

*“Only Nature Is a Thing Unreal”:
The Anthropocene 1890s*

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To most students of the period, the 1890's in England . . . are less a chronological designation than a state of mind. For some, the decade conjures yellow visions of Decadence, of putrescence in life and art, with its loss of the “complete view” of man in nature, perhaps best symbolized by fetid hothouses where monstrous orchids, seemingly artificial, are cultivated as a challenge to nature and an assertion of man's cunning.

Preface to Karl Beckson's *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890's* (1966)¹

Nature is so indifferent, so unappreciative. Whenever I am walking in the park here, I always feel that I am no more to her than . . . the burdock that blooms in the ditch.

Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” (1889; 1891)²

Years before the term Anthropocene was coined, Karl Beckson's classic 1966 anthology on the literature of the 1890s opened with this chapter's first epigraph, foreshadowing several descriptive tropes of the anthropogenic age: the alienation of “man” from “nature,” the key figure of the greenhouse or hothouse, and the object of nature (here, an orchid) that seems newly monstrous and unnatural.³ The menace of “man's cunning” against nature is now measured in parts per million, but in the 1890s it was already being measured in *fleurs du mal*.⁴ Arthur Symons's 1895 poem “Violet,” for example, praises the “sweet white wildwood violet” found growing amid the orchids “under hot-house glass” where “the flowers forget / How the sun shines.”⁵ This stray hothouse violet has taken on “the orchid's coloring,” growing “in this spice-laden atmosphere, / Where only nature is a thing unreal.” Far superior to Wilde's “burdock that blooms in the ditch,” this fantastic hothouse violet is, for Symons's speaker, the “artificial flower of my ideal.” Theodore Wratistlaw's 1896 poem “Hothouse Flowers” offers a less sophisticated take on the same decadent trope: “I hate the flower of wood or common field,” the

speaker says, and “the cultured garden’s banal yield,” but “I love those flowers reared by man’s careful art.”⁶

Beckson reads “the exotic flowers that grow in decadent literature” and the hothouses in which they grow as “central images of the decadents’ disdain of nature” (Beckson, “Introduction,” xxvii).⁷ The decadent hothouse flower trope can be traced back to Charles Baudelaire and J. K. Huysmans, and both Elizabeth Hope Chang and Dennis Denisoff have held it up for extended ecocritical analysis – Chang emphasizing the temporal and geographical estrangements produced by the greenhouse garden, and Denisoff calling attention to the many decadent writers (hothouse trope notwithstanding) who actually “relied heavily on nature and nature worship for conceptualizing and articulating their non-normative tastes and social values.”⁸ Such work usefully updates and revises the “disdain of nature” hypothesis articulated by Beckson and other early critics of decadence – going back to Max Nordau, who also described the decadents’ “aversion to nature” in his diatribe *Degeneration* (1892–93, English trans. 1895).⁹ But I want to begin this chapter by instead reading the prevalence of decadent hothouses and hothouse flowers as paradigmatic of the greenhouse gas effect and thus as projections of the power of human anthropogenic agency over seemingly impervious natural domains such as climate and the atmosphere.¹⁰ In this way the decadent greenhouse will provide a point of departure for this chapter’s broader investigation of the Anthropocene imaginaries of the *fin de siècle* and their reorientation of the literary and cultural imagination toward new understandings of time and the human place in the natural world.

When we revisit this period with a perspective informed by ecocriticism and the climate change humanities, the 1890s emerge as a microperiod of concentrated meaning – a hothouse of the Anthropocene – with the era’s texts and authors providing an intensely distilled account of the arrival of anthropogenic nature. For this reason, I will suggest, the 1890s have a special significance in the literary history of the Anthropocene, not only due to the themes of the era’s literature but also the methods through which we have studied it. The *fin-de-siècle* has traditionally been understood to be the era when artifice triumphed over nature, but reexamining the period today, we can instead see how literature and art of the period reckoned with the idea of an indeterminate nature without design, purpose, or end, profoundly shaped by human forces and yet beyond human reckoning and control. The concentrated finitude of the era reflects its own grasp of the finitudes and vicissitudes of the natural world.

At the same time, writers of this era also grappled with the tangle of meanings gathered together under the sign of “natural.” Symons’s description of the hothouse flower, in the poem quoted above, denaturalizes nature itself by declaring “only nature is a thing unreal.” This suggests the complex registers of meaning and reference in which the hothouse image intervenes, for the term “natural” has multiple, overlapping implications: it can denote “ordinary; conforming to a usual or normal character,” or “formed by nature; not subject to human intervention, not artificial,” or “occurring in, or part of, the environment.”¹¹ “Natural” overlaps with “normative,” in other words, while also problematically referring to an order of being separate from the human, and this complex of meanings constitutes a terminological (and epistemological) obstacle in our understanding of decadent nature as well as anthropogenic nature.

In his important article “Fin du Globe: On Decadent Planets,” Benjamin Morgan argues that “although decadence is often associated with a rejection of nature in favor of artifice, it is better understood as a mode of ecological thought that undermines the distinction between the natural and the made.”¹² Such a distinction between the natural and the made is an example of the kind of binary thinking that has traditionally separated “Nature” from “Society” in Western epistemology, “the Cartesian order . . . in which Society and Nature interact rather than interpenetrate” as Jason Moore describes it, a dualism that Moore identifies at the core of “the violence of modernity,” “drip[ping] with blood and dirt.”¹³ The nature/society binary has long obscured the reality of human interdependence with the world around us as well as the profound human impacts on Earth’s creatures and systems.¹⁴ But decadent literature, as Morgan says, called into question the conception of nature as “not subject to human intervention,” and the enclosed atmosphere of the greenhouse or hothouse, an image that appeared frequently across the work of decadent writers, put forth a microcosm of this human-shaped environment.¹⁵ Even further, as Jesse Oak Taylor and Heidi C. M. Scott have both discussed, nineteenth-century glasshouses “provided the basis for conceiving of Earth’s atmosphere in terms of the greenhouse effect,” modeling a “condition in which nature exists” not apart from the human but “apart from itself,” which is to say, in a state of profound alteration and disruption.¹⁶

Disruption was the order of the day in the 1890s. Oscar Wilde’s April 1895 arrest in London was perhaps the defining event of the decadent era and a historical watershed in the legal history of non-normative sexuality; and though it may seem completely unrelated, it was just one year later, in

April 1896, that Svante Arrhenius published his watershed article “On the Influence of Carbonic Acid in the Air upon the Temperature of the Ground” in the *London, Edinburgh, and Dublin Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science*. Arrhenius’s publication was the first to attempt to calculate what we now call the greenhouse gas effect (although it did not use the words “greenhouse,” “hothouse,” or “glasshouse”). The article asked, “Is the mean temperature of the ground in any way influenced by the presence of heat-absorbing gases in the atmosphere?”¹⁷ In posing this question, Arrhenius was far more concerned with the long history of global temperature change and the origins of the Ice Age than with the climate impacts of “the industrial development of our time” (271), which he saw as minimal, but nevertheless his work provided an empirical basis for the idea that an “effect on the earth’s temperature” would result from a “variation of the aërial carbonic acid [CO₂]” (263).¹⁸ If the hothouse is, as Taylor has put it, “the quintessential habitat of the Anthropocene” (23), the prominence of this image and trope within decadent literature and the near-simultaneous calculation of the greenhouse gas effect within scientific literature suggest, together, that this period has a special significance for the literary history of the Anthropocene, or at least that the Anthropocene has a special significance for understanding this period. In this chapter, I aim to tease out the environmental and ecological inheritance of the decadent 1890s while simultaneously teasing apart the complex conceptual contestation between rival assaults on the category of the “natural” within this era, assaults that can be roughly grouped around Wilde’s 1895 denaturalizing of heterosexuality and Arrhenius’s 1896 denaturalizing of the atmosphere. This conglomeration of seemingly unrelated events made the 1890s, as I will argue, a period of intensely concentrated disruptions of the very idea of “the natural,” accompanied by observations on the rise of anthropogenic nature in the industrial era.

The Anthropocene 1890s

We are now living, as the Anthropocene Working Group has proposed, in a new geological age characterized by the transformation of Earth systems through anthropogenic activities.¹⁹ As we survey the path of modernity’s storm and anticipate its future permutations, stratigraphers and cultural historians debate when, exactly, the Anthropocene began: the birth of the steam engine in the British Industrial Revolution has been one contender; the nuclear era and the post–World War II Great Acceleration another. Some recent critics have suggested that its origins are traceable less to a

particular technological regime than to a means of organizing social, labor, and natural relations, such as capitalism, colonialism, or the plantation system.²⁰ To my knowledge, the 1890s have never been hazarded as a starting point for the Anthropocene, and it is not my intention to suggest that they should be; in an ideational sense, however, the decade warrants a reconsideration from the standpoint of anthropogenic climate change, and the prevalence of literary and figurative greenhouses at the very moment when the greenhouse gas effect was first being calculated is but one indication that this is the case.

Regardless of which origin story one settles on, the Anthropocene thesis has already forced a widespread reconsideration of periodization within the humanities, asking us to think at wider scales and to connect the past to the present in new ways.²¹ World ecology, world systems theory, the Anthropocene, the planetary: there is no shortage of new ways to think big. What are the implications of such magnitudinous approaches for scholarly work on the diminutive period of the 1890s, especially in literary criticism? Viewed now in the context of climate history, slow violence, and ecological crises such as climate change that play out over the *longue durée*, it may be difficult to sustain the idea that the 1890s are as exceptional as they have seemed.²² The decade makes for an unusual period of literary history precisely because of its brevity. In these ten years that shook the world (so the story goes), Victorianism died, modernism was born, and everything changed – everything, it would seem, except the weather. Lord Henry's flip remark in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891), "I don't desire to change anything in England except the weather," takes its humor from the supposed imperviousness of the weather to human intervention, but in the era of global warming, the line invites new questions about the ecological significance of the *fin de siècle* and the particular environmental imagination which grew from this era – an imagination cultivated from within the weather-altering capacities of the greenhouse.²³

Considering, for example, that Lord Henry's family's money comes at least in part from the coal industry, his line about changing the weather takes on a new air. For it was understood by the 1890s that the burning of coal actually *does have* the capacity to change the weather, if not the climate (since climate change was not fully theorized at the time, as discussed earlier in this chapter with reference to Arrhenius's work).²⁴ More importantly, as Wilde's novel suggests, the fossil economy was also imagined to have an unprecedented capacity to free individuals from the constraints of environmental materiality. In a novel full of leisured, languid characters,

Lord Fermor, who is Lord Henry's uncle, has perfected "the great aristocratic art of doing absolutely nothing" by paying "some attention to the management of his collieries in the Midland counties, excusing himself from this taint of industry on the ground that the one advantage of having coal was that it enabled a gentleman to afford the decency of burning wood on his own hearth" (Wilde, *Dorian*, 71). Fossil capital is equated here with a complete freedom from the burdens of labor and with a total access to consumer choice, such that one may opt to heat his home with wood despite literally owning a coal mine. Such incredible magnitude of personal freedom is evident also in Lord Henry's expressed desire to change the weather, and in his famous declaration that "what our century wants" is "a new hedonism" (63).

Dorian Gray's new hedonism is an Anthropocene hedonism, not a classical hedonism, for it translates not just to the pursuit of sexual and sensual pleasure, but also to a denial of natural limits that manifests, most obviously, in the phenomenal acquisitiveness of title character Dorian Gray. Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that the "mansion of modern freedoms stands on an ever-expanding base of fossil-fuel use," and I would suggest that the pointed inclusion of Lord Fermor's collieries in *Dorian Gray* is a nod to the economic roots of the freewheeling consumption enjoyed by the novel's characters.²⁵ Dorian's collections of gemstones, textiles, and ecclesiastical vestments, among other beautiful objects, form the primary subject of chapter 11, where they are cataloged and described at length. If Dorian's sins are famously left to readers' imaginations, his purchases are lengthily documented in great detail in a chapter that describes, as Potolsky puts it, "his descent into decadence" (Potolsky, *Decadent Republic*, 17). "Pleasure is Nature's test, her sign of approval," Lord Henry remarks (Wilde, *Dorian*, 114), but importantly, pleasure in this novel extends well beyond the realm of the bodily into the realm of consumption, property, and object ownership, exemplifying, perhaps, Benjamin Morgan's useful framing of decadence as "an expression of the over-refined individual thriving at the expense of the whole" (Morgan, "Fin du Globe," 621).

Dorian Gray is a monument in the history of gay literature and was even quoted and discussed in the context of Wilde's trial, but today we must wrestle with the connection the novel sometimes draws between a release from sexual puritanism and a release from finite nature.²⁶ To overconsume, the novel at times seems to suggest, is to overcome "tedious . . . middle-class virtue" (Wilde, *Dorian*, 144). At the same time, however, the novel also presents such excessive acquisitiveness as a drug, not unlike the

opium which Dorian will also come to imbibe: “these treasures, and everything that [Dorian] collected in his lovely house, were to be to him means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape” (172). What is more, *Dorian Gray*’s deeper, more philosophical materialism continually relocates us back *within* the bounds and affordances of nature, even despite the supernatural plot and the characters’ immoderate consumption.²⁷ Dorian is apt, for example, to trace “the thoughts and passions of men to some pearly cell in the brain or some white nerve in the body” and to link “the absolute dependence of the spirit on certain physical conditions” (166). Lord Henry, too, wonders “whether we could ever make psychology so absolute a science that each little spring of life would be revealed to us” (97). Such formulations of the metaphysics of morality and desire suggest a liveliness, a “spring of life,” within the material world, a vision of environmental materiality that is vital rather than inert, contravening the logics of objectification and accumulation. In this sense *Dorian Gray* captures a paradox of the Anthropocene, where the agency of the natural world becomes manifest precisely in the wake of its abject commodification.²⁸

This paradox is also central to another novel of the 1890s, H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* (1898), which opens with a vision of humanity lulled into a false sense of overmastering agency over an inert universe: “With infinite complacency men went to and fro over this globe about their little affairs, serene in their assurance of their empire over matter.” Under these conditions, “no one gave a thought to the older world of space” – until space asserts itself in the form of a Martian attack.²⁹ Ultimately, however, once the Martians are defeated, the narrator comes to feel that the invasion was “not without its ultimate benefit” since it “robbed us of that serene confidence in the future which is the most fruitful source of decadence” (Wells, *War of the Worlds*, 179). *The War of the Worlds* was written and published in the 1890s, at the height of the decadent movement, but it is set in the early twentieth century. To describe “the great disillusionment” of human agency that came with the Martian invasion, and the consequent end of the decadent stage, Wells found it necessary to look to the near future. Wells’s temporal imagination, spilling into the twentieth century, raises the question again of how to situate the 1890s within the Anthropocene framework and whether the period’s scope is too short to afford any special anthropogenic significance, given how crucial temporal duration must be to any form of environmental consciousness. To convincingly depict catastrophic change, Wells felt the need to move beyond his own decade, and after all, a ten-year period barely registers within the vast scale of geological history. Yet this point is

popularly understood today at least in part thanks to another work published by Wells in the 1890s, *The Time Machine* (1895), a novel that resolutely stays fixed to one place (southwest suburban London) while imaginatively voyaging forward to the year 802,701 CE and beyond – till the end of the Earth.

In different ways, in other words, these 1890s novels by Wells and Wilde are all grappling with similar questions around environmental agency and temporal duration, suggesting the centrality of this decade to the Anthropocene as an idea. The example of *The Time Machine* reminds us that literature is not fixed to its moment but is an essentially durational art, one that grows from existing literature, archives its own moment, and persists into the future every time it is read, sometimes even imagining the future within its pages. Dorian Gray's portrait within Wilde's novel is a figure for this durational capacity, since – contrary to the nature of most portraits – it records its subject's gradual degradation and degeneration over time and experience even while his body persists, intact and unmarked by the years' ravages. As the greenhouse concentrates light and atmosphere, the portrait concentrates years, referencing the temporal frames through which we read art, literature, and literary movements.³⁰ Though initially the painting memorializes just one modeling session at the beginning of the novel, it comes to convey an arc of change across the whole of Dorian's lifetime; similarly, the arts of the fin de siècle convey a longer history and future of change and decline. In a discussion of M. P. Shiel's decadent novel *The Purple Cloud* (1901), Morgan has suggested that "cultural production[s] of the fin-de-siècle Decadent Movement can help us understand the promise as well as the limitations of a widely held view that criticism oriented by climate change requires expanded scales of analysis that are cognizant of planetary space and deep time" (Morgan, "Fin du Globe," 610). In a novel like *Dorian Gray*, we can see the virtue of contracted as well as expanded scales of analysis, and we can see how decadence shadowed forth the end of the world from the rather delimited experience of the end of the century. To the extent that the painting of Dorian is a metacommentary on the role of art in a decadent society, Wilde seems to suggest that art's compactness imbues it with the capacity to miniaturize problems otherwise too large to grasp.

Hothouse Periodization: Micro-scaling and the Concentration of Meaning

We might say, then, that Dorian Gray's portrait, and the Decadent Movement more generally, are case studies for microscaling as a literary-

environmental method: an interpretive mode where the small elucidates the big, where the foreshortened or delimited renders the wide-angle view. The *fin de siècle* and its decadent imaginary appear capable of perceiving *fin du globe* precisely from the narrow circumstance of a century's end: the greenhouse gas effect captured in the green carnation. This figure and method of magnification, I want to suggest, has long been an underlying, underdiscussed principle in our approaches to the 1890s and our dominant ways of understanding the period. Take the career of Wilde, the writer who often serves to embody the 1890s as the spirit of the age. His career was tragically shortened by imprisonment with hard labor under the charge of "gross indecency," and by his premature death following his release, but Wilde's artificially limited oeuvre has proved remarkably expansive. He should have written more novels, but he wrote only one – a circumstance that inspired a recent internet list to declare, "You Only Need To Strike Gold Once. Wilde only completed one novel – but *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is one of the best ever."³¹ In part because of its singularity, *Dorian Gray* has been understood to magnify the story of its age in all its distorted temporalities. Comparing Wilde's lifetime, 1854–1900, with those of his close contemporaries George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950) or H. G. Wells (1866–1946), we can see why: Wilde's early death, which stopped him at the doorstep of the twentieth century, invites the peculiar interpretive formation that I have called microscaling, where magnitude is grasped through miniaturization.

The *fin de siècle*, too, was a period defined by its end, and its power was amplified by its limit. In this way, the 1890s eerily resemble the Anthropocene imaginary, which rests, above all, on the idea of "this world that will have been," as Rob Nixon has recently phrased it.³² As several critics have discussed, the dominant trope of Anthropocene discourse is that of "an alien geologist from the future" who "detects in the strata of the ground evidence of the presence of humans long after we have gone extinct."³³ Who will remain to read such evidence in the Earth? "Nature is always behind the age," as Vivian says in "The Decay of Lying," "and in some ways, authors of the 1890s seem to have voiced the pre-posthumous Anthropocene condition long before the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere led to widespread recognition of the dominant form of environmental catastrophe in the industrial age (Wilde, "Decay," 1078).

Vivian's claim that "Nature is always behind the age" is a precursor for his more famous assertion in "The Decay of Lying" that "Nature, no less than Life, is an imitation of Art" (1086). In leading up to this point, Vivian's interlocutor Cyril prompts him to define his terms, and Vivian

significantly presents his intervention as encompassing “nature” in both the “normative” and “environmental” senses. In other words, he claims that his point holds whether “we take Nature to mean natural simple instinct as opposed to self-conscious culture” or whether “we regard Nature as the collection of phenomena external to man” (1078). This is important because it suggests that Wilde’s dialogue, in its famous declaration that nature imitates art, is taking on the entire constellation of meanings gathered under the sign of “nature.” His discussion of nature does not, perhaps cannot, separate the natural world from its etymological connection to normativity and its etymological opposition to culture and art. This helps explain Wilde’s essay’s apparent hostility to nature and its dismissive tone, evident from the opening lines when Cyril enjoins Vivian, “Let us go and lie on the grass and smoke cigarettes and enjoy Nature,” to which Vivian responds, “Enjoy nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty. . . . My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care for Nature. . . . Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place” (1071). Keeping in mind the multiple meanings of “nature” at play in the dialogue, Vivian’s riposte may be directed as much against normative sociality as against the “hard and lumpy and damp” grass on which Cyril foolishly expects him to lie. Elsewhere in the dialogue, however, when the natural world enters the conversation as polluted rather than pastoral, Vivian’s performative ecophobia bears much more directly on the atmospheric questions with which this chapter began.

In explaining to Cyril how “Nature” can be viewed as “an imitation of Art,” and how “Nature follows the landscape painter,” Vivian takes the Impressionists as his central example in a description that presents decadent intimations of an anthropogenic nature in a rhetorical posture of something akin to, or anticipating, climate denial:

Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? . . . The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art. . . . For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. . . . There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But . . . they did not exist til Art had invented them. (1086)

The passage hovers between a startling recognition of the false binarism of Nature/Society (“Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our

creation”) and an equally startling overprivileging of the individual impression and individual experience as a source of knowledge (“Things are because we see them”). From our perspective today, where climate change has been rendered conceivable through a constellation of data points that dwarfs the minuscule empirical capacity of any lone seer, impressionism’s fixation on rendering the glancing, individual consciousness may feel like a reaction against new methodologies in the sciences and social sciences, already in the late nineteenth century, which were proving the informational insufficiency of the individual gaze. As Katharine Anderson explains, the new Victorian science of meteorology “called attention to the new scale of scientific activities, which required coordination and centralization that put the work beyond any one individual’s abilities and resources.” Because meteorology required “the collective organization of science working in official or semi-official bodies,” it was a focus for debate about data and technocratic authority.³⁴ Wilde’s dialogue emerges instead from the Walter Pater tradition where “experience . . . is ringed round for each one of us by that thick wall of personality through which no real voice has ever pierced . . . each mind keeping as a solitary prisoner its own dream of the world.”³⁵ But the rival example of meteorology reminds us that the privileging of individual perspective in Pater and Impressionism was a romantic response to the individual’s attenuated authority and diminished capacity for making truth-claims in the era of statistical knowledge.

As is so often the case in Wilde’s writings, however, one can hardly take Vivian’s statements about Impressionism straight, followed as they are by a satirical chaser: “It must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis” (Wilde, “Decay of Lying,” 1086). Wilde’s reference to bronchitis is a reminder that the health effects of London’s smog had worsened significantly in the 1890s, leaving little doubt that the city’s climate had indeed changed. While London *had* had fogs for centuries, as Vivian says, these fogs had become much worse in the context of the coal-powered Victorian era, hitting a dangerous nadir in the 1890s.³⁶ In his poetry, Wilde, like many writers of his day, described that fog in terms that could be said to aestheticize the climate of industrial pollution: “like a yellow silken scarf / The thick fog hangs along the quay,” he wrote in “Symphony in Yellow,” and his poem “Impression du Matin” reads like an accompaniment to Monet’s Houses of Parliament series: “The Thames nocturne of blue and gold / Changed to a Harmony in grey: / . . . The yellow fog came creeping down / The bridges, till the houses’ walls / Seemed changed to shadows.”³⁷ Perhaps the yellow of the

yellow nineties was not merely an allusion to the covers of unseemly French fiction, but also to this foul yellow fog.

Socialist writer and advocate of gay rights Edward Carpenter wrote just one year after “The Decay of Lying,” in his 1890 article “The Smoke-Plague and Its Remedy,” that the death rate in London increased significantly whenever the city was overtaken by a dense fog such as that described in Wilde’s poems. Carpenter saw in this increasingly common effluvium the sign of an anthropogenic nature: “There is a common impression that the climate of England is not so fair as it used to be in the good old times. What if there be a truth in this – that the climate is worse . . . and that we have made it so? After a careful study of the midland districts of England . . . I feel now next to no doubt that the continued cloud . . . is largely due to the continual presence of a thin film of smoke from our manufacturing centres.”³⁸ Both Carpenter and Wilde confronted the industrialized nature of the Victorian era as gay men, in the context of a cultural and linguistic community where the double meanings of “natural” could seem to align the values of nonhuman phenomenal reality with a categorical heteronormativity. Wilde responded to this knot of conceptual confusion with a performative ecophobia that ultimately undermined the Nature/Society binary and reenvisioned nature as an anthropogenic creation, but Carpenter went in the other direction. Like Walt Whitman before him, Carpenter presented homosexual love as “natural” in all senses of the word: as he wrote in his 1906 volume *Days with Walt Whitman*, Whitman’s work “upset all former and formal moralities, and exposed himself to the fiercest opposition; but some day . . . it will be seen that ‘Leaves of Grass’ is, perhaps of all books ever written, the most natural.”³⁹ If Carpenter naturalized queerness, Wilde queered nature.

Conclusion: Fin du Globe

The Anthropocene has warped our chronologies, lengthening temporal perspectives and asking us to view the present from the perspective of the future. “I wish it were *fin du globe*,” Dorian famously remarks in *Dorian Gray* (Wilde, *Dorian*, 209): a man born too soon.⁴⁰ Wilde’s novel offers a synopsis of such chronological distortion. Indeed, Wilde’s entire oeuvre, tragically shortened though it is, is full of similar figures of chronological disruption. Salome, the lead figure in Wilde’s 1891 play of the same name and perhaps the most ostentatiously decadent of all his characters, is a teenage girl in the space of transition from child to adult who draws the unwelcome sexual attention of her uncle/stepfather, Herod. At the climax

of the play, she dances the dance of the seven veils under a moon that “has become red as blood,” a figure for menstruation, before calling for the head of Iokanaan (John the Baptist) and kissing his severed head because “I was chaste, and [he] didst fill my veins with fire.”⁴¹ The play’s stylized narrative of the most perverse menarche of all time interweaves the moon and the female cycle to involve the natural world more forcefully in the deformed temporalities of Wilde’s decadent characters. Killed by order of Herod at the end of the play, Salome’s life is cut short at the very onset of sexual maturity and well before the process of adult decay sets in – a female Dorian, more explicitly linked to unnatural nature through the play’s obsessive lunar imagery. Nature in *Salome* is anything but natural, in other words, and Salome’s short life and violent death contain within them a big, Biblical epic of the human interpenetration with the natural world.

The socialist journal the *New Age* said in the opening column of its January 25, 1908, issue that a “serious symptom of decadence” is “the incapacity for long views.”⁴² Speaking specifically of Britain’s ruling Labour government, the editor diagnoses “a hectic flush of haste in all the present Cabinet’s work, as if they felt the hand of death” (242). Decadence means, in this passage, the sense of impending death that generates, paradoxically, a speeding up, a rushed feeling of haste that inhibits the “long view.” Ultimately, this is the legacy of the decadent 1890s for the Anthropocene: the era’s keen sense that civilization is in decline, that the downward trend has begun – a rushed, hectic slide. This affective-temporal mood was palpable across the domains of literature, politics, and art at the end of the nineteenth century, where *fin du globe* was everywhere evident in *fin de siècle*. Within Wilde’s career, we might read his major work of prison writing, *De Profundis*, as especially emblematic of this concentrated conceptual space: here the constrained space of imprisonment and the abbreviated temporal horizon of the sentence lend themselves, paradoxically, to considerations of great depth and scope (“*de profundis*” means “from the depths”). As Wilde wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas in this long, painful letter, “Of course I discern in all our relations, not Destiny merely, but Doom: Doom that walks always swiftly, because she goes to the shedding of blood.”⁴³

Notes

- 1 Karl Beckson, “Introduction” to *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890’s* (New York: Vintage, 1966), xii–xxii (xii).
- 2 Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying” (1889; 1891), in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, 5th ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), 1071–92 (1071).

- 3 The Anthropocene is the proposed term for a new geologic epoch characterized by indelible human impacts on Earth systems, including but not limited to anthropogenic climate change. Although used informally before its publication, the term “Anthropocene” is usually dated to Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000): 17–18.
- 4 For a daily measurement of atmospheric CO₂ levels in parts per million at Mauna Loa Observatory, Hawaii, see <https://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/carbon-dioxide>.
- 5 Arthur Symons, “Violet: I. Prelude” (1895), in *Poems*, vol. I (New York: John Lane, 1902): 85.
- 6 Theodore Wratishaw, “Hothouse Flowers,” from *Orchids* (London: Leonard Smithers), 23.
- 7 Matthew Potolsky offers a helpful historical orientation regarding the emergence of decadence: “As a literary movement with a name and a manifesto, decadence dates to 1886, when Anatole Baju published the first issue of his flagship journal *Le Décadent*”; Matthew Potolsky *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 3. As useful as the designator “decadent” is, it is a term, as Kristin Mahoney explains, that should be used advisedly given its history of negative connotations. *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 4.
- 8 See Elizabeth Hope Chang, *Novel Cultivations: Plants in British Literature of the Global Nineteenth Century* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019), ch 2; see also Dennis Denisoff, “The Dissipating Nature of Decadent Paganism from Pater to Yeats,” *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 3 (2008): 431–46 (432).
- 9 Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: Appleton, 1895), 317.
- 10 “Greenhouse gas effect” is the term that describes how heat-trapping gases such as carbon dioxide and methane produce global warming when released into the atmosphere.
- 11 “natural, adj. and adv.” OED Online. June 2021. Oxford University Press, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/125333?isAdvanced=false&result=3&rskey=ho7Cao&> (accessed July 7, 2021).
- 12 Benjamin Morgan, “Fin du Globe: On Decadent Planets,” *Victorian Studies* 58, no. 4 (Summer 2016): 609–35 (611).
- 13 Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2015), 180, 4.
- 14 See also John Bellamy Foster: “To be sure, the human relation to nature is less direct than that of other species since it is mediated by society, and society is the immediate human environment. But society has nature as its environment.” John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 241.
- 15 See also Dennis Denisoff’s *Decadent Ecology in British Literature and Art, 1860–1910* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), which

- understands decadent ecology as “disruptive interfusions among the natural, cultural, spiritual, and imaginative, as well as the individual and the collective” (32).
- 16 Jesse Oak Taylor, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2016), 18, 23. See also Heidi C. M. Scott, *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014). Scott notes that the term “greenhouse effect” was coined in 1937, but that scientific experiments and theories leading to this coinage, and reliant on the greenhouse concept, were conducted much earlier by scientists such as Joseph Fourier and John Tyndall.
 - 17 Svante Arrhenius, “On the Influence of Carbonic Acid in the Air upon the Temperature of the Ground,” *Philosophical Magazine and Journal of Science* (April 1896): 237–96 (237).
 - 18 On nineteenth-century Ice Age science and its role in Victorian scientific and literary culture, see Michael Thomas Gaffney, “The Birth of the Ice Age: On Narrative and Climate History in the Nineteenth Century,” *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 42, no. 2 (2021): 1–14.
 - 19 For recent work on the Anthropocene from the perspective of literary studies, see Jeremy Davies, *The Birth of the Anthropocene* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2016); and Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor, eds. *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).
 - 20 On the Capitalocene as an alternative framing to the Anthropocene, see Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (New York: Verso, 2016); or Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life*. Kathryn Yusoff, drawing on the work of Sylvia Wynter and other critical race theorists, argues instead for identifying the origin of the Anthropocene with colonial genocide in the Americas and the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade in the sixteenth century, since this is the point at which “Blackness becomes characterized through its ledger of matter” (35); Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). On the Plantationocene as a frame that centers exploited labor as well as large-scale agriculture and monocultural land use, see Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
 - 21 On scaling and periodization in the Anthropocene humanities, see, for example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (Winter 2009): 197–222; and “The Planet: An Emergent Humanist Category,” *Critical Inquiry* 46 (Autumn 2019): 1–31. For work in Victorian studies on this topic, see Benjamin Morgan, “After the Arctic Sublime,” *New Literary History* 47, no. 1 (2016): 1–26; and “Scale as Form: Thomas Hardy’s Rocks and Stars,” in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary*

- History in Geologic Times*, eds. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017): 132–49.
- 22 I take the concept of “slow violence” from Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011). For conceptions of “slow causality” as they came to be grasped within the Victorian scientific and cultural sphere, see Tina Young Choi and Barbara Leckie, “Slow Causality: The Function of Narrative in an Age of Climate Change,” *Victorian Studies* 60, no. 4 (Summer 2018): 565–87.
 - 23 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), ed. Norman Page (Peterborough: Broadview, 1998), 79.
 - 24 As Peter Brimblecombe explains, it was understood by the late Victorian period that “high levels of pollution . . . aid the formation of fog,” and that because of smoke pollution the fogs “were thicker, more frequent and of a different colour from those of the past”; Peter Brimblecombe, *The Big Smoke: A History of Air Pollution in London since Medieval Times* (London: Methuen, 1987), 109.
 - 25 Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History” 208.
 - 26 Attorney Edward Carson, after reading in court a passage from the novel where Basil Hallward confesses his adoration for Dorian, asked Wilde on the stand, “Do you mean to say that that passage describes the natural feeling of one man towards another?” Testimony of Oscar Wilde on Cross Examination, April 3, 1895. Douglas O. Linder, Famous Trials, <https://famous-trials.com/wilde/346-literarypart> (accessed July 8, 2021). On materialism and ecological thinking, see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx’s Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000).
 - 27 On materialism and aestheticism, see Benjamin Morgan, *The Outward Mind: Materialist Aesthetics in Victorian Science and Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017).
 - 28 As Bruno Latour puts it, in the era of global warming we see nature unexpectedly take on the role of active subject after having been evacuated of agency, objectified and turned into a “zombie atmosphere”; Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (Summer 2014): 1–18 (12, 13). For another version of this argument, see Sylvia Wynter’s discussion of “the West’s epochal historical rupture,” with the advent of colonialism and capitalism, in its thinking about the natural world: the “de-supernaturalization of the physical cosmos”; Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of Désêtre: Black Studies toward the Human Project,” in *Not Only the Master’s Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006), 107–72 (159). See also Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), for more on the politics of animacy.
 - 29 H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (London: Penguin, 2005), 7.

- 30 At the beginning of the novel, Dorian seems to be “little more than a lad, though he is really over twenty” (51). Soon the timescales of art and life are reversed and Dorian is frozen in time while his portrait ages without him. This eventuality is explained through the metaphor of the seasons: “when winter came upon [the portrait], he would still be standing where spring trembles on the verge of summer” (141). Lord Henry believes that “the lad was premature” and that “he was gathering his harvest while it was yet spring” (96). In other words, the passage of time in the novel is marked always by discrepancies among Dorian, the painting, and the natural world.
- 31 Danielle De Wolfe, “16 Things We Can Learn from Oscar Wilde” (July 2, 2014), <https://www.shortlist.com/news/16-things-we-can-learn-from-oscar-wilde>.
- 32 Rob Nixon, “All Tomorrow’s Warnings,” *Public Books*, <https://www.publicbooks.org/all-tomorrows-warnings> (accessed August 17, 2020).
- 33 Nils Bubandt, “Haunted Geologies: Spirits, Stones, and the Necropolitics of the Anthropocene,” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, eds. Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 121–41 (G135).
- 34 Katharine Anderson, *Predicting the Weather: Victorians and the Science of Meteorology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 2, 10.
- 35 Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 187–88.
- 36 Meteorological records indicate that “fog frequency appears to have reached a peak in the 1890s,” (Brimblecombe, *The Big Smoke*, 111).
- 37 Oscar Wilde, *Complete Poetry*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 142, 129. For a reading of Victorian poetry in the context of a dawning Victorian recognition of the power of nonhuman agencies and compromised anthropogenic mastery, see Devin Garofalo, “Victorian Lyric in the Anthropocene,” *Victorian Literature and Culture* 47, no. 4 (2019): 753–83.
- 38 Edward Carpenter, “The Smoke-Plague and Its Remedy,” *Macmillan’s* 62 (1890): 204–13 (207).
- 39 Edward Carpenter, *Days with Walt Whitman* (New York: Macmillan, 1906), 59–60.
- 40 Morgan notes that in manuscript, Wilde had originally used the phrase “fin du monde” before revising it to “fin du globe” – a suggestive revision (“Fin du Globe” 619).
- 41 Oscar Wilde, *Salome*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Isobel Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 300–29 (322, 328).
- 42 A. R. Orage, ed., “Notes of the Week,” *New Age* 2, no. 13 (January 25, 1908): 241–43 (242).
- 43 Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* 5th ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 2003), 980–1059 (995).