Did a Decadent Metre Exist at the *Fin de Siècle*?

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**I Introduction**

Defining and codifying a national metre for England occupied many poets and prosodists during the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century, and it is no coincidence that these attempts to codify a national metre were concurrent with the decadent or symbolist ‘movements’ that tended towards the perceived ‘foreignness’ of French or Classical metres. A number of factors brought about the desire for a stable narrative of English metre’s history and future, among them the development of phonetics, the teaching of English as the national literary language in the newly state-funded schools, the need to educate and civilize the working class and colonial schoolchildren (and the belief that English poetry could do just that),¹ and the waning of the Classical languages as the marker of the educated elite.² As Linda Dowling has argued, English literary decadence emerged as a result of Romantic-era philology, stimulating anxiety and insecurity about English literature’s role in promoting English culture. The rise of comparative philology and its neogrammatarian programme also inspired the need to define English prosody—its pronunciation but also versification, or the way that poems were measured—for an English language that was becoming standardized via the *New English Dictionary* and the advent of the International Phonetic Alphabet.³ If pronunciation was being turned into new signs and symbols, what did that mean for the metre of a poem? How could poems both preserve the (now insecure) sounds of English while at the same time resist the patriotic programme of the national school system?

Dowling’s work supports the view that the increased attention to alliteration and sonic effects in *fin-de-siècle* poetry has ideological
underpinnings. And indeed, following Mallarmé, English poets foregrounded the sonic in order to maximize linguistic textures of words and to argue for the immediate experience of the sensual. As if to separate the sensual from the semantic, the story goes, poets imagined that poetry could reveal new—perhaps better—kinds of knowledge. David Ayers writes, ‘the generation conditioned by Aestheticism and ironic egoism felt itself charged with the cargo of rich interiority, differentiated by its social and sexual attitudes, but only in uneasy and skeptical relationship with any ethos of historical progress’. The uneasy and skeptical relationship with historical progress that Ayers cites resided, for poets, in their relationship to poetic forms as opposed to linguistic sounds. Though many poets of literary decadence used sound to highlight the impressionistic, the fleeting, or what Ernest Dowson called ‘the virtue of much and careful meditation upon life’, in order to distinguish themselves and their poems from the homogeneity of national literature, they did so while participating steadfastly in the poetic forms that spoke directly to that national literature—gesturing, in their selective adoption of French forms, to a kind of cross-channel exchange that would enliven both national literatures. Though much of the French and English writing of the *fin de siècle* was more thematically than formally linked, I want to explore just one instance of how English poets adopted and thought through French poetic forms as part of their participation in literary decadence. That is, a largely invented idea of ‘English national metre’ emerged in the late nineteenth century and collapsed a series of metrical verse forms (tetrameter, pentameter, accentual verse, accentual syllabic verse, syllabic verse) into an abstract concept of ‘rhythm’—as long as the theme of the poem was patriotic and the rhythm could be perceived as marching to a ‘common drum’ or easily perceptible beat. At the same time, a counter-idea of French-inflected poetic form also emerged that similarly collapsed a variety of forms and was more thematic than formal, but that also revered and revived the strictures of the French syllabic alexandrine line in English. This abstract concept of French prosody in English pre-dated the reactionary ‘English metre’ that emerged at the turn of the century and developed concurrently to it.

Among myriad other metrical narratives, the idea of a ‘decadent metre’ at the *fin de siècle* succeeded in making the common English ‘Alexandrine’ seem at once foreign and English, moving it back into a squarely French tradition in translations and imitations of Baudelaire but also using it to refer to the potentially exotic excess of a longer line in English, even if that longer line might only seem longer because of