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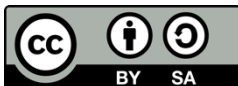
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Hierophants of Decadence: Bliss Carman and Arthur Symons

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Canada has never produced a major man of letters whose work gave a violent shock to the sensibilities of Puritans. There was some worry about Carman, who had certain qualities of the *fin de siècle* poet, but how mildly he expressed his queer longings!

(E. K. Brown)

Decadence came to Canada softly, almost imperceptibly, in the 1880s, when the Confederation poet Bliss Carman published his first poems and met the English chronicler and leading poet of Decadence, Arthur Symons. The event of Decadence has gone largely unnoticed in Canada; there is no equivalent to David Weir's *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain* (2008), as perhaps has been the fate of Decadence elsewhere. As a literary movement it has been, until a recent slew of publications on British Decadence, relegated to a transitional or threshold period. As Jason David Hall and Alex Murray write: 'It is common practice to read [...] decadence as an interstitial moment in literary history, the initial "falling away" from high Victorian literary values and forms before the *bona fide* novelty of modernism asserted itself.'¹ This article is, in part, an attempt to bring Canadian Decadence into focus out of its liminal state/space, and to establish Bliss Carman as the representative Canadian Decadent. To begin with, I situate the *fin de siècle* in Canada and examine the fruitful literary connection between Carman and Symons; then I read Carman's poem 'The Eavesdropper' through a Decadent lens and continue toward an articulation of a distinctly Canadian Decadence. For the major part, I desire nothing less than to secure a foothold for Carman as the Father of Canadian Decadence.

Oh Decadent Canada: The Confederation Poets and the Fin de Siècle in Canada

The event of Decadence is underexplored in Canada; much of literary criticism on the *fin de siècle* in Canada tends to focus primarily on the emergence of a national literature during the Confederation period. There is no book-length study bearing the title Canadian Decadence; Brian Trehearne's *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists: Aspects of A Poetic Influence* (1989) is a notable exception, yet Trehearne does not discuss Carman. Before I continue, I must clarify that the purpose of my study here is Canadian literature written in English. Francophone literature, situated mostly in Quebec, has its own history of literary developments, and, in 1895, formed its *École littéraire de Montréal* that followed French Parnassian and Decadent models, with Émile Nelligan, perhaps the *École's* best representative, who shows his indebtedness to Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine.² Predominantly for historical reasons, and especially before the *fin de siècle*, there was little if any conversation between English Canadian and French Canadian writers. Bentley's literary history of the last twenty years of the nineteenth century in Canada, *The Confederation Group of Canadian Poets, 1880-1897* (2004), offers a contextualized study of the six English Canadian poets: Charles G. D. Roberts (1860-1943), Archibald Lampman (1861-1899), Bliss Carman (1861-1929), William Wilfred Campbell (1860-1918), Duncan Campbell Scott (1862-1947), and Frederick George Scott (1861-1944). They were the 'The Confederation Group of Canadian Poets' or Confederation poets, so named because these poets were born in the 1860s, in the decade when Canada became a nation (1867). But only three of them, Roberts, Carman, and Campbell Scott, 'show[ed] evidence of contact with [...] [European] avatars of the *symboliste* aesthetic' in the 1890s.³ Bentley continues,

Lampman, Campbell, and Frederick George Scott held themselves aloof from the aesthetic-decadent movement that hosted *symbolisme* before it entered the literary mainstream en route to becoming a major component of Modernism, but the other three members of the group all drank deep of the *symboliste* spring and thus also of the esoteric or occult beliefs with which it was associated.⁴

Here I focus on one of the three members who did not hold himself 'aloof' from Decadence/Symbolism but rather 'drank deep[ly]' from it, namely, Bliss Carman. In 1882, before Carman and Symons met in London in 1896, Wilde toured America to lecture on aesthetic taste and

visited Canada, briefly meeting up with Carman at Roberts's house. Wilde must have at least provided some curiosity, if not inspiration, for the twenty-one-year-old Carman. Aside from that brief acquaintance, in October, Wilde also lectured at the City Hall in Fredericton, the capital of New Brunswick (eastern Canada, where most Confederation poets lived). Wilde's influence notwithstanding, Terry Whalen describes 'a "strange aesthetic ferment" in the last two decades of the nineteenth century', in line with Decadent, Symbolist, and Aesthetic stirrings in France and England.⁵ Those Confederation poets 'who drank deep of the *symboliste* spring' follow similar developments as their European counterparts, yet with some of their own unique ways. It is my heuristic argument that at least some of the Confederation poets could be classified as Decadents, keeping in mind, as Murray observes, that '[i]dentifying practitioners [of Decadence] is notoriously difficult; it is near impossible to find a self-described Decadent writer'.⁶ Certainly, Carman did not bear the label, as did many a Decadent or Symbolist writer; I hope to establish that Carman is such a one, not the least through his association with Symons.

Symons and Carman: Friendship and First Contact via Letters

Although Carman initially encountered Wilde in 1882, eighteen years later a much closer connection developed between Carman and Arthur Symons, more so than between any other Canadian and British Decadents. The friendship between Carman, the Canadian poet who lived and worked in New York and Boston for most of his adult life, and Symons, who was four years younger and had just moved to London, began when Symons sent two letters, one posted 4 July 1890, and the next, 5 December 1890, with two of his early poems, requesting that Carman, who was editor between 1890-92 of the New York weekly the *Independent*, publish them. At that time the *Independent* 'had a large general readership and a history of literary publication, especially poetry [E. B. Browning, Thomas Hardy, A. C. Swinburne, and W. B. Yeats, among others]'.⁷ It was nearly impossible for Carman and other Canadian poets of new verse to get published at home at the end of the nineteenth century; for the most part, between 1820-80, 'Canadian publishers of imaginative literature were

content to keep the lucrative field of reprinting well-known British and American authors'.⁸ Not so in New York and the United States in general, with its larger reading public and demand for 'new writing'. James Doyle avers that, in the 1890s, American 'monthly periodicals' 'flourish[ed]', while in Canada 'the publishing industry struggled'.⁹ Possibly, Symons also took advantage of the 'American periodical boom of the 1880s and 1890s' as an opportunity to publish some of his early poems and his own 'The Decadent Movement in Literature' in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* in 1893, with the very real purpose of disseminating Decadence across the Atlantic.¹⁰

Tragically, the poems that Symons sent to Carman in 1890 have been lost, and those issues of the *Independent* have not been preserved; the digitized version of the paper shows a gap between July-December 1890 to December 1895, just the years that would interest us the most here. However, we may surmise. In the letter posted on 4 July 1890, Symons refers to '[s]ome verses (written at Dieppe on my way back' from France, so we can probably guess that this might be a poem or all poems from his 'At Dieppe' sextuple ('After Sunset', 'On the Beach', 'Rain on the Down', 'Before the Squall', 'Under the Cliffs', and 'Requies'), first published in his upcoming *Silhouettes* collection in 1892, after Symons returned from his trip to Paris with Havelock Ellis in June 1890. Tracy Ware writes: 'Because a poem by Symons appeared in the *Independent* shortly after each letter and at no other time during Carman's tenure there, we can be reasonably certain of the identity of the poems he enclosed (now lost)'.¹¹ According to Ware, Symons's letter dated 5 December 1890 includes 'probably "Love in Dreams", which appeared in the *Independent*, XLII, No. 2207 (March 19, 1891)'.¹² In his first letter, with the request to publish his own poems, Symons praises Carman's early work: 'I so much admire what I have seen of your own poems. [...] There is something delightfully fresh in them – a lyric April. I hope you will soon collect them into a book'.¹³ Carman did publish Symons's poems and followed up with a few collections of his own poetry. It seems the two young poets found much in common; as Ware states, 'the letters reveal an affinity between two young men'.¹⁴ This affinity created enough interest for the two to meet in person.

1896: Carman's Visit to London, and Symons Reviews Carman

Carman must have read at least some of Symons's early poems to garner enough interest to visit Symons in London in 1896. After their initial epistolary acquaintance, the two poets met in person in London in 1896, where discussions about directions of modern poetry also included Yeats. In a letter to his friend Louise Imogen Guiney, who was in Nova Scotia at the time, Carman wrote on 2 September of the same year: 'O I had a gay time in your London. [...] Arthur Symons, whom I ran to earth in Fountain Court, Temple, took me to Yeats' new abode'.¹⁵ In 1893, before Carman and Symons actually met, Symons reviewed Carman's first volume of poetry *Low Tide on Grand Pré: A Book of Lyrics* (1893), and subsequently the Canadian poet's three following books: *Songs from Vagabondia* (1894, with the American poet Richard Hovey), *Behind the Arras: A Book of the Unseen* (1895), and *More Songs from Vagabondia* (1896, with Hovey). In 1896 Symons also published Carman's poem 'In Scituate' in *The Savoy*. Symons 'played a key role in the growth of Carman's reputation'.¹⁶ In the 1890s, both vagabonds, Canadian and British, were keen on publishing and promoting each other's work and the work of other Decadents. Certainly, Carman's movements between Eastern Canada and New York partly reflect his desire to introduce and publish Canadian writers in the United States. In a similar way, Symons not only brought French Symbolist or Decadent writers to the English reading public by way of his publications, but also established connections with Carman.

After his sojourn in London in 1896, Carman travelled to Paris where he landed 'in the heart of the *Symboliste* movement'.¹⁷ To be sure, Carman shared some of Symons's enthusiasm regarding Paris and the French Symbolists: 'Since Carman's return from abroad, there had been several articles connecting him with the French *Symbolistes* and the British Aesthetes'.¹⁸ Furthermore, in the 1890s, 'Carman was dubbed the "American High Priest of Symbolism" by a New York newspaper [*The New World*]'.¹⁹ Carman's poetry espouses the influence of both English and French nineteenth-century Decadents. Before he travelled to meet Symons in London, the Canadian poet had spent a year at Oxford and the University of Edinburgh (1882-83) and then a year at Harvard (1885). In his early years, he was influenced by D. G. Rossetti and Swinburne, and, with the encouragement of

Hovey, read and translated Paul Verlaine. As with Symons, some of the French Symbolist influence is evident in Carman's poetry. I am inspired by all of Carman's connections to British, French, and American nineteenth-century authors; these are but little-examined and happily require the space of at least one future book. I must quench my zeal, for now, with establishing Carman as a progenitor of Canadian Decadence, and this article must not exceed the boundary of a prolegomenon.

Carman's Poetry as Canadian Decadence

More than one critic in Canada has declared the strangeness of Carman's poetry, both in the damning and praiseworthy sense. Odell Shepard, the American poet and writer, published the first significant book on Carman's work: *Bliss Carman: A Study of His Poetry* (1923). Shepard praises Carman for his 'mastery of verse technic', his "'tone color'", and 'pure unimpeded' musical quality.²⁰ Shepard insists that Carman's poems 'must be read slowly, as an epicure savours an ancient wine, with a special lingering upon the clear vowel sounds'.²¹ At the same time, the American critic writes that Carman was 'save[d] from the poisonous heresy of "art for art's sake"'.²² Seemingly, as an admirer and editor of Henry David Thoreau and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Shepard could not endure the literature of the *fin de siècle*; however, we would not be wrong to associate Carman with the American Transcendentalists, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson.

In the late 1950s, when Carl F. Klinck began to compile the first *Literary History of Canada: Canadian Literature in English* (1965), some of his contributors did not know what to do with Carman. For example, Roy Daniells, while writing his entry on 'Confederation to the First World War', laments in a letter to Klinck in 1961, 'I find that both Roberts and Carman distressing people to deal with, [...] they evoke either pity or anger and not much else'.²³ Reginald Watters, who with Klinck, undertook to publish a Canadian anthology in the 1950s, also wrote to ask his co-author, 'How fond are you of Carman and Roberts? [...] Both leave me pretty unmoved. [...] I found it difficult to discover more than 400 lines by each that I would want'.²⁴ Lorne Pearce, editor of Ryerson Press in the 1920s, and Carman's literary executor, told Klinck that he was 'greatly worried

about [publishing] Carman's unconventional love letters, of which he had trunks full'.²⁵ Carman never married, was quite attractive, witty and intelligent, with celebrated beautiful locks of hair, and 'seems to have sought safety in numbers' in his relationships with women; unusual for his milieu, he led the lifestyle of a vagabond poet.²⁶ In 1990, a much-awaited collection of essays on Carman appeared, edited by Gerald Lynch. Appropriately subtitled *A Reappraisal*, it restored Carman, somewhat, to worthy literary status within the shrine of Canadian literature; *Bliss Carman: A Reappraisal* was published with a suitably yellow cover. Feasibly, one needs to read Carman through a Decadent lens.

'The Eavesdropper' (reproduced in its entirety at the end of this article) from his first collection, *Low Tide on Grand Pré: A Book of Lyrics* (1893), a volume that Symons also reviewed, will serve us well here as an instance of Canadian Decadent poetry. Carman's poem of nine quatrains and written in iambic dimeter, is one of suggestion and impression rather than thought. It is a poem that ushers the reader into a subjective world of immediate experience, yet, at the same time, offers nothing definitive. It begins in the realm of decline, in the autumn of the year, with 'the paling autumn-tide'. As Brian Trehearne finds, if a Decadent poet writes 'poems of nature', and nature is strongly present, even personified in Carman's poem, 'Autumn, the "failure" of the year, emerges as a typical Decadent setting'.²⁷ However, this change in seasons is more than a setting; just as Symons's city in his London poems is not just a 'background' to the 'clandestine' and 'shadowy' spaces, neither is the outside world in 'The Eavesdropper'.²⁸ We learn next to nothing about the lovers in the poem who lie in repose, inside 'a still room', 'side by side', 'all the swarthy afternoon'. But nature teems with colours and sounds and movements: 'The livelong day the elvish leaves | Danced with their shadows on the floor' and 'The great deliberate sun | Walk[ed] through the crimson hazy world, | Counting his hilltops one by one'; then, 'purple twilight came | And touched the vines along our eaves', while the lovers, inside the room, 'heard', 'watched', and 'saw'. Nature, albeit with its summer's strength waning, is the actor still, even with its fallen leaves that are 'The lost children of the wind | went straying by our door'; by contrast, human energies are spent, after

the lush months of spring and summer are behind them. The lovers observe, almost passively, as the yellow and/or fallen leaves ‘stir’, make a ‘tiny multitudinous sound’, ‘rustle’, ‘dance[d]’, ‘stray[ing]’, and behave like ‘elvish’ children. Maurice Maeterlinck’s influence upon Carman, through Hovey, is perhaps evident here. In ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’, when Symons speaks of the ‘symbolistic and impressionistic’ dramas of Maeterlinck, notably *L’Intruse*, *L’Aveugles*, and *Les Sept Princesses*, he remarks that in the former two plays ‘the scene is stationary, the action but reflected upon the stage, as if from another plane’, and, in the latter, ‘the action, such as it is, [...] is literally, in great part, seen through a window’.²⁹ The motionless couple in ‘The Eavesdropper’ watch the goings-on outside, as if in a (dare I say) languid state, through ‘the open door’.

Instead of revealing situational details about the two lovers, Carman foregrounds colours, shades, and edges, outside of the ‘still room’: ‘the yellow maple tree’, ‘the silvery blue’, ‘crimsoned hazy world’, ‘gray wind’, and ‘black’, forming an impressionistic palette. Interpolated with colours, Carman’s poem also abounds in edges, liminal spaces, and boundaries, some metaphoric: ‘our door’, ‘the eaves’, ‘my Love’s lips’, ‘[t]he maze of dream’, and ‘the verge of western sky’. The voluminous colours speak for the abundance and activity of nature; the borders signify limitations and transgressions, mirroring the lovers’ plight. For instance, the dual agency of the ‘purple twilight’, registering the in-between stage after day ends and before nightfall, touching ‘the vines along our eaves’, and the eaves, the perimeter that overhangs the walls of a house, providing an extended edge to the roof, forges a space where nature again takes the active role while allowing Carman to continue to not to name, but hint at, the outlines, the peripheral and the hidden. D. G. Jones writes that Carman ‘is not concerned to articulate things [...] The typical event is transitional, like a change in the weather or the season, or it is a brief epiphany’.³⁰ Kostas Boyiopoulos similarly observes that in Symons’s London poems ‘the city’s disjoined settings mirror the fragmented subjective states of mind in Symons’s poetic speakers’.³¹ In Carman’s poetry, and specifically in ‘The Eavesdropper’, we might observe such a correspondence between stirrings in nature and the subjective states of the lovers as well.

Some of the words and sentiments in ‘The Eavesdropper’ will sound familiar to a Decadent ear. The fixation on the woman’s hair, for example, reveals, albeit vaguely and indirectly, more about the situation of the lovers than the rest of the poem. The use of transferred epithet, ‘memories of reluctant night | Lurked in the blue dusk of her hair’, adds to the sense of the imprecise. It is not clear if it is the night that is reluctant to leave because the ‘hush of dawn’ has arrived or if the woman is reluctant to face the day, or if she has regrets about the days and night(s) she spent, albeit reluctantly, with her lover (but, one thing is clear – if I were to choose the decidedly beautiful quintessential Decadent line or two from Carman’s poetry, these would be the ones). Through another fixation on the woman’s eyes, namely, the repetition of the Lover’s ‘earth-brow eyes’ and then ‘her great brown eyes’, Carman conveys the abrupt change in mood, from ‘glad’ to then ‘veiled and sad’. In ‘The Eavesdropper’, the ‘blue dusk of her hair’ and the arrival of the ‘Shadow’ are pivotal epiphanic moments. The arrival of another ‘One’ from elsewhere signals the decided change in the lover’s mood from within, pointing to the protective isolating edge around the female Love, and threatening the cozy, albeit troubled, hermetic seclusion of the couple.

The ‘Another Shadow’ from ‘without’, the ‘One’ (who?) that is not part of nature, but ‘gloom[s]’ and ‘loom[s] over’ the other ‘shadows on the floor’, is an unnatural, menacing shadow, a shattering, foreboding presence. This stranger ‘gloomed the dancing of the leaves’, and, once the speaker ‘hurr[ied] to the open door’,

[...] saw retreating on the hills,
Looming and sinister and black,
The stealthy figure swift and huge
Of one who strode and looked not back.

Because secrecy abounds in this mysterious poem, once more, it is not clear who the Shadow or the One is: the speaker’s Lover’s husband, her guilty conscience, death, a foreboding, a malevolent force; the identity of the eavesdropper remains unknown. Once again, even these last lines are remarkably reminiscent of Maeterlinck’s *L’Intruse*, where Death, or an intruder, initially unseen or invisible, comes unobserved through an open door.³² The Shadow or the One or the eavesdropper

brings about the grandiose, lethal change in the fate of the lovers, although, even before he appears, an overall sense of something lost, imperceptibly yet progressively, prevails in this poem of failure. “The “Shadow” is but the inexplicable presence that reminds the lovers of something they already knew to be true within themselves; as Trehearne reminds us of Decadent writing, an awareness of the ‘transience of beauty’, ‘love’, and ‘inescapable decay’ is imminent.³³ In this regard, I also cannot help but think of Symons’s first lines from his ‘Prologue: Before the Curtain’ (1895): ‘We are puppets of a shadow play’, that also ring true in this Canadian Decadent poem.

How did Symons react to Carman’s poetry? To my mind, it is evident from this poem alone why Symons encouraged Carman to write more, to publish a collection of poetry. In ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’ Symons praises Verlaine’s ability to express ‘exquisite troubled beauty’ of verse, and, ‘to express the inexpressible[,] he [Verlaine] speaks of beautiful eyes behind a veil’.³⁴ Carman had certainly read Verlaine, but it is as if he had read Symons’s essay as well (both *Low Tide on Grand Pré* and ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’ were published in 1893, which makes it impossible to say). Carman’s ‘earth-brown eyes’ and ‘great brown eyes’ that ‘were veiled’ speak of the unspeakable, the secret, the insight, the epiphany, the truth. The resemblance between Symons’s praise of Verlaine’s verse for the French poet’s renderings of ‘the palpitating sunlight of noon’ and ‘a cool autumn sky’ again uncannily resonates with Carman’s ‘deliberate sun’ and ‘silvery blue’ and ‘paling autumn-tide’. In the comparison between Verlaine’s poetry from *Romances sans Paroles*, which Symons calls ‘The poetry of sensation, of evocation; poetry which paints as well as sings, and which paints as Whistler paints, seeming to think the colours and outlines upon the canvas’, we are reminded once more of the subtle unspoken painterly impressionistic descriptions of Carman, full of colours and hues and shadows and edges in ‘The Eavesdropper’, as analyzed above.³⁵

According to Tracy Ware, Symons, in his review in the *Athenaeum* (14 April 1894), provides ‘measured praise’ for *Low Tide on Grand Pré* and ‘tries to combine his sincere approval with a suggestion for improvement’.³⁶ Symons comments: “The whole book is an expression of passionate delight in the beauty of the outward world. [...] [I]t deals with certain vague ardours, vivid longings

after the indefinite in nature'.³⁷ Symons commends Carman for his expressions of 'a delicate consciousness of mystery which lies about the deeper reaches [...] [and] is the very key-note of Mr. Carman's work' in his review of *Grand Pré*.³⁸ But, at times, according to Symons, Carman's expression is too vague:

Mr. Carman is, in general, subtle in the expression of fine shades, though his phraseology—rich, coloured, suggestive at its best, and with an elusive touch of natural magic—does sometimes become a mere coloured mist. He can express fine shades, but it is doubtful if can express anything else. [...] The only question is whether he does not sometimes allow himself to use words too loosely, for the sake of their suggestive quality, which, after all, is not always a matter to be relied upon.³⁹

It seems a little ironic that the promulgator of Decadence would criticize Carman for his vagueness and suggestive expression of fine shades. I am inclined to think that Symons did not read all the poems in Carman's first volume, due in part to his innumerable writerly responsibilities in the early 1890s. Certainly, he makes no mention of 'The Eavesdropper' in his review, although he does praise 'Afoot' for its remarkable rendering of vagabond sensations. Also, perhaps by 1894 Symons had outgrown the style 'in the direction of simplicity' of his own poetry in *Silhouettes* (1892) or indeed the poetry he had submitted to the *Independent*, most likely in 'At Dieppe', in 1890.⁴⁰ What I find remarkable is the rendering of colours and sensations in Symons's 'At Dieppe' sextuple, using the same evocative vocabulary as Carman in his representative poem. For example, in 'On the Beach' Symons employs 'grey sky', 'tide', 'stealthy night'; in 'Rain on the Down', 'veil', and 'her hair'; and, perhaps the most telling similarities between Carman's and his language occurs in 'Under the Cliffs', where we find 'the white sun walk across the sea, | This pallid afternoon' and 'I see | The footsteps of another voyager', along with the word 'shadows' repeated twice.⁴¹ The similarity between the 'speaking voice' in Symons's second volume of poetry and that of Carman's in *Low Tide on Grand Pré*, with 'The Eavesdropper' as an effective example, is striking, for, as Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick have noted, the voice 'is often located in a scene, but otherwise carries no burdens of circumstance, history, or "character"' and 'speaks for a painterly "eye"'.⁴² The similarities do not end here; if we were to compare colours and outlines and otherworldly beings, we would have multiple

parallel passages. For now, I must leave the comparative study between Symons's and Carman's early poetry for another day. Instead, I will refer again to Symons's later critical writings on Verlaine as a guide to his evaluation of Decadent verse.

In *Colour Studies in Paris* (1918), Symons consistently praises Verlaine's artistic virtues: the French poet's 'is a twilight art, full of reticence, or perfumed shadows, of hushed melodies. It suggests, gives impressions, with a subtle avoidance of anything definite'.⁴³ According to Symons, Verlaine's 'Art poétique' 'express[es] the inexpressible[;] he speaks of beautiful eyes behind a veil, of the full palpitating sunlight at noon, of the blue swarm of clear stars in a cool autumn sky'.⁴⁴ Verlaine's language in 'Art poétique' neatly aligns with Carman's; for example, the lines 'des beaux yeux derrière des voiles' [beautiful eyes behind veils] and 'un ciel d'automne attiédi' [a tepid autumn sky] recall Carman's '[h]er great brown eyes were veiled' and 'paling autumn-tide' in 'the silvery blue', albeit without the effulgent sun.⁴⁵ Earlier, in his high praise for Verlaine, Symons, in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), observes that 'only with Verlaine, the thing itself, the affection or regret, is everything; there is no room for meditation over destiny, or search for a problematical consolation'.⁴⁶ We have observed the same in Carman. In 'The Eavesdropper' the moments of reluctance or regret overshadow any details about the lovers' lives, personality, thoughts, or a resolution. Carman's poem is one of suggestion and impression, rather than thought, a poem of some shades of colour and outlines. In a conclusive way, I must maintain, inasmuch as one cannot speak of the totalizing classification of Decadent poetry that would amount to the relegation of all Decadents' styles to a few, that Carman's poetry meets the standards of Decadence set out by Symons himself.

The Distinct Nature of Canadian Decadence

What is Canadian Decadence? At the risk of defining or naming and possibly destroying all enjoyment, I will venture to say that this article contains but preliminary work towards identifying the event in Canada. Because of its distinct literary history alone, factors and conditions contributing

to the rise and development of Decadence in Canada will not be the same as in French or British or American Decadence. Weir argues (and Symons would agree) that one needed a literary tradition or a civilization to rebel against, or at least to realize that one's civilization has come to end, in order to devolve into Decadence. For example, Weir writes that '[in] America, the cultural conditions that produced the possibility of decadence in Europe simply did not exist'.⁴⁷ Notable exceptions were New York and Boston; otherwise, as he proclaims, 'there was no local grain to go against'.⁴⁸ At the end of the nineteenth century, (English and French) Canada was just beginning to behave as a nation. In Canada, there is, as Symons writes in 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', no equivalent to a 'disease of form' arising from 'a civilization grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action'.⁴⁹ Canadian settlers were just beginning to shape a new civilization (in their own eyes, First Nations culture notwithstanding) and, frankly, as Virginia Durksen comments, 'the energy and focus of the largely rural population may well have been spent on practical considerations of survival'.⁵⁰

English Canada, just to limit this discussion to the nineteenth century, had perceived itself without its own civilization and with an imported Victorian literature. However, it developed its own settler literature alongside it, albeit one that attempted, initially, to write back to its parent country. Victorian novels served as models for at least some of nineteenth-century English Canadian literature, like Catharine Parr Trail's *The Backwoods in Canada* (1836) and Susanna Moodie's *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852). These were written with a British audience in mind; both sister-writers were born in England and were sending notes home, as it were. The novels of Parr Traill and Moodie, along with other 'canonical narratives of settlement', were meant to 'entice emigrants from the British Isles to the New World'.⁵¹ For the most part, an imported Victorianism, or a second-to-Victorianism sentiment reigned in Canada between 1820-80.

Yet, English Canada, with its imported, inherited British literature, was also beginning to sprout some locally inspired seedlings of its own. Towards Confederation, literature was beginning to seek its own national identity, and, with the Confederation poets, a distinctly Canadian literature

began; writing about Canadian landscapes and experiences, they were no longer writing back to England. D. G. Jones, writing about Carman's poetry, says that '[u]nlike events of a pioneer narrative, [...] it settles nothing, establishes no stable centre'.⁵² Roberts, in his essay 'A Note on Modernism' (1931), states that the Confederation poets 'had already initiated a departure, a partial departure, from the Victorian tradition of poetry, years before the movement [Modernism] began in England', arguing for Canada's own domestic early Decadence-into-Modernism movement.⁵³

It is perhaps ironic that, for Carman and other Confederation poets, the beginnings of a national Canadian literature, in published form, appeared in the United States. For reasons already stated above, Carman and his associates had a hard time getting published in their native land. While at the *Independent*, in his role of assistant editor, Carman not only saw that 'various young American' poets got into print, but also 'promot[ed] the work of Canadian friends, including Archibald Lampman, Duncan Campbell Scott, Charles G. D. Roberts, Wilfred Campbell, and Gilbert Parker'.⁵⁴ The rich literary milieu of Boston offered some degenerative growth, even producing some Decadent short-lived journals: *The Knight Errant* (1892-94) and *The Mahogany Tree* (1892), which survived for only six months, sadly, for it was 'one of the first forums for decadent-aesthetic ideas in the United States'.⁵⁵ In the first volume of the *Knight Errant*, Carman is published alongside Hovey and Louise Imogen Guiney, all included among others whose 'names [...] come up again and again in the context of medievalism, decadentism, and aestheticism'.⁵⁶ Although not listed as its editor, the *Independent* named Carman as associate editor of the *Knight Errant*, with Ralph Adams Cram as its chief editor.⁵⁷ Of the *Knight Errant*, a New York magazine, *Current Literature: A Magazine of Record and Review* (1888-1925), writes in 1892:

The Knight Errant, a new quarterly, has [...] at length appeared. It is devoted to art in wherever its many phases, dealing in its first number with its own peculiar aims—which are to make war against naturalism wherever it shows its head.⁵⁸

Cram and Carman, as stated in the 'Apology' of the first issue of the *Knight Errant*, waged a 'war against [...] realism in art', as represented by the likes of the American Realist novelist William Dean Howells (1837-1920), and sought to restore 'the inner world of the imagination as the proper focus

of art'.⁵⁹ In 1894, Carman also became editor of the first four issues of *Chap-Book* (1894-98), a magazine which Doyle compares with *The Yellow Book* which appeared but a month earlier in 1894.⁶⁰ Both magazines were inspired by 'the periodicals of France devoted to the new symbolist poetry'.⁶¹ Again, Carman made sure his fellow Confederation poets were published in the *Chap-Book*: Roberts, Lampman, and others appeared on its pages along with Beerbohm and Yeats.⁶² In a way, Symons's efforts in publishing French poets in English journals, and his promotion of Decadence/Symbolism, correspond to Carman's determination to publish the work of international, and especially Canadian, poets. Both were active promoters of Decadence, on both sides of the Atlantic.

Carman dipped into some of the Decadent stirrings in New York and Boston but not at the expense of writing his own brand of vagabond and mystical poetry. As Doyle states, Carman, and other

young Canadian writers hoped to participate in what they perceived as the new international wave of modernism which they felt would yield new opportunities for unique self-expression and experimentation. The kind of writing they envisaged included a substantial degree of nationalistic self-awareness, just as American writing did, and focused on the descriptive details of the northern landscape.⁶³

Carman's poetry, especially his early poetry, remained deeply connected to the maritime landscape, the place of his birth. The Confederation poets, on the whole, wrote specifically about the Canadian landscape and wilderness experiences. Something that does set Canadian Decadence apart from English, French, and American Decadences is its attitude towards nature, already begun with the settler narratives. Carman's life as a vagabond, an explorer of nature, sets him, and in turn Canadian Decadence, apart from his European and American counterparts. As we have observed in 'The Eavesdropper', nature takes an active role in Carman's poem. Canadian Decadence does not share the *à rebours*, or against nature, characteristic with its European counterparts. What I have in mind here is Huysmans's designation of nature as tedious in 'the *summa* of decadence', as Matei Calinescu refers to *À rebours*.⁶⁴ According to Des Esseintes, through whom Huysmans is speaking, in part against Naturalism but also referring to trees and mountains, '[n]ature [...] has had her day'; the Duc

speaks of ‘the revolting uniformity of her landscapes and skylines’, with ‘a monotonous store of meadows and trees’.⁶⁵ In Huysmans’s novel, artifice is the ultimate goal in all aesthetic endeavours; Des Esseintes ‘wanted some natural flowers that looked like fakes’ and cultivates bizarre specimens of ‘*fleurs du mal*’, thus paying homage to Baudelaire who also pronounced nature and the natural world as ugly in his ‘Salon of 1859’. With Baudelaire, Huysmans recoils against Naturalism in France, ‘a time when verse no longer served any purpose except to depict the external appearance of things’, yet Baudelaire, ‘had succeeded in expressing the inexpressible’.⁶⁶ Wilde, in ‘The Decay of Lying’ also decries Naturalism and Zola’s work, specifically his *L’Assommoir*, as ‘unimaginative realism’.⁶⁷

In Canada, nature is not tiresome but new. It is, even in the twenty-first century, much untouched, grandiose, but little explored, mysterious, and magical. By comparison, nature in the Britain, for example, is comparably familiar and limited in space; Northrop Frye believes that European poets ‘see nature in terms of a settled order which the mind can interpret’.⁶⁸ A Canadian poet cannot avoid nature, nor rebel against it, nor grow tired of it because much of it is still unfamiliar. In Canada, nature has not become tiresome; presently, due to a harsh climate, in part, and its vast geography, man/woman still has not set foot on many a terrain. In works of fiction, such as Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987), it was still possible, in the early twentieth century in Canada, to be ‘born into a region which did not appear on a map until 1910’, and ‘the place’ still appeared ‘[i]n the school atlas’ as ‘pale green and nameless’.⁶⁹ Obviously, the spaces which we occupy have not necessarily become places with names, and that relationship to the land will affect our perceptions of self and production of writing. Carman may have been influenced by Romantic, Victorian, and Transcendentalist poets, but it is the Canadian landscape that formed the primary consciousness, as he woke up to it every morning and wandered through it as an adult.

In Carman’s writings on nature, as in his collection of essays, *The Kinship of Nature* (1903), nature is not familiar to the point of contempt as in Huysmans, but more like a ‘friend’ before whom ‘you will stand astonished’: ‘You have been surprised again by nature’, he writes.⁷⁰ There is no reason to go against nature; if anything, Canadian Decadent poets went into nature as an act of rebellion,

and some, like Carman, became nature's best vagabonds. In Canada, nature is venerated as a container of strange sensations, a compendium to be explored, feared, and revered. There is just so much literature, as evinced by Carman's 'The Eavesdropper', wherein it takes centre stage. One simply does not act out against nature; the absolute size of it is outrageous. For example, when the Imagist T. E. Hulme worked and studied in Canada in 1906 for a few months, it 'appears that the sheer size of the Canadian prairies challenged Hulme's previously confident belief that the world could be explained in terms of mathematical principles'.⁷¹ Oliver Tearle writes that 'once again, the vastness of nature resists any easy categorization or ordering on the part of humanity'; after his visit to Canada, Hulme wrote in his 'Cinders', a posthumously published collection of observation and notes about art, that '[t]he flats of Canada are incomprehensible to any single theory'.⁷² And, to revert to the Confederation poets again, Roberts, in 'A Note on Modernism', also points to a distinctly Canadian Decadence, 'more immediately in contact with nature'.⁷³ In Canada, Decadence is not so much a falling away from high Victorian values, or civilization, but a falling into nature, with Carman as its best representative.

Towards a Conclusion (but, really, this is just the beginning)

As a relatively unnoticed phenomenon, Canadian Decadence demands much more exploration, but, here, Carman gets the last word; Canadian Decadence must begin with Carman. I have introduced the only slightly documented, literary friendship between Carman and Symons with the purpose of establishing Carman as Canada's quintessential Decadent. Both Symons and Carman, as poets, essayists, and editors, embarked on a comparable mission: they published each other's poetry and reviews, made personal connections with each other in their travels, and also with other Decadents, Aesthetes, and *Symbolistes*. They promoted and published Decadent poetry. Carman's 'The Eavesdropper' is one such poem. To be sure, Canadian Decadence is more than its inherited legacy via France and England; Carman promoted a distinctly Canadian Decadence, with its borrowed models, without upholding artifice against nature. In this preliminary sketch I have demonstrated

that Carman is the best representative of Decadence in Canada, and hopefully I have laid some groundwork as the beginning of a larger work on Canadian Decadence.

* * *

The Eavesdropper

In a still room at hush of dawn,
My Love and I lay side by side
And heard the roaming forest wind
Stir in the paling autumn tide.

I watched her earth-brown eyes grow glad
Because the round day was so fair;
While memories of reluctant night
Lurked in the blue dusk of her hair.

Outside, a yellow maple tree,
Shifting upon the silvery blue
With tiny multitudinous sound,
Rustled to let the sunlight through.

The livelong day the elvish leaves
Danced with their shadows on the floor;
And the lost children of the wind
Went straying homeward by our door.

And all the swarthy afternoon
We watched the great deliberate sun
Walk through the crimsoned hazy world,
Counting the hilltops one by one.

Then as the purple twilight came
And touched the vines along the eaves,
Another Shadow stood without
And gloomed the dancing of the leaves.

The silence fell on my Love's lips;
Her great brown eyes were veiled and sad
With pondering some maze of dream,
Though all the splendid year was glad.

Restless and vague as a gray wind
Her heart had grown, she knew not why.
But hurrying to the open door,
Against the verge of western sky

I saw retreating on the hills,
 Looming and sinister and black,
 The stealthy figure swift and huge
 Of One who strode and looked not back.

¹ Jason David Hall and Alex Murray, 'Introduction: Decadent Poetics', in *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Jason David Hall and Alex Murray (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 1-25 (p. 5).

See, for example, *Decadence: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Jason David Hall and Alex Murray; Kostas Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons and Dowson* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); and Alex Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

² E. D. Blodgett, 'Francophone Writing', in *The Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*, ed. by Eva-Marie Kröller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 49-69 (p. 56).

In his earlier work, *Configuration: Essays in Canadian Literature* (Downsview: ECW Press, 1982), Blodgett makes an even stronger point: 'Canada is not a unified country in either a political or cultural sense, and therefore to seek some common thread in its literatures is a vain enterprise indeed' (p. 8).

³ D. M. R. Bentley, *The Confederation Group of Canadian Poets, 1880-1897* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 22.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Terry Whalen, 'Charles G. D. Roberts (1869-1943)', in *Canadian Writers and Their Works*, ed. by Robert Lecker, Jack David, and Ellen Quigley, 2 vols (Toronto: ECW Press, 1989), II, pp. 159-214 (p. 160).

⁶ Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence*, p. 5.

⁷ Nick Mount, *When Canadian Literature Moved to New York* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 70.

⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁹ James Doyle, *The Fin de Siècle Spirit: Walter Blackburn Harte and the American/Canadian Literary Milieu of the 1890s* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1995), p. 9.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

¹¹ Tracy Ware, 'Two Unpublished Letters from Arthur Symons to Bliss Carman', *English Language Notes*, 28 (March 1991), 42-46 (p. 42).

¹² Ibid., p. 46, n. 12.

¹³ Ibid., p. 43.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 42.

¹⁵ Bliss Carman, letter to Louise Imogen Guiney (2 September 1896), in *Letters of Bliss Carman*, ed. by H. Pearson Gundy (Kingston & Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1981), p. 109.

Gundy examines the relationship between Carman and Guiney more closely in his 'Flourishes and Cadences: Letters of Bliss Carman and Louise Imogen Guiney', *Dalhousie Review*, 55 (1975), 205-26. For a discussion on Guiney as representative of the *fin de siècle*, see also Alex Murray, *Landscapes of Decadence*. Born in the same year, Carman and Guiney both lived and moved between Britain, Canada, and America.

¹⁶ Arthur Symons, 'Arthur Symons' Reviews of Bliss Carman', *Poetry Criticism*, ed. by Elisabeth Gellert, 34 (Detroit: Gale, 2002), <<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1420036373/LitRC?u=ucalgary&sid=LitRC&xid=bc4c27a8>> [accessed 9 May 2018]. Originally published in *Canadian Poetry*, 3 (Winter 1995), 100-13.

¹⁷ Muriel Miller, *Bliss Carman: Quest and Revolt* (St. John's: Jespersion Press, 1985), p. 151.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Odell Shepard, *Bliss Carman: A Study of His Poetry* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Publishers, 1923), p. 95.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 117. Interestingly, Donna Bennett does not hold Shepard's book in high esteem: She considers it 'neither a cultural biography nor a detailed analysis of Carman's life and work', but rather 'impressionistic' and an exemplar of 'the hostility towards modernism [...] prevalent in Canadian criticism at the time' ('Criticism in English' in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, Second Edition, edited by Eugene Benson & William Toye (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 242-67, p. 243).

²³ Karl F. Klinck, *Giving Canada a Literary History: A Memoir*, ed. and intro. by Sandra Djwa (Ottawa: Carleton University Press, 1991), p. 123.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁶ Gundy, 'Flourishes and Cadences', p. 220.

- ²⁷ Brian Trehearne, *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists: Aspects of A Poetic Influence* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), p. 15.
- ²⁸ Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image*, p. 80.
- ²⁹ Arthur Symons, 'The Decadent Movement in Literature', in *Aesthetes and Decadents of the 1890s: An Anthology of British Poetry and Prose*, ed. and intro. by Karl Beckson, rev. edn (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1993) pp. 134-51 (p. 145). Originally published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 87 (November 1893) 858-67.
- ³⁰ D. G. Jones, 'Carman: *Animula vagula blandula*', in *Bliss Carman: A Reappraisal*, ed. by Gerald Lynch (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1990), pp. 33-42 (p. 34).
- ³¹ Boyiopoulos, *The Decadent Image*, p. 84.
- ³² Symons, 'The Decadent Movement', p. 145.
- ³³ Trehearne, *Aestheticism and the Canadian Modernists*, p. 15.
- ³⁴ Symons, 'The Decadent Movement', p. 139.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- ³⁶ Tracy Ware, 'An Introduction to "Arthur Symon" Reviews of Bliss Carman"', *Poetry Criticism*, ed. by Elisabeth Gellert, 34 (Gale, 2002), Literature Resource Center, <<http://link.galegroup.com/apps/doc/H1420036379/LitRC?u=ucalgary&sid=LitRC&xid=8fdddf4f>> [accessed 9 May 2018]. Originally published in *Canadian Poetry*, 37 (Winter 1995), 100-102.
- ³⁷ Symons, 'Arthur Symons' Reviews of Bliss Carman', no pagination.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick, 'Introduction', in *Arthur Symons: Selected Early Poems*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Chris Baldick (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2017), p. 8.
- ⁴¹ Arthur Symons, 'On the Beach', 'Rain on the Down', and 'Under the Cliffs', in *Silhouettes*, Second Edition (London: Leonard Smithers, 1896), pp. 4, 5, 7.
- ⁴² Desmarais and Baldick, *Arthur Symons: Selected Early Poems*, p. 8.
- ⁴³ Arthur Symons, *Colour Studies in Paris* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1918), p. 200.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- ⁴⁵ Paul Verlaine, 'Art poétique', in *Jadis et Naguère* (Paris: Léon Vanier, 1884), pp. 23-25 (p. 23).
- ⁴⁶ Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), p. 96.
- ⁴⁷ David Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature against the American Grain, 1890-1926* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 1.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ⁴⁹ Symons, 'The Decadent Movement', p. 136.
- ⁵⁰ Virginia Durksen, 'The Literary Garland: Preliminary Research'. An unpublished paper submitted to E. D. Blodgett for the Canadian Literature Workshop Project, 1988, annotated and revised in 2018, 16 pp. Permission from author granted; p. 3.
- ⁵¹ Carole Gerson, 'Literature of Settlement' in *The Cambridge History of Canadian Literature*, ed. by Coral Ann Howells and Eva-Marie Kröller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 87-103 (p. 87).
- ⁵² Jones, 'Carman: *Animula vagula blandula*', p. 34.
- ⁵³ Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, 'A Note on Modernism' (1931), in *An English Canadian Poetic: Vol 1. The Confederation Poets*, ed. by Robert Hogg (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2009), pp. 139-42 (p. 141).
- ⁵⁴ Doyle, *The Fin de Siècle Spirit*, p. 38.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- ⁵⁶ Weir, *Decadent Culture in the United States*, p. 52.
- ⁵⁷ Doyle, *The Fin de Siècle Spirit*, p. 41.
- ⁵⁸ *Current Literature: A Magazine of Record and Review*, X (May-August, 1892), p. 275.
- ⁵⁹ Doyle, *The Fin de Siècle Spirit*, pp. 43, 44.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 84, 85.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- ⁶⁴ Matei Calinescu, *Fine Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 172.
- ⁶⁵ J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1959), p. 36.
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 148.
- ⁶⁷ Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' in *Intentions* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004), pp. 1-55 (p. 17).
- ⁶⁸ Northrop Frye, 'The Narrative Tradition in English Canadian Poetry' (Winter 1946), in *Northrop Frye in Canada*, ed. by Jean O'Grady and David Staines, XII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 55-63 (p. 56).
- ⁶⁹ Michael Ondaatje, *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987; Toronto: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 10-11.
- ⁷⁰ Bliss Carman, *The Kinship of Nature* (Boston: L. C. Page & Company, 1903), p. 195.
- ⁷¹ Rebecca Beasley, quoted in Oliver Tearle, *T. E. Hulme and Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 34-35.

⁷² Tearle, T. E. *Hulme and Modernism*, p. 35; Hulme quoted in Tearle, p. 35.

⁷³ Roberts, 'A Note on Modernism', p. 141.