

“Of Things that Are Not and That Should Be”: Aesthetic Decadence in Charles Baudelaire’s *Paris Spleen*, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four*

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Abstract

In *The Decay of Lying* (1889), Oscar Wilde delivers a spirited attack against Realism and predicts that one day, “Facts will be regarded as discreditable...and Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land...singing of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and that never happened, of things that are not and that should be” (35). Realism, which Wilde treats as the antithesis of art, brought the metropolis and all its class divisions to light, exposing an undercurrent of criminality in just about every sphere of society, yet honing the journalistic skills of writers who could actually earn money writing for journals, as was the case of Baudelaire, Wilde, and Conan Doyle.

In this presentation, I will examine the philosophy of Decadence reflected in *Paris Spleen*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Sign of the Four*, in terms of its Bohemian subtext of artistic independence, its critique of middle-class morality, and its aesthetic criteria.

Introduction

In an essay entitled, “Charting the ‘Transitional Period’: The Emergence of Modern Time in the Nineteenth Century,” Göran Blix (2006) traces the historical awareness in Romanticism of an increasing sense of transience expressed by a generation of writers who felt neither the promise of progress or the certainty of tradition which had once given cohesion and style to an age or period. “Thus we see Baudelaire,” he points out, “in the *Salon de 1846*, refer to ‘the shameless filth proper to transitional periods’” and cites Alfred de Musset’s characterization of his age in *La Confession d’un enfant du siècle* (1836) as “half mummy...half fetus”(63). Blix points to Baudelaire’s attempt in *La Peintre de la vie modern* (1863), “to mold a shapeless present into a visible historical formation,” by extolling “modernity as “the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent”(55-57). He omits however the rest of the declaration, “the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable”: an important component changing the equation suggested by Blix by basing modernity paradoxically within a classical tradition. Blix recognizes but underestimates Baudelaire’s achievement: It was more than a face-saving solution for artists viewing theirs as a faceless age made up of the motley bric-a-brac of history. It was grand, announcing a new idea that could synthesize the diverse tendencies into a definite orientation and new movement. Blix however complains of the amorphousness of the term, “modernity,” as compared to the more derogatory “transitional period,” which he felt recovered the sense of crisis and ennui of the age (55).

In another provocative essay, “Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment,” Christine Ferguson (2002) examines the accord between scientists and Decadent writers in their stance of objective detachment, amorality, lack of sentiment, self-experimentation, and

pursuit of a single-minded ideal. She observes how this mimicked the philosophy of the physiologist, Claude Bernard, who saw human beings as determined biological organisms "rather than creature[s] of unique sentiment and moral disposition"(469). Both essays touch upon revisions concerning the view of history, nature and religion during the nineteenth century. In a chapter devoted specifically to the Romantic reaction in *Science and the Modern World* (1925), Alfred North Whitehead suggests that Romantic poets were accurate in maintaining an organic view, which allowed for what we see and feel to be factored in the experience of nature, unlike scientific objectivity, which subtracted it.

Decadent art and literature, despite reflecting a romantic longing for a higher reality, rejected Rousseau's idealized primitivism and embraced Darwin's view of nature as indifferent and the scientist's precision of observation, while creating a new synthesis of aesthetics and detachment. Increasingly artists transformed nature into decorative artifice, rejecting its rough-hewn character and rambling paths for the metropolis, while nature receded into the hinterland of the unconscious to reemerge, as Freud would observe, often from artists themselves, in the shadow world of dreams and uncanny psychological compulsions, which would become the psychological component of Darwin's master plan of biological destiny. Naturalism and Realism were responses to Darwin's theory of evolution. The actual detail of class existence and conflict supported a theory of evolution and adaptation also based on "survival of the fittest." In the works this paper explores, however, the authors create defiant characters seeking to escape the real via the refinements of art. In this realm, nature is crafted into art and art becomes the new religion.

Science had demolished one of the central consoling premises of religion-- that time would be redeemed as "the *pleroma tou chronou*" (cf. Gal. 4:4, "the fulfillment of time"), a concept identical with Christ's transformation of time from *chronos* to *kairos*. The new science introduced matter without soul or ultimate teleology, except the will to survive. Darwin's theory was to become the servant of unchecked capitalism under the guise of natural selection, aiding the notion of progress. A growing middle-class could now celebrate the prosperity offered by Imperialism and ignore the poor: those who had not been naturally selected. Furthermore science began to treat the many diseases that over-consumption generated.

Vivisection, in the service of a quest for physical perfection, oddly left many corpses along the way. Victor Frankenstein's experiment to eradicate disease and create a perfect being is botched not because his creature cannot be redeemed, but because he is discarded as a flawed product, an imperfect experiment: It was the position of the vivisectionists in search of a cure. One of the burning issues of the anti-vivisectionist movement in the nineteenth-century was precisely this, the callous disregard of animal and human subjects (mostly the poor and the incarcerated) for experimentation in the interest of a higher abstract goal of perfection or cure. The lurid crimes of body snatching grew in number as the century wore on. There was the notorious case of William Burke and William Hare. "Over a twelve-month period they killed sixteen people...in a murder spree which ended only with their arrest in November 1828. Their motive was profit, for Edinburgh was a major center of medical education, and lecturers would pay high prices for 'subjects,' that is cadavers for dissection"(Rosner 2011, 1). This was common practice. In fact, a new verb was coined, "burking" to identify this proliferating crime. No doubt such crimes inspired

Conan Doyle. Many of his criminals come from the professional class, much like the doctors who turned a blind eye to the surprisingly fresh corpses that Burke and Hare were delivering.

Experimentation is a major subject of late Victorian literature and in the Sherlock Holmes' stories. "Two-thirds of the sixty Sherlock Holmes tales were published in 1903, and the vast majority are set in the closing decades of the reign of Queen Victoria," writes Rosemary Jann (1995, 3). One thinks of Culverton Smith in "The Adventure of the Dying Detective," injecting his nephew with an infectious tropical disease or Professor Pressbury in "The Adventure of the Creeping Man," who injects himself with serum extracted from Langur chimpanzees in order to gain sexual vitality. Hawthorne and Poe in works like *The Birthmark* (1843) and *The Oval Portrait* (1850), precursors to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), introduce a scientist and artist, respectively, who kill the person they each love in pursuit of physical perfection: Aylmer by removing his wife's birthmark which is attached to her heart, thus murdering her and the painter of the oval portrait by wearing his wife to death till he gets a likeness that is living, while she pines away as a result of his indifference to her. In this genre, Robert Louis Stevenson's, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), is second to none, yet one could see in the titles and the chronology mentioned the evolution of a genre.

The Decadents were indebted to the Gothic tradition, especially to Poe for reviving the subject of evil as a persistent and energetic agency in the human personality, despite the proclamations of Positivist philosophy. In Charles Baudelaire's, *Paris Spleen* (1869), double reality brings into relief the spectral aspect of the fractured metropolis with its social evils, beggars, prostitutes, the poor, the Bohemians, the street sellers, journalists, all the purveyors of commodities, glittering facades of gaiety, emporiums stretching to arcades beneath street level, emerging boulevards, exterior space cluttered as a Victorian chamber in contrast to the ascetic dwelling of the poet, where like a monk he takes a bath in solitude. Impelled by boredom and lack of means toward down and out locales that constitute his Bohemia, the poet seeks anonymity for himself and hidden beauty for his art. He is an eye or voyeur seeking new sensation in his peripatetic quest. "Multitude, solitude," begins the poem "Crowds," "Identical terms interchangeable to the active and fertile poet. The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd" (1970, 20). The poet like the anatomist remains detached as he dissects his ennui.

Most early commentators saw Decadent literature as perverse and neurasthenic (for a fairly comprehensive discussion on the subject, see, for example, Russell M. Goldfarb's "Late Victorian Decadence" [1962]). They were the hypocrites demanding the suppression of Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil* (1857) and the sadistic moralists who gloried in the prosecution and persecution Oscar Wilde. They failed to account however for Aesthetic Decadence's vitality as a movement or to recognize its subversive caricature of the age as one of progress and social improvement. Many of the Decadents set their compass according to Poe. Realism and Naturalism create much of the setting of their work, yet the protagonists find ways to warp the natural and the real into the fantastic and spectral. They escape through detachment and insularity, releasing themselves from customary habits that shape the real. In "The Soul of Man under Socialism," Wilde writes, "The majority of people spoil their lives by an unhealthy and exaggerated altruism...surrounded by hideous ugliness, by hideous starvation, [it] is inevitable that they should be moved by all this. The emotions

of man are stirred more quickly than man's intelligence [and] and it is much more easy to have sympathy with suffering than it is to have sympathy with thought" (*The Artist as Critic* 255). The Decadents combined a search for beauty with the photographer's art of capturing physiognomies. The poet as *flâneur*, stroller or loiterer in the *Paris Spleen* vignettes, according to Walter Benjamin in his famous "Essays on Charles Baudelaire," gathers portraits of human types as he goes "botanizing on the asphalt" and the final destination of his walk, in a society that has marginalized him, is the marketplace, as Carlos Salzani observes in *Constellations of Reading: Walter Benjamin in Figures of Actuality*, "The fruits of the long hours spent thus are the saleable products of his observations and reflections. The artist as producer in mass society is the supplier for the culture industry of news, feuilletons, and advertisements, a new prototype of salaried employee who produces mass-marketed products." Citing Benjamin, he astutely points out, "the social base of *flânerie* is journalism" (2009, 58).

Paris Spleen certainly seizes on the episodic. In his introductory letter to Arsène Houssaye, Baudelaire refers to it as "a little work...that has neither head nor tail" and confesses his awareness that he is doing something singularly different—an accident"(ix). These situations with no plot are chiseled with irony. "The Double Room" is reflected through an opium reverie introducing the poet's ascetic chamber of the mind, "no abominations on the walls. Definite, positive art is blasphemy compared to dream and the unanalyzed impression." The furniture and décor has an elongated form or art nouveau quality and languid style. In this space, the poet contrives to slow down time. The reverie, crowned with the mocking and detached lover of the poet's dreams, is interrupted by a knock at the door, the room is then described in its actual squalor as events invade the narrator's sanctuary with the disappointments of real life and his precarious existence as a writer. A succession of figures march through the door, "A bailiff in the name of the law," "a concubine," "a messenger boy from a newspaper editor demanding the last installment of a manuscript." The room is then introduced as "a filthy hole," "an abode of eternal boredom," with "dusty, dilapidated furniture, a hearth without fire or embers, disgusting with spittle, windows that have traced furrows through the dust, manuscripts marked with erasures or unfinished, a calendar with pencil marks over the direst dates." As he says, "Time has reappeared" and "it pokes me with his double goad as if he were an ox" (5-7). One thinks of Coleridge's parallel experience in dreaming the poem, "Kubla Khan," in the same opiated state, having it cut short by a knock on the door. The opium allows the narrator to escape inward and bask in stillness—the hallmark of classical art. Languidness and listlessness, words that describe the opiated poet of *Paris Spleen*, Dorian Gray and Sherlock Holmes, point to the ideal and its failure in these quests to allay the boredom of daily life, which translates into time without purpose.

The narrator of "The Double Room," invests much passion in his sorrow. Oscar Wilde observes in one of his many sympathetic references to Baudelaire, "you will wind up worshipping sorrow as you have never worshipped joy" (*The Artist as Critic* 378). Wilde depicts poetry as the supreme art and sees the poet as "the supreme artist" to whom all "mysteries are disclosed, to Edgar Poe and Baudelaire not Benjamin West and Paul Delaroche" (*The Artist as Critic* 15). Poe, who Baudelaire with his essays and translations elevated to a major influence in European literature in the mid-1840's, is the link connecting the three writers of this study: Baudelaire, Wilde, and Conan Doyle. All pay tribute to him

and borrow from his fantastic gallery of pathological characters, melodramatic settings, and twisted ironic plots.

In the trilogy, "The Poor Child's Toy," "Eyes of the Poor," "Beat up the Poor," " Baudelaire introduces a major backdrop of Decadent literature, the resilient poor, with Poe's sense of mordant irony and respect, akin to Conan Doyle's street urchins and poor folk. In "The Poor Child's Toy," two children, one rich one poor, are exchanging gifts through the grate of an iron gate, the blooming rich child is looking with fascination at the poor child's toy on the other side of the fence standing among "nettles and thistles...pitifully black and grimy. One of those urchin-pariahs whose beauty an impartial eye would discover...[if] it peeled off the disgusting patina of poverty." This toy that "the grimy little brat was shaking, teetering and turning in a box covered with wire, was a living rat. And the two children were laughing together like brothers, with teeth of identical whiteness"(36).

The grotesque and the sublime fuse in this clash of class and its eradication by nature itself, for the children are equal under its pitiless eye. In "The Eyes of the Poor," the children accompany a poor father as they all look at the café the narrator and his lovely but unsentimental mistress are sitting. The narrator looks at them with sympathy, while she becomes offended at their "saucer eyes." Here each family member according to his age reflects the stages of a fall from grace: the baby, "joy, utterly stupid and profound," the six year old boy seeing it as a house "where only people who are not like us can go," and the father, admiring its beauty musing that "all the gold of the poor world must have found its way onto those walls"(52-53). These meditations on class and its relationship to aesthetics, beauty linked to wealth and ugliness to poverty, introduce a shifting trope, tarnishing notions of the sublime with the attribute of decadence and possible criminality, or as in the case of the narrator's obtuse mistress, superiority and indifference. In "Beat up the Poor," the narrator beats a beggar to a pulp to try out an experiment, till the beggar beats him to a pulp in turn. The narrator expresses satisfaction with his experiment, "that a man is the equal of another only if he can prove it"(102). The satire on self-improvement books and Positivist philosophy is evident at the beginning of the poem, where the narrator tells us that for fifteen days he read nothing but "the lucubrations of all the purveyors of public happiness"(101).

Paris Spleen portrays the city as the poet saw it from his Bohemian perspective of survival as a free-lance writer and poet. In twenty-six years he earned no more than sixteen thousand francs. He went to Belgium at the end of his life desperate for opportunities to earn money, returning ill and exhausted to France to die, this self-proclaimed "monarch of a rainy country" and splenetic "prince of clouds," as he referred to the poet (himself) in the poem entitled, "Spleen," in *The Flowers of Evil*.

Oscar Wilde was also a collector of physiognomies. In fact in his work of criticism published in the journals of the day, portraiture is an essential part of all the essays. Similarly to Poe and Baudelaire, he achieves the status of theorist for the new art through his essays, plays, poems, stories, but *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is his most famous work and only novel. The affinity to Baudelaire extends to his struggle to survive as a writer. One of the paradoxes of the aesthete is his disdain for money simultaneous to its necessity to cultivate his dandyism. Wilde padded the novel to satisfy the publisher's wishes for more pages. Conan Doyle described the "golden evening" in his 1924 autobiography, *Memories*

and Adventures when Joseph M. Stoddart, managing editor of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, a Philadelphia-based journal seeking to create a British version of the magazine, invited the two men to dinner at the Langham Hotel, 30 August 1889 and commissioned the novels, *The Sign of the Four* by Conan Doyle, published in February 1890, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Wilde, published in June of the same year (*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle: Interviews and Recollections*, 18-19).

The novel of Wilde offers a cautionary tale with studied lightness and indifference. On the one hand, as Richard Ellmann points out in his introduction to the text, it is a reworking of the Faust story. Dorian makes a pact with the devil in order to achieve eternal youth. He becomes the work of art, while his portrait reveals the state of his increasingly corrupt soul and his slide into crime and perversity. Modeled somewhat on Joris Karl Huysman's *Des Esseintes* whose boredom with reality plunges him into a series of perversions and bizarre extravagances, Dorian Gray's descent into evil, while more extreme, is more sociable. *Des Esseintes* shrinks from life, Dorian Gray descends into it and goes further and further down in his pursuit of forbidden sensations that lead to crimes he barely feels. He becomes an *homme fatal* driving the luckless actress, Sybil Vane to suicide when she fails in her art, killing Basil Hallward for making the devilish portrait, blackmailing his classmate, Alan Campbell to conceal Basil's murder and to vaporize his body, leading him to suicide, causing Jim Vane's accidental death, and destroying the reputations of other men through sex and drugs. The character of Dorian is so over the top that the story teeters into comedy and campiness. The melodrama is countered by the endless banter of the characters, particularly Lord Henry Wotton, the charming Mephistopheles incarnate. Considering his experiment in Dorian, he looks to science as model:

He had always been enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import. And so he had begun by vivisectioning himself, as he had ended by vivisectioning others...It was clear to him that the experimental method was the only method by which one could arrive at any scientific analysis of the passions (51-53).

Dorian is a failed experiment. A "Narcissus," as Lord Henry typifies him, in love with power his beauty and wealth give him to get away with murder. Yet there is also the hidden personality represented by the locked chamber or "double room," where the other in oneself is hid, a barely veiled reference to Wilde's situation as a homosexual.

The melodramatic plot is constantly undermined by flippant dialogue, the discussion of decor, rare objects, gardens, elegant dinners, hankies with perfume, opiated cigarettes. The use of the adjective and adverb, "languid" and "languidly" and "listless" and "listlessly," gives the work a blasé, almost playful tone. The theatricality of the novel with its various stage sets and irreverent dialogue reminds the reader that this is art, after all, not life.

It is hard to believe that solely five years after its publication, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* would be used against its author in the notorious trial that would lead to his imprisonment.

Wilde's fall like Dorian Gray's was total. He died penniless in Paris (1900), three

years after his release from prison. Thirteen people attended his funeral. He was forty-six years old, the same age as Baudelaire's when he died. In 1909, he was reinterred in Père Lachaise cemetery. His mausoleum, created by Sir Jacob Epstein, bears a quatrain from the "Ballad of Reading Goal" that aptly describes his own situation and his appeal to the future:

And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men
And outcasts always mourn.

Increasingly artists would "go on strike" against society, as the poet-guru of the Symbolists, Stéphane Mallarmé, had implored them to do. Artists' disdain for mass culture and cheap reproductions would lead to self-selected coterie or brotherhoods which would mirror the early cults of Gnosticism, Neo-Platonism, and Hermetic philosophy and revert to bygone ages. The proliferation of theosophical and spiritualist clubs, books dealing with mysticism, lodges such as the Rosicrucian, *L'Aube dorée* in Paris, styled after The Golden Dawn in London (led by Mathers Samuel Liddell, brother-in-law of the philosopher, Henri Bergson) helped foster the development of an ideologically and philosophically-directed art subculture out of the initial Bohemian milieu. This artistic network grew into a powerful minority that would render popular culture a secondary affair in the scheme of art posterity.

Poetry became more prosaic and prose more poetic as the nineteenth-century wore on. Though as early as 1817, the prototype of all the Decadents, Lord Byron, wrote in his long poem tale, *Beppo*, "I have a mind to tumble down to prose but poetry is more in fashion so here it goes." It is the reverse by the time Arthur Conan Doyle creates the spectacular duo of John H. Watson and Sherlock Holmes. The prose of the Sherlock Holmes novels and especially the stories is poetic, rhythmic, and economical yet contains complex interweaving narratives and much erudition in history, geography, politics, and medicine. Today, millions of fans around the world think that Holmes belongs to them, yet his aesthetic decadence credentials and disdain for society form a cornerstone of his personality, while it is Watson who humanizes the eccentric polymath and carries the brunt of Victorian morality. Holmes is the aesthete recast as detective, while Watson is a Holmes for everyman. Their Bohemian status is established from the outset in the work that introduces them to each other, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887). Holmes has no other occupation aside from consulting detective, though he has the aesthete's habit of research into arcane and sundry subjects. Watson is a doctor who barely practices his profession. *The Sign of the Four* was Conan Doyle's second novel in the series following the introductory *A Study in Scarlet*. It begins with Holmes rolling up his sleeve to administer cocaine. His forearm and wrist as Watson tells us were "all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture marks." Watson exasperated by this ritual three times daily bursts out, "'Which is it today?' I asked—morphine or cocaine?' "He raised his head languidly from the old black-letter volume which he had opened. 'It is cocaine,' he said, 'a seven percent solution—would you care to try it?'" Holmes explains, "I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exultation"(1-3). He does not work for recognition or money. In fact, he and Watson live quite modestly at 221B Baker Street, at the lodging of Mrs. Hudson. He is a free-lance artist, a self-created consulting detective engaged in the art of detection. In *The Sign of Four*, "as it was subsequently renamed, relief from boredom comes in the fair form of Miss

Mary Morstan, a damsel in distress, who in the midst of a crime scene falls in love with Watson and he with her. The novel is unique in the manner that it meshes several stories together—the mystery of the sign of four that Miss Morstan brings to Holmes; the London setting of the story concentrated on the exotic and sinister Pondicherry Lodge; the back story set in India during the Sepoy Rebellion (1857-58); the romance between Watson and Miss Morstan which leads to his offer of marriage; the introduction of the Baker Street Irregulars, the amiable sleuth hound, Toby, the strange Sholto twins, Thaddeus and Bartholomew, the sons of Major John Sholto, who stole the Agra treasure and was pursued by Jonathan Small, a peg-legged convict who had acquired the treasure, and his loyal Andaman island companion who kills Bartholomew in search of it with a poison dart; and of course, Scotland Yard, as well as a host of other minor colorful characters. Thaddeus Sholto is a nervous aesthete, who detests gross materialism, is surrounded by fine art, his hookah, and sensitivity to beauty. It is he who wishes to reinstate Miss Morstan's fortune, stolen from her father, who dies trying to retrieve it. It is the gift of a precious pearl a year to her from Thaddeus and the desire to do her justice that brings her to Holmes. Her pending wealth is a calamity for Watson who feels he cannot court her with his inadequate means if she acquires wealth. He is relieved to hear that Small has strewn the treasure in the Thames. Holmes proceeds to piece all the scattered details of Bartholomew's death and in a chase by boat on the Thames catches Jonathan Small and brings him to Baker Street to hear his tale, relieving his distress with whiskey. Once the case is solved, Holmes returns to his languorous loafing state and his cocaine bottle: "'For me,' said Sherlock Holmes, 'there still remains the cocaine-bottle.' And he stretched his long white hand up for it" (153).

In this work, so full of the detail of Victorian life, the crime victims, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, are depicted in a clinical manner, while the living protagonists are protected by rare hospitality, even the criminals get to tell their tales and have a drink. Yet how does Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an exemplary Victorian gentleman, defender of the crown, soldier, athlete doctor, aspiring politician, and courtly nineteenth century knight fit into the company of literary outsiders? He insisted that he was Watson not Holmes, yet as a writer he belongs to that August group which includes Poe, Baudelaire, and Wilde, because of Holmes. Holmes is an aesthete after beautiful solutions. He peruses the newspapers as if he were walking the street, a *flâneur* of the page. He knows how to collect the traces of fugitive events to reconstruct a history. Rosemary Jann writes in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes: Detecting Social Order* (1995):

Detectors' reconstruction of the crime shared common ground with the contemporary methods used to reconstruct the past, as the Victorian scientist Thomas Henry Huxley pointed out in his essay, "The Method of Zadig: Retrospective Prophecy as a Function of Science." Borrowing his title from Voltaire's character Zadig who is accused of theft after he correctly describes a horse and dog he had never seen by interpreting the signs they had left behind. Huxley argued that the foundation of natural science rests on the imaginative ability to reconstruct from present clues what was past or absent (3-4).

It is the joy of revelation and order restored that propels the Sherlock Holmes adventures and the detective genre, in general. Rarely is sympathy incited for the poor

corpse. The description of the dead Bartholomew Sholto with his grinning face has an opposite effect from one of horror. Holmes retrieves an aspect of Conan Doyle that leads us in a remarkable way to Baudelaire Wilde and that is dissatisfaction, so aptly symbolized by smoking. As Lord Henry says, "A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied." Baudelaire in the poem, "The Pipe," (*The Flowers of Evil*) lets the pipe speak for the poet,

"One look at me/And the coffee color of my Kaffir face/ Will tell you I am not the only slave:/My master is addicted to his vice.../Every so often he is overcome/by some despair or other, whereupon/tobacco clouds pour out of me as if/the stove were kindled and the pot put on"(1985, 70).

Holmes, as well, the most energetic on the subject of smoke, having produced a monograph on tobacco identifying 140 different types of ash, is often depicted even by Watson, a more moderate smoker, as poisoning the atmosphere. In "A Scandal in Bohemia," Watson describes Holmes as loathing "every form of society with his whole Bohemian soul...alternating from week to week between cocaine and ambition, the drowsiness of the drug and the fierce energy of his own keen nature" (1). Holmes also reflected a more insular side of Conan Doyle. Indeed the author had aspirations that seemed at odds with one another. His staunch defense of spiritualism, now considered a curiosity (despite the 150th anniversary of the Ghost Club this year, of which even Dickens was a member) indicates a chasm in the age, in general, that seems unbridgeable. Evidently much of the charm of the Sherlock Holmes' stories rested on the friendship between Watson and Holmes. There is no end usually but this to most stories: The two men return to 221B Baker street to sup, drink, smoke, and share fellowship in perpetuity. More than Baudelaire and Wilde (both Bohemian bachelors of the type he describes in "The Three Garidebs"), Conan Doyle felt keenly the deaths of his loved ones and saw the Absolute only partially as a habit of intellectual excellence. He projected into it the hope of a reunion and a lifting of the veil of mystery from "that great secret society," as André Breton would characterize death (*Manifestoes* 32). When Conan Doyle died at 71 years of age after an exhausting lecture tour on spiritualism, Conan Doyle was convinced that he would continue communicating with his family, yet paradoxically, it is Sherlock Holmes who continues to commune with the world, while few know the name of the author himself. Yet art graced all three writers with some form of immortality.

Romanticism, which Wilde so passionately defends in *The Decay of Lying*, was ultimately a protest against a new wave of scientific infringement on the artist's sense of analogy and correspondence with the cosmos. Artists looked toward Swedenborg, Agrippa, Flamel, Paracelsus, *The Book of the Dead* (translated by A.E. Wallis Budge, the keeper of the British Museum specializing in Egyptology, 1894), to pursue an esoteric path, as Baudelaire would say, paradoxically "anywhere out of this world"(*Paris Spleen*). The Bohemian-Decadent backdrop set up the credo or the ideological basis for a flight away from the real, the natural, the rational, toward the "Orphic and the Hermetic, shaping the new art, as well, of the twentieth century and the artist's embracing of abstraction.

In an important exhibition that was held between 12 September 2012 and 6 January 2013 at the Tate Britain, entitled "Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde," the curators, Alison

Smith, Tim Barringer and Jason Rosenfeld (2012) acknowledge the moral and aesthetic conspiracy that was fomented during the Victorian era and its link to the twentieth century avant-garde. In a manner akin to Baudelaire's framing of the modern, they boldly "present the art of the Pre-Raphaelites as an avant-garde movement...an organized grouping with a self-conscious radical, collective project of overturning current orthodoxies in art and replacing them with new, critical practices often directly engaged with the contemporary world...associated with movements such as Impressionism, Cubism, Dadaism and Surrealism. [It] belongs among the very earliest of the historical avant-gardes"(9). The same can be said about the parallel movement of Aesthetic Decadence, where style comes to embody a poetics and a politics that salvages the idiosyncratic over the monumental, the minority over the majority, the artistic over the mechanical. Certainly Göran Blix in his estimation of the ongoing "transitional period," extending in an unresolved fashion into the twenty-first century, puts his finger on an ongoing crisis. Yet artists like canaries in a mine were at the forefront of sensing the ramifications of unchecked materialism, as they set themselves adrift from the system of social sanctions, unafraid of economic marginalization or poverty. They did not shrink from the task of offering alternative solutions or exotic combinations to combat the torpor and uniformity of what Wordsworth termed in "The World is Too Much With Us," "getting and spending." If his generation defended the rapidly disappearing forests, subsequent artists such as Baudelaire, Wilde, and Conan Doyle, like their brethren the Pre-Raphaelites, preserved a "forest of symbols"(Baudelaire), choosing to sing in the manner of Wilde, "of beautiful and impossible things, of things that are lovely and that never happened, of things that are not and that should be"(The Decay of Lying 35).

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