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The Beginning of the Fin

The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture in the 1890s. Ed. Joseph Bristow. Athens, Oh: Ohio University Press, 2005. xxxi + 352 pp.

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<1>The last 20 years have been an important span for the study of late-nineteenth century literature and art. Long dismissed as an age of ephemeral poseurs or dangerous degenerates, the fin de siècle has more recently been recognized as the origin of many elements of modernity and post-modernity, from queer camp to styles of consumer culture. The impetus for this reconsideration of the period came initially from post-structuralist theorists like Derrida, who identified a proto-deconstructive account of language in Stéphane Mallarmé and most influentially, from Michel Foucault, whose introductory volume of the *History of Sexuality* located the emergence of homosexuality in the sexological discourses of the period. Beginning in the 1970s and 1980s, scholars such as Linda Dowling, Elaine Showalter, Charles Bernheimer, Jonathan Dollimore, and Eve Sedgwick, began to take seriously writers who had long been dismissed as unreadable. More recently, scholars of the fin de siècle have benefited from the increasing availability, in electronic and paper form, of long-forgotten works from the period—especially the works of women writers who were central to the literary culture of the period, but were largely erased from literary histories.

<2>Despite all of this important work, the fin de siècle remains a frustratingly underdeveloped scholarly field. In part, this condition is a lingering hangover from the longstanding critical reception of the British fin de siècle as the product of mere imitators and lesser minds. For this reason, scholars of the fin de siècle always seem to be introducing, surveying, defining, and at least implicitly, such scholars (and I count myself among them), curiously always seem to be beginning again.

<3>*The Fin-de-Siècle Poem*, a collection of eleven essays first presented together at a conference of the same name in February of 2002, is a valuable contribution to this ongoing recovery of late-nineteenth century literary culture, but one that suffers at points from weaknesses endemic to the field. The editor, Joseph Bristow, has assembled an impressive group of both established and younger scholars of fin-de-siècle poetry, and has balanced essays on a variety of individual figures with others focusing on thematic or historical questions. There are some puzzling gaps for a book with entitled *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem*—for example, there are no extended reconsiderations of such key figures as Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, Arthur Symons, and little on Oscar Wilde's still-neglected poetry—but overall the essays are thoughtfully selected and organized, and provide an especially good account of the women poets of the period. (To be fair, Bristow makes efforts to discuss these figures at least briefly in his introduction; other essays also touch briefly on one or more of these figures). Collectively, the contributions to this book will provide an outstanding source for future scholarly work on the period.

<4>In his substantial introduction, Bristow both offers a general frame for the study of the period, and an account of how and why the period came to be regarded as diminished by later critics. Self-proclaimed “survivors” of the period, such as Yeats, took Wilde’s spectacular fall as a paradigm for their retrospective accounts of the fin de siècle, detailing the wasted and tragic lives of Johnson, Dowson, and their contemporaries. Bristow notes that this approach has had the effect not only of entwining the poetry the period to the sometimes lurid biographies of its writers, but also of obscuring the contributions of many other writers—most often women—whose careers did not fit this mold. In their own contributions, Jerusha McCormack and Holly Laird, respectively, highlight the way that modernist mythmaking has shaped not just the depiction of the fin de siècle in literary histories, but even the way it is read by current scholars. McCormack, for example, calls decadent culture “one of the first great urban myths”—because it arose from an urban context, often took an oral or legendary form, and because it so entwined life and work as



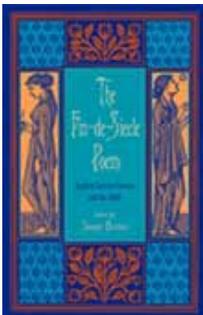
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to make it difficult even now to distinguish the two. Laird similarly notes that the image of the fin-de-siècle poet as spectacularly self-destructive systematically overlooks the nuanced accounts of suicide in poetry from the period.

<5>Five of the essays in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem* concern individual women writers. Linda K. Hughes writes on Rosamund Marriott Watson, Julia F. Saville on the aunt and niece couple who wrote as “Michael Field,” Linda Hunt Beckman on the Anglo-Jewish poet Amy Levy, Ana Parejo Vardillo on A. Mary F. Robinson, and Yopie Prins on Alice Meynell. All of these essays are interesting and informative, though with the exception of the contributions by Prins and Saville, they tend to function, perhaps necessarily, more as biographically inflected introductions than as complex critical readings. Prins’ essay is a real standout, to my mind the best piece in the volume, in large part because it focuses so closely on Meynell’s writing and thought. Prins explores the way Meynell adapted Coventry Patmore’s ideas about meter into a powerful account of the rhythmic and periodic basis of all life. Meynell imagined meter as an embodied form, and often apostrophized as a kind of lover in her poetry. Saville cannily teases out the ways in which Field’s 1892 volume *Sight and Song* both borrows from and complicates the principles of Paterian aestheticism.

<6>As Bristow notes in his introduction, the fin de siècle was a great age of book making, and many volumes of poetry from the period are valuable as much for their innovative bindings and illustrations as for the poetry they contain. Two essays in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem* detail the interrelationship of book art with poetry. Nicholas Frankel examines the two volumes of poetry published collectively by the Rhymers’ Club, noting how comparatively plain the design of these volumes is in the context of the period, and how this design choice reflects an emphasis on the interrelationship of the poems rather than the identity of an individual poet. In the next chapter, Jerome McGann offers a fascinating close reading of the “bibliographical aesthetics” of Herbert Horne’s 1891 volume *Diversi Colores*. Connecting the language of the poems to their typography and *mise en page*, McGann suggests that Horne wants us not to read the poems as referential, but as material instantiations of beauty.

<7>*The Fin-de-Siècle Poem* closes with two thematically focused essays. Tricia Lootens’ contribution is an excellent discussion of the similarities between two “bardic” poets, the Anglo-Indian Rudyard Kipling, and the Indo-Anglian woman poet Toru Dutt. Both poets, Lootens argues, highlight the instability of national and imperial affiliation from very different positions in the British empire. Marion Thain looks at the role of Catholic conversion in the poetry of Michael Field and John Gray. Conversion to Rome was something of a trend among fin-de-siècle poets. As Thain argues, the conversions of Field and Gray do not negate the poet’s former “decadent” life, but recast it in terms of Catholic imagery and ideas.

<8> Despite its many strong qualities, the volume does suffer from a couple of problems with its conception and execution. To begin with, the focus on poetry alone, while certainly justifiable, is also rather limiting in this context, and tends to miss what makes the fin de siècle so potentially interesting. The fin de siècle was a period of great experimentation in genre. Works like J-K Huysmans’ *A rebours* (1884), or Walter Pater’s *Renaissance* (1873) are at once critical essays and works of fiction, and many of the best poets were not exclusively poets, but wrote essays and fictional works as well. As the interest in book arts and ekphrasis in the period suggests, moreover, writers of all stripes were interested in blending the literary with the visual. I also think the contributions remain too fixed on the British literary context (Lootens’ piece is an exception). Fin-de-siècle writers were resolutely cosmopolitan. For previous generations of critics, this cosmopolitanism was a given, though it was commonly dismissed as plagiarism or hero worship. More recent discussions have revitalized the period by reconstructing its relationship to British literary culture, but have as a result often neglected its important cosmopolitan impulses. A couple of contributors do seek to address the influence of French writing in England, but do so in a limited or problematic way. Linda Hunt Beckman, for example, relies on definitions of French Symbolism from the 1970s in assessing Amy Levy’s interest in Mallarmé. Bristow traces the origin of the term “decadent” to the novelist Maurice Barrès in 1884, when in fact it was in wide use as a description of literature and literary schools from the 1830s. A more thorough engagement with French writing and scholarship in particular would have enriched the depiction of British literary culture in the volume.

<9> It may seem unfair to fault a book about fin-de-siècle British poets for being just that, but I think a full critical reconsideration of the period will require the kind of comparative and interdisciplinary work that made Romanticism for example viable as a serious academic field in

the 1960s. *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem*, for all its many virtues, still remains at the beginning of the fin.

Endnotes

(1) On the introductory orientation of scholarship on decadence, see the introduction to Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), pp. 1-32. (△)