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Review of Robert Stilling's Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry

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Decadence and its creative aftermath

Review of Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry*. Harvard University Press, 2018, 384pp.

Books on postcolonial cultures that tackle the genre of poetry are still relatively rare. Robert Stilling's book is thematic in focus and wide-ranging but selective in its approach to authors. In respect of a singular theme as the driving idea for a book on postcolonial poetry, it resembles Jahan Ramazani's book *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), and its selectiveness—a chapter per author, with authors drawn from different cultures and societies—to Ramazani's earlier book on postcolonial poetry, *The Hybrid Muse* (2001). The strength of this approach is that if the theme is well chosen and well illustrated, the argument of the book as a whole has cohesion and coherence. The potential limitations of this approach are two. When analysis and exemplification are confined to a single author per chapter, the manner in which traits or preoccupations that are said to characterize the individual's **work gives** less than secure purchase for any extrapolations or generalizations that might apply to the society and culture that the author works in, or to other authors writing from the same culture at about the same time. Also, the scope for analysis and exemplification to add up to anything like the narrativity of literary or cultural history remains attenuated since its **generalizations arise** from a fairly narrow set of discrete bases.

The theme of Stilling's book is decadence. Charles Baudelaire, speculating in 1857 of the literatures that would emerge from former colonies, and pointing in particular to America and Edgar Allan Poe, anticipated that the new poetics would begin where their colonial masters had left off: in decadence. A hundred years later, and attended by far more anxiety than Baudelaire had any reason to bring to the matter,

Frantz Fanon worried that “a borrowed aestheticism” and a “path of negation and decadence” was more likely to beset writing from the formerly colonized parts of the globe than the modernity of new beginnings and a new vocabulary of liberation. The second step in the argument is that a rift or divergence is claimed to have resulted between authors preoccupied with issues of form or “the oppositional aesthetic sensibility of decadence,” and the needs of new cultural nationalisms.

Given these two hypotheses, a question is inevitable: if postcolonial poetics might be said to have begun in various manifestations of derivative decadence, is that to be seen as a historical process that has room for change over time, or is it to be interpreted as an abiding predicament? How long does a “founding condition” hovering between European decadence and the “unformed possibilities” of postcolonial cultures continue in an “unformed” state? Does decadence mutate or evolve into something else? Or does it continue as the aesthetic sensibility always more or less oppositional to the discourses of postcolonial nationhood? The question is particularly relevant when we look at the active timeframe of the authors that Stilling has singled out for attention: they are authors active from the middle of the twentieth century to now. Does that imply that the poetic cultures of the formerly colonized have never stepped out of the shadow of decadence all through the twentieth century? Or is that applicable only to the authors selected for scrutiny in this book?

The answer is interesting and selective. The authors brought together share a common strategy. They invoke, and make use of, the idea of European 1890s decadence—for which Wilde becomes the not unexpected presiding figure for this book. For poets thus inclined, extrapolated ideas regarding decadence become a counter to the call in decolonizing cultures to contribute to a national literature defined along specific lines that might be said to represent the kind of earnestness satirized by Wilde. This aim

accounts for the somewhat unusual assemblage: two authors from Africa (neither primarily a poet, Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka); one poet from the Caribbean (Derek Walcott); one Kashmir-born diasporic poet whose work and life were split between India and the USA (Agha Shahid Ali); two non-Caucasian writers from Britain (Yinka Shonibare and Bernardine Evaristo, neither of whose work **is primarily** in the genre of poetry); and one Irish poet (Derek Mahon). In no sense is the selection likely to be representative, except regarding the one chosen theme that holds such an eclectic set together. The period of their writing is from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. That is, we are not with the beginnings of new or postcolonial literatures. Instead, we are being asked to buy into the idea that the kind of dissent that Wilde and others associated with the Art for Art's Sake movement offered to conventional mores comes in handy for later writers from the former colonies. It provides them ideas and inspiration for giving the slip to the new conventions of expectation that urge themselves inevitably upon writers in nations born in the aftermath of empire and colony. That makes it less a book "about postcolonial poetry" than a book about how Wilde and some of his "decadent" contemporaries provide certain authors from the postcolonial world inspiration and techniques for their own creativity.

Once this orientation is taken on board, a lot about the book falls into place and makes sense, although there is not much to learn from here that is new about modernism. **The connection** that comes up is straightforward enough: aesthetic modernism, especially in the formerly colonized, was never very far from a whiff of Art for Arts's sake, creating unresolved tensions between a writer's commitment to issues of form and the expectation that postcolonial writing might contribute somehow to an assortment of cultural nationalisms. Amidst or surrounding this familiar discursive

terrain, an irony persists. Postcolonial poetry, presented thus, cannot be said to have quite escaped derivativeness, or the kind of anxiety captured in V. S. Naipaul's phrase, "the mimic men." Creativity thus represented is never able to escape the issue of dependency; instead, what these exemplars demonstrate is how when the models are singled out as unapologetically "decadent," the works that result retain a very particular flavor, one that continues to taste of unfreedom, in a context where any notion of "freedom" (C.S. Peirce's idea of "firstness") is probably an illusion. Along the way of these theses, however, much that is of insight comes up for recognition. The fine hand-woven cotton muslins (Dacca gauzes) that inspire some of the finest lines in Agha Shahid Ali get a very thorough and enlightening scholarly treatment in terms of the link between Wilde, Ali, and the history of the material culture embedding the production of such fabrics. Likewise, the connection on between Ali's role in disseminating an accurate version of the ghazal form in the West, and the associations of that form with the decline of the Mughal empire, and its attendant decadence, are neatly delineated.

Each subsequent chapter has its tangible rewards at the level of connections between two sets of local detail. Thus Walcott and European painting—especially, though not exclusively, the ethos created by Watteau—is well-delineated. Likewise, the inspirational sources for Yinka Shonibare's non- or anti-realist art get a sympathetic exposition, largely under the shadow of Wilde; and Bernardine Evaristo's art, as exemplified by *The Emperor's Babe* (2001), is juxtaposed with the decadence of the Roman Empire in its period of decline. Similarly, the business of how selling one's manuscripts and waste-paper basket to well-endowed American archives bothers Derek Mahon, and gets tied up with his disgust at **aspects of contemporary Ireland**, and his dip into the period of the Yellow Book comes in for some fascinating discussion. In his "Introduction," the author wonders if the term "postcolonial" was needed for a book

such as this, and indicates that he decided to retain it as a marker of historical and geographic positions. I wonder if the book might have signaled itself better as a set of case studies demonstrating the resurgence of decadent motifs in contemporary authors. It could then have treated colony, postcolony and empire more plausibly as side-motifs to a narrative about how ideas surrounding decadence continue to sponsor creativity amidst an assortment of cultural predicaments, (only) some of which merit the term “postcolonial.”

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