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Converts and Apostates

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MARTIN LOCKERD: *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism*.
London: Bloomsbury, 2020.
\$108 hardcover; \$35.95 paperback.

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Martin Lockerd's book, *Decadent Catholicism and the Making of Modernism*, addresses the influences on literary modernism of the decadent movement of the 1890s using the lens of Catholic conversions and apostasies. Decadence, Lockerd argues, is fundamentally a Catholic literary movement because Catholicism's "extra-rational economy of sin and grace, its storehouse of images for suppressed and sublimated desire, its reverence for celibacy ... and its eschatological worldview" were central to decadent artists' "[m]annered language, ritual, drunkenness, hedonistic wit, [and] conversion" (5, 1). Lockerd suggests that decadence has been unjustly ignored by scholars of modernism following W. B. Yeats's claim that "In 1900 everybody got down off his stilts; henceforth nobody drank absinthe with his black coffee; nobody went mad; nobody joined the Catholic church" (1).

For Lockerd, connecting modernism to decadence and decadence to Catholicism enables better understandings of texts that "engage with Catholicism using the language, symbols, and logic of decadence and with the crisis of modernity using the language of decadent Catholicism," including James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (6).

Lockerd argues that the decadents followed the traditions of the Pre-Raphaelites, who used Catholic images and invoked rituals but without adhering to the faith. When the decadents themselves were "accused" of "pursuing artistic interests that were never ratified by sincere spiritual experience," the evidence lay in their fetishization of ritual and "flaunting the moral teachings of the institutional church" (10-11). For Lockerd, the late-in-life conversions of Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley, as well as the conversion of "transgressive poet turned priest" John Gray, signal an opportunity to consider the whole life's work of each man in a Catholic context, since the church teaches that "eleventh-hour converts like Wilde and Beardsley are as eligible for the reward of everlasting life as their more spiritually industrious peers" (11).

Lockerd begins his study with a chapter on the decadents, focusing heavily on Lionel Johnson and Ernest Dowson. He then turns to Yeats and Ezra Pound, who each worked to encourage moderns to “forget” the decadent movement and especially its Catholicism. He devotes a whole chapter to T. S. Eliot, arguing against dividing Eliot’s oeuvre into pre- and post-conversion eras and seeing the seeds of Eliot’s future conversion in his earlier poetry. A chapter on George Moore and James Joyce will probably interest Joyceans most. It is followed by a chapter on Evelyn Waugh and a briefer discussion of Alan Hollinghurst and DBC Pierre.

Lockerd’s chapter on Joyce and Moore, titled “Decadent Anti-Catholicism and Irish Modernism,” focuses mainly on connections between Moore’s *Confessions of a Young Man* and Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Lockerd ends up arguing that Joyce is less anti-Catholic than Moore, because his character rejects the church in favor of art but without leaving behind the forms and ways of thinking that have informed his upbringing within the church. While Lockerd’s interest in this chapter, as in the book, is on the two writers’ relationship to Catholicism, I found myself thinking, throughout the chapter, of Joyce’s statement that he shouldn’t be thought of as a Catholic, but as a Jesuit. Joyce’s precision in this statement suggests that Lockerd’s emphasis is possibly askew, perhaps most when he describes Joyce as having “Catholic nostalgia” (112). Is it nostalgia when Stephen tells Cranly, “I am not afraid to make a mistake, a lifelong mistake and perhaps as long as eternity too” (*P* 247)? Or when Stephen says he “neither believe[s] nor disbelieve[s]” in the Eucharist, and prompted by Cranly to “overcome” his doubts, replies that “I do not wish to overcome them” (*P* 239)? Granted Joyce’s ironic relationship to Stephen, these statements still seem to me to be fairly steely-eyed, not blurred by nostalgia.

In the half-chapter devoted to *Portrait*, Lockerd gives substantial space to how Joyce uses the Virgin Mary in his novel. Zeroing in on the line in Joyce’s August 31, 1909, letter to Nora Barnacle in which he wrote that “You have been to my young manhood what the idea of the Blessed Virgin Mary was to my boyhood” (*SL* 165), Lockerd tries to peel apart the connections between Stephen’s spiritual and erotic life, connections perhaps suggested by the priest at the end of chapter three who advises 16-year-old Stephen to “Pray to our mother Mary to help you. She will help you, my child. Pray to Our Blessed Lady when that sin comes into your mind” (*P* 144). Of course, Stephen has been mixing up devotion to Mary with sexual desire since he was a little boy, when Eileen put her “long white hands” over his eyes while playing and Stephen thought, “That was ivory: a cold white thing. That was the meaning of Tower of Ivory” (*P* 35). Lockerd sees in Stephen’s “momentary desire to

repent ... mixed with ... a tendency to revel in the erotics of ritual devotion” the same “unsettling erotic conflation of virgin and whore that is prevalent in the work not only of Baudelaire but also of Gray, Wilde, and Dowson,” the latter three of whom are key focuses of Lockerd’s book (134-35).

The chapter on Moore and Joyce highlights the strongest feature of Lockerd’s work—his extensive and revelatory use of archival material from the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas. Lockerd has clearly spent ample time in the archive, and he uses what he has studied there to enhance his discussion throughout the book. For instance, he describes Joyce’s characteristic red-crayon annotations of a copy of *Evelyn Innes* that was in his library in Trieste and is now housed at the Ransom Center. Archival gems are sprinkled throughout the book, offering peeks into the writers’ practices and interests.

Joyceans interested in James Joyce’s feelings about Catholicism or the particular experiences in life that made their way into *Portrait*, either as incidents in Stephen’s story or as formal elements that help structure the novel, should not expect Lockerd’s book to satisfy them. *Decadent Catholicism* is not an updated *Joyce Among the Jesuits* or *James Joyce’s Schooldays*, and biographies provide a more comprehensive catalog of events than Lockerd attempts. But the book does provide context for *Portrait* and situates the novel in a new way among other texts of the period.

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