

T.S. Eliot and Decadence

The role of T.S. Eliot as a progenitor of Modernism is well known, not least because of the role played by Ezra Pound in editing *The Waste Land*. What is less often acknowledged is the important influence on Eliot of the French Decadent Movement in poetry and the arts, and of the seminal year which he spent in Paris in 1910-11.

Although associated in most peoples' minds with dissolute behaviour and challenges to social norms, with opium smoking, absinthe drinking and sexual experimentation, the Decadent Movement was also, as its name suggests, concerned with the 'falling away' of civilisation, and its decline into a series of 'fading repetitions' of what had gone before. The Decadents were resolutely opposed to Enlightenment ideas of progress, and obsessed by ideas of entropy, decline, and the incorrigibility of human nature. In the midst of the age of empire and the triumph of capitalism they anticipated apocalypse and the 'end of times'. This viewpoint arguably proved amazingly prescient as the Victorian world self-destructed in the First World War, the consequences of which are still with us. It is possible to place Eliot's early poetry firmly within this Decadent world picture. Humans have been hollowed out, and their civilisation is characterised by aridity, fading repetitions, fragmentation, and loss of meaning. Reaching its full expression in *The Waste Land*, this brand of philosophical and historical pessimism feels strangely topical in our new age of anxiety.

The experiences of our youth always have a great impact upon us, and Eliot was no exception. However, he was also very fortunate in Paris to have, in his house mate Jean Verdenal and his language tutor Alain-Fournier (the author of *Le Grand Meaulnes*), two cultured friends whose tastes were very similar to his own, and in whose company he launched into the cultural life of a city whose lectures, concerts, ballets, revues and exhibitions were at the forefront of cultural modernity. In her book *T.S. Eliot's Parisian Year* Nancy Duvall Hargrove has written persuasively about the Paris scene, and has traced possible connections between Eliot's year in the city and the style and technique, and some of the salient images and references, in his poetry. The fact that both of his friends died shortly afterwards on the battlefields of the First World War added a great poignancy to his recollections of this time, and arguably contributed directly to the post-war desolation of *The Waste Land*.

However, Eliot's debt to France goes rather deeper than the incidentals of his time in Paris. Vincent Sherry, in his book *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*, argues that the literary and intellectual ideas of the Decadent movement are directly reflected in Eliot's poetry and that his Modernism (if that is what it is) is the direct heir of the Decadent aesthetic. Sherry argues that the picture was confused by Arthur Symons, the author of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, and the greatest populariser of French poetry in the English speaking world. It was Symons' book which first inspired Eliot to spend a year in Paris. Much taken by Yeats and his national myth-making it seems that Symons reframed the whole story of French poetry in terms of Symbolism, editing Decadence out of the story and restoring a sense of historical progress and a religious sensibility, both evidently lacking in the Decadent aesthetic. If we examine the actual influences on Eliot the poet we discover, Sherry argues, not only the notable stylistic influence of Jules Laforgue, but also strong thematic echoes of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine and other Decadent artists.

We should not forget, of course, that Eliot was a young man, hungry for experience and stimulation. And Paris in 1910-11 combined the historic past with the technological future in an intoxicating mixture which Eliot described later as allowing him to enjoy 'un présent parfait'. Music played an important part in this, and we know that Eliot savoured the full range of concerts on offer, from performances of Wagner at the opera house to concert hall performances of new music by Ravel and Debussy, ballet music by Stravinsky (who became a friend), right through to the vibrant popular music of the café concerts, captured in compositions by Satie. Nancy Duvall Hargrove comments that it was perhaps music, as much as poetry, which encouraged Eliot to experiment with the rhythms and structures of poetry, introducing fragmentation and repetition, collage and association, mixing together the language of Dante with the demotic imagery of the streets. In the meantime Eliot returned to the US in 1911 wearing French style clothes and carrying a Malacca cane, every inch the Parisian man of fashion.

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*The **T.S. Eliot and Decadence** event is taking place at 7.30pm on Tue 21 Feb in hall 1 at Kings Place, 90 York Way, London N1 9AG, a short walk from King's Cross station. The event will tell the story of Eliot's Parisian year, and will explore the influence on his poetry of the Decadent Movement. The event is being held in partnership with the T.S. Eliot Foundation. **Simon Callow**, the celebrated screen and stage actor, with talk about the influence of Jules Laforgue in particular, and will read a selection of Eliot's poems. **Margaret (Peggy) Reynolds**, broadcaster and professor of literature at Queen Mary, University of London, will talk about Eliot's time in Paris in 1910-11, and **Matthew Creasy**, lecturer in French literature at the University of Glasgow, will tease out the connections between Eliot and the Decadent movement. **Roy Howat**, the acclaimed pianist will perform superb pieces by Ravel, Debussy and Chopin, and singer **Anna Sideris** will perform French mélodies and chansons from the café concert tradition, transporting the audience back to the time of Eliot's Paris sojourn.*

Tickets are £12.50 each, and can be purchased on line from Kings Place at

<http://www.kingsplace.co.uk/whats-on/spoken-word/ts-eliot-and-decadence#.WIo8g41vjIU>

Members of the T.S. Eliot Society (UK) are especially welcome to attend the event, and have a unique booking code to obtain tickets at a discount price – details in the Members Area of the TS Eliot Society (UK) website.