Aestheticism and Decadence

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‘Art for art’s sake’? Aestheticism and decadence shocked the Victorian establishment by challenging traditional values, foregrounding sensuality and promoting artistic, sexual and political experimentation. Dr Carolyn Burdett explores the key features of this unconventional artistic period.

The National Philatelic Collection, held at the British Library, contains more than 8 million items, and includes postage stamps, railway letter stamps, telegraph stamps, airmails, metal dies and plates and philatelic literature. It has over 50 important collections, including the original Tapling bequest, the first to be gifted to the British Museum in 1891. Now on display at the British Library, it is believed that the Tapling Collection is the only major 19th-century philatelic collection that remains intact. The selection below includes some of the rarest philatelic examples. They are often unique because of printing errors that make them truly one of a kind.

Although references to the ‘aesthetic movement’ are commonplace, there was no unified or organised movement as such. Critics still disagree about when aestheticism began and who should be included under its label. Some associate the movement with the Pre-Raphaelites, who were active from the mid-19th century. Their emphasis on sensual beauty and on strong connections between visual and verbal forms was certainly highly influential. Perhaps the most important inaugurating phase of aestheticism, however, occurred during the late 1860s and early 1870s.

Swinburne and Pater

The poet Charles Algernon Swinburne is a crucial figure of this period. Strongly influenced by the French writers, Charles Baudelaire and Théophile Gautier, Swinburne agreed with them that poetry had nothing to do with didacticism (the teaching of moral lessons). He also insisted that beautiful poetic form and what he deemed ‘perfect workmanship’ made any subject admirable. Like Baudelaire, he put this argument into practice by combining lyrical language and complex metrical rhythms with subject matter commonly seen as antithetic to aesthetically pleasing poetry. Themes of perverse sexuality or cruelty and violence shockingly dismantled what many Victorians felt were necessary or even natural lines drawn between aesthetic beauty and repellent or ‘ugly’ morality. Mainstream Victorian culture saw art and literature as a means of self-improvement or a spur to good works. Swinburne’s poetry instead presented readers with moral ambiguity and provided them no comfortable psychological position.

Also influenced by French ideas was the critic Walter Pater. His 1873 Studies in the History of the Renaissance is widely regarded as the manifesto of aestheticism. In a period when the Middle Ages were celebrated, Pater instead advocated Renaissance culture. He praised the renaissance artists’ individualism and also their acknowledgement of hidden and mysterious motives and desires. But his most provocative and influential statements came in the book’s famous ‘Conclusion’. Flying in the face of Victorian notions of both objective reality and eternal truths, Pater described a world of fleeting impressions. All the individual has is the subjective experience provided by intense sensory engagement with lovely things. Pater advises that the wisest people will seek to concentrate all their energies and efforts on the pleasure of these moments. For some, this seemed a recipe for self-indulgence through the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. For others, though, it was a breathtakingly radical call to cast off the heavy weight of Victorian moralism and Christian doctrine in the name of art.

Aesthetic style

Poetry was central to aestheticism, from the work of Pre-Raphaelites (especially Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Christina Rossetti), Swinburne and William Morris, through to the flourishing of poetic voices in the final decades of the 19th century. After being lost to sight for much of the 20th century, recent literary scholarship has retrieved many important women poets of this period, including Alice Meynell and Amy Levy. Equally
important, though, were the prose forms associated with aestheticism – and especially the essay of art appreciation. Important essayists include Pater, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Symons and Vernon Lee (the name adopted by Violet Paget). Their writing was sometimes condemned as ‘purple prose’ (i.e. writing that’s overly elaborate and ornate), because it borrowed from the stylistic techniques of imaginative writing and was often densely allusive and metaphorical. Wilde’s writing, especially, also threw off Victorian ideas about earnest and serious argument, instead relishing playfulness and paradox. Aesthetes played with traditional oppositions or even hierarchies between art and life. Wilde teased his readers with the claim that life imitates art rather than the other way round. His point was a serious one: we notice London fogs, he argued, because art and literature has taught us to do so. Wilde, among others, ‘performed’ these maxims. He presented himself as the impeccably dressed and mannered dandy figure whose life was a work of art.

For others, similar notions propelled an interest in literature as a material thing of beauty. Intricately crafted books were produced by William Morris’s Kelmscott Press, which opened in 1891, dedicated to printing and binding using traditional methods. In part, Morris was striving to preserve traditional skills against the ever-increasing cheap mass production of reading matter. In so doing, he was making an overtly political gesture. Morris was a socialist and rejected capitalist methods of producing goods which, he believed, exploited workers and reduced them to parts in machine-like factory processes. He rejected consumer culture as deadening to the human spirit. However, his own work – including textile and other crafts as well as books – quickly became associated with desirable consumer objects. Aestheticism has often been accused of complicity with the consumer culture it overtly rejected.

**Aesthetics and politics**

Morris was one among a number of important proponents of aestheticism who saw art as inseparable from political ideals. He drew from the work of the great Victorian critic, John Ruskin, to argue that capitalism enslaves workers, and advocated instead a system in which work is creative as well as productive. In creativity, proper human freedom resides. Oscar Wilde was also a supporter of socialist politics, as was the writer Edward Carpenter. Carpenter was a socialist poet and a gay activist. He wrote as a prophet of a new age of fellowship based on socialist principles and a life lived with simple tastes and commitments to art and learning.

**Satire and critique**

This mixture of radical politics, sexual dissidence and privileging of the individual’s experience of beauty was highly alarming to more conventional Victorians. In the press, aestheticism was roundly criticised. It was also the butt of inventive satire. The magazine *Punch* was a leading force in this respect. *Punch* attacked figures like Swinburne, the artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler, and Oscar Wilde, creating types like ‘the fleshly poet’. Favourite aesthetic caricatures included the poet Jellaby Postlethwaite, who had affinities with Wilde and was sometimes drawn to look like Whistler. His artist friend, Maudle, was modelled on Swinburne. In one famous cartoon, Postlethwaite goes to lunch and sits contemplating a lily, preferring to feast his senses on its beauty rather than ordering food. These figures were invented and drawn by the satiric artist George du Maurier, who also has Postlethwaite explaining that he never bathes as ‘I always see myself so dreadfully foreshortened in the water, you know.’ Brilliant satire, such as Du Maurier’s, helped popularise – albeit in distorted form – what were often rarefied poems, essays and arguments.

**Decadence**

By the 1890s, another term had become associated with this focus on ‘art for art’s sake’. It has origins in common with aestheticism and the two terms often overlap and were sometimes used interchangeably. ‘Decadence’ was initially used to describe writers of the mid-19th century in France, especially Baudelaire and Gautier. By the century’s end, decadence was in use as an aesthetic term across Europe. The word literally means a process of ‘falling away’ or decline. In relation to art and literature, it signalled a set of interlinked qualities. These included the notion of intense refinement; the valuing of artificiality over nature; a position of ennui or boredom rather than of moral earnestness or the valuing of hard work; an interest in perversity and paradox, and in transgressive modes of sexuality. One of the most important explicators of decadence was the poet Arthur Symons, whose essay ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’ (1893), described decadence
as ‘a new and beautiful and interesting disease’. For Symons – as well as for others who were critical rather than intrigued and entranced – decadence was the literature of a modern society grown over-luxurious and sophisticated.

In France, decadence became associated with a type of poetry exemplified by the writing of Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé, and also with the fiction of Joris-Karl Huysmans. Huysmans’s most notorious work, À Rebours – published in 1884, it was translated as Against Nature or Against the Grain – is widely believed to be the notorious ‘poisonous’ book that fascinates Dorian Gray in Oscar Wilde’s 1891 novel, The Picture of Dorian Gray. Huysmans’s novel caused a shocked outcry when it appeared. Focused almost exclusively on the inner life of its ailing aristocrat protagonist, Des Esseintes, the novel charts his obsessive sensual experiments. Dorian Gray’s passion for studying and collecting jewels or perfumes or ecclesiastical vestments, and surrounding himself with exotic and sensual objects, mirrors Des Esseintes’s pursuit of ever more refined sensory experiences.

In England, it was Wilde himself who was identified as central to the English decadent tradition, along with Arthur Symons and the poet, Ernest Dowson. Wilde was important because of his high visibility in fashionable London clubs and theatres. He dressed flamboyantly, sparking fashions that others copied. He was a brilliant self-publicist, and quipped that his life was a work of art. Other important poets include Lionel Johnson and John Davidson. Although often under-recognised until very recently, women also contributed to decadent style. The most important voice was ‘Michael Field’, the name under which two women, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, jointly wrote. The Rhymers’ Club, set up by poets W B Yeats and Ernest Rhys in 1890s, also explicitly rejected literary naturalism and embraced experimental modes of writing. ‘Symbolist’ poetry was closely aligned with aesthetic and decadent styles: all of them aimed to explore the beauty of strange, subjective and unique moments.

The Yellow Book

One of the most notorious exponents of what was labelled decadence was not a writer, however, but an artist. Aubrey Beardsley’s distinctive, witty and often erotic illustrations are immediately recognisable, with their innovative shapes and lines and bold use of black and white space. Beardsley provided the cover illustrations for perhaps the most famous and notorious of decadent publications, The Yellow Book. This was a periodical, featuring essays, poems, fiction and illustrations. Launched in 1894, it ran until 1897. Yellow and green – colours associated with bruising and decay – were associated with decadent style, and The Yellow Book contributed to their startling new appeal. Large format, and beautifully produced, the volumes drew attention to their appeal as objects, like the works from Morris’s Kelmscott press. Again, decadence was part of a culture of commercialism as well as of creativity.

Degeneration and the Wilde trial

Decadence alarmed those who valued ‘traditional’ norms and values. It seemed to signify a society and culture threatened to its core with decline and decay. By the 1890s, decadence was associated with degeneration, an association popularised by the sensationalist writing of Max Nordau, who condemned writers like Wilde in his 1895 book, Degeneration. But that same year also saw the event that did as much as anything to halt the inventive flourishing of decadence. Oscar Wilde, at the height of his fame as the most popular playwright of the moment, was put on trial. He was charged with gross indecency under recently passed legislation that allowed homosexual acts to be punishable under the law. The trial was an extraordinary media event and its outcome was Wilde’s committal to two years hard labour.

Decadence was intimately associated with dissident sexual desires. Wilde’s fate left in its wake fear and anxiety for those associated with it. Many felt it wise to distance themselves from its dangerous label. Nevertheless, the experimentalism, creative energy and commitment to thinking against the grain that characterised aestheticism and decadence did much to prepare the ground for the Modernist period, which was beginning to gather its own distinctive powers after the turn of the century.
Footnotes


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