

*Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience in Victorian Literary Decadence*. Sarah Green. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023. viii + 274 pp. ISBN: 9781108917490

Given the recent critical work Decadence has received in terms of queer radicalism and avant-gardist tactics, Sarah Green's debut monograph, *Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience in Victorian Literary Decadence*, is a significant contribution to the history of fin-de-siècle sexuality. Previously a Postdoctoral Research Assistant at Oxford's 'Diseases of Modern Life: Nineteenth Century Perspectives' research project, Green's study comes with a robust knowledge of sexual health discourse. As the title indicates, the focus on sexual restraint and sensual discipline aims to divert from the prevalence of homoerotic and queer readings of Decadent writers, such as those made by Denis Denisoff and Richard Dellamora, that tend to sideline an influential aspect of late-Victorian discourse, what Green refers to as "productive sexual continence" (3). While the book recognises the need to disrupt Victorian modes of discourse around sexuality, her approach is one of delineating the relationship between forms of sensual/sexual refusal and aesthetic life as imagined by Decadent writers. Of course, today's readers would be baffled by "sexual continence", a term that advocates for moderation in sexual life. Indeed, Green encourages readers to think outside modern understandings of sexuality and queerness to grasp what late Victorians thought about sexual health, desire, and the nature of intimate relations. Such an approach also means that *Sexual Restraint* departs from the pseudo-Freudian readings privileged by critics encountering continence, whereby sublimation creates an "always-deferred sexuality expressed in activities other than genital acts" (7). Crucially for the Decadents, and Green's study asks, what sensual philosophy and practice enabled the full potential of an aesthetic mode of life?

*Sexual Restraint* focuses on four writers commonly discussed within Decadence Studies – Walter Pater, Lionel Johnson, Vernon Lee and George Moore. Before her close readings, Green introduces popular medical and scientific discourse on sexual health leading up to and surrounding Decadent writers. In her analysis of popular guides for young men, for example, the male-centred language of seminal regulation encouraged readers to practise restraint and therefore preserve energy. Such guides reflected a cultural turn from anatomical to more physiological conceptions of human sexuality, in which self-regulation was thought to improve the rigour of both mind and body. Crucially, Green draws attention to the distinction between "sensuousness" and "sensuality" that underpinned how readers would have interpreted writings on continence. It is an easily muddled distinction that rests on attitude more than it does on practice: "sensuousness, the intense and pleasurable experience of the external world via the senses, could be separated at least intellectually from sensuality, an approach to such experience in an excessive, selfish, possessive, or lustful manner" (11).

This sense-driven philosophy is explored in a fascinating chapter on Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and his unfinished *Gaston de Latour*. Here, Pater detailed how the aesthete must distinguish between "destructive sensuality and disciplined sensuousness" (87), something Green believes is underdeveloped in homoerotic readings of Pater. Green also gives an interesting take on Pater's interpretation of Plato, whose "unimpassioned passion" is placed within the Oxonian turn from Aristotle to Plato in classical scholarship. On nineteenth-century appreciations of Greek art, Green brings forth one of Pater's defining questions: "Can we bring down that ideal into the gaudy, perplexed light of modern life?" (87). This question came to preoccupy the younger Decadent Lionel Johnson, who converted to Catholicism in 1891 and sought to combine his religious and aesthetic sentiments into a "Paterian Catholicism". As "Scholarship's constant saint" (128), Pater had a potent grip on Johnson's formulation of a continent and artistic life, largely crediting the Oxford don for his

formation of cultural humanism. By analysing his poetry and uncollected critical writing (mostly publishing in the *Anti-Jacobin*), the chapter reveals how Johnson blended pools of aesthetic and Tractarian thought to promote sexual restraint as a vital component of an artist's sacred life-course.

Turning to another Paterian writer, Green argues that Vernon Lee can also be placed within the Decadent tradition of sexual continence, albeit more uncomfortably. The more gendered notion of "sex" is used on account of its broadened physiological use when discussing women in Victorian discourse. While much has been made of Lee's novel, *Miss Brown* (1884), as a critique of the aesthetes' sexual immorality, Green tactfully shows how Lee's opposition was directed at the 'Aesthetic Movement' and not aestheticism completely. Diverging from Oxonian thought, Lee was keen to distance herself from the overtly sensualist readings of Plato in favour of "non-sensual aestheticism" (173). Considering much recent scholarship on Lee hinges on her sexual repulsion and repressed lesbianism, Green reveals the varieties of intimacy Lee was committed to as part of an interpersonal and aesthetic vision. Such touchiness around sexual matters was not shared by the final figure in *Sexual Restraint*. For the Irish writer George Moore, who routinely scolded Victorian critics for their sexual prudery, the aesthete must establish a holistic appreciation of "art, sex and 'humanity'" (179). As Green aptly puts it, Moore strived "to develop a model of artistic integrity and isolation that also satisfies the claims of sex and humanity" (179). Moore's sexual restraint took the form of self-proclaimed impotence in his later life and fostered his appreciation of sensuality in forms of reminiscence and memory.

These dwellings on Decadent writers make for a fascinating study. At times, however, I did feel slightly unmoored by the vacillating use of words such as "continence", "sensuality", "sex" and "sexuality" that varied according to each writer. While this does demonstrate something of their affinities and tendencies, it does somewhat obscure relations between the writers and the pervading discourse. Green, however, is all too conscious of this non-descript usage, what she calls its "slipperiness" in her conclusion, and place within a subject where "there is no word that can unproblematically embrace all forms of sexual refusal (itself an uncomfortably negative phrase)" (203). None of this, it must be said, takes away from the scholarly contribution of Green's book, in which the Decadent preoccupation with sensual and aesthetic life receives a thoroughly novel investigation.

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