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Sarah Green. *Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience in Victorian Literary Decadence*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023. 266 pp.

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<1>Restraint may not be the first concept that comes to mind when one thinks of the Decadent Movement. Over the past few decades, the resurgence of interest in Decadence has tended to stress that the movement's interest in pleasure, desire, and the senses along with its Paterian ethos of openness, curiosity, and resistance to orthodoxy engendered sexually dissident forms of countercultural discourse. This interest in Decadence's investment in experimentation and experience has rhymed well with other lines of inquiry that have foregrounded how Decadent curiosity, or the Decadent desire for difference, facilitated cosmopolitan encounters along with more troubling forms of Orientalism and cultural appropriation. All of this together has tended to frame the Decadents in terms of the ways they indulged, whether that be in eroticism, innovative modes of sexual connection, travel, or sex tourism. As Sarah Green argues in *Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience in Victorian Literary Decadence*, this is not the whole story. There was within the Decadent Movement a strand of carefulness, ethical consideration, and concern about the distinction between sensuous experience and sensuality that endeavored to generate modes methods for enjoying beauty that also considered the good of the collective and preserved the individual's productive capacity. Alongside all of this erotic rapacity and insatiability, in other words, ran a strain of Decadence that worried very much about the impact perpetual indulgence might have on the self and the other. Green's book carefully traces how four significant figures with ties to Decadence, Walter Pater, Lionel Johnson, Vernon Lee, and George Moore, thought very deliberately about how to live and how to be an aesthete with an eye to continence and self-control.

<2>The greatest strength of this book lies in Green's desire to truly hear what these writers were trying to say. This entails trying to understand how late-Victorian writers with Decadent commitments attempted to balance their aestheticism with other seemingly contradictory commitments, placing a love for beauty at the center

of their lives while at the same time holding themselves back from unfettered or unethical enjoyment of that beauty. To truly comprehend this balancing act, one must slow down and really try to see how these writers made sense of themselves to themselves, attend to what they read and how they understood it, and allow for the very weird contradictions within their lines of thinking. As Green notes in her introduction, some of the most important work on aestheticism has read, for example, Decadent texts against the grain, indicating where sexuality might be encoded or expressed obliquely within texts marked by caution or hesitancy around desire. Green asks, on the other hand, what might happen if we read these statements about continence and restraint in earnest, not as evidence of repression or encoded expressions of eroticism but as very real attempts to generate a kind of Decadent ethics.

<3>This is a project that operates responsibly and thoroughly, beginning with a foundation that takes wider discourses about desire into account before moving into careful readings of individual authors' oeuvres. In a very helpful first chapter on broader conversations about sexual morality and chastity in the nineteenth century, Green situates the Decadent interest in continence within the context of medical and non-medical discourses (such as Platonism, the Oxford Movement, and New Woman writing) concerning the benefits of sexual restraint, which she links together under the category of "productive sexual continence." Acknowledging that Pater operated as a significant point of inspiration for many Decadent authors drawn to the concept of continence, she then devotes a longer chapter to comprehending how Pater theorized sexual restraint "not as the indication of something missing or unsaid, but as an active and productive state in its own right," a state that facilitated aesthetic self-cultivation while inhibiting selfishness and destructiveness (76). In the book's most compelling chapter, Green demonstrates how the "tragic" Decadent Lionel Johnson, known primarily for drinking too much and dying young, thought very long and very hard about how to be, about how enacting a productive mode of sexual continence might open up his capacity for sympathy and artistry, looking to his letters, poetry, and criticism as ongoing evidence of the great effort and thought he devoted to developing a modern mode of ethics. Vernon Lee is perhaps the least surprising appearance within *Sexual Restraint's* cast of characters, and Green makes a convincing case for taking seriously Lee's delineation of a vision of sexually continent love, rather than reading her work as evidence of failed or frustrated desire. One might not, on the other hand, expect to see George Moore here, but Green argues that, while Moore linked artistic production to sexuality, he was also drawn, through the principle of art for art's sake, to the idea of the artist as isolated from the world. Moore's thinking is the most all over the place of all the authors with which *Sexual Restraint* engages, and Green must work hard to reconcile his much more permissive

attitude toward sexuality along with his negative representations of celibacy with his belief that sexual energy might be redirected toward aesthetic activity. She acknowledges, however, Moore's playfulness and contradiction as well as moments when he treats these ideas with humor and as thought experiments.

<4>As Decadence moves from the margin to a more central position within nineteenth-century British studies, there will be more room to take into account how diverse of a movement this was, how many movements it contained within itself. *Sexual Restraint and Aesthetic Experience in Victorian Literary Decadence* is a welcome contribution to this enlivened and enlarged vision of Decadence, showing us that we might not know all there is to know about how the Decadents thought about sex, that burning always did not necessarily involve burning others, that Decadents took great care to consider how a life devoted to pleasure might also be ethical, thoughtful, productive, and kind.