

Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 1
Number 1 *Summer 1999*

Article 8

Summer 1999

Review of Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*.

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Recommended Citation

Schaffer, Talia (1999). Review of "Review of Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*." *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 1 : No. 1

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Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999. 448 pp. ISBN 06774194462.

Reviewed by Talia Schaffer, San Francisco State University

Ellis Hanson's *Decadence and Catholicism* is part of the new wave of books reconsidering the 1890s in light of the sexual and political turmoil at our own *fin de siècle*, including Elaine Showalter's *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (1990), Richard Dellamora's *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (1990), Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (1994), and Jonathan Freedman's *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (1990). *Decadence and Catholicism* takes on an ambitious project: it argues that at the end of the nineteenth century, Catholicism coexisted harmoniously with homosexuality in the writings of decadent men.

In this era of slashed publishers' budgets Harvard University Press deserves credit for fostering, and Hanson for writing, a capacious and leisurely study with plenty of room for rambling, for stylistic experimentation, for explorations and tangents and suggestions. Hanson has apparently read everything each of his subjects ever wrote, which allows his chapters to cover a broad range of texts, tracing how their characteristic obsessions broaden, alter, and dissipate over a lifetime of writing. Hanson is as comfortable with Continental literature as with the British tradition, covering a period stretching from the 1860s through modernism. His 'decadence' is an international and wide-ranging movement.

Decadence and Catholicism begins with an introduction attempting to define 'decadence,' but its first full chapter is one which traces Wagner's influence over a wide range of poets and in particular charts Verlaine's oscillations between 'saint' and 'sinner,' as well as using Eve Sedgwick's notion of 'shame' to read Baudelaire. This fairly miscellaneous chapter is not quite as satisfying as the next chapter, which focuses on Huysmans. Hanson explores the way Huysmans's idea of 'hysteria' anticipates Freud's and stresses the way Huysmans allied satanism and sodomy not only to each other, but also to the textual rather than the real.

When Hanson turns to the British decadents, he begins with Pater, arguing that it is acceptable to read Pater as decadent, gay, and Catholic although he was, technically, none of these things. Hanson shows how Pater's work is haunted by a morbid melancholy and by a fascination with the creative (even procreative) work of homoerotic and autoerotic desires. This leads to a chapter on Pater's student Wilde, who, Hanson argues, had a significant and complicated religious faith which privileged beauty over truth and which incorporated a Hellenized version of Christ. In this chapter, Hanson rambles off on discussions of Tractarianism, Anglo-Catholicism, and anti-Papist sentiments as well, subjects whose relevance is not particularly clear. The final chapter is as wide-ranging as the first one, loosely focusing on writers who produced 'priest and acolyte' stories but accommodating a lengthy tangent on Andre Raffalovich (who did not). The primary figures here are 'Baron Corvo' (Frederick Rolfe), John Gray, Montague Summers, and Ronald Firbank.

Often Hanson's chapters demonstrate the ubiquity of Catholic images more than they make any coherent or specific argument about those images, but when he allows himself to focus on one writer he can come up with compelling readings. His discussion of Pater's maternal imagery is clever and persuasive, especially considering that Pater is so notoriously difficult to discuss. I also learned something from his argument that Wilde's fascination with confession is unrelated to the presence of any real sin to confess.

Hanson's own writing style is evidently shaped by the jeweled prose his subjects produced. The book is rife with witty or provocative or lovely turns of phrase. Sometimes these moments are brief but perfect, as when a chapter on Pater's fascination with virginal maternity and death is entitled "Pater Dolorosa." Sometimes he daringly appropriates his sources' language, as in a gorgeous "Conclusion" whose opening and closing paragraphs are lifted, though with significant alterations, from Pater's own "Conclusion." Sometimes Hanson writes with an almost incantatory fervor, as in this passage: "The confession produces the sin by virtue of its remorse or its impenitence. It produces the priest by the solemnity of its transmission. It produces the confessional by virtue of its whisper. It produces God by its expectation of forgiveness" (294). The economy of expression and the denseness of thought in these deceptively simple phrases reminds one, at moments, of Foucault.

But after a few hundred pages, one begins to wonder what the point of this book really is. Hanson appears to be laboriously amassing careful pieces of evidence for the sole purpose of convincing us that gay Catholic decadent writers used gay, Catholic, and/or decadent images in their writing. But in fact, the confluence of gay and Catholic interests in fin-de-siècle writing is an old, well-worn truism. Recently, Angela Leighton wrote, "The Catholic Church, with its erotic rituals and emphasis on chastity, was the natural home of the aesthetes" (*Victorian Women Poets*, 222). This one line tells us pretty much everything Hanson takes nearly four hundred long pages to explain.

It is possible that the reason Hanson sees himself as fighting to reveal a heretofore unacknowledged truth is that he remains unaware of the extensive critical literature on the topic. *Decadence and Catholicism* has no bibliography, so one must adduce Hanson's sources from a very sketchy index. But the results of such an investigation are somewhat surprising. Hanson does not seem to have read any of the original histories of decadence and aestheticism: Holbrook Jackson's *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913), Richard Le Gallienne's *The Romantic '90s* (1925), Osbert Burdett's *The Beardsley Period* (1925), and Max Beerbohm's satires (it is particularly odd to read a whole section on Catholic satanism without encountering the hapless Enoch Soames's "Catholic diabolism"). Nor does Hanson seem to have read many of the modern critical texts. Hanson does not seem to know about James Eli Adams's *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (1995) or Alan Sinfield's *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment* (1994), which cover precisely the issues of dandy-esque and decadent masculinity he cares about. He never cites anything by Regenia Gagnier, although she is the preeminent authority on aestheticism and Wilde. He seems ignorant of both Carolyn Williams's crucial book on Pater (*Transfigured World: Walter Pater's Aesthetic Historicism*, 1989) and Jonathan Freedman's important *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (1990). He is capable of writing a whole section on the life of Frederick Rolfe without using A.J.A. Symons's famous *The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography*

(1934), which is rather like writing on Samuel Johnson without reading Boswell. Books on decadence are also missing; where is David Weir's *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (1995), R.K.R. Thornton's *The Decadent Dilemma* (1983), or Ian Fletcher's *Decadence and the 1890s* (1979)? Hanson apparently has no idea that Martin Green has already traced Wilde's legacy to 1920s dandies in *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of Decadence in England After 1918* (1976).

Equally problematically, Hanson generally cites other critics solely to insist on his superiority to them. Only Eve Sedgwick and Richard Dellamora escape unscathed. At one point, Hanson announces that "the only kind thing I have to say about" Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" "is that, well, it is nicely written. From the point of view of history, however, it strikes me as absurd" (373). He condemns T.S. Eliot's "highly idiosyncratic and unjust reading" of Pater (367). Jonathan Loesberg is "alarmingly inaccurate" and "homophobic" (187), Jonathan Dollimore is self-contradictory (294), Hilary Fraser undermines herself (384n19), Jean Pierrot "fails to describe the texts or the lives of any of those writers we call decadent and still read," except for an "alarmingly lame appraisal" of Flaubert (15), John R. Reed "hardly does justice" to Wagner or decadents (30), Guy Willoughby's book "is remarkable for its refusal to discuss sex, history, or Wilde's life" (386). The cumulative effect is one of spitefulness, not scholarship.

Unfortunately, Hanson's fundamental carelessness is visible not just in his disregard for critical history, but also in his vague and casual assumptions about his key terms. In a book called *Decadence and Catholicism*, neither of those words is well defined.

Hanson's definition of decadence is a surprisingly vague one; he seems content to assume that decadence was the same in Germany, France, and Great Britain, that decadence and aestheticism were essentially synonymous, and that all decadents were upper-class white males with problematic masculinity (3). These positions could be defended, but they are not. It does not seem to occur to Hanson that national and cultural differences might inflect the movement differently (see Weir for a description of how French *decadisme* differed from its British counterpart). Hanson lists a number of potentially synonymous terms, including Pre-Raphaelitism, aestheticism, symbolism, and impressionism, only to announce that he defines decadence differently (2). Why? What does his definition have to do with these other realms—is he rejecting them or constructing an overlapping category or arguing that they all mean 'his' decadence? More care in distinguishing decadence from its alternatives would have lent this category more credence.

I am also concerned about Hanson's decision to ignore all decadent writers except for gay Catholic men. This misrepresents the real population of the movement. It also seriously weakens his treatment of his own subjects. If he wants to convince us that these men merged decadent and Catholic styles to create a particular discourse, the best way to do so is to compare them with others who wrote differently. Why not read gay Catholic decadents like Verlaine, Huysmans, Pater, and Wilde specifically against straight decadents (some of whom were Catholic)—Rosamund Marriott Watson, E.L. Voynich, Richard Le Gallienne, Max Beerbohm, Alice Meynell, Francis Thompson, Henry Harland, 'John Oliver Hobbes'? Or why not contrast gay decadents against lesbian decadents (some of whom were Catholic too): Amy Levy, 'Vernon

Lee, 'Lucas Malet,' 'Michael Field'? Hanson does occasionally mention the aunt-niece couple who formed 'Michael Field,' but he treats them just like 'one of the boys,' apparently assuming that lesbians react just like gay men, an odd blind spot for a work of contemporary queer theory. Since Michael Field famously wrote "from decadence, Good Lord deliver us!", one would think that they pose some challenge to Hanson's vision of a seamlessly happy merging of decadent and homosexual ideals (Leighton, 217). As it is, however, we never know if Hanson is even aware of the fact that he is studying only one subculture in a complex field. Treating this coterie in isolation means we have no way to judge their importance, their novelty, or their role in a larger culture.

Hanson treats Catholicism in an equally blinkered way. In *Decadence and Catholicism*, there is no faith but Catholicism and these decadents are its prophets. Hanson frequently uses 'Catholic' as a synonym for 'Christian,' slipping between these terms in the same paragraphs (68, 231, 368-369). Indeed, virtually any reference to souls, faith, religion, guilt, spirit, or sin is triumphantly adduced as proof of underlying Catholicism—regardless of the fact that these terms were fashionable in their own right in the nineteenth century or that they occupied a common lexicon shared by anyone with religious training or operating in the Anglican-based cultural environment of nineteenth-century Britain. In Hanson's world, anyone with the slightest interest in the soul must be a closet Catholic. Nor does he ever extend to other religions the kind of respect he gives Catholicism. Any decadent man who is not Catholic is just a proto-Catholic or a might-as-well-be Catholic, with no understanding of how an upbringing in particular Protestant denominations (or, in Raffalovich's case, in Judaism) might have specifically shaped religious experience. This unremitting Catholic-centrism leads him to make identifications that are unintentionally funny, as when he calls Gilbert and Sullivan's "Patience" a "religious satire" (242)—presumably because "Patience" parodies the medieval revival, which Hanson equates with ritualism, thus Anglo-Catholicism, and therefore Catholicism itself.

While Hanson tends to spy Catholics under every bed, he is curiously ambivalent about their faith. With an introduction and conclusion sure to alienate Catholic scholars with its provocative attack on the Church (amongst other things, he views the Church as a corporate behemoth and "the bulwark of reactionary politics throughout the world" (371)), he spends the rest of the book giving heartfelt, emotional testimony about the power and beauty and necessity of what he calls 'the Faith' in a way sure to make poststructuralists uneasy. At times his identification with Catholicism is so powerful that he strenuously fights long-dead battles on its behalf, as when he condemns Victorian anti-Papist propaganda in the present tense, as if it were still a major movement (263-264).

Along with these conceptual lacunae are a number of minor but grating errors. Hanson explains that while some of Dorian Gray's sins are explicit, his "opium addiction [is] hinted at if we are able to read the signs"—but nothing in that novel is more explicit than Dorian's visit to an opium den (283-285). Hanson claims that Wilde "defined for his age the dandy as Roman Catholic ritualist. The diabolical aspect of the dandy's Catholicism is obvious enough" (246). Since Wilde wasn't a Roman Catholic until his deathbed conversion (if one accepts that he *did* convert, about which there are competing accounts), and since he wasn't remotely diabolical, this is a truly odd statement. In fact, Hanson goes on to adduce evidence which is not about Wilde but about Barbey d'Aureville, decades earlier and in a different country. In the final chapter, Hanson calls

Rolfe "celibate" though ten pages later he explains that Rolfe had sexual relations with Venetian boys (332, 343). To make matters worse, Hanson then claims that Rolfe only broke his vow of celibacy just before his death (344). Which is it? A reading of Symons's biography could have helped here.

In his conclusion, Hanson finally gives some reasons why he has collected so much proof for something nobody doubted in the first place. First, Hanson describes himself as writing about "the direction that Christian thought took in English literature" (366). That would be fine if there hadn't already been plenty of such histories. His second motivation, however, is slightly more interesting. He sees himself as attempting to reconcile homosexuality with Catholicism by demonstrating how intimately they have been linked historically (372). The ambition and grand daring sweep of such an attempt can only be respected, and I wish Hanson had written the book he evidently intended *Decadence and Catholicism* to be. But the project seems to have gotten stuck in the phase of piling up evidence, never proceeding to draw larger theoretical conclusions about the conceptual affinities between these movements. Third, Hanson sees *Decadence and Catholicism* as an attempt to provide a proud history for the 'gay aesthete' persona, "Catholic and otherwise," highly visible in culture and academia and the arts (374). This is a fairly modest goal, but he succeeds as far as it goes. Certainly Hanson is not the first to claim that a modern gay persona is descended from Wilde—in fact it's hard to find Wilde readers who don't believe this—but being a truism does not make it any less true, and his final chapter does demonstrate the lineage persuasively.

It also occurred to me that there is an implicit theoretical question in *Decadence and Catholicism*, of which Hanson himself is not aware: can we use the structure of queer theory to investigate other forms of identity? *Decadence and Catholicism* uses all the techniques queer theory has taught us—the careful, skeptical readings, the hunting for half-buried hints, the sensitivity to nuance and double meanings—to seek out concealed religious identifications as well as sexual ones. I'm not sure it always works here. For one thing, the decadents about whom Hanson writes often performed their Catholicism (and sometimes their homosexuality) quite flamboyantly, so that Hanson often seems like a detective carefully using a magnifying glass to locate an elephant in plain view. For another thing, religion may not have the sort of transformative power over a text that sexuality can have; if an author's religious affiliation is merely perfunctory or facile, is it really worth going to great lengths to spy out? Nonetheless, this would have been an interesting idea to explore.

At the end of *Decadence and Catholicism*, then, one can't help but feel perplexed at this immersion in a closed universe where all we are expected to do is register the irrefutable proof that gay Catholic men were indeed gay and Catholic. The book is nicely written and makes some rather good readings of Wilde and Pater. But on the whole, *Decadence and Catholicism* is an enormous tome that wants to be encyclopedic but leaves out important decadents; that wants to be theoretical but keeps getting stymied by its emotional attachments; that hopes to rethink identities but doesn't offer any cogent definitions of them; that wants to be a new word in criticism but appears ignorant of most of the critical heritage; that aims to be important but can't articulate that justification in any convincing or meaningful way. At times, *Decadence and Catholicism* seems like four hundred pages of evidence looking for an argument, and while such a book may be useful to graduate students looking for a concatenation of primary materials—I

confess to my own disappointment in finding that this book, which could have been so important, fails in so many ways.