Symbolism or Decadence?
England and the 1890s

Maria João Pires

Resumo
O presente artigo procura definir o espaço cultural da Inglaterra dos anos 90 do séc. XIX. Partindo da delimitação dos termos "decadência" e "simbolismo", enquanto denominadores comuns aos movimentos estéticos-literários das duas últimas décadas do séc., perspetivar-se-ão as figuras de Wilde, Symons e Pater como essenciais a esse processo.

Abstract
This paper deals with England’s cultural space in the 1890s: decadence and symbolism constitute the common denominators of European literary and artistic trends during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. In this wide context, Wilde, Symons and Pater give us the main issues for a definition of fin-de-siècle literature in England.

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It is a generally adopted view that decadence was merely an early stage of symbolism. Particularly developed by Guy Michaud, this interpretation presents decadence as a negative reaction to naturalism and parnasianism, in contrast to the positive stance of symbolism. Naturalism came to England at the end of the nineteenth century and was more or less dead by the turn of the century. George Moore and George Gissing are without doubt the most important naturalistic writers in England. For Frank Swinnerton, for instance, the term naturalism goes together with pessimism and determinism to provide a defeatist and glumly fiction (cf. Swinnerton).

On the other hand, the term symbolism also remained a complex word: if not combining a very coherent doctrine, and certainly not shared by all, there coexisted different issues, such as the concept of ‘correspondences’, the importance of music, the use of free verse, a concern with technical detail, philosophical idealism or even a predilection for the world of dream and legend. Borrowing the notions of ‘correspondences’ and ‘the forest of symbols’ from the Swedenborgian terminology, Baudelaire was the first to exploit the relationships between the material world and the supernatural, between physical characteristics of objects and moral qualities. Then, Mallarmé became the theore-
tician of the movement: applying the evocative power of music to literary composition, he defined the new poetry as architectural and premeditated. The symbol was indeed the mind’s opportunity to create mystery and the poet lifted the veil of the unknown. In an era of profound agnosticism, Mallarmé defined the poetic communication as a suggestive art in which the poet misnamed, substituted or deviated signifieds. Instead of a chronological time perception, the symbolist poet created a time-free ontology. In Crise de Vers, Mallarmé proclaims the elimination of elocutionary rhetoric and the disappearance of the poet in what he called the ‘pure work’. In the poetic representation, the single word assumed an analogical function and concrete meanings could give a plurality of images:

Le vers qui de plusieurs vocables refait un mot total, neuf, étranger
à la langue et comme incantatoire, achève cet isolement de la parole:
niant, d’un trait souverain, le hasard demeuré aux termes malgré
l’artifice de leur retrempe alterné en le sens et la sonorité...

(Mallarmé :368)

The symbolist movement had a strong impact in the world at large, including decadents and aesthetes like Pater, Symons and Wilde and then in Yeats, Eliot, Rilke, Lorca and Stevens, as well as the direct French heirs, Valéry and Claudel. The symbolist influence was especially widespread among the fin-de-siècle poets, although there emerge some fundamental distinctions between the decadent’s essential condition and the symbolist aspirations: between decadent’s irony and self-consciousness and symbolist’s self-transcendence, between decadent’s bound to history and symbolist’s world of analogies and free-time. Being much more aggressive on strategies of rebellion and shock, decadent art aims to aestheticize or refine the object, rather than transform it.

However, it is an error to regard the decadent movement as being merely a poetic period. In fact, decadence constitutes the common denominator of all literary and artistic trends that emerged during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. We may also say that decadence exercised a wide and durable influence in the field of prose writing and was the source of a whole range of tales published during the nineties, specially in France, in such periodicals as L’Echo de Paris and Le Journal.

In the field of the novel, J.K. Huysmans’ A Rebours was to be regarded as the gospel of the new aesthetic. Besides, the decadent esthetic also bore fruit in the work of painters such as Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon and left its mark on several painters of the nineties, and finally led to the renewal of European art of which Art Nouveau would be the main expression.

So, in the wide context of the history of the imagination, we could even say that the decadent esthetic leads the romantic ‘fancy’ to different cultural and
artistic realms. If it existed then, the decadent movement in England is usually associated with 25 May 1895, the date when Oscar Wilde was found guilty of acts of indecency. It was not only Wilde’s behaviour that was being tried: above all it was a whole body of moral, literary and aesthetic ideas that were on trial.

On the other hand, at the centre of a discussion of decadence in England there have to be always considered Arthur Symons’ theoretical positions in his Prefaces to the second editions of Silhouettes (1896) and London Nights (1897). But in the Savoy of November 1895, Symons denied links with any sort of movement:

We have no formulas and we desire no false unity of form or matter. We have not invented a new point of view. We are not realists or romanticists or decadents. For us, all art is good which is good art

(Lhombreaud:126)

In fact, Symons and the Savoy are more likely to be linked to symbolism than decadence. In 1899 his book, which was to be called The Decadent Movement in Literature came out with the title The Symbolist Movement in Literature. Symons explains the change of words in the following passage:

Meanwhile, something which is vaguely called Decadence had come into being. That name, rarely used with any precise meaning, was usually either hurled as a reproach or hurled back as a defiance. I pleased some young men in various countries to call themselves decadents, with all the thrill of unsatisfied virtue masquerading as uncomprehended vice. . . . The interlude, half a mock-interlude, of Decadence, diverted the attention of the critics while something more serious has crystallized for the time, under the form of Symbolism, in which art returns to the one pathway, leading through beautiful things to the eternal beauty.

(Symons: 242-54)

What Symons’ statement really prefigures is that a shift in sensibility was to take place. Language could no longer appropriate the world, words and spaces led to other words and spaces, to metaphoric representations and not to an identifiable world. The dialogue of life and art had gone far beyond Keats’s description in ‘To Autumn’. On the one hand, the decadent is attracted to the world’s impressions; on the other, he searches the eternal and the ideal. The artist becomes a voyeur, trying to live an echo or a reflection of the real world’s visual counterpart.

For Morris, Wilde and Pater, there had been a period of history, which appears as a metaphoric era, when art and life, the individual and the artistic imagination were indistinguishable. Keats was very close to this demand for a state of perfection. But, it is in Yeats’s «A Vision» that a conception of history as
metaphor really takes place. There, Yeats reconstructs the 'secret history' that underlies the surface of the orderly flow of events. This implies a reincarnation for the individual and an internal process of mirroring of eras. The forgotten paradigms of history are then revealed and made accessible to the imagination. History becomes private and the metaphoric eras on the level of historical consciousness correspond to an interest in the history of self and in the nature of autobiography. Whereas the romantic artist conceived his mind as being an Aeolian harp and the imaginative centre of the world, the fin-de-siècle artist was willing to transform himself into a work of art. In this way, he wanted to overcome the gap between the history of art and the history of his own life. Autobiography was then subjective history made public. In changing the title from Autobiographies to Autobiography, Yeats was already stating that to live one's life was to live everyone else's. The private history becomes the microcosmic history of the world. As Wilde also noted in 'De Profundis':

Since his coming the history of each separate individual is, or can be made, the history of the world... culture has intensified the personality of man. Art has made us myriad-minded

(Wilde:926)

Both Wilde and Yeats point to an intensification of one's own history. This was also a way of trying to exhaust time by overcoming discontinuity between a man and his masks. In 'The Critic as Artist' and also in 'De Profundis', Wilde states that art is part of one's development and 'personal history':

The difference between objective and subjective work is one of external form merely. It is accidental, not essential. All artistic creation is absolutely subjective. . . . For out of ourselves we can never pass, nor can there be in creation what in the creator was not. Nay, I would say that the more objective a creation appears to be, the more subjective it really is. . . . Man is least himself when he talks in his own person

(Wilde: 1045)

For the artistic life is simple self-development. Humility in the artist is his frank acceptance of all experiences, just as love in the artist is simply that sense of beauty that reveals to the world its body and soul

(Wilde, 'De Profundis':922)

The decadent artist remained dark and inward - mirror and mask were his true emblems. And, having focused much of the artistic, psychological and cultural crisis of the late nineteenth century, decadence itself has many faces or masks. It balanced between fragmented individualism and multiplicity, between object and self, evanescence and stabilization. Space was enfolded within total
art and the Mallarméan suite of blank pages asked for an infinite interpretation. The fall which decadence enacted was a prelude to regeneration.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839) Poe gives an interesting account of the decadent artist. Appalled by what he witnesses, the narrator presents the story of Roderick and Madeline Usher: it is a record of the degeneration and final collapse of a family line into perversion, madness and death. Usher lives according to the decadent aesthetic, an attitude portrayed by Baudelaire at midcentury and exemplified during the fin-de-siècle by Des Esseintes, the hero of J.K. Huysmans' *A Rebours*. Having left all that the narrator regards as normal, Usher creates a fantastic self who refuses to accept any contact with conventional reality. He appears to be a Schopenhauerian pessimist, recognizing that happiness is only a nostalgic memory, now impossible in a universe subject to mechanical determinisms and indifferent to human desire. It is the dead world of nineteenth century science and materialism evoked in Usher’s song, ‘The Haunted Palace’.

Like almost all decadents, Usher suffers from ‘an excessive nervous agitation’ and ‘a morbid acuteness of the senses’ (Poe: 275-80). This condition, to which Baudelaire was to call ‘spleen’, was a quest for evasion through refinement of sensations. In this way, Usher is intensely committed to idealism, to the pursuit of what Poe calls ‘supernal Beauty’. He combines poetry, music and painting to produce works which owe nothing to nature. His paintings are nonrepresentational designs and his song ‘The Haunted Palace’ impresses the narrator as ‘the result of that intense mental collectiveness and concentration’. As Gautier in his Preface to *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) in ‘The Poetic Principle’ (1850) Poe speaks of ‘the poem per se’ and denounces what he calls heresy of the Didactic’ and art’s mimetic function. During the fin-de-siècle, Oscar Wilde would deny any moral or ethical concern in the artist. So, for Poe as for Wilde, art is a veil through which we may glimpse Beauty.

In defining poetry as ‘the rhythmical creation of beauty’, Poe revisits Longinus sublime. He portrays this Beauty, not as a quality, but an effect, ‘a pure elevation of the soul. In Poe’s platonic idealism, Beauty is the transcendent reality that may be glimpsed through the imagination. Poetry is the language of this spiritual reality, mastered by a conscious artist. In his writings on Poe, Baudelaire presents him as a ‘poète maudit’ devoted to the cause of decadence - a kind of a Miltonic Satan rebelling against the American God. (Baudelaire: 317-58)

Defining the imagination as an instrument of discovery, an unconscious reservoir of truth, Baudelaire followed the coleridgean view that the imagination is a divine creative power. Thus, as the most scientific of the faculties, it comprehends universal analogy and poetry becomes the language of spiritual reality.
In spite of this, after the midcentury skepticism of Schopenhauer, Strauss and Renan, the romantic ideal of love was no longer available to the European and north-american artist. Decadence becomes the realm of a grave spiritual crisis and, on the other hand, of the dawn of literary modernism.

If the term 'decadent' traditionally means breaking down or falling apart, it was becoming, in French and British fin-de-siècle artistic contexts, an image of culture as an instrument shaped by deliberate choice. Decadence was then a program which also meant to break prejudices and conventions. In the Introduction to the 1950 edition of Poe's Prose and Poetry, Auden states that Poe was one of the first modern writers because he suffered consciously the impact of the desintegration of the traditional community and its values (Auden: p.xvi).

Being a child of Victorian materialism, the decadent is caught between opposite poles: on one hand, he is fascinated by the impressionistic representation of the world; on the other, he moves to the artificial and the unnatural. So, he retreats from reality and accepts only those realities which art creates. Art and artifice become the one way of going beyond the world. As des Esseintes had shown, the extreme of this is impossible and the decadent who wishes to become artificial fails to be totally decadent.

Balancing between the real world and the ideal, the decadent tried new modes of dealing with experience. As a transitional and brief movement, decadence embodied the crisis of civilization. Its primary motifs were evanescence, instability and an historical and personal sense of fall. But in reality, the economic and agricultural depressions of the 1870s, the rise of German industrial and military hegemony and the decline of Victorian cultural confidence provided a plausible context.

Owing much to France, English decadence is then better defined both by language work and by themes: the play with natural word order, the use of French words, irony and parody may be as well found in Symons and Wilde's poems. In spite of this, it is in symbolism that these issues are to be found. Yeats would be the greatest spokesman for the Symbolist movement in English literature. In 'The Symbolism of Poetry' he asks:

How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men's hearts that we call the progress of the world, and lay their hands upon men's heart-strings again, without becoming the garment of religion as in the old times?

(Yeats, Essays: 162-3)
But it is in a crucial passage of Autobiographies that Yeats shows his deep concern with symbolism:

I was unlike others of my generation in one thing only. I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition . . . . I wished for a world where I could discover this tradition perpetually.

(Autobiographies: 115-6)

He sees in it a way of reading the universe, its permanences and purpose. Thus, symbolism would provide a recognition of mysteries as a preliminary step to the rebirth of religious faith. Denying naturalism as anti-visionary and a way of dealing with the surface of things, Yeats states that the true function of art is visionary:

I cannot get it out of my mind that this age of criticism is about to pass, and an age of imagination, of emotion, of moods, of revelation is about to come in its place; for certainly belief in a supersensual world is at hand again; and when the notion that we are 'phantoms of the earth and water' has gone down the wind, we will trust our own being and all it desires to invent; . . . . for art is a revelation, and not a criticism.

(Yeats, 1961: 197)

The artist has to reject the externalities of the world and see into the underlying structure of things. Defining Blake, Yeats explains at the same time symbolism and his own need to create a mythology:

He was a symbolist who had to invent his symbols . . . . He was a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his hand.

(Yeats, 1961: 114)
References


