

Preface

‘Littérature de décadence! – Paroles vides de sens que nous entendons souvent tomber, avec la sonorité d’un baillement emphatique’ (Charles Baudelaire, *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe*, 1857).

This Halloween issue of *Volupté*, devoted to the writings of journalist, translator, and writer Lafcadio Hearn and guest-edited by Fraser Riddell, is a useful reminder of the limitations of labelling, an issue that has dogged decadence scholarship since the mid 1950s, when John Reed’s book *Decadent Style* (1954) sparked new interest in the field and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* published two articles on the meaning of decadence: Clyde de L. Ryals, ‘Towards a Definition of Decadent as Applied to British Literature in the Nineteenth Century’ (September 1958), pp. 85-92, and Robert L. Peters, ‘Towards a “Un-Definition” of Decadent as Applied to British Literature in the Nineteenth Century’ (December 1959), pp. 258-264. Peters’s response to Ryals’s article set the tone for discussions about defining decadence for the next seventy years or so.

For Ryals, decadence was ‘a subphase’, ‘a logical outgrowth of romanticism’ (pp. 86, 91) that resulted in an imperfect ‘blending of strangeness and the desire for beauty’ (p. 92). ‘[W]hereas romanticism expressed itself by maintaining an equilibrium between the natural and the grotesque,’ Ryals argued, ‘decadence found expression in distorting this balance and placing value on the grotesque at the expense of the natural’ (p. 87). Peters objected to Ryals’s simplistic ‘tabloid, undiscerning approach’, and he prescribed instead a full, critical understanding of the ‘multiplicity of artistic modes, energies, and directions, both *decadent* and not, present in the eighteen-eighties and eighteen-nineties’ (p. 258). ‘Decadence,’ he went on, ‘with its several manifestations at the close of the century, is much too many-faceted a creature to submit thus calmly to Mr. Ryals’s slimsy lasso’ (p. 263). Today, the conceptual complexity and category-defying ‘polyvalence’ of decadence, as we tend to call it, continue to be the focus of lively debate, and we range widely beyond the confines of the British fin de siècle. This issue of *Volupté* takes us to the US South, the Caribbean, Europe, and Japan.

The extent to which we can identify cosmopolitan Hearn and his writings as ‘decadent’ is intriguing to ponder, for like many writers and artists discussed in the pages of *Volupté*, and notably those who straddle decadence, the Weird, and the supernatural (Arthur Machen and Vernon Lee come immediately to mind), Hearn was angrily resistant to being pigeonholed. He eschewed the label of ‘decadent’. ‘Never read a line of Verlaine in my life’, he insisted, ‘and only know enough of the decadent school to convince me that the principle is scientifically wrong, and that to study the stuff is mere waste of time.’ Not that Verlaine was enamoured either by the epithet ‘decadent’. In his introduction to ‘The Decadent Movement in Literature’ in *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (November 1893), Arthur Symons, himself of course no stranger to changing tack, reports a trio of complaints: ‘Verlaine objects to being called a Decadent, Maeterlinck to being called a Symbolist, Huysmans to being called an Impressionist’ (pp. 858-867: p. 858).

So, let us fling aside ‘Mr. Ryals’s slimsy lasso’, and with decadent capaciousness in mind celebrate the unkind critic in the *New Statesman* who in 1925 described Hearn’s writing as inhabiting ‘a kind of No Man’s Land’, for No Man’s Land with its ‘amphibian or mongrel or half-caste’ literature is truly the unstable home of decadence, a literary tradition best defined by a big emphatic Baudelairean yawn about labels and labelling.

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31 October 2025