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Decadence, Degeneration and Revolting Aesthetics: The Fiction of Emily Lawless and Katherine Cecil Thurston

By GERARDINE MEANEY


New Women and Decadents

A SIMPLE OPPOSITION BETWEEN PROGRESSIVE AND REGRESSIVE CULTURAL POLITICS IS NOT TENABLE IN REGARD TO WOMEN’S WRITING OF THE LATE NINETEENTH AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURIES. DESPITE VERY CONSIDERABLE DIFFERENCES IN STYLE, SUBJECT MATTER, AND PROFESSED AESTHETIC ASPIRATIONS, THE NEW WOMAN WRITERS WERE LINKED WITH THE DECADENT MOVEMENT BY THE CONSERVATIVE PRESS AS EXAMPLES OF CULTURAL, NATIONAL, AND SEXUAL DEGENERACY. (TERESA MANGUM NOTES THAT THE TWO GROUPS WERE REGULARLY REVIEWED TOGETHER UNDER SUCH TITLES AS “LITERARY DEGENERATES” OR “SEX IN MODERN LITERATURE.” 1) “THE DARK SIDE OF PROGRESS”, 2 THE CONCEPT OF DEGENERACY BLURRED IN LUCID LOATHING THE DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN INTERNAL THREATS TO SOCIAL AND SEXUAL ORDER AND THE MANY OTHER, EXTERNAL THREATS

1. For examples of such reviews see Hogarth and Crackenthorpe.
2. See Chamberlin and Gilman.
to European hegemony. Victorian England invested a great deal of moral authority in cultural activities proper to an empire convinced of its civilizing mission. Improper cultural activities, or those that challenged or mocked that tradition, were identified with political subversion. As Sandra Siegel commented in a key intervention:

So long as the words “civilization” and “masculine” were conceived as conceptual cognates, the New Woman was shocking and the new decadents were an “invention as terrible”. The New Woman like her mirror image, the new decadent, who was always male, confused what was essential to her nature. She not only moved in the public sphere, but behaved like a man, even as the new decadents, in their self-absorption and inaction, behaved like women, lost their masculine vigor. (Siegel 209)

Two key figures in the confusion of gender and culture so deplored were from a nation often cited as an example of degeneracy. The obvious one is Oscar Wilde, the lesser known was the writer who coined the term New Woman, Sarah Grand. By an act of self-invention that would surely have impressed Wilde, Grand constructed herself: starting life as Frances Elizabeth Clarke (later McFall) in Donaghadee in 1854, she became the quintessential New Woman. Her early life is a little unclear. She went to England after her father’s death to live as a poor relation, attended charity boarding schools that appear to have made Lowood look like a model for building self-esteem, eloped with an army surgeon, left him to pursue her career as a writer, became Sarah Grand, campaigned for women’s suffrage on two continents, and by the middle of her life had moved so far from the periphery to the centre of English politics to be six times mayor of Bath.

Grand was one of a number of Irish women writers and women with Irish connections who played an important part in the development of the New Woman character in fiction and of sensational and decadent fiction. George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne) and Katherine Cecil Thurston were similarly prominent exponents of this new fiction. Thurston, the most decadent, sensational, and successful of the three, often dealt with Irish characters, but Irish characters abroad. (I will focus later on Thurston’s final novel, Max, which features a woman artist.)

The woman artist, or potential artist, was an important figure in the increasingly self-reflexive fiction which these women produced. This marked an important shift from the work of earlier nineteenth-century women writers, who could not attribute “realistically” to their characters the same freedoms they themselves enjoyed as writers and earners. It also reflected and elaborated the intensified self-reflexive quality always associated with the juxtaposition of terms “woman” and “writer”. Neither the sensational nor the politically committed women writers of the period felt obliged to preface

3. See the slightly different biographies in Mangum and in Newman 90.
4. Grand’s career and significance are analysed with great insight by Mangum 47-66. Mangum highlights Grand’s attack on the decadent movement in The Beth Book. Grand’s status as a specifically Irish woman writer was first proposed by Janet Madden-Simpson.
their work with disclaimers, apologies, and self-defence, as the first women novelists had done. Yet their surrogates within their fiction are often themselves passionately defended and in turn offer impassioned pleas not only for general social and sexual, but also specific educational and artistic freedom for women. Thurston’s Max/Maxine pleads for understanding from the lover she tries to reject:

I have power—power to think—power to achieve. And how do you think that power is to be developed? ... Not by the giving of my soul into bondage—not by the submerging of myself in another being ... Can’t you understand? I left Russia to make a new life; I made myself a man, not for a whim, but as a symbol. Sex is only an accident, but the world has made man the independent creature—and I desired independence. (324-25)

Novels from the turn of the century which feature women artists tend to displace this self-reflexivity by making painters, not writers, the central protagonists. Part of the attraction must have been cultural continuity: the woman artist expanded what had been a feminine accomplishment, sketching, into an art and a profession. She epitomised the New Woman, since her advent was even more recent, modern, and daring than the woman writer’s, but she also seemed to epitomise the new century of possibility.

In representing women in such unconventional roles, these writers were part of the movement which shattered the narrative paradigms of the previous century and laid the foundation for modernism. The unconventionality was enough to render any distinction of purpose from the decadents invisible to conservative, popular opinion. Nor was that unconventionality confined to their fiction. Wilde was not the first celebrity writer by any means, but the combination of mass literacy, the popular press, and the association of art and decadence made notoriety easier for some of his contemporaries in more ways than one. The newspaper coverage of Thurston’s divorce was salacious and unkind, but it does not appear to have diminished her books’ popularity. In an era of sensation fiction, sensational novelists were only to be expected.

Late twentieth-century feminism tended to go too far in producing an antithesis where contemporary reviewers saw identity. Elaine Showalter in her introduction to the excellent anthology, Daughters of Decadence, argues that:

Women writers needed to rescue female sexuality from the decadents’ image of romantically doomed prostitutes or devouring Venus flytraps, and represent female desire as a creative force in artistic imagination as well as in biological reproduction. (xi)

In a related vein, critics such as Teresa Mangum have suggested that the New Women and Decadents prefigure the alignment and conflict in contemporary culture between feminism and postmodernism:

For a feminist novelist, this suspicion [of the decadents] that language has no “meaning”, that in fact the surfaces of language and the style of utterance are more “real” than the “content” of ideas one presumes to constitute in language must have posed then, as it does now, a profound dilemma. [Grand’s] Beth’s quest for a form appropriate to women’s experience thus becomes part of a larger dilemma for the writer, a dilemma most forcibly rendered by the stylists who adamantly rejected the very notion of content. (Mangum 55)
There is some truth moreover in Karl Beckson's comment in his exhaustive study of London's cultural life in the 1890s that:

The image of the aggressive female, intent on emasculating the decadent Victorian male... achieved its most strident expression in Wilde's *Salomé* (1893) and in Beardsley's illustrations for the English translation. (139)

Yet Wilde was a close friend of one of the Wittiest new woman writers, Ada Leverson, who remained staunchly loyal to him during his trial and wrote an appreciation of him in 1926. True, he called her the Sphinx, a name which linked the very modern with the eternal female in a similar mode to *Salomé*. Their relationship could even be considered characteristic of that between decadence and the new women novelists: contradictory, often based on misunderstanding, but ultimately supportive in ways neither movement understood at the time.

It is true the agendas of the two groups were different, one aiming at social reform, the other wishing to dissociate literary and "moral" values, but these are only directly contrary if viewed in very narrow terms. Irish critics, for example, always ascribe to Wilde a political and subversive aestheticism.5 (The ambiguity of the relation between "social decadence" and "artistic decadence" was, of course, deliberately cultivated by the artists themselves.)6

The aesthetic values of the decadents and the New Woman writers also diverged, but certain key characteristics were common to both: narrative excess, stylistic experiment, sexual candour, self-reflexive analysis of art's function, however differently they might understand it. As Mangum's outline of the central dilemma of Grand's *The Beth Book* indicates, women writers, in asserting their right to be both, tended toward self-reflection in art. Just as in the Decadents' works, mirrors and portraits figure prominently in New Woman fiction: their pivotal roles in *Max* are exemplary. Above all, an examination of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Irish women's fiction complicates the assumption that "the quest for a form appropriate to women's experience" (Mangum 55) can be mapped between the polarities of postmodern artificiality and nostalgia for an authentic expression always already lost to women.

**The Ethics of Literary Forgery**

The vortex of forces, constituted by decadence, degeneracy, and gender revolt, that shaped fin de siècle literature can be usefully explored in the work of an Irish woman writer notoriously difficult to categorize, Emily Lawless. A contributor to the prominent journal, *The Nineteenth Century*, Lawless's

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5. See, for example, Kiberd (33-50) who argues that there is an intimate relation between anti-colonial elements in Wilde's work and a revolutionary approach to gender.

6. Beckson charts this ambiguity, citing Arthur Symons's untypically straightforward outburst in 1908: "There has been great talk of late of degeneracy, decadence... But it is the millionaire, the merchant, the money-maker... who are the degenerates of civilisation" (44).
work was inevitably read by contemporaries in the context of the aesthetic and sexual politics of the time, as well as that of Irish politics and Home Rule, all of which were frequently debated in its pages. The high seriousness, moral tone, and historical weight of her work appear to put her emphatically in the opposite camp to the decadents. She also appears to have opposed women’s suffrage, though it is difficult now to read either her novel *Grania* or her biography of Maria Edgeworth as anything other than proto-feminist works.

Lawless’s critical essay proposing an “ethics of literary forgery” began as a review of scholarly translations of ancient Irish manuscripts:

Supposing—I say supposing, because one may really suppose anything—that for once he did not fail—supposing that he succeeded in producing so ingenious an imitation, so steeped in the colours of his elected period, so discreet in its modifications, so slyly, delicately archaic in all its details as to deceive the very elect—what then? Would his guilt be thereby lessened? On the contrary, it is clear that from our present point of view it would only be increased tenfold.

And this is really the gist of the matter; so, for fear of any misunderstanding, I had better repeat it. It is not a question as to whether we ever can succeed in such imitation, but as to whether we ought to wish or even to try to succeed. The point may appear to be one of the smallest possible importance, especially considering the infinitesimal value of most of such imitations, but it is not quite so small as may at first appear, and has decidedly larger bearings.

For to write badly is after all only to prove oneself human; but to go about telling—worse, printing—lies is surely the very superfluity of naughtiness. (90-91)

A great deal is at stake for this Anglo-Irish novelist in this essay, for the claims of authenticity had already been used to disqualify her from commentary on Ireland and would be again. Cahalan notes that the *Nation* newspaper accused her of looking down on her peasant characters “from the pinnacle of her three-generation nobility” (28); Synge dismissed *Grania* because “the real Aran spirit is not there”, attributing her shortcomings as a chronicler of island life to her status as a lady (102-03 n.1). Yeats, while acknowledging she had “in her the makings of a great book full of an avid and half spectral intensity”, insisted her potential had thus far been stunted by her “imperfect sympathy with the Celtic nature” (138).

For Lawless as surely as for her decadent compatriots, artificiality was life-giving and the demand for authenticity merely political prescription:

A good deal of talk goes on in these days about the Celtic spirit, but does any one really know what that spirit is? Has any one ever tracked it to its secret home; ascertained where it was born, and of what elements it was originally composed? If we look at it closely and quite dispassionately, is it not nearly as much a topographical as either a philological or an ethnological spirit? Certainly if “the breath of Celtic eloquence” is not also to some degree the breath of the Atlantic, I should be puzzled to define what it is. So soft, and so loud; so boisterous, and so heady; extremely enervating, according to some people’s opinion, but Oh how subtly, how fascinatingly intoxicating, it is certainly not the property of any one creed, age, or condition of life,

7. See “An Appeal Against Women’s Suffrage”. I am extremely grateful to Lia Mills for drawing this to my attention. The political significance of public dissociation from the demand for suffrage is much debated, since moderates arguing for educational and social reform sometimes sought strategically to distance themselves from a position and campaign which attracted such hostility.

8. “A Note on the Ethics of Literary Forgery” opens with a review of Standish O’Grady’s *Silva Gadelica* and Whitely Stokes’s *The Reines Dindsenchas*.

9. See also Brewer.
any more than it is of any one set of political convictions. We can only say of it that like other breaths it bloweth where it listeth. There is no necessary connection between it and the Clan-na-Gael, any more than there is between it and Landlords’ Conferences or Diocesan Synods. Nay, may we not even go further? May we not say that a prosaic pure-bred East Briton—the child of two incredulous Bible-reading parents—may in time grow positively Celtic in spirit if only he will surrender himself absolutely to these influences; if only he will fling away his miserable reason, and refuse from this day forward to disbelieve anything, especially anything that strikes him as absolutely impossible?

And is not the converse proposition at least equally true? May not a very Celt of the Celts—an O or a Mac into whose veins no minim of Saxon blood has ever entered since the Creation—become so unceltlike in his inner man, so be-Saxonised if one may use the phrase, in the atmosphere of caucuses and committee rooms; so appallingly practical, so depressingly hardheaded, nay—if the corruption be carried far enough—actually so logical, that at last, as a Celt, he cannot, strictly speaking, be said to have any existence at all? (92)

The logic of Lawless’s aesthetic argument leads her into direct conflict with the presumption of racial essence, just as her excursion into literary history led her into conflict with such presumptions in relation to gender. Richard Lovell Edgeworth, as embodiment in every possible respect of the institution of patriarchy, is her regular target in her biography of Maria Edgeworth:

...a more benevolent embodiment of the principle of autocracy has perhaps never flourished since that institution was introduced upon a much-ruled planet.

It was the very benevolence of [t]his autocratic standpoint which made it impossible for him to believe that any one belonging to him—especially a mere daughter, a member of the less important half of his enormous brood—could fail to be the better for carrying on her little pursuits under his direct eye, and subject in every detail to his approval or disapproval. That he was in essentials one of the best-intentioned of fathers is certain, yet few bad, few merely indifferent fathers, have inflicted upon a gifted son or daughter worse injuries, from an intellectual point of view, than he did. (38)

Ironic reversal is a central part of Lawless’s critical arsenal against the surveillance of the arbiters of authenticity, morality, and nationality in fiction, but in important respects she herself was the victim of a counter-reversal. While she maps the allure of identity as artifice, her work shows the intractable force of belief in “real” “historical” “character”.

(New) Woman of Aran

Lawless’s work makes clear precisely what was at stake in negotiating the complex relationship between gender and national identity. This is nowhere more apparent than in the contrast between her progressive views on gender and retrogressive ones on land reform. Grania (1892) indicates how the habit of figuring Ireland in feminine terms could complicate writing firmly opposed to nationalist politics and how the habits of imperialist perception could haunt progressive, feminist thinking. The novel tells the story of a spirited young woman who cannot fit into peasant society on one of the Aran

10. Lawless persistently refers to Richard Lovell Edgeworth as a “patriarch” in this context.
islands. Though she possesses characteristics of the New Woman, Grania's integrity and independence are consistently represented in the novel as more true to the spirit of the place and the history of its people than the conventional lives of those around her:

To her Inishmaan was much more than home, much more than a place she lived in, it was practically the world and she wished for no bigger, hardly for any more prosperous, one. It was not merely her own holding and cabin, but every inch of it that was in this peculiar sense hers. It belonged to her as the rock on which it has been born belongs to the young seamew. She had grown to it, and it had grown to her. She was part of it, and it was part of her. (I: 103)

The name, Grania O'Malley, identifies Lawless's protagonist with the legendary Gaelic woman chieftain. Grania refuses to learn English and is passionately attached to her home island of Inishmaan and her intensely religious, invalid sister, Honor. Throughout the novel there is a tension between the representation of Grania herself as proto-feminist heroine and doomed epitome of a traditional Irish identity.

Though identified with the island, she does not belong to the island community, an alienation identified as part of her inheritance from her mainland mother: "In her neighbours' eyes she was a 'Foreigner,' just as her mother had been a foreigner before her" (1: 104). Reviewers at the time in both Ireland and the U.S. comment on a Spanish intensity which is both Grania's inheritance from the west of Ireland's turbulent history and responsible for her distance from the conventional mind-set of those around her. In contrast, a reviewer in Athenaeum commented that "Grania, heroic in her failings as in her strength, and Honor, the pale saint, are beautiful types of Irish womanhood". Essentially Irish and essentially foreign, Grania embodies the island and so, paradoxically, makes it strange, feminine. This familiar logic is ultimately obstructed in Lawless's version, however, for Grania cannot be possessed.

In a key scene, Grania sees in a wretched cottage where she takes shelter the fate in store for her if she marries Murdough Blake, despite her love for him. It is worth quoting at length, not least because Grania is still difficult to access and Lawless's prose must at some stage be allowed to speak for itself:

Presently the door of the nearest cabin opened, and a woman came out, carrying a pail in her hand. She came directly towards Grania, who sat still on her stone under the pelting rain and watched her. She was a terribly emaciated-looking creature, evidently not long out of bed, though it was now getting to the afternoon. She seemed almost too weak, indeed, to stand, much less to walk. As she came up to the stranger she gazed at her with a look of dull indifference, either from ill-health or habitual misery; set her pail under the pipe in the bank through which the stream ran, and, when it was filled, turned and went back, staggering under its weight, towards the door of her cabin again.

With an instinct of helpfulness Grania sprang up and ran after her, took the pail from her hands and carried it for her to the door. The woman stared a little, but said nothing. Some half-naked, hungry-looking children were playing around the entrance, and through these she pushed

11. Reviews from the Irish Times 31 Mar. 1892; Evening [?] Transcript, 1892, in Lawless Papers, Marsh's Library.
her way with a weary, dragging step. Then, as if for the first time observing the rain, turned and beckoned Grania to follow her indoors.

Dull as it had been outside, entering the cabin was like going into a cellar. There was hardly a spark of fire. That red glow which rarely fails in any Irish home, however miserable, was all but out; a pale, sickly glimmer hung about the edges of some charred sods of turf, but that was all.

A heavy, stertorous breathing coming from a distant corner attracted Grania’s attention, and, looking closely, she could just distinguish a man lying there at full length. A glance showed that he was dead drunk, too drunk to move, though not too drunk, as presently became apparent, to maudlin out a string of incoherent abuse, which he directed at his wife without pause, meaning, or interruption, as she moved about the cabin. One of the brood of squalid children—too well used, evidently, to the phenomenon to heed it—ventured within reach of his arm, whereupon he struck an aimless blow at it, less with the intention apparently of hurting it, than from a vague impulse of asserting himself by doing something to somebody. He was very lamentably drunk and probably not for the first, or the first hundredth time.

The woman indifferently drew the child away and sent it to play with the other children in the gutter outside. Then having set the black pot upon the fire, she squatted down on her heels beside it, heedless, apparently, of the fact that there was not a chance of its boiling in its present state, and taking no heed either of her visitor or of her husband, who continued to maudlin out more or less indifferent curses from his corner... (1: 115-18)

There is no doubt that the current generation of Irish women respond to *Grania*—when it is made available to them—with a great sense of approbation, as a realism which they missed in more canonical texts. I am conscious in situating the text in relation to the discourse of degeneracy of potentially stifling that response. But the text’s hospitality to the revolt against the national past of young Irish women is both relevant and part of the way in which it must be read at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This pleasure of identification with the text’s repudiation of usually romanticised Irish peasant life and the aura of illicit knowledge it possesses because of its non-canonical status are *part of the meanings* which have accrued to *Grania* since its publication, not distortions to be stripped away for a clearer historical view.

The distaste for maternity and its identification with a death of the self rather than the advent of life are evident in much nineteenth-century writing by women. Here the repugnance is intensified by the poverty, violence, and despair of the family life portrayed. It is a bracing antidote to the idealisation of Aran and the West, metonymic of “authentic” Ireland, made all the more effective by the metaphoric relation of Grania herself to the place. (The novel is titled for her, but subtitled “The Story of an Island”.)

For Grania it is a moment of radical disillusion. She sees her future self in the woman before her, but more disturbingly the handsome Murdough, already fond of drink, in the wreck of a man. In effect, this scene reverses the novel’s one great moment of exaltation, when out in the boat with Murdough she realises she loves him:

She did not know yet what it was, but it was a revelation in its way—a revelation as new and as strange as that other revelation two days before in the boat, only that it was exactly the reverse of...
It is a highly unusual scene. Even in the 1890s such dark thoughts were rarely attributed to sympathetic heroines and we might expect the disgusted rejection of romantic love and maternity to have shocked contemporary readers. The largely admiring contemporary reviews indicate that this was not the case, however. Lawless’s hard-working peasant woman occupies a different relation to both feminine roles than that of the standard middle-class heroine. Grania herself is in many regards the antithesis of the degeneracy of those around her. She is also the representative of a doomed race: her linguistic purity and integrity of national character are anachronistic. The doubling, whereby the islanders are both atavistic throwbacks and symbols of contemporary decay, is paralleled in Grania, who is a woman of the present and distant past with no future at all. Her revolt against motherhood is also revulsion against breeding a degenerate race. Greenslade, for example, cites W.E. Henley’s denunciation of “abysmal fecundity” in 1892, the year of Grania’s publication, as a feared attribute of those least “fit” to breed (Greenslade 38).

The narrative’s distaste for the other peasant characters is epitomised by the reference to one of the “brood” of children as “it”. Lawless’s novel is everywhere inflected with the discourse of racial degeneracy.

Surveying both “scientific” tracts on race and the imagery of commercial advertisement and political cartoons, Anne McClintock has linked the discourse of degeneracy with a triangular formation of race, class, and gender. Positioning the Irish within this triangle, she powerfully argues that:

The iconography of domestic degeneration was widely used to mediate the manifold contradictions in imperial hierarchy—not only with regard to the Irish but also to the other “white negroes”: Jews, prostitutes, the working-class, domestic workers, and so on, where skin colour as a marker of power was imprecise and inadequate. (53)

An initial example cited by McClintock is an 1882 Puck cartoon entitled “The King of a Shantee”, in which “an Irishman is depicted lazing in front of his hovel—the very picture of domestic disarray” (McClintock 53). McClintock’s analysis begs the question of the extent to which borderline groups, but particularly white natives such as the Irish, fulfilled an important role in maintaining distinctions of race and class at the imperial centre. Their function was to represent domestic disarray and underlying sexual disorder as foreign even when they manifested themselves locally.

In the Puck cartoon analysed by McClintock, the simianized husband sits on an upturned wash basin, a cooking pot on his head, while his equally unprepossessing wife stands in the doorway, “the boundary between private and public” (53). The domestic scene in this cartoon is turned inside out: an instrument of hygiene becomes a site of idleness, the maternal cooking pot is absurdly misappropriated, housekeeping and husbandry are in chaos.
In a number of important respects the scene from *Grania* above more subtly reproduces these stereotypes of domestic degeneracy. The cabin's inhabitants are dehumanised; the woman of the house is unable to nurture, establish order, or properly to maintain the boundaries between private and public, as a proper Victorian mother should; the brutish, incoherent drunk recalls the simianized king of a Shantee; the imagery of a neglected hearth locates the source of this poverty internally, in a lack of proper care and domestic industry, not in the external worlds of social and economic life. Yet, the subject of address in this scene is radically different, for the mediating consciousness is that of one who could become the thing she sees and dreads, not one who can recoil and find reassurance in her difference from the scene. (On more than one level: retrospectively, it is impossible to ignore Lawless's own heroin addiction, though its exact genesis and trajectory remain unclear.) Consequently, instead of establishing boundaries, this confrontation with domestic degeneracy challenges though it ultimately cannot subvert them. McClintock notes that “the so-called degenerate classes were bound in a regime of surveillance” (56). Here the surveillance is from the inside. Grania's authenticity, her rootedness in the island, her relationship with the sea, her status as “atavistic throwback” (McClintock 56), all of these distance her from the degenerate present of these “Celtic Calibans” (McClintock 52).

*Uncomfortable Prosperos*

**Grania's Affinity to Landscape** and alienation from her native community echo earlier nineteenth-century women's fiction, where nature takes the side of heroines like Maggie Tulliver and Catherine Earnshaw against a corrupt society. More alienated in the drawing room than on the desolate moor, Catherine Earnshaw is the epitome of the type. But if Grania has affinities to her, she singularly lacks a Heathcliff. Murdough Blake, whom she loves from childhood, is the opposite of rugged authenticity: “Murdough had nothing to sell and nothing to do, but any opportunity of escaping for a few hours from Inishmaan, any prospect of stir, bustle, and life was welcome to him” (104). Integrity in the novel is associated with having only one, native language:

“I've got no English either, and I don't want any of it,” she [Grania] answered proudly; “I had sooner have only the Irish.” (131)

Murdough, who is talking while idly watching Grania work, despises his own language and craves a multiplicity of languages, a desire that is the very substance of all his ambitions, themselves defined by impracticality, excess, and a repudiation of work and struggle (he craves languages more than a horse, for example):

13. See Grabgeld 115-29.
"I wish that I knew all the languages that ever were upon this earth since the days of King Noah, who made the Flood. Yes, I do, and more too, than ever there were on it! Then I could talk to all the people and hold my head high with the best in the land." (131-32)

Language is power and wealth to Murdough, but he loves language for its own sake. It is without referent or structure for him. His loquacity is an effect of impotence, not creativity or power:

It was a torrent to which there was apparently no limit, and which, once started, could flow as readily and continue as long in one direction as another.

Grania was hardly listening. She wanted—she hardly knew what she wanted—but certainly it was not words. (139-40)

The other figure of cultural continuity in the text is the storyteller with no audience, Old Durane. His memory is largely a matter of words, but of unuttered or private ones. His rich language is not a communal one and is used for recollection, not communication. He is described sitting alone for hours:

muttering over and over some cabalistic word—a word which, for the moment, had the effect of recreating for him the past, one which, even to himself, had grown almost spectrally remote, so dim and far away was it. A queer old ragged Ulysses this, whose Ithaca was that solitary islet set in the bleak and inhospitable Atlantic! (77)14

This queer old ragged Ulysses is all that remains of the spectrally remote traditions elegised by Lawless in Maelcho. "Senachies, such like beings—big talkers and little doers" (185) are despised by Hugh Gaynard, the English youth who is the initial hero of that novel. But just such a big talker comes to occupy the central role. Maelcho, with his stories about "the Fear Gortach, a giant who eats up children and animals and drops their bones from the sky and about three young men who conquered the world and then HyBrasil, along the way defeating three giants, Gom, Gum & Groggertnabognach" (152-53)—is on one level an icon of native strangeness. He is part of a culture of linguistic excess which is identified with violence and sometimes indistinguishable from the absence of culture. At one point, the crowd are stirred by an incantation:

Never had they so closely resembled a company of wolves, such a company as one might imagine resting for a moment in the shadow of some wood, before sweeping on to tear down everything it met with on its path, leaving only a few red and mumbled fragments to tell the tale. (54)

Yet Maelcho becomes, in Lawless’s powerfully contradictory novel, not Caliban but his master. When Gaynard begins to function as messenger for Sir James, his duties “liberated him from having to act as Caliban to such an uncomfortable Prospero as Maelcho the senachie” (162).

In Grania, Murdough’s verbosity is modern and restless, but also native. It is a very tattered remnant of the storytelling tradition and culture Maelcho

14. It is interesting to contrast Yeats’s image of the “wise and simple” fisherman with this portrait of cultural decline and isolation, especially given that he was obviously impressed with the passage, citing “spectral intensity” as an important element in Lawless’s work.
eventually loses in madness, silence, and defeat. This decline and loss are characteristic of all aspects of native culture in the novel: the Claddagh fishermen “fish less and worse than their father did, and let the lion’s share of the yearly spoil fall into the hands of strangers” (79-80). Murdough represents the degeneration of a race, the pure, archaic version of which is represented in Grania, who can see no point in the continuation of life and whose own life ends in a reckless bid to ease her sister’s death. (Honor is intensely religious and Grania’s death by drowning in a futile attempt to bring her a priest from the mainland can be seen as a suicidal act of self-assertion. It is also her final defeat by the community which refuses to help her and by the church, distant and all powerful, which fails her.)

Lawless’s own anxieties, biographical and historical, pervade her fiction and historical works. Personal anxiety about the role of heredity must have played heavily on the mind of a daughter of a notorious madman. The suicide of Lord Cloncurry, Emily’s father, was sensationally reported in the media and fear of hereditary madness (a prevalent concept in the society as it was in the literature of the time) was an inevitable legacy. The kindest thing which Lawless’s mentor, the Scottish novelist Margaret Oliphant, could do in her warm obituary for her old friend Lady Cloncurry was simultaneously to obliterate all mention of her husband and laud the achievements of her daughter as the new Edgeworth.

A broader historical anxiety also haunts Lawless’s fiction and the Irish gothic tradition which influenced it. Lawless lampooned the alliance of Irish nationalism and American novelty in her weakest and most reprinted novel, Hurrish. Yet there and elsewhere an uneasy suspicion surfaces that the peasant life Lawless can chart with extraordinary sympathy and insight is the locus of progress and possibility. In all her contradictions, Lawless was an Irish Victorian; belief in and anger at progress were tempered for her by the fear of elimination by it. Class affiliation complicated and perplexed her desire for reform in social and sexual relations. Perhaps for this reason, contemporary commentators had difficulty classifying her. Swinburne admired Grania: another reviewer compared it to Gissing, “but Grania is more poetical and less sordid”. Her poetry was first appropriated by nationalism and then dismissed as mere patriotic verse.

Perhaps precisely because of these difficulties, Grania is a startling, powerful, and still relevant exploration of the conflict between communal identity and feminine individuality. The conflict is cast within the narrative of degeneracy, yet at key points it challenges that narrative.

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15. See for example: Times (London) 5 April 1869: 6, col. 5; 6 April 1869: 9, col. 6.
16. Oliphant recollects her as “strongly opposed to Home Rule and all the follies connected with that conception. She had no sympathy either with the flutter of feminine agitations which have been so general: though she was never contemptuous as so many are, but was always ready to discriminate between that which is modest and just and that which is noisy and silly, a thing that the wisest women do not always do. At the same time she was strong on her own side; if we may so express it” (246). At the same time she argues that Lady Cloncurry strongly supported the claims of women who were unfortunate or mistreated.
17. See Cahalan 31, Brewer 125.
18. Speaker 2 April 1892; in Lawless Papers, Marsh’s Library.
If Lawless’s fiction was continually drawn into the vortex of essences from which she sought critically to distance herself, Katherine Cecil Thurston’s sensational tales celebrate self-invention to a dizzying degree. Paradoxically, she is now best known for the one novel where life fails to live up to the fantasies of its protagonist. Thurston’s *The Fly on the Wheel* is close to *Grania* in its exploration of the social and psychological restrictions on a young woman of independent mind in turn-of-the-century Irish society. Isabel Costello faces, not the perils of the Atlantic, however, but those of middle-class, Munster, respectable society. *The Fly on the Wheel* ends, like *Grania*, with the death of the heroine.

Like Lawless, Thurston came from a political family. Her father was a Home Rule Mayor of Cork and an associate of Parnell’s. Unlike Lawless, Thurston herself strictly avoided national politics in her writing, though the sexual politics of the younger woman’s work was spectacularly more radical and overt. While never successful in the complete separation of national and sexual politics, Irish women’s writing has consistently tended to be much more adventurous with regard to the possibilities of sexual freedom outside of Ireland. Like Kate O’Brien, for whom she is a significant predecessor, Thurston’s fiction set in Ireland is significantly more pessimistic about the possibility of social, sexual, and personal change than that set elsewhere.

Ireland is nonetheless romanticised in Thurston’s fiction, in the rural landscapes of *The Gambler* and the finally irresistible Irish lover for whom Max becomes Maxine. Its society is dreaded, however. Thurston is now best known for *The Fly on the Wheel*, the only one of her novels reprinted by Virago. An excerpt has also been included in Colm Tóibín’s current anthology of Irish fiction. It is the closest Thurston comes to sober realism, despite its melodramatic conclusion. The fatally headstrong protagonist was so far identified with Thurston in her lifetime that her death in a Cork hotel at the age of thirty-six was widely speculated to have been a suicide despite the coroner’s verdict of natural causes. The speculation left the realm of gossip and became literary biography when it was repeated by the prurient Stephen Brown in his *Ireland in Fiction* in 1916. This confusion of scandalous life and sensational art is not unusual for woman writers, but it has a particular irony in Thurston’s case. She was, without doubt, a celebrity constantly on the verge and often in the realm of notoriety. Her divorce from novelist E. Temple Thurston was reported in great detail and the case was in effect fought by him as one between the claims of decadent art and those of the New Woman, attributing the desertion and adultery of which she accused him to their conflicting careers as novelists:

*it was necessary for his literary work that he should descend into the depths of society. He complained that she was making more money from her books than him, that her personality dominated his, and said that he wanted to leave her. (The Times 8 April 1910: 3, col. 5)*
Thurston’s novels everywhere celebrate the freedom of art, the right to independence of feeling and thought, and the facility of self-invention. Where these are missing, as in the Waterford of *The Fly on the Wheel*, life is simply not worth living. The novel’s main male protagonist, Stephen Carey, finds initially that “even for me,—the respectable citizen, the cut-and-dried lawyer,—there’s life to be lived” (281) and seems ready to turn from “sitting in my office, living the petty routine, playing the eternal game” (281) to run away with the novel’s heroine, Isabel Costello. When he fails to do so, he is depicted returning to his reading room: “its very barrenness, its very coldness suited him on this day” (311). Isabel, who, in true sensational fashion, finally commits suicide with the poison she had intended for him, is presented as more alive in her death: “her eyes caught the warmth, the redness, the glory of the sun” (327).

There is something incorrigibly youthful about the anger, energy, and passionate optimism of most of Thurston’s work. Interestingly, *The Fly on the Wheel*, which was her fourth novel, did seem to indicate a turn to social realism and pessimism, but *Max*, published just two years later, can be read as an emphatic recovery from both afflictions. Set in a Paris of fantastically glamorous possibility, *Max* epitomises the adventurous spirit of much decadent and New Woman fiction in its presentation of gender as role play, its exploitation of the homoerotic, and its exploration of the relationship between sexual and aesthetic freedom. The central character lives as a man in order to become an artist, making out of the loss of sexual identity the very material of her art. Published eighteen years after *Gracia*, it indicates the extraordinary re-imagining of gender which had occurred in the interim. The contrast between its audaciousness and its current obscurity is salutary. Nothing in Irish culture will approach its exuberant gender play until Neil Jordan’s *The Crying Game*. Like the latter, the novel turns upon a scene of sexual revelation which is also a scene of sexual transformation.

The publisher’s advertisement for *Max* linked it to Thurston’s enormously popular first novel: “Like John Chilcote M.P. it deals with a masquerade, but one planned upon entirely different lines, for it is the heroine and not the hero who masquerades.” The successful reinvention of identity was at this point the trademark and selling point of Thurston’s fiction. In *John Chilcote M.P.*, the impoverished impostor turns out to be a better man than the drug-addicted politician who hires him as convenient double. The permanent replacement of the real Chilcote by his double, both in the public eye and in his previously ailing marriage, is presented as a happy and even morally appropriate ending. The enormous popularity of this novel, which successfully transferred to the stage and later to cinema,\(^{19}\) indicates something of the popular appetite for such freedom to reinvent the self. In *Max*, this freedom is linked to art and to the release of a creativity more authentic than the accidents of society, sex, and personality which constitute one’s “real” identity.

For the first twenty chapters of the novel, Max is consistently referred to as "he" and, though a mystery linked to the disappearance of a Russian lady is hinted at, there are no real clues within the novel that the boy is anything other than that. He then retrieves his long, feminine hair, and is discovered looking at himself in the mirror by Jacqueline, the neighbour who has already guessed his/her secret. This episode constitutes the moment of crisis in the novel, when an incident in a nightclub awakens Max to the sexual possibilities of his/her relationship with Edward Blake, the Irishman whom s/he has cultivated as a friend and mentor. This sexual awakening precipitates an artistic one. Max’s femininity does not emerge as a natural, real identity, but is constructed, first by the addition of hair, next by the skills of Jacqueline, and finally by Max’s artistic “materialisation” of it in the painting of his sister, Maxine, with which he, without understanding quite what he is about, seduces Blake. The transformation occurs gradually in the latter part of the novel and is resisted by Max himself. (Thurston refers to her protagonist as him when dressed as a man, her when dressed as a woman, throughout.) Initially, Max loses rather than gains sexual and indeed all identity:

Max looked and, looking, lost himself. The boy with his bravery of ignorance, his frankly arrogant egoism was effaced as might be the writing from a slate, and in his place was a sexless creature, rarely beautiful, with parted, tremulous lips and wide eyes in which subtle, crowding thoughts struggled for expression. (193)

The idealist boy seeks to rationalise and stabilise his identity in a pose of artistic androgyny: "We have all of us the two natures—the brother and the sister! Not one of us is quite woman—not one of us is all man!" (198). Max does not wish to acknowledge that his difficulty in maintaining this position stems from his growing attraction to Blake. He displaces his unease on to a “little human play, where real people played real parts” (199), witnessed between lovers in the restaurant where he had dined with Blake. Jacqueline is more astute, however, and produces an image of the femininity which Max has lost for him in the mirror, herself taking on the role of artist in the process:

Excitedly, and without permission, she began to free Max of the boy’s coat, while Max yielded with a certain passive excitement. “Ah!” She gave a cry of delight and ran to the bed, over the foot of which was thrown a laced gold scarf—a strip of rich fabric such as artists delight in, for which Max had bargained only the day before in the rue André de Sarte.

“Now the tie! And the ugly collar!” She ran back, the scarf floating from her arm; and Max, still passive, still held mute by conflicting sensations, suffered the light fingers to unloose the wide black tie, to remove the collar, to open a button or two of the shirt.

“And now the hair!” With lightning-like dexterity, Jacqueline drew a handful of hairpins from her own head, reducing her short blonde curls to confusion, and in a moment had brushed the thick waves of Max’s clipped hair upwards and secured them into a firm foundation.

“Now! Now, madame! Close your eyes! I am the magician!” (200-01)

It is not undressing, but dressing that makes Max a woman, and while the description of this process is erotic and obviously sexually charged for Jacqueline, it is the opposite for Max:

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Meaney: Decadence, Degeneration and Revolting Aesthetics: The Fiction of
Max’s eyes closed, and the illusion of dead hours rose again, more vivid, more poignant than before. With the familiar sensation of deft fingers at work upon the business of hairdressing, a thousand recollections of countless nights and mornings—countless preparations and weariness—countless anticipations and disgusts, were born with the placing of each hairpin, the coiling of the unfamiliar—familiar—weight of hair. (201)

Femininity as masquerade is hard labour, but also art:

“Now Madame! Is it not a picture?”

With the gesture and pride of an artist, Jacqueline cast the wide scarf round Max’s shoulders and stepped back.

Max’s eyes opened, gazing straight into the mirror, and once again in that night of contrasts, emotion rose paramount.

It was most truly a picture: not the earlier puzzling sketch—the anomalous mingling of sex—but the complete semblance of the woman—the slim neck rising from the golden folds, the proud head, seeming smaller under its coiled hair than it had ever appeared in the untidiness of its boy’s locks. (201)

Max seeks the only possible way out of the dilemma. He tries to exorcise this image of himself as woman by painting it. His success suggests that the previously struggling and frustrated artist must find a way to channel his femininity into his art rather than deny it. Aesthetic success intensifies his personal dilemma, however, for the man he loves falls in love with his picture. Max seeks Blake’s critical approval of his art: “But Blake’s eyes were for the picture; the portrait of a woman seated at a mirror” (209). If the romantic Irishman is an old type, he is in Max also a new man, a creature which even the New Woman occasionally found difficult to imagine. When he finally witnesses the transformation of the woman in the portrait into his young male friend, he only pauses very briefly to say “‘God!’ very softly to himself. ‘God!’” (321), before rushing into his arms and acknowledging “I never treated Max as a common boy … I always had a queer—a queer respect for him” (323).20 Blake is nonetheless relieved when the transformation is reversed and his love for Maxine finally proven and accepted. Maxine argues:

“I know all the specious things that love can say; the talk of independence, the talk of equality! But I know the reality, too. The reality is the absolute annihilation of the woman—the absolute merging of her identity.” (326)

Thereafter she briefly reverts to Max and art, before art itself, in the form of a love song, convinces her she has lost more than she gained. It is easy today to dismiss Max’s final “ardent and eager” (337) repudiation of his masculine identity and flight to Blake as a compromise, reinstating the heterosexual couple. In the context of 1910, such an ending was also a celebration of the force of desire itself and an insistence that aesthetic and sexual freedom are not separable.

20. There appears to be no degree of certainty about the point at which “queer” came to have its current associations, but it did connote forgery and impersonation in 1910. Thurston is mischievous enough to have played with the sexual ambiguity if it existed in any form.
Difficult Belongings

Max was published at the end of an era and at the end of Thurston's life and represents a kind of apotheosis. It epitomises the particular achievement of decadents and New Women: to make the artifice of identity, particularly sexual identity, into art, to counter the terrible pseudoscientific certainties of their age with regard to gender and race with that art, and to develop an aesthetic which was very much more ethical and subversive than the moralists who condemned it could imagine.

In a recent meditation on the ethics of literary history, Linda Hutcheon has argued:

... If literary histories do work to create a sense of belonging and recognition for a people, they can also work to enlarge our sense of what it is that we belong to and recognize ourselves as part of. (4)

The work of Lawless and Thurston indicates that Irish literary history is much more heterogeneous, challenging, and disrupted than we had thought. It makes the cultural past stranger, puts strain on our faculty of recognition, for neither woman belongs fully to either the traditions of Unionism or nationalism, neither supports a version of Irish women as silent historical victims, neither elicits celebratory identification. Their absence from the records until very recently indicates the dangers of loss and obliteration where literary history manufactures continuity and homogeneity. Only a heterogeneous, fractured narrative can make sense of what Irish women actually wrote and make it available to the present. The contemporary appeal of Lawless and Thurston, their failures, their revolts, and challenges, is rooted in our desire for a past that extends rather than limits present horizons. Literary history is a multilayered story and one of the layers is an always present desire for validation from the past.

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