'The death of Ernest Dowson will mean very little to the world at large, but it will mean a great deal to the few people who care passionately for poetry', wrote Arthur Symonds in 1900. 'A little book of verses, the manuscript of another, a one-act play in verse... some translations from the French, done for money; that is all that was left by a man who was undoubtedly a man of genius, not a great poet, but a poet, one of the very few writers of our generation to whom that name can be applied in its most intimate sense'.
The subject came up on a walk, one rainy Sunday last year, in south London’s Brockley Cemetery. My companion and I were standing at Dowson’s grave, at the very spot where Symons himself may have stood sombre with head bowed. We had arrived to find it, though heavily vandalized, literally garlanded in laurels, with a half-full bottle of absinthe nestled among the leaves. As we strolled away from the grave, the question was this: ‘Who, as in which poets, would you defend, if it came to it, in an argument?’

My answer seemed to be Dowson. He certainly isn’t a major poet, and much of what he wrote isn’t even (being polite) very good. But posterity has seen to that side of the argument, so I chose to defend him. He is not at all without charm, either: a kind of charm that Keats and, for example, Isaac Rosenberg had – the charm of being a genuine, striving, earnest – and doomed – person. There is a localised, London charm, too: these three were all highly indigenous London poets. And Dowson also has a strange recurring reach into unlikely areas (one of his poems even features at the end of the noir film Laura). He is one of those people who simply crop up.

Ernest Dowson – the ultimate aesthete, equally addicted to prostitutes and (sentimentally) little girls, lilies and absinthe – died, aged 32, in a friend’s lodgings in Catford, of either (depending which view you take) tuberculosis or egregious alcoholism. Following that discussion a year ago, this is the story of how he came to play a bit part in the formation of one of the most Modern of all the Modernist projects of the 20th century: the atonal music of Arnold Schoenberg.

Two deaths, both tragic and both marked with the period, book-end that year and mark the irrevocable close of the Decadent nineties. The first was Ernest Dowson’s, on 23 February; the second, on 30 November, was Oscar Wilde’s. The seal was set on the epoch only two months later, when Queen Victoria herself joined them on 22 January 1901.

But the world of poetry – at least, the world of poetry that got read and noticed, at least in English – would remain much as it had been for several years yet. The touch paper wouldn’t go up – wouldn’t ‘lick its tongue into the corners of the evening’ – for another 15 years. Just as we’re told sex was invented in 1963, poetic Modernism apocryphally was born caterwauling with the publication of ‘The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock’.

But the paper had been lit before that. In fact, the paper is always getting lit. A series of random events made 1909, our own year’s pre-centenary, a cluster year towards the new century’s aesthetic. But as the arrow began to point forward, like the hands of Dorothy’s Scarecrow it was also pointing back, far into the nineteenth century. Because nothing is ever just beginning. You can chuck out your chintz, but you can’t chuck out everybody else’s. And arguably you can’t chuck out yours either. You have to wait till it wears out.

We’re taught about Art or Music or Poetry (if we’re lucky) as if ‘this’ period gave way to ‘that’ school, which forced ‘this’ breakaway group to write ‘that’ manifesto. It’s as if everybody alive went to the Salon d’Automne, and mocked the blinkered critics. It’s neat, it’s tidy, it’s unchallenging, it makes us look good (if you subscribe to the idea of progress), and it turns 1066 and All That into a workable
The educationalist template. In this way, from a very early age, we are encouraged not to look at things, or wonder about them; just assign them a year and away we go, to our studio in happening Hoxton.

The reality, of course, is that if you walked into a house at random, you wouldn’t see a house full of things that ‘date from’ this year. You’d see the furniture, books, curtain fabric from the last 10, 30, 90 years. You’d see your trendy mate poring over the latest issue of *Wallpaper* curled up in the chair his mother bought when he was ten (though he probably wouldn’t still have her black velvet clown painting unless he was called Wayne Hemingway.) The revolutionaries may have new stuff, but they also still have their chintz – it’s precisely what they can’t even see, they’re so used to it. They have it because it’s comfy and it fits the space.

The 1900s were the years of Picasso’s blue and rose periods. *Les Demoiselles D’Avignon’s* aggressive primitivism pretty much put paid to the late Victorian discovery of Orientalism, which of course flourished on in high Art Nouveau style (though it would never quite replace it as a basis for home furnishings). The decade saw Richard Strauss’ shocking opera *Salomé* (based on Wilde’s shocking play) and the first stirrings of Gertrude Stein. (For unlikely pairings and era-overlap, consider the interesting fact that, when young, Gertrude Stein looked strikingly like Beatrix Potter.) Levels of dissonance in music had been steadily rising since the late nineteenth century. Liszt’s *Bagatelle Sans Tonalité* was written in 1885 (three years after Wilde’s embarrassing trip to America as a specimen Aesthetic, in the pay of D’Oyly Carte – during which he found opportunity to make Henry James feel provincial), Debussy swirled the colours around like paints in a pot in the nineties, and Satie the “phonometrician” wrote his strange, light, off-kilter pieces alongside.

Poetry, however, was different: in English, the 1900s were the years of Thomas Hardy, Alfred Noyes, Yeats, Robert Service, Walter De La Mare. 1905, mopping up the puddles of the nineties, saw the publication of Ernest Dowson’s *Collected Poems* as well as Symonds’s *A Book of Twenty Songs* – as well as Wilde’s shocking posthumous essay about his incarceration, *De Profundis*. There was a small offering from the young James Joyce halfway through the decade, and one from Stein. But in 1907 the arch-conservative bugbear, Kipling, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Ten years after Debussy’s *Prélude à l’Après-Midi d’un Faune* (itself based on Mallarmé’s great Symbolist poem of 1876), poetry audiences – still large at that point – were reading new collections by Swinburne, Hardy and Henry Newbolt.

Then something happened. On December 21, 1908, a concert audience in Vienna sat down to hear Arnold Schoenberg’s String Quartet No. 2. It was a musical sensation; even though the composers were more forward-thinking than the poets at this stage, the public was finding their worst excesses hard to handle. To say Schoenberg had had a bad year would be an understatement: only that autumn he had discovered that his wife Mathilde was having an affair with a young Expressionist painter, Richard Gerstl. When Mathilde broke it off, Gerstl had retaliated by staging a spectacular, possibly too Expressionist, suicide. After this episode apparently there was nowhere left, musically, for Schoenberg’s state of mind to go. The string quartet he had been working on all autumn became a lesson in evocative disintegration – an orgy of atonal uncertainty and despair.
punctuated and heightened by a ghostly floating hint of a nursery tune (Ach, Du Lieber Augustin; in English, Did You Ever See a Lassie?), and partly set to words, and with no anchoring key signature, melody or pretty effect to cling to. It ended in chaos, with hisses and jeers from a crowd that had already been expecting the worst – some of them even had noisemakers with them, just in case. In the weeks that followed it was written about everywhere as ‘the Schoenberg affair’.

The two wordy movements in that Quartet are set to poems from Der Siebente Ring (The Seventh Ring), by the German Symbolist poet and translator Stefan George, who was crucial to Schoenberg’s oeuvre. They are, of course, deeply indicative of Schoenberg’s state of mind at the time:

Deep is the sadness that gloomily comes over me,
Again I step, Lord, in your house.
Long was the ride, my limbs are weary,
The shrines are empty, only anguish is full.
...
Kill the longing, close the wound!
Take my love away, give me your joy.

The next month, in London, the cocky 25-year-old poet TE Hulme (who would be blown up in the trenches in 1917, along with the only manuscript of his important monograph on Jacob Epstein) published the first poems that could arguably be called Imagist. He then seceded from the Poets’ Club, of which he was secretary, to form a breakaway group called – imaginatively – the Secession Club.

In April 1909 a young American poet called Ezra Pound was invited to join Hulme’s group, and the 20th century was in business. It wasn’t before time, either: as late as 1908 Pound had seen fit to title his second collection A Quinzane for This Yule. Here is an extract from Aube of the West Dawn, Venetian June:

Then svelte the dawn reflected in the west,
As did the sky slip off her robes of night,
I see to stand mine armouress confessed,
Then doth my spirit know himself aright,
And tremulous against her faint-flushed breast
Doth cast him quivering, her bondsman quite.

The Secession Club set to work stripping away the varnish (‘the sheer weight of Prague,’ as a fictitious Kafka would say), writing light, shimmering poems based on principles of simplicity, clarity and – well – images. The first Imagist anthology was out that year in time for Christmas.

1909 was the year Picasso painted the first work of Analytical Cubism, the Portrait of Ambroise Vollard. Schoenberg’s brilliant student Anton Webern wrote his Six Pieces for Orchestra. Algernon Charles Swinburne, the hyper-Victorian flagellist and versifier, perished.

It was the year in which Arthur Symonds had a psychotic breakdown that would remove him more or less permanently from the literary scene. It’s hard to
imagine, but Symonds lived on until 1945, writing nothing of any note, stuck in his time; in the 1930s John Betjeman wrote a tragic poem – in the head waiter’s book – about seeing the old Decadent sitting, alone and pathetic, in the Café Royal:

I saw him in the Café Royal  
Very old and very grand.  
Modernistic shone the lamplight  
There in London's fairyland...

In the summer of 1909, still deranged from the cataclysm of the previous autumn, Schoenberg dramatically wrote: 'I have only one hope – that I will not live much longer'. He wrote, 'in a word – I am totally broken'.

In The Rest is Noise, his survey of twentieth century music, Alex Ross writes that Schoenberg ‘warned that he would 'soon follow the path, find the resolution, that at long last might be the highest culmination of human actions'. But, in an intriguingly vague turn of phrase, he could not foresee ‘whether it will be my body that will give way or my soul”.

One might even say, in a gothically Decadent turn of phrase.

During this time he also wrote, to Kandinsky: ‘Art belongs to the unconscious! One must express oneself! Express oneself directly! Not one’s taste, or one’s upbringing, or one’s intelligence, knowledge or skill’. He told Alma Mahler to listen for ‘colours, noises, lights, sounds, movements, glances, gestures’.

Cut to a dark and stormy might. It was 1913. Although it would never prove possible to wean him off the Orientals, Pound was finally about to achieve the famous two-line apogee of Imagism, his In a Station of the Metro:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Schoenberg had weathered his near-breakdown several years earlier; the intervening years were a colourful hardening. He had discovered in the aftermath of Gerstl’s suicide the beginning of his true path, and knew he had to take modern music beyond tonality. Beyond what he might have considered his early Late Romantic pandering, and into the world of strange structures.

(Schoenberg, already an angry man, was made even angrier by the common term used to describe his music. ‘To call any relation of tones atonal’, he wrote, ‘is just as farfetched as it would be to designate a relation of colors aspectral or acomplementary. There is no such antithesis’. He wrote: ‘I find above all that the expression “atonal music” is most unfortunate – it is on a par with calling flying “the art of not falling”, or swimming “the art of not drowning”. Only in the language of publicity is it thought adequate to emphasize in this way a negative quality of whatever is being advertised’.

Always keen to make his point, Schoenberg went on to state that:

‘... this expression is wrong: with tones only what is tonal, in keeping with the nature of tones, can be produced; there must at least be that connection of tones based on the tonal, which has to
exist between any two tones if they are to form a progression that is at all logical and comprehensible; an opposite, “atonal” can no more exist among tones and tone-relationships than can an opposite “aspectral” or “acomplementary”, among colours and progressions of colours.7)

And because any vestige of tunefulness was seen as a betrayal of this hard new sense, in the way that rhyme (say) has subsequently come to be, it was necessary to find new structures to support these tune-free pieces. For this reason, even the most abstract century’s most abstract artists in the most abstract art form continued to work with lyrics, making something as seemingly chintzy as atonal songs. Schoenberg was no exception.

Some of the lyrics Schoenberg worked to (for his Erwartung, Pierrot Lunaire, Die Glückliche Hand) were written by amateur poets – including himself – and were as Expressionist as the music he set them to. But other inspirations were found elsewhere, in a darker, older Symbolism.

Schoenberg was particularly addicted to the work of the aforementioned Stefan George – whose work, as Alex Ross says in The Rest is Noise, ‘showed Schoenberg a way out of the easygoing pleasures of Viennese aesthetics. The sheer density of the poet’s imagery did not permit easy access, although sensual secrets resided in the labyrinth’.vi

The labyrinth, needless to say, is where Ernest Dowson lived.

Dowson was even more the consummate Decadent than his friend Symonds. He was so addicted to ethereal beauty that he didn’t even have a proper home. He apparently lived on absinthe and lilies, identified at least as much with France as with England (Wikipedia calls him ‘a kind of English Verlaine’vii) and lived by the truism that a prostitute was cheaper than a hotel. He invented the witticism, ‘absinthe makes the tart grow fonder’. He was devoted for most of his adult life (not very long, remember) to a Polish waitress called Adelaide, who was 11 when he started frequenting her parents’ café. He was a legendary, and quite scary, bon viveur and drunk. Both his parents had killed themselves; he was literally waiting for his ship to come in, in the form of some compensation for the failure of the defunct family dockyard in Limehouse. And he knew absolutely everybody, including the King of the Decadents, Oscar Wilde.

In short, Dowson was the symptom of the disease, of the reason Modernism had to happen, in a nutshell: the living embodiment of the apogee of the decay of Victorian sentimental ornamentism. So says a reader of mine, an intelligent, discerning, unsentimental man, who tried to read the poems in a slim volume bound in red calf, and ended up throwing it across the room. His complaint was anticipated by Symons (things were beginning to change, after all, even in 1900), who continues:

‘People will complain, probably, in his verses, of what will seem to them the factitious melancholy, the factitious idealism, and (peeping through at a few rare moments) the factitious suggestions of riot. They will see only a literary affectation, where in truth there is as genuine a note of personal
sincerity as in the more explicit and arranged confessions of less admirable poets’.

Symons goes on to articulate the thing that makes Dowson’s admittedly rather florid poetry live, which I also articulated to my questioning friend: it is just that he seems, like Pinocchio, to be a Real Boy. Here is Symons again:

‘To Dowson, as to all those who have not been ‘content to ask unlikely gifts in vain,’ nature, life, destiny, whatever one chooses to call it, that power which is strength to the strong, presented itself as a barrier against which all one’s strength only served to dash one to more hopeless ruin. He was not a dreamer; destiny passes by the dreamer, sparing him because he clamours for nothing. He was a child, clamouring for so many things, all impossible. With a body too weak for ordinary existence, he desired all the enchantments of all the senses. With a soul too shy to tell its own secret, except in exquisite evasions, he desired the boundless confidence of love’.

Before we go on, here are some Dowson stanzas, which may (to coin a Thurberian phrase) refresh your memory. First, from his zappily-titled Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae:

I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind,
Flung roses, roses riotously with the throng,
Dancing, to put thy pale, lost lilies out of mind;
But I was desolate and sick of an old passion,
Yea, all the time, because the dance was long:
I have been faithful to thee, Cynara! in my fashion.

And second, from his Vitae Summa Brevis:

They are not long, the days of wine and roses:
Out of a misty dream
Our path emerges for a while, then closes
Within a dream.

Notice anything familiar in there? Have you, in the recesses of your consciousness, started saying to yourself, ‘Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn!’? Or humming show tunes from Kiss Me Kate? But that’s not all. Not only did Dowson insert three figurative phrases straight into the heart of our colloquial language – which is more than a lot of poets have managed – he is also the first person recorded in the English language to have used the word ‘soccer’. And what is nearly as little known as this is that his High Victorian words were also (in the German translation of Stefan George) used as the basis for a song by no less titanically Modernist a master than the future tone guru himself, our other hero, Arnold Schoenberg.

On this occasion, as he peered through his spectacles at a sheaf of translations, a poem called Seraphita caught Schoenberg’s eye. He was already interested in making some form of music drama after another Seraphita – the 1835 novel of another distinctly pre-Modernist writer, Balzac. Here is what he read, in Dowson’s original English:
Come not before me now, O visionary face!
Me tempest-tost, and borne along life’s passionate sea;
Troublous and dark and stormy though my passage be;
Not here and now may we commingle or embrace,
Lest the loud anguish of the waters should efface
The bright illumination of thy memory,
Which dominates the night; rest, far away from me,
In the serenity of thine abiding-place!

But when the storm is highest, and the thunders blare,
And sea and sky are riven, O moon of all my night!
Stoop down but once in pity of my great despair,
And let thine hand, though over late to help, alight
But once upon my pale eyes and my drowning hair,
Before the great waves conquer in the last vain fight.

With three shorter pieces by Rilke (natch) he set this poem (in German) to music, creating his very important atonal song sequence, the fetchingly titled Opus 22.

There is, unsurprisingly, a huge seam of moon-lore in Decadent and symbolist literature – far more than there is in Modernist literature. This extends to a whole seam of Pierrot imagery. Just confining ourselves to the artists already under discussion, Wilde uses the moon as a major signifier or symbol in his *Salomé*, where the moon’s face changes to signify the emotional content of the action – which ends with Salomé’s murder by Herod:

**THE PAGE OF HERODIAS**
Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things.

**THE YOUNG SYRIAN**
She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing.

**THE PAGE OF HERODIAS**
She is like a woman who is dead. She moves very slowly.

Wilde’s *Salomé*, too shocking for London, had its first performance in 1896 in Paris. By that time Wilde was in prison, but Ernest Dowson attended the play with Aubrey Beardsley. Strauss’ opera, based on Wilde’s play, opened to scandalised crowds in Dresden in 1905.

And of course Schoenberg’s own *Pierrot Lunaire*, using poems by the French poet Albert Giraud (translated into German by Eric Harleben, who used to recite or chant them in music halls and cabarets), celebrates this very same aesthetic in very jarring Sprechstimme vocals that are much harder to listen to, even a hundred years later, than the lyric is to read. (I have heard reports of paying customers walking out of it in the Barbican in 2009.) Here, translated into English by Cecil Gray, is a small sample:
The pallid buds of moonlight
Those pale and wondrous roses
Bloom in the nights of summer—
O could I pluck but one!
...
As a lingering drop of blood
Stains the lip of a consumptive,
So this music is pervaded
By a morbid deathly charm.

In other words: the music was so far ahead of its time as to be still ahead of its time, and the lyric was, frankly, in a manner that any gothy schoolboy could relate to now, then or ever. Except that they would have called it Romantic, and we would now probably say Emo. In 1897, Dowson himself had written a moon-drunk one-act play, *The Pierrot of the Minute*, about a Pierrot who is allowed to fall in love for one night with a moon-nymph, on the understanding that it will ruin his life:

THE LADY (reads)
"Au Petit Trianon, at night's full noon,
Mortal, beware the kisses of the moon!
Whoso seeks her she gathers like a flower —
He gives a life, and only gains an hour."

PIERROT (laughing recklessly)
Bear me away to thine enchanted bower,
All of my life I venture for an hour.

Beardsley, who illustrated it (and would be dead of TB at 25), called it a ‘foolish little playlet’; but then, he also insulted Wilde’s play, which he most famously illustrated. (Wilde, in his turn, disliked the pictures.) *Pierrot of the Minute* is quite revealing, in an incidental way, of Dowson’s biographical proclivities: the moon is as symbolically pale, unattainable and asexual as a little girl, and the doomed life the Pierrot is destined to lead afterwards is foretold.

Dowson’s *Seraphita* makes the longest song in Opus 22. Schoenberg’s decision to set Brockley’s distinguished deceased to music has been criticised for being a throwback to a less-developed taste; but on the contrary, as we can see, the poem was still in 1913 – just about – au courant; and its inward-looking, rather maudlin text suits Schoenberg’s music, which was still at that stage, overtly emotional. Dowson’s slightly apocalyptic tone might have appealed to a jaded, symbolically-minded composer looking for a way out of a creative impasse. And finally, there are senses in which the Moonlight Pierrot could simply be read as another sexy, hungry vampire hero.

‘It doesn’t make Dowson any better a poet’. This is the voice of David Secombe, my Brockley walking companion and author of *I Have Been Faithful to Thee, Ernest! In My Fashion* – a tragic-farcical play about Dowson and the nature of failure. ‘But it goes to show that rigid definitions like “Victorian”, “decadent”, “symbolist”, “expressionist” and “modernist” can be misleading. The common
aesthetic preoccupations of the late Victorian and Edwardian world were strong enough to mitigate against easy classification’.

It’s all a long way from the generation of poets then working their way up: the bankers, doctors, insurance men, publishers, staid men of letters who kept their expressionist tendencies well-wrapped and sought to eliminate, as TS Eliot abjured us to do, the personality from his art (with, I think we’d have to add, mixed success). At this stage the great Modernist composer Charles Ives (‘a great man’, according to Schoenberg) was breaking the sound barrier all by himself in secret, at weekends, in between transforming the fledgling American discipline of selling life insurance.

Back in Brockley Cemetery, where the whole top of Dowson’s cross has been knocked off, we found a plastic document wallet also nestled among the garland of laurel. Some very faded, large, bold, italic lines of poetry were printed on pink paper inside it – evidence of some local school project on the local literary heritage, maybe. (We took it off, naturally, for the picture, but put it back afterwards.) Were all these artefacts connected? Had the apocryphal pupils really worked out such a deep understanding of what Ernest would like best? Did the teacher really tell them about the Green Fairy and the death in Catford? It’s easy to guess that they weren’t played any Schoenberg music; and I like to think that if it was the kids who left the absinthe they at least got their teacher to buy it for them.

Literary criticism, like history, is the story of the victors. If Dowson was a Victorian, so was Schoenberg: he was 25 when Dowson died at 32. Nine years later at 34 Schoenberg was just getting started. He lasted until 1951, dying in distant Beverley Hills, prophet and scourge into the ages of the machine, Bauhaus, the New Look, almost the atomic fifties. Eisenhower would be elected two years later. Poor Ernest only reached Catford, and never saw a telephone or a movie. What would he have written if he’d lived to develop his art past the little green-lit window allotted to him?

Dowson, like Schoenberg, like Keats before them, died thinking he was misunderstood and a failure. He wanted his aesthetic to prevail, but he also wanted popular success. Like all writers and artists, he wanted to be loved – on his own terms, for his art. Little did he know that he would influence and inspire both the godfather of the highbrow, and the as-yet-unimaginable populist, Cole Porter – in that future world that so many artists would escape into. It’s pleasant to imagine that had he lived even another nine years, to the edge of the century that just touches us, he might have come out of the Café Royal one night whistling a new song, a hundred years old this year:

By the light, of the silvery moon,  
I want to spoon,  
To my honey I’ll croon love’s tune.  
Honey moon, keep a-shinin’ in June.  
Your silv’ry beams will bring love’s dreams,  
We’ll be cuddlin’ soon,  
By the silvery moon.
i The friend was the writer Robert Sherard. The death scene is incredibly affecting, and was related to an interviewer by the not altogether reliable Mrs Sherard many years afterwards, in a workhouse in Poplar.


iii Alex Ross: *The Rest is Noise*, Fourth Estate (2008) p50

iv Ibid., p57

v Ibid., p57

vi Ibid., p49


viii Cole Porter: ‘Always True to You, in my Fashion’, *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948)


x according to a note found after his death; reported in http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,945067-1,00.html

xi music by Gus Edwards; lyrics by Edward Madden; (1909)