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Part of a growing body of scholarship interested in cosmopolitanism and cross-Channel connections, Matthew Potolsky’s *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* investigates the transnational affiliations forged by nineteenth-century decadence. Like Regenia Gagnier’s recent *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of the Part to the Whole, 1859-1920* (Palgrave, 2010), Potolsky’s book explores decadent writers’ critiques of the nation and attention to alternative forms of attachment. What is new in Potolsky’s work is his focus on decadent writers’ debt to tropes of republican politics. Drawing on recent work on republicanism, he argues that these pan-European writers—Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, Walter Pater, Charles Algernon Swinburne, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Oscar Wilde—fashioned a “decadent republic of letters” bound by taste rather than national affiliation. His comparative approach draws attention to specifically international and counter-national aspects of the decadent movement, whose artists so frequently invoked foreign artistic traditions in mocking their own nations’ complacency.

Potolsky begins by discarding the stylistic and thematic definitions of decadence offered by contemporary figures like Paul Bourget and Arthur Symons, presenting the movement instead
as “a consciously adopted and freely adapted literary stance” and “a characteristic mode of reception” (4). “Works are ‘decadent,’” he asserts, “not because they realize a doctrine or make use of certain styles and themes, but because they move within a recognizable network of canonical books, pervasive influences, recycled stories, erudite commentaries, and shared tastes” (5). Potolsky suggests that these acts of creative reception produced a new, cosmopolitan community of readers and writers. In borrowing from, expanding on, and locating themselves within a network of texts, he proposes, the decadents constructed “a new and more amenable imagined community … composed of like-minded readers and writers scattered around the world and united by the production, circulation, and reception of art and literature” (6).

The first two chapters focus on Baudelaire’s poetry and prose and on later writers’ responses to Baudelaire. While Potolsky acknowledges Baudelaire’s anti-democratic turn after the Revolutions of 1848, his first chapter uncovers a “classically republican valorization of civic virtue” that runs throughout Baudelaire’s body of work. In his critiques of bourgeois liberalism, Potolsky suggests, Baudelaire consistently conceives of art as a public good rather than private property and imagines a community of outsiders (embodied by the dandy and the flâneur) who embody “the necessary function of beauty in public life” (31). The third chapter explores the ways in which later writers relied on republican tropes in their development of this vision of aesthetic sociability. Gautier’s “Notice” to the 1868 edition of Les Fleurs du mal (1857) draws upon the Athenian epideictic genre of the funeral oration in order to refigure Baudelaire as “a warrior for the poetic ideal” who suffered “in the service of an emerging dissident community” (48), and Swinburne’s elegy for Baudelaire, “Ave atque Vale” (1868), utilizes the key classical republican trope of brotherhood in order to present Baudelaire as a revolutionary hero. In
memorializing Baudelaire as a martyr for his art, Potolsky claims, these writers also construct an “incipient republic of letters” made up of outsiders, exceptions, and rebels (62).

In his third and fourth chapters, Potolsky explores decadent critiques of the nation. Chapter three considers one of the most recognizable features of decadent literature: the collection. Scholars have long noted the significance of collecting within decadent literature, but Potolsky importantly presents these eccentric collections as critiques of the national collections exemplified by the national museum and their ideological counterpart, the national artistic canon. “International, idiosyncratic, and manifestly artificial,” he explains, “these collections stand as an affront to purportedly organic national traditions in their design and their preoccupations” (37).

Of particular interest to Potolsky are the queer canon of Renaissance painters that Pater develops in *Studies of the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and the library of perverse works collected by the character Des Esseintes in Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884), both of which he reads as cosmopolitan countercanons that “mirror the logic of national canon formation but deliberately foreground the constructed nature of such traditions” (76). Potolsky ends the chapter with a reading of mimetic canonization in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and Michael Field’s *Sight and Song* (1892). He argues that Wilde constructs himself as a decadent writer by presenting Dorian as “a hero who becomes decadent by reading a decadent book and imitating its hero” (97), and that Michael Field constructs “a specifically female decadence” by grafting “female and lesbian perspectives” onto male-authored decadent texts (99, 98).

In its examination of how decadent depictions of student-teacher relationships critiqued emerging nationalist pedagogies, the fourth chapter functions as a kind of counterpart to the third chapter. Writing at a time when universal education was heralded as a way to “foster national cohesion” (104), Potolsky asserts, decadents made “education a central trope in their subversive
attack on the form of the nation” (17). Central to his argument are decadent writers’ appropriations of the libertine tradition, particularly the sexual contract. In their stories of domination and submission, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Rachilde, and Vernon Lee show “teachers and students agreeing to pedagogical contracts that mock the liberal theory of the social contract” (17-18). In the second part of the chapter, Potolsky revisits the work of Pater and Wilde, arguing that Marius the Epicurean (1885) and Dorian Gray present an ideal education as “an aesthetic self-culture that may be stimulated, but never fully directed, from above” (18). Of particular interest is Potolsky’s reading of Dorian as complicit in his own corruption. It has become something of a commonplace to read Dorian as the victim of Lord Henry and/or the “yellow book,” and Potolsky interestingly presents Dorian as “a model collaborator” who actively responds to Lord Henry’s influence (125).

In his fifth chapter, Potolsky moves to three works that he believes epitomize the “republic of letters” imagined by decadents: Lee’s history of the Renaissance Euphorion (1884), Pater’s unfinished historical novel Gaston de Latour (1888), and Aubrey Beardsley’s unfinished pornographic novel The Story of Venus and Tannhäuser (1896). Drawing on Michael Warner’s theorization of a “public” as “a relationship among friends or strangers constituted by the circulation of discourse” (133), Potolsky argues that each of these works construct a “counterpublic” against the dominant public of the nation. Lee’s history presents the Renaissance as “an age marked by the circulation, hybridization, and contamination of cultural and political forms” that is made possible by the “radical instability” of the city-state (136); Pater’s protagonist, Gaston, imagines an artistic and literary community in terms of the Pentecost, transforming the Holy Spirit into a “nameless impulse” and the tongues of flame into “versions of the ‘hard, gem-like-flame’” described by Pater (145); and Beardsley’s depiction of an
underground community in which performers are literally consumed by their audience “builds an address to the decadent counterpublic into its very composition” (18).

In his Postscript, Potolsky returns once again to memorialization of Baudelaire, this time focusing on Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire” (1877). Whereas nineteenth-century readers of Baudelaire described monstrous flowers and exotic landscapes, Mallarmé presents him as “the archetypal urban poet” (165). Potolsky argues that this difference reflects a “break from the decadent repudiation of modernity and a move toward a more inclusive notion of the relationship between poets and their audiences” (19). In describing Baudelaire in terms of public works like sewers, street lamps, and cemeteries, he suggests, Mallarmé claims Baudelaire “not as an outcast writing for other outcasts but as a foundation for the broader community” (165).

While particularly pertinent for scholars of British and French decadence, A Decadent Republic of Letters should also be of interest to those working on nineteenth-century aesthetics, republicanism, and cosmopolitanism. Whereas most studies of decadence (with a few notable exceptions) have situated decadent texts within national traditions, A Decadent Republic of Letters re-orient decadence around the creative reception of an international body of shared texts. In presenting decadence as a set of practices—as different forms of creative appropriation—rather than a movement demarcated by stylistic features or national identifiers, Potolsky not only demonstrates the decadents’ engagement with what Bruce Robbins has termed “attachment at a distance” (qtd. in Potolsky 32), he also persuasively argues that the decadents’ “republic of letters” anticipated the virtual communities and counterpublics of today.

Biographical Information:
Carrie Dickison is a Ph.D. Candidate in English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her dissertation, “Curating the Object: Art Collection and Connoisseurship in the Long Nineteenth Century,” explores the nineteenth-century culture of objects through literary depictions of art collecting.