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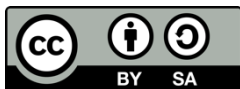
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The Journal as Archive:  
*Vesy* and the Russian Reader's Encounter with Decadence

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The journal *Vesy* [*Libra*], published in Moscow between 1904 and 1909, offered a markedly new venue for the waves of modernist authors and theorists emerging in turn-of-the-century Russia. It incorporated numerous nods to European literary trends and included regular contributions from Remy de Gourmont, frequent articles on Oscar Wilde, reproductions of artwork by Odilon Redon and Aubrey Beardsley, and a steady stream of reviews of recent books in French, English, German, and Italian. Yet it also published new works by the most prominent Russian Symbolists and decadents. *Vesy*'s aesthetic stance was abundantly clear to its readers, prompting a hostile critic to label it 'the Koran of the Moscow Decadents'.<sup>1</sup> This offhand dismissal contains a surprising degree of insight. The journal billed itself as a 'bibliographical monthly' that sought to combine Russian and Western, new and old, original and translation. True to the journal's bibliographical identity, the mixture of materials included in the seventy-two issues of *Vesy* did indeed read like another breviary of decadence that collected the foundational tenets of the new tradition, accumulated over several decades from all corners of Europe, into a single space of publication. For Russian readers and authors, decadence was a balancing act. On the one hand, they sought to imitate authors and texts of the past that were imported with a badge of decadence that had already been established by European critics and readers, and on the other, they were simultaneously generating distinctly Russian iterations of what, for them, was an emerging modernist art form.<sup>2</sup> Having created an instant, serialized, and widely accessible archive of decadent works, *Vesy* offers a curious indication of how decadence was read from a distance while also working as a template for transplanting it into new cultural spaces. This perspective helps flesh out a definition of decadence that highlights its open-endedness and malleability.

This article examines the structural principles that governed *Vesy*'s mixture of poetry, prose, criticism, and reviews. I show how *Vesy* was designed to educate a Russian audience about decadence and nurture a coterie of readers versed in its underpinning aesthetics. This didactic element emerges when aspects of reception theory are applied to our reading of the print culture of decadent publications. Matthew Potolsky shows how the definition of decadence hinges on the people and institutions that informed its reception.

Works are 'decadent' not because they realize a doctrine or make use of certain styles and themes but because they move within a recognizable network of canonical books, pervasive influences, recycled stories, erudite commentaries, and shared texts. Each decadent text borrows from and expands the network, locating itself by reference to the names or books it evokes and leaving its own contributions behind.<sup>3</sup>

Russian readers were particularly attuned to the contexts and networks of decadence. The highly mediated ways they accessed modernist works created a confluence of influences and models that emphasized their communal elements. The eclectic diversity of decadence, the hodgepodge of traits that contribute to Potolsky's dynamic and somewhat mercurial definition, are the crux of its Russian readers' conceptual understanding of the tradition. The journals and publications that helped to import decadence into Russian literary culture relied on promoting and participating in the networks of texts and authors that reveal the contours of its definition. Modernist journals in turn-of-the-century Russia were a major tipping point in shepherding Russian literature and culture from the era of the psychological and realist novel to a sensibility focused on individual experience and the subjective perception of the surrounding world. The journals, with *Vesy* ultimately taking the lead, could articulate a unifying viewpoint, 'the principal of individuality, of freedom of art, of the subjectivity of artistic creation [which] played the role of a consolidating idea' that bound Russia's nascent modernists.<sup>4</sup> This called for a steady introduction of both European works and forms and original literary and artistic creation from Russia itself. The modernist journals' transitional position has been explored extensively in scholarship that situates it within the dramatic and rapid development of new art and aesthetics in late Imperial Russia.<sup>5</sup> I expand the scope of those interactions by highlighting the significance of the Russian journal's complex

relationship with temporality in navigating the presentation of modernism. As part of a second, delayed, wave of theorizing and modelling modernism, *Vesy* actively cultivated an awareness of the multiplicity of decadence, the many components that fashioned it for a new cultural context, and strove to offer a vehicle for decadence's encounter with a Russian audience.

I focus on presenting and analyzing several elements of the inaugural issue of *Vesy* from 1904. Its opening article, Valerii Briusov's 'Keys to the Mysteries', was immediately followed by Konstantin Bal'mont's extended discussion of the life and poetry of Oscar Wilde. Bal'mont's posthumous and historical appraisal of Wilde complements the generative and novel quality of Briusov's aesthetic manifesto. By capitalizing on the belated introduction of decadence to Russia, the journal functioned as an archival repository of European decadence while also fostering the creation of new decadent works in Russian. Through this combination of its retrospective and future-oriented functions, *Vesy* illustrates how readers first experienced decadence and came to understand and even emulate it in the aftermath of that encounter. Within the scope of this article, I limit my analysis to the first issue of *Vesy*. It serves as a representation of the journal as a whole in terms of its structure, style, and aesthetic stance. But this particular issue is an especially informative site for an investigation of Russian modernism. It conveys the aspirations of an emerging group of writers, it is modelled as one long manifesto for their art, it was designed to be utilized as a sourcebook for a new aesthetics, and it overtly seeks to create bridges between distant times and disparate places, to connect a Western literary past to a Russian literary present.

*Vesy*'s dualistic temporal focus is indicative of the liminal nature of Russian modernism. The journals and publications that disseminated Symbolist and decadent writing in Russia in the mid 1890s were explicitly creating something new. They imported an aesthetic language and literary style that deviated significantly from the realist prose works that had preoccupied Russian readers from the 1840s into the late 1890s. With little in the way of transition or organic development, modernism seemed to appear *ex nihilo* on the Russian literary landscape around 1894-95 with a spate of publications, both genuine and parodic, touting their novelty. In this early wave of what

was generically labelled ‘the new art’, it was quintessential for writers to prominently proclaim their aesthetic affiliation. Calling a booklet of poetry ‘Russian Symbolists’ and being associated with an article about the ‘Moscow Decadents’ was a clear indication of an artistic stance to their readers. My approach to the period hinges on understanding the dynamic relationship between author and reader. By importing decadence into Russia decades after it was introduced in Europe, Russian writers adopted a didactic role, educating their readers in a new aesthetic. This complicates the model of literary evolution that views modernism as a natural reaction to the nineteenth century and exposes the punctuated nature of its development. *Vesy* captured the uneven and temporally disparate quality of decadence by mixing its past, present, and future, adding a notable element of intentionality and self-awareness to the Russian writers’ relationship to decadence. They approached the concept as both a canon of established works and a potential new trajectory for Russian literature. *Vesy* was a tangible and relatively well delineated model while also simultaneously conveying the vague notion of future work in an as yet unseen corpus of Russian art.

Fast-forwarding a decade to 1904, the heyday of that early impulse to introduce this new art, *Vesy* reveals the complexity of the Russian reader’s encounter with modernism. Decadence was simultaneously understood as something connected to foreign books and non-Russian authors and as an increasingly visible presence in Russian literature. By the turn of the century, ‘decadence’ was a term that had been bandied about by Russian writers, readers, and critics as both insult and badge of honour. They had a sometimes inchoate, sometimes specific idea of its behavioural, cultural, and stylistic markers. It represented forms of newness and alternatives to the status quo that coincided with growing social and political discontent.<sup>6</sup> After a decade of exposure to decadence, a complex network of sources and aesthetic stances had emerged, contributing to the Russian definition of decadence. The journal offers a window into the myriad forces driving this perception. The first issue of *Vesy* demonstrates the extent to which modernism was a part of Russian literature’s nascent twentieth-century identity while also representing a removed and

seemingly inaccessible cultural and temporal otherness. Its presentation of both the concept of decadence and a collection of decadent works captures the multifaceted nature of Russia's relationship to modernism's formative texts and traditions. With its deep roots in history and frequent engagement with classical motifs and aesthetics, decadence supplied Russian readers with a connection to both the distant and recent past. Yet the decadent works showcased in *Vesy*, and the decadent qualities it helped to define, bound it inextricably to Russian literature's present discourse. The journal collected and categorized an aesthetic that charted a path for practitioners yet to come. In this respect, it encompassed both the twilight and the dawn of European decadence.

*Vesy* was the organ of a number of writers who had struggled to find a suitable place in print. It was the logical extension of the publishing house Skorpion, founded in 1899 to wrest control from commercial publishers and divert their books away from hostile readers.<sup>7</sup> Skorpion's significant early investment in translations of works by Henrik Ibsen, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Knut Hamsun, Edgar Allan Poe, and Arthur Schnitzler complemented its active efforts to establish a canon of original poetry and prose by such Russian figures (both notable and obscure) as Valerii Briusov, Aleksandr Dobroliubov, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, Fedor Sologub, Zinaida Gippius, and Aleksandr Miropolskii. By founding a journal in 1904, those affiliated with the publishing house could create a complexly organized and interdisciplinary platform for disseminating 'Symbolism, Decadence, and the new art' (the movements they identified with in the journal's opening editorial statement) in Russia. The holistic and intentional convergence of the roles of publishing house and journal was reified in the fifteen-page publisher's catalogue appended to the first issue of *Vesy*. Both the content of the issue and the catalogue were meant to be mutually instructive and were directed at the same readers. The model of a catalogue is one of the operating paradigms for *Vesy* and a generally helpful approach to the process of importing and adapting decadence in Russia. This is the first structural concept that I will discuss as a key context in which Russian readers came to know this art and regard it as both native and foreign, contemporary and historical.

Beyond this, the range of articles and reviews in the issue itself establishes another structural paradigm that corresponds to *Vesy*'s self-designation as a 'bibliographical journal'. This is a particular manifestation of the archival impulse that reflects the processes by which decadence was presented to and collected for a Russian readership. I will also touch upon the relevance of translation and a self-awareness of the international and imported nature of a decadent aesthetic. With a keen eye on the European print context, the Russians levelled out linguistic and temporal distinctions in order to foster a unified and timeless conception of decadence. All three of these structural models help us understand the combination of reactive and productive elements of Russian decadence and give us particular insight into the broader presentation of its aesthetic tenets. Through a combination of collecting and creating, Russian decadents used the journal to establish a Janus-faced version of the art form that points both backwards and forwards.

The publisher's catalogue provides a telling snapshot of this intersection between literature of the past and literature of the future, between Russian and non-Russian decadence. The final fifteen pages of the first issue of *Vesy* comprised a catalogue of all books published by Skorpion from 1900 to 1904. Beyond its commercial purpose to sell more of the publisher's books, the catalogue creates a distinct sense of affinity and connection between all of the titles listed. It gathers and organizes decadence into a clearly delineated set of works linked by their stylistic and thematic qualities. This function complements the Russian modernist journal by consolidating the meandering branches of European decadence into a single time and space. The combination of modernist journal and book catalogue offers a clearer sense of both the purpose and the intended readership of Russian decadence. These are expressions of an understanding that an aesthetic concept is most comprehensible when presented as a cluster of works. By establishing a critical mass of disparate texts that nonetheless are branded with the same designation and association, the compilation of articles in the issue functions didactically while the list of books adds a complementary prescriptive element.

Readers of *Vesy* were amenable to its instructive qualities and drawn to the coterie represented in microcosm in its catalogue. And herein lies the crucial artistic tension and challenge for second-wave decadence. *Vesy* sought to represent an established canon of decadent works and tropes while also propelling it into the future. Kate Hext, Kristin Mahoney, Alex Murray, Vincent Sherry, and David Weir have drawn attention to the paradoxically productive role played by decadence in the development of twentieth-century modernism.<sup>8</sup> *Vesy* was particularly invested in the creation of a new type of writer, one who embodied Hext and Murray's notion of 'Decadent Modernism'. *Vesy* exposed its audience to the interest in the aesthetic, the championing of alterity, and the perspectival shifts that fuelled late nineteenth-century decadence. This awareness informed the Russian readers' and writers' sense of modernity and, as exemplified in *Vesy*'s first issue, was built on an extensive foundation of texts and ideas already marked with the badge of decadence. By rehashing decadence's aesthetic stance and recontextualizing its major works and authors in the single, simultaneous space of a journal, *Vesy* reimagined the archive as a fundamental entry point into decadence. Its compactness and accessibility allowed Russian readers to incorporate it into their own visions of modernism and propel decadence into Russia's own literary and artistic avant-garde.

The list of books issued over the previous four years by the journal's publisher performs the type of levelling-out that is prominent in Russian decadence. They bring an assortment of authors and languages together and present them to the reader as an established and interconnected group. While the label 'decadent' may not be the most common for each individual book in the catalogue, in the aggregate these works form a corpus of decadence. The publisher's emphasis on variety showcases the range of sources that fed Russian decadence. The implicit community created by placing these books in a single catalogue overcomes the differences in time and place that separate Edgar Allan Poe from Zinaida Gippius and Henrik Ibsen from Andrei Bely. The titles listed here are both a static collection of books on the shelf of an archive and the



dynamic syllabus of items available in the bookstores that are necessary for new readers to acquaint themselves with a wide and capacious array of decadence.

The challenge of encompassing both the past and the future created the potential for a rift in the presentation of decadence to Russian readers. By circumscribing decadence as a set group of published works while also actively using it to cultivate a new, as yet unwritten, literary tradition Russian proponents of the new art had to nimbly navigate multiple temporal identities. The catalogue that served as the culmination of the journal established an archive of past and present examples of decadence. As a text, the catalogue operates similarly to an anthology or a miscellany. It is a ‘professionally mediated and systemized’ document that shapes its reader.<sup>9</sup> Barbara Benedict explains that

[i]f in one sense the readers of late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century anthologies are passive, in another, depending on the extent and nature of the editorial mediation, they must expend enormous energy in converting decontextualized material into meaningful experience, in choosing for themselves what has been chosen for them. This enforced process of imaginative engagement simultaneously defines reader and literature as culturally elite.<sup>10</sup>

The process of inscribing additional meaning onto extant works and finding insight into a new art form through the aggregate of the catalogue is part of the imaginative engagement that marks the active reader. By assembling exemplars of decadence, the catalogue is an overt articulation of modernism as a complex network of people, works, and institutions. The consistent format of its entries – with most including a portrait of the author, annotation about the book, and excerpts from reviews – puts this list of titles into dialogue with one another. They become a coterie into which an aspiring writer or curious reader is initiated by collecting these books. The dissolving boundary between text and biography implied by the coterie, what Lytle Shaw qualifies as the ‘kinship’ of its members, is particularly suited to introducing decadence to Russian audiences.<sup>11</sup> The catalogue offers an entry point for those new to the tradition while using the model of an archive (a mediated, curated, and annotated collection of established texts) to express a definition of decadence that legitimizes their participation in it. With its apparent straightforwardness, the

catalogue intentionally smooths over the significant distance in time and place between the members of its coterie. In this respect, *Vesy* is part of a broader modernist trend for effacing national boundaries and conveying the internationally networked identity of the movement. As Eric Bulson has shown, the journal was a form well suited to reflecting modernist aesthetic and technological advancements.<sup>12</sup> While adopting the static concept of decadence inherited from this established collection of works, the catalogue opens up the potential for a more fluid and dynamic decadence by empowering the reader to reformulate its connections and form a new whole from these disparate elements.

The catalogue does not function in isolation, but as an integral element of the first issue of *Vesy*. It is part of the highly instructive and structured experience of reading the journal's Russian and non-Russian works. The articles in the journal also operate in the bifurcated temporality of Russian decadence. Ultimately, reading this inaugural issue of one of Russia's most consequential literary journals of the turn of the century is to inhabit multiple planes and be immersed in a plethora of temporal and geographical modes. As Joan Delaney Grossman has shown, in *Vesy* the Russian modernists

envisioned a journal devoted to the new literary and artistic culture with special attention to those Western currents on which Russian developments were still dependent for inspiration. This aim was in keeping with their conception of art's essential oneness and their hopes for a broad new artistic movement without national or linguistic boundaries.<sup>13</sup>

*Vesy*'s emphasis on an instructive and didactic approach to decadence helps to explain its self-proclaimed classification as a bibliographical journal. This is a curious term for a publication at the forefront of importing modernist tendencies into Russian literature and culture. *Vesy* does indeed include an extensive section of book reviews that covers publications in Russian, German, Italian, French, and Swedish. But the impulse to collect and gather books, as I have discussed, was not limited to the reviews. Its bibliographical identity serves to emphasize the centrality of reading in the creation of Russian modernism. The work of constructing meaning out of the journal's various elements called for an engaged and committed readership. Through the confused temporality of

the archive it aligns decadence with the fragmentary and subjective facets of later modernism. The readers' interaction with decadent texts, as modelled by their encounter with *Vesy*, is mediated by the external figure of an editor. The editor acts as guide, explicating and curating the reader's experience. The archival assemblage of the catalogue enables this encounter and presents decadence to the reader in a structure that lends itself to such mediation. As with later twentieth-century modernist texts, decadence is a literary mode that seeks to train and acculturate its readers.<sup>14</sup> When *Vesy* is considered as a whole, its blend of retrospection and guidance, the constituent factors in its bibliographical function, construct a reading experience that fosters a nuanced understanding of decadence.

Like the catalogue that concludes it, the first part of *Vesy*'s first issue, consisting of original articles, reinforces its bibliographical structure. Once again we see the constellation of coterie, collection, and archive that fuels this issue and sets up its complex relationship to time: it presents both a retrospective position on art of the past and a future-directed mandate for emerging authors. To this end, the issue is programmatic in several ways. While Briusov's 'Keys to the Mysteries' is the most frequent subject of critical attention in this issue, its pairing with the next article, Bal'mont's 'The Poetry of Oscar Wilde', conveys the particularities of Russia's appropriation of decadence and the relevance of the space of the journal. For the reader, the implied conversation between the two and the relationship established by this textual proximity links Wilde to contemporary Russian artistic theory. Through the bibliographical code of the journal, the side-by-side placement of these two articles creates an equivalence between the ideas and figures they discuss.<sup>15</sup> The community of past and present authors generated in these articles anticipates the decadent network of the publisher's catalogue on the final pages. The interaction between parts and the whole reveals the journal's interstices in such a way that we can see how it constructs the concept of decadence. Briusov elucidates the general principles of decadence, but the context provided by Bal'mont's article adds colour and detail to Briusov's declarations about the nature of art.

Written three years after Wilde's death, Bal'mont's appraisal of his poetic career is distinctly styled as neither an obituary nor a memorial. He seeks to fix Wilde's place in both the European *fin de siècle* and in early twentieth-century Russian aesthetics. Near the end of the article, he asserts that Wilde and Friedrich Nietzsche, who died just three months before Wilde in 1900, were paradigms of late nineteenth-century thought. Their lives and personalities serve as models for aspiring Russian decadents: 'How representative of our confused epoch, always searching and never finding, that these two geniuses from two great countries, with their passion and their desire, ended in insanity and exile.'<sup>16</sup> Bal'mont's article is in part an overview of Wilde's career and an analysis of his writing, thus adding to the international record of critical responses to the writer. But it is also the first comprehensive study of Wilde in Russian and opens new horizons for the impact of his work on emerging artists.<sup>17</sup> When paired with Briusov's manifesto, it becomes both descriptive and prescriptive. Bal'mont is engaged in an act of summation. He takes stock of Wilde's career and makes a sweeping justification for the 'Poetry' in his title, with the entirety of Wilde's work, not just his verse, being qualified as poetic: 'I am now speaking about the poetry of his personality, the poetry of his fate.'<sup>18</sup> The goal of Bal'mont's article is to convey a single, appreciable version of Wilde for a Russian audience. He encapsulates Wilde's essence by listing his qualities: 'Oscar Wilde would everywhere scatter a glistening waterfall of paradoxes, ideas, comparisons, conjectures, biting sarcasm, delicate charm, a stream of sunshine, smiles, laughter, Hellenic joy, poetic surprises.'<sup>19</sup> Here is a straightforward appraisal of Wilde's personality as well as a catalogue of the qualities that can help define a decadent. As Evgenii Bershtein argues, '[i]t was in the numerous responses to Bal'mont's article that Wilde's story became completely mythologized. Russian critics now considered his life as a failed superhuman effort to overcome morality; and in his attempt to create life artistically, they saw a revolt doomed to punishment.'<sup>20</sup>

This broadly-focused instruction is part of Bal'mont's effort to place Wilde in the past and create an archive of his life and work for Russian readers. But elements of Bal'mont's article are in conversation with the more present-minded theoretical facets of *Vesy*. Bal'mont's discussion of

Wilde constantly hovers around the notion of beauty, particularly beauty as understood through Wilde's aestheticism. It is rooted in Bal'mont's appraisal of the interplay between society and art that is central to his presentation of Wilde. It is the beauty of tragedy and suffering that he identifies with Wilde: 'If in so loving himself, a brave man is rendered blind, he will be genuinely defeated, and in that there is more beauty, more poetry than if he conquered multitudes [...]. Such was the drama of Oscar Wilde.'<sup>21</sup> Bal'mont's privileging of beauty as the key to Wilde's work and his soul, as the condensed essence of his decadence, is more than a repetition of well-worn notions of 1890s aestheticism. Bal'mont sets up the legend of Wilde as a trope for the future production of decadence. Wilde's life story moves from the biographical to the realm of the manifesto. In second-wave decadence, conveying old paradigms and inventing new ones occurred simultaneously. *Vesy* navigated this mixture of memory and invention by combining backward glances at European decadents with nods forward to the new Russian art. Beauty and art, the unsurprising keystone of Bal'mont's presentation of Wilde, are also central to Briusov's article 'Keys to the Mysteries', which the reader of *Vesy* had encountered in the preceding pages.

Briusov describes beauty in terms of mystification and the quest for eternity. This comes at the culmination of his discussion – after he has charted a path through various nineteenth-century aesthetic theories. While he tracks the development of utilitarian art, pure art, and empirical art, their relationship to beauty serves as a gauge that anticipates their function in contemporary literary practice. The polemics that he voices by spelling out the arguments of the supporters and detractors of each movement will resonate with Bal'mont's map of Wilde's life in art. Briusov fixates on the link between art and revelation through the contemplation of previous art forms. Bal'mont's discussion of Wilde plays readily into this approach. As the reader learns, the tenets of realism that Briusov rejects in the first pages of *Vesy* had been rejected by Wilde years before. Briusov and Bal'mont create a parallel between the past and the present fashioned through a well-curated examination of Wilde's life and work. The fulcrum for their interaction is in the concept

of beauty, a term both critics capitalize at key moments. They both focus on the struggle of the writer and the importance of the individual in contemporary art:

A person to whom everything in the world is simple, clear, attainable, cannot become an artist. Art is only where there is audacity beyond the edge, breaking through the boundaries of the cognizable with a craving to scoop up at least a drop of

‘An alien element, from the beyond’.

‘The gates of Beauty lead to cognition’, said the same Schiller. In all the centuries of their existence, unconsciously, but unchangingly, artists have carried out their mission: to explain the mysteries revealed to them, and at the same time they have sought other, more perfect means of attaining cognizance of the universe.<sup>22</sup>

The definition of art and the artist promoted by Briusov as a manifesto for his contemporaries and literary allies is built on the foundation of previous decades of European art. Only when paired with a comprehensive understanding of Wilde (as mythologized for the Russian decadents) and a catalogue of works branded as decadent do Briusov’s declarations fit into the landscape he seeks to inhabit. Without an archive of past achievements, the present of Russian decadence seems unanchored and incomprehensible to the reader.

These Russian thinkers are constructing their own version of decadence through bricolage. They assemble various pieces, both native and foreign, established and nascent, and manage to sustain a version of decadence that is at once historical and novel. They acknowledge and embrace its imported character and deep roots in the past while still promoting its viability and vitality for new Russian writers. The ability to gather together so many exemplary models through the creation of an archive is essential to this project. By fixating on the act of reading decadence in all of its many spaces and times, its Russian proponents showcase the ‘otherness’ of decadence without alienating their audience. A highly contingent and networked understanding of the tradition emerges in the process. The overarching meaning that is derived from fusing these fragments for the Russian reader can be understood as a version of decadence that is telling for both its broader conceptual development and its particular place in Russian literary and artistic culture. The final structural model of *Veiy* I consider brings me to a question that is naturally, and belatedly, at the heart of this discussion: how did Russian authors and readers understand the concept (or concepts)

of decadence and what traits did it embody for them? This last approach to *Vesy* hinges upon the knowingly adaptive and borrowed nature of its content. Russian readers had access to European decadent publications such as *The Savoy*, *The Yellow Book*, the *Athenaum*, *La Plume*, the *Mercure de France*, *Cosmopolis*, and *La Revue Wagnérienne*, and knew of its major practitioners. As I have discussed elsewhere, by 1898 even seventy-year-old Lev Tolstoy had read two dozen or so *fin-de-siècle* writers including Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and Maurice Maeterlinck.<sup>23</sup> The Russian understanding of decadence is strongly shaped by these imported sources. It draws from the types of otherness seen in Baudelaire, the musicality of Verlaine and Arthur Rimbaud, the aestheticized morality of Wilde, and the immersion in Classical and Renaissance art of Walter Pater. For Russians, decadence is at once about recapturing the resonance of the lyrical ‘I’ and pushing back against the traditions of authorial social and civic responsibility that had dominated the later nineteenth century. The paradigmatic figures of Russian literature’s previous decades – Lev Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, Fedor Dostoevsky, Ivan Goncharov – cemented the turn towards realist prose that immersed the reader in physical and psychological details. It was primarily outside of Russia that the emerging decadents of the 1890s could find aesthetic models. Many writers devoted significant effort in that early phase to discovering, obtaining, and collecting these works.<sup>24</sup> Translation and imitation were part of the Russian experience of the new art from the very beginning and by 1904 *Vesy* could quite naturally integrate numerous strains of European decadence into its pages and catalogue alongside the developing canon of Russian decadence.

*Vesy* consolidated these non-Russian perspectives and organized them in an accessible space. It forged a common perspective and established a set of terminology (in Russian) that put them into dialogue. Here we return to the idea of the ‘Koran of the Russian Decadents’, the pejorative label given to *Vesy* by Asheshov that was mentioned at the outset. While to an extent the Judeo-Christian Bible emphasizes narrative cohesion, the Koran is structured as a compilation of stories and episodes. For Russian writers, a pastiche of foreign works and a more amorphous constellation of figures and ideas became the entry point into decadence. The accumulated heft of

decadence, assembled into a whole, informed their understanding of the concept. The bibliographical and archival traits of the journal, as seen most readily in *Vesy*'s structure, facilitated this pursuit. For Russian readers, decadence was primarily a collection of various works by non-Russian writers bound by common spaces of publication, a common critical framework, and the associative links of the canon or archive. In this respect, decadence gains a uniformity and cohesiveness through proximity and context without endangering the open-endedness and diversity that are essential to its definition. The combination of gathering and commenting makes this into a curated assemblage of an aesthetic whose sum is more cohesive and instructive than its constituent elements. By experiencing decadence in the aggregate, readers overcame the geographical, temporal, and aesthetic divisions that made it such a capacious tradition. *Vesy* is a tangible example of the network that constitutes decadence. It is the reification of decadence's conflicted relationship with the new and modern that makes it a notoriously slippery concept.<sup>25</sup>

Decadence's liminality and alterity come from its uneasy relationship with borders and boundaries.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, it could be adopted by writers and readers at a significant spatial and temporal distance from its origins. Russian decadents capitalized on this mobility and fluidity to join a tradition that was not native to their literary heritage. The process called for the rapid education of a Russian audience through the instant creation of an archive of decadence. It was essential to translating a decadent canon into Russian while also fostering the development of an indigenous decadent tradition among Russian writers. By consigning decadence to the archive, *Vesy* enabled both of these functions. It turned decadence into a relatively unified object of study, a contemplation of literature's past, while sparking its ongoing development with new works and new authors bound by its thematic, aesthetic, and stylistic markers. Archiving decadence was an effective strategy for performing the shifts in geography and temporality that made it part of the present and future for new literary traditions. Ultimately, the ways *Vesy* reflected and refracted decadence affirmed its timelessly dynamic and mercurial nature, a status conferred by the Russian journal's appropriation of the archive.



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<sup>1</sup> Nik Asheshov, 'Review of K. D. Bal'mont (*Sobranie stikhotvorenii. Tom vtoroi*), Viacheslav Ivanov (*Prozrachnost'*), Andrei Belyi (*Zoloto v lazuri*)', *Obrazovanie*, 8 (1904), Part III, 146-51 (p. 149). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Scholarly considerations of modernism tend to pinpoint its beginnings in the shifts in thought that had been percolating since the appearance of Baudelaire, Swedenborg, and Darwin in the mid nineteenth century. Thus, decadence was born of the same paradigm shifts that enabled modernism's artistic and social upheavals and can be treated as an early phase of modernism, one that would help propel the movement into the twentieth century. See David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995); Vincent B. Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); and Kate Hext and Alex Murray, eds, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> A. V. Lavrov, and D. E. Maksimov, 'Vesy', in *Literaturnyi protsess i russkaia zhurnalistika kontsa XIX-nachala XX veka. 1890-1904. Burzhuazno-liberal'nye i modernistskie izdaniia*, ed. by B. A. Bialik, V. A. Keldysh and V. R. Shcherbina (Moscow: Nauka, 1982), pp. 65-136 (p. 70).

<sup>5</sup> The contours of this transition and the foreign influences on writers of the 1890s have been the subject of several major studies. See Georgette Donchin, *The Influence of French Symbolism on Russian Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1958) and Rachel Polonsky, *English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). General overviews of the evolution of the Russian modernist journal can be found in Joan Delaney Grossman, 'Rise and Decline of the "Literary" Journal: 1880-1917', in *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia*, ed. by Deborah Martinsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 171-96; Stanley Rabinowitz, 'Northern Herald: from traditional thick journal to forerunner of the avant-garde', in *Literary Journals in Imperial Russia*, ed. by Deborah Martinsen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 207-27; and Hanna Chuchvaha, *Art Periodical Culture in Late Imperial Russia (1898-1917)* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> See Joan Delaney Grossman, *Valery Bryusov and the Riddle of Russian Decadence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Mark D. Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin de Siècle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Olga Matich, 'Russia', in *The Fin-de-Siècle World*, ed. by Michael Saler (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 150-66; and Jonathan Stone, *Decadence and Modernism in European and Russian Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> The most extensive treatments of the history and development of *Vesy* (whose name was derived from the zodiac sign but has been variously translated into English as *Libra*, *The Balance*, and *The Scales*) are Lavrov and Maksimov, 'Vesy', and K. M. Azadovskii and D. E. Maksimov, 'Briusov i "Vesy" (K istorii izdaniia)', in *Valerii Briusov. Literaturnoe nasledstvo 85* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), pp. 257-324. A more focused approach to *Vesy* can be found in the articles contained in D. A. Zavel'skaia and I. S. Prikhod'ko, eds, *Iz istorii simbolistskoi zhurnalistiki. Vesy* (Moscow: Nauka, 2007). There is also a cursory overview of the journal in Oleg Minin, 'Modernism Upheld: Moscow Journals of Art and Literature', in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines. Vol. III, Europe 1880-1940*, ed. by Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 1276-798.

<sup>8</sup> Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*; Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence*; Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence*; and Hext and Murray, eds, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism*.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Benedict, *Making the Modern Reader: Cultural Mediation in Early Modern Literary Anthologies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), pp. 17-47.

<sup>12</sup> Eric Bulson, *Little Magazine, World Form* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Grossman, 'Rise and Decline of the "Literary" Journal', p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> See Molly Abel Travis, *Reading Cultures: The Construction of Readers in the Twentieth Century* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1998), pp. 18-23.

<sup>15</sup> On the concept of bibliographical codes, see Jerome J. McGann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Konstantin Bal'mont, 'Poeziia Oskara Uail'da', *Vesy*, 1 (1904), 22-40 (p. 37).

<sup>17</sup> On Wilde's place in Russian culture, see Evgenii Bershtein, 'The Russian Myth of Oscar Wilde', in *Self and Story in Russian History*, ed. by Laura Engelstein and Stephanie Sandler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), pp. 168-88, and Polonsky, *English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance*, pp. 152-69.

<sup>18</sup> Bal'mont, 'Poeziia Oskara Uail'da', p. 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Bershtein, 'The Russian Myth of Oscar Wilde', p. 179.

<sup>21</sup> Bal'mont, 'Poeziia Oskara Uail'da', pp. 24-5.

<sup>22</sup> Valerii Iakovlevich Briusov, 'Keys to the Mysteries', in *The Russian Symbolists: An Anthology of Critical and Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. by Ronald E. Peterson (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986), 52-64 (p. 63). The original is in Valerii Iakovlevich Briusov, 'Kliuchi tain [1904]', in *Sredi stikhov, 1894-1924: manifesty, stat'i, retsenzii*, ed. by N. A. Bogomolov and N. V. Kotrelev (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1990), p. 101.

<sup>23</sup> Jonathan Stone, 'Decadent Style with a Symbolist Worldview: Andrei Bely, Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, and the Perils of Surfaces', *Modernism/Modernity*, 21.1 (2014), 269-82.

<sup>24</sup> A crucial starting point for many was Zinaida Vengerova's 1892 essay, 'Symbolist Poets in France'. Zinaida Vengerova, 'Poety simvolisty vo Frantsii', *Vestnik Evropy*, 9 (1892), 115-43.

<sup>25</sup> See Weir and Sherry, who build on Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979).

<sup>26</sup> This is the crux of Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky's characterization of decadence as an aesthetic of 'perennial decay'. Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky, eds, *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).