



[Review] *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*

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Fin-du-Globe

Kimberley Challis

Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry.
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Most studies of decadence involve a lot of hand-wringing over the difficulties we encounter when trying to precisely fix the boundaries of its period and characteristics. Robert Stilling's *Beginning at the End* sidesteps this entire dilemma by confidently arguing for a more inclusive decadence: a transnational phenomenon not situated in any particular place or time but rather as work produced under 'the tectonic friction between rising and falling empires'.¹

Taking its title from Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Stilling's study posits that the artists, poets and thinkers of postcolonial nations and their diaspora risked following what Fanon identified as the West's 'path of negation and decadence without ever having emulated it in its first stages of exploration and invention'.² As such, they necessarily find themselves 'beginning at the end', and run the risk of 'skipping the inventive phase of youth for a premature senility'.³

Stilling argues convincingly, however, that while many anglophone postcolonial artists have deliberately engaged with fin-de-siècle decadent writers in their work, the resultant texts are anything but prematurely senile. Indeed, over five chapters, Stilling demonstrates their use of decadence's most critical tools—wit, satire, paradoxical formulations, resistance to realism, sexual dissidence, and a revisionist approach to history—as a means to critique the failures of postcolonial societies.⁴ While some, notably

¹ Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2018), p. 11.

² Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Constance Farrington (London: Penguin, 1970), p. 179. It must also be noted that Stilling is sensitive to concerns regarding the term 'postcolonial', but defends his use of the term by positing that in the texts he examines, 'the relation these poets and artists imagine between their contemporary moment and varying histories of empire, the nation, and art is one of imperial aftermath' (Stilling 26). It is for this reason that this review will also use the term, rather than the broader 'postmodern' or 'global Anglophone'.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴ Stilling, p. 12.

Stilling asserts that historical revisionism is a critical feature of decadence, citing Wilde on the topic: 'The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it' (16). Perhaps he would not stress this as characteristic of fin-de-siècle decadence, however, were it not so central to the postcolonial works he considers here.

Chinua Achebe, Léopold Senghor, and Michael Thelwall, have argued that ‘art for art’s sake’ should have no place in postcolonial literature, arguing the necessity of political engagement, others see aestheticism as a means to express ‘art’s opposition to real-world conditions’.⁵ Indeed, fin-de-siècle tropes, strategies and images allow the artists under consideration to position themselves in relation to the end of the imperial era: ‘sometimes earnestly, sometimes ironically, almost always ambivalently’.⁶

Stilling reads decadent works by J. K. Huysmans, Walter Pater, Henry James, and, above all, Oscar Wilde in tandem with those of early postcolonial writers (Fanon, Senghor, Achebe, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Derek Walcott, and Wole Soyinka), and a some more contemporary authors. These later writers form the primary focus of each of the book’s chapters: Agha Shahid Ali’s re-working of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Kashmir; Walcott’s reimagining of the Caribbean roots of French impressionism; Yinka Shonibare’s use of ‘African’ textiles to critique the nineteenth-century’s leisure class; Bernadine Evaristo’s revisionist history of Africans in Roman Britain; and Derek Mahon’s efforts to place Ireland in the global literary market.⁷ Stilling focuses primarily on poetry precisely because of its associations with elitism and detachment, positing that was a distrusted form during the early period of decolonisation.⁸ Leela Ghandi’s preface to Nissim Ezekiel’s *Collected Poems* perfectly captures this concern: poetry was, supposedly, not suited for ‘the realist work of narrating the nation; a handicap only exacerbated when the verse was executed in the language of the conqueror’.⁹

This tension between artistic expression and cultural responsibility is the central conflict of Stilling’s book. Its resolution, however, is somewhat surprising. Thelwall, a man who proclaimed that ‘any black novelist who is not consciously and purposefully a cultural nationalist is an aberration’, rejects the supposedly ‘earnestly self-indulgent’ modernists in favour of decadence’s most recognisable proponent: Oscar Wilde.¹⁰ Thelwall is by no means alone in this tendency, and Stilling convincingly argues that these writers do not make such strange bedfellows as one might initially think. Wilde, when understood as an Irishman often at odds with late-Victorian English society, and a wit whose epigrams turned received wisdom on its head, does seem quite the natural ally of a movement involved in questioning cultural orthodoxies.¹¹ Stilling also traces the virulently

⁵ Stilling, pp. 6, 19-20, 288.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 229, 289.

⁸ Chapter 3 does also consider drama and fine art; Chapter 4 discusses a verse novel.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12. Of course, Wilde is not always invoked as an icon of rebellion: his ability to distill and memorably communicate the aesthetic debates of the colonial era enable postcolonial writers to merely

racist treatment of the ‘native Irish’ Wilde during his tours of the United States where portrayals of the ‘dandy-as-Negro and Negro-as-dandy’ flourished, and were intended to mock the idea that people of colour could be beautiful and that their artworks could be aesthetically valuable.¹² Stilling argues that this, as well as Wilde’s subsequent incarceration, has led to Wilde becoming ‘a mirror for succeeding generations of readers and artists as they grapple with the relation between art and injustice’.¹³ He goes on to posit that Wilde’s presence is so widely felt in postcolonial writing that it seems an incredible oversight that his legacy and ideas have not been often considered in this context before.¹⁴

Stilling acknowledges that his study is only the beginning in what must be an incredibly rewarding field of inquiry. It must be hoped that others will expand further on this critical perspective. After all, who else might consider so perceptively the decline of a civilisation than those who have witnessed the disintegration of empire firsthand?

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allude to Wilde as a shorthand for these issues (Stilling 16). This will be done, in many cases, before proceeding to undermine or criticise the aesthetic positions of which he has become emblematic.

¹² Ibid., p. 296-297.

¹³ Ibid., p. 304.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 290.