’s chest, their entwined hands, and their bodies ‘enrolled’ in ‘Cupid’s train’, recall the forbidden nature and the sexual temptation of this interspace. The virginal realm conceals and protects the chaste and innocent child but the presence of the speaker leads to its contamination.

In the Poésie Schublade Notebook, *Verses*, and *Decorations*, the themes of purity and corruption, restriction and release, are inseparable from the poet’s feelings of *betwixtness*. Dowling observes that this is most apparent in ‘A Coronal’ [‘A Dedication: with his poems and Her Days to His Lady; and to Love’ (16 October 1890)], the second

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<sup>45</sup> ‘To One in Bedlam’ was reprinted in the *Second Book of the Rhymers’ Club* (1894), before being included in *Verses*, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> Dowson, ‘To One in Bedlam’, p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> Dowson, ‘To One in Bedlam’, p. 5.

<sup>48</sup> Dowson, ‘Beyond’, in *Decorations*, p. ix.

<sup>49</sup> Dowson, ‘Jadis’, in *Decorations*, p. 18.

preface to *Verses* after 'In Preface: For Adelaide'. In this opening poem to the collection, the *jeune fille* is presented as a mystical, quasi-religious figure who, along with the poet, is engaged in a ritualistic practice of creating a 'frail, fair wreath' from 'Violets and leaves of vine' in order to crown a transitory 'Love that lives a day'.<sup>50</sup> This type of fleeting love is shown to be, paradoxically, inescapable, and the violets and vines not only appear to surround the two figures, but are also woven through the envelope structure of the poem. Dowling relates the form of this poem to Dowson's dual desire for entrapment and emancipation. She remarks that Dowson's 'alliterative and self-consciously mellifluous mode of writing', in which stanzas "entwine" or bind together through sound lines that have little syntactic or thematic connection to each other', suggests a sort of entangled, overgrown structure.<sup>51</sup> The wrapping of grief and loss in expressions of love and beauty is alluded to in the revised title of the poem. The coronal implies a ceremonial wreath and recalls the floral bowers of his earlier poems but condensed into a garland. The stanzas, like the wreath, 'gather and entwine' Dowson's enduring themes of love and nature, loss and death.<sup>52</sup> As anticipated in the small, enclosed stanzas of 'A Coronal' and the twisted, entwined flowers in the wreath, rather than embracing an expansive natural world, Dowson's speaker in *Verses* also appears to turn towards even more extreme forms of enclosure.

Threshold spaces of removal and restriction recur across Dowson's poetry collections. In 'Libera Me' ['Hymn to Aphrodite' (1886)], in *Decorations*, the speaker appeals to Aphrodite to free him from the 'altars' of his love. He looks for deliverance from his sins and Dowson's only revision to the original Poésie Schublade Notebook poem is to the title. 'Libera Me' ['Deliver Me'] takes the focus away from classical mythology and towards Catholic doctrine as they are the first words of the Roman Catholic chant, sung in the liminal period in a Catholic funeral during the Requiem Mass but before burial, which asks for the mercy of the deceased at the Last Judgement. The speaker's plea for liberation and the floral bower imagery is typically Swinburnian, and Thornton and Caroline Dowson describe the obvious influences of his poetry on Dowson's 'metrics and in certain patterns of phrase such as antithetical pairs (Swinburne's "lilies and langours of vice" and Dowson's "days of wine and roses" or

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<sup>50</sup> Dowson, 'A Coronal', in *Verses*, p. xi.

<sup>51</sup> Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, p. 208.

<sup>52</sup> Dowson, 'A Coronal', p. xi.

“the weeping and the laughter”)<sup>53</sup> In ‘Libera Me’, however, there is evidence that while Dowson is using the language of Swinburne he is refining the spatiality of his enclosed garden spaces. Central to the erotic sensuality of Swinburne’s embowered maidens is the tension caused by the closed virginal world of the ‘woman in the bower’ and the possibility of penetration from the outside by the solitary male poet.<sup>54</sup> In ‘Libera Me’ this is reversed. The speaker begs for release from this tormenting interspace where yearnings and loss meet: ‘Truce of the love of thee, Cyprian, let me go free.’<sup>55</sup>

In *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1890s* (1993), Murray Pittock explains this torment in relation to Dowson’s ‘double exile: exile from the changes of life and from the eternities of salvation’.<sup>56</sup> The purity of the embowered girl and the innocence of childhood are states of ‘innocent enquiry’ that are ‘fated to rapid destruction’.<sup>57</sup> The poet, in comparison, remains in a state of purgatory and moral ambiguity. ‘Libera Me’ is an early Notebook poem but it is included towards the end of *Decorations* with two other songs for lost love – ‘Moritura’ (twenty-fourth in the Notebook) and ‘To a Lost Love’ (a new composition for the volume). This leads to a revised reading of the poem as a response to a culmination of years of waiting for his beloved. Its inclusion perhaps exemplifies Dowson’s emotional stasis. In ‘Libera Me’, he expresses his ache for liberation from an indeterminate situation and he articulates a similar sentiment in ‘To a Lost Love’, published thirteen years later, when he writes that he wants ‘no more to bridge the gulf that lies | Betwixt our separate ways’.<sup>58</sup>

‘Betwixt’ is used by Dowson in two other poems: ‘Breton Afternoon’ (where he refers to his final resting place in Pont-Aven as ‘betwixt the bounds of life and death’) and in his most widely known poem from his Poésie Schublade Notebook, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’ (7 February 1891).<sup>59</sup> The ‘Cynara poem’

<sup>53</sup> Thornton and Caroline Dowson, ‘Introduction’ to *Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, p. xxi.

In 1900, Symons wrote an article for the *Fortnightly Review* about Dowson and commented on his ‘obligation to Swinburne’. This article was later reprinted as ‘Ernest Dowson’, the preface to *The Poems of Ernest Dowson: Verses, The Pierrot of the Minute, Decorations in Verse and Prose* (Portland, Maine: Thomas B. Mosher, 1902), pp. xvii-xxxvii (p. xxxviii).

<sup>54</sup> The bower is a recurrent image in Pre-Raphaelite art and literature. For example, in Alfred Tennyson’s ‘The Lady of Shalott’ (1832) and Dante Rossetti’s ‘Song of the Bower’ (1860), the bower is a place where lovers meet, away from the real world.

<sup>55</sup> Dowson, ‘Libera Me’, in *Decorations*, pp. 34-35 (p. 35).

<sup>56</sup> Murray Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1890s* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 141.

<sup>57</sup> Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, p. 139.

<sup>58</sup> Dowson, ‘To a Lost Love’, in *Decorations*, p. 36.

<sup>59</sup> Dowson, ‘Breton Afternoon’, in *Decorations*, p. 25.



describes a memory of the past and a current state of desire. In *Verses* it is positioned between two others that evoke threshold situations and spaces, the appeal to the frozen moon maiden in ‘Flos Lunae’ [‘Claire: la lune!’ (20 July 1891)] and the ‘dim nebulous land’ of ‘Vanitas’ [‘Vanitas’, (19 March 1891)]. As Ezra Pound writes in his review of Plarr’s biography of Dowson, ‘Cynara’ is an early poem from the ‘days before the shadow’, a reference to Dowson’s alcoholism and ill-health towards the end of his life.<sup>60</sup> However, this poem can also be interpreted as the lingering physical presence of worldly desires even as he attempts to find divine forgiveness in the Catholic church. Cynara’s haunting and, as the poet imagines, judging presence in everything he does is clear from the first line – ‘betwixt her lips and mine | There fell thy shadow, Cynara’.<sup>61</sup> While the body of the prostitute and the ‘kisses of her bought red mouth’ are physical and real, as opposed to the ‘shadow’ of Cynara, the speaker is unable to free himself from memory and desire.<sup>62</sup> Like Baudelaire and Jeanne Duval, Dowson takes inspiration from his living muse, Adelaide. But, while Baudelaire fetishizes aspects of Jeanne’s physical appearance as vehicles for transcendence, Adelaide remains, like Cynara, untouchable and intangible. Unlike earlier French Decadent writers who imagine the threshold as an interconnecting and transformative space which opens up into other realms, Dowson’s focus is directed inwards. He hovers on the threshold of vice and purity – the ‘madder music’ and ‘stronger wine’ of reality and the ‘pale, lost lilies’ of his ideal.<sup>63</sup>

‘Betwixt’ is a key word in this poem and it relates to the poet’s intermediate and indecisive situation: heavenly delights are offered from above and those from hell come from beneath, but on earth there is no real escape from either. Dowson’s imagery evokes the inescapable power of the in-between and this *thresholdness* is associated with the impossibility of ever being free from desire and love, loss and pain. The increasingly confessional tone of his Poésie Schublade Notebook poems coincides with his growing habit of transcribing versions of them at the end of letters to his friends. ‘Cynara’, for example, was sent in draft form to Arthur Moore (7 February 1891). The

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The title, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’, is taken from Horace, Ode IV.I, ‘I’m not the man I was | in good Cinara’s reign’. Horace, *The Complete Odes and Epodes*, trans. and ed. by David West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 112, lines 3-4.

<sup>60</sup> Ezra Pound, ‘Ernest Dowson by Victor Plarr’, *Poetry*, 6:1 (1915), 43-45 (p. 44).

<sup>61</sup> Dowson, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’, in *Verses*, pp. 17-18 (p. 17).

<sup>62</sup> Dowson, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’, p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> Dowson, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’, pp. 17 & 18.

space of the letter becomes like a confessional, and this creates a type of diminished interspace that parallels the reduced poetic spaces in his works. ‘Cynara’ is set in a series of threshold realms – ‘yesternight’ (but before the morning), in a ‘gray’ dawn, and ‘when the feast is finished and the lamps expire’.<sup>64</sup> These interspaces serve as frames through which Dowson expresses his unchangeable yearnings and feelings of the ‘betwixt’. He is haunted by something that is permanently out of reach and also paradoxically close.

Dowson’s poems are often discussed in terms of the figure of the little girl, and the Poésie Schublade Notebook poems that Dowson includes in *Verses* and *Decorations* foreground his obsession with her as an untouchable figure in an inaccessible space. In a letter to Moore, dated 3 September 1891, he confesses his fears that his unrequited relationship with Adelaide will be misunderstood by his friends and he criticizes the scandalous abduction of sixteen-year-old Lucy Pearson by the 39-year-old journalist Edward Newton. ‘This beastly thing’, he writes, ‘has left a slimy trail over my holy places’.<sup>65</sup> Dowson imagines his relationship in sacred and sanctified terms, and this becomes most apparent when we look at the Poésie Schublade Notebook poems in their original order. The Notebook indicates a process of poetic refinement and a quest for purity. This is clear in his treatment of the figure of the *jeune fille*, who develops from the removed embowered maiden to the saintly, cloistered girl. However, through the rearrangement of his Notebook poems, Dowson’s conflicting, ambiguous feelings regarding self-purification become obscured by his obsession with his muse.

Cynara’s presence is associated with a space of silence and emptiness that is different to Dowson’s image of the embowered maiden in his earlier poems and, rather than imagining being with her, the poet is entrapped in a space that is like a cell – a small room in which a prisoner is locked up or where a monk sleeps. Similarly, in ‘Vanitas’, the poet is also in limbo; ‘Beyond the need of weeping, | Beyond the reach of hands’.<sup>66</sup> Dowson finds perfection in purity and in the poetic space that is like a monastic cell (simple, stark, and away from the world) he is able to imagine other places beyond what is immediate and present, some ‘ulterior land’.<sup>67</sup> Diminished interspaces

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<sup>64</sup> Dowson, ‘Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae’, pp. 17 & 18.

<sup>65</sup> Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 3 September 1891, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 212-13 (p. 213). Adams gives a detailed description of the case in *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, pp. 56-58.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Vanitas’ was first published in the *Book of the Rhymers’ Club* (1892), p. 69, and included in *Verses*, pp. 19-20 (p. 19).

<sup>67</sup> Dowson, ‘Vanitas’, p. 19.

are used metaphorically to express the poet's desire for somewhere private, where he can focus on his obsession without distraction, and at the same time physically separate himself from his corporeal love.

### **Diminished Interspaces: Dowson's Decadent Minimalism**

Dowson's exploration of the threshold of vice and purity is evidenced in the reducing and refining spatiality of the *Poésie Schublade* Notebook poems. The Notebook poems, in essence, describe half-open spaces which contain the poet's feelings of moral indeterminacy and this is expressed metaphorically through the image of reduced spaces, like the drawer and the shell. These diminished interspaces articulate his desire to withdraw from the world of vice, focus in on himself, and try and redeem his own sinfulness. As I discuss, Dowson's spaces of extreme retraction and simplification evoke a Decadent form of minimalism. Like Baudelaire's perfume bottle in 'Le Flacon', the epitome of reductionism is also a poetic expression of immensity. In Bachelard's words, 'le minuscule [. . .] ouvre un monde' [the minuscule [. . .] opens up a world].<sup>68</sup> Baudelaire focuses on the effect of strong perfumes that correspond to an abundance of memories and fantasies, and Dowson depicts the vast emotional or transformative effect of one object or space at a time. Tiny things and spaces, more specifically what Bachelard terms 'la miniature', are an integral part of Dowson's minimalist aesthetic. Like the biblical merchant who sells all his pearls to buy one of exquisite beauty, Dowson's reductionism indicates a surrender of all other distractions in order to focus on one singular and perfect thing.<sup>69</sup> He takes this purification and refinement to a Decadent extreme: the speaker retracts from the immorality of the world into spaces of absolute silence and solitude, and the little girl is imagined as a holy relic.

In "'The Harem of Words": Attenuation and Excess in Decadent Poetry' (2013), Nick Freeman discusses the paradox of Decadence and constraint in reference to linguistic restriction:

When decadence is so often considered to be a mode of writing (and living) characterized by luxury and excess, it is striking to see the poetry associated with

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<sup>68</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace*, p. 146 / my translation.

<sup>69</sup> The 'Parable of the Pearl' is one of the parables of Jesus, in Matthew 13:45-46. It is used to describe the true teachings of the church which are hidden in all the various teachings of the world.

its late Victorian incarnation making such a deliberate play with limitation, restriction, and repetition.<sup>70</sup>

Freeman refers to ‘Dregs’, first published in *Decorations*, as an example of Dowson’s refinement and compression of Swinburne’s themes and imagery. In this poem, the speaker is alone, ‘The golden wine is drunk, the dregs remain’, and he is waiting for the ‘dropt curtain and the closing gate’ to release him from this feeling of limbo and abandonment.<sup>71</sup> In eleven lines, Dowson distills Swinburne’s ‘A Ballad of Burdens’ to its essence and transforms Swinburne’s first and second stanzas on ‘the burden of fair women’ to, Freeman argues, one line, ‘This was a mistress’.<sup>72</sup> However, this is not the only distillation in ‘Dregs’, a poem that illuminates the recurrent theme in Dowson’s poetry of reduction and intensification. Using the dual meaning of ‘dregs’, he casts his speaker as a worthless outcast from society and describes the effect of an intensified remnant. The undesirable sediment that collects at the bottom of a liquid is also the part where the most powerful ingredients settle. Similarly, the dregs of the ‘golden wine’ taste ‘bitter as wormwood and as salt as pain’ (a distillation of poison, pain and loss) and they stimulate broader thoughts of dead friends and past lovers; ‘This was a mistress, this, perhaps, a friend.’<sup>73</sup> ‘Dregs’ exemplifies both a linguistic refinement and a spatial retraction.

Dowson’s use of diminished interspaces is exemplified most explicitly in the ‘Sonnets – Of a Little Girl’ sequence, eight sonnets that appear near the beginning of his Poésie Schublade Notebook.<sup>74</sup> In the Notebook, these poems mark the point where focus begins to shift away from the purity of the child and towards the purity of the poet. From the blossoming garden outside the casement window ‘thrown | Wide to the summer air’, the poet retreats into the solitary space of the grave, ‘doubtless cold | The

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<sup>70</sup> Nick Freeman, “‘The Harem of Words’: Attenuation and Excess in Decadent Poetry”, in Hall and Murray, eds, *Decadent Poetics*, pp. 83-99 (p. 84).

<sup>71</sup> Dowson, ‘Dregs’, in *Decorations*, p. 23.

<sup>72</sup> Freeman, ‘The Harem of Words’, p. 95. See Swinburne’s ‘A Ballad of Burdens’, in *Poems and Ballads* (London: J. C. Hotten, 1866), pp. 144-47 (p. 144).

In their notes to this poem Thornton and Caroline Dowson similarly refer to how ‘Dowson obviously remembered Swinburne’s “A Ballad of Burdens”’. *Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, p. 258.

<sup>73</sup> Dowson, ‘Dregs’, p. 23.

<sup>74</sup> According to the chronological order of the notebook and the date on number four, which was published in *London Society*, they were probably written around 1885. They are the tenth to the seventeenth poems in the Notebook.

coffin dark'.<sup>75</sup> Ultimately he longs for a welcome release from the corruption and decay brought about by time. The final sonnet was the only one to appear in Dowson's poetry collections, heavily revised as the epilogue to *Decorations*, 'A Last Word'. As Thornton and Caroline Dowson explain, it is impossible to tell if this sequence remained (mostly) unpublished because he thought these verses 'too poor or too private', but they certainly foreground Dowson's primary themes which are developed in his 1890s verses – the ephemeral experience of love, the threshold of purity and corruption, and reduced spaces as portals to the Beyond.<sup>76</sup>

In the sonnet sequence, the speaker becomes increasingly preoccupied with purification and refinement, as epitomized in his representation of venerated objects that are associated with the little girl. The role of material artefacts in Christianity is associated with commemorating the dead in various different ways. Amulets, talismans, and charms are portable spiritual objects that often contain organic material, such as ashes, blood, or pieces of bone.<sup>77</sup> In the third sonnet, the girl's name, for example, is compared to an amulet, an object whose most important characteristic is the power ascribed to it, and in the fourth sonnet, she is associated with an ocean shell that contains the vastness and mystery of the ocean within 'its coiled sphere'.<sup>78</sup> Recalling the pilgrim at a shrine, the poet uses these objects to meditate on heaven and mortality. Saying her name is the speaker's 'ritual, my mystic prayer', but the speaker's devotion to this practice is not enough to release him from his confinement.<sup>79</sup> He longs for oblivion, and this culminates in an image of the poet looking out at what he cannot reach – 'in the hush of night thro' lattice bars | I see it written in the lonely stars'.<sup>80</sup> This echoes the movement that occurs in the later *Poésie Schublade Notebook* poems, in which the little girl as relic is replaced with the poet's longing to be in the sequestered space himself.

The complex withdrawal in Dowson's poetry is underpinned by the contradictory space of the shell. It is an object which powerfully symbolizes the minimalism of Dowson's spatiality. For Bachelard, it is a space of two parts – the shell itself and the

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<sup>75</sup> Dowson, 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, II' and 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, VII', in *Poésie Schublade, Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, pp. 19 & 25.

<sup>76</sup> Thornton and Caroline Dowson, 'Introduction' to *Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, p. xx.

<sup>77</sup> For more detailed discussion of the relic in Christian worship see Julia M. H. Smith's article 'Portable Christianity: Relics in the Medieval West (c.700-1200)', in *Proceedings of the British Academy, 2010-2011 Lectures*, vol. 181 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 143-67.

<sup>78</sup> Dowson, 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, IV', p. 21.

<sup>79</sup> Dowson, 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, III', p. 20.

<sup>80</sup> Dowson, 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, III', p. 20.

creature inside – and unlike other animal homes it is a solitary and lonely space. Withdrawing into the shell, Bachelard posits, is like a sort of death before a creature's renewal and emergence into the world. 'Sur le thème de la coquille' [On the shell theme], Bachelard ruminates, 'l'imagination travaille aussi, outre la dialectique du petit et du grand, la dialectique de l'être libre et de l'être enchaîné' [the imagination is stimulated, in addition to the dialectic of small and large, the dialectic of creatures that are free and those that are enchained].<sup>81</sup> Alongside the idea of the shell as a recessed space, it is also a space of withdrawal and protection, death and rebirth. In the fourth sonnet, where the poet imagines a child on a beach holding a shell to his ear, the small hollow space contains:

Whispers of wind and wave, soul-stirring songs  
Of storm-tossed ships and all the mystery  
That to the illimitable sea belongs<sup>82</sup>

The speaker compares himself to the boy holding a seashell, as the little girl's hands and face have the same effect as the shell in creating a sense of vastness. Her body enables him to imagine the vast realm of love. The recessed space of a shell symbolizes, as the photographer Edward Weston explains in relation to his own photographs of shells from 1927, 'the very combination of the physical and the spiritual'.<sup>83</sup> It is both a miniature hide-away, and, paradoxically, a portal to the sound of vastness associated with the sea.

Catherine Robson (2001) notes that concave spaces pervade 'the landscape of the sonnet sequence' and 'conspire to form a world of receptacles that can both comfort and terrify'.<sup>84</sup> However, I assert that these hollow images are less physical, bodily metaphors and more representative of the relationship in Dowson's poetry between the retraction and expansion characteristic of Decadent threshold poetics. Most significant for Robson is the symbolism of the shell and what Dowson describes as 'that tiny cavity' which is 'both open [. . .] and internally immense'.<sup>85</sup> To the speaker, the sound

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<sup>81</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de l'espace*, p. 109 / my translation.

<sup>82</sup> Dowson, 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, IV', p. 21.

<sup>83</sup> Edward Weston, quoted in Ben Maddow, *Edward Weston: His Life and Photographs* (New York: Aperture, 1979), pp. 69-70.

<sup>84</sup> Catherine Robson, *Men in Wonderland: The Lost Girlhood of the Victorian Gentlemen* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 190-91.

<sup>85</sup> Robson, *Men in Wonderland*, p. 191.

of the ‘mystic ocean’s tremulous ebb and flow’ is a reminder of time and tide, the effect of ageing, and his own fluctuating desires in terms of a dichotomy between worldly activities and spiritual practices. The protective and hidden qualities of the shell are appealing to the poet, as they reflect his aspiration to protect the child from the negative effects of time and decay that he articulates in the sixth sonnet as the ‘sobbing sea that sadly ebbs and flows’.<sup>86</sup> The poet is searching for a space of nothingness and oblivion. In the seventh sonnet, the speaker retreats ‘Into some cavern’ to ‘fall asleep | And sleeping die, or melt like a sad song | Into the winds’, and in the eighth, ‘Epilogue’, he prays for the earth to turn his ‘life-sick’ heart ‘into dust’.<sup>87</sup> The poet retracts into his ‘shell’, waiting for the moment of disintegration, and paradoxically, rebirth. Decadent threshold poetics, as explored previously, is related to personal withdrawal from the world. The diminished interspace of the shell represents perfectly Dowson’s ambivalence towards life.

In Dowson’s revisions to the last sonnet in this sequence as ‘A Last Word’, and the last poem in *Decorations*, he more clearly articulates his intense wish for silence and emptiness. He asserts:

Let us go hence, somewhither strange and cold,  
To Hollow Lands where just men and unjust  
Find end of labour, where’s rest for the old<sup>88</sup>

The image of ‘hollow lands’ evokes the inside of the sea shell, but devoid of all transformative magic.<sup>89</sup> Like the snail in its shell, the poet’s body and the hollow space around him are all that remain. Bachelard writes, ‘On sait bien qu’il faut être seul pour habiter une coquille. En vivant l’image, on sait qu’on consent à la solitude’ [We know perfectly well that to inhabit the shell we must be perfectly alone. By living this image, one knows that one has accepted solitude].<sup>90</sup> The poet is the penitent, forced to remain

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<sup>86</sup> Dowson, ‘Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, VI’, p. 23.

<sup>87</sup> Dowson, ‘Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, VII’ and ‘Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, VIII, Epilogue’, pp. 24 & 25.

<sup>88</sup> Dowson, ‘A Last Word’, in *Decorations*, p. 39.

<sup>89</sup> Dowson’s image of ‘hollow lands’ was an influence on T. S. Eliot, particular the imagery in the third section of *The Waste Land* (1922) and his poem ‘The Hollow Men’ (1925). For more discussion of poetic motifs shared by the two poets see Joseph Maddrey’s section on the *fin de siècle* in *The Making of T. S. Eliot: A Study of the Literary Influences* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2009), pp. 10-12.

<sup>90</sup> Bachelard, *La Poétique de l’espace*, p. 120 / *The Poetics of Space*, p. 123.

on an earthly plain, worshipping his idol from afar, and desiring an escape into oblivion. In comparison to Huysmans, the recessed spaces in Dowson's poems are an attempt to contain and control his desires but there is no sense of transformation. Unlike the spaces of Des Esseintes' villa, there is no dynamism in Dowson's handling of space.

Dowson's Decadent minimalism is the opposite of a fascination with excess and enrapturing sensations, and it sets him apart from other Catholic poets of the *fin de siècle* who foreground the sensationalized, performative, and luxurious nature of Catholic rituals and present religious objects as portals to other realms of pleasure and excess. For example, in his poem 'A Crucifix', dedicated to Dowson and included in *Silverpoints* (1893), John Gray describes the crucifix as a shimmering and vivid, as if bejewelled, object emblematic of glory and light. The poem begins:

A gothic church. At one end of an aisle,  
 Against a wall where mystic sunbeams smile  
 Through painted windows, orange, blue, and gold,  
 The Christ's unutterable charm behold.  
 Upon the cross, adorned with gold and green,  
 Long fluted golden tongues of sombre sheen,  
 Like four flames joined in one, around the head  
 And by the outstretched arms, their glory spread.  
 The statue is of wood; of natural size;  
 Tinted; [...] <sup>91</sup>

The abundance of colour, lists of sensations, and allusions to heaven and hell overwhelm the object itself, a simple, wooden statue. This poem is, as Claire Masurel-Murray (2008) asserts, 'less about the crucifixion than about art.'<sup>92</sup> Gray's poem is an adaptation of Verlaine's 'Un Crucifix' (1893), and the poem is an acknowledgement of the gift of a copy of the original crucifix made for the poet by a friend, who 'knowing how I worshipped it, | Forgot it, in my room, by accident.'<sup>93</sup> Through layered imagery and his presentation of the process of creating art, Gray creates a complex portrayal of this simple object of religious contemplation. To the poet, this archetypal Catholic icon

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<sup>91</sup> John Gray, 'A Crucifix', in *The Poems of John Gray*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1988), pp. 31-32.

<sup>92</sup> Claire Masurel-Murray, 'From the Beauty of Religion to the Religion of Beauty: Catholicism and Aestheticism in Fin-de-siècle Poetry', in *Ecstasy and Understanding: Religious Awareness in English Poetry from the Late Victorian to the Modern Period*, ed. by Adrian Grafe (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 16-26 (p. 24).

<sup>93</sup> Gray, 'A Crucifix', p. 32.



evokes an external commitment to beauty rather than an internal reflection on the divine and his own spirituality.

In comparison, Dowson's 'Ad Manus Puellae' ['To a Girl's Hands'], which he enclosed in a letter thanking Gray for a copy of *Silverpoints*, is an exercise in simplicity and devotion.<sup>94</sup> The speaker describes the girl's small, fragile, chaste hands, which he only looks upon and does not touch. Her hand takes on a highly purified form of beauty. When it is exposed to veneration, it evokes memories of other hands and other girls whom he has lost:

I remember a hand like a *fleur-de-lys*  
 When it slid from its silken sheath, her glove;  
 With its odours passing ambergris:  
 And that was the empty husk of a love.  
 Oh, how shall I kiss your hands enough?<sup>95</sup>

Previously, the glove, just the 'husk' of his object of devotion, smelt to the poet of the most expensive and rare fragrance. Now, faced with the actual hand of his beloved, he is completely overwhelmed, as if presented with the holiest of relics. Through singular objects and a monochromatic palette, the poem depicts immaculateness. In the third stanza, Dowson uses the simile of the hand as a shell, previously used in 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl, IV', and how her fingers 'blush to the tips like a curled sea-shell'.<sup>96</sup> The essence of Dowson's Decadent minimalism is embodied in this image. The shell is a diminished, intensified, and highly suggestive symbol of his commitment to, and sacrifice for, purity. However, for the speaker, its metaphorical associations, symbolism, and allusions to spiritual transcendence amplify his feelings of lost love, impurity, and fear of corruption, such as the unthinkable torture and salvation of 'the higher lands, | The citadel of your sacred lips'.<sup>97</sup> It exemplifies his threshold situation, indicating to the poet the purity of the spiritual world while simultaneously making obvious his worldly sinfulness.

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<sup>94</sup> In the letter to Gray, Dowson also includes the alternative 'Dominae' [mistress] for 'Puellae' [girl], and the penultimate line in the letter version is 'I am always in prison to their commands'. Dowson, letter to John Gray, 27 February 1893, *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 172-73 (p. 172).

<sup>95</sup> Dowson, 'Ad Manus Puellae', in *Verses*, p. 15.

<sup>96</sup> Dowson, 'Ad Manus Puellae', in *Verses*, p. 15.

<sup>97</sup> Dowson, 'Ad Manus Puellae', in *Verses*, p. 15.

Dowson's Decadent minimalism aspires to an excessive form of purity. This is epitomized in the church, a source of spiritual purity and moral cleanliness, and embodied in the figure of the monk. 'O Mors! quam amara est memoria tua homini pacem habenti in substantiis suis' ['O Death! how bitter is the remembrance of thee to a man that liveth at rest in his possessions'], dated '28 / April / 91' in the Poésie Schublade Notebook and included in *Verses*, describes the jettisoning of worldly pleasures and sensations in order to enable a deeper connection to God. As implied by the title, from Ecclesiasticus 41, the speaker curates a space of silence on earth which copies the sanctity of heaven. This is exemplified in the echoing sounds of each stanza of the poem, which are like empty, pure spaces. For a poet who is interested in sound and words, silence is the perfect example of this extreme refinement:

Be no word spoken;  
 Weep nothing: let a pale  
 Silence, unbroken  
 Silence prevail!  
 Prithee, be no word spoken,  
 Lest I fail!<sup>98</sup>

Symons remarks, in his obituary essay on Dowson, that in this poem 'surely the music of silence speaks, if it has ever spoken. The words seem to tremble back into the silence which their whisper has interrupted'.<sup>99</sup> It is the punctuated intervals between the notes that makes 'the music'. As Dowling writes, in contrast to the twisting and confining bower space in 'A Coronal', 'it is the space between words that interests Dowson stylistically, just as it is the idea of silence purifying words that interests him thematically'.<sup>100</sup> Like the inside of the shell, the space between the words can be perceived and imagined but not fully occupied.

In his poems written at the end of his Poésie Schublade Notebook and around the time of his conversion in September 1891, such as the 'In Praise of Solitude' group, Dowson searches for complete annihilation of sound and sense. His pursuit of this

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<sup>98</sup> 'O Mors! quam amara est memoria tua homini pacem habenti in substantiis suis' is the fifty-seventh poem in the notebook and was first published, as '*O Mors! quam amara est memoria tua homini Pacem habenti in substantiis suis*', in the *Book of the Rhymers' Club* (1892) (p. 30) before being included in *Verses*, pp. 23-24 (p. 23).

<sup>99</sup> Symons, 'Ernest Dowson', p. xxvi.

<sup>100</sup> Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, p. 210.

impossibility is, to use Dowling's words, 'not apocalyptic or world-disintegrating, it is world-contracting'.<sup>101</sup> In a letter to Arthur Moore, from December 1890, Dowson half-jokingly expresses his desire to 'give up writing, enter the Order of St Benedict and devote [his] life to editing the Fathers.'<sup>102</sup> Trappist monks, who practise the most severe form of Benedictine monasticism, live in austerity with simple rituals, repetition and an absence of luxury. The monastic life that Dowson describes in his letter, which avoids all distractions from prayer and meditation, is imagined in his poems at the end of the *Poésie Schublade Notebook*, written prior to and just after his conversion to Roman Catholicism. Dowson's attempt at pious devotion is indicated in his reduction of his poetic themes to a focus on God and the afterlife. 1891 is the last year that he wrote in the *Poésie Schublade Notebook*, after which Dowson concentrates on religious themes and holy spaces. As I will show, in the cloister and charterhouse the erotic and the spiritual are brought into a Baudelairean correspondence.

### **From the Drawer to the Cloister: The Catholic Verses**

In *Decadence and Catholicism*, Ellis Hanson observes how Dowson turned towards 'the only beautiful ism left in the world, even as he numbered his days of wine and roses'.<sup>103</sup> Dowson imagines the sequestered beauty of spiritual spaces while retaining a secular perspective, and while he uses 'Poésie Schublade' to refer to a specific body of early poems, a sense of enclosure is useful for also understanding his preoccupation with religious spaces of retreat that symbolize man's relationship to the world and his contemplation of the spiritual. The spaces of the cloister and charterhouse in his Catholic verses signify a release from the moral and personal dilemmas previously discussed in this chapter, and although their occurrence articulates Dowson's expectations of religious salvation and deliverance, they also express his recurrent obsession with the sinfulness of the body.

In the group of three *Poésie Schublade Notebook* poems retitled 'In Praise of Solitude' (published in *The Century Guild Hobby Horse* (October 1891)), his first publication after his conversion, Dowson expresses his hope for a religious life of

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<sup>101</sup> Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*, p. 205.

<sup>102</sup> Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, date unknown (Thursday night [? 4 December 1890]), in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 178-79 (p. 178).

The *Regula Benedicti* [Rule of Saint Benedict], a guide to Christian monasticism written in the sixth century, provides information on giving up external possessions and, correspondingly, internal clutter.

<sup>103</sup> Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, p. 245.

removal from the world. ‘Amor Umbratilis’ (18 September 1890), ‘Flos Lunae’, and ‘Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration’ [‘Ursulines of the Perpetual Adoration’ (10 February 1891)], describe silent, enclosed spaces that are more than just physical refuges.<sup>104</sup> ‘Amor Umbratilis’ creates the impression of a private prostration before a supreme being:

This one gift, you shall take:  
Like ointment, on your unobservant feet,  
My silence, for your sake.<sup>105</sup>

This act of submissiveness, as it is practised in Catholic doctrine, is intended as a purification ritual to counteract immoral actions or thoughts and to enable a temporary contact between the human and the divine worlds. In a letter to Arthur Moore, dated 28 March 1890, Dowson comments that his aim in life is to linger ‘*in perpetuo* without desire or aim or consciousness whatsoever’ and credits this phrase to Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) where Pater describes the idealism of youth: ‘Had the Romans a word for unworldly? The beautiful word *umbratilis* perhaps comes nearest to it’.<sup>106</sup> In ‘Amor Umbratilis’, this state of *perpetuo* is expressed through the silent adoration of the speaker and is emphasized by the title of the poem, translated as ‘love in the shade of’ or ‘love in private’, which alludes to the secret and solitary nature of Dowson’s love. In relation to the preparation of Marius for the priesthood, Pater writes that there is a ‘sort of mystic enjoyment’ that can be found in abstinence and in ‘the strenuous self-control and *ascēsis*’ that it entails.<sup>107</sup> This sacerdotal discipline is given physical shape in the ascetic monastic space itself, and while the speaker in ‘Amor Umbratilis’ is not prostrate before God, Dowson imagines this incorporeal love as taking place in a liminal, contemplative realm between heaven and earth. Given the Paterian significance of ‘umbratilis’ as ‘unworldly’, the title of this poem could be translated as ‘unworldly love’, perhaps suggestive of a space outside of or between worlds. The speaker demeans himself in a sort of limbo – an empty, silent space in which colour and worldly beauty

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<sup>104</sup> Dowson, ‘In Praise of Solitude’, in *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, vol. VI, October 1891, pp. 136-38.

<sup>105</sup> Dowson, ‘Amor Umbratilis’, in *Verses*, p. 7.

<sup>106</sup> Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 28 March 1890, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 143-45 (p. 144), and Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, ed. by Michael Levey (1885; London: Penguin, 1985), p. 49.

<sup>107</sup> Pater, *Marius the Epicurean*, p. 49.

have been thrown away: 'I have cast my flowers away', the poet declares, 'Blossoms unmeet for you!'<sup>108</sup>

The 'In Praise of Solitude' group illustrates how the poet remains on the threshold between the 'outside' world of sinfulness and pleasure and the 'inside' world of spirituality and nullification. In 'Amor Umbratilis' and 'Flos Lunae' ['Flowers of the Moon'] the girl, as in the 'Sonnets – Of a Little Girl' sequence, has become like a devotional object or relic – 'A frozen thing, alone, apart' – and the poet worships her from afar.<sup>109</sup> Snodgrass comments in 'The Poetry of the 1890s' (2002) that Dowson's 'threatened innocents' are transformed into the 'human equivalents of changeless and untainted works of art', and notes how the woman in the bower has changed into an idol in a reliquary.<sup>110</sup> The speaker's singular focus on her frozen form isolates and minimizes her, but it also intensifies his desire. Her cold and statuesque body is saintly, virginal, and, simultaneously, erotic. Correspondingly, his devotion to her imprisons the speaker on an earthly plane, and it is unclear who is the 'frozen one', himself or her:

I would not alter thy cold eyes,  
With trouble of the human heart:  
Within their glance my spirit lies,  
A frozen thing, alone, apart;<sup>111</sup>

In the opinion of Christopher S. Nassaar (1974), Dowson 'seems to be attracted to Catholicism mainly because it offers a death-like state of calm'.<sup>112</sup> However, the description of the ritual of adoration, and the dedication and restriction it entails, is less morbid than devotional. Within the confines of a monastic space, the poet imagines that he can fully dedicate himself to his struggle against temptation and worship a pure form of beauty. His devotion, however, is to a false God of his own creation, and this idolatry is exacerbated by describing her as a 'moon maiden', an image that evokes pagan lunar worship and the goddess of the moon, Hecate. He remains 'betwixt' and there is a sense of torment that comes from being in this threshold space. The speaker performs an act of spiritual devotion but is really preoccupied with himself and his worldly desires.

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<sup>108</sup> Dowson, 'Amor Umbratilis', p. 7.

<sup>109</sup> Dowson, 'Flos Lunae', in *Verses*, p. 16.

<sup>110</sup> Chris Snodgrass, 'The Poetry of the 1890s', in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 321-41 (p. 330).

<sup>111</sup> Dowson, 'Flos Lunae', p. 16.

<sup>112</sup> Christopher S. Nassaar, *Into the Demon Universe: A Literary Exploration of Oscar Wilde* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 106.

The final poem of the ‘In Praise of Solitude’ group, ‘Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration’, was written seven months before Dowson was received into the Catholic Church. In this depiction of solitude, he describes the nuns’ vows of silence and chastity within the cloister as lived examples of Decadent minimalism, ‘In the dim church, their prayers and penances | Are fragrant incense to the Sacrificed.’<sup>113</sup> The nuns reject the outside world in favour of a life of religious devotion, and this results in a direct and deeper communion with God. Originally titled ‘Ursulines of the Perpetual Adoration’ after the religious order of nuns founded in the fifteenth century for the primary purpose of educating girls and caring for the sick, this poem proposes that far from being just an escape from the world, the monastic enclosure exists to develop a more intense type of spiritual devotion.<sup>114</sup> As in the other two poems in this group, Dowson’s focus is on a singular object of devotion. The Catholic practice of Perpetual Adoration, where the Blessed Sacrament is removed from the tabernacle and continually worshipped (during both the day and night), is the opposite of fleeting, worldly contemplation. Dowson proposes a substitution of desires – freedom and new sensations are exchanged for the timeless security of God and the church. The cloister provides a place set apart from the world where the nuns can dedicate themselves to the contemplative life. ‘Calm, sad, secure; behind high convent walls’, they are protected from the fading beauty, and the ‘wild and passionate’ life they have left behind.<sup>115</sup>

Dowson’s focus on religious spaces, as opposed to religious objects, is developed in ‘Carthusians’, written three months after ‘Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration’.<sup>116</sup> Dowson’s inspiration for this poem is recorded in a letter to Moore (3 April 1891), in which he reveals that he ‘spent Monday at a Carthusian monastery in Sussex: Cowfold. An adorable place, high up and away from everywhere. Beata Solitudo! Perpetual silence!’<sup>117</sup> Having been enchanted by the peace and solitude of the actual place, in the poem (composed a month later) Dowson’s focus is less on the evocative power of the ritual object or the Blessed Sacrament, and more on an examination of the ceremonial

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<sup>113</sup> Dowson, ‘Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration’, p. 2.

<sup>114</sup> Dowson makes a few revisions to the title of this poem. In the ‘In Praise of Solitude’ group, it is titled ‘The Carmelite Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration’. This could be an allusion to the Carmelite Monastery in North Kensington, where, in one of the busiest parts of London, a silent order of nuns resides.

<sup>115</sup> Dowson, ‘Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration’, in *Verses*, p. 2.

<sup>116</sup> The manuscript in the Poésie Schublade Notebook is dated 27 May 91.

<sup>117</sup> Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, 3 April 1891, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 190-91 (p. 191).

space of the charterhouse – an enclosure of ‘austere walls’ where ‘no voices penetrate’.<sup>118</sup> In this ‘cloistered company’ the monks are ‘companionless’ but dedicated to one purpose: ‘The sweeter service of the most dolorous Cross.’<sup>119</sup> However, the religious vows of Christian monasticism (poverty, chastity, and obedience) are in contrast to the quasi-Catholic rite performed by the speaker and his companions, what Boyiopoulos terms, in *The Decadent Image* (2015), a ‘twisted Holy Communion, evoking the Catholic satanic rituals in Huysmans’s *Là-Bas* (1891)’.<sup>120</sup> As expressed in the penultimate stanza:

We fling up flowers and laugh, we laugh across the wine;  
 With wine we dull our souls and careful strains of art;  
 Our cups are polished skulls round which the roses twine:  
 None dares to look at Death who leers and lurks apart.<sup>121</sup>

This observance is infused with imagery that suggests death and despair – wine, roses, and skulls. Rather than receiving the sacrament from the chalice, a reminder of eternal life after death, their cups contain oblivion and dullness – ‘Our viols cease, our wine is death, our roses fail’.<sup>122</sup> Roses wither and die, children become adults, but the Carthusians move beyond worldly limits and achieve salvation and transcendence. The speaker, however, is unable to fully bring himself to despise ‘the world’s wisdom and the world’s desire’.<sup>123</sup>

Joseph Salemi, in ‘The Religious Poetry of Ernest Dowson’, explains how the renunciation of the world, as described in ‘Carthusians’ for example, is associated with the restriction of the body. According to the rules of claustration in Catholic doctrine, the profane is prevented from filtering in from the outside world through the actions of the individual monk who should attempt to reach a divine state of moral and physical cleanliness.<sup>124</sup> Spatial separation from the world assists in the monks’ detachment from bodily pleasures, and Salemi comments on how ‘the arousal of devotion is intimately

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<sup>118</sup> Dowson, ‘Carthusians’, in *Decorations*, pp. 6-7 (p. 7).

<sup>119</sup> Dowson, ‘Carthusians’, p. 7.

<sup>120</sup> Kostas Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons and Dowson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 146.

<sup>121</sup> Dowson, ‘Carthusians’, p. 7.

<sup>122</sup> Dowson, ‘Carthusians’, p. 7.

<sup>123</sup> Dowson, ‘Carthusians’, p. 7.

<sup>124</sup> ‘Claustration (Cloister), Rules of’, in *Encyclopaedia of Monasticism*, vol. I, ed. by William M. Johnson (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000), pp. 104-06.

linked with visual and oral stimuli'.<sup>125</sup> Within the monastic space, all of the senses are controlled in order to assist in religious absolution. Everything that the monk eats, touches, smells, and chants, has a divine significance. As Salemi elaborates, Catholicism has 'always favoured the corporeal as the first step to the spiritual'.<sup>126</sup> The refined religious space and the purity of the monk anticipate the exquisite beauty of heaven and the divine. In Dowson's Catholic verses, however, this is reversed. Restriction, renunciation, and devotion (the spiritual) intensify rather than negate his obsession with his lost love and his own sinfulness (the corporal). Through the restriction of physical sensations and limitation of pleasure the sacred becomes tangible, but at the same time the incense, anointing oils, and sacred chants of the church are pleasurable bodily experiences that are reminders of the earthly pleasures. In Dowson's Catholic verses, the cloister and charterhouse are not presented like waiting-rooms, in which the speaker prepares himself for salvation, rather they are like ideal threshold spaces, situated between the worldly and the spiritual.

Between 1891 and 1896, when he moved to Pont-Aven in Brittany, Dowson refined and reworked his poems.<sup>127</sup> His later verses become more minimalist and he describes self-punishment as a form of purification. Robert Sherard, the friend who looked after Dowson for a few weeks until the poet's death, recounts how Dowson's search for suffering was conducted 'with the same eagerness with which most men pursue pleasure . . . neglecting himself utterly, with the deliberation of the penitent seeking in the humiliation of sackcloth and ashes and vermin the absolution of his follies and his sins.'<sup>128</sup> Chris Snodgrass writes in 'Aesthetic Memory's Cul-de-sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson' (1992), that Dowson's longing for complete forms of purity, search for timelessness through annihilation of the body, and acute awareness of the ephemeral nature of life recall Arthur Schopenhauer's ideas of nihilism and extreme pessimism.<sup>129</sup> Dowson's post-conversion poems, to use Schopenhauer's words, focus

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<sup>125</sup> Joseph Salemi, 'The Religious Poetry of Ernest Dowson', *The Victorian Newsletter*, 72 (1987), 44-47 (p. 45).

<sup>126</sup> Salemi, 'The Religious Poetry of Ernest Dowson', p. 45.

<sup>127</sup> As I discuss in the conclusion to this thesis, Dowson's Pont-Aven poems, written at the end of his life (1896-1899), indicate a later development in his work and become more focused on the materiality of place and littoral spaces.

<sup>128</sup> Robert Harborough Sherard, *The Real Oscar Wilde*, p. 82, quoted in Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 103.

<sup>129</sup> See Chris Snodgrass, 'Aesthetic Memory's Cul-de-sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson', *English Literature in Transition*, 35 (1992), 26-53 (p. 30).



on ‘aesthetic contemplation’ and a denial of the ‘Will-to-live’.<sup>130</sup> Silence, purity, and stillness are the main concerns of ‘Villanelle of his Lady’s Treasures’, ‘A Valediction’, ‘Beata Solitudo’ [‘Blessed Solitude’], and all the poems that were included in *Verses*. In ‘Villanelle of His Lady’s Treasures’, the image of reliquary recalls the ‘Sonnets – Of a Little Girl’ sequence, but in the later poem he fragments her body, taking her ‘dainty eyes’, ‘her voice, a silver bell’, and her ‘whiteness virginal’ and abstracts her beyond a relic and into nothingness.<sup>131</sup>

The purity inferred in these poems evokes the space of the cloister, but unlike his earlier Poésie Schublade poems there is a sense that the speaker is finally saying goodbye ‘to his Lady and to Love’, leaving himself empty of hope or desire.<sup>132</sup> In ‘A Valediction’, written after Adelaide’s rejection of Dowson’s marriage proposal in April 1893, for example, the speaker’s last farewell to his love is an expression of his emptiness and sorrow.<sup>133</sup> The poem is set in a realm where ‘Words are so weak’ that silence speaks.<sup>134</sup> Similarly, in ‘Beata Solitudo’, Dowson invites the reader to imagine the blessings of isolation in a ‘silent valley’.<sup>135</sup> The poem contains echoes of his earlier bower verses. For example, the apple-blossom, a symbol of virginal purity, returns the poet to the memory of his innocent love object, Adelaide. However, Dowson experiences these memories of a past desire as a tormenting punishment, rather than a source of salvation. They follow him from the drawer, to the cloister, and beyond.

### **The Threshold Body in ‘Extreme Unction’**

In ‘Extreme Unction’, a poem that was initially included in a letter to Plarr (28 November 1893) and first printed in the *Second Book of the Rhymers’ Club* (1894) before being published in *Verses*, a feeling of *thresholdness*, if not exactly a threshold

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A number of Dowson’s contemporaries testified to Schopenhauer’s profound influence on the poet. See, for example, Victor Plarr in *Ernest Dowson; 1888-1897* and Robert Harborough Sherard in *Twenty Years in Paris* (London: Hutchinson, 1905).

<sup>130</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The Will to Live: Selected Writings of Arthur Schopenhauer*, ed. by Richard Taylor (1962; New York: Ungar, 1975), p. 242, quoted in Snodgrass, ‘Aesthetic Memory’s Cul-de-sac: The Art of Ernest Dowson’, p. 30.

<sup>131</sup> Dowson, ‘Villanelle of His Lady’s Treasures’, in *Verses*, p. 37.

<sup>132</sup> Dowson, ‘A Coronet’, p. xi.

<sup>133</sup> ‘A Valediction’ was initially written on the back of a letter from a share-pusher, dated 13 December 1893. See Thornton and Caroline Dowson’s notes to the poem, in *Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems*, p. 242.

<sup>134</sup> Dowson, ‘A Valediction’, in *Verses*, p. 49.

<sup>135</sup> Dowson, ‘Beata Solitudo’, in *Verses*, pp. 32-33 (p. 32).

space, is at its most intense [see Appendix D].<sup>136</sup> In this poem, the speaker dramatizes the sealing up of the body and the extreme cleansing and anointing that is taking place in order to purify the soul for heaven, but at the same time he also lingers on the sensory pleasures of the body. He describes the Sacrament of Extreme Unction – the final purification ritual of anointing the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands, and, occasionally, the feet of the dying, with sacred oils after confession and before Holy Communion. The stilled and cleansed body that is still able to perceive the world but take no part in it is the ultimate form of Dowson's Decadent minimalism.

The ritual of Extreme Unction is imagined by Dowson as a reverse baptism through which the body is returned to a pure state. While it seems to bring the point of death nearer, this sacrament also provides a consolation. Life becomes more distant and salvation becomes closer. Similarly, there is a clear transcendental quality to Dowson's poem that culminates in the penultimate stanza where the speaker ruminates on the confusion of his life that has led him to this moment:

I know not where nor when I come,  
Nor through what wanderings and toils,  
To crave of you Viaticum.<sup>137</sup>

When it is administered to the dying, the Eucharist is known as Viaticum, a word that alludes to the ancient Greek custom of giving supper to those setting out on a journey.<sup>138</sup> A craving for the symbolic body of Christ, in the form of the Eucharist, replaces the speaker's desire for the physical body, and the taking of the Viaticum symbolizes the preparation for the final journey from life to death. The moribund body epitomizes a threshold state, just after the 'walls of flesh grow weak' but before 'each anointed sense' perceives the light of the other side.<sup>139</sup> The speaker imagines blocking up his senses and purifying his body; essentially turning himself into a hermetically sealed space via these newly cleansed 'passages'. Through the cleansing process, the empty body is relieved of the pressures of the world. This results in a change in sensory perception – rather

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<sup>136</sup> Dowson includes a version of 'Extreme Unction' in a letter to Plarr (28 November 1893). See *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 299-300.

<sup>137</sup> Dowson, 'Extreme Unction', in *Verses*, p. 44.

<sup>138</sup> The Latin root is *viaticus*, i.e. 'of or pertaining to a road or journey'. For further definition see <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/15397c.htm> [accessed 12 September 2016].

<sup>139</sup> Dowson, 'Extreme Unction', p. 44.

than opening up, the act of Extreme Unction symbolizes a complete sensory withdrawal.

The change in the way that Dowson imagines this ritual exemplifies the development that has taken place in his poetry – from a focus on beauty and sensuality, this poem expresses a desire for perfect emptiness. In 1893, Dowson was asked by Alexander Teixeira, a member of the Lutetian Society, to translate Émile Zola's *La Terre* [*The Earth*], a commission that Dowson was initially happy to receive due to his life-long interest in the French writer's work, and his enthusiasm for Zola is suggested in 'Extreme Unction', which he wrote while undertaking this translation.<sup>140</sup> The poem directly relates to the episode in Zola's novel *Le Rêve* [*The Dream*] (1888), which describes an extended account of the last rites performed on the child, Angélique Marie. In the novel, Zola refers to Extreme Unction as 'la médecine céleste, instituée pour la guérison de l'âme et du corps' [the celestial medicine, instituted for the cure of the soul and body].<sup>141</sup> The ritual is intensified through the decoration of the room with a large crucifix, silver candelabra, and great white roses. Angélique is positioned in the middle of this whiteness and, like the roses, her body appears as a manifestation of innocence and sensuality.

In a letter to Arthur Moore, written three months after the publication of *Le Rêve* (January 1889), Dowson compliments Zola's depiction of the 'excessively fine notion' of this last rite and how 'one would procure it – (it seems essentially pagan) without undue compromise or affectation of a belief in "a sort of something somewhere", simply as an exquisite sensation, & for the sensation's sake'.<sup>142</sup> In the letter, Dowson foregrounds sensory salvation and perverse enjoyment. Extreme Unction is perceived as a bodily ritual that, in the manner of Des Esseintes' experiments, would be performed for the sensation rather than any deeper religious meaning.<sup>143</sup> In *Le Rêve*, Angélique experiences the sensations of Extreme Unction and takes the sacrament only to then

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<sup>140</sup> Arthur Symons and Victor Plarr had also been asked by Teixeira to translate *L'Assommoir* (*The Drunkard*) and *Nana*, respectively. See Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, pp. 71-72.

<sup>141</sup> Émile Zola, *Le Rêve* (Paris: G. Charpentier de cie, 1888), p. 273 / my translation.

<sup>142</sup> Dowson, letter to Arthur Moore, date unknown (Thursday night [? 3 January 1889]), in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 21-23 (p. 22).

<sup>143</sup> Katherine Wheatley comments on the similarities between 'Extreme Unction' and descriptions of this last rite in French literature, with particular reference to Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856) and the ending of the novel where Monsieur Bournisien administers the sacrament to Emma Bovary on her death bed. However, Wheatley's conjecture that Dowson merely versifies Flaubert's depiction of Extreme Unction places the focus on sensory excess rather than on Dowson's spiritual preoccupations. Katherine Wheatley, 'Ernest Dowson's Extreme Unction', *Modern Language Notes*, 38:5 (1923), 315.

recover, and, similarly, Dowson imagines participating in and then reflecting on his own last rites.

The focus on the body in ‘Extreme Unction’ initially suggests an emphasis on the corporeal. Dowson names each part of the body that is to be anointed and follows this with an account of the sin that has taken place. ‘The eyes’, for instance, ‘that were so often cast | On vanity’.<sup>144</sup> The first two stanzas are a direct reference to the priest’s words in the sickroom and, in comparison to Dowson’s lengthy description of girl’s hands in ‘Ad Manus Puellae’, ‘Extreme Unction’ is a not really a poem about the body. Instead, at the same time that he is imagining past physical pleasures, Dowson’s references to the senses and sacramental oils allude to a sense of religious purification and an emptying-out of sins and senses. In the opening stanza, the connection between ‘sense’ and ‘innocence’ is enhanced by the light rhyme at the end of the second and fourth lines, and the rich and sensual sounds that permeate the rest of the poem. The feet, for example, are ‘soothly sealed’ and this culminates in the speaker’s almost sacrilegious cries for ‘Vials of mercy! Sacring Oils!’<sup>145</sup> As he watches the last rites of a dying man, the speaker craves the ‘Renewal of lost innocence’ that he is receiving.<sup>146</sup> Through cleansing the aesthetic impurities from the body and metaphorically sealing up the orifices from the world, the body becomes like ritual object – an enclosed, sealed vessel for the soul. The body is in a state of betwixtness.

In “‘Enchanted wine’: Symons, Dowson, and Keats’s intoxications’ (2015), Boyiopoulos argues that in contrast to Symons, who attempts to escape through a repetitive and amplified engagement with artifice and sensuality, ‘Dowson’s speakers sharpen the senses in the realm of the imagination and through perverse forms of abstinence, as in Roman Catholic ritual.’<sup>147</sup> The ritual of Extreme Unction is performed on a non-responsive body, and is a reminder of the sensual excesses of the past. As the ‘anointing oil is spread’ on ‘all the passages of sense’, the now still eyes, lips, and feet are contrasted with their former movement; feet that ‘ran so fast | To meet desire’.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Dowson, ‘Extreme Unction’, p. 44.

<sup>145</sup> Dowson, ‘Extreme Unction’, p. 44.

<sup>146</sup> Adams posits that ‘Extreme Unction’ may well have been a direct reaction to Dowson witnessing the last rites of Adelaide’s father, Joseph Foltinowicz, and this could account for the focus on the renewal of innocence in the poem. See *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 76.

<sup>147</sup> Kostas Boyiopoulos, “‘Enchanted wine’: Symons, Dowson, and Keats’s intoxications”, in *Decadent Romanticism: 1780-1914*, ed. by Kostas Boyiopoulos and Mark Sandy (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 59-74 (p. 69).

<sup>148</sup> Dowson, ‘Extreme Unction’, p. 44.

The speaker takes pleasure from watching this extreme bodily restriction and restraint. Only after receiving Extreme Unction and with its spiritual health restored can the soul transition to the after-life, but Dowson subtly dramatizes this moment of *betwixtness* – when the body is in the last phase of life just before death. For Dowson the figure of the dying man becomes a metaphor for the poet trapped in a limbo between the worldly and the spiritual.

From the drawer to the cloister, Dowson's *thresholdness* is associated with the point of nullification. In his early poems, he imagines the *jeune fille*, a figure on the cusp of youth and adulthood, in a bowered space of perpetual springtime. After his Catholic conversion, he depicts states of worldly and spiritual indeterminacy in which his speakers become silenced and reduce their bodies to vessels for the soul. The symbolism of the drawer, in which objects are hidden but also revealed, is not just evocative of the intimacy and secrecy of his poetry, but communicates to the reader the search for spaces of withdrawal that motivate his speakers in both *Verses* and *Decorations*. Thinking of Dowson's poems in terms of purity, minimalism, and withdrawal helps us to understand the retraction that characterizes his poetry. His speakers are situated in spaces that become increasingly silent, ghostly, and empty. Unlike Huysmans's threshold of the worldly and the spiritual, in which sensory experiences and ornate objects act as portals to other realms, the threshold qualities of Dowson's writing are epitomized in reduced spaces which convey his personal, moral dilemmas. Across his poetic oeuvre, Dowson's focus is solipsistic. He is less focused on the materiality of threshold spaces and is more focused on communicating a private feeling of being 'betwixt'.

In his memoir of Dowson, Symons comments on 'the two sides' of Dowson's life, 'the side open to the street, and the side turned away from it, where he could "hush and bless himself with silence."' <sup>149</sup> This recalls 'Benedictio Domini' ['Blessing of God'] (1894), in *Verses*, and Dowson's use of the city church as an example of a religious space that is, like himself, unable to be completely disconnected from the world. Unlike his earlier depictions of imagined removal from the modern world, the drawer and the cloister, the city church is not a completely isolated place of veneration. The worshippers are partially removed from the sounds of London, and in the church they

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<sup>149</sup> Symons, 'Ernest Dowson', p. xxiii.

are ‘Hushed with bowed heads’.<sup>150</sup> Within the church all that can be heard is the ‘admonition of a silver bell’, and all that can be seen is the white altar ‘Dressed like a bride’.<sup>151</sup> The ‘sullen noises of the street’ are countered with simplicity. For Dowson, the threshold space of the doorway is symbolic of the place where the sacred and the secular are in communion, the physical place where the two worlds correspond. The speaker lingering on this threshold symbolizes his dual longings. He will always be pulled between the ‘drawer’ (physical love) and the ‘cloister’ (spiritual salvation). This is expressed in the juxtaposition between silence and sound, which in the last stanza is aligned with damnation: ‘the sounding street | Heralds the world’s swift passage to the fire’ and the concluding line of the poem, ‘When shall men cease to suffer and desire?’ is posed rhetorically.<sup>152</sup> Suffering will only end when worldly desires are rejected in favour of the quiet and simple beauty of the church.

The sanctuary is no longer just an imaginary space, but rather a physical place that offers the promise of purity and renewal. The poet however remains ‘betwixt’ – admiring the purity and sanctity of the monastic life but unable to fully relinquish the world’s desires and give himself over to a contemplation of the divine. His portrayal of the Notre Dame de France in ‘Benedictio Domini’ for example is a rare description of his surroundings, and ‘The voice of London, inarticulate’.<sup>153</sup> In relation to his own struggle with salvation and damnation, the modern noises of *fin-de-siècle* Leicester Square have become meaningless.

In Dowson’s poems, Symons found ‘hidden away like a secret, all the fever and turmoil and the untainted dreams of life’.<sup>154</sup> In the following chapter I discuss how, in contrast to Dowson’s inward retreat, Symons uses exterior, urban spaces as stages for his personal moral and sexual dilemmas. In contrast to the idea of Dowson as a ‘drawer’ poet, I consider Symons as a ‘border’ poet, who explores points of transition and crossings in his poetry. Dowson and Symons share a poetic focus on a representing a feeling of *thresholdness*. However, the threshold space, which encapsulates a sense of separateness in Dowson’s verses, is related more to physical spaces in Symons’s early Decadent poetry collections, *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*. City streets, back-alleys,

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<sup>150</sup> Dowson, ‘Benedictio Domini’, in *Verses*, p. 13.

<sup>151</sup> Dowson, ‘Benedictio Domini’, p. 13.

<sup>152</sup> Dowson, ‘Benedictio Domini’, p. 13.

<sup>153</sup> Dowson, ‘Benedictio Domini’, p. 13.

<sup>154</sup> Symons, ‘Ernest Dowson’, p. i.

and doorways are marginal spaces associated with everyday life, but they also mediate between the public and the private in a way that evokes Symons's restless and roving perspective. He represents travelling between different spaces in the city and this kind of threshold spatiality recalls Baudelaire's portrayal of Paris from earlier in the century. In the poems that depict moving between the private space of Fountain Court and the public space of the music-hall, Symons associates travelling between places with a sense of personal yearning.

## CHAPTER 4



## Urban and Rural Thresholds

### Arthur Symons's *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*

Arthur Symons's early verse collections, *Silhouettes* (1892, revised 1896) and *London Nights* (1895, revised 1897), are intense evocations of *thresholdness*. In these collections, he exhibits a preoccupation with fluctuating states, borders, and transitions. As in the work of Baudelaire, Huysmans, and Dowson, Symons's depiction of urban threshold spaces exemplifies his marginal and restless perspective.<sup>1</sup> His description of the flux and stillness of the city is underpinned with a Baudelairean sense of urban threshold poetics; the sensory and performative music-hall space in which the poet and the performer are interconnected share a spatiality with Huysmans's dynamically compartmentalized rooms; and in his depictions of the private realms of dancers' dressing rooms and back-stage areas he implies something of Dowson's spatial reductionism and sensory intensification. However, as I argue in this chapter, Symons also explores another kind of threshold, one that is more to do with feeling in-between, in an anxious and restless state of expectation and excitement. In 'A Prelude to Life' (1905) he writes:

If I have been a vagabond, and I have never been able to root myself in any one place in the world, it is because I have no early memories of any one sky or soil. It has freed me from many prejudices in giving me its own unresting kind of freedom; but it has cut me off from whatever is stable, of long growth in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Symons's experiences of living in the heart of London and his travels to the Continent are described in *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*, collections that he published

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<sup>1</sup> The breadth of Symons's interests and his mediation between French and English writers are two of the themes of the forthcoming volume, *Arthur Symons: Poet, Critic, Vagabond*, ed. by Elisa Bizzotto and Stefano Evangelista (Cambridge: Legenda, Forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Symons, 'A Prelude to Life' (from *Spiritual Adventures*, London, 1905), in *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890s*, ed. by Karl Beckson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), pp. 6-24 (p. 6).



after his first holiday abroad, a visit to France with Havelock Ellis in September 1889, and his move to Fountain Court in January 1891. Ellis recalls:

[Symons] had never been to Paris or out of England before, and was pleased to be under my wing. He had, indeed, never left the roof of his father, a Puritanical Wesleyan minister, and at Paris I introduced him, for the first time, to wine and cigarettes.<sup>3</sup>

During their eight-day stay, Symons was drawn to the bohemian and restless life of the *Rive Gauche* and this experience had a lasting impact on his writing. There is a marked difference between the dramatic monologues of *Days and Nights* (1889), which take inspiration from Browning, for example, and Symons's use of the short lyric in *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* after his visit to Paris. References to French writers (Baudelaire and Verlaine) and artists (Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas) recur in *Silhouettes*, and their influence becomes explicit in his perception of London as a place of desire and longing in *London Nights*. They are considered Symons's most Decadent poetry collections, and they established him as key figure of the literary scene of the *fin de siècle*. Like Dowson's *Verses* and *Decorations*, they reflect both his personal experiences and the atmosphere of *fin-de-siècle* London, but unlike Dowson's obsessive and minimising focus, the spatiality of Symons's poetry collections (urban and rural, British and continental) reflects his roving and wandering perspective.

Previous studies of Symons's early poetry collections have predominantly focused on his music-hall poems and his depictions of dancers.<sup>4</sup> As critics such as Matthew Sturgis (1995) and Barry Faulk (2004) have commented, the music-hall is a clear influence on his early poetry collections – Symons thinks of them in terms of music and performance, using an operatic arrangement for *London Nights* and giving many poems musical titles ('Caprice', 'Madrigal', and 'Air de Ballet', for instance). This, combined with his numerous critical pieces on dancing and the ballet, has led

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<sup>3</sup> Havelock Ellis, *My Life* (London and Toronto: William Heinemann, 1940), p. 203.

<sup>4</sup> There is a concentration of works on Symons and dance in the 1960s and in the past decade. Some major studies not discussed elsewhere are Ian Fletcher, 'Explorations and Recoveries, II: Symons, Yeats and the Demonic Dance', *London Magazine*, 7 (June 1960), 26-60; Roger Lhombreaud, *Arthur Symons: A Critical Biography* (London: Unicorn Press, 1963); Jane Pritchard, "'More Natural Than Nature, More Artificial Than Art": The Dance Criticism of Arthur Symons', *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 21 (2003), 36-89; and Alice Condé, 'Incorporeal Punishment: Writing Masochism in English Decadence 1860-1900' (unpublished PhD Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014).

Symons to be reputed as the ‘decadent laureate’ of the music-hall.<sup>5</sup> However, I argue that Symons’s restlessness extends beyond the confines of the metropolis to the countryside and beyond that to the littoral spaces of the coast. In both collections, his poems of European travel and rural landscapes (predominantly Wales and Cornwall) outnumber the London poems and offer a new perspective on his urban verses. As I discuss in the second half of this chapter, in the opening section of *Silhouettes*, ‘At Dieppe’, Symons compares the restlessness of the sea and his perception of London, and in *London Nights* the threshold between the city and coastal spaces determines the structure of the collection. The three ‘London Nights’ sections are punctuated with a series of holiday poems in the form of two Intermezzo sections, proposing a comparison between the city, sea, and countryside. The impression that is created overall is of Symons’s itinerant perspective and a sense of travelling between different spaces.

Symons scholars and critics have tended to focus on the city poems, but I argue that if we consider *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* in their entirety, their evocation of threshold spaces and states becomes strikingly apparent and reflects both Symons’s own sense of rootlessness and yearning – a typically Decadent preoccupation with impermanence and ambiguity. The *thresholdness* of Symons’s poems reveals a poignant sense of searching and seeking, which he describes in his later autobiographical essay, *Confessions: A Study in Pathology* (1930) as ‘the Demon of Restlessness’ that possessed him throughout his life.<sup>6</sup>

### **Travelling between: Fountain Court and the Music-Hall**

In the two most important verse collections, *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*, Symons’s speaker appears to conform to the French figure of the *flâneur*. As I explored in the first chapter of this thesis, this term was used by Walter Benjamin in reference to Baudelaire’s description of the poet in ‘Le Peintre de la vie moderne’. He is someone who attempts ‘[ê]tre hors de chez soi, et pourtant se sentir partout chez soi; voir le monde, être au centre du monde et rester caché au monde’ [to be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Sturgis writes that the music-hall was a ‘toy decadent world’ in which Symons became ‘the toy decadent laureate’. *Passionate Attitudes: The English Decadence of the 1890s* (1995; London: Macmillan, 2011), p. 102. However, in ‘The Blight on the Music-halls’ (1899), Max Beerbohm was the first to refer to Symons as the ‘laureate’ of the music-hall.

<sup>6</sup> Symons, *Confessions: A Study in Pathology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930), p. 14.

yet to be unseen of the world].<sup>7</sup> For both Baudelaire and Symons, the poet-*flâneur* is paradoxically placed – both of the world and outside it. This is particularly evident in Symons's poems that depict travelling as a metaphor for his feelings of marginality and restlessness. He depicts London as a characteristically threshold city and describes moving between its different districts and boroughs; from leafy bohemian Hampstead to the seedy alleyways of the East End, and from the quiet and secluded backstreets of Holborn to the riotous music-halls of Soho and Leicester Square. In his early verse collections, I argue, we encounter a familiar sense of Decadent *thresholdness*. The poems convey a sense of physical thresholds (between interior and exterior); of temporal thresholds (between night and day); and of experiential thresholds (between memory and desire). In the first parts of this chapter, my focus is on the physical and experiential threshold in Symons's *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* – the threshold experience of travelling between different spaces in the city, and the threshold spaces of movement and stillness (the music-hall and Fountain Court) – and in the later parts, I consider how rural and littoral locations in these early poetry collections are used in comparison to urban spaces. Symons represents the parallels between the city and the sea. They are both fluctuating and dynamic threshold spaces.

Symons wrote, or revised, all of the poems collected and published in *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* while living in his four-room London apartment in 2 Fountain Court (now 33 Essex Street), Middle Temple.<sup>8</sup> Fountain Court was Symons's home for ten years, from January 1891 until he married Rhoda Bowser in 1901, and it was the centre of a literary and cultural network in the 1890s. Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick remark, in their 'Introduction' to *Selected Early Poems: Arthur Symons* (2017), 'Symons's apartments included a second suite of rooms in which he was able to accommodate at various times such temporary tenants or visitors as Havelock Ellis, Yeats, and Verlaine himself.'<sup>9</sup> It is clear from his letters, memoirs and friends' accounts

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<sup>7</sup> Baudelaire, 'Le Peintre de la vie moderne', p. 692 / *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Fountain Court is the central chamber of a network of courts and surrounding streets: New Court to the north-east, Middle Temple Lane to the east, Garden Court to the south-west, and Essex Street to the north-west. In the summer, Fountain Court can also be approached through Middle Temple Library on the east side. In 1891-1901, the Middle Temple was not part of Holborn, which lay to the north of Fleet Street.

<sup>9</sup> Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick, 'Introduction' in *Selected Early Poems: Arthur Symons*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), pp. 1-26 (p. 7).

Verlaine stayed with Symons during his lecture tour in 1893, and recorded his memory of his visit in the poem 'Fountain Court, à Arthur Symons', which he dedicated to Symons. See Paul Verlaine,

that Symons used his apartment as a meeting space and as somewhere to reflect on his experiences of London.<sup>10</sup>

In the fashion of French writers, whose apartments were both private and public spaces, Symons's rooms in the Temple served a dual function. On his return to London after his first visit to Paris, Symons was left with the lingering impression that French writers had both private spaces of retreat in which they worked and public places of intellectual exchange.<sup>11</sup> As Symons writes in a letter to his American friend Katherine Willard, dated 5 February 1891, Fountain Court is like 'an oasis in the heart of London – quietest spot in all the great city, yet with the roar of the Strand only just out of hearing.'<sup>12</sup> It was the 'realisation of a dream' to have obtained rooms in this area that was 'supposed to be used only by lawyers'.<sup>13</sup> Positioned between the urban bustle of the east end of the Strand and the Embankment running along the north bank of the Thames, the medieval courtyard is a threshold space of partial retreat – both a part of the hubbub of the city and a world apart.<sup>14</sup> Symons also decorated his rooms in the style of a bohemian man of letters, and he may have had in mind the parallel vogue in England and France for interviewing celebrities in their homes (such as the photographs of Huysmans taken by Dornac which I discussed in Chapter Two). In another letter to Willard, dated 21 December 1891, for example, he asks her to look out for a small divan which will co-ordinate with his "'tones" of colour'. He chooses colours favoured by the 1890s Decadents for his apartment. 'My room', he writes, 'is all green and yellow [...] mine are a somewhat greyish green and a somewhat vague yellow'.<sup>15</sup>

In both *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*, Fountain Court is a point of departure and return. The poem 'In Fountain Court', included in 'Moods and Memories' in *Silhouettes*

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'Fountain Court, à Arthur Symons', *Dédicaces, Œuvres complètes de Paul Verlaine*, vol. 3 (Paris: A. Messein, 1908), p. 157.

<sup>10</sup> In 1894, Havelock Ellis moved into an adjoining two-room apartment overlooking Essex Street and he continued to occupy rooms there until Symons's marriage, occasionally renting out his rooms to other people, such as Yeats from October 1895 to February 1896.

<sup>11</sup> In his essay 'Paul Verlaine', Symons describes his first introduction to the French poet. After meeting him in the Café François Premier, Verlaine invited Symons to his room in in the Hôtel des Mines, 65 Boulevard Saint-Michel, the following night. See Symons, 'Paul Verlaine', *Black and White*, I (20 June 1891), p. 649.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Symons, letter to Katherine Willard (then Baldwin), 5 February 1891, in *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters, 1880-1935*, ed. by Karl Beckson and John M. Munro (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 70-73 (p. 70).

<sup>13</sup> Symons, letter to Willard, 5 February 1891, p. 70.

<sup>14</sup> In 1871, the Inn purchased the building and renamed it 'Fountain Court' in 1880. It now retains its original name of 33 Essex Street.

<sup>15</sup> Symons, letter to Katherine Willard, 21 December 1891, in *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, pp. 90-93 (p. 92)

and composed on 11 June 1891, is the only one in which Symons explicitly describes the atmosphere of the courtyard beneath his apartment.<sup>16</sup> His bedroom and study were on the top floor, directly overlooking the fountain and ancient mulberry tree. As is described in the poem:

The fountain murmuring of sleep,  
 A drowsy tune;  
 The flickering green of leaves that keep  
 The light of June;  
 Peace, through a slumbering afternoon,  
 The peace of June.

A waiting ghost, in the blue sky,  
 The white curved moon;  
 June, hushed and breathless, waits, and I  
 Wait too, with June;  
 Come, through the lingering afternoon,  
 Soon, love, come soon.<sup>17</sup>

It is ‘a slumbering afternoon’ and Symons’s thoughts of the city gather around the courtyard as if it is a magnetic centre. Two types of imagery coalesce to create a sense of the drawn-out threshold moment, poised between the sanctity of the peaceful court and the excitement of the night to come. His evocation of the ‘peace’ of the fountain and the ‘hushed and breathless’ sounds of his first summer spent in Fountain Court initially create a sense of restfulness, and the real-world images, the ‘murmuring’ fountain and ‘flickering’ leaves, generate a sense of the surrounding city and its muffled sounds and glimmering lights. All the sensations of a summer afternoon keep the poet in a state of expectancy. Fountain Court is presented as a secluded and isolated space but at the same time it offers a sense of the visual excesses of the urban nightlife outside of the Temple.

This *thresholdness* is captured by Alvin Langdon Coburn in his photograph of the courtyard, *The Temple* (1909), taken to accompany Symons’s topographical study, *London: A Book of Aspects*, privately printed in 1909 but predominantly written in the

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<sup>16</sup> This date was included in Symons’s annotations to his *Collected Works* (London: Martin Secker, 1924). While these dates are of great value to critics and biographers, they are not always reliable as they were added post-breakdown. I have indicated in the footnotes where I have found anomalies between Symons’s 1924 dates and his movements in the 1890s.

<sup>17</sup> Symons, ‘In Fountain Court’, in *Silhouettes*, p. 85.

1890s [Fig. 4.1]. In the Arthur Symons archive at Princeton, it is the only image from this proposed collaboration retained in his collection of photographs and pictures. The elevated angle in this photograph is the same viewpoint as Symons would have had when looking down from his apartment. Using the photo-mechanical process of photogravure, in which photographic details are etched into copper then inked and printed, Coburn creates an image that evokes both movement and stillness.<sup>18</sup> The painterly, Impressionistic effect creates an analogy between the rippling water and the blurred, moving leaves that surround the shadowy figure. In comparison to Baudelaire's *chambre*, discussed in Chapter One as a space of partial retreat from the city that necessitates a further withdrawal from the real world into a vast imaginative landscape, Symons's apartment anticipates his restless, outward-looking perspective.

**Third-party copyright image removed**

Fig. 4.1. Arthur Symons's copy of Alvin Langdon Coburn, *The Temple* (1909), photogravure, 533 x 404 mm. Arthur Symons Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, C0182, Series 9.

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<sup>18</sup> Coburn learnt the process of photogravure over three years, from 1906, at the London County School of Photo-Engraving in Bolt Court, off Fleet Street. See *Alfred Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography*, ed. by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim (New York: Dover Publications, 1978), p. 74.

In 'Romancing the City: Arthur Symons and the Spatial Politics of Aesthetics in 1890s London' (2002), Michelle Sipe briefly remarks on the function of Symons's apartment as a space for private reflection and urban inspiration. She refutes the 'self-fashioned image' of Symons as just an 'urban Rambler and poet'.<sup>19</sup> As 'Silhouette', Symons's pen-name for the *Star* newspaper, he visited a range of theatres and music-halls, returning to the sequestered space of Fountain Court to write his reviews.<sup>20</sup> Sipe comments on how most critics have 'overlooked the significance of his modest yet legitimate middle-class lodgings, or the productive spatial relationship between the professional writer's home and his centralized access to spaces for pleasure and consumption as well as writing and productivity'.<sup>21</sup> This amalgamation of work and pleasure is described perfectly in the pair of poems, 'City Nights', included in the same sub-section as 'In Fountain Court' and originally published in the *Academy* (4 July 1891). In the first edition of *Silhouettes*, this pairing retains its original title, 'London Nights', and the two poems 'I. In the Train' and 'II. In the Temple' are titled 'Going to Hammersmith' and 'From Kings Bench Walk', respectively.<sup>22</sup> In 'I. In the Train', Symons describes travelling west from Temple station to Hammersmith on the District line and, in 'II. In the Temple', walking back to Fountain Court from the East End, along the Victoria Embankment and through the Temple gardens.

In 'City Nights', it is the journey to the music-hall and back again that is Symons's focus. Both share a sense of *thresholdness*, and the journey and the music-hall are perceived as transitional spaces. Symons associates his critical reflections on the music-hall performers with his description of the London streets. In 'I. In the Train', the city from the window is a 'dazzling vista', lacking in small detail but full of sensation.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Michelle Sipe, 'Romancing the City: Arthur Symons and the Spatial Politics of Aesthetics in 1890s London', in *Imagined Londons*, ed. by Pamela K. Gilbert (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 69-84 (p. 80).

<sup>20</sup> Freeman comments that "'Silhouette' was, initially, the generic name of whoever was reviewing theatre and music-hall performances for the *Star*. As Symons became well known in London's theatres, his identity as "Silhouette" became common knowledge'. Nicholas Freeman, 'Introduction', in Arthur Symons, *Spiritual Adventures*, ed. by Nicholas Freeman (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Sipe, 'Romancing the City', p. 80.

<sup>22</sup> Both of these poems were reprinted in *Littell's Living Age*, 190 (19 September, 1891). In the signed first edition of *Silhouettes* in the British Library there are two small pencil markings that indicate his changes to 'London Nights' and 'A Retreat', the only poem excised from the second edition and which describes the poet's desire for 'A momentary step aside' from 'the turmoil of the street'. 'A Retreat', in *Silhouettes*, First Edition (London: Mathews & Lane, 1892), pp. 90-91.

<sup>23</sup> Symons, 'I. In the Train', in *Silhouettes*, p. 81.

Petra Pointner reflects on how Symons presents a new perspective on London in 'In the Train', relating his visual perception of the city to Walt Whitman's sensory description of Manhattan, in *A*

The quiet interior of the train muffles the sound from the outside and it becomes a temporary space of solitary reflection on the night to come. Not only is the poet depicted as a traveller, but the journey anticipates his experiences in the music-hall. In 'II. In the Temple', he contrasts the urban bustle of Hammersmith, where the Lyric Music-Hall was located, with the still, secluded atmosphere of the two Inns of Court (Inner and Middle Temples). The 'grey and misty night' against which the plane trees of the Embankment are silhouetted provide a counterpoint to the 'sudden, racing lights' and the distant sounds of the 'rhythm of festive nights'.<sup>24</sup> Symons depicts Fountain Court as an inner sanctum – nested within a network of smaller, enclosing streets – and the predominant effect is that of still contemplation.

In 'A Prelude to Life', Symons describes living in Fountain Court as a counterpoint to, and a point of connection with, the *Schwelle* of the surrounding city:

I have never been able to stay long under a roof without restlessness, and I used to go out into the streets, many times a day, for the pleasure of finding myself in the open air and in the streets. I had never cared greatly for the open air in the country, the real open air, because everything in the country, except the sea, bored me; but here, in the 'motley' Strand, among these hurrying people, under the smoky sky, I could walk and yet watch. If there ever was a religion of the eyes, I have devotedly practised that religion.<sup>25</sup>

This roving and wandering perspective is typical of Symons's depiction of the city. Symons is a sensual writer who privileges seeing. In the 'Nocturnes', the fourth subsection of *Silhouettes*, for example, he stages his memories of past desires and missed romantic opportunities in transitional threshold spaces; travelling in a cab from Fountain Court, waiting on the street where an ex-lover used to live, and loitering on Hampstead Heath overlooking Central London.<sup>26</sup> Different areas of the city are surveyed and covered by the poet-*flâneur*, who depicts everything from the enclosed courtyard beneath his apartment to the open space of Hampstead Heath. Symons's poems create a multi-dimensional image of London. Rather like Benjamin's *flâneur*, he

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*Prelude to Modernism: Studies on the Urban and Erotic Poetry of Arthur Symons* (Heidelberg: Anglistische Forschungen, 2004), pp. 91-105.

<sup>24</sup> Symons, 'II. In the Temple', in *Silhouettes*, p. 81.

<sup>25</sup> Symons, 'A Prelude to Life', p. 53.

<sup>26</sup> The title of this section evokes the musical compositions of Chopin as well as the impressionistic paintings of James McNeill Whistler.



immerses himself in the fleeting images and interstitial spaces of the city to such an extent that they become an intimate part of his daily existence:

For if *flâneurie* can transform Paris into one great interior – a house whose rooms are the *quartiers*, no less clearly demarcated by thresholds than are real rooms – then on the other hand, the city can appear to someone walking through it to be without thresholds; a landscape in the round.<sup>27</sup>

Benjamin's point here is that, to the uninitiated, the city appears like a shapeless, undifferentiated blur, but the urbanite *flâneur* is able to perceive both a series of delimited spaces and one merged territory. In the three poems in the sub-section 'Nocturnes', in *Silhouettes*, for example, Symons's speaker experiences a conflation of different streets and urban spaces that are both clearly demarcated and share a common memory. In the opening poem, 'Nocturne', drafted in August 1889 when he was still living with his parents in Buckingham, and revised for inclusion in *Silhouettes*, he describes the city as seen from a window of a taxi at night. London initially appears as an impressionistic blur of 'magic' and 'mystery', and the 'little cab to hold us two' is an enclosed space from which the poet briefly experiences the glittering, flickering beauty of London.<sup>28</sup> The speaker and his lover are both removed from the city and travelling through it, and Symons presents a speeded-up version of Baudelaire's depiction of Paris as experienced on foot.<sup>29</sup> It is set in Symons's London of relatively fast moving traffic, expressed in terms of the 'rattling wheels' of the cab and the glimpse of a 'bright train', but the poet still clearly recognizes the specifics of the scene outside of the window, the Victoria Embankment on the North side of the Thames, directly south of Fountain Court. While Baudelaire's 'La Chambre double' exemplifies how the *Schwelle* of the city permeates into his room, Symons's private memories and experiences appear to be revealed in the city streets.

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<sup>27</sup> Benjamin, 'The *Flâneur*', *The Arcades Project*, [M3,2] p. 422.

<sup>28</sup> Symons, 'Nocturne', in *Silhouettes*, p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> In their notes to 'Nocturne', Desmarais and Baldick also cite Dante Gabriel Rossetti's poem 'Love's Nocturn' (1870) as a possible source for Symons's extension of the term 'Nocturne' to poetry. Symons also uses similar images to Rossetti – notably the 'murmuring' sounds and setting the poem in the dreaming 'Interludes' that are full of 'grievous moods that weep'. See *Selected Early Poems: Arthur Symons*, p. 72, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Poems. A New Edition* (London: Ellis & White, 1881), pp. 95-102.

Elisa Bizzotto addresses the connection between momentary sensations and Symons's perception of urban landscapes in her essay 'Re-crediting Arthur Symons, Decadent-Modernist Literary Ghost' (2017). Bizzotto argues that 'Symons's metropolitan traveller is a transitional type from Baudelaire's "man of the world"', noting that, like Benjamin's *flâneur*, Symons's urban explorer is both a neutral observer and examines the city in relationship to his own identity.<sup>30</sup> Speaking of Symons as a 'casual wanderer in the metropolis, who moves around to please his senses rather than open his mind', Bizzotto acknowledges that Symons's experience of the city is more than that of a 'literary ghost' re-walking the pathways of Baudelaire's urban stroller; it anticipates a solipsistic sense of otherness from the crowd that is heralded by Modernist writers.<sup>31</sup> Symons's speaker can be understood as a transitional figure; both a Baudelairean *flâneur* and, to use Andrew Thacker's term from *Moving through Modernity* (2003), a Modernist 'voyageur'.<sup>32</sup> In reference to Virginia Woolf, Thacker discusses how 'the material culture of transport' (trains, buses, and cars) is a 'suitable "vehicle"' for rendering the quotidian experiences of the modern world.<sup>33</sup> Rather than the slow, rhythmic experience of walking the streets, modern modes of transportation can be read as symbols for the daily influx of experiences generated by the city. Woolf writes that 'their speed is the speed of lyric poetry, inarticulate as yet, sweeping rhythm through the brain, regularly, like the wash of great waves.'<sup>34</sup> From the window of the cab, Symons's speaker suggests this in his focus on the Thames, whose 'wavering gleams' appear as 'Near and distant as our dreams'.<sup>35</sup>

'Nocturne' is both an accurate rendering of the city seen from a moving window and a poignant account of an intimate, transient experience that concludes with a Baudelairean desire for oblivion: "'O last for ever!" my heart cried; | It ended: heaven was done.'<sup>36</sup> The taxi ride is over, the street is deserted, and by writing about this temporary escape he captures the mood of searching and restlessness that is developed

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<sup>30</sup> Elisa Bizzotto, 'Re-crediting Arthur Symons, Decadent-Modernist Literary Ghost', in *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism: Continuities, Revisions, Speculations*, ed. by Bénédicte Coste, Catherine Delyfer, and Christine Reynier (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2017), pp. 31-44 (p. 39).

<sup>31</sup> Bizzotto, 'Re-crediting Arthur Symons', pp. 39 & 40.

<sup>32</sup> Thacker uses the French 'voyageur' meaning 'voyager', from *voyager* 'to travel'. Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Thacker, *Moving through Modernity*, p. 153.

<sup>34</sup> Thacker, *Moving through Modernity*, p. 153.

<sup>35</sup> Symons, 'Nocturne', in *Silhouettes*, p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> Symons, 'Nocturne', p. 63.

in the next two poems of this sequence. Unlike the fleeting vision of the city in 'Nocturne', in 'Her Street (In Absence)' he describes a 'street of many memories' and the nights he 'stood and gazed' at his lover's window.<sup>37</sup> He reflects on how he once knew the tiny details of this street – the 'pavement-stones: I knew them all'.<sup>38</sup> This attention to detail is a characteristic of Baudelaire's *flâneur* who, as described by Benjamin, is 'able to catch the scent of a threshold or to recognize a paving stone by touch'.<sup>39</sup> Both focus on the insignificant details of the street, but Symons experiences the city more visually than Baudelaire. As analysed previously in this thesis, Baudelaire's speaker uses all of his senses to navigate the newly remodelled and refurbished streets of Haussmann's Paris. In the old quarters of London, the streets remain the same and it is the perspective of Symons's speaker that shifts. He quickly moves to another scene, remembering a time when he knew these streets better, but they still have the power to evoke something that had previously been forgotten. For example, in the following poem 'On Judges' Walk', named after a street near where Symons lived in Hampstead in the latter half of 1890 with Ernest Rhys, he remembers the awkward silences and the words 'Half uttered in the breeze' during his last night walking on this road.<sup>40</sup> London is a landscape of memory, in which spaces and sensations evoke sudden remembrances.

Kostas Boyiopoulos discusses how the sudden memory of a once-forgotten experience is triggered by being in a space in the city. Travelling, like *flâneurie*, is underpinned by a sense of movement and discovery but also pauses in order to remember and reflect. In reference to an earlier poem 'A Winter Night', in *Days and Nights*, he argues that Symons's observations of moods, sensations, and experiences of place, are reflected in the streets. 'The nightscape of 'A Winter Night' is an inside-out version of the music-hall. The "windows", like wings or stalls in a theatre, are "watchful eyes" that gaze at the "solitary figure"'.<sup>41</sup> As the only moving element in this scene, Boyiopoulos posits, 'the *flâneur* is also an aimless dancer'.<sup>42</sup> Rather than being a frozen night scene through which the lone figure moves, the movements of the flickering shadow are counterpointed by the surrounding space. The natural light from 'The pale

<sup>37</sup> Symons, 'Her Street (In Absence)', in *Silhouettes*, p. 64.

<sup>38</sup> Symons, 'Her Street (In Absence)', p. 64.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, 'The *Flâneur*', *The Arcades Project*, [M1,1] p. 416.

<sup>40</sup> Symons, 'On Judges' Walk', in *Silhouettes*, p. 65.

<sup>41</sup> Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image*, p. 89.

<sup>42</sup> Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image*, p. 89.

moon shining from a pallid sky' is immobile and morbid, but the artificial light from the houses and street lights has a nervous quality.<sup>43</sup> It glitters and shimmers under gaslight like light on water. Symons's depiction of the blurring of the interior and exterior, particularly in terms of emotion and sensation, recalls the relationship between the city streets and Baudelaire's *chambre*. As Boyiopoulos posits, in relation to the Decadent image, this creates a sense of 'suspended tension'.<sup>44</sup> Symons's observations of moods, sensations, and experiences of place are reflected in the city streets and, in a way that recalls the transition between interior/exterior in Benjamin's description of the *Schwelle*, in the ambiguous and transformative space of the music-hall.

In *London Nights*, a collection which Symons published after he had been living in Fountain Court for four years, he refines his focus to specific interiorized spaces. In particular, he depicts the music-hall as a threshold space of intense erotic suggestiveness. As Desmarais and Baldick explain:

Symons's transition from the gas-lamps of the street to the footlights, and thus the apparent narrowing of the London world into the microcosm of the stage, was in these terms an exclusive focus that could disclose the city's essential secret, its artificial "soul".<sup>45</sup>

This narrowing perspective is exemplified in the three cycles of poems in *London Nights*, each dedicated to a different music-hall performer: 'Lilian', later identified as Violet Piggot, the first ballet girl that he took as a lover in 1892; Céleste; and 'Bianca', a fictional name by which Symons addresses the real Lydia, a dancer he met at the Empire in 1893.<sup>46</sup> Symons's descriptions of particular music-hall performers are similar to Huysmans's chapters dedicated to each collection in the house at Fontenay. In 'I. Proem', the first of twelve poems in the Lilian sequence, he styles Lilian as a natural flower found amongst the artificial blooms of the hothouse:

This was a sweet white wildwood violet  
I found among the painted slips that grow  
Where, under hot-house glass, the flowers forget

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<sup>43</sup> Arthur Symons, 'A Winter Night', *Days and Nights* (London: Macmillan, 1889), p. 97.

<sup>44</sup> Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image*, p. 20.

<sup>45</sup> Desmarais and Baldick, 'Introduction', in *Selected Early Poems: Arthur Symons*, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> For more detail on these women see the notes to the sequence titles by Desmarais and Baldick, in *Selected Early Poems: Arthur Symons*, pp. 92 & 139.

How the sun shines, and how the cool winds blow.<sup>47</sup>

Symons explicitly connects the music-hall and the Decadent hothouse. They are ‘punningly compounded’, as Desmarais and Baldick note, in Symons’s reference to ‘painted slips’ – an allusion to both the wings of a stage set and the cutting removed from a plant to propagate a new one, in this case one that has been artificially coloured.<sup>48</sup> In ‘I. Proem’, the music-hall is associated with the hothouse due to its suggestion of corruption and decay. They share a sense of oppressive heat and a ‘spice-laden atmosphere’.<sup>49</sup>

In the rest of the sequence, Symons depicts Lilian in a variety of different spaces, most pertinently ‘In the Temple’ and ‘On the Stage’. In ‘VI. In the Temple’, there is a change of emphasis from the descriptions of the courtyard outside Symons’s apartment, as in *Silhouettes*, to the rooms inside. The two stanzas of the poem describe the arrival and departure of Lilian, and how her otherworldly and artificial qualities change the atmosphere of his room. She brings the magic of the stage with her and casts ‘round my room, a fairy ring’.<sup>50</sup> Although Symons rarely comments on the process of writing in his poetry, his reference to the ‘tedious page’ that the speaker resumes writing after Lilian has left alludes to the way in which he was forced to balance his leisure time with his journalistic work and creative output while living in Fountain Court.<sup>51</sup> In the subsequent poem, ‘VII. On the Stage’, the boredom he feels in his apartment is in direct contrast to the exciting movement associated with the music-hall. On the stage, he observes a stifling cloud of colours and profiles, ‘tights, and wigs, and tights’.<sup>52</sup> In the music-hall he retains the position of an observer and watches as life transitions into art. In particular, while watching the dance he reflects on a fusion between modern artificiality and the flickering impressionism that he previously witnessed in the city streets. On the stage he perceives a similar blur of lights and artificial colours:

Lights, in a multi-coloured mist,  
From indigo to amethyst,  
A whirling mist of multi-coloured lights<sup>53</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Symons, ‘I. Proem’, in *London Nights*, p. 9.

<sup>48</sup> Desmarais and Baldick, ‘Introduction’, in *Selected Early Poems: Arthur Symons*, p. 92.

<sup>49</sup> Symons, ‘I. Proem’, p. 9.

<sup>50</sup> Symons, ‘VI. In the Temple’, in *London Nights*, p. 14.

<sup>51</sup> Symons, ‘VI. In the Temple’, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> Symons, ‘VII. On the Stage’, in *London Nights*, p. 15.

<sup>53</sup> Symons, ‘VII. On the Stage’, p. 15.

### **On the Stage and in the Wings: Symons and Performance**

In *Passionate Attitudes*, Matthew Sturgis notes that the music-hall provided Symons with a miniature Decadent world: ‘It was artificial, it was perverse, it was sexually charged, it was overflowing with “curious and strange and beautiful sensations”’.<sup>54</sup> Sturgis reads Symons’s music-hall as an experiential threshold space in the manner of the hothouse in Huysmans’s *À rebours*. However, he does not acknowledge that while Symons’s music-hall appears to be like a French Decadent space of desire and longing, it is also closely connected to thwarted sensations and impotency. In *London Nights*, the music-hall is presented as a confined interior space, which reflects the artificial and stylistic excess of Decadence alongside the complex ambivalent feelings of the speaker. Symons, I argue, struggles to reconcile his interest in this tempting realm of sexuality and desire with his own moral anxieties and fluctuating desires. Rather than immersing himself within an artificial, Decadent world (like Des Esseintes) he remains on the peripheries of the performance, a silhouetted figure in the audience watching the stage from a distance.

The poet in *Silhouettes* is a roving observer of the cityscape but in *London Nights* he adopts a more explicitly threshold viewpoint. In *London: A Book of Aspects*, Symons comments that he ‘liked to see ballet from the wings, a spectator but in the midst of the magic’.<sup>55</sup> This enables him to ‘lose all sense of proportion’, submerge himself in ‘chance felicities of light and shade and movement’, and perhaps most importantly feel a part of the ‘performance oneself, yet passive, with the leisure to look about one. You see the reverse of the picture: the girls at the back lounging against the set scenes, turning to talk to someone at the side’.<sup>56</sup> This peripheral perspective is very similar to his viewpoint in his earlier street poems. From his position at the edge of the stage he observes a flickering between restlessness and inactivity, performer and observer, which is similar to the glittering ‘magic and mystery’ of the London streets in ‘Nocturne’. The music-hall is a similarly diverse place of novelty and crowds where, as Barry Faulk comments in *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (2004), the audience would be presented with a ‘miscellaneous

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<sup>54</sup> Sturgis, *Passionate Attitudes*, p. 102.

<sup>55</sup> Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects*, p. 54.

<sup>56</sup> Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects*, p. 54.

revue of art and amusements'.<sup>57</sup> In *London Nights*, Symons demonstrates his enthusiasm for the music-hall, specifically his interest in the figure of the dancer.

In his first essay on the music-halls, 'A Spanish Music-hall' published in the *Fortnightly Review* (May 1892), Symons refers to himself as an 'aficionado' rather than an expert.<sup>58</sup> He is an onlooker, captivated by the 'exquisite sense of the frivolous', but also knowledgeable, as he makes apparent through his nuanced discussion of the subtle differences between the music-halls in Spain and the music-halls in London.<sup>59</sup> As a self-styled 'aficionado', Symons is sensitive to minor variations and fluctuations in lighting and design, and his poems recount the novelty of viewing performances from the sidelines and the overall effect of watching a dancer from the back of the music-hall. He consciously adopts a transitional threshold perspective in the music-hall and this is slightly different to the marginal perspective of the *flâneur*, who is both in and of the crowd. Symons's perspective, particularly in the music-hall poems, is more accurately described as threshold. He is neither a part of the crowd nor a performer, but somewhere in-between. This perspective creates a transition between artist and audience. He imagines himself on the stage.

In 'Prologue', the opening poem to *London Nights*, Symons's speaker assumes a position consistent with the figure of the Decadent collector depicted in *À rebours* and outlined in Chapter Two of this thesis. Symons's speaker lounges, smokes, and watches as the dancers perform. However, while he is aware that he is the onlooker, he also imagines himself as the dancer, 'Painted, pathetically gay'.<sup>60</sup> Like the objects in Des Esseintes' collection, the performers reflect back to him his own fears and anxieties. His 'life is like a music-hall' not because it is wild, extravagant and filled with variety, but because, like a dancer, the poet is also expected to entertain and perform.<sup>61</sup> For Symons, the act of watching is an intense, reflexive experience. 'Chained by enchantment to [his] stall', he is trapped and fascinated by the endless repetition of

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<sup>57</sup> Barry Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity: The Late-Victorian Discovery of Popular Culture* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Arthur Symons, 'A Spanish Music-Hall', *Fortnightly Review*, 51 (May 1892), 716-22.

This article was reprinted in revised form as 'A Music-hall in Barcelona', in *Egoist*, 4 (September 1917), 117-18, and later published in the collection *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (London: W. Collins Sons & Co., 1918), pp. 145-57.

<sup>59</sup> Symons, 'A Spanish Music-Hall', p. 716.

<sup>60</sup> Symons, 'Prologue', in *London Nights*, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Symons, 'Prologue', p. 3.

movement and sound.<sup>62</sup> The dancer is a projection of all his tense and indefinite feelings, and these become manifested in the dance itself.

The relationship between the performer and the observer was first described by Frank Kermode. In *Romantic Image* (1957) he discusses the aestheticized dancer who becomes a metaphor for the isolated artist. He writes that Symons's essay 'The World as Ballet' (1898) is 'a perfectly clear expression' of the complex relationship between the dancer and the symbol of the artist.<sup>63</sup> Kermode's italics emphasize Symons's point, that in the dance '*Nothing is stated*, there is no intrusion of world used for the *irrelevant purpose of describing . . .* and the dancer, with her gesture, *all pure symbol*, evokes, from her mere beautiful motion, idea, sensation, all that one need ever to know of event.'<sup>64</sup> The solipsistic performer is an important symbol for Symons as she embodies the idea of art as a powerful means of escape from the world.

In *Salome's Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression*, Petra Dierkes-Thrun explains, in relation to Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1894), how the dancer is a threshold figure due to her intense physicality. Using Michel Foucault's discussion in 'Préface à la transgression' ['A Preface to Transgression'] (1963), regarding the movement towards physical sensation and away from metaphysical experiences in the late nineteenth century, she argues that the 'modern subject craves the experience of the limit' and so is intrigued by the controlled movements of the dancer.<sup>65</sup> She uses her body in a way that is unavailable to those who lack such training in order to approach 'the sensational limit experience of physical excess' in her performance.<sup>66</sup> This is dramatized by Symons in the second poem in *London Nights*, 'To a Dancer'. The speaker recounts a moment of transportation to another world while watching her intoxicating performance on stage. She appears to perform for him alone and he feels a sense of anticipation that she may have singled him out from the crowd: 'From her desire that leaps to my desire; | Her eyes that gleam for me!'<sup>67</sup> The music takes over, 'Subtly, deliciously', and the dancer's talent enables the speaker to transcend the usual

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<sup>62</sup> Symons, 'Prologue', p. 3.

<sup>63</sup> Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image* (1957; London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 87.

<sup>64</sup> Arthur Symons, 'The World as Ballet', from 'Ballet, Pantomime and Poetic Drama', *The Dome* (1898), quoted in Kermode, *Romantic Image*, p. 87.

<sup>65</sup> Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity*, p. 53.

Michel Foucault's 'Preface a la transgression' was first published in *Hommage à Georges Bataille, Critique*, 195-96 (1963), 751-70.

<sup>66</sup> Dierkes-Thrun, *Salome's Modernity*, p. 54.

<sup>67</sup> Symons, 'To a Dancer', in *London Nights*, p. 5.



parameters and limits of the music-hall.<sup>68</sup> The temporal metaphors in this poem, the ‘quickenning fire’ that becomes ‘silent waves’, for example, evoke the rhythm of the music and have a suggestive, sexual quality.<sup>69</sup> In the orgasmic final stanza, this tension and release culminates – ‘When, as the magic moment’s close, | She dies into the rapture of repose’.<sup>70</sup> The climax results from the actions that have led up to it and this is, in reality, a choreographed and controlled moment designed around the effect it will have on the viewer.<sup>71</sup> ‘Intoxicatingly’, the delimited space of the stage, the physicality of the dancer, and her spiritual artistry become an almost sacred union of life and art.<sup>72</sup>

Through a focus on its marginal spaces, off-stage, in the wings, and at the back of the auditorium, Symons emphasizes the music-hall’s transitional spatiality. In the group of five poems that make up ‘Décor de Théâtre’ in *London Nights*, Symons gives an overall impression of the music-hall through a description of three types of performance spaces viewed from different perspectives – the Moulin Rouge in Paris; the grand Leicester Square music-halls (the Empire and the Tivoli); and the Foresters, a small music-hall on Cambridge Heath Road, Whitechapel.<sup>73</sup> In the opening poem of this sequence, ‘I. Behind the Scenes: Empire’, he watches as the dancers ‘flit’ and ‘flicker’ in the wings.<sup>74</sup> Faulk discusses how ‘Symons’s poem catches the ballet dancers in the process of transformation. They are about to change from working-class women into something more ethereal, if artificial “All wigs and paint”.’<sup>75</sup> The music-hall is a transformative threshold space where working-class girls transform into extraordinary muses and where the middle-class, male audience member transforms into the love object of the dancer. ‘Behind the scenes’, the dancers ‘Troop sadly, shivering with cold’

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<sup>68</sup> Symons, ‘To a Dancer’, p. 5.

<sup>69</sup> Symons, ‘To a Dancer’, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Symons, ‘To a Dancer’, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> Marion Thain argues for a reading of the dancer in Symons’s poetry as an expression of ‘phenomenological “feeling”’: an experience of the world that is gained fundamentally through the body and the skin’. See Marion Thain, ‘Arthur Symons and Decadent Lyric Phenomenology’, in *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism: Forms of Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 130-52 (p. 139).

<sup>72</sup> Symons, ‘To a Dancer’, p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> The fifth poem in this sequence, ‘At the Ambassadeurs’ (19 June 1894) describes a slightly different space. Les Ambassadeurs was a café-concert space situated in the Hôtel de Crillon, on the Place de la Concorde in Paris.

<sup>74</sup> Symons, ‘I. Behind the Scenes: Empire’, in *London Nights*, p. 21.

When it was first published in the *Sketch*, ‘Behind the Scenes: Empire’ was accompanied by an illustration of ballet dancers descending the stairs. See ‘Behind the Scenes at the “Empire”’, *Sketch*, 21 March 1894 (p. 389), included in Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity*, p. 166.

<sup>75</sup> Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity*, p. 165.

before being altered by a thin beam of ‘gusty gaslight’ into immortal beings.<sup>76</sup> In his encounter backstage, the transfiguration of the performer is exposed in an intimate way. The crossover from wings to stage is typically a hidden moment, not really meant for the eyes of the audience or the critic. Symons’s speaker, to use Faulk’s words, ‘stakes out ground in unstable territory’.<sup>77</sup> This instability relates to Symons’s position as a middle-class critic in a predominantly working-class space, but it also indicates his attraction to areas that are forbidden – to transformative and transgressive spaces.

Rather than viewing the ballet with the other regular patrons in the front row, Faulk argues that Symons ‘stays outside the network of gazes that circulate here’.<sup>78</sup> In each of the poems in ‘Décor de Théâtre’, Symons’s speaker assumes a variety of alternative stances and physical viewpoints. He stands on the threshold of his own experience, watching both the dancers and himself perform a variety of different roles. In ‘II. The Primrose Dance: Tivoli’, dedicated to the dancer Minnie Cunningham, for example, Symons depicts a dancer viewed from a distance and adopts the viewpoint of an audience member in the cheap seats at the back of the hall:

Skirts like the amber petals of a flower,  
 A primrose dancing for delight  
 In some enchantment of a bower  
 That rose to wizard music in the night<sup>79</sup>

In contrast to his oblique viewpoint in ‘I. Behind the Scenes: Empire’, this opening re-enacts the experience of watching one performer onstage from a distance. He recognizes more of a narrative in her choreographed movements and grapples with its meaning. The dancer is like an ethereal muse who temporarily creates an imaginative ‘wonder-land’ of airiness and nature, a moment of release for the speaker ‘in the smoke-polluted place | Where bird or flower might never be’.<sup>80</sup> He adopts the role of an enraptured audience member confronted with a headline star, but his use of the

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<sup>76</sup> Symons, ‘I. Behind the Scenes: Empire’, p. 21.

<sup>77</sup> Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity*, p. 35.

<sup>78</sup> Faulk, *Music Hall and Modernity*, p. 66.

<sup>79</sup> Symons, ‘II. The Primrose Dance: Tivoli’, in *London Nights*, p. 22.

<sup>80</sup> Symons, ‘II. The Primrose Dance: Tivoli’, p. 22.

adjectives, ‘vague’, ‘mazy’, and ‘wonder-haunted’, allude to the more negative realities of life as a music-hall performer.<sup>81</sup>

In the following poem, ‘III. At the Foresters’, we move with the speaker to the wings of a small East-End music-hall. In comparison to his portrayal of the dancer viewed from the auditorium, his examination of the performer as he stands off-stage is more critical. He is able to examine every detail of the dancer’s face and costume, as well as the subtle suggestion of her uncertain feelings for him. Beside her in the wings he can see both the woman and the performer. He addresses an ‘Ambiguous, independent Flo’, whose make-up cannot hide her slight nervousness and apprehension:

Divinely rosy rouged, your face  
Smiles, with its painted little mouth,  
Half tearfully, a quaint grimace;  
The charm and pathos of your youth  
Mock the mock roses of your face.<sup>82</sup>

These poems are less depictions of the dancer, than descriptions of the poet’s fluctuating roles and desires in each of these different music-hall spaces. Up-close, he cannot ignore what he perceives as a mocking sense of artificiality, the tricks of the theatre which turn the women into divine beings, and yet, far away all he encounters is a distanced, and abstracted flower-woman. Underpinning his perspectives as a ‘critic’ and as a ‘punter’ is an awareness of the relationship between the performer and the audience, and between the performer as a person and the role that the performer portrays. In ‘Décor de Théâtre’, Symons uses his experiences of different music-halls and the spaces within them to create one overall impression of music-hall as experienced by an ‘aficionado’; a threshold figure who moves between the different spaces in the music-hall but is never completely absorbed into the role of amateur or expert.

In ‘Music Halls and Ballet Girls’, he contemplates why he was drawn to the music-hall and reflects that

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<sup>81</sup> In letter to Ernest Rhys, Symons mentions that he has ‘fallen in love with a new dancer. This time it is Minnie Cunningham.’ Arthur Symons, letter to Ernest Rhys, 17 February 1892, in *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, pp. 95-96 (p. 95).

<sup>82</sup> Symons, ‘III. At the Foresters’, in *London Nights*, p. 23.

I lived in them for the mere delight and sheer animal excitement they gave me. I liked the glitter, barbarous, intoxicating, the violent animality, the entire spectacle, with absurd faces, gestures, words, and the very odour and suffocating heat.<sup>83</sup>

Symons's comment that he came to the music-halls purely for sensory titillation is implied in 'IV. La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', the final poem of 'Décor de Théâtre', about the dancer Jane Avril who was nicknamed 'La Mélinite', the patented name of a high explosive similar to dynamite. However, this poem also foregrounds the connection between the dancer and the poet. The poem begins with the dancer-flower shedding 'in a rhythmic shower | The very petals of the flower' in a process that is like a striptease, but that also implies anatomization and disintegration.<sup>84</sup> Like the hothouse flowers in Chapter Eight of *À rebours*, the flower-dancer in the mirrored performance space of the Moulin Rouge reflects back to the poet his own lecherous gaze. Amid the repetitive and almost ritualistic movements (twirling, circling, and returning), his gaze fixes on one dancer who stands 'Alone, apart' looking at her reflection.<sup>85</sup> She is shadowy, flitting and vanishing, until the brief moment that she looks in the mirror. In the midst of the ebb and flow of the dance, the dancer becomes still and conscious of herself and her surroundings. The dance is a balance of conflicting states – movement and stillness, repetition and interruption. Similarly, the poet struggles with his Decadent attraction to sensory pleasure and artificial excesses alongside a more poignant connection between the lone performer and the solitary restless poet.

Symons's music-hall poems capture the state of being on the brink or on the border of something – akin to the 'suspended tension' Boyiopoulos attributes to Symons's street poems. While *thresholdness* is not the single defining quality of the music-hall poems, but one of a number of active qualities including marginality, reflexivity, and transitionality, his use of threshold spatiality does epitomize his attraction to the transformative spaces between two states. The moment when the girl

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<sup>83</sup> Symons, 'Music Halls and Ballet Girls', in Beckson, ed., *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons*, pp. 109-14 (p. 109).

<sup>84</sup> Symons, 'IV. La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', in *London Nights*, p. 24.

<sup>85</sup> Symons, 'IV. La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge', p. 24.

Heather Marcovitch discusses the ritualistic qualities of the dance and claims that the 'timeless essence of humanity can be found in the most modern of places, the London music-hall'. See 'Dance, Ritual, and Arthur Symons's *London Nights*', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 56 (2013), 462-82 (p. 465).

becomes the dancer and, equally, when the ‘multi-coloured mist’ of the theatre becomes the ‘blurred lights’ of the street.

In *London: A Book of Aspects*, Symons recalls that his most memorable experience was a ‘magical glimpse’ of a performance from the road in front, ‘when two doors were suddenly thrown open’ as he walked by:

In the moment’s interval before the doors closed again, I saw in that odd, unexpected way, over the heads of the audience, far off in a sort of blue mist, the whole stage, its brilliant crowd drawn up in the last pose, just at the perfect moment, by some rare felicity of chance.<sup>86</sup>

Pavements, doorways, and back-alleys are sites of seductive potential and clandestine meetings, but also of missed connections, yearnings, and misunderstandings. In *London Nights*, the speaker spends as much time waiting for music-hall performers, reminiscing about his encounters with them, and wandering the streets, as he spends watching them on stage. His impression of the performer changes when she crosses the threshold of the music-hall and becomes just another woman in the city.

In ‘Renée’, what Symons refers to as the ‘old familiar door’ is a physical threshold between the stage and the street.<sup>87</sup> The stage-door is a place of transformation where the ethereal dancer, ‘Pale as the spirit of rain, with the night in her hair’, lingers for only a moment before becoming part of the city.<sup>88</sup> There is a sense of release from the paradoxically claustrophobic and expansive world of the theatre. Similarly, in the following poem, ‘Nora on the Pavement’, he restages the ballet girl ‘on the midnight pavement’, and in so doing transforms ‘A footlight fancy, petulant and bewildered’ into a figure of tragedy, wild-eyed and captivating like an Ibsen heroine.<sup>89</sup> Out in the freshness of the streets, the enchanting art and poetry of the music-hall quickly fades, and is replaced with a sense of elusive femininity. He observes the moment when Art becomes Life, the opposite transformation to the performer taking the stage from the wings. On the street, the barrier between the woman and the poet is no longer physical (the separation between audience and performer, stage and wings) but becomes a self-imposed limit. This is also apparent in the last few poems of the ‘Lilian’ sequence ‘VII.

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<sup>86</sup> Symons, *London: A Book of Aspects*, p. 53.

<sup>87</sup> Symons, ‘Renée’, in *London Nights*, p. 6.

<sup>88</sup> Symons, ‘Renée’, p. 6.

<sup>89</sup> Symons, ‘Nora on the Pavement’, in *London Nights*, p. 7.

On the Stage' is followed by 'VIII. At the Stage Door' and he describes waiting by the stage-door for the performer to emerge onto the street. 'Kicking [his] heels in the street', the bored and self-conscious poet fantasizes about fulfilling his prior sexual connection.<sup>90</sup> The speaker is still impatiently waiting and left to only imagine the perfect union – 'the smile of her heart to my heart, of her eyes to my eyes'.<sup>91</sup> Symons evokes an uncertain meeting through his imagery of 'flickering', 'wavering' and 'blurring', the same intransitive verbs that he uses to evoke his restless uncertainty in 'To A Dancer' and 'I. Behind the Scenes: Empire'. In the following poem, 'IX. On the Doorstep', the poet remains in a restless, threshold space, lingering with 'her' on the threshold of her house. Symons's speaker travels between the interior spaces of the music-hall to the stage door and her doorstep.

### **From City to Country to Coast**

Perhaps the most striking feature of Symons's *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* is a sense of vagabond restlessness. The collections shift between different settings and experiences, particularly the urban environments and amorous adventures offered by Paris and London. However, to focus on the relatively small group of dancer poems in these collections, in *London Nights* in particular, is to ignore the plentiful number of poems that describe his holidays in Wales and Cornwall and his travels to the Continent. If we consider these collections in their entirety we encounter a new kind of threshold between artifice and nature, between the Decadent spaces of London music-hall culture and the open spaces of country and coast.

For Symons, urban and rural threshold spaces clearly evoke a sense of yearning and longing. He suggests that the emotional flux and restlessness that is implied by the shifting boundary of the shoreline is also a quality of urban threshold spaces like the city streets. For example, in 'Quest', a new addition to the second edition of *Silhouettes*, the poet is led through the night by an intangible 'shadow' to arrive at the furthest edge of the land.<sup>92</sup> This is a poem about the speaker's endless searching and seeking, as indicated through the refrain, 'I follow', which begins as part of a question ('I follow,

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<sup>90</sup> Symons, 'VIII. At the Stage Door', in *London Nights*, p. 16.

<sup>91</sup> Symons, 'VIII. At the Stage Door', p. 16.

<sup>92</sup> Symons, 'Quest', in *Silhouettes*, p. 49.

According to the dates in Symons's *Collected Works*, 'Quest' was one of the poems composed on 14 August 1892 during his visit to Ernest Rhys in Wales.

follow: is it she?') and ends as a statement ('I follow unavailingly.').<sup>93</sup> The alternation of trembling lights and darkness evokes rows of street lamps, and the 'shadow' is the restless *flâneur*. As much as this poem depicts the strange, artificial light of the city, the play of light and shadow also evokes the grey seascape depicted in the opening subsection 'At Dieppe'. The immense liquid seascape that rises up into waves and, when quieted, transforms into a reverberating mirror of light, is also the sensory impression that Symons has of the city streets. Notably, the 'shadow', in 'Quest', does not lead him through the city but towards 'the grey margin of the sea'.<sup>94</sup> The flickering in this poem, 'Out of the dark, into the light' (repeated in the first and last stanzas), variations of which recur in different poems (such as 'Stella Maris'), alludes to the intangible presence of memories that appear to come and go in a wave-like motion. 'Quest' is intriguing precisely because Symons ambiguously suggests both the city and the sea, and in so doing he proposes a correspondence between metropolitan and littoral threshold spaces.

In *Silhouettes*, the speaker roves between London and Paris but the collection is framed by the opening section, 'At Dieppe', a series of *plein air* sketches of this popular seaside town that provides an insight to interpreting the rest of the collection. John Munro (1969) observes that there is a 'certain wistfulness' to Symons's observations about living an unstable life, as intimated in his comment about being a vagabond in 'A Prelude to Life', and this melancholy longing is apparent in the pensive atmosphere of the Dieppe poems.<sup>95</sup> In 'Before the Squall', for example, Symons describes the moment before a sudden increase in wind associated with a storm. The sea takes on a tormented quality. It 'moans as if uneasily | It turned in an unquiet sleep'.<sup>96</sup> Symons suggests the Victorian view of the sea as a contemplative and personal space. This evokes what Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter (2015) comment on as a change in the perception of the seaside as a 'vacationscape' towards the end of the century. The seaside becomes more of 'a place of regeneration and of withdrawal from everyday life', and similarly Symons's speaker observes the rhythms of the natural landscape and connects them

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<sup>93</sup> Symons, 'Quest', p. 49.

<sup>94</sup> Symons, 'Quest', p. 49.

<sup>95</sup> John Munro, *Arthur Symons* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), p. 51.

<sup>96</sup> Symons, 'Before the Squall', in *Silhouettes*, p. 6.

with the ebb and flow of existence.<sup>97</sup> This pre-empt the focus on the visual qualities of place and their personal resonances in the city poems.

According to the dates in the 1924 edition of Symons's *Collected Works*, the 'At Dieppe' group of poems were written over three days (18-20 June 1890), coinciding with his second extended visit to France with Havelock Ellis (17 March - 23 June 1890).<sup>98</sup> Through his brief sketches of a deserted harbour and rainy seascape seen at twilight, he evokes the last eight days of the trip, spent in Rouen and Dieppe. Instead of depicting Dieppe's popular casinos, cafés and promenade, however, Symons's gaze is directed outwards towards the sea. With the exception of the title of the sub-section, his depiction of a wild, stormy sea is not limited by a specific location. It equally recalls the Pembrokeshire coast, where Symons was born, and also the other seaside places that he experienced when he was living in Devon and Cornwall.<sup>99</sup> Symons focuses on the universal qualities of the sea, in a similar way to his focus on collective urban experiences. This is described in 'On the Beach'. The poet is entranced by the tide that rises as the night descends, and in this moment he 'cannot think or dream'.<sup>100</sup> In this hiatus between the ebb and flow of the waves, he looks out to sea questioning 'where the sea-line ends | The shore-line of infinity'.<sup>101</sup> Symons characterizes the fluctuating sea and unstable beach as an in-between space – 'a grey sky, a ghostly sea'.<sup>102</sup> In the subsequent sub-sections of *Silhouettes*, the quality of greyness similarly occurs in moments of stillness or contemplation and serves to recall the misty, damp edgeland of the shoreline – the 'blue-grey smoke of cigarettes' in 'At the Cavour' and the 'grey and misty night' in 'II. In the Temple', for instance.<sup>103</sup>

The city and the sea share a restless and ambiguous spatiality and the opening sub-section 'At Dieppe' introduces the themes explored throughout the rest of the

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<sup>97</sup> Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter, 'Introduction: 'Twixt Land and Sea: Approaches to Littoral Studies', in *The Beach in Anglophone Literatures and Cultures: Reading Littoral Space*, ed. by Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 1-20 (p. 2).

<sup>98</sup> In the case of the pastoral poems in *Silhouettes* and the intermezzi in *London Nights*, the dates given by Symons in his *Collected Works* coincide with the dates given in his letters and in Beckson's biography.

<sup>99</sup> From his birthplace in Milford Haven, a port town in Pembrokeshire, Wales, his family moved to Guernsey (1866), Alnwick, Northumberland (1868), St. Ives, Cornwall (1871), Tavistock, Devon (1873), Tiverton, Devon (1876), to Bideford, Devon (1879), and to Yeovil, Somerset (1882).

<sup>100</sup> Symons, 'On the Beach', in *Silhouettes*, p. 4.

<sup>101</sup> Symons, 'On the Beach', p. 4.

<sup>102</sup> Symons, 'After Sunset', in *Silhouettes*, p. 3.

<sup>103</sup> Symons 'On the Beach', p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> Symons, 'At the Cavour', in *Silhouettes*, p. 27, and 'City Nights: II In the Temple', in *Silhouettes*, p. 81.



collection – wateriness, twilight moments, missed opportunities and the process of remembering. It paradoxically educes a sense of an ending, the melancholy thoughts of home that emerge at the end of a holiday, and from the first poem, ‘After Sunset’, Symons proposes that moments of perfection quickly shift and change. Warm, sensual experiences, such as the ‘purple blush’ of the sunset, are fleeting and transitory.<sup>104</sup> In the rest of the collection, the unquiet of the sea and the constant motion of the waves are suggested through watery analogies. In ‘April Midnight’, for example, Symons aestheticizes his brief encounter with the music-hall performer (Minnie Cunningham) in the street. ‘After the heat and the fumes and the footlights’, the figures of the ‘dancer’ and the ‘dreamer’ (the poet) are released into the ‘tumultuous night of London’.<sup>105</sup> ‘Cleansing, entrancing’, the air of the street blows ‘fresh’ and ‘cool’ in their faces, evoking the sea-air described in ‘At Dieppe’.<sup>106</sup> They are drawn by the irresistible tidal force of the crowd, and they become lost and amorphous figures, ‘Roaming together under the gaslight’.<sup>107</sup>

The process of thinking while walking along the shoreline also informs the street poems in the collection, as the seashore and the street are both places that enable a moment of reflection and contemplation. In ‘Music and Memory’, the street provides Symons with an opportunity to meditate on the lingering effect of the evening’s entertainment alongside his memory of ‘K. W.’ (Katherine Willard). Like his memories of the music and the sounds of the sea, images of the not-yet-past and the not-yet present intermingle, and her face is ‘a refrain’ that washes over him. Symons intensifies the connection between memory and water through his image of memories that are like ‘tides’, anticipating the flickering waves and lighthouse beam in ‘Stella Maris’, a poem that I will explore in more detail in the next part of this chapter. In ‘Music and Memory’, the speaker’s recollection of her ‘swims’ and ‘over brims’, as indicated by the irregular division of the octameter across two lines in each stanza.<sup>108</sup> Like waves, his thoughts ebb and flow but they are contained within one place, ‘the night’, which ends the first line and encloses the last line of each stanza. The envelope structure is derived from

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<sup>104</sup> Symons, ‘After Sunset’, p. 3.

<sup>105</sup> Symons, ‘April Midnight’, in *Silhouettes*, p. 52.

<sup>106</sup> Symons, ‘April Midnight’, p. 52.

<sup>107</sup> Symons, ‘April Midnight’, p. 52.

<sup>108</sup> Symons, ‘Music and Memory’, in *Silhouettes*, p. 46.

Verlaine, and it is used by Symons to reflect his method of composition.<sup>109</sup> In a letter to Willard (20 February 1891), he writes that he ‘walked up and down the deserted lengths of Trafalgar Square, a certain monotonous rhythm going over in my head. It beat itself out into a little piece called “Music and Memory”’.<sup>110</sup> This poem evokes a sort of shoreline, where the rhythm of the walker and his waves of memory combine in a harmonious way.<sup>111</sup>

Benjamin traces the connection between the city and the sea back to Baudelaire and argues that he was ‘the first to have conjured up the sea of houses, with its multisensory waves’.<sup>112</sup> For Symons, the overall effect of opening *Silhouettes* with ‘At Dieppe’ creates a similar impression as he intends to evoke the parallels between the city and the sea-side. They are comparable due to their restless, threshold characteristics. His description of the sea articulates a feeling of searching for something that is always out of reach and this mournfulness appears to seep into the city verses. Symons does not draw a stark contrast between the beach, a solitary site of contemplation and memory, and the city, a space of escape and new experiences, but demonstrates how they are both transmutable and dynamic. For example, in ‘Pastel’, the first poem in ‘Masks and Faces’, Symons evokes the sunset colours of ‘At Dieppe’, but experienced within a gloomy Parisian room. Through his portrayal of the smoke and the flickering glow from their cigarettes, he reverses the image of the setting sun from the first section, and the poem ends with ‘her’ face rising up out of the gloom.

And then, through the dark, a flush  
Ruddy and vague, the grace –  
A rose – of her lyric face.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>109</sup> Desmarais and Baldick comment on Symons’s adoption of Verlaine’s ‘envelope’ rhyme scheme, ‘in which the first line rhymes with the fourth’. See ‘Introduction’ to *Arthur Symons: Selected Poems*, p. 5.

<sup>110</sup> Arthur Symons, letter to Katherine Willard, 20 February 1891, in *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, pp. 74-76 (p. 75).

In this letter Symons comments that he composed this poem after attending a classical concert where he ‘heard Wagner, the [Beethoven] *Pastoral Symphony*, Mozart, Liszt. As I walked back through the misty night, fantasies began to mingle, fantasies of music and a face’. (p. 75).

<sup>111</sup> The connection between the ebb and flow of the sea and the diminuendo and crescendo of music are alluded to in Symons’s description of his impressions and sensations of the Alhambra. He describes how the dancers and the music combine ‘turning round one another, advancing and retreating, in waves of movement, as the music scattered itself in waves of sound’. Symons, ‘At the Alhambra: Impressions and Sensations’ (first published in *The Savoy*, September 1896) in *Spiritual Adventures*, pp. 88-116 (p. 95).

<sup>112</sup> Benjamin, ‘Baudelaire’, *The Arcades Project*, [J10,6] p. 245.

<sup>113</sup> Symons, ‘Pastel’, in *Silhouettes*, p. 11.

‘Her’ face is removed from her body, and any implication of physicality and sex is lost. She becomes a symbol of missed opportunities and fleeting moments. This missed sexual connection haunts him throughout this section, even as he moves from Paris to London, appearing in the flashing vision of the woman in ‘On the Heath’, and in the ‘dark face’ that appears ‘mysteriously alone, | And infinitely far away’ in ‘In the Oratory’.<sup>114</sup>

In *London Nights*, it is less the shared spatiality of urban and rural spaces and more a universal sense of marginality and displacement that becomes apparent. Symons inserts two intermezzi sub-sections – groups of holiday and travel poems – between his poems about the city. In the two sub-sections, ‘Intermezzo: Pastoral’ and ‘Intermezzo: Venetian Nights’ placed second and fourth, Symons groups together poems that he wrote during the holidays he took while writing the first edition of the poems – the five weeks he spent in North Wales in Ernest Rhys’s holiday cottage (August to early September 1892), three weeks in Carbis Bay visiting Havelock Ellis (from 22 November 1893), and his visit to Italy with Herbert Horne (mid-March to late-May 1894).<sup>115</sup> Notably, each of these holidays coincides with intense moments in Symons’s life, such as his financial problems in 1892 which culminated in his having to borrow money from his father in June, and the end of Verlaine’s London series of lectures in 1893. These holidays are in locations that resonate with his past experiences and his current problems. Like an operatic intermezzo, the holiday poems in *London Nights*, are situated between the ‘London Nights’ sections and enable a brief pause and moment of reflection before we are transported back into the movement of London. The reader is also forced to move between different spaces that are themselves suggestive of being on the threshold of self-actualization.

Some of these holiday poems are of dubious quality compared to the other verses in *London Nights*. However, they demonstrate how Symons’s obsessions, particularly regarding his unfulfilled sexual desires, follow him from place to place. For example, the elusive dancer of *Silhouettes* becomes a tangible object of desire in *London Nights* but one that the poet is unable, or unwilling, to touch. His moral ambiguity in relation

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<sup>114</sup> Symons, ‘In the Oratory’, in *Silhouettes*, p. 19.

<sup>115</sup> Symons made many other trips to Italy, and later in his life it took on a larger significance as the site of his breakdown (September 1908). The effects of Venice on his mental health are documented in Symons’s autobiographical account *Confessions: A Study of Pathology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930).

to erotic desire becomes an obsessive cycle of tantalization and disappointment, and this is foregrounded in ‘Intermezzo: Venetian Nights’, a sequence of five small lyric poems written while in Venice in 1894. In ‘Venice in Easter: Impressions and Sensations’ (1894), an article that he wrote while on holiday, Symons foregrounds the similarities between Venice and the music-halls of London. He feels as if he is ‘watching a marvellous ballet, a more marvellous Aladdin’ and in his ‘favourite way, in the very midst of it, among the glittering “properties” knocking at every step against bits of superb scenery’.<sup>116</sup> Venice is like a stage-set when the performance is over and the almost photographic sense of stillness in these Venetian poems evokes Théophile Gautier’s painterly depictions of Venice in ‘Variations sur le carnaval de Venise’ [‘Variations on the Venice Carnival’] from *Émaux et camées*.<sup>117</sup> Like Gautier, Symons depicts Venice as a city of faded glamour, dreaminess, and memory.

In ‘V. Alle Zattere’, the poet depicts himself as a ‘crazy lover of the moon’ who longs for the ‘crystal and the rose’, hard and soft objects that would not be out of place in *Émaux et Camées*.<sup>118</sup> However, unlike the regular quatrains and octosyllabic verse used by Gautier, ‘V. Alle Zattere’ has a tripping rhyme scheme that falters and restarts. The poet, even when on holiday, is unsure of himself and only the moon can become his mistress, ‘Constant to [his] inconstant love’.<sup>119</sup> He attempts rhyming couplets but they are partial or merely alluded to through the half-rhyme – ‘dies’ / ‘lunacies’, ‘arms’ / ‘warms’. These symbols appear to be etiolated or evaporating and this sets up the strange intensity of the next ‘London Nights’ section. In particular, the ten poems of the ‘Bianca’ cycle – a sequence inspired by Symons’s involvement with Lydia, a dancer who he met in the Empire Theatre in 1893, before his trip to Venice, and who is the inspiration for his subsequent poetry collection *Amoris Victima* (1897). While the

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<sup>116</sup> Symons, ‘Venice in Easter: Impressions and Sensations’, *Harper’s Monthly Magazine* (April 1894), 738-50 (p. 739).

In a letter to James Dykes Campbell (6 May 1894), Symons mentions that this article is forthcoming and that he has been ‘luxuriating in Italy’ since March. See *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, pp. 105-06.

<sup>117</sup> In *Émaux et camées*, Gautier creates an impression of the dissipated beauty of the Venice carnival, which due to the Revolution was outlawed entirely in 1797, and he is drawn towards subjects which provoke memories, reveries and daydreams. Symons translated ‘Coquetterie posthume’ [‘Posthumous Coquetry’], from *Émaux et Camées* in 1889 and he makes his adoration for this collection apparent in his section on Gautier in ‘Notes and Impressions: French Writers’. He comments that ‘it is not everyone who can write poetry like the *Émaux et camées* . . . to say nothing of such inspired Baedekers as the *Voyage en Espagne*’. Symons, *Studies in Two Literatures* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1897), p. 259.

<sup>118</sup> Symons, ‘V. Alle Zattere’, in *London Nights*, p. 60.

<sup>119</sup> Symons, ‘V. Alle Zattere’, p. 60

sections of *London Nights* appear as distinct and discrete acts, feelings of melancholy, impotence, and lost desire characterize both the intermezzi and the 'London Nights' sections. In terms of mood, atmosphere, and focus on visual impression, the intermezzi are not just insignificant interludes but, like the city poems, demonstrate Symons's focus on rendering moods, atmospheres, and fleeting impressions.

Coming after the cosmopolitan descriptions of the various types of women he has loved and music-halls that he has visited in London and Paris (such as in 'Décor de Théâtre'), 'Intermezzo: Pastoral', the second sub-section of six poems, is notably rural and in his grouping of the poems he connects his Welsh birthplace and Cornish upbringing with his more recent European visits.<sup>120</sup> In August 1892, Symons left London to spend five weeks with Ernest Rhys and his wife Grace in their holiday cottage in Llangollen, a valley in North Wales. In a letter to Rhys before he left, Symons writes that while he has work to do while he is away, he wishes to 'amuse himself with mountains instead of footlights'.<sup>121</sup> This holiday from London was designed as a restorative trip and, in *Wales, England, Wed* (1940), Rhys recalls how his Welsh cottage was chosen for its secluded location. In contrast to his exhausting life in London, 'the Welsh mountains meant an escape, and the programme I had sketched – stories, poems and Celtic plays, to be written – they all assumed a rosy colour in the vista'.<sup>122</sup> For Symons, however, the stillness of the Welsh mountains is both inspiring and anxiety-inducing. 'In the Vale of Llangollen' illustrates how his return to the countryside is marked by intensity. In the first line he reminds himself that this is a return to his birthplace, he is 'In the fields and lanes again' and is bombarded by 'Messages, messages' from the natural environment.<sup>123</sup> The messages, Symons suggests, are memories of the past which come back to him in this childhood setting. There is a sense

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<sup>120</sup> In the *Collected Works*, the poems are dated as 'In the Vale of Llangollen' (9 August 1892), 'At Carbis Bay' (26 November 1893), 'Autumn Twilight' (12 September 1891), the two parts of 'Colour Studies' as 'At Dieppe' (16 September 1893) and 'At Glan-y-Wern' (28 August 1892), 'On Craig Ddu' (12 August 1892), and 'In the Meadows at Mantua' (Milan, May 7, 1894).

<sup>121</sup> Symons, letter to Ernest Rhys, late July 1892, in *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, pp. 98-99 (p. 98).

<sup>122</sup> Ernest Rhys, *Wales England Wed* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1940), p. 128.

In *A London Rose and Other Rhymes*, Rhys compares London to Wales in the two opening sections. For example, he contrasts the 'remote mountain life' to 'the modern noise of the street'. See 'The Mountain Cottage', in *A London Rose and Other Rhymes* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894), pp. 22-27 (p. 25).

<sup>123</sup> Symons, 'In the Vale of Llangollen', in *London Nights*, p. 29.

'On Craig Ddu' is another poem in this sub-section that was written three days earlier and takes its name from the rocky, wooded upland on the southern side of Llangollen. See Desmarais and Baldick's notes to the poem, *Arthur Symons: Selected Early Poetry*, p. 107.

that the speaker of the poem, brought up in the countryside, is aware of the *thresholdness* of his existence. Neither a highly successful urbanite nor wholly rustic, Symons's poems reflect his restless roving between the countryside and the city and his travels to the Continent in search of a home and sense of identity.

In a letter to Herbert Horne on 6 August 1892, written while on holiday in Wales, Symons asks him to 'commend me to the good offices of the saint who watches over music-halls, that I may be rightly inspired, duly directed, & decently pulled through, in my mountain vigils for the sake of the music-halls of Paris.'<sup>124</sup> Symons articulates the impulse to retreat to a rural landscape in order to return to the city, somehow renewed and inspired. If we look back at the city poems after considering his holiday verses, as Symons himself suggests in his letter to Horne, we can see how his urban focus on shifting visual scenes is also apparent in these rural poems. In 'Colour Studies', 'II. At Glan-y-Wern', the name of a farm near Llangollen, is paired with 'I. At Dieppe', which, like the opening section of *Silhouettes*, depicts the harbour of the French sea-side town but was composed during what appears to be a second visit in 1893. In this poem Symons's focus on the delicate tones of colour, dedicated to Walter Sickert, is made more explicit in the partly revised selection of *London Nights* poems (under the section heading 'London Nights' in *Poems* (1901)) in which it is given the subtitle 'Grey and Green'.<sup>125</sup> His intention is to create a visual impression of the 'after-sunset light', which is not rosy, as it is in 'After Sunset', but instead 'Withers grey-green, and takes the grass's tone'.<sup>126</sup>

In 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (1893), Symons lists Walter Pater, along with W. E. Henley, as an English Verlaine, and there are echoes of Pater's 'Conclusion' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* in Symons's attempt to depict 'the inward world of thought and feeling'.<sup>127</sup> His restless and subjective depictions blur the distinction between life in the countryside and in the city. As Pater writes, 'every

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<sup>124</sup> Symons, letter to Horne, postmarked 6 August 1892, Dugdale, quoted in Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life*, p. 91.

<sup>125</sup> Symons, 'London Nights', *Poems*, vol. 1 (1901; New York: John Lane, 1914), pp. 79-174 (p. 105). The date of composition given in Symons's *Collected Works*, 16 September 1893, coincides with the dates during which Sickert painted *L'Hôtel Royal, Dieppe* (1894).

<sup>126</sup> Symons, 'I. At Dieppe', in *London Nights*, p. 32.

<sup>127</sup> Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1873), p. 208.

Symons's 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' was first published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (1893), 858-67. In 'Walter Pater' (1906), Symons gives further remarks on Pater's style. He writes of reading the first edition of *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, on ribbed paper, commenting that 'I have the feel of it still in my fingers'. 'Walter Pater', in *Figures of Several Centuries* (London: Constable, 1916), pp. 316-35 (p. 322).

moment some form grows perfect in hand or face; some tone on the hills or sea is choicer than the rest; some mood or passion or insight or intellectual excitement is irresistibly real and attractive to us, – for that moment only.’<sup>128</sup> In ‘Colour Studies’, Symons’s representation of ephemeral moments relates to his shifting sense of self. Vincent Sherry (2015) remarks that in these poems Symons is attempting to ‘recover or reconstitute’ his original memories.<sup>129</sup> However, rather than reclaiming an important lost moment, he depicts an instant that is ‘not different to any other, not special, not original’.<sup>130</sup> It is not a beautiful sunset but a mediocre one, and he describes this ‘indifferent moment as it dies’.<sup>131</sup>

In ‘I. At Dieppe’, Sherry argues, Symons illustrates a move from depicting epic romantic scenes towards a modern emphasis on the mundane and the everyday, a continuation of Baudelaire’s emphasis on the transient nature of the commonplace. The harmony of this moment shifts and changes, creating the idea that these spaces of stillness and solitude are palpable but out of reach. In the companion poem, ‘II. At Glan-y-Wern’, given the subtitle ‘White and Rose’ in the 1901 selection of *London Nights* poems, the emotional memory of the sea is compared to a Welsh vision, a ‘White-robed woman’ with a ‘gipsy face’ who he glimpses through the window.<sup>132</sup> Initially, these two ‘Colour Studies’ appear to be opposites as the vague grey-green is contrasted with the crisp whiteness of the woman’s clothes and the brightness of her face. However, both settings – the sea at Dieppe and the room at Glan-y-Wern – share a sense of unfolding, but not fulfilled, desire. The ‘Listless and endless’ memory of Dieppe and the woman who ‘flashed into the evening light’ are lost moments of self-realization. In ‘Colour Studies’, as in the rest of the ‘Intermezzo: Pastoral’, there is more than just a focus on familiar natural scenes. Symons’s physical engagement with travelling through and observing different rural thresholds (mountains and the shore) provides him with a way to reflect his feelings of ambivalence and longing. He depicts flashes of understanding and self-awareness triggered by specific physical places. As argued

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<sup>128</sup> Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, p. 210.

<sup>129</sup> Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 74.

<sup>130</sup> Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, p. 74.

<sup>131</sup> Symons, ‘I. At Dieppe’, p. 32.

<sup>132</sup> Symons, ‘II. At Glan-y-Wern’, in *London Nights*, p. 33. See also, ‘III. At Dieppe: Grey and Green’ and ‘IV. At Glan-y-Wern: White and Rose’, in *Poems*, pp. 105-06.

in the next section, in the poems written at Carbis Bay, the evocation of memories and anxieties is intensified by the vast space of the coast.

### **Travelling Beyond: The Carbis Bay Poems**

Symons's three-week visit to Ellis and his wife Edith in their holiday cottage at Carbis Bay, Cornwall, in late 1893, coincided with two main events in his life: the publication of 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', later extended and revised as *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), and the end of Verlaine's visit to London.<sup>133</sup> The three poems that he wrote during this holiday, 'At Carbis Bay' (26 November 1893), 'Stella Maris' (30 November 1893), and 'Tears' (3 December 1893), focus on the quiet, melancholy, and contemplative atmosphere of the English seaside in winter (see Appendix E). The suggestive qualities of these Carbis Bay poems are aptly described by Symons's own definition of Verlaine's poetry in 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', that Decadence is the poetry of sensation. It should attempt to 'fix the last fine shade, the quintessence of things; to fix it fleetingly'.<sup>134</sup> This is perfectly exemplified by the metaphor of the sand on the beach being washed away by the tide. Yet, it is not just the temporal image of 'time and tide' that makes the familiar, nostalgic seaside motif significant for Symons, but its implication of impermanence and indistinctness.

As mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, Murray begins his study of place in Decadent literature with a discussion of Cornwall and Symons's poem 'At Carbis Bay', included in 'Intermezzo: Pastoral', and he argues that in this poem Symons responds to 'the coast of Cornwall as he would respond to London or Paris, his Decadent form adaptable for different landscapes.'<sup>135</sup> For Symons the transcendent and boundless power of this littoral space and its ability to draw forth lost memories conveys a shared spatiality with the streets of London. Both are transformative spaces of flux and transition, and Murray argues that 'only the title marks out the location; otherwise it is free from concrete description, an attempt to retrospectively capture the

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<sup>133</sup> On 22 November 1893, after putting 'Verlaine on the train for Oxford', Symons took the train to Cornwall to stay at Havelock Ellis's holiday cottage for three weeks. Symons's notes on Verlaine's visit and his timetable in London are cited by Lhombreaud in *Arthur Symons: A Critical Biography*, pp. 102-03.

<sup>134</sup> Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', p. 862.

<sup>135</sup> Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence*, p. 2.



integral elements of the experience as lodged in the memory'.<sup>136</sup> I agree with Murray that Symons's focus is on the impression of the scene as experienced by the poet rather than a geographic rendering of Carbis Bay. However, I disagree that it is free from concrete description. Due to its title and its position in 'Intermezzo: Pastoral', it is a very vivid description of the effect of looking out to sea on a stormy night, when 'A sharp and hurrying wind | Scourges the waters white'.<sup>137</sup> In a similar way to Symons's use of specific urban thresholds, the threshold of the coast evokes a particular sense of yearning and nostalgia across the three Carbis Bay poems.

In 'At Carbis Bay', the poet lingers on the border of his own self-awareness and the sea and the wind pose indecipherable and ominous questions.<sup>138</sup> In the second stanza, impressions and memories appear to come to him 'Out of the doubtful dark, | Out of the night of the land' and this creates a sense of foreboding and unrest.<sup>139</sup> Katherine Miller, in her doctoral thesis 'The Observances and Observations of Walks by the Sea' (2012), ruminates on the poetic symbolism of the beach as a place that is constantly in transition. She affirms that,

Facing perpetual alteration to boundaries, formed and reformed by the tide, the beach offers not a landscape – in the sense of man-made composition – but a prospect of the random, ephemeral and half-hidden as emblematic of the mind's preoccupations.<sup>140</sup>

The beach as a site of pleasure and anxiety is a familiar Victorian trope, and in Symons's beach poems, the unstable, shifting motion of the waves, which both erase and mark the still shore, also suggests the movement of his memories.

In a letter to Willard, dated 30 November 1893, Symons writes that he found Carbis Bay impossible 'to describe, for the effect is so big, so terrifying, really, that words become ridiculous, meaningless, when they put on emphasis enough to come

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<sup>136</sup> Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence*, p. 2.

<sup>137</sup> Symons, 'At Carbis Bay', in *London Nights*, p. 30.

<sup>138</sup> The sea wind is a recurring theme in Symons's later collections. See 'Wind on the Sea', in *Images of Good and Evil* (1899), and 'Cornish Wind' in *The Fool of the World and Other Poems* (1906), in *The Collected Works of Arthur Symons*, vol. 2, p. 114 and p. 188, and 'Hymn to The Sea' in *Lesbia and Other Poems* (1920), in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, pp. 288-90.

<sup>139</sup> Symons, 'At Carbis Bay', p. 30.

<sup>140</sup> Katherine Miller, 'The Observances and Observations of Walks by the Sea' (unpublished PhD Thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014), p. 66.

near rendering it.’<sup>141</sup> In the presence of the vast symbolism of nature words appear to fail him, but he still attempts to render the personal significance of this landscape through poetry. Kate Hext (2015) relates Symons’s ‘refusal of the sublime’ in ‘At Carbis Bay’ to Decadent solipsism.<sup>142</sup> Rather than being overwhelmed by the vast expanse of the sea, Hext argues that through the form of the poem Symons takes control of the natural landscape. For example, the regular repetition at the beginning of the first two lines of each stanza (‘Out of the’) and rhyme scheme (abcbb) creates ‘a circulatory within which there is no space for the initial “terror” to evolve’.<sup>143</sup> Instead, what emerges out of ‘the turbulent night’ is delicacy and serenity – the silence of the stars and ‘The peace of the sky’.<sup>144</sup> The speaker’s feelings of yearning, desire and loss are waves that threaten to break but only gently ripple on the surface of the poem. The effect is, yet again, a sense that the speaker is both seeking and resisting self-actualization. This creates a sense of unrest. For example, the rhythm of the lines is slightly irregular, fluctuating by one or two beats, and the mirroring of the stanzas serves to connect the ‘peace of the sky’ in the final stanza to the previous descriptions of the ‘terror by night’ and ‘menace of land’.<sup>145</sup> As is apparent in Symons’s city poems, moments of silence are actually uncomfortable experiences. They expose his personal restlessness which is attributed to an inescapable feeling of always searching for something that is slightly out of reach. He asks ‘What is it that breathes and broods, | Hoveringly at hand?’<sup>146</sup>

The similarity between the flux of the sea and fervent and elusive memories reaches an apex in Symons’s second, and much more controversial, Carbis Bay poem ‘Stella Maris’ (30 November 1893), included in the second ‘London Nights’ section after ‘Intermezzo: Pastoral’.<sup>147</sup> His depiction of the speaker on the shore watching a

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<sup>141</sup> In this letter, Symons writes about his holiday, describing time spent walking the coastal paths with Ellis and how this place, at ‘the very edge of England, at Carbis Bay, close to St. Ives’, was where he lived for three years as a child. Symons, letter to Willard, 30 November 1893, *Arthur Symons: Selected Letters*, pp. 102-04 (p. 103).

<sup>142</sup> Kate Hext, ‘Decadence and the Fate of the Romantic Sublime’, in *Decadent Romanticism*, pp. 145-60 (p. 150).

<sup>143</sup> Hext, ‘Decadence and the Fate of the Romantic Sublime’, p. 150.

<sup>144</sup> Symons, ‘At Carbis Bay’, p. 30.

<sup>145</sup> Symons, ‘At Carbis Bay’, p. 30.

<sup>146</sup> Symons, ‘At Carbis Bay’, p. 30.

<sup>147</sup> ‘Stella Maris’ was originally published in the first number of the *Yellow Book* (April 1894) and was singled out by critics as an outrageous description of an amorous encounter with a London prostitute. See Philip Gilbert Hamerton, ‘The Yellow Book: A Criticism of Volume I’, *Yellow Book*, 2 (1894), 181.

lighthouse beam flicker while reminiscing over an almost forgotten erotic encounter is a layered portrayal of threshold feelings and sensations evoked in a littoral space.<sup>148</sup> In ‘Perfume Clouds: Olfaction, Memory and Desire in Arthur Symons’s *London Nights* (1895)’ (2015), Jane Desmarais ascribes the movement of the light and the ebb and flow of the waves to Symons’s endeavour to articulate his shifting and restless sensations. ‘Like the lighthouse beam that both attracts and warns seafarers,’ she explains, ‘the processes of memory are ambiguous and overwhelm the poet.’<sup>149</sup> The flickering lighthouse beam across the infinite sea-scape is used as a symbol of this intermittent memory, and the flashes of light ‘Fade, and return, and fade away’ like waves of recollection.<sup>150</sup> The effect is also, in a looser sense, musical, and the circling of the light combines with the waves of the beach in a way that is reminiscent of the restless dancer performing under the shimmering lights of the music-hall. The ‘phantom of the lighthouse light, | Against the sky, across the bay’ appears to ‘fade, and return, and fade away’, in harmony with the movement of the dancers described in ‘La Mélinite: Moulin Rouge’.<sup>151</sup> The speaker’s awareness of life’s transience is given form in the image of the flickering lighthouse beam across the infinite sea.

The haunting dream that is called forth by the movement of the light on the waves is specific, focused and dwells on something that was real and physical, but is now absent and unobtainable:

Let us be glad to have forgot  
That roses fade, and loves are not,  
As dreams, immortal, though they seem  
Almost as real as a dream.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> ‘Stella Maris’ is an epithet for the Virgin Mary and literally translates as ‘star of the sea’, a guiding spirit or female protector for sailors at sea. Symons draws on both these meanings in his address to his own particular type of guide, the ‘Juliet of the night’ previously encountered in or around the music-hall.

<sup>149</sup> Jane Desmarais, ‘Perfume Clouds: Olfaction, Memory and Desire in Arthur Symons’s *London Nights* (1895)’, in *Economies of Desire at the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Libidinal Lives*, ed. by Jane Ford, Kim Edwards Keates and Patricia Pulham (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 62-79 (p. 71).

<sup>150</sup> Symons, ‘Stella Maris’, in *London Nights*, pp. 40-42 (p. 40).

<sup>151</sup> This is developed by Jan B. Gordon who argues that the ghostly woman in ‘Stella Maris’ and the elusive dancer in the music-hall are both described using fleeting and intangible images. See Jan B. Gordon, ‘The Danse Macabre of Arthur Symons’ *London Nights*’, *Victorian Poetry*, 9 (1971), 429-43.

<sup>152</sup> Symons, ‘Stella Maris’, p. 40.

The refined image of the lighthouse beam indicates Symons's interest in 'the finer sense of things unseen, the deeper meaning of things evident', which he attributes to Symbolism in his later extended volume of criticism.<sup>153</sup> At the beginning of the poem the landscape 'seems a reproach' to the speaker's sexual thoughts.<sup>154</sup> It is 'so serene a pausing place' that the 'pure expanse of sea' and the 'shadowy shore's austerity' appear to contrast with the luxurious and impure memory that is evoked.<sup>155</sup> He is not sure why of 'all the women' he has met 'in the chance romances of the streets' he remembers this one particular figure.<sup>156</sup> The poem is both an accurate rendering of a physical place, inspired by the view of Godrevy lighthouse as seen from Carbis Bay, and it gives the impression of being a mystical landscape underpinned with a hidden, symbolic significance. In an imperfect echo of the refrain in 'At Carbis Bay', 'Out of the night, out of the sea' the speaker's memories and longings appear to call forth the Nereid, a mythical mermaid symbolic of female sexual power and the dangerous lure of the sea.

The image of the lighthouse in 'Stella Maris' perfectly encapsulates a sense of searching for something which is now lost. Looking out across the distance, and imagining past encounters, is also a theme of the third Carbis Bay poem, 'Tears', which was included in the second edition of *Silhouettes*. This poem, which is flanked by street poems in *Silhouettes*, takes on a new significance when it is considered in conjunction with 'Stella Maris' and 'At Carbis Bay'. In these two quatrains in envelope rhyme, Symons returns to the image of memory and desire in a more simplified form. While the physical seascape is lost in this poem, what remains is a description of the implacable temporality of human existence. In the second stanza he pleads to his lost loves:

Women, once loved, and always mine,  
I call to you across the years,  
I bring a gift of tears,  
I bring my tears to you as wine.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', p. 859.

In 'Arthur Symons: Symbolist: 1', Munro analyses the differences between the definition of Symbolism given in 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' (where, along with Impressionism, it is considered an off-shoot of Decadence) and Symons's expanded reassessment of Symbolism in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. Munro, *Arthur Symons*, pp. 56-81.

<sup>154</sup> Symons, 'Stella Maris', p. 40.

<sup>155</sup> Symons, 'Stella Maris', p. 40.

<sup>156</sup> Symons, 'Stella Maris', p. 40.

<sup>157</sup> Symons, 'Tears', in *Silhouettes*, p. 56.

These three very different poems all inspired by the same landscape illustrate how Symons's image of the sea is not fixed. His treatment of this natural threshold space exemplifies his oscillating mode of vision, but also a mood of longing and transience. The sea is both perilous and destructive, reminding the speaker of his own mortality and all the experiences that he once had and that he longs to experience again.

Sebastian Hayes in *Arthur Symons: Leading Poet of the English Decadence* (2007) comments on the 'distinctive' mood of Symons's nineties poems and argues that it is very different from that of other more nostalgic poets, such as Alfred Tennyson and A. E. Housman. Hayes asks:

What is this mood exactly? In Symons's case it is not so much a backward-looking stance, nostalgia for a 'lost land of content' (Housman), as forward-looking, a yearning for something intangible just out of reach but whose proximity we nonetheless sense – the predicament of Tantalus.<sup>158</sup>

This is apparent, Hayes notes, in the 'glimpses of pleasure' Symons experiences in the music-hall and then loses when he returns to the reality of Fountain Court. In his poems that are inspired by the edge of the shore, this tantalising fantasy, inspired by music, dancers, and multi-coloured lights, changes slightly. The metaphor of the sea hints at something more expansive and immeasurable, a spiritual point of outreach into the unknowable.

The 'shore-line of infinity', as Symons describes it in 'On the Beach', is both a clear limit and evokes boundlessness and eternity.<sup>159</sup> In a similar way to Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Brise Marine' ['Sea Breeze'] (1866), which Symons translated and included in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, the Carbis Bay poems express a sense of weariness in both body and mind and are focused on a something shadowy, distant and unknowable; a point beyond the known universe and life itself.<sup>160</sup> The horizon is the focal point; it is something that appears to the restless poet as a distinctive

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<sup>158</sup> Sebastian Hayes, *Arthur Symons: Leading Poet of the English Decadence* (Shaftesbury: Brimstone Press, 2007), p. 9.

<sup>159</sup> I am grateful to Dr Kostas Boyiopoulos for his insights into infinity in Symons's poetry, including his thoughts on the unpublished poem, 'The Universe', in Box 15 Folder 5 (Poems S-Z) of the Arthur Symons Papers, Princeton.

<sup>160</sup> Mallarmé's 'Brise Marine' ['Sea Wind'] was first published in *Le Parnasse Contemporain* (12 May 1866). It begins 'La chair est triste, hélas! et j'ai lu tous les livres', which Symons translates as 'The flesh is sad, alas! And all the books are read'. Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, p. 373.

but illusive boundary between the familiar and the unfamiliar. This anticipates his description of the reversal that takes place in Symbolist poetry: ‘a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world is no longer a dream’.<sup>161</sup>

In the Arthur Symons archive at Princeton University, one of the only non-professional photographs of Symons depicts him sitting on a groyne, a manmade costal threshold designed to protect the beach from longshore drift [Fig. 4.2]. In this undated holiday snapshot, he appears slightly more natural and less stylized. It depicts, in some ways, a return to the littoral spaces of his youth, but it is not an intimate photograph. It is dominated by the still, vast, and deserted background of the beachscape. In ‘Sea Magic’, from *Wanderings* (1931), Symons comments on his lingering attraction to the sea, a fascination that grows in intensity after his 1908 breakdown, and he asks ‘How can this space, vacant of colour as it is vacant of actuality, mean more to me than an opium dream?’<sup>162</sup> In this question, Symons evocatively contrasts the artificial and curated threshold spaces of earlier Decadent poets, notably Baudelaire’s dream in ‘La Chambre double’, with his own attraction to more natural, wild spaces. The image that we have of Symons as purely an urban poet is disrupted by paying closer attention to the different types of threshold spaces in *Silhouettes* and *London Nights*. The urban and rural thresholds depicted in these poems suggest Symons’s broader and more personal vision, but most importantly illustrate how a threshold existence undergirds his subjectivity. Rather than being located in one interior and compartmentalized interior, Symons’s ‘vagabond restlessness’ leads us beyond the urban spaces typically associated with Decadence.

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<sup>161</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>162</sup> Arthur Symons, ‘Sea-Magic’, in *Wanderings* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1931), p. 285.

**Third-party copyright image removed**

Fig. 4.2. Undated photograph of Arthur Symons, 145 x 103 mm. Arthur Symons Papers, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Box 28, Folder 1, CO182.

## CONCLUSION



This thesis is a study of thresholds in the work of selected Decadent writers through their representation of physical space. Using the concept of the threshold, drawn from the work of Walter Benjamin and Subha Mukherji, I have argued that unlike the enclosed spaces we find in Gothic literature or the hermetic retreats traditionally associated with Decadence (with *À rebours* in particular), the representation of Decadent space is complex and dynamic, suggestive of the relationship between Decadence and modernity, and of the nature of Decadence itself.

Drawing on Benjamin's idea of the *Schwelle*, I have argued that Baudelaire's poetry and prose poems, particularly 'La Chambre double', describe the experience of living in the changing cityscape of Paris. In Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*, this is an intensely threshold experience, as exemplified in his representation of the crowd as an interconnected mass of different perspectives, and the interior/exterior spatiality of alcoves, balconies, and *ruelles*. Baudelaire is equally a poet of the city streets and the urban interior. The flux of the city appears to seep into the Parisian *chambre*, imaginatively binding the two spaces together. Bachelard's 'l'immensité intime' is a useful concept for thinking about the threshold between interior spaces and the interior life of the poet, and the relationship between small objects and spaces and vast realms of dream and memory is recurrent throughout the works examined in this thesis. In Baudelaire's prose poem 'La Chambre double', for example, the room is both a physical *chambre* of work and relaxation, and a private dream space of creative freedom. The space most typical of Decadent literature is liminal, a portal between the private urban interior (often perceived as a retreat from the world) and exterior modern flux.

In Huysmans's *À rebours* we encounter the idea of retreat, typical of Gothic and Decadent literature, but Des Esseintes' withdrawal is only partial. He may think he is sealed off from the middle-class humdrum, but he retains connections to the city and to his past life in the form of objects collected and curated within the villa. The rooms of the house at Fontenay are not closed off. They are in dynamic relation to one another, symbolic of Des Esseintes' attachment to worldly obsessions and spiritual questing.



Rather than providing him with an escape from his fleshly desires and repulsions, this threshold space, in which binary oppositions are broken down, comes to resemble a hothouse. Through creating new sensory fusions and correspondences, the villa intensifies his obsessions and neuroses. This becomes most apparent in Chapter Eight in which the strange and distorted growths of Des Esseintes' imagination find their corollary in his collection of exotic hothouse plants. Built of transparent glass that obscures the difference between outside and inside, the hothouse is the ultimate threshold space. Huysmans uses this metaphor in his Durtal tetralogy in order to illustrate how Durtal is caught between the comfort of belief and his failure to renounce the pleasures of the world. From the diseased floral images of *Là-bas* through to the representation of monks as spiritual horticulturalists in *L'Oblat*, the hothouse represents Durtal's struggle to find religious salvation.

Moving on to consider the treatment of space by English Decadent writers, Chapter Three and Chapter Four provided analyses of the poems of Dowson and Symons. In Dowson's poetry we find a fascination with small, reduced spaces, exemplified by the *Poésie Schublade Notebook*, in which the threshold image of half-openness, suggested by the drawer, takes prominence over the image of the *jeune fille*. Like Huysmans, Dowson expresses anxiety about the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, but rather than exploring this through the metaphor of the house or room, he focuses on intimate and devotional spaces like the drawer and the cloister. Decadent literature has a reputation for excess, clutter, and abundance, but in Dowson's poetry we encounter an obsessive focus on reduction and refinement, which I term Decadent minimalism. In the 'Sonnets – of a Little Girl' sequence, he describes the inside of the shell as an ideal space of withdrawal and immensity, and after his conversion this obsession with spaces of extreme purification and negation becomes more focused on dying and wasting away. In 'Extreme Unction' the pleasure offered by the last rites demonstrates how, like the speaker, the moribund body is trapped 'betwixt' the real world and spiritual salvation.

Symons is an interesting case study in terms of the idea of threshold poetics. While the music-hall and city spaces that he evokes in *Silhouettes* and *London Nights* are threshold spaces of desire and denial, in which he finds himself 'Chained by

enchantment to [his] stall',<sup>1</sup> his poems about the countryside and the coast (often neglected by critics) suggest a more expansive, even Romantic, perspective. For example, in the opening sub-section of *Silhouettes*, 'At Dieppe', Symons's description of the threshold where the sea meets the shore evokes the movement of time and memory, and this analogy is also used in his city poems. His engagement with modernity may recall Baudelaire's image of the *flâneur* wandering the boulevards, but there is a greater sense of yearning and restlessness in Symons's poems. In *London Nights*, the Intermezzi exemplify his itinerant perspective and the reader is transported out of London to the Continent and other British rural and littoral landscapes. Of the four writers that I have discussed, Symons is probably the most quintessentially threshold poet. As his holiday poems exemplify, he explores other types of thresholds beyond the interiorized and curated spaces typically associated with Decadent literature. In the three poems written while at Carbis Bay, the speaker stands on the threshold looking inward towards the shore and outward towards the horizon, and this image of a lone individual facing the mysterious vastness of the landscape is evocative of Symbolist ideas.

The relationship between the writers in this investigation and the urban environment is significant. As Alex Murray's recent volume, *Landscapes of Decadence*, and David Weir's current research into the urban geography of Decadence exemplify, the Decadent imagination was cultivated in the nineteenth-century metropolis.<sup>2</sup> The paradoxes of Decadent threshold poetics are related to the new and complex experiences of modernity. However, it is limiting to see Decadence in terms of a wholesale rejection of nature. Further research into Decadent spatiality could focus on the treatment of spaces beyond the bounds of the urban environment and the ways in which they evoke the relationship of Decadence with other literary traditions. As I hope to have shown in Chapter Four, Symons's volumes of Decadent verse move between the city, the country, and the coast. In Dowson's Pont-Aven works, too, written while he was staying at the Hôtel Gloanec (now the Hôtel des Ajoncs d'Or) in Brittany, we encounter non-urban thresholds and edgelands that blur the boundaries between Decadence and Symbolism. These are terms are often used interchangeably. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Symons, 'Prologue', p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> See 'The Urban Geography of Decadence', in *Cambridge Critical Concepts: Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming).

I propose that an attention to the different types of spatial and experiential thresholds that we encounter in Symbolist and Decadent literature could lead to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between these two literary traditions.<sup>3</sup>

We find an increasingly Symbolist aesthetic in the later work of Symons, for example. In *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands* (1918), a collection of essays on Spain, Britain, and Ireland that includes a reprint of *London: A Book of Aspects*, Symons describes the effect of leaving the city behind completely. In his essay on ‘The Islands of Aran’, published four months after visiting Inishmore with W. B. Yeats in August 1896, he explains how in only three days his outlook on life had changed:

I have never believed less in the reality of the visible world, in the importance of all we are most serious about. One seems to wash off the dust of cities, the dust of beliefs, the dust of incredulities.<sup>4</sup>

In Symons’s ‘In Ireland’ sequence in *Images of Good and Evil* (1899), this interest in the liminal realm between conscious reality and a magical otherworld is developed and he draws on a similar sense of Celtic mysticism to Yeats. In ‘V. In The Wood of Finvara’, the last poem of the sequence, Symons writes of how he has ‘grown tired of rapture and love’s desire’.<sup>5</sup> In the woodland at the edge of the village he finds a sense of release and enchantment: ‘Here, between sea and sea, in the fairy wood, | I have found a delicate, wave-green solitude.’<sup>6</sup> This liminal landscape, ‘between sea and sea’, exemplifies what Vincent Sherry terms the ‘trading away’ of the ‘poetic techniques and emotional themes and imaginative experiences of decadence’.<sup>7</sup> Symons’s descriptions of the regenerative power of the earth, images of eternity, and legendary creatures of

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<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to the collection of essays *Symbolism, Decadence, and the Fin de Siècle: French and European Perspectives* (2000), Patrick McGuinness comments on the convergent and contrasting aspects of Symbolist and Decadent writing. However, there are few critical works that directly focus on the complicated relationship between Decadence and Symbolism. As Asti Hustvedt mentions, ‘the boundaries that separate decadence from symbolism’ remain ‘blurry at best’. See Asti Hustvedt, ‘The Art of Death: French Fiction at the Fin de Siècle’, in *The Decadent Reader*, pp. 10-29 (p. 14), and Patrick McGuinness, ‘Introduction’, in *Symbolism, Decadence, and the Fin de Siècle: French and European Perspectives*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2000), pp. 1-18.

<sup>4</sup> Symons, ‘The Islands of Aran’, in *Cities and Sea-Coasts and Islands*, pp. 302-27 (p. 314).

<sup>5</sup> Symons, ‘V. In the Wood of Finvara’, in *Images of Good and Evil* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> Symons, ‘V. In the Wood of Finvara’, p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, p. 80.

folklore are the antithesis of the fading memories and intermittent desires described in his Decadent poems.

In a similar way to Symons's Carbis Bay poems and his later Irish verses, Dowson's Pont-Aven poems also imply a Symbolist movement out of interiorized Decadent threshold spaces and into physical littoral borderlands.<sup>8</sup> Given his early interest in the small, reduced confines of the shell, it is not surprising that Dowson finds his final place of seclusion and solitude by the sea. 'In a Breton Cemetery' in *Decorations*, included in a letter to John Gray (22 March 1896) and dated 'Pont Aven March/96', for example, evokes the poet's location between the calm Breton cemetery and the turbulent ocean.<sup>9</sup> The simplicity and predictability of the country life, governed by nature and culminating in a return to the earth, is an alluring counterpoint to the nomadic and unrestrained life of the urban poet:

And now night falls,  
 Me, tempest-tost, and driven from pillar to post,  
 A poor worn ghost,  
 This quiet pasture calls;  
 And dear dead people with pale hands  
 Beckon me to their lands.<sup>10</sup>

In his letter to Gray, Dowson refers to this poem as a 'versicle du pays' [country poem], a phrase that also conjures the sense of a yearning pull for home ('mal du pays' [homesickness]).<sup>11</sup> In Symons's account, even in Dieppe, Dowson was unable to resist 'discovering strange, squalid haunts about the harbour, where he made friends with amazing inn-keepers, and got into rows with fishermen who came to drink after midnight.'<sup>12</sup> In the Breton verses the poet is not merely engaged in reminiscing but is also anticipating his own demise. He uses the symbolism of littoral spaces to capture a sense of liminality, transitoriness, and instability. One of the major characteristics of

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<sup>8</sup> After the tragic deaths of his parents by suicide (his father on 15 August 1894 and mother on 4 February 1895) and Adelaide's final rejection, Dowson began to take many trips to Europe. He travelled to Belgium in October 1895 with Conal O'Riordan, first visiting Bruges, then Paris (to stay at the Hôtel de Medici in 214 Rue St Jacques), and from February to October 1896 he settled in Pont-Aven, Finistère, Brittany. See Adams, *Madder Music, Stronger Wine*, p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> 'In a Breton Cemetery' was also included in a letter to Samuel Smith from the Hôtel Gloanec, 24 March 1896, British Library MS 45135: 1891-1896.

<sup>10</sup> Dowson, 'In a Breton Cemetery', in *Decorations*, p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Dowson, letter to John Gray, 22 March 1896, in *The Letters of Ernest Dowson*, pp. 349-50 (p. 350).

<sup>12</sup> Symons, 'Ernest Dowson', p. xvi.

Dowson's later work, as described by Murray Pittock is 'a kind of inverted correspondence between the visible and invisible worlds: an image of Symbolist death to correspond with worldly life'.<sup>13</sup> The poet is looking forward, beyond this world to the next. He becomes in these last poems 'A very ghostly lover', in the words of Symons, 'wandering in a land of perpetual twilight'.<sup>14</sup>

Decadence is a literary tradition that is often difficult to define. As David Weir points out, it is 'like the mystical sphere whose circumference is everywhere but whose center is nowhere'.<sup>15</sup> His image of sphere without a centre evokes interiority and enclosure but also alludes to the multifaceted qualities of Decadent writing. Since the 1970s scholars have endeavoured to find a definition of Decadence that captures its paradoxical aspects. Jean Pierrot and Jan B. Gordon have attempted to read the tradition in relation to Gothic writers' treatment of compartmentalized space, but this, I would argue, does not do justice to the subtle complexities of Decadent writing as the shifting perspectives and the Decadent tendency to blur boundaries are not related to gender and sexuality as they are in Gothic literature. In the work of Baudelaire, Huysmans, Dowson, and Symons, interior and exterior spaces are unfixed and suggestive. They are shifting and subjective, resonant of the Decadent's ambivalence towards modernity.

Decadent writers prefer peripheral positions, being on the outside looking in, and in their writing this is expressed through an attention to spatiality that is, like their point of view, essentially threshold. Even when English Decadents begin to move away from the materiality of physical artefacts towards plainer, more prosaic objects (Dowson) or from inside bedrooms to outside on the streets or the natural landscape (Symons), they retain a peripheral perspective. What I hope to have shown in this thesis is that paying attention to the *thresholdness* of Decadent writing provides us with new ways of reading Decadent texts, but it also articulates the more serious concerns of the literary tradition, such as the complexity of materiality and the nature of modern experience. Writing Decadence, to quote Remy de Gourmont, is to remain on the threshold.

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<sup>13</sup> Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence*, p. 140.

<sup>14</sup> Symons, 'A Literary Causerie: On a Book of Verses', p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*, p. xix.

## APPENDIX A



## Charles Baudelaire's 'La Chambre double' (1869) and Michael Hamburger's Translation 'The Double Room'

### La Chambre double\*

Une chambre qui ressemble à une rêverie, une chambre véritablement *spirituelle*, où l'atmosphère stagnante est légèrement teintée de rose et de bleu.

L'âme y prend un bain de paresse, aromatisé par le regret et le désir. — C'est quelque chose de crépusculaire, de bleuâtre et de rosâtre; un rêve de volupté pendant une éclipse.

Les meubles ont des formes allongées, prostrées, alanguies. Les meubles ont l'air de rêver; on les dirait doués d'une vie somnambulique, comme le végétal et le minéral. Les étoffes parlent une langue muette, comme les fleurs, comme les ciels, comme les soleils couchants.

Sur les murs nulle abomination artistique. Relativement au rêve pur, à l'impression non analysée, l'art défini, l'art positif est un blasphème. Ici, tout a la suffisante clarté et la délicieuse obscurité de l'harmonie.

Une senteur infinitésimale du choix le plus exquis, à laquelle se mêle une très-légère humidité, nage dans cette atmosphère, où l'esprit sommeillant est bercé par des sensations de serre chaude.

La mousseline pleut abondamment devant les fenêtres et devant le lit; elle s'épanche en cascades neigeuses. Sur ce lit est couchée l'Idole, la souveraine des rêves. Mais comment est-elle ici? Qui l'a amenée? quel pouvoir magique l'a installée sur ce trône de rêverie et de volupté? Qu'importe? la voilà! je la reconnais.

Voilà bien ces yeux dont la flamme traverse le crépuscule; ces subtiles et terribles *mirettes*, que je reconnais à leur effrayante malice! Elles attirent, elles subjuguent, elles dévorent le regard de l'imprudent qui les contemple. Je les ai souvent étudiées, ces étoiles noires qui commandent la curiosité et l'admiration.

À quel démon bienveillant dois-je d'être ainsi entouré de mystère, de silence, de paix et de parfums? Ô béatitude! ce que nous nommons généralement la vie, même dans son expansion la plus heureuse, n'a rien de commun avec cette vie suprême dont j'ai maintenant connaissance et que je savoure minute par minute, seconde par seconde!

Non! il n'est plus de minutes, il n'est plus de secondes! Le temps a disparu; c'est l'Éternité qui règne, une éternité de délices!

Mais un coup terrible, lourd, a retenti à la porte, et, comme dans les rêves infernaux, il m'a semblé que je recevais un coup de pioche dans l'estomac.

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\* From *Le Spleen de Paris (Petits poèmes en prose)*, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 280-82.

Et puis un Spectre est entré. C'est un huissier qui vient me torturer au nom de la loi; une infâme concubine qui vient crier misère et ajouter les trivialités de sa vie aux douleurs de la mienne; ou bien le saute-ruisseau d'un directeur de journal qui réclame la suite du manuscrit.

La chambre paradisiaque, l'idole, la souveraine des rêves, la *Sylphide*, comme disait le grand René, toute cette magie a disparu au coup brutal frappé par le Spectre.

Horreur! je me souviens! je me souviens! Oui! ce taudis, ce séjour de l'éternel ennui, est bien le mien. Voici les meubles sots, poudreux, écornés; la cheminée sans flamme et sans braise, souillée de crachats: les tristes fenêtres où la pluie a tracé des sillons dans la poussière; les manuscrits, raturés ou incomplets; l'almanach où le crayon a marqué les dates sinistres!

Et ce parfum d'un autre monde, dont je m'enivrais avec une sensibilité perfectionnée, hélas! il est remplacé par une fétide odeur de tabac mêlée à je ne sais quelle nauséabonde moisissure. On respire ici maintenant le ranci de la désolation.

Dans ce monde étroit, mais si plein de dégoût, un seul objet connu me sourit: la fiole de laudanum; une vieille et terrible amie; comme toutes les amies, hélas! féconde en caresses et en traîtrises.

Oh! oui! le Temps a reparu; le Temps règne en souverain maintenant; et avec les hideux vieillard est revenu tout son démoniaque cortège de Souvenirs, de Regrets, de Spasmes, de Peurs, d'Angoisses, de Cauchemars, de Colères et de Névroses.

Je vous assure que les secondes maintenant sont fortement et solennellement accentuées, et chacune, en jaillissant de la pendule, dit: — «Je suis la Vie, l'insupportable, l'implacable Vie!»

Il n'y a qu'une Seconde dans la vie humaine qui ait mission d'annoncer une bonne nouvelle, la *bonne nouvelle* qui a cause à chacun une inexplicable peur.

Oui! le Temps règne; il a repris sa brutale dictature. Et il me pousse, comme si j'étais un bœuf, avec son double aiguillon. — «Et hue donc! bourrique! Sue donc, esclave! Vis donc, damné!»

### The Double Room\*\*

A ROOM that is like a reverie, a room truly soulful, where the stagnant atmosphere is lightly tinged with rose-colour and blue.

There the soul bathes in idleness, made fragrant by regret and desire. It is something of twilight, blueish and roseate; a dream of delicious pleasures during an eclipse.

The furniture has elongated, prostrated, languid forms. The furniture has the air of dreaming; it seems endowed with a somnambulistic life, like vegetables or minerals. The cloth materials speak a silent language, like flowers, like skies, like setting suns.

No artistic abomination on the walls. In relation to the pure dream, to the impression left unanalysed, definitive art, positive art is a blasphemy. Here all things possess the required clarity and the delicious vagueness of harmony.

An infinitesimal odour most exquisitely chosen, which is mingled with a very slight dampness, floats in this atmosphere, where the soul in a trance is lulled by hothouse sensations.

Muslin flows abundantly from the windows and from the bed; it pours out in snowy cascades. On the bed lies the Idol, the sovereign of dreams. But how does she come to be here? What magic power has installed her on this throne of reverie and voluptuous delights? What does it matter? She is here, and I recognize her!

These, indeed, are the eyes whose flame pierces the twilight; those subtle and terrifying *peepers*, which I recognize by their dreadful malice! They attract, they subjugate, they devour the gaze of the impudent man who contemplates them. I have often studied them, those black stars that call for both curiosity and admiration.

To what benevolent demon do I owe the joy of being thus surrounded with mystery, with silence, with peace and with perfumes? O beatitude! That which we generally call life, even when it is fullest and happiest, has nothing in common with that supreme life of which I am now acquainted and which I am tasting minute by minute, second by second!

No! there are no more minutes, there are no more seconds! Time has disappeared; it is Eternity that reigns now, an eternity of delights!

But on the door a terrible, heavy knock has resounded, and, as in some infernal dream, it seemed to me that my stomach received a blow struck by a pick-axe. And then a Spectre entered. It is a bailiff who has come to torture me in the name of the law; an infamous concubine come to proclaim misery and to add the trivialities of her life to the sorrows of mine; or else errand-boy of the editor of some newspaper who is asking for the sequel to the manuscript.

The paradisiac room, the idol, the sovereign of dreams, the *Sylphide*, as the great René called her, all this magic has vanished with the brutal blow struck by the Spectre.

Oh Horror! I remember! I remember! Yes! this hovel, that dwelling-place of eternal boredom, is, after all, my own. Here is the stupid furniture, dirty, with chipped corners; the fireplace without flame and without embers, sullied with spittle, the dreary windows on which the rain has traced furrows in the dust; the manuscripts, effaced or incomplete; the almanac in which my pencil has marked sinister dates!

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\*\* From *Twenty Prose Poems*, trans. by Michael Hamburger (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1988), pp. 15, 17, & 19.



And that perfume of another world, with which I inebriated myself by means of a perfected sensibility, alas, is replaced by a fetid odour of tobacco mixed with some indescribably nauseating mustiness. Now the room is filled with the rancid air of desolation.

In this world so narrow and yet so full of disgust, only one familiar object invites me: the phial of laudanum; an old and terrible mistress, and, like all mistresses, liberal of caresses and betrayals.

Oh yes, Time has returned; now Time reigns absolute; and with the hideous old man the whole of his demoniac retinue has returned, Memories, Regrets, Spasms, Fears, Anguishes, Nightmares, Rages and Neuroses.

I assure you that now the seconds are strongly and solemnly accentuated, and each one, spurting from the clock, says: 'I am Life! insupportable, implacable Life!'

There is only one second in human life whose mission is to announce good news, the *good news* which fills every man with an inexplicable fear.

Yes! Time rules now; he has resumed his brutal dictatorship. He pushes me, as though I were an ox, with his two-pronged goad. 'Move on there, beast! Sweat, you slave! Live, convict, live!'

## APPENDIX B



**The Poésie Schublade Notebook Poems and their  
inclusion in Ernest Dowson's *Verses* (1896) and  
*Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (1899)\***

<b>Contents of the Poésie Schublade Notebook</b>	<b>Inclusion in:</b>  <i>Verses</i> (1896)	<b>Inclusion in:</b>  <i>Decorations: In Verse and Prose</i> (1899)
<p>Manuscript MA 1480 in the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.</p> <p>The earliest poems are dated 1886 and it was used until it was full in December 1891. The notebook was found among Dowson's possessions after his death in 1900.</p> <p>The poems below are listed in the original chronological order of the notebook. When they have been dated by Dowson, this appears in brackets after the title</p>	<p>Followed with a number indicating the position of the poem in the collection, out of 44 poems.</p>	<p>Followed with a number indicating the position of the poem in the collection, out of 30 poems (not including the 5 prose poems).</p>
To Cynara		
A Mosaic		
Hymn to Aphrodite		Retitled: Libera Me [26]
Requiem		
Potnia Thea [August 1886]		
Rondeau ("Could you forget, put out of mind")		

\* Publication details marked with an asterisk (\*) indicate where amendments have been made to R. K. R Thornton and Caroline Dowson's notes in *Ernest Dowson: Collected Poems* (Birmingham: Birmingham University Press, 2003).

Rondeau (“In Autumn when the leaf is sere”)		
Sonnets, I. In Memoriam. H.C. ob. Feb. 24. 1886		
Sonnets, II. Novalis		
Sonnets – Of a Little Girl (i)		
Sonnets – Of a Little Girl (ii)		
Sonnets – Of a Little Girl (iii)		
Sonnets – Of a Little Girl (iv)		
Sonnets – Of a Little Girl (v)		
[Sonnets – Of a Little Girl] (vi)		
[Sonnets – Of a Little Girl] (vii)		
[Sonnets – Of a Little Girl] (viii) Epilogue		Retitled: A Last Word [30]  [first published as ‘Epilogue’ in <i>The Savoy</i> , no. 7 (November 1896), p. 87]
La jeunesse n’a q’un temps		
Song of the XIX <sup>th</sup> Century		
A Lullaby		
Spleen		
After Many Years		

Praeterita		
Moritura [torn out, leaving only 'ndon Society. March 1887']		Moritura [25]  [first published in <i>London Society: a monthly magazine of light and amusing literature for the hours of relaxation</i> (March 1887), p. 297]*
Adios!		
A Song for Spring Time		Retitled: In Spring [29]
Seraphita-Seraphitōs		
'Sonnet: April' [April 1888]	Retitled: My Lady April [4]  [first published as 'My Lady April' in <i>Temple Bar</i> , vol. LXXXV, part 341 (April 1889), p. 514]	
It is finished		
Ere I go Hence		
Transit Gloria [19 May 1887]		
Sonnet, to nature		
Awakening [May 1888]		
Lullaby [May 1888]		
The Old Year [31 December 1888]		
The New Year [January 1889]		

From the Icelandic [April 1889]		
This is the wisdom of the wise		Retitled: Wisdom [28]
Love's Epilogue [2 August 1889]		
To Hélène: A Rondeau [August 1889]		Retitled: Beyond [Epigraph]  [first published as 'A Roundel', in <i>Temple Bar</i> (September 1893), p. 118]*
Rondeau: Hélène [August 1889]		
Rondeau [24 August 1889]		Retitled: Jadis [13]
Roundel: To Hélène [27 October 1889]		
To His Mistress [2 December 1889]		To His Mistress [12]
Rondel [4 February 1890]		
The Dead Child		The Dead Child [2]  [first published in <i>Atalanta</i> , 6 (February 1893), p. 358]*
Villanelle [25 March 1890]		Retitled: Villanelle of Acheron [6]
Villanelle [2 June 1890]	Retitled: Villanelle of Sunset [3]  [first published as 'Villanelle of Sunset' in the <i>Book of the Rhymers'</i> <i>Club</i> (1892), p. 83]	

Amor Umbratilis [18 September 1890]	Amor Umbratilis [7]  [first published in the <i>Century Guild Hobby Horse</i> , vol. VI (October 1891), as part of the 'In Praise of Solitude' triplet, pp. 136-38 (p. 136-37)]*	
A Dedication: with his poems and Her Days to His Lady; and to Love [16 October 1890]	Retitled: A Coronal [1]	
Ad Domnulam Suam [18 October 1890]	Ad Domnulam Suam [6]  [first published in the <i>Book of the Rhymers'</i> <i>Club</i> (1892), p. 53]	
A little while to walk with thee, dear child [26 December 1890]		Retitled: Transition [21]
Discedam, explebo numerus, reddarque tenebris [31 January 1891]		
Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae [7 February 1891]	<i>Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae</i> [15]  [first published in the <i>Century Guild Hobby Horse</i> , vol. VI (October 1891), p. 67]	

Ursulines of the Perpetual Adoration	Revised title: Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration [2]  [first published as ‘The Carmelite Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration’ in the <i>Century Guild Hobby Horse</i> , vol. VI, October 1891, as part of the ‘In Praise of Solitude’ triplet, pp. 136-38 (p. 136-37)]*	
Vanitas [19 March 1891]	Vanitas [16]  [first published in the <i>Book of the Rhymers’ Club</i> (1892), p. 69]	
O Mors / quam amara est memoria tua homini Pacem habenti in substantiis suis [28 April 1891]	Revised title: <i>O Mors! quam amara est memoria tua homini Pacem habenti in substantiis suis</i> [19]  [first published as ‘ <i>O Mors! quam amara est memoria tua homini Pacem habenti in substantiis suis</i> ’ in the <i>Book of the Rhymers’ Club</i> (1892), p. 30]	
Carthusians [27 May 1891]		Carthusians [3]
Claire: la lune! [20 July 1891]	Retitled: Flos Lunae [14]  [first published as ‘Fleur de la Lune’ in the <i>Century Guild Hobby Horse</i> , vol. VI, October 1891, as part of the ‘In Praise of Solitude’ triplet, pp. 136-38 (p. 136)]*	
From the French of Paul Verlaine / Il pleut		Retitled: After Paul Verlaine I, <i>Il pleut</i>

doucement sur la ville. Rimbaud. [8 September 1891]		<i>doucement sur la ville.</i> Rimbaud. [8]
After Paul Verlaine II, Colloque Sentimental [missing, but p. 80 contains a variant of the first line of the last stanza]		Retitled: After Paul Verlaine II, Colloque Sentimental [9]
You would have understood me had you waited [13 September 1891]	Revised title: "You would have understood me had you waited" [20]  [first published as 'Ah, dans ces mornes séjours/ Les jamais sont les toujours' in the <i>Second Book of the Rhymers'</i> <i>Club</i> (1892), p. 120]*	
Against My Lady Burton: on her burning the last writing of her dead husband [10 November 1891]		
Vain Resolves [3 December 1891]	Vain Resolves [23]	
Marguerites. A Villanelle [31 December 1891]	Revised title: Villanelle of Marguerites [9]  [first published as 'Of Marguerites (Villanelle)' in <i>Temple Bar</i> , May 1894, p. 144]*	

<b>Loose pages:</b>		
To a Lady asking Foolish Questions [last two lines]		To a Lady asking Foolish Questions [23]
De Amore		De Amore [1]



Sapientia Lunae [last stanza]	Sapientia Lunae [39]	
After Paul Verlaine, Spleen [2 February 1892]		Retitled: After Paul Verlaine III, Spleen [10]

## APPENDIX C



**Contents of Ernest Dowson's *Verses* (1896) and  
*Decorations: In Verse and Prose* (1899)**

NB. Poems which were originally from the Poésie Schublade Notebook are in bold. They are followed by the title in the Notebook and date of composition.

For example:

In *Verses*, 'A Coronal' was originally from the Poésie Schublade Notebook in which it was titled 'A Dedication: with his poems and Her Days to His Lady; and to Love', and dated 16 October 1890.

VERSES (1896)

<i>Vitae summa brevis spem nos vetat incohare longam</i>
In Preface: For Adelaide
<b>A Coronal</b> A Dedication: with his poems and Her Days to His Lady; and to Love (16 October 1890)
<i>VERSES:</i>
<b>Nuns of the Perpetual Adoration</b> Ursulines of the Perpetual Adoration
<b>Villanelle of Sunset</b> Villanelle (2 June 1890)
<b>My Lady April</b> Sonnet: April (April 1888)
To One in Bedlam
<b>Ad Domnulam Suam</b> Ad Domnulam Suam (18 October 1890)

<p><b>Amor Umbratilis</b></p> <p>Amor Umbratilis (18 September 1890)</p>
Amor Profanis
<p><b>Villanelle of Marguerites</b></p> <p>Marguerites. A Villanelle (31 December 1891)</p>
Yvonne of Brittany
Benedictio Domini
Growth
Ad Manus Puellae
<p><b>Flos Lunae</b></p> <p>Claire: la lune! (20 July 1891)</p>
<p><i>Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae</i></p> <p>Non sum qualis eram bonae sub regno Cynarae (7 February 1891)</p>
<p><b>Vanitas</b></p> <p>Vanitas (19 March 1891)</p>
Exile
Spleen
<p><i>O Mors! quam amara est memoria tua homini pacem habenti in substantiis suis</i></p> <p>O Mors / quam amara est memoria tua homini pacem habenti in substantiis suis (28 April 1891)</p>
<p><b>“You would have understood me, had you waited”</b></p> <p>You would have understood me had you waited (13 September 1891)</p>
April Love

Vain Hope
<b>Vain Resolves</b> Vain Resolves (3 December 1891)
A Requiem
Beata Solitudo
Terre Promise
Autumnal
In Tempore Senectutis
Villanelle of his Lady's Treasures
Gray Nights
Vesperal
The Garden of Shadow
<i>Soli cantare periti Arcades</i>
On the Birth of a Friend's Child
Extreme Unction
Amantium Irae
Impenitentia Ultima
A Valediction
<b>Sapientia Lunae</b> Sapientia Lunae [On a loose page] "Cease smiling, Dear! a little while be sad"
Seraphita
Epigram
<i>Quid non speremus, Amantes</i>

Chanson sans Paroles
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*DECORATIONS: IN VERSE AND PROSE (1899)*

<b>Beyond</b>
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To Hélène: A Rondeau (August 1889)
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<i>IN VERSE:</i>
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<b>De Amore</b>
-----------------

De Amore [On a loose page]
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<b>The Dead Child</b>
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The Dead Child
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<b>Carthusians</b>
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Carthusians (27 May 1891)
---------------------------

The Three Witches
-------------------

Villanelle of the Poet's Road
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<b>Villanelle of Acheron</b>
------------------------------

Villanelle (25 March 1890)
----------------------------

Saint Germain-en-Laye
-----------------------

<b>After Paul Verlaine I</b>
------------------------------

From the French of Paul Verlaine / Il pleut doucement sur la ville. Rimbaud. (8 September 1891)
--

<b>After Paul Verlaine II</b>
-------------------------------

After Paul Verlaine II, Colloque Sentimental
--

<b>After Paul Verlaine III</b>
--------------------------------

After Paul Verlaine, Spleen (2 February 1892)
---

After Paul Verlaine IV
------------------------

<b>To His Mistress</b>
------------------------

To His Mistress (2 December 1889)
<b>Jadis</b>
Rondeau (24 August 1889)
In a Breton Cemetery
To William Theodore Peters on his Renaissance Cloak
Breton Afternoon
Venite Descendamus
The Sea-Change
Dregs
A Song
<b>Transition</b>
A little while to walk with thee, dear child (26 December 1890)
Exchanges
<b>To a Lady asking Foolish Questions</b>
To a Lady asking Foolish Questions [On a loose page]
Rondeau
<b>Moritura</b>
Moritura [torn out, leaving only 'ndon Society. March 1887']
<b>Libera Me</b>
Hymn to Aphrodite
To a Lost Love
<b>Wisdom</b>
This is the wisdom of the wise
In Spring

**A Last Word**

[Sonnets of a Little Girl] (viii) Epilogue

*IN PROSE:*

The Fortunate Islands

Markets (after an old Nursery Rhyme)

Absinthia Taetra

The Visit

The Princess of Dreams

## APPENDIX D

**Ernest Dowson's 'Extreme Unction' (1894)\***

EXTREME UNCTION.

For LIONEL JOHNSON.

Upon the eyes, the lips, the feet,  
 On all the passages of sense,  
 The atoning oil is spread with sweet  
 Renewal of lost innocence.

The feet, that lately ran so fast  
 To meet desire, are soothly sealed;  
 The eyes, that were so often cast  
 On vanity, are touched and healed.

From troublous sights and sounds set free;  
 In such a twilight hour of breath,  
 Shall one retrace his life, or see,  
 Through shadows, the true face of death?

Vials of mercy! Sacring oils!  
 I know not where nor when I come,  
 Nor through what wanderings and toils,  
 To crave of you Viaticum.

Yet, when the walls of flesh grow weak,  
 In such an hour, it well may be,  
 Through mist and darkness, light will break,  
 And each anointed sense will see.

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\* First published in the *Second Book of the Rhymers' Club* (London: Elkin Mathews and John Lane, 1894), pp. 6-7. Later included in *Verses* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 44.



## APPENDIX E

**Arthur Symons's Carbis Bay Poems**

NB. The dates given in brackets after each poem are from *The Collected Works of Arthur Symons*, 9 vols (London: Martin Secker, 1924)

**AT CARBIS BAY\***

Out of the night of the sea,  
 Out of the turbulent night,  
 A sharp and hurrying wind  
 Scourges the waters white:  
 The terror by night.

Out of the doubtful dark,  
 Out of the night of the land,  
 What is it breathes and broods,  
 Hoveringly at hand?  
 The menace of land.

Out of the night of heaven,  
 Out of the delicate sky,  
 Pale and serene the stars  
 In their silence reply:  
 The peace of the sky.

[26 November 1893]

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\* in *London Nights*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Leonard Smithers, 1897), p. 30.  
 First published in *London Nights* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1895), p. 30.

**STELLA MARIS\***

Why is it I remember yet  
 You, of all women one has met  
 In random wayfare, as one meets  
 The chance romances of the streets,  
 The Juliet of a night? I know  
 Your heart holds many a Romeo.  
 And I, who call to mind your face  
 In so serene a pausing-place,  
 Where the bright pure expanse of sea,  
 The shadowy shore's austerity,  
 Seem a reproach to you and me,  
 I too have sought on many a breast  
 The ecstasy of an unrest,  
 I too have had my dreams, and met  
 (Ah me!) how many a Juliet.  
 Why is it, then, that I recall  
 You, neither first nor last of all?  
 For, surely as I see to-night  
 The phantom of the lighthouse light,  
 Against the sky, across the bay,  
 Fade, and return, and fade away,  
 So surely do I see your eyes  
 Out of the empty night arise,  
 Child, you arise and smile to me  
 Out of the night, out of the sea,  
 The Nereid of a moment there,  
 And is it seaweed in your hair?

O lost and wrecked, how long ago,  
 Out of the drowning past, I know  
 You come to call me, come to claim  
 My share of your delicious shame.  
 Child, I remember, and can tell  
 One night we loved each other well,  
 And one night's love, at least or most,  
 Is not so small a thing to boast.  
 You were adorable, and I  
 Adored you to infinity,  
 That nuptial night too briefly borne  
 To the oblivion of morn.  
 Ah! no oblivion, for I feel  
 Your lips deliriously steal  
 Along my neck, and fasten there;

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\* in *London Nights*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Leonard Smithers, 1897), pp. 40-42.  
 First published in a shorter version in *The Yellow Book: An Illustrated Quarterly*, vol. 1 (April 1894),  
 pp. 129-31, and in *London Nights* (London: Leonard Smithers, 1895), pp. 40-41.

I feel the perfume of your hair,  
I feel your breast that heaves and dips  
Desiring my desirous lips,  
And that ineffable delight  
When souls turn bodies, and unite  
In the intolerable, the whole  
Rapture of the embodied soul.

That joy was ours, we passed it by;  
You have forgotten me, and I  
Remember you thus strangely, won  
An instant from oblivion.  
And I, remembering, would declare  
That joy, not shame, is ours to share,  
Joy that we had the frank delight  
To choose the chances of one night,  
Out of vague nights, and days at strife,  
So infinitely full of life.  
What shall it profit me to know  
Your heart holds many a Romeo?  
Why should I grieve, though I forget  
How many another Juliet?  
Let us be glad to have forgot  
That roses fade, and loves are not,  
As dreams, immortal, though they seem  
Almost as real as a dream.  
It is for this I see you rise,  
A wraith, with starlight in your eyes,  
Where calm hours weave, for such a mood  
Solitude out of solitude;  
For this, for this, you come to me  
Out of the night, out of the sea.

[Carbis Bay, 30 November, 1893]

**TEARS\***

O hands that I have held in mine,  
That knew my kisses and my tears,  
Hands that in other years  
Have poured my balm, have poured my wine;

Women, once loved, and always mine,  
I call to you across the years,  
I bring a gift of tears,  
I bring my tears to you as wine.

[Carbis Bay, 3 December 1893]

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\* in *Silhouettes*, Second Edition, Revised (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), p. 56.

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