Chapter 3

Nineteenth-century Literary and Artistic Responses to Roman Decadence

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Désiré Nisard's 1834 *Études de mœurs et de critique sur les poètes latins de la décadence* [Cultural-Critical Studies of Latin Poets of the Decadence] pioneered the application of the term 'decadence' to literature, suggesting an analogy between the Silver Age of Latin and French Romanticism (Vance 1997: pp. 251-2). Nisard's readings of poets such as Persius, Juvenal, Seneca, Statius, Martial, and Lucan identify characteristics which remain central to our understanding of literary decadence, 'from the imagery of Roman decline to sensual indulgence, extreme erudition, and linguistic complexity' (Potolsky, 2013: p. 3). Yet for Nisard's British contemporaries the literature of the Silver Age was derivative, over-decorated and not representative of Rome's greatness. G. H. Lewes, in his 1842 essay 'The Roman Empire and its Poets', considers these 'puny poets' from a corrupt and crumbling empire to be 'tawdry, florid, and wearisome', distinctly inferior to predecessors such as Virgil, Ovid, Lucretius, Horace, and Catullus, and worthy of attention only because they are Roman. Even that Roman identity is disputed when Lewes emphasizes the foreign ancestry of these poets from the far reaches of an empire too unwieldy to give its heterogeneous peoples any sense of unity—'Macedonians, Carthaginians, Spaniards, Etrurians, &c.' (37). The qualities that are here seen as characteristic of foreign influences weakening Rome, such as 'abundant artifice' and 'corrupt language', become strengths when celebrated by decadent writers such as Lewes' French contemporaries Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire (36). Half a century after Nisard's study of decadence in Latin literature, in Joris-Karl Huysmans' *À rebours* (1884), Des Esseintes deliberately builds up a library of neglected Latin writers, disdaining the Augustan authors who remained prominent in the nineteenth-

century reception of ancient Rome: he considers the language of Horace, Cicero, Virgil, and Caesar tedious and unoriginal, restricted in idiom, inflexible in syntax, colourless and flat. He suggests that the label of 'decadence' is already a hackneyed topic in university lectures, encouraging students to disregard authors such as Lucan and Petronius (Huysmans, 2003: p. 27).

Des Esseintes does not share the tastes of 'dilettante scholars' who relish numerous authors of the Silver Age including Seneca, Suetonius, Tacitus, Juvenal, Persius, Statius, Martial, and others. He reserves his admiration for Petronius' *Satyricon*, a fragmentary collection of prose fiction, and the 'fine craftsmanship of Lucan's enamelled and jewelled verse' in the *Pharsalia* (p. 29). These two Neronian authors are significant for the decadent reception of antiquity, prefiguring the celebration of artificiality and the grotesque, the morbid fascination with dismemberment and death. He is charmed by the eclectic use of language in Petronius' *Satyricon*, the 'style that makes free of every dialect, that borrows expressions from all the languages imported into Rome, that extends the frontiers and breaks the fetters of the so-called Golden Age' (Huysmans, 2003: p. 30). His preference for linguistic freedom extends to the Christian Latinists of the tenth century CE, well into a mediaeval period conventionally identified as the Dark Ages. Matthew Potolsky describes Des Esseintes' taste for the Latin of late antiquity as a decadent canon, 'an alternative version of existing traditions' which privileges the stylistic hybridity of authors from Africa, Greece, and other countries colonized by Rome (2013: pp. 86-8). The poet and critic Remy de Gourmont dedicated his *Le Latin mystique: Les poètes de l'Antiphonaire et la Symbolique au Moyen Âge* [Mystic Latin: Poets of the Antiphonary and Symbolism in the Middle Ages] (1892) to Huysmans, who wrote an introduction to the volume. Huysmans characterizes mediaeval Latin as fertile and reinvigorated by vulgar and barbaric diction, the introduction

of gamey idioms, the foreign words and concepts of Charistianity, and the language of the streets, after the exhaustion of the pagan language.

Huysmans also finds parallels between the *Satyricon* and the naturalist fascination with representing the sordid contemporary world. Rodolphe Gasché notes Huysmans's preoccupation with the similarities between modern French literature and the transitional nature of Silver Latin, emerging in 'times of appalling storm and stress, profoundly marked by contrast and antithesis' (1988: p. 185). Des Esseintes describes the *Satyricon* in terms of its realism, its detailed and dispassionate analysis of the scandalous antics of the common people in Rome:

> unnatural old men with their gowns tucked up and their cheeks plastered with white lead and acacia rouge; catamites of sixteen, plump and curly-headed; women having hysterics; legacy-hunters offering their boys and girls to gratify the lusts of rich testators, all these and more scurry across the pages of the *Satyricon*, squabbling in the streets, fingering one another in the baths, beating one another up like characters in a pantomime. (Huysmans, 2003: p. 30)

By comparison with Des Esseintes' critical engagement with the *Satyricon*, the hero of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) has a superficial idea of Petronius, based on the commonplace but unverified identification of the author with the arbiter of elegance in Nero's court (described by Tacitus, Pliny the Elder, and Plutarch). Dorian finds 'a subtle pleasure in the thought that he might really become to the London of his own day what to imperial Neronian Rome the author of the *Satyricon* once had been, yet in his inmost heart he desired to be something more than a mere *arbiter elegantiarum*, to be consulted on the

wearing of a jewel, or the knotting of a necktie' (Wilde, 1985: p. 161). Laura Eastlake examines the 'distinctly Neronian figure of the Decadent' as a notable image of masculinity at the fin de siècle, an expression of anxiety about modern urban life set against 'the health and vigour of the New Imperialist', which represents a divergent reception of Roman history (2016: p. 474). Wilde affected a Neronian haircut and bestowed on Dorian Gray his own 'aesthetic fascination with elegant and luxurious evil' embodied in emperors such as Tiberius, Nero, Caligula and Elagabalus (Vance, 1997: p. 258). Despite his reputation for tyranny and personal cruelty, Nero could be regarded more favourably as an artist and patron of the arts, presiding over and participating in a flourishing literary and artistic culture. He 'demonstrated an aptitude and enthusiasm for such activities as sculpture, painting, poetic composition, song, the playing of the lyre, and horsemanship', and has been described as 'not so much the ruler of the Roman world as a full-time performance artist' (Leigh, 2017: p. 21).

i

The imperial taste for performance and spectacle extends into the world of less exalted citizens in the *cena* (banquet) or *convivium* (the Roman equivalent of the Greek symposium), a frequent motif in representations of decadence. The most substantial surviving fragment of the *Satyricon* depicts a *cena* given by the vulgar and dissolute freedman Trimalchio, who is obsessed with displaying his extraordinary wealth. He surrounds himself and his guests with reminders of the brevity of life as a justification for their greed and drunken indulgence. Amongst the dishes served to the guests is a wild boar with sucking pigs made from pastry arranged around its teats. When the boar is carved, live thrushes fly out to be caught by fowlers and distributed to the guests. The lavishness of the food and entertainment and the elaborate artistry of the delicacies served at the feast stimulate the reader's senses: Victoria Rimell notes that the repeated metaphor of literature as food suggests that 'we are eating the

cena which has already been devoured by the dinner guests; we participate in the tasting of a layered dish of the kind that graces Trimalchio's table' (2002: p. 40). The banquet is an occasion of sexual freedom as well as gluttony. While women are present at the *cena,* Trimalchio's attention is focused on the long-haired slave boys (*capillati*); his wife becomes angry when he kisses a pretty boy, but she is silenced by Trimalchio's reminder that he himself had once been a slave who won his master's favour and eventually inherited his estate (Richlin 2009: pp. 82-101). Nikolai Endres describes Trimalchio's *cena* as a 'fully physicalized version of the Platonic *symposion*', presented within a text which extends the representation of homosexuality beyond the pederastic dynamic and provides a model for the triangulation of desire and erotic reciprocity in decadent texts such as Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (2017: pp. 259-61).

The genre of historical painting offered artists the opportunity to depict scenes of debauchery in lavish detail by accompanying them with a moral meaning. Thomas Couture's huge painting *Les Romains de la décadence* [The Romans of the Decadence] (1847) displays exhausted pleasure seekers sprawling on dining couches, drinking wine, and entwined with naked courtesans; two disapproving foreigners and a melancholy youth remain apart from the revels. They are surrounded by statues representing Rome's heroic past, andthe dignified architecture of past generations recedes into a shadowy background. A. E. Carter describes the scene as a typical representation of 'the metropolis, at the zenith of its glory, seeking relief from boredom and satiety in all manner of excess' (1958: p. 26). Couture's painting was understood to be a 'pictorial commentary, indirect but unmistakable' on France (Weir, 1995: p. 28). Norman Vance explains that the reinvention of an idealized version of the Roman Republic was used to enhance the dignity of the French Revolution of 1789 (1997: pp. 24-6). Analogies between ancient Rome and modern France became less flattering with the rise of a new Caesar in Napoleon Bonaparte and could be used to suggest the likelihood

of a decline yet to come. Couture's painting was exhibited a year before the 1848 revolution, a time of bitter disappointment with the failings of the July Monarchy, a period of bourgeois influence and colonial expansion (1830–1848). While the representation of corrupt and decadent Romans failing to live up to the ideals of their ancestors was understood to reflect on contemporary Paris, the habit of appropriating images of antiquity for contemporary purposes allowed viewers to discover a variety of political or social interpretations of the painting according to existing ideological biases (Boime, 1980: p. 137). In the catalogue, the painting's title was accompanied by a quotation from Juvenal's sixth Satire (lines 292–3): 'saeuior armis | luxuria incubuit uictumque ulciscitur orbem' [luxury, more brutal than war, weighs heavy on us and avenges the world we have conquered].[1] Decadence is exemplified here in Roman matrons celebrating the rites of a fertility goddess: they are accused by men who are excluded from the cult of 'indulging in the most outrageous transgressions and role reversals, mostly of a sexual kind' (Plaza, 2006: p. 132). Juvenal employs traditional misogynistic stereotypes characterizing women as 'by nature slaves to the senses, helpless to control their lust and given to drunkenness, materialism and all manner of irrational impulses', establishing connections between women, foreigners, and homosexuals in opposition to an increasingly endangered normative Roman manliness (Shumate, 2006: pp. 21-3). He goes on to explore larger concerns about a decadent society weakened by wealth and luxury, suggesting that Rome's long period of peace and prosperity (the *pax Romana*, which began in the reign of the emperor Augustus and was to end two centuries later with the death of Marcus Aurelius) has had deleterious effects.

The Roman Empire could be used as both model and warning by countries with ambitions to extend their imperial power, like Britain and France. Patrick Brantlinger, in

[1] The catalogue also gives a French translation of the quotation from Juvenal – 'Plus cruel que la guerre le vice s'est abattu sur Rome, et venge l'univers vainçu': Musée Royal, *Explication Des Ouvrages De Peinture, Sculpture, Architecture Gravure Et Lithographie Des Artistes Vivants* (Paris: Vinchon, 1847), p. 46.

describing the decadent approach to the ancient world as 'negative classicism'—a reaction against industry, mass culture and bourgeois notions of progress—argues that Imperial Rome and Byzantium function as 'the ironic mirror' of nineteenth-century societies, 'a model of decadent behavior to be admired and imitated but also an exemplar of imperial hubris and futility' (1983: pp. 114–5). As France attempted to establish a colonial empire, the example of Rome seemed pertinent, and French commentators not only identified France with Rome but also disparaged Britain as a modern Carthage (Bryant Davies, 2018: pp. 281-2). Gustave Flaubert questions this comforting analogy in his novel *Salammbô* (1862), which aligns post-Napoleonic France with Rome's bitter enemy. The question of genre—whether Flaubert's text was to be regarded as a form of history, historical fiction, or an 'epic poem', as Gautier described it—was confused by Flaubert's contradictory attitude towards acknowledging sources such as the Greek historians Polybius, Herodotus, and Diodorus Siculus, the philosopher Theophrastus, and the Roman naturalist and historian Pliny the Elder. Charles Bernheimer notes that Flaubert told Jules and Edmond de Goncourt that his book was not historical, but defended it to others on the basis of his painstaking research (2002: pp. 38-9). Flaubert not only chooses a relatively unknown period but also critiques the idea of progressive history by subordinating events to the pictorial and stylistic aspects of the text. The critic Sainte-Beuve censured Flaubert's focus on the otherwise forgotten Mercenary War, remote from modern times and petty by comparison with Rome's long conflict with Carthage. *Salammbô* is set in the aftermath of the First Punic War (264–41 BCE). This was a protracted conflict between the Romans and the combined forces of Carthage and Syracuse, with the occupation of Sicily acting as a proxy for control of the western Mediterranean. At the end of the war, Carthage was forced to accept humiliating terms, to surrender Sicily, release Roman prisoners without ransom and pay an indemnity which rendered Carthage

unable to pay the foreign mercenaries who had fought in the war; these soldiers became Carthage's enemies in the Mercenary War of 240–283 BCE.

Flaubert's fantastical depictions of opulent banquets; outlandish clothing and jewellery; extraordinary architecture; and religious and magical rituals draw on historical sources that are embellished with an Orientalist exoticism. Elaborate and painstaking passages of description of bizarre settings and characters frequently impede the progress of the plot, which is subordinated to stylistic embellishment and the ostentatious demonstration of obscure erudition. Political corruption and physical degradation are embodied in the Carthaginian leader, Hanno, a leper whose monstrously obese body is covered with running sores inadequately concealed with cosmetics. In describing Carthaginian banquets Flaubert draws on the representation of food in Roman satire, which 'tends towards the putrid, disgusting, or taboo, exposing the tenuous and often arbitrary divide between what is considered edible or inedible' (Gowers, 1993: p. 109). The descriptions of the meat dishes recall Roman extravagance, but also evoke disgust at barbarian tastes:

> antelopes with their horns, peacocks with their feathers, whole sheep cooked in sweet wine, haunches of she-camels and buffaloes, hedgehogs in garum, fried grasshoppers and preserved dormice. […] Pyramids of fruit tumbled over honey-cakes, and they had not forgotten a few little dogs with big bellies and pink bristles, fattened on olive-pulp, that Carthaginian delicacy which other people found revolting. (Flaubert, 1977: pp. 18-19)

Even after Rome's decisive victory in 146 BCE after more than a century of conflict, Carthage retained a hold on the Roman cultural imagination as a significant threat: in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the threat is projected into the past, so that the anger of Carthage's patron goddess

Juno imperils the foundation of Rome by repeatedly endangering the hero Aeneas. The most powerful threat to Rome's destiny is the love between Aeneas and Dido, Queen of Carthage, whose tragic death prefigures Rome's destruction of Carthage. The pathos with which Virgil portrays her undermines the imperial mission with a reminder of the human cost of Rome's triumph, yet Dido is also reminiscent of a more recent threat to Rome, the Eastern femme fatale Cleopatra. Flaubert's Salammbô, who performs a dance with a black python (Swinburne praised the 'mystic marriage […] between the maiden body and the scaly coils of the serpent' [qtd. in Bernheimer, 2002: p. 34]) is akin to the Egyptian queen. There are echoes of Virgilian epic in *Salammbô*: Mâthô, the chief of the barbarian soldiers, who falls in love with the daughter of his Carthaginian enemy, dares to steal a lavishly bejewelled veil belonging to a statue of the moon goddess Tanit (the Phoenician deity identified with the Roman Juno Caelestis). This violation of a sacred artefact identified with the welfare of the state recalls the theft of the Palladium by the Greeks in Book 2 of the *Aeneid.*

Flaubert's delight in the portrayal of carnage connects the text with Silver Latin literature, such as Seneca's lurid tragedies and Lucan's *Pharsalia* or *Bellum Civile* [*The Civil War*], a poem 'strewn with mangled limbs and severed heads' (Most, 1992: p. 397). In one of Flaubert's set pieces of sadism, Mâthô's body is torn apart until it is no longer recognizably human: 'just a long shape, completely red from top to bottom; his broken bonds hung along his thighs, but could not be distinguished from the tendons of his wrists which had been completely stripped of flesh' (Flaubert, 1977: p. 281). Lucan depicts similar scenes with a bloodthirsty relish which sets the decadent poet apart from epic predecessors such as Homer and Virgil. Lucan extends scenes of wounding or killing to three or four times the length of those in other epics, focusing not on 'the mental sufferings of the physically wounded', but rather on the reader's feelings (Most, 1992: 400). The literary fascination with mutilation connects with Roman audiences' taste for spectacles of cruelty and human suffering, such as

gladiatorial combat and staged animal hunts (*venationes*) in which the human hunters might be savaged by lions, bears, or crocodiles, followed by the display of 'extreme cases of human injuries' (402). In Neronian literature, the fragmentation and mutilation of the human body stand for larger failures of moral and political order. Although he praised Nero in the early years of his reign, Lucan was later involved in a conspiracy to assassinate the emperor; his glorification of the Roman Republic and resistance to the Virgilian narrative of Rome's imperial destiny are expressed in the *Pharsalia*, an epic celebrating the losers of Rome's civil war and representing the establishment of the Julio-Claudian dynasty as a catastrophe for Rome. Lucan's poem depicts 'a world out of joint, a history that cannot be organized by imperial apologists into the plot of destiny' (Quint, 1993: p. 147). *Salammbô* similarly reflects unfavourably on colonial power, evoking the 'military occupation and brutal French tactics in Algeria in the 1830s and 1840s', including 'conditions similar to the slavery, barbarity, and planned massacres of the indigenous populations' (Goellner, 2018: p. 72). The decadent culture of Carthage in *Salammbô* is sadistically cruel, grotesquely violent, rapacious and immoral.

Images of Roman decadence are often drawn from the Julio-Claudian era, highlighting the depravity of emperors such as Caligula and Nero. For some Roman observers, decline could be traced further into the past, to the beginning of the Empire or even the late Republic. Juvenal attributes the weakening of the Roman character to the influence of foreigners from the empire: he claims that filthy money and shameful indulgences have softened and corrupted Rome. Virgil had acknowledged the supremacy of the Greeks in music and literature while praising the practical and military skills of the Romans; Horace claimed that colonizing Greece had enriched the cultural heritage of Rome when the captive Greeks taught the conquering Romans their arts; by Juvenal's time there was a concern that the weak and effeminate Greeks would contaminate Roman civilization.

Such fears are echoed (in the *Juvenal* volume of the Blackwood's series *Ancient Classics for English Readers*) in concerns about the expanding British Empire, and the conquered peoples who might infect the colonizers with 'mean, low, sneaking vices':

> they have a strong, not to say irresistible, tendency to lead their captors captive, and stupefy their minds with the insinuating enervating poison which is their essential character. This process may be traced recurring again and again […] the same cycle of deterioration, decay and subjugation, being ensnared by the luxurious and effeminate customs of those whom they had vanquished. (Walford, 1872: p. 70)

Walford writes of the Romans living in 'luxury and sluggish peace' and 'feeling the emptiness in their own times, the total absence of any field in which a spirit cast in the old heroic mould could find a worthy sphere of action' (p. 48), evoking similar anxieties about British heroism and readiness for action in the century after the Battle of Waterloo (1815). Such enervating foreign influences recalled the seductive influences luring hardened warriors towards indolence and despair about the cruelty of the gods in Tennyson's poem The Lotos-Eaters'.

ii

Responses to Latin literature illuminate close connections between the romanticism of Tennyson and the decadence of his fin-de-siècle counterparts. When George C. Schoolfield observes that the decadent 'regards himself as being set apart, more fragile, more learned, more perverse, and certainly more sensitive than his contemporaries' (2003: p. xiii), the sense of being set apart from the crowd evokes Horace's *Odes* 3.1 on the role of the *vates* (poet-priest) – 'odi profanum vulgus et arceo' [I hate the uninitiated masses and keep my distance

from them] (Horace, 2004: p. 140). Arthur Hallam's review of Tennyson's *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830) represents poets as men who are set apart because they feel more acutely than others: 'whose senses told them a richer and ampler tale than most men could understand, and who constantly expressed, because they constantly felt, sentiments of exquisite pleasure or pain, which most men were not permitted to experience' (Armstrong, 1972: p. 88). Tennyson could also be interpreted as a precursor of decadence as a *doctus poeta* [scholar poet], whose 'linguistic and philological self-consciousness' assimilates his poetry to the 'Alexandrian' influences on Roman poets such as Catullus and Horace (Dowling, 1986: p. 142). Allusions to classical poetry enable Tennyson to explore an obsession with mortality that anticipates the work of fin-de-siècle poets such as Oscar Wilde, Ernest Dowson, and Lionel Johnson in their intertextual dialogues with Sappho, Propertius, Horace, and Ovid. Joseph Bristow notes that these poets use classical models to 'articulate dissident desires that proved hard to express elsewhere', as the poet and Latin scholar A. E. Housman also does in the 'quietly rebellious volume *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), whose hardly outspoken homosexual and atheist sentiments have become critically more audible in recent years' (Bristow, 2013: pp. 28-9). Tennyson's *In Memoriam* frequently invokes the love poems of Catullus, Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus (Markley, 2004: pp. 75-9), as well as an elegiac sensibility connected with mourning, as in Catullus 101, the poem addressed to the poet's dead brother. In turn, Swinburne appropriates Catullus' phrase 'ave atque vale' [hail and farewell] in the title of his elegy for Baudelaire (1868). In lamenting the death of a brother author, Swinburne links private and public mourning by mingling the motifs of the praise of the dead in the pastoral elegy tradition with the tropes of the funeral oration expressing an ideal of brotherhood as a revolutionary political ideal (Potolsky, 2013: pp. 49-69).

The *Odes* of Horace presented Victorian poets with a world of masculine camaraderie in which in which the presence of women (usually slaves, prostitutes or entertainers) is

incidental and fleeting. Stephen Harrison (2017) examines the reworking of themes from the *Odes* in poems by Tennyson, Arnold and Clough, and Edward FitzGerald's *The Rubiáyat of Omar Khayyám*. Horatian conventions could be used to express a socially acceptable system of *amicitia* [male friendship] (as in Tennyson's invitation poem 'To the Rev. F. D. Maurice') or to imply a countercultural discourse of love between men. Indulgence in wine and other pleasures is tempered by an Epicurean awareness of the brevity of life and the uncertainty of the future. In *Odes* 1. 11 Horace memorably urges the celebration of the present with the phrase 'carpe diem' [seize the day] (2004: p. 44) . There is much that a decadent poet might exploit in the conventions of the Latin love elegy, such as the cruelty of the *domina* [mistress] and the subversion of Roman notions of masculinity in the prevalent conceit of *militia amoris* [soldiery of love], in which the poet is unfit for conventional warfare but skilled in a metaphorical battle of love. Dowson's 'Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae sub Regnum Cynarae' [I am not what I was in the reign of good Cinara] notoriously borrows its title from Horace *Odes* 4.1 (2004: p. 218), a poem marking Horace's return to lyric a decade after the publication of his first three books of *Odes*. Yet Dowson does not engage with the rest of the poem from which the line is taken (or the other three odes in which Horace refers to Cinara). The allusion serves to intensify the distance between Horace's expression of nostalgia for a long-lost girl, even as he pleads with Venus not to reawaken his desires after so many years, and Dowson's complaint that the shadow of his 'old passion' for Cynara interrupted what should have been an easy sexual encounter with a prostitute. Linda Dowling argues that Dowson alludes to classical texts to establish his remoteness from a 'nobler, more active poetic tradition'; the reference to Cynara (whose name recalls both Horace's Cinara and Propertius' Cynthia) marks a cultural distance between the 'guiltless pleasures' of the Roman poets and the 'oppressed consciousness' of the disaffected speaker (1986: pp. 203-4). Horace's lyric connects Dowson's with an intertextual lyric tradition; Horace claimed to be

the first poet to have written Greek lyric in Latin, but when in *Odes* 4.1 he alludes to one of Sappho's most famous poems he also invokes Catullus' reworking of Sappho (Bristow, 2013: pp. 31-3).

iii

In the Victorian period, threats to religion are often associated with developments in science. Concerns about how to live in a universe not governed by a benevolent deity connect with the Epicurean materialism of Lucretius: Matthew Arnold planned to write a play about Lucretius but reworked some of the material into *Empecdocles on Etna* (1852), a drama which could more closely express Arnold's awareness of 'living in an age of intellectual transition', poised between faith and doubt (Shrimpton, 2015: pp. 476-82). Tennyson makes use of a legend that Lucretius' jealous wife gave him a love potion to restore his passion, subjecting him to such vivid and terrible dreams that he killed himself. In his nightmares, the juxtaposition of images of blood and disintegration with erotic torment anticipates decadent preoccupations (Markley, 2004: pp. 141-8). Linda K. Hughes suggests that 'Lucretius' belongs to a time in which Tennyson is emboldened to 'approach sensual content more frankly' after the publication of Swinburne's controversial *Poems and Ballads* (1866), prompting an intertextual dialogue: 'the Roman pagan becomes a site where Tennyson and Swinburne can meet' (2009: pp. 306-10). Depicting the era of transition from paganism to Christianity offered writers the opportunity to suggest that the dominance of Christianity might be coming to an end. Swinburne, in 'Hymn to Proserpine' (1866), highlights a time of doubt after the emperor Constantine had established Christianity as the official religion in Rome: his nephew and successor Julian converted to paganism and unsuccessfully attempted to re-establish the old religion. Swinburne's poem takes the emperor's last words—'vicisti, Galilæe' [you have conquered, Galilean]—as a recurrent motif in the last hymn of a dying

pagan. The poem casts Christianity as a pale, barren and macabre creed by comparison with the cruel and beautiful sensuality of the chthonic cult of Proserpina [Persephone]. The speaker suggests that Christianity will become obsolete in its turn and the pagan deities will return.

Norman Vance identifies a shift from an era of creative appropriation of Republican Rome in the Romantic era to a late-Victorian focus on imperial Rome, 'initially pagan and a persecutor of Christians but progressively Christianized' (p. 197). In historical fiction, colourful, sensationalized accounts of the persecution of early Christians often take place against the backdrop of the Roman Empire; sympathetic pagan characters are ripe for conversion, as in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834). Such narratives were used to intervene in contemporary sectarian debates, as Charles Kingsley's anti-Catholic *Hypatia* (1853) provoked ripostes by Cardinal Wiseman in *Fabiola or, The Church of the Catacombs* (1854) and J. H. Newman in *Callista, A Tale of the Third Century* (1855). Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) takes a more tentative approach to the conversion plot—the hero spends much of the novel attempting to find an acceptable version of Epicureanism before he befriends Christian converts, witnesses the celebration of the Eucharist, receives the last rites and is treated as a martyr without having ever committed himself to Christianity.. Uncertainties about the morality of traditional religion and the lack of a satisfying philosophy to replace monotheistic or polytheistic worship link the worlds of the hero and the nineteenth-century reader. The narrator explicitly points out an analogy between the reign of Marcus Aurelius in second-century Rome and that of Queen Victoria in Britain, a similarity suggested by Matthew Arnold in an essay on Marcus Aurelius published in 1863 (Weir, 1995: pp. 76-7). This kind of comparative approach, applying ancient philosophy and history and the problems of the contemporary world, was encouraged by the programme of classical studies in which authors such as Pater were engaged, Oxford's *Literae Humaniores* [literally,

'the more humane letters'] or 'Greats'. Like Huysmans, Pater finds the transitional nature of the era of imperial weakness and the rise of Christianity germane to the present. He is also impressed by the linguistic fertility of the period and in particular by the elaborate literary Latin of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*.

iv

Decadence is associated not just with the imperial city of Rome but also with southern Italy (a region once colonized by the Greeks and known as Magna Graecia), and in particular the Bay of Naples. The eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE (chronicled in an eyewitness account by Pliny the Younger) both obliterated and preserved the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum. Excavations began in the mid-eighteenth century, and archaeological evidence proved a rich source of erotic and pornographic images, statues and inscriptions. One response to such discoveries is found in texts such as *The Last Days of Pompeii*: the idea that the eruption of the volcano was a divine punishment. Versions of Pompeii presented for widespread consumption were selective and sanitized, such as those at the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in the 1850s, where the Pompeian Court offered a 'domestic and anglicized vision of the ancient world' (Nichols, 2015: p. 240). Those who visited the ruins or the Naples museum could see much more: Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands argue that the 'myth of censorship'—that the excavators were so shocked by the licentious material discovered in Pompeii and Herculaneum that they concealed it from the public—was greatly embellished by later generations to suit stereotypical notions of Victorian prudery (2011: pp. 302-3). In the late nineteenth century, Naples and Capri were associated with sexual tourism, partly because of the associations with decadent Roman emperors. The cruel and paranoid Tiberius spent the latter half of his reign on the island of Capri; the distance from Rome fed the rumours of his depravity. Suetonius dwells on Tiberius surrounding himself with erotic

paintings, sculptures, and books which were instruction manuals for the prostitutes of both sexes who engaged in orgies watched by the emperor. Jon L. Seydl comments that ancient sites in the Bay of Naples were seen as a 'subversive sexual environment', represented by painters as a 'homoerotic Arcadia, populated by young men and boys', and associated with sexualized encounters between men (2012: p.22). The city that saw the reunion of Oscar Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas following Wilde's release from prison had become 'an established destination for northern European homosexual tourists' (Murray, 2016: pp. 27-8).

Imagery based on archaeological discoveries from Pompeii and Herculaneum is prominent in the popular Roman paintings of artists such as Edward Poynter and Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Pictures of 'the minutiae of everyday life' in the ancient world replaced the grand tradition of moralizing history painting about the deeds of heroes, as archaeology encouraged an interest in the domestic (Prettejohn, 1996a: p. 56). The sumptuous interiors Alma-Tadema depicts are full of details inspired by his study of recent archaeological discoveries, but they do not represent specific Roman buildings. Some of his fictional spaces evoke the homes of the wealthy in ancient Rome and Victorian London, in which young women in diaphanous but respectable version of Roman dress may be observed reading, talking and lounging against a background of elaborately decorated marble. In *The Favourite Poet* (1888), the scroll one woman is reading from could be replaced with a volume of Homer to create a contemporary version of the scene. In other pictures historical accuracy provides an excuse for the representation of hedonistic and erotic scenes in a Roman context that would have been controversial in a contemporary setting. Female nudes could be depicted in the setting of the Roman baths in Alma-Tadema's *Tepidarium* (1881), *The Baths of Caracalla* (1899) and *A Favourite Custom* (1909), and Poynter's *Diadumenè* (1884) and *Water Babies* (1900) (Prettejohn, 1996b: 147-70). While the scale of Alma-Tadema's *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) evokes the tradition of history painting, the artist 'parodies the

conventions' of such images of exemplary virtue (Prettejohn 1996a: p. 60). Alma-Tadema uses the familiar setting of the *cena*, with the teenage emperor Elagabalus and his favoured guests surrounded by imagery associated with the wine-god Dionysus (Bacchus to the Romans), watching as diners on a lower level (described as 'parasites' in the *Historia Augusta*) are gradually smothered by the accumulation of pink rose petals which fall from a false ceiling. Rosemary Barrow suggests that Alma-Tadema's frequent use of roses in his paintings combines a 'distinctive Roman aura of excess' (associated with the extravagant banquets of Cleopatra, Nero and Vitellius) with the familiarity of the Victorian language of flowers (1997-8: 183-5). The image of the rose could evoke corruption and death: Swinburne alludes in the poem 'Dolores' (1866) to 'the raptures and roses of vice' (2000: p. 124). Elizabeth Prettejohn notes the erotic implications underlying the superficial prettiness of the scene: the 'abandoned poses' of the guests suggest that they experience a brief ecstasy as they suffocate and die (1996a: p. 60). Elagabalus' extravagant tastes included the use of immensely heavy silver vessels, decorated with lewd designs, at banquets which were themed by colour and different for every day of the summer, and he required his banqueting rooms to be strewn with flowers such as lilies, violets, narcissus, and hyacinths. Such indulgences could be portrayed without overt allusions to Elagabalus' notorious sexual escapades with his wives, courtesans, numerous male lovers, and the charioteer 'husband' to whom Elagabalus played the 'empress'. Richard Jenkyns criticises Alma-Tadema's approach to painting classical scenes as 'fancy dress', 'dressing up and playing at having an orgy; and remaining careful not to go too far' so as not to offend contemporary taste (1992: pp. 234-9). However, an outraged response by Archdeacon F. W. Farrar suggests that the more subversive interpretations perceptible below the superficial prettiness of the rose petals did not escape the contemporary gaze: for Farrar this is a 'picture of unquestionable power' which 'can hardly fail to awaken very painful reflections'. He finds the perversion of the symbol of the

rose particularly disconcerting: an ‘avalanche of these sickening, crumpled, decaying blossoms for vile purposes vilely abused’ (1891: 543). For Farrar such a painting debases not only the tradition of historic painting but the history of Rome itself::

> In all the stately and noble scenes of Roman rule, its lofty figures, its heroic ideals, its magnificent magnanimities, the all but Christian grandeur of its endurance and its patriotism, was there nothing worth the infinite toil of this skilled hand but this carnival of bejewelled sensualism, this portent of abysmal depravity[?] (1891: 543)

With so many historical figures who could be appropriated to uphold the exemplary Roman virtues—dutifulness to family and the gods, self-sacrificing patriotism, heroic manliness— to focus instead on the extravagance, weakness and sexual deviance of the emperors exhibit the perversity for which decadent culture is renowned. A sense of belatedness, a feeling that the greatness of the past is gone forever, connects the Silver Age and the late nineteenth century, inspiring a pessimistic world view but also a freedom from the artistic and linguistic restrictiveness of a self-consciously great era. Yet the transition from virtuous to dissolute images of Rome is not simply a phenomenon of the fin de siècle: the counter-cultural instincts of melancholy, self-indulgence, effeminacy, extravagance, embellishment and foreign influences that undermine the exemplary Rome of the Golden Age work with romantic sensibilities and react against imperial ambitions to create a complex understanding of the Roman past.