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Goldsmiths
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Voluptuous Interventionism:
An Introductory Note from the Editor-in-Chief

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Decadence has come a long way. What was once a term of opprobrium used to dismiss the mannered confections of a ‘movement of elderly youths’, as Holbrook Jackson described them, now defines a field of study taught across the world and debated along multi-disciplinary and transnational lines by a growing community of students and researchers. The founding scholars of Decadence studies – Linda Dowling, Matei Calinescu, Barbara Spackman, Ian Fletcher, Regenia Gagnier, David Weir – broadened our engagement with Decadent literature and expanded its social, political, and cultural relevance to such an extent that it is impossible today to study the literature of Decadence without reaching back to fourth-century Rome or pondering the decay and decline, the beauty and rot, of our own times.

Scholarly interest in Decadence has been intensifying over the last five years. It has taken some new turns – cosmopolitan, sensory, and spatial – but the overriding concern continues to be with its relationship to modernity and to that complex aesthetic expression of modernity – Modernism. Numerous monographs and edited collections have appeared, including, to name but a few, Matthew Potolsky’s *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (2013), *Decadent Poetics: Literature and Form at the British Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Jason David Hall and Alex Murray (2013), *Decadence and the Senses*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé (2014), Kostas Boyiopoulos’s *The Decadent Image: The Poetry of Wilde, Symons and Dowson* (2015), Vincent Sherry’s *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2015), Alex Murray’s *Landscapes of Decadence: Literature and Place at the Fin de Siècle* (2017), and, most recently, Weir’s *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (2018).

The conference circuit has been lively too, with a large number of events – mainly in the UK – either exclusively or in part devoted to a Decadent theme. In April 2014, Goldsmiths,

University of London, hosted an international conference on *Decadence and the Senses*; this was followed a year later by two other London-based events: *Aestheticism and Decadence in the Age of Modernism: 1895 to 1945* at the Institute of English Studies, and *Fin de Siècle Echoes: Strange Friendships, Unseen Rivalries, and Lost Paths of Literary Influence, 1880-1910* at King's College London. In April 2016, Goldsmiths organized a one-day symposium on *Ernest Dowson (1867-1900): Poet, translator, novelist*, and in July of the same year Birkbeck, University of London, hosted *Forgotten Geographies in the Fin de Siècle, 1880-1920*. 2017 began with a two-day spring conference on *George Egerton* at Loughborough University, and ended with a winter symposium at Durham University on *Neo-Victorian Decadences*. We are currently only half way through 2018, but already it promises to be a bumper year, with two events Stateside in May—*Curiosity and Desire in Fin de Siècle Art and Literature* (University of California, Los Angeles) and a one-day symposium on *Transnational Poetics: Aestheticism and Decadence at the Fin de Siècle*, at New York University – and two upcoming conferences in July: [*Women Writing Decadence: European Perspectives, 1880-1920*](#) (Oxford University) and [*Decadence, Magic\(k\), and the Occult*](#) (Goldsmiths).

Despite the continuing broad interest in Decadence, there has been no interdisciplinary journal of Decadence that looks beyond the nineteenth century for its material or seeks to connect late nineteenth-century Decadent literature with its roots in Roman antiquity and its expression in modern and contemporary literature, art, and culture – until now. As is obvious from the titles of conferences and symposia listed above, Decadence has tended to be absorbed into the broader fields of Nineteenth-century Studies, Victorian literature, and Modernism, and is often viewed in relation to Aestheticism and *Fin de Siècle* Studies, but this does not do justice to the continuity, complexity, and polyvalence of Decadent literature. Neither does it reflect its intrinsic and fascinating unruliness, the way it calls into question traditional literary categories such as genre and periodization. It was in recognition of the peculiar dimensions and challenges of Decadence that the idea for a journal of Decadence studies was conceived. *Volupté* was born.

We derive the journal's title from Charles Baudelaire of course, and the recurring line 'Luxe, calme, et volupté' from the poem, 'L'Invitation au voyage', evoking Henri Matisse's 1904 painting of the same name, in the hope that the various associations of the word 'volupté' with fullness and sensuality and volume (in terms of both capacity and bibliophilia) will create the conditions for a rich reading of Decadence. Titles are sometimes difficult to pick but in this case the tribute to Baudelaire is entirely fitting, and we have adapted his own handwritten version of the word 'volupté' from the title page of *Les Fleurs du mal* as the journal's logo.

Volupté is part of a series of broader, interlocking research initiatives at Goldsmiths to develop and advance the field of Decadence studies. A subject of study at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, Decadent literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries forms a distinctive and highly popular part of the curriculum and research environment of the Department of English and Comparative Literature (ECL). In 2017, a [Decadence Research Unit](#) (DRU) was established in ECL to lend a public-facing coherence to the ongoing research by academics and early-career researchers in the Department and to provide intellectual anchorage for aspiring postgraduates and early-career academics. In the same year, we also set up a [British Association of Decadence Studies](#) (BADs), the primary aim of which is to generate funding for Decadence events, essay prizes, and modest postgraduate bursaries. Its first annual event will be the conference *Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult*, with a special issue of *Volupté* on the theme to be published later this year.

This inaugural issue of *Volupté* celebrates the subtle and diverse work of poet, translator, editor, and critic, Arthur Symons (1865-1945), of whom Jackson once said that 'No English writer has a better claim to recognition as an interpreter of the decadence'. Symons revised his ideas about Decadence over a period of fifteen years, attempting a first review of Decadent literature in an article for *Harper's New Magazine* in 1893, later revising it in *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). By 1908, the year he suffered a nervous breakdown, Symons was drawn to comment on

Decadence again, but by this time he was preoccupied with the notion of a social decadence and seriously disillusioned with a self-destructive materialistic world.

As the two recent conferences on Symons demonstrated (*Arthur Symons: Writing across Arts and Cultures* (Università Iuav di Venezia, 2015) and *Arthur Symons at the Fin de Siècle* (Goldsmiths, 2016)), Symons is a byword for transition. Living so long and writing so much, he brought his changing times to vivid life, championing a cosmopolitan outlook and engaging with urban modernity on Baudelairean terms. A lover of the interstitial, as Leire Barrera-Medrano attests in her article, “‘Inarticulate cries’: Arthur Symons and the Primitivist Modernity of Flamenco”, Symons was fascinated by the Spanish Gypsy, interpreting the flamenco dance as the perfect embodiment of a primitivist and modern aesthetic. Like the other contributors to this volume, Barrera-Medrano treats us to new material and new perspectives on Symons, providing a broader, detailed examination of his rapport with gypsy culture and his early passion for the interconnectedness of the arts.

Bénédicte Coste and Laurel Brake focus on Symons’s journalism, and give us a clear sense of his French connections and the extent to which journalism is at the heart of his writing career. His letters to distinguished French critics and men-of-letters, Coste argues in “‘A capital fellow, full of vivacity & good talk’: Arthur Symons and Gabriel Sarrazin”, show something of his ambition as well as his Gallic sympathies. Symons lived his life among various networks, moving between individuals, countries, and subjects with some acquired ease. In ‘Symons and Print Culture: Journalist, Critic, Book Maker’, Brake uses his article ‘The Painting of the Nineteenth Century’ and its different print incarnations over a four-year period to explore his complex relationship to print culture and the notion of professional ‘influence’. Will Parker’s article, ‘Arthur Symons, Laurence Binyon, and Paterian Aestheticism: Dancers and Dragons’, in contrast, brings an art-historical perspective to bear on a comparison between the Pater-inspired art writings of Binyon and Symons, illuminating not only the divergent directions of Paterian aestheticism in the

post-Victorian era, but the extent to which the writings of critics like Symons and Binyon reflect the tensions between impressionist and educative art writing at the turn of the century.

All the articles published in this issue chart new Decadent territory, either through the use of hitherto unpublished archival material or through new interpretations, new juxtapositions, and together they offer an impressive international perspective on Symons's work. Rita Dirks's piece, 'Hierophants of Decadents: Bliss Carman and Arthur Symons', however, is the starting-point for a bold, new direction in Decadence studies: Canadian Decadence. Using Carman's poem, 'The Eavesdropper' as her focus, she asks, to what extent was the relationship between Carman and Symons the building block of an Anglophone movement of Canadian Decadence? We wait and see. In the spirit of critical creativity and creative critique, David Weir offers a personal essay on 'Decadence and Pleasure', bringing our attention to the voluptuousness of the whole enterprise of *Volupté* and reminding us that excess and pleasure – key components of Decadence after all – are usefully, if not beautifully, at odds with one another. 'Perhaps it is truer to say', Weir states, 'that while the basis for judging pleasure as decadent may once have been *both* moral and aesthetic, more recently the basis is *either* moral or aesthetic'. *Volupté* is brought to a close with what will become a regular feature of the journal's pages: scholarly and entertaining reviews of books (both crepuscular and new), films, theatre, exhibitions, and the like.

Unlike the reviewer of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, who cautioned against 'The New Voluptuousness' as 'always lead[ing] to too much bloodshedding', we are confident that *Volupté* will stimulate new and exciting debates about Decadence. For those 'curious in research', as Symons put it, we hope that the journal will expand the historical and literary origins of the field to embrace the different disciplines and perspectives of critics and creatives of all stripes.

Acknowledgements

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Jane Desmarais, Editor-in-chief

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