

Decadence in the Age of Modernism edited by Kate Hext and Alex Murray. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2019. 304 pp. + 13 b/w illus. ISBN 1-4214-2942-7. \$54.95.

A friend came upon me reading *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (under physically distanced conditions) and assumed from its Art Deco cover that I was reading some fabulous novel. Appropriate to its subject matter, it is a stylish as well as a substantive book. The editors have curated a collection of eleven essays from senior and mid-career scholars of literary decadence and Modernism, including several who have done foundational work to bring these fields together.

This book vividly demonstrates the value of bridging the fields of Victorian, Modernist, and Harlem Renaissance studies – fields too often broken up along the lines first set by high Modernist writers themselves – in order to better understand and appreciate literature in English from the late nineteenth century well into the twentieth. By tracing the reception and deployment of decadent aesthetics into the Modernist era, these essays help us better understand *fin-de-siècle* decadence itself as a literary movement, while also illuminating the work of both high Modernist authors, such as Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot, and writers excluded from the Modernist canon, such as Ada Levenson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Ronald Firbank, and Bruce Nugent. Thanks to its attention to these lesser-known writers, the collection contains especially valuable discussions of creative practices of gender and sexuality developed in Modernist-era decadent writing – and living.

As the editors Kate Hext and Alex Murray recount, decadence was the object of a “conservative backlash” after the 1895 trials of Oscar Wilde. Always countercultural, decadence became construed as a threat to morality, or at least to one’s reputation. Always suspicious of progress over time, it became a marker of anachronism, of the outmoded, even of being stuck in some adolescent phase. Always queer, it became queerer. Affirming and deploying these associations, the masculinist avant garde of Modernism – T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis – disavowed its own decadent debts. At the same time, other writers developed these associations to create an “expanded version of modernism.” Hext and Murray call this “decadent modernism.”

Hext and Murray’s introduction offers an excellent survey of the field of “decadent modernism” by reviewing and connecting scholarship that is sometimes overlooked by Victorianist or Modernist scholars because it falls between the fields or focuses on lesser known writers. Demonstrating how “critical narratives of early twentieth-century literature have been complicit in the erasure of decadence after Wilde,” the introduction chronicles the long,