Decadence and Realism

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SINCE the 1980s, when decadence returned to scholarly prominence after a period of relative neglect, critics have tended to stress the movement's conflicts with and differences from its Victorian milieu. Almost uniformly they have interpreted these conflicts and differences as anticipatory, evidence of development toward modern artistic, social, and political formations. Decadence looks forward to modernist experimentation, launches modern queer identity, prophesizes the society of the spectacle. There is little doubt that decadent writing had a pervasive influence on twentieth-century art, sexuality, and consumer culture, but it is never easy to tell whether the spirit of anticipation belongs to the decadents or to their later readers.[1] This essay will reconsider one example of anti-Victorian animus in the movement: its polemic against realism. Commonly regarded as a step on the royal road toward modernism, decadent antirealism seems to repudiate stale aesthetic verities that would be definitively toppled in the next century. I will argue that this claim needs to be revised. The decadents' critique of realism is not an argument for innovation but an example of what Antoine Compagnon has called antimodernism, a stance that combines literary innovation with heterodox conservative political views.

Although it is often associated with the political right, antimodernism is not simply reactionary, and sometimes borrows from the left. Its real target is the vulgarity and materialism of modernity. Antimoderns are moderns "malgré lui," as Compagnon puts it, strategic conservatives, who call up lost artistic ideals and political formations to repudiate the new.[2] Charles Baudelaire, who turned to the Catholic right in the 1850s, is perhaps the paradigmatic antimodern, but the socialist William Morris, who claimed that the driving force of his life's work

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was a "hatred of modern civilization" that led him back to medieval ideals, might be called one as well.[3] Amanda Anderson has recently identified a tradition of "bleak liberalism" in Victorian and modern thought that is deeply aware of "those forces and conditions that threaten the realization of liberal ambitions."[4] Antimodernism is its cynical, inverted mirror image: beginning from some force or condition of modern life—its ugliness, its democratic reforms, its praise of rationality, its empty materialism—it looks to the past for principles that help focus its discontent. Realism, for the decadents, is a signal modern ailment, the symptom of a corrupt age, and a grave threat to artistic freedom.

My main example in this essay will be Oscar Wilde's dialogue "The Decay of Lying." Initially written as a critical article in 1888, first published in *The Nineteenth Century* in January 1889, and then revised for the 1891 volume *Intentions*, this dialogue recapitulates, synthesizes, and extends more than a quarter-century of earlier antirealist polemics in works by Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Walter Pater, James McNeill Whistler, and others. Along with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and *Salomé* (1893), "The Decay of Lying" was Wilde's most sustained foray into the discourse of decadence. It had an important influence on later writers in England and France, who saw it as a bold manifesto for the movement.[5] Yet despite his reputation as a harbinger of modernism, Wilde does not write as an innovator. "What we have to do," he claims, "is to revive this old art of Lying."[6] The dialogue is an exercise in such antimodern revivalism. Realism epitomizes all the unenviable qualities of modernity, and in response Wilde appeals to the authority of neoclassical critical theory and classical republican paradigms for political liberty. Paradoxically, what makes the dialogue feel innovative is also what makes it most antimodern. It brings old and outmoded ideas into new contexts, brushing contemporary verities against the grain.

1. Decadence Has Never Been Modern

According to a familiar critical narrative, nineteenth-century decadence saw realism as its implacable foe. Whereas realism made a serious commitment to mimesis, decadence rejected imitation in favor of artifice. And while realism earnestly documented the present social world, decadence pursued dream and fantasy as bulwarks against the incursion of the quotidian. "[T]he sacralisation of art by fin de siècle aesthetes," writes Stephen Arata, "was a way to withdraw it from the fret and fever—and, often, the complexities—of the everyday and of mass culture."[7]

The decadents hated the contemporary world and so could not abide realism, which sought to represent it truthfully and objectively. Seeking images more amenable to their taste, they embraced illusion and escapism instead of mimesis.

Recent scholarship on decadence tends to superimpose this critical narrative on another one, originating in twentieth-century critical theory, that defines realism as the staid and traditional backdrop for the emergence of modernism. For theorists like Theodor Adorno and Roland Barthes, realism is an outmoded form that naïvely reflects an ideological image of reality rather than reality itself. Purporting to give a dispassionate picture of everyday life, it only mirrors the unquestioned assumptions of its readers. The nonrealist forms of modernism and postmodernism alone break through the crust of convention and common sense that keeps the status quo in power.[8] From this perspective, the decadents' antirealism looks anticipatory. Hilda Schiff, for example, discerns the origins of modernist impersonality in Wilde's praise of art's distance from life.[9] Arata writes that Wilde and other decadent writers look forward to a "recognizably modernist conception of literary art," which foregrounds artifice and experimentation over mimesis.[10] Jonathan Dollimore argues that Wilde's "transgressive aesthetic" inspired the depthless surfaces of postmodernism.[11]

When Wilde looks at realist works in "The Decay of Lying," however, he does not see tradition or ideology but disruption. Wilde's speaker Vivian, who dominates the dialogue, associates realism with the modern and the new. Summing up his repudiation of realist novels at the end of the dialogue, Vivian states: "the two things that every artist should avoid are modernity of form and modernity of subject-matter" (102). We should take him at his word. Scholars in a number of fields have begun to push back against the prevailing theoretical critique of realism, but perhaps the most telling example comes in recent work by postcolonial critics challenging what Susan Andrade calls the "reading-for-modernism" reflex in the field.[12] Like postcolonial studies, decadence studies has been shaped by the antirealism of twentieth-century theory and reflexively valorizes formal innovation over realist documentation. Postcolonial scholars have argued that this prejudice ignores other forms of native resistance and leaves important realist writers out of the third-world canon. The "reading-for-modernism" reflex among scholars of decadence has had problematic effects of a different sort, distorting the decadents' actual objections to realism and overstating their commitment to progress and innovation.

Consider the examples Vivian gives of texts that meet his decadent ideals, nearly all of which are old or deliberately archaic. He praises Elizabethan tragedy, the dubious historical writings of Herodotus, the fantastic travel narratives of Marco Polo, the encyclopedic natural science of Pliny, William Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and the quasifictional memoirs of Giacomo Casanova (87). His vision of literature's mendacious future is even more archaic, drawn from the Bible, fantasy, and ancient myth. When realism has been driven into the wilderness, Vivian claims, "Behemoth and Leviathan" will rise from the seas, "Dragons will wander about the waste places, and the phoenix will soar from her nest of fire into the air" (101). Art brings forth "winged lions," dryads, fauns, centaurs, and "hawk-faced" gods (90). Lying began with cavemen, and its best teacher remains Plato. The only recent novelists Vivian praises have complicated relationships to modernity. George Meredith has "made himself a romanticist" in a "revolt against the noisy assertions of realism" and in order to "keep life at a respectful distance" (81). Charles Reade's only great work, *The Cloister and the Hearth* (1861), evokes an old and foreign context. Honoré de Balzac "created life, he did not copy it," and for this reason he cannot be called a realist, though Vivian criticizes his interest in modern subjects (82). The setting of Wilde's dialogue evokes an atmosphere of aristocratic leisure that contrasts sharply with the contemporary urban context of much late-century realist writing. And although Vivian proudly claims his argument in defense of lying "throws an entirely new light upon the history of Art" (103), he plans to publish his "protest" in a journal called the *Retrospective Review*.

Wilde's French sources also saw realism as an unwelcome modern innovation. Baudelaire's jeremiad against photography in the *Salon of 1859*, written the same year George Eliot published her famous defense of realism in *Adam Bede*, is the most influential example. Baudelaire denounces photography as a disruptive technology that threatens to replace the painter's vision with mimetic copies. "Each day art further diminishes its self-respect," he writes, "by bowing down before external reality; each day the painter becomes more and more given to painting not what he dreams but what he sees."[13] Photographs are valuable for preserving the tourist's memories or the scientist's research, but they should never displace the true office of the imagination or deign to "encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary."[14] Baudelaire's complaint is echoed in Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884). Huysmans's protagonist, Des Esseintes, a decrepit aristocrat in retreat

from modernity, alludes to the rise of naturalism in French art in his claim that he cannot tolerate "pictures of the human form toiling in Paris between four walls or roaming the streets in search of money." Thus, he looks to works of "exquisite refinement" that are "divorced from modern times and modern society" and provide an "atmosphere of ancient fantasy" or transport the viewer "to some unfamiliar world."[15]

Wilde, Baudelaire, and Huysmans all present themselves as staunch defenders of tradition in retreat from modernity. Decadence here is anything but an anticipation of modernist innovation—it is instead realism that looks experimental and progressive. Fredric Jameson has recently pointed to realism's "flight from classification," its drive to depict each scene and narrate each individual life in the most concrete and specific terms possible.[16] The realist impulse seeks the singular and the contingent, expressing what Jameson calls "affect," the eternal present of physical and bodily sensation. A contrary drive, which Jameson calls "récit," wants to organize events into complete actions, sealing them in a past touched by the sense of destiny. Affect undermines the stabilizing functions of récit, stressing the immediate and the concrete, while récit imposes order on affect by making it part of a narrative arc. Decadent writers offer a very similar account of realist forms. "The Decay of Lying" describes a struggle between the immediate and the eternal, the chaotic forces of life and the order imposed by artifice. Realism is a reckless innovation, which casts aside convention, decorum, and taste in an ill-considered quest for unmediated descriptions of life—what Linda Nochlin has called "the demand for contemporaneity" among realist painters and writers.[17] Wilde opposes realism's innovations with an appeal to order and constraint. Art is distinct from the real: "Remote from reality, and with her eyes turned away from the shadows of the cave, Art reveals her own perfection," not the actual world (96). The great error of contemporary realists is to confuse art and life, foregoing the conventional structures art provides in favor of immediacy and concreteness.

2. Wilde's Neoclassicism

Given its dialogic form and comically extreme claims, it is perhaps a fool's errand to identify a consistent aesthetic doctrine in "The Decay of Lying." Still, Wilde was very proud of the dialogue and claimed in a letter to Violet Fane that "*au fond* it is of course serious."[18] That "serious" element, I would argue, is the neoclassical principle of verisimilitude,

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which Wilde adopts in "The Decay of Lying" as an alternative to the realist drive for the immediate and the concrete. Although it is often conflated with realism, verisimilitude was a key term in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critical theory and described a very different way of thinking about the reality of fiction. Stressing rule, order, and convention above mere reflection, the doctrine argues that art should be probable and lifelike but never imitate life directly.[19] Its guiding theoretical claim is Aristotle's contrast between the historian and the poet: while the former is constrained to report things as they are or have been, the latter tells of what "might occur," what is probable and not what is factual.[20] For this reason, art can include the marvelous, legendary, and imaginary, which fall outside the scope of realism in its nineteenth-century guise. Hence Vivian's evocation of dragons and the phoenix. Shaping and organizing reality according to the dictates of taste and reason, art borrows from nature but does not follow it in every detail.

As Stephen Halliwell has pointed out, Wilde's apparently antimimetic statements in "The Decay of Lying" do not actually reject mimesis but "displace its purpose" by ascribing the act of imitation to life rather than art.[21] In fact, Wilde's theory of imitation in the dialogue is even more traditional than Halliwell suggests, echoing the views of neoclassical critics like Charles Batteux, whose book *Les beaux arts réduits à un même principe* (*The Fine Arts Reduced to a Single Principle*) (1747) was among the most influential accounts of art in the eighteenth century. In line with the doctrine of verisimilitude, Batteux warns artists against imitating what he calls "brute nature"—things as they are or have been. "The arts do not imitate slavishly," he writes. "Rather, they are selective about the objects and properties that they represent and these are represented in the best possible light."[22] Art is not an imitation of reality "as it is in itself, but as the mind conceives it ought to be" (12). It idealizes brute nature through its artificial arrangement of beautiful parts and the shaping influence of the artist's taste. Works that try to render the world immediately, without the intervention of this guiding hand, remain too close to nature and lose their verisimilitude. Batteux appeals to an ancient anecdote about the artist Zeuxis, who constructed a painting of Aphrodite from "the various features of several living beautiful women," shaping the final image according to his inner sense of beauty rather than "anything actual." Molière, similarly, did not "search Paris" to find an original for Alceste in *The Misanthrope*; rather, he constructed a composite image of the character's "bleak disposition" from the range of his experience (12). "Nothing is real [*réel*] in these works," Batteux states (10). Art's

true object is not reality but what Batteux calls "*belle nature*": "This is not the reality that is; rather it is the reality that could be, the truly beautiful" (13).

Vivian's descriptions of artistic method echo these core neoclassical principles on almost every level. He argues that artists should impose their will on life and nature, shaping them according to traditional, self-consciously artificial, aesthetic principles and an internal ideal that embodies the artist's taste and knowledge of convention. There should be nothing immediate or contingent about art: "Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms" (84). Artists stand between reality and the audience, turning the confusion, imperfection, and disorder of brute nature into beautiful images.[23] The portrait painters Hans Holbein and Anthony van Dyck, for example, do not imitate their sitters in every detail but shape the depiction according to the inner "type" they bring with them to the studio (91).[24] The decorative arts succeed when "the visible things of life are transmuted into artistic conventions," subjecting the lawless forms of nature to rational principles (86). Providing the necessary distance from life that realism elides, art should take us away from the everyday, not confront us with it. "The only beautiful things," Vivian claims, cribbing a line from Théophile Gautier's preface to *Mademoiselle du Maupin*, "are the things that do not concern us."[25] Anything that is "a vital part of the environment in which we live" must be radically transformed before it can serve as a fit subject for art. The best works do not rouse "partisan feelings of any kind"; they invite disinterested contemplation by presenting the audience with verisimilar images rather than direct transcriptions (82).

Writing just three years after Batteux, Samuel Johnson, in *The Rambler* 4, offers a prescient model for Wilde's critique of realism: "It is justly considered as the greatest excellency of art," he states, "to imitate nature; but it is necessary to distinguish those parts of nature, which are most proper for imitation: greater care is still required in representing life, which is so often discoloured by passion, or deformed by wickedness. If the world be promiscuously described, I cannot see of what use it can be to read the account; or why it may not be as safe to turn the eye immediately upon mankind, as upon a mirror which shows all that presents itself without discrimination."[26] For Wilde, as for Johnson, life is formless and chaotic, disfigured by passion and self-interest; it should be the task of art to correct this disorder for its audience rather than simply reflect it as in a mirror, that ancient emblem of unmediated realism.

Wilde would demur from Johnson's didacticism, but the vision of art he provides is otherwise the same.

Consider Wilde's critique of realist characters, what Vivian condemns as "modernity of subject-matter." Realism wants to capture people as they really are, but Vivian insists that such depictions are "entirely wrong . . . on the ground of art," for they do not select and order the raw materials life provides (79). Vivian dislikes having to read tales about "the weekly washerwoman" or the beset denizens of the East End and laments that, as readers, we choose to "spend our days in the sordid streets and hideous suburbs of our vile cities" (76, 83). "In literature," he states, "we require distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power. We don't want to be harrowed and disgusted with an account of the doings of the lower orders" (79). As Lawrence Danson has noted, Wilde's elitist dismissal of realist characters concerns their literary rather than their sociological status. These characters are reductive, driven only by base natural needs and desires, when they should be shaped by the author's inward ideal.[27] Realism depicts human life as it is rather than as it might be. Émile Zola is "perfectly truthful and describes things exactly as they are," Vivian complains, but his characters are boring: "They have their dreary vices, and their drearier virtues. The record of their lives is absolutely without interest. Who cares what happens to them?" (79). Guy de Maupassant seeks to present human life unmediated by the artist's idealizing touch but gives his readers only ugliness and affliction: he "strips life of the few poor rags that still cover her, and shows us [the] foul sore and festering wound" (78). The same is true of Paul Bourget's novels, which purport to lift the "mask" each of his characters wears and reveal the reality beneath, but only display "that dreadful universal thing called human nature." Like the wounded human body, the troubled human soul is "made out of the same stuff" across social classes and national boundaries (80). Bourget and Maupassant strive to expose the singular and the contemporary qualities of their characters but only succeed in transcribing brute nature. Their works sacrifice verisimilitude for immediacy.

Wilde's objection to "modernity of form"—the commitment to mimetic representation—also targets realism's intemperate desire for the immediate. Take Vivian's critique of the quasiscientific fascination contemporary novelists have with facts and accuracy. Vivian rejects these writers for penning "novels which are so lifelike that no one can possibly believe in their probability" (77). Robert Louis Stevenson's description of Dr. Jekyll's transformation, for example, "reads dangerously like

an experiment out of the *Lancet*" (77); and Mary Augusta Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888) reproduces the experience of attending "a meat tea in the house of a serious Nonconformist family" (78). Realism slavishly attempts to reproduce the material world, to present a picture of things as they are in accurate, factual detail, like photographs in words.[28] But in so doing, writers cede the role of artist to life and nature, casting imagination aside and relinquishing the crucial mediation of style and convention: "Certainly we are a degraded race, and have sold our birthright for a mess of facts" (83). Vivian's "mess of facts" is the equivalent of Batteux's "brute nature." Realism tries to present life with empirical precision but again ends up destroying verisimilitude: "There is such a thing as robbing a story of its reality by trying to make it too true" (77). Even great writers produce bad art when they try to go directly to nature. Shakespeare's realist phase is marked by language that is variously "uncouth, vulgar, exaggerated, fantastic, obscene even" (85). Vivian's rather disorganized list here reproduces the lack of order that nature introduces into Shakespeare's works. Making art realistic does not make it truer, only more chaotic—it is the artist's power of selecting and shaping that creates order. This is why so many of the works Vivian admires are not pure fiction but history or autobiography: because they depend on and refer to life, these forms highlight the way art modifies its "rough material."

Realism thus fails by its very own measure of success. As Elaine Freedgood recently argued, the "realist novel is ruptured by its twin commitments to fictionality and reference," which, against its reputation for conventionality, engender a dizzying ontological flexibility: fictional characters walk on real streets and historical figures attend fictional dinner parties.[29] Wilde claims realism mistakenly privileges reference over fictionality, binding the novel too firmly to its place and time. In its quest for the immediate, it makes itself obsolete. Life and nature, Vivian argues, are inevitably and ironically belated, and so work produced under their influence "is always old-fashioned, antiquated, and out of date" (83). "[I]t is only the modern that ever becomes old fashioned," Vivian states: "M. Zola sits down to give us a picture of the Second Empire. Who cares for the Second Empire now? It is out of date. Life goes faster than Realism" (102). Despite their evocation of fashion, these comments are not made in defense of immediacy and newness, for Vivian's ideals in art are, as I noted above, antique and archaic. Rather, they stress the inevitable inability of life to achieve the immediate expression that realism sought.

The lie, by contrast, pushes neoclassical admiration of order to its logical breaking point: lies resemble the real but do not depend on it—they correct it. Nineteenth-century realists argued for the truth and objectivity of their depictions of reality. In *Le rouge et le noir* (1830), Stendhal defends realist mimesis by comparing the novel to a mirror carried along a city street, sometimes reflecting the "azure blue" of the sky and sometimes the "mire in the puddles on the road below."[30] The mirror captures everything dispassionately, and the novelist, devoted to truth above all else, should not bring its images into line with conventional aesthetic and ethical ideals, as neoclassical theorists like Johnson and Batteux dictated. Eliot makes a similar point in *Adam Bede* (1859): "These fellow-mortals," she states, "every one, must be accepted as they are: you can neither straighten their noses, nor brighten their wit, nor rectify their dispositions[.] . . . I am content to tell my simple story, without trying to make things seem better than they were; dreading nothing, indeed, but falsity."[31] For Wilde, such statements epitomize the failure of realism to select and order its materials. Stendhal and Eliot see traditional decorum as a barrier to truthful representation, an elevation of artistic convention over truth. Wilde recognizes the underlying implication of this claim—that following conventions is akin to lying—and reasserts the superiority of verisimilitude. Lies are wholly devoted to what "might occur," in Aristotle's sense, valuing probability rather than fact. "After all," Vivian asks, "what is a fine lie? Simply that which is its own evidence" (74). The lie begins in nature, like all art for neoclassicism, but it ultimately frees verisimilitude of any responsibility to truth.

3. Realism, Democracy, and the Crowd

The earnest defense of realism in Stendhal and Eliot was widely recognized as something more than just a statement of aesthetic principles—it was also an argument for the social mission of the novel. By representing people as they are, the novel cultivates sympathy for the common and the everyday. Realism, in this view, is the natural ally of democracy, a point Erich Auerbach influentially makes in *Mimesis*. Ancient Greek critical theory, Auerbach notes, reserved verisimilar representation for the lives of the noble and heroic. The "realistic depiction of daily life," by contrast, "had a place only in comedy or, carefully stylized, in idyl."[32] Earlier periods associated democracy with nonrealist forms, as in classical Athens, where comedy gave voice to populist impulses.[33] It is only with nineteenth-century realism, Auerbach shows, that the

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separation of styles loses its hold on writers and common people become the subjects of the serious mimetic attention formerly given only to the wealthy. Realism is a product of democratization and, in turn, a generative source for what Isobel Armstrong calls the "democratic imaginations" that circulate in modernity.[34]

These same trends, as Jacques Rancière has recently argued, undermined the epistemological and sociological order that long supported the doctrine of verisimilitude. Verisimilitude was grounded on two basic principles: the Aristotelian unity of action (a logical chain linking beginning, middle, and end) and the heroic unity of the actor (who could stand outside that chain and foresee its vicissitudes). These principles were both aesthetic and political. Unity of action is evidence of the rational ordering of affairs in the world; and the heroic actor is evidence for the justice of social stratification. By the end of the eighteenth century, Rancière notes, this order began to break down: "Action requires a finite world, circumscribed knowledge, calculable forms of causality and designated actors," but the modern world "has become too vast" and knowledge "too subtle, too differentiated" to be imagined in terms of a single action or an unproblematically heroic actor.[35] Realism embraces this new condition, replacing older ideas about action and the actor with a more democratic distribution of stories and roles, thus striking at "the political heart of the principle of verisimilitude."[36]

The decadents were deeply suspicious of this alliance between realism and democracy, a fact that ties them closely to the broader conservative critique Simon During finds in the era of democratization.[37] Huysmans's acerbic character Des Hermies puts it bluntly in the opening pages of the novel *Là-bas* (1891): naturalism, he says, promotes "the idea of art as something democratic!"[38] The realist novel here becomes a mirror image of the democratic order, its accuracy of artistic representation an implicit endorsement of equality in political representation. Just as realism dispassionately reflects every object that falls within its purview, so the democratic polis, founded on disinterested laws and impartial procedures, treats every citizen the same way. Realism turns the principle of universal political equality into an artistic imperative, rendering the act of selection not just artistically untrue but antidemocratic. In the eyes of decadent writers, realism epitomizes the chief political ailment of modern democracy: its subjection of (elite) minorities to what Alexis de Tocqueville calls the "tyranny of the majority."[39] The overwhelming power of public opinion in modern democracies means that everyone can have a say on art, whether they are qualified to speak or not.

"What a pitiless dictatorship is that of opinion in a democratic society!" writes Baudelaire.[40] Decadent texts often describe hostile crowds threatening to impose their degraded wants on the beset writer—an allegory for the unconstrained passions that drive public opinion. Naturalism, claims Des Hermies, is the emblem of "our moral Americanization": "With what prodigious humility it has deferred to the ghastly taste of the masses!"[41] In the *Salon of 1859*, Baudelaire writes that photography's increasing influence over painting epitomizes "the involuntary, forced obedience of the individual to the mass."[42]

Wilde, too, resisted the democratization of taste and opinion that realist writing seemed uncritically to promote. In "The Decay of Lying," Vivian equates the realist fact with the teeming multitudes Huysmans and Baudelaire discern in the modern city: facts have "invaded the kingdom of Romance" and imposed the "crude commercialism of America" on the imagination (87). Wilde's most striking repudiation of public opinion, however, comes in "The Soul of Man under Socialism" (1891). Although this essay is often cited as proof of Wilde's sympathy with the political left, it is also thoroughly antidemocratic, at least in matters pertaining to art. "High hopes were once formed of democracy," Wilde writes, "but democracy means simply the bludgeoning of the people by the people for the people" (244). He spends a great deal of the essay criticizing the reading public ("The People"), which he characterizes as a despotic power that claims control over both the body and the soul of the creator: "Their authority is a thing blind, deaf, hideous, grotesque, tragic, amusing, serious and obscene. It is impossible for the artist to live with the People. All despots bribe. The people bribe and brutalize" (261–62). Wilde's chaotic list of despotic qualities recalls the description of Shakespeare's unfortunate turn to realism in "The Decay of Lying." The unmediated authority of life and nature makes a mess of art, the public sphere, and even the list itself.

Wilde's condemnation of democracy and the public is not as consistent as that of his French sources, but the antimodern defense of verisimilitude in "The Decay of Lying" points in much the same direction. Take Wilde's association of realism with compulsion and unthinking repetition—action no longer free but enchained. Baudelaire argues, in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (*The Painter of Modern Life*) (1863), that nature is what we do by instinct rather than by rational design: "Nature teaches us nothing, or practically nothing. I admit that she *compels* [*contraint*] man to sleep, to eat, to drink, and to arm himself as well as he may against the inclemencies of the weather: but it is she too who incites

man to murder his brother, to eat him, to lock him up and to torture him."[43] Nature makes things happen, produces effects, but does not think; it "compels" and "incites" but "teaches us nothing." Only reason and culture lead to the good, giving us the necessary distance from our desires to select among potential responses to stimulus: "Evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art."[44]

For Wilde, similarly, life and nature represent sheer impulse rather than free and deliberate action. Vivian complains that nature "keeps on repeating" artistic effects even after they have been exhausted, evidence of its inability to think or constrain its actions (95).[45] Several times in the dialogue, he accuses life of "forgetting" its debt to art, as if it were sunk in some kind of semiconscious stupor. Realist writers pursue "careless habits of accuracy" (77), which surrender control to an outside force; they "worship" facts and "bow the knee to Baal," suggesting an unthinking devotion to false idols (81); their commitment to truth-telling is "morbid and unhealthy," a matter of body rather than mind (77). The readers of their novels also fall victim to unconscious compulsion. The dialogue points to a range of ways people imitate artworks: women at galleries who resemble figures in paintings by Dante Rossetti or Edward Burne-Jones; boys who brandish unloaded revolvers on suburban streets in imitation of the outlaws they read about in adventure stories; a friend of Vivian's who modeled her life on William Makepeace Thackeray's Becky Sharp. Vivian tells of a man who was "filled with horror" when he recognized that he was unwittingly reliving the opening pages of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (93), and of a woman he knew who found herself "compelled" by "an irresistible impulse" to reproduce the choices of the heroine in a Russian story (94). These tongue-in-cheek examples imply that realism, too, is a form of compulsion, a ceding of the artist's will and control to life. Realist action is undirected and confused, its characters unable to rise above the crude promptings of life, and its forms mere transcriptions of brute nature. Rather than fighting the tyranny of the crowd, realism gladly surrenders to it, indeed gives it a powerful voice.

4. The Art of Republican Liberty

Wilde's association of realism and compulsion is grounded on what contemporary political theorists would call a classical or neo-Roman "republican" theory of liberty. This theory was central to decadent ideas about political community and underlies many claims decadent writers make

about art and conduct.[46] By contrast with the liberal idea of freedom as noninterference (John Stuart Mill's basic position in *On Liberty*), republican freedom stresses nondomination. Valorizing autonomy and self-determination above all, its abiding metaphor is that of master and slave, *liber* and *servus*, rather than the government censor. "The condition of liberty" in this tradition, as Philip Pettit argues, "is explicated as the status of someone who, unlike the slave, is not subject to the arbitrary power of another: that is, someone who is not dominated by anyone else."[47] The difference between liberal and republican ideas of liberty may seem small, and the two models are closely interrelated in nineteenth-century thought, but they have strikingly different implications when translated into artistic theory. For the decadents, freedom means the ability to live and work without external compulsion, whether this compulsion comes from the uncouth forms of life and nature, the unconscious promptings of social influence, or the unacceptable demands of critics and the public.

The republican model of liberty went into eclipse at the end of the eighteenth century, alongside the order of verisimilitude as Rancière describes it. Pettit notes that the theory foundered when women and former slaves were included in the calculus: "If freedom was to be cast as an ideal for all citizens, then freedom would have to be reconceived in less demanding terms."[48] This explains why decadent antirealism is most often, and most vociferously, espoused by male writers: it is premised on an older conception of action in which women as well as racial and colonial others were passive subjects rather than full social actors. Despite (or perhaps because of) its relative obsolescence as a political theory, the classical republican model of liberty had wide purchase in aestheticism and decadence. In *William Blake: A Critical Study*, for example, A. C. Swinburne denies that literature could ever be the "handmaiden" of moral teaching: "Art is not like fire or water, a good servant and bad master; rather the reverse. She will help in nothing, of her own knowledge and freewill: upon terms of service you will get worse than nothing out of her."[49] Art must be its own master, Swinburne asserts: aesthetic autonomy is akin to republican self-determination. In the final pages of his "Winckelmann" essay, Pater argues that literature should provide a "sense of freedom" to its readers in the face of natural laws that threaten to dominate them.[50] "For us," Pater writes, "necessity is not, as of old, a sort of mythological personage without us, with whom we can do warfare. It is rather a magic web woven through and through us . . . penetrating us with a network, subtler than

our subtlest nerves, yet bearing in it the central forces of the world."[51] These laws "embarrass us" because they seem to control our lives, render us unfree. Great works of art place these forces at a distance from the audience, turning their domination into a "tragic situation," under the cloud of which "certain groups of noble men and women" work out their fates for our pleasure.[52]

The key word in Pater's description is "noble": literature gives readers the aristocratic privilege of freedom in the face of circumstances. The aristocrat is the traditional paradigm of mastery, embodying precisely the kind of liberty that realism threatens to eclipse. Although the tragic characters Pater describes are subject to necessity, readers stand outside of the action; their aesthetic distance makes them free, however limited that freedom may actually be. As Linda Dowling has argued, Wilde's aristocratic pose represented a late intervention in a philosophical debate originating with Lord Shaftesbury over the social function of the aesthetic. Aristocracy is a metaphor "meant to translate into an older language of rank and status Wilde's conviction that aesthetic consciousness represents, especially amid the bleakness of a modern mass or industrial society, a superior mode of existence."[53] Wilde casts true artists as the undisputed masters of their materials—aristocrats of word and design. Selecting and ordering the disparate elements they encounter in life and nature, artists find unity and a kind of heroism in what would otherwise be a mess of competing forces. Selection, Vivian claims, is "the very spirit of art" (85), and artists, accordingly, are the very paradigm of republican liberty—hence Wilde's frequently stated imperative to live life as a work of art. Realism, by contrast, is a "prison-house," in Vivian's words, its uncritical dependence on the real subjecting artists to outside forces (88). It makes itself the slave of life.

Bourget famously defined decadent style as a kind of anarchy, with each element of the work—word, sentence, paragraph, page—going its own way in defiance of organic form.[54] According to Wilde's account of artistic liberty, I have argued, it is realism, not decadence, that most resembles this stylistic anarchy, both artistically and politically. Vivian calls style the "very condition" of art; it is, for him, a practice of Paterian self-discipline and ascetic constraint. Realism, by contrast, epitomizes "the true decadence . . . that we are now suffering" (84). Lying is not the newest fashion but an ancient ideal, whose triumphant return Vivian imagines as the repudiation of an ugly and chaotic present—an ancient rebarbative to modern ills. "And when that day dawns, or sunset reddens," he intones, "how joyous we shall all be! Facts will be regarded

as discreditable, Truth will be found mourning over her fetters, and Romance, with her temper of wonder, will return to the land" (101). "The Decay of Lying" performs an unexpected but characteristically Wildean inversion: realism and decadence change places, with realism now guilty of promoting anarchy in art and life, and decadence imagined as the vanguard of a glorious restoration. From this perspective, realism is the true harbinger of modernism, not decadence.

Notes

My thanks to Rachel Teukolsky and Dennis Denisoff for their perceptive readings of this essay.

1. For recent work on the persistence of decadence in modernism, see Sherry, *Modernism*; Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics*; and the essays in Hext and Murray, *Decadence*.
2. Compagnon, *Les antimodernes*, 10. Compagnon's frame of reference is French, and one might argue, as Murray does in "Decadent Conservatism," that the better term in British literature is "conservative." I prefer "antimodern" for two reasons: first, because British decadents looked to French antimoderns like Baudelaire for their style of engagement; and second, because antimodernism is more patently than conservatism both a sociopolitical position and a stylistic mode—and one that overlaps in many ways with decadent style.
3. Morris, *News*, 381.
4. Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism*, 22.
5. For Wilde's influence in France, see Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, 16–24.
6. Wilde, *Criticism*, 100. All subsequent references to this edition will be cited parenthetically in the text.
7. Arata, "Realism," 182.
8. The debate is too complex to detail fully here, but for two key statements, see Adorno, "Reconciliation under Duress," and Barthes, "The Reality Effect." On the role of fin de siècle debates over realism in the later institutionalization of modernism, see Esty, "Realism Wars."
9. Schiff, "Nature and Art," 96–97.
10. Arata, "Realism," 184.
11. Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 72–73.

12. Andrade, "Realism," 295. The past two decades have also seen push-back against this reflex in Victorian studies, which had cast realism as a monolithic and fatally nation-bound form. In Goodlad's words, the reflex "systematically underrates the vitality of Victorian fiction" (*Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 29).
13. Baudelaire, *Art in Paris*, 154.
14. Baudelaire, *Art in Paris*, 154.
15. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 50.
16. Jameson, *Antinomies*, 143. Jameson argues, though, that this flight always fails, and realism soon settles into familiar forms and genres.
17. Nochlin, *Realism*, 103.
18. Wilde, *Letters*, 386.
19. Wilde regularly looks to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries for artistic cues. Almost all of Wilde's chosen genres—gothic, society comedy, epigram, fairy tale—originate or were especially popular in that era. And while critics often trace the genre of "The Decay of Lying" to Plato, it has much more in common with eighteenth-century dialogues like Denis Diderot's *Rameau's Nephew* than with the Socratic form.
20. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 59.
21. Halliwell, *Aesthetics*, 369.
22. Batteux, *Fine Arts*, 11. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
23. As Bristow and Mitchell show in "Oscar Wilde's 'Cultivated Blindness,'" 104–09, Wilde's idea of design in the essay also alludes to theological debates in the period.
24. Both painters served as court artists in England, suggesting a national allegory for Wilde's opposition of art and life: the English aristocracy is akin to "brute nature" idealized by the artist's imported type.
25. "Rien de ce qui est beau n'est indispensable à la vie [nothing beautiful is indispensable to life]" (Gautier, *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, 45).
26. Johnson, *The Rambler*, 22.
27. Danson, *Wilde's Intentions*, 49.
28. Wilde removed the word "photograph" from earlier drafts of the piece when he revised it for publication, as if the very word would allow in too much of the modern world.
29. Freedgood, *Worlds Enough*, 99.
30. Stendhal, *Scarlet and Black*, 365.
31. Eliot, *Adam Bede*, 176.
32. Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 22.

33. See Ruffell, *Politics and Anti-Realism*.
34. See Armstrong, *Novel Politics*.
35. Rancière, *The Lost Thread*, 101–02.
36. Rancière, *The Lost Thread*, 14.
37. See During, *Against Democracy*.
38. Huysmans, *The Damned*, 3.
39. See Tocqueville, *Democracy*, 239–42.
40. Baudelaire, *Painter*, 71.
41. Huysmans, *The Damned*, 4.
42. Baudelaire, *Art in Paris*, 154.
43. Baudelaire, *Painter*, 31.
44. Baudelaire, *Painter*, 31–32.
45. In *Oscar Wilde's Oxford Notebooks*, Smith and Helfand trace this vision of unselfconscious nature to Wilde's college reading of Aristotle (59).
46. I discuss the centrality of republican theory to decadent writing in Potolsky, *Decadent Republic*. For the broader context, see Weiner, *Republican Politics*.
47. Pettit, *Republicanism*, 31.
48. Pettit, *Republicanism*, ix.
49. Swinburne, *William Blake*, 90.
50. Pater, *The Renaissance*, 184.
51. Pater, *The Renaissance*, 185.
52. Pater, *The Renaissance*, 185.
53. Dowling, *Vulgarization*, 95.
54. See Bourget, *Essais*, 24.

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