

### Reading Aestheticism, Decadence, and Cosmopolitanism

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Late Victorian into Modern

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter traces the development of cosmopolitan and transnational sensibilities later emphasized by twentieth-century writers such as Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster. Ranging from Anglo-American aesthetes including Oscar Wilde, Henry James, Walter Pater, and Michael Field to French Decadents like Charles Baudelaire and Joris-Karl Huysmans, the chapter demonstrates the *Zeitgeist*'s dependence on what Conrad called 'the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation'. Style, synaesthesia, and ekphrasis were among the tools writers employed to emphasize the multivalent nature of their politics and aesthetics. In doing so, however, they hearkened back to the politicized aesthetics underscored earlier in the nineteenth century in the works of John Ruskin, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels. Current critical practice shares many of the concerns of these writers: it is therefore necessary to preserve modes of reading that attend to stifled, marginalized voices because of the salutary socio-political lessons they can teach our discipline.

Keywords: aestheticism, cosmopolitanism, Henry James, Baudelaire, Decadence, travel, distant reading, sensory modernism, Oscar Wilde, E. M. Forster

One of the uncanny things about reading is that it can feel a lot like travelling. And so, just like that, we get carried away. To read is to be transported somewhere else. How we go and where we go depends on a sacred contract between strangers, an intimate pact between an author and a reader who consents to be carried away. Being kidnapped by a book is perhaps one of the greatest pleasures there is. For many readers, travelling in place is a strange but familiar sensation. Reading is a rapture that ultimately leaves us physically unmoved even though a book may move us intellectually or emotionally. So the act of reading hinges on a paradox: we can be cosmopolitans without ever leaving the library. When we look up from the page, we are still where we were when we started. Though nothing has changed, everything seems different. We have visited another time and place. That's why we talk about the uncanny feeling of being carried away by a book or 'enraptured by reading', as J. Hillis Miller puts it.<sup>1</sup>

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Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century aesthetes and decadents were especially attuned to this paradoxical feeling, and sought out its peculiar forms of transport. Take Oscar Wilde, for instance. A French contemporary of Wilde's remembered him as someone who 'believed he was living in Italy during the Renaissance, or in Greece at the time of Socrates', not in England under Queen Victoria.<sup>2</sup> One reason for this was that Wilde had been thoroughly trained in classics at Trinity College Dublin before he arrived to take his second undergraduate degree at Oxford. There he fell under the spell of the classicist Walter Pater whose 1873 *Studies in the History* (p. 482) of the Renaissance invites and even encourages literary rapture. Here is Pater describing reading the Italian Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola:

To read a page of one of Pico's forgotten books is like a glance into one of those ancient sepulchres, upon which the wanderer in classical lands has sometimes stumbled, with the old disused ornaments and furniture of a world wholly unlike ours still fresh in them.<sup>3</sup>

This quotation encapsulates a way of reading and of seeing the world that was formative for Wilde's generation as well as later aesthetes and decadents. When we encounter beauty in any form, the key questions we need to ask, according to Pater, are these:

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?<sup>4</sup>

With these questions, Pater laid down some of the central principles of aesthetic criticism—which is to say critical appreciation of any beautiful object. But he also gives us a way of thinking about ourselves in relation to art, literature, and culture that is immensely valuable because it acknowledges and sanctions the vital importance these experiences have on us. In other words, it invites us to feel, meditate, and reflect on where we go when we are enraptured or carried away.

Like us, characters in later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fiction were prone to get carried away by their reading. Like Wilde, they became time-travelling cosmopolitans because of it. In Henry James's 1890 novel *The Tragic Muse*, Gabriel Nash (another Oxford-trained aesthete and reader of Pater) denies that he lives in London and in the nineteenth century. 'I drift, I float,' he says.<sup>5</sup> I am only in London, Nash concedes, 'when I'm not at Samarcand!'<sup>6</sup>—the fabled city now in Uzbekistan. And James himself was susceptible to such literary transports. In the early 1900s, while preparing the Preface to the New York edition of his novel, he drifted back to late 1880s Paris, where he had written part of it. 'Re-reading the last chapters of *The Tragic Muse*, I catch again the very odour of Paris, which comes up in the rich rumble of the Rue de la Paix—with which my room itself, for that matter, seems impregnated.'<sup>7</sup> What did it mean to read this way in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? And why did aesthetes and decadents seek out the pleasures this sort of reading offers? What did it do to them? In what follows, I will explore the importance of this phenomenon (p. 483) and consider the cultural and political

significance of these historically contingent forms of reading. My subject, then, is the feeling that certain kinds of reading provoked around the turn of the century. The main question I want to let hover over what follows is this one: Why did these feelings become so significant at a historical moment punctuated by debates over race, ethnicity, and nationhood; rising anti-Semitism; ethnic cleansing and the Dreyfus Affair; international conflicts including the Anglo-Zulu War (1879), the Second Afghan War (1878–80), the Anglo-Egyptian War (1882), the Boer War (1899–1902), the First World War (1914–18), and the Anglo-Irish War (1919–21)?

### A solidarity of the senses

Charles Baudelaire's seminal 1863 essay collection, *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, articulates many of the principles that have come to define modernity. Baudelaire's sketches form a *catalogue raisonné* ranging from modern manners to the man of the world. On the question of cosmopolitanism—of what it is, what it does, what it feels like—he tells us this:

To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate, impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define.<sup>8</sup>

The hero of Baudelaire's reflections is the person who survives the onslaught of urban modernity. He does this, Baudelaire says, by becoming 'a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness'.<sup>9</sup> In every interaction, he melts into the flickering life around him and explains it, Baudelaire says, 'in pictures more living than life itself'. Aesthetic cosmopolitanism often articulates itself through the senses. It is no surprise, then, to find that aesthetes and decadents sought out the pleasures this sort of reading offers.

For the sound of cosmopolitanism, we turn to poetry. So, for instance, the English aunt and niece collectively known under the pen-name Michael Field tell us that their 1892 poetry collection, *Sight and Song*, aims to 'translate into verse what the lines and colours of certain chosen pictures sing in themselves'.<sup>10</sup> Their poems achieved this through jewel-like descriptions of Italian paintings ranging from Tintoretto to Bellini. The collection does something more, however: it is a travel guide for English readers and, as such, acts as a Baedeker to beauty. This is because the location of every painting that inspired these ekphrastic poems is given as part (p. 484) of their title. So via their verse-pictures, these poems take readers from the Louvre to the Accademia of Venice and beyond.

Of the *fin-de-siècle* novelists, perhaps Joseph Conrad comes closest to what Pater had in mind when he wrote that 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'.<sup>11</sup> Conrad's aesthetic manifesto, his 1897 Preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, is imbued with his experience of foreignness and indebted to Paterian literary impressionism. The artist, Conrad writes, speaks to our shared sense of beauty, as well as 'to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation; and to the subtle but invincible conviction of soli-

darity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts: to that solidarity ... which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity'.<sup>12</sup>

Cosmopolitans, too, were bound each to each by their lonely hearts. And even when alone decadent cosmopolitans found fulfilment by seeking out experiences that would stimulate their senses. More often than not, this meant multi-sensory experiences recorded in a style that privileged a jewelled diction and lavish syntactical pile-ups. The first paragraph of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) exemplifies this mode. The decadent Lord Henry watches as 'the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid jade-faced painters of Tokio who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion'.<sup>13</sup> Here Lord Henry's multi-sensory impressions are mirrored in Wilde's style and his combination of artistic forms. In this staging of Lord Henry's impressions, the curtained window 'is at once a picture frame and a stage set for the action'.<sup>14</sup> Part of that action is Lord Henry's cerebral voyage from London to Tokyo and back, a flight of fancy prompted by the birds fluttering across the imported silk curtains. Lord Henry's intellectual pilgrimage pays homage to another signal moment of synaesthetic decadent cosmopolitanism: the aborted voyage to London undertaken in the golden book of decadence, Joris-Karl Huysmans's 1884 novel *À rebours*. This is the poisonous book that Dorian Gray buys nine copies of in Paris. While reading one of them, Dorian feels that Huysmans's decadent hero embodies all the 'moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed'.<sup>15</sup> Here again, Wilde's own (p. 485) book mirrors his character's impression of another book. Indeed, Chapter 11 of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offers an admiring, abbreviated pastiche of Huysmans's novel.

In *À rebours*, Des Esseintes, the reclusive hero, contemplates leaving France to escape the corrosive ennui from which he suffers. Reading Dickens has given him exciting 'visions of English life' so he plans to travel to England to find fresh sensations.<sup>16</sup> He forces himself out of his suburban refuge and, en route to England, stops in a Parisian tavern, where he feels as if he is already in London. Around him, people are talking about the weather and eating rumpsteak pie, just like in England. To Des Esseintes, the people have become Dickensian characters. Living fictions seem to step from the page: *Bleak House*'s Mr Tulkinghorn and *David Copperfield*'s Mr Wickfield seem to appear before him in the flesh. 'Wasn't he in London now, surrounded by London's smells, atmosphere, inhabitants, food, utensils?' Huysmans asks. Going to England would only be a disappointment. 'I've seen what I wanted to experience and see', our armchair cosmopolitan reasons, 'I've been steeped in English life, I would be insane to risk losing, by an ill-advised journey, these unforgettable impressions'.<sup>17</sup> So Des Esseintes goes home. By living through English literature, his English voyage has reached its terminus *ad quem* while still in Paris.

Late nineteenth-century French and English decadent writings often make the eyes gateways to the other senses. These texts privilege sight even when working synaesthetically on characters and readers. More often than not, what we talk about when we talk about aesthetic cosmopolitanism is the way it *looks*. The priorities of today's critics map neatly

onto the *fin-de-siècle*'s obsession with visual culture. This suggests the dominance of 'surface reading'—the descriptive mode described by its proponents as 'immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value)'.<sup>18</sup> Yet alongside this critical approach, we need to preserve modes of 'suspicious' and 'symptomatic' reading, as well as theoretical interventions that pride themselves on lip-reading and listening to stifled voices.<sup>19</sup> To completely abandon these kinds of 'symptomatic reading' would be to discard the salutary and redemptive socio-political capacities of our discipline, and of the humanities.

(p. 486) This form of reading enables us to give a different quality of attention to the letters of the young Henry James, for example. In his fiction James was almost as closeted as could be, but he carefully used his cosmopolitanism to signal his allegiances. So on his first visit to Italy, the twenty-six-year old marvelled at the good looks of the sunlit Italian men he saw 'screaming—bare-chested, bare-legged, magnificently tanned and muscular'.<sup>20</sup> These Italian men, the young Henry told his older brother, the psychologist William James, 'are a very effective lot'. James was not often this unguarded about what turned him on, though he remained a champion gossip and flirt.<sup>21</sup> He had a horror of blackmail, and took steps to protect himself, steps that included building backyard bonfires where letters served as tinder and burned with a hard, gem-like flame.

Though James lived most of his life in Europe, his cosmopolitan credentials are engraved on his tombstone at Cambridge, Massachusetts: he was a 'citizen of two countries and interpreter of his generation on both sides of the sea'. The critic for *The Yellow Book* described James's cosmopolitanism as a cold affair, and accused him of being undemonstrative of 'love, both for his own countrymen and for England'.<sup>22</sup> This description owes more to perceptions of James's attitude to love and sex—which he called 'zoological sociability'<sup>23</sup>—than to the warmth of his feeling for internationalism. To be a cosmopolitan, James explains in his 1886 novel, *The Princess Casamassima*, is to be 'exempt from every prejudice'.<sup>24</sup> It doesn't spare one from the disappointment of not finding the real world as satisfying as its fictional representations, as a young aesthete discovers in one of James's early comic tales. In Paris, this American complains, 'I never meet those opportunities that we hear about and read about—the things that happen to people in novels and biographies'.<sup>25</sup>

James used cosmopolitanism as a shorthand for a sensual solidarity he could hardly speak of. It became symbolic of sympathies that were, in the nineteenth century, unutterable. In 1877, he met the reformer and historian of homosexuality John Addington Symonds. James bragged about the encounter in a letter to his brother and also mentioned he had visited London's Cosmopolitan Club. But it would be seven years before James wrote to Symonds himself. In this letter, we listen to James's niceties about Symonds's writings on Italy, and hear him (p. 487) confess his 'unspeakably tender passion' for the place.<sup>26</sup> 'I wanted to recognize this', James explains, emphasizing the point. What does James really want to recognize? That they both care about Italy? Certainly. But Italy is also a symbol that demands recognition. Within a few years of James's letter, Symonds's 1883 pamphlet, *A Problem in Greek Ethics: Being an Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion*, was being passed from hand to hand among a circle of sexually curious, mostly ho-

mosexual, men.<sup>27</sup> James's library contained almost all of Symonds's works. 'It seemed to me,' James wrote to Symonds, 'that the victims of a common passion should sometimes exchange a look.'<sup>28</sup> Perhaps they looked to Italy together because they could not speak—homosexuality was not decriminalized in Britain until 1967. What James doesn't give voice to, what he doesn't say, could be encoded in the language of cosmopolitanism.

## Fear and desire

Cosmopolitans in this period read in unusual ways that affected their relationship to the real world. Aesthetic and decadent cosmopolitanism differs from the usual models of national belonging which often defined international affiliations in the period.<sup>29</sup> By purchasing Victorian periodicals, like *The Cosmopolitan*, *The Yellow Book*, or *Cosmopolis*, readers gained a purchase on something that defined their way of being in the world.<sup>30</sup> Decadent print cultures challenged national models of identity and replaced them with new forms of community: 'a republic of nothing but letters' composed from a 'cosmopolitan constellation of books and readers.'<sup>31</sup>

But as desirable as this might have been to some, it struck fear in others. How was the aesthetic cosmopolitan perceived by those who were not members of his tribe? Two fin-de-siècle novels published within a few years of each other give us a clear sense of his ambivalent reception. As such they capture the structure of feeling cosmopolitans generated. George Du Maurier's 1894 bestseller, *Trilby*, gives us a British opera diva and her mesmeric Jewish mentor. Conversely, Henry James's 1890 novel *The Tragic Muse* tells the story of a Jewish opera diva and her English mentors.

Du Maurier made cosmopolitanism the signature of *Trilby*'s most sinister character. 'He went by the name of Svengali, and spoke fluent French with a German (p. 488) accent.'<sup>32</sup> Svengali is 'so offensive to the normal Englishman', Du Maurier writes, that he compels his narrator to become the provincial reader's friend. 'I will translate him into English,' he promises, reassuring the English reader that he will omit Svengali's accent because it transforms 'a pretty language into an ugly one'.<sup>33</sup> Du Maurier's anti-cosmopolitanism was well-judged and contributed to the novel's success. By comforting the provincial English reader, Du Maurier also performed an intellectual and emotional lowering that spoke to rising anti-Semitic sentiment in Britain. From the 1880s onwards, the frequency and severity of anti-Jewish massacres in Eastern Europe led to an unprecedented influx of Jewish immigrants to Britain. Negative feelings towards these fifty thousand new arrivals led to the restrictions of the 1905 Aliens Act. Still, the pogroms continued unrestricted into the 1920s.

In *Howards End* (1910), E. M. Forster gives us this protective foreign policy in miniature by turning it into a domestic one. The novel's cosmopolitan heroines—the Anglo-German Schlegel sisters—open their doors to foreigners of all sorts, from bearded musicians to German cousins and *louche* 'acquaintances picked up at Continental hotels'.<sup>34</sup> This alarms their parochial English aunt, and her response captures the flutter of fear over alien inva-

sion that Du Maurier successfully exploits. In Forster's novel, the individual English home becomes a synecdoche for the nation at large in the early twentieth century.

While in *Trilby* cosmopolitanism could stand for a repugnant foreignness, in *The Tragic Muse* it represented something certain middle-class English people strived for. In the opening chapter, the parochial Biddy Dormer meets the enigmatic aesthete Gabriel Nash. She would have taken him for 'very foreign', James writes, except for the fact that he speaks English. Biddy wonders how Nash 'seemed to draw rich effects and wandering airs from [his English]—to modulate and manipulate it as he would have done a musical instrument'.<sup>35</sup> James plays on the cosmopolitan's 'wandering airs' to insinuate his kinship to wandering Jews. Like Du Maurier with his mesmerizing Svengali, James wants us to notice the musical quality of the cosmopolitan's voice. And he wants us to detect that, like music, this voice can transport us in ways that are apt to thrill and terrify. There is another reason Biddy, the simple English girl, responds in this way: Gabriel Nash is loosely based on Oscar Wilde, James's Irish frenemy, and Wilde's cultivated English accent was known to wander. How does Biddy feel when she meets Nash? She fears that 'she should pass with this easy cosmopolite for a stiff, scared, English girl, which was not the type she aimed at'. That may not be what Biddy wants to be, but it is who she is. 'He won't hurt us,' her brother reassures her. 'On the contrary he'll do us good.'<sup>36</sup> Several hundred (p. 489) pages later, the cultural tonic has worked and the provincial Biddy marries a cosmopolitan English diplomat.

The examples of Du Maurier's Svengali and James's Nash illustrate how cosmopolitanism functions as a crucible of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century fear and desire. They combine a fear-inducing foreign element with an aspirational programme of higher culture and sophistication. So what I'm suggesting is this: in this period, cosmopolitanism is a paradox that pulls in two different directions (one about phobia, the other about fetishizing). This is surprising because cosmopolitanism, at its root, is not beset by such divergent tensions. The word cosmopolitanism combines the word *cosmos* (from the Greek for the universe, an ordered and harmonious system) and the *polis* (the ideal city state). Literally and metaphorically, cosmopolitanism contains a kind of harmony of the spheres.

## The voice of cosmopolitanism

Part of the paradox of cosmopolitanism is that it speaks in multiple accents and voices. *Salome*, the play Oscar Wilde wrote in 1891, is one of the best instances of this kind of performed and performative aesthetic cosmopolitanism. Its content and history are closely intertwined. *Salome* is important, as Julia Prewitt Brown notes, because 'Wilde was the first of the extraordinary line of Irish-European playwrights who helped fashion modernist European drama'.<sup>37</sup> As Katherine Worth observes, in this play 'written by an Irishman living out of Dublin and writing in French,' it is as if Wilde 'were holding out his hand across fifty years to Beckett'.<sup>38</sup>

Wilde reimagined the New Testament stories of the seductive daughter of Herodias dancing before her stepfather, Herod, and demanding the head of John the Baptist. When Jokannan (John the Baptist) first sees Salome he cautions her, 'speak not to me. I will not listen to thee, I listen but to the voice of the Lord God'.<sup>39</sup> Jokanaan's provocation spurs her on and Salome's mission becomes nothing less than redeeming the experience of being a female in a society that does not listen to its women. So she speaks the only language in which she knows she will be acknowledged, using her sexuality and her body to make herself heard. In the end, she removes her mask in triumph. It was all a ruse, she tells Jokannan's severed head. 'Thou didst treat me as a harlot, as a wanton, me, Salome,' she crows in her penultimate speech.<sup>40</sup>

To make Salome interesting as more than a sex object, Wilde needed to endow her with an inner life that would be progressively revealed to the audience through her words and actions. By setting up the drama in this fashion, he succeeded in (p. 490) making Salome's psychology actual and relevant to late nineteenth-century ideas about women's relationships to gender ideology and their increasingly vocal demands for equality. In 1890, a year before he began composing *Salome*, Wilde extolled the harmonizing powers of cosmopolitanism. To be cosmopolitan was to view the world critically, to read it deeply, and to question it. He explained his position thus:

It is Criticism that makes us cosmopolitan ... It is only by the cultivation of the habit of intellectual criticism that we shall be able to rise superior to race-prejudices ... Criticism will annihilate race-prejudices, by insisting upon the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms ... The change will of course be slow, and people will not be conscious of it. They will not say 'We will not war against France because her prose is perfect,' but because the prose of France is perfect, they will not hate the land. Intellectual criticism will bind Europe together in bonds far closer than those that can be forged by shopman or sentimentalist ... How little we have of this [cosmopolitan] temper in England, and how much we need it! <sup>41</sup>

Across the Channel, in the pages of *Le Figaro*, even the French nationalist Maurice Barrès admitted 'we are certainly moving towards a culture that will be more cosmopolitan than national'.<sup>42</sup> But he soon turned chauvinist again: he claimed one could find in French literature all of the nuances that readers thought they discovered in foreigners. 'In fact, even the anxious quasi-epileptic compassion that we love in Dostoyevsky (and in Dickens)' already exists in French literature, Barrès argued.<sup>43</sup>

By the summer of 1892, the French actress Sarah Bernhardt had come to England to play *Salome* in French. Rehearsals were underway. Suddenly, the play was denied a licence by the censor. With *Salome* hanging in the balance, Wilde also suspended his nationality. 'I am not at present an Englishman', Wilde told the Parisian reporter for *Le Gaulois*, while awaiting the censor's final verdict.<sup>44</sup> 'I am an Irishman, which is by no means the same thing', Wilde explained. Though it was an awkward position, it was entirely consistent with his theory of cosmopolitanism. 'If the Censure refuses *Salome*', Wilde said, 'I

shall leave England and settle in France, where I will take out letters of naturalization. I will not consent to call myself a citizen of a country that shows such narrowness in its artistic judgment.’<sup>45</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, cosmopolitanism meant freedom. It liberated the artist from ‘the service of religion, conventional morality, party politics, diplomacy, patriotism, the state or any of the other forces which try to reduce art to a means to (p. 491) their ends’.<sup>46</sup> Art for art’s sake did not mean that art should necessarily be divorced from these ideals. But it emancipated art from the forced marriage it had often had to endure with them. Wilde’s position gives us a sense of the reasons why cosmopolitanism began to be resented, feared even, despite its attractions. Rooted in art rather than in the nation, Wilde’s cosmopolitanism demonstrates the advantages and the disadvantages of the mode: art flowers in rooted cosmopolitanism, but these roots can easily be transplanted elsewhere. The province of the mind is eminently transportable. This was more than a pose. It was a politics. This legacy resonates in twentieth-century literature as well.

## Seeing the universe: Prose, politics and passion

In one of her most important chapters on the state of early modernist writing, ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown’, Virginia Woolf observes that ‘the men and women who began writing novels in 1910 or thereabouts had this great difficulty to face—that there was no *English* novelist living from whom they could learn their business’.<sup>47</sup> This was less of a problem for the writer who published *Howards End* in 1910—a novel conspicuously absent from Woolf’s chapter. Though E. M. Forster was a cosmopolitan aesthete, he nevertheless remained a deeply English novelist even when he criticized his countrymen. His cosmopolitanism proposes itself as an alternative to knee-jerk nationalism and offers independence from petty patriotism. ‘No national character is complete’, Forster writes in his ‘Notes on the English Character’.<sup>48</sup> ‘We have to look for some qualities in one part of the world and others in another.’ Here, Forster sounds like Wilde a few decades earlier, arguing that the major benefit of cosmopolitanism is its insistence on ‘the unity of the human mind in the variety of its forms’.<sup>49</sup>

*Howards End* shows us how nineteenth-century aesthetic cosmopolitanism carried over into the twentieth century. The novel pits the liberal, cultured, imaginative Anglo-German Schlegel sisters, Margaret and Helen, against the imperialist, business-minded Wilcoxes. Wedged between these two factions is Leonard Bast, a weak-hearted autodidact. The Schlegels’ objective is to help in humanity’s ‘building of the rainbow bridge that will connect the prose in us with the passion’.<sup>50</sup> Why? Because the bridge spans life with beauty. Without this bridge, Forster warns, ‘we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man’.<sup>51</sup>

(p. 492) Before 1914, the growing British hostility towards Germany due to trade rivalry and the mounting possibility of military conflict gave rise to nervousness and antagonism. We can count as a bridge-building effort the very fact that Forster decided to make the novel's well-intentioned heroines, the Schlegel sisters, Anglo-German, but not 'Germans of the dreadful sort'. Still, they are viewed with suspicion by the English Wilcoxes. Margaret's chrysanthemums are sniffed at for being too exotic to be suitable flowers for a funeral. 'She isn't really English', the youngest Wilcox explains. 'She's a cosmopolitan', the eldest Wilcox, Charles, adds.<sup>52</sup> 'I cannot stand them, and a German cosmopolitan is the limit.' Charles Wilcox represents the imperial type expanding England's reach to encompass the world but annihilating everything he touches. 'He is a destroyer,' Forster explains. 'He prepares the way for cosmopolitanism, and though his ambitions may be fulfilled, the earth that he inherits will be grey.'<sup>53</sup>

Cosmopolitanism is not innocuous, Forster reminds us when he sends Margaret Schlegel to visit her husband to be, Henry Wilcox, at the London offices of the Imperial and West African Rubber Company. On his company's map, the world appears quartered and hung. On closer inspection of it, Margaret notices that Africa looks 'like a whale marked out for blubber'.<sup>54</sup> She shrinks back. 'Imperialism always had been one of her difficulties', the narrator tells us. It's worth pausing to worry with Margaret Schlegel for two reasons. First, because imperialism is also one of the difficulties that besets Forster's oeuvre, as post-colonial critics of *A Passage to India* (1924) have underscored. And second, because imperialism also haunts cosmopolitanism. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels pointed this out in *The Communist Manifesto*'s discussion of the 'cosmopolitan character' of modern consumption (about which there will be more to say momentarily).<sup>55</sup> Margaret knows that cosmopolitanism can be mistaken for imperialism—a lesson that should not be lost on us in this great age of global and multinational trade.

So what makes Schlegel cosmopolitanism better than Wilcox imperialism? For Forster, it is the fact that it is activated by the binding force of love.<sup>56</sup> What is heroic in the Anglo-German Schlegels is that, even though their bridge-building fails, they are *trying* to build a link between themselves and the world around them. Forster gently mocks their idealism though he shares much of it, like a parent teasing a beloved child whose imperfections he shares. Forster gives us a rooted cosmopolitanism that carefully negotiates art, politics, and ethics. The literary critic and political theorist Frederic Jameson put it nicely when he described Forster as 'both moral and aesthetic all at once' because he offers 'an aesthetic pattern of relationships that (p. 493) confirms it as a social reality'.<sup>57</sup> And there have been other important ways of thinking about what such feelings can do. The political scientist Benedict Anderson has given us the expression 'imagined community', to describe the feeling of shared values and aims, while the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has given us the phrase 'community of sentiment' to describe how imagining and feeling things together enables a group to take collective action.<sup>58</sup>

In the last part of this chapter, I want to suggest that Forster's aesthetic cosmopolitanism enables a politically engaged take on modernity of the kind enacted by James and Wilde and more recently theorized by Anderson and Appadurai. What I mean by this is that, in

## Reading Aestheticism, Decadence, and Cosmopolitanism

*Howards End*, cosmopolitanism is both an aesthetic and a political proposition. Read this way, the novel's well-known epigraph—'Only connect ...'—sounds in tune with the upheavals of the twentieth century. By 1936, Forster's injunction became urgent. That year, the Spanish Civil War broke out. Nazi Germany violated the Treaty of Versailles and occupied the Rhineland. Stalin initiated the Great Purge in the Soviet Union. Forster didn't mince his words. 'The nations must understand one another, and quickly; and without the interposition of their governments,' he said, underlining the conciliatory power of art.<sup>59</sup>

How, then, do we take up Forster's directive to 'only connect'? One of the ways in which his cosmopolitans connect is through conversations about art. Here is Margaret trying to do it with Leonard when they meet, for the first time, at a Beethoven concert: 'Do you think music is so different to pictures? ... What is the good of the Arts if they're interchangeable? What is the good of the ear that tells you the same as the eye?' Forster emphasizes what Leonard feels in this moment. 'Oh, to acquire culture! Oh, to pronounce foreign names correctly!' he sighs. Margaret's incomprehensibility arouses profound cravings in him. Leonard is envious of the Schlegels for being cultivated, for having the leisure 'to see life steadily and to see it whole'.<sup>60</sup>

Margaret has probably read Marx and Engels and the art critic John Ruskin and much more besides. Forster owned at least three of Ruskin's books, including a fine morocco-bound edition of *The Stones of Venice*, a mid-Victorian manual of public taste that aligns architecture and morality, and was republished in the early 1880s in a travellers' edition targeted at tourists. The art historian Kenneth Clark said it was impossible to read *The Stones of Venice* 'without a thrill, without a sudden resolution to reform the world'.<sup>61</sup> And so it is with Ruskin's great book that Leonard sets out to capture a bit of the cosmopolitanism he longs for. In Chapter 6 of *Howards* (p. 494) *End*, we sit with Leonard as he reads *The Stones of Venice*. As he reads the chapter on Torcello, a Venetian island he will never visit, Leonard reflects reverently, 'the rich man is speaking to us from his gondola'.<sup>62</sup> But Leonard cannot connect with *The Stones of Venice*, though he admires Ruskin's 'voice in the gondola ... piping melodiously ... full of beauty, full even of sympathy and the love of men'.<sup>63</sup> Leonard cannot travel to Venice literally or intellectually. He is no armchair cosmopolitan. He is no Des Esseintes reading Dickens in *À rebours*, no Dorian Gray reading Huysmans, no Henry James reading John Addington Symonds. Leonard does not clamber into Ruskin's gondola. He has missed the boat, and Forster makes sure that we see this. We may say that this smacks of elitism, and it does. That is Forster's point—and it is Ruskin's too, as we shall see.

'We are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable, and only to be approached by the statistician or the poet', Forster's comic magisterial narrator intones at the beginning of the scene in which we witness Leonard reading. There are good reasons to hear this sneering, ham-Dickensian voice as ironic; first, because Chapter 6 actually does 'the unthinkable' by constraining us to think about poverty. Forster made sure of that. This is why he bothers to take us into Leonard's mind and to endow him with intelligent reveries. So he makes us see through Leonard's eyes and think through Leonard's mind about his material and intellectual conditions. The second reason the narrator's

irony matters is that it announces a Marxist commentary on the scene of Leonard reading. The furniture of Leonard's mind matches the furnishings of his subterranean London flat. These shabby material conditions inform his mental conditions: he cannot follow Ruskin because his makeshift flat is dark and stuffy, his stomach is rumbling, he is tired, the family in the flat above is singing hymns, and his fiancée is calling him to bed. Leonard believes in effort, and so he tries to shut his ears to the plangent world around him. But he still fails.

Leonard is modern economic man: he wants to be cosmopolitan, but he can't afford to be. To see Leonard reading Ruskin is to witness him being culturally tantalized and, in Forster's words, 'craving better [intellectual] food'. To see him with the cosmopolitan Schlegels is to hear his 'empty stomach assert[ing] itself'.<sup>64</sup> Here Forster enacts a form of gruesome connoisseurship by inviting his educated readers—those who have read their Ruskin—to see this allusion to Ruskin as darkly comic. Forster's grim inside joke is that *The Stones of Venice* predicts Leonard's condition and foretells exactly this state of affairs in its explanation of modern labour's stultifying effects. Labour's chief flaw, Ruskin explains, is that it exhausts individual intelligence and leaves hard-working men with nothing but the 'crumbs of life'.<sup>65</sup> No wonder then, that Leonard is condemned to crave.

(p. 495) A few years before Ruskin's observations about the dehumanizing nature of modern labour, Marx and Engels's *The Communist Manifesto* was already worrying about the 'cosmopolitan character'<sup>66</sup> of modern consumption in similar terms. Leonard has had a taste of culture and he wants more. What was once threatening is now desirable, the exclusive seems to be democratized as the global becomes local. Forster shows us how Leonard is subject to the mechanisms of international consumption and cosmopolitan desire. He inhabits the same cultural moment that Marx and Engels point to when they observe how modern man hungers for foreign flavours. 'In place of the old wants', Marx and Engels write,

satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.<sup>67</sup>

Leonard knows, Forster writes, that 'his mind and his body had been alike underfed, because he was poor, and because he was modern they were always craving better food'.<sup>68</sup> He is the twentieth-century counterpart to Oliver Twist, the little rebel who dared to ask for more. Leonard is doomed through no fault of his own. His farcical murder, partly attributed to a shower of books, takes us back to Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), the tragedy of another working man destroyed by the culture he so admired. But that is another story.

No one who reads *Howards End* can fail to notice the price the characters pay for their beliefs. Still, Forster does not surrender his cosmopolitanism, though by the novel's end he has shown what it costs. Neither cosmopolitanism nor imperialism is without flaw. Even though Leonard doesn't manage to 'push his head out of the grey waters and see the universe',<sup>69</sup> others will. Forster's exclusion of Leonard is a troubling form of gate-keeping. But to dwell only on the fact that Leonard has missed the boat is to miss another vital truth that Forster is setting before us. Culture endures.

In 1927, Forster delivered a series of lectures at Cambridge that he later published as *Aspects of the Novel*. 'We are not concerned with' Dostoyevsky's message, Forster told his privileged audience, repeating the haunting formulation he had used to begin Chapter 6 of *Howards End*. 'What matters,' Forster continued, 'is the accent of his voice, his song',<sup>70</sup> and what Dostoyevsky does to us. To press this point, Forster returned to an image very similar to Leonard's encounter with Ruskin. Reading Dostoyevsky, Forster said, gives us 'the sensation of sinking into (p. 496) a translucent globe and seeing our experience floating far above us on its surface, tiny, remote, yet ours'. In other words, cosmopolitan reading allows us to connect with the universe that Leonard longed for, to achieve what he could not. What cosmopolitan reading can do, Forster implies, is enable us to push ourselves beyond the limits of our own minds. When we do that, we can go beyond the limits of our own watery grey matter: we can travel outwards into the *cosmos* and the *polis* without even leaving home.

### Further Reading

Agathocleous, Tanya. *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century: Visible City, Invisible World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Anderson, Amanda. *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

Casanova, Pascale. *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

Freedman, Jonathan. *Professions of Taste: Henry James, British Aestheticism, and Commodity Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990).

Freedman, Jonathan. *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Keirstead, Christopher M. *Victorian Poetry, Europe, and the Challenge of Cosmopolitanism* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2011).

Stiegler, Bernd. *Traveling in Place: A History of Armchair Travel* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Walkowitz, Rebecca L. *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

### Notes:

(<sup>1</sup>) J. Hillis Miller, *On Literature* (London: Routledge, 2002), 29.

(<sup>2</sup>) E. H. Mikhail (ed.), *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1979), I, 191.

(<sup>3</sup>)

Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986),

27.

(<sup>4</sup>) *Ibid.*, xxix.

(<sup>5</sup>)

Henry James, *Novels, 1886–1890: The Princess Casamassima, The Reverberator, The Tragic Muse*, ed. Daniel Mark Fogel (New York: Library of America, 1989),

720.

(<sup>6</sup>) *Ibid.*, 718.

(<sup>7</sup>) Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1995), 6.

(<sup>8</sup>)

Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*, ed. Jonathan Mayne, 2nd edn (London: Phaidon, 1995),

9.

(<sup>9</sup>) *Ibid.*, 10.

(<sup>10</sup>) Michael Field, *Sight and Song* (London: Bodley Head, 1892), p.v.

(<sup>11</sup>) Pater, *The Renaissance*, 124.

(<sup>12</sup>) Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of The 'Narcissus': An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Reviews and Criticism*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1979), 145–6.

Rebecca Walkowitz notes how the intertwined strands of cosmopolitanism operate in Conrad: on the one hand, he is preoccupied by 'the geographic cosmopolitanism of immigration, international travel, and colonialism', and, on the other, 'the aesthetic cosmopolitanism of literary impressionism and Decadence, whose values the novels reproduce and whose urban meanderings and ambiguous poses are crucial to his later texts'. Rebecca L.

Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 36.

<sup>(13)</sup> Oscar Wilde, *Collins Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1999), 18.

<sup>(14)</sup> Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 32.

<sup>(15)</sup> Wilde, *Works*, 96.

<sup>(16)</sup>

J. K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, ed. Nicholas White, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009),

105.

<sup>(17)</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>(18)</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction,' *Representations* 108/1 (Fall 2009), 16.

<sup>(19)</sup> As Felski and Kucich note, suspicious reading is, in part, an 'intellectual exercise in demystification' and a testament to 'the specific skill humanists bring to data: interpretation' (Rita Felski, 'Suspicious Minds', *Poetics Today* 32/2 (2011), 216; John Kucich, 'The Unfinished Historicist Project: In Praise of Suspicion', *Victoriographies* 1/1 (2011), 65). I am thinking of the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and of those who have followed in her wake in privileging queer analytical models. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 7.

<sup>(20)</sup> Henry James, *Letters*, ed. Leon Edel, 4 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974–84), I, 142.

<sup>(21)</sup> For examples of James's flirtatiousness, see Henry James, *Dearly Beloved Friends: Henry James's Letters to Younger Men*, ed. Susan E. Gunter and Steven H. Jobe (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

<sup>(22)</sup> Lena Milman, 'A Few Notes Upon Mr. James', *The Yellow Book* (October 1895), 73.

<sup>(23)</sup> Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, the Prefaces to the New York Edition*, ed. Leon Edel and Mark Wilson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 939.

<sup>(24)</sup> James, *Novels, 1886–1890*, 311.

<sup>(25)</sup> Henry James, *Complete Stories, 1874–1884*, ed. William Vance (New York: Library of America, 1999), 495.

<sup>(26)</sup> James, *Letters*, III, 30.

<sup>(27)</sup> Wendy Graham, *Henry James's Thwarted Love* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 32.

<sup>(28)</sup> James, *Letters*, III, 30.

<sup>(29)</sup> See Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 147–76; Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 135–53.

<sup>(30)</sup> Tanya Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century: Visible City, Invisible World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 53.

<sup>(31)</sup> Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, 150, 163.

<sup>(32)</sup>

George Du Maurier, *Trilby*, ed. Elaine Showalter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 11.

<sup>(33)</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>(34)</sup> E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, ed. Paul B. Armstrong (New York: Norton, 1998), 13.

<sup>(35)</sup>

James, *Novels, 1886–1890*, 717.

<sup>(36)</sup> *Ibid.*, 719, 721.

<sup>(37)</sup>

Julia Prewitt Brown, *Cosmopolitan Criticism: Oscar Wilde's Philosophy of Art* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997),

25.

<sup>(38)</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 25.

<sup>(39)</sup>

Wilde, *Works*,

590.

(<sup>40</sup>) Ibid., 604.

(<sup>41</sup>) Ibid., 1152–3.

(<sup>42</sup>) ‘Cela est certain, nous allons vers une culture qui sera plus cosmopolite que nationale’.

Maurice Barrès, ‘La Querelle Des Nationalistes Et Des Cosmopolites’, *Le Figaro*, 4 July 1892, 1

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(<sup>43</sup>) ‘Et en effet, cette angoisse, cette compassion poussée jusqu’à l’épilepsie que nous adorons dans Dostoïewski (et dans Dickens), elle est dans notre Michelet’, *ibid.*

(<sup>44</sup>)

Mikhail (ed.), *Interviews*, I,

190.

(<sup>45</sup>) Ibid., I, 188.

(<sup>46</sup>) T. S. Champlin, ‘Doing Something for Its Own Sake’, *Philosophy* 62/239 (1987), 47. Quoted in Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 66.

(<sup>47</sup>) Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London: Hogarth, 1924), 11 (emphasis added).

(<sup>48</sup>) Forster, *Howards End*, 310.

(<sup>49</sup>) Wilde, *Works*, 1152–3.

(<sup>50</sup>)

Forster, *Howards End*,

134.

(<sup>51</sup>) Ibid., 135, 134.

(<sup>52</sup>) Ibid., 22, 75.

(<sup>53</sup>) Ibid., 229.

(<sup>54</sup>) Ibid., 141.

(<sup>55</sup>) Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. David Harvey (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 38.

(<sup>56</sup>) Forster, *Howards End*, 186.

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<sup>(57)</sup> Frederic Jameson, 'Modernism and Imperialism', in T. Eagleton, F. Jameson, and E. W. Said (eds), *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 59.

<sup>(58)</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 8.

<sup>(59)</sup>

Forster, *Howards End*,

310.

<sup>(60)</sup> Ibid., 30, 31, 42 (the quotation is from Arnold's 'To a Friend').

<sup>(61)</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic Revival* (London: Pelican, 1964), 1881.

<sup>(62)</sup>

Forster, *Howards End*,

31.

<sup>(63)</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>(64)</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>(65)</sup> John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', in E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The Stones of Venice, The Works of John Ruskin*, 39 vols (London: George Allen, 1903–12), X, 196.

<sup>(66)</sup>

Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*,

38.

<sup>(67)</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>(68)</sup>

Forster, *Howards End*,

35.

<sup>(69)</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>(70)</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 2000), 123.

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