Introduction: The Scales of Decadence

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RECENT scholars have been captivated by the indeterminate potentialities that decadence sets not in contradiction to, but in disarming misstep with, Victorian claims of individual, social, and global systems operating harmoniously toward a singular order. These systems also happened to privilege the aspirations of the middle class, the patriarchal machinery, white British colonial expansionism, and anthropocentric privilege. In a scene in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Oscar Wilde offers a particularly pithy encapsulation of this effective obliqueness and extensibility of decadence in relation to cultural norms. The character Algernon enters the room and, on seeing his endearing cousin Gwendolen, offers the complement, "Dear me, you are smart," to which she replies, "I am always smart!" The retort's brash overconfidence is diluted by the sense that Gwendolen perhaps misunderstood what Algernon meant; he was complementing her looks, but she may have thought he was referring to her intellect. If so, then she is clearly not as sharp as she claims. But even if she did understand him and was, like him, referring to her appearance, the comment is destabilizing; it renders flat Algernon's attempt to complement her as particularly appealing at this particular moment. Either way, her response is somehow off. And when her suitor Jack follows up this bit of banter by declaring Gwendolen "quite perfect," she again rebuffs the complement: "Oh! I hope I am not that. It would leave no room for developments, and I intend to develop in many directions."[1] The humor arises because of Gwendolen charmingly construing the conventional for the philosophical, her seeming inability quite to understand what others mean, her way of taking a simple compliment and scaling it up almost to the level of the epistemological or metaphysical.

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Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 49, No. 4, pp. 541–562.

doi:10.1017/S1060150320000194

This is a mainstay for much of the comic wit in the play, but it also constructs Gwendolen as an enigma who speaks, not in contradiction to others, but from a disarming perspective that is always somehow pointing out alternative options through which to understand both the upper-middle-class British society that Wilde presents and the world in which it operates more generally. Victorian society—with its global self-identity, futuristic and evolutionary visions in science and art, and commitment to consumer capitalism's unstoppable development—is reflected in Gwendolen's naïvely confident sense of herself as both "always smart" and yet also forever keenly expanding in multiple directions. Meanwhile, crucially, Gwendolen also embodies decadence. In disturbing the image of wholesome perfection, decadent literature, art, and culture suggest possibilities that do not stand in contradistinction to bourgeois aspirations but undermine the site of difference itself, offering formulations that, from a conventional standpoint, always appear somehow ill-fitting, mistimed, out of scale.

Decadence has eluded scholarly attempts at conclusive definition so persistently over the past century that, as with Gwendolen, indeterminacy has become recognized as an innate aspect of its character. While often in the past decadence has been portrayed as simply oppositional, recent scholars have increasingly appreciated its strategic obliqueness. The comparative measures through which it has been calibrated—whether as a cultural movement, a strategy of political action, an aesthetics or poetics, a scholarly field of study, or something else—have proven to have their own plasticity, sustaining the characteristic skewedness of decadence despite any efforts to demarcate it. The articles in this issue of *Victorian Literature and Culture* collectively explore the repercussions of this extensibility in ways that speak to the broader interests of the journal's readership. They grapple with conceptual expansions and mutations that reveal unexpected ways in which decadence offers new insights into other areas of study, while also accounting for how recent developments in Victorian studies have shaped the study of decadence. This seeming ability to adapt to simultaneous, multidirectional influences has, after all, fostered the discordant obliqueness by which decadence is now so often recognized.

Albeit incomplete in themselves, definitions of decadence as a cultural (primarily literary) movement, a style characterized by excess and self-awareness, and a challenge to convention have all been helpful in its conceptualization. With decadence continuing to offer fresh formulations and methodologies for Victorianists working in what have previously often been seen as distinctly different areas of study, it is worth

noting that a greater number of academics appear to be engaging with the field of late. In the last five years alone, it has fostered so many new, international scholarly associations, publications, conferences, and symposia calling for a fresh assessment—from "Dickens and Decadence" to "Victorian Apocalypse: The *siècle* at Its *fin*"—that they warrant their own endnote.[2] The very indeterminacy and slanted character of decadence have proven useful for recent engagements with globalism, postcolonialism, ecology, undisciplining Victorian and modernist studies, realism, poetics, liberalism, conservatism, gender and queer studies, sensoria, affect, defect, deviancy, new media, cinema, translation, spiritualities, the occult, posthumanism, the gothic, the weird, the apocalyptic, and others. As decadence has morphed, it has developed an expanded portfolio of authors and artists, while diversifying both the sociopolitical inquiries with which it engages and the spatial, temporal, and philosophical scales on which it operates.

1. Decadence and Strategic Obliqueness

This conceptual broadening of decadence is itself a continuation of a growing historical awareness of decadence's definitional ambiguity and its application to various formative models of society. Enlightenment philosophers made the term familiar as a descriptor of the decline of civilizations as an organic, inevitable process modeled on the eventual decline of any human individual but most dramatically embodied by those people who have a level of prosperity and comfort that fosters their complacency and inaction. Montesquieu's *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734) and Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88) offer particularly influential examples of the sociopolitical notion of decadence that would become common among Victorians. For Gibbon, the Roman Empire's "latent causes of decay and corruption" were rooted in its comfortable affluence: "This long peace and the uniform government of the Romans, introduced a slow and secret poison into the vitals of the empire. The minds of men were gradually reduced to the same level, the fire of genius was extinguished. . . . The most aspiring spirits resorted to the court or standard of the emperors; and the deserted provinces, deprived of political strength or union, insensibly sunk into the languid indifference of private life."[3] Speaking of those orators of the Byzantine Empire "most eloquent in their own conceit," Gibbon links the social and bodily decay in the above quotation with a

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150320000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

decadent poetics: "In every page our taste and reason are wounded by the choice of gigantic and obsolete words, a stiff and intricate phraseology, the discord of images, the childish play of false or unseasonable ornament, and the painful attempt to elevate themselves, to astonish the reader, and to involve a trivial meaning in the smoke of obscurity and exaggeration. Their prose is soaring to the vicious affectation of poetry: their poetry is sinking below the flatness and insipidity of prose."[4] As the British decadent movement took shape, the tendency to layer sociopolitical, individual, and aesthetic forms of decadence upon each other was increasingly familiar. Even as the movement itself became a common cultural framework in Victorian society, such conflations continued to be made, appearing in works that challenged the aesthetic and moral values of the movement itself, such as Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892; English trans. 1895) and Arthur Symons's *Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899). During the nineteenth century, decadence was recognized for engaging with notions of ornamental artifice, degeneration, decay, and inaction seen to challenge Western society's investment in visions of an essentially healthy macrosocial ecology, a holistic evolutionary model, and eternal middle-class economic growth and progress. Within the context of realism and mainstream formats of the novel, decadence celebrated experimental forms, the supernatural, and symbolism.

During the twentieth century, scholars devoted considerable energy to defining decadence as a link—or just a phase—between Romanticism and modernism. In 1899 Symons declared that the literature of such authors as Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Flaubert, and the Goncourt brothers was an "offshoot of Romanticism."[5] Decadence was, historically speaking, no more than an aberration, "an interlude, half a mock-interlude," "usually either hurled as a reproach or hurled back as defiance" by "some young men in various countries."[6] It was but an immature rebelliousness characterized by stylistic excess, a distraction while "something more serious was in preparation," namely symbolism.[7] Symons's declaration that "Nothing, not even conventional virtue, is so provincial as conventional vice" was intended as a criticism of the elitism of these decadent young men, but the argument reveals as well Symons's own sense of intellectual superiority; as decadence would have it, he is consumed by his own critique. At the very turn of the century, Benedetto Croce suggested that the nineteenth-century Italian phenomenon of *decadentismo* (heavily influenced by the French and British decadent movements but with a distinctly broader notion of historical modernism) was a sign of a new aesthetic that would invigorate a new age, but, by 1907, he

concluded that it was a feeble extension of Romanticist philosophy marked by an excess of attention to artifice and form and a heightened interest in the subconscious and irrational. In *The Romantic Agony* (1930), Mario Praz likewise brings attention to connections between Romantic and decadent interests, but, unlike Croce, his intention is to situate the latter within a respected literary tradition. Even then, as Stefano Evangelista points out, Praz's "unrelenting focus on perversion was at best a double-edged sword at a time before postmodern criticism positively embraced the value of dissidence as a category capable of offering privileged insights into cultural history."[8]

Defining decadence in opposition to some commonly accepted ontological reality inadvertently reaffirmed that reality as fundamental while entrapping decadence in a state of subordinate opposition. Denying the validity of that reality, however, drained the pond of the epistemological environment in which decadence flourished, thereby gutting the conceptual validity not only of the normative reality but also of decadence itself. A frustration with this dilemma can be found throughout the twentieth century. Symons had proposed as much when, in 1899, he observed that the decadents' desire to "'bewilder the middle classes' is itself middle-class."[9] Of course, his declaration that the decadents were bourgeois only reaffirmed a middle-class essentialism on the outside of which scholars of decadence, including even Symons, often envisioned themselves. Meanwhile, in *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987), Matei Calinescu analyzes decadence through a Marxist lens, asking: "[I]s the artistic culture of a period of crisis and decay (at least insofar as the ruling classes are concerned) a decadent one? Or, to be more specific, is an artist who chooses to defend an ideologically reactionary position a decadent?" He is drawn to conclude that there is "absolutely no suggestion in either Marx or Engels that such a relationship between ideological content and aesthetic achievement can be established."[10]

Richard Gilman, writing in 1979, affirms that "'Decadence' is a scarecrow, a bogyman, a red herring. . . . Decadence has always been made to function as a presumed mode of behavior or action that stands as evidence of a withdrawal from normality; whether this results from weakness, ill will, bad faith, or cunning decision, it is always the outcome of a fatal principle."[11] As he attempts to explain, "there is nothing to which it actually and legitimately applies," offering as analogies: "A woman is not a 'bitch' though we may call her one. Sexual offenders are not 'fiends.' Homosexuals are not 'fruits' or 'queers.' The Chinese are not the 'yellow peril.'"[12] "Decadence," for Gilman, is but an epithet

that falsely signifies as the singular and inadequate means of asserting the fundamental authority of an assumed, normative alternative. There is much to unpack here, but I only wish to point out the politicized reconceptualizations over recent decades of terms such as "bitch" and "queer" since Gilman made his argument in 1979. "Decadence," "bitch," and "queer" have been shown not to operate all on the same scale of normativity that Gilman suggests. That said, the co-option of the term "queer" as an act of political self-assertion does insightfully recall the "young men in various countries" whom Symons saw adopting the term "decadence" in a gesture of "defiance."[13] This strategy of oblique incorporation—acceptance without definition—also captures the recent spirit and scholarly methodologies that have dislodged decadence from a position of reliance on the normative for its own articulation.

Late twentieth-century academics introduced an appreciation for the ways in which works of the nineteenth-century decadent canon themselves undermined the binary logic that commonly characterized them as perverse, unhealthy, feeble, and regressive. Decadence is not adequately captured, scholars beginning in the 1990s proposed, by its nonconformity to liberalism, bourgeois values, or norms of gender and sexuality, let alone by an overwrought style, curt wit, or the persona of the urban dandy-aesthete. In *Decadent Subjects* (2002), Charles Bernheimer proposes that the very elusiveness which Gilman critiques as a "red herring" actually fosters the concept's "valuable subversive agency"; moreover, Bernheimer suggests, a number of contributors to nineteenth-century decadence were themselves aware of this disturbing potential and analyzed it through their art. "It is not the referential content of the term that conveys its meaning," he explains, "so much as the dynamics of paradox and ambivalence that it sets in motion. Its meaning is the injury of the kind of meaning Gilman is looking for."[14] Barbara Spackman, in a 1998 analysis of Joris-Karl Huysmans's writing, also reminds us of the familiar scholarly formulation of decadence as "accomplish[ing] an inversion that ends up reaffirming the 'positive' side of the opposition on which it depends, negatively, for its own definition."[15] Contrary to this ineffectual understanding of decadence, she argues, Huysmans and other nineteenth-century authors offered a model of diversity that postulates "interversions" rather than inversions (43), "contraries, but not contradictories" (40), thereby destabilizing the reinscription of the notion of a fundamental truth.[16] Similarly, Richard Dellamora argues that decadence "makes most sense as a set of interpretive strategies that work by . . . unsettling commonly held assumptions," but it does

not "imply adherence to a particular political point of view. Decadent critique can be directed from liberal, socialist, and/or anarchist perspectives, as well as from conservative or even reactionary ones."[17] Decadence in nineteenth-century western Europe, Dellamora asserts, can even be characterized as "a critically antimodern tendency within modernity, which depends on vanguard aesthetic techniques and subject matter." Taking these assessments into consideration, decadence as a nineteenth-century cultural movement can be described as diverse tropes, subjects, and creative practices that challenged and disrupted the oppositional and evolutionary logic framing the late-Victorian sociopolitical milieu. It may have congealed in the popular consciousness around particular clichés, but it did not arise through them and, by the same logic, was not the innocent victim of spurious epithets hurled by a self-centered, voracious middle class.

Bernheimer, Spackman, and Dellamora all focus their analyses on works by authors that are established within the decadent canon. Nevertheless, these scholars (and the authors and artists they address) all make arguments that strongly encourage consideration of diverse writing, art, and personae for their "dynamics of paradox and ambivalence," "strategic interversions," and "unsettling" "interpretive strategies," to cite all three of them. Decadence is more accurately understood not as a particular literary and artistic development within a fixed historical period but as an attitudinal stance and set of oblique strategies that have reverberated in new ways throughout literature, the arts, and societies. Following the constructionist scholarship of the late 1990s and early 2000s, more recently scholars have not only begun applying the concept of decadence with greater diversity, but have recognized it as having a greater scope than usually noted in both the cultural and scholarly arenas.

2. Inquiries of Our Decadent Moment

Engagements such as Bernheimer's, Spackman's, and Dellamora's encourage an understanding of decadence as both preceding and continuing to morph in awareness of other narratives of how individuals, societies, and global or ecological networks do or should function. In some ways, this understanding harkens back to the broad conceptions of decadence that preceded the Victorian movement—not a nostalgic backward glance so much as a reassessment of the sociopolitical context that gave birth to Victorian modes of self-identification, strategic essentialism, and indeterminate reconfigurations. In this light, ever since

academic engagement began, both decadence itself and its study have been characterized by perennial transformativity. The latest configurations encourage us to understand decadence as a set of paradigmatic mutations that, as with queerness, both preceded and found fresh political import from a historical moment when the term "decadence" was most virulently intended as a negative epithet.[18] This understanding of decadence as strategically indeterminate, along with the diversity in methodologies and scales of applications that we see in decadence studies today, has fostered recent consideration of whether such an amorphous term should be capitalized. "Decadence" has often been capitalized when used to refer to a relatively specific time and place—such as, in the British context, from the publication of Algernon Charles Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* in 1866 up until the end of that century, by which time *Punch* and other populist periodicals were no longer getting much mileage from mocking the phenomenon. In this usage, it has been connected most frequently to the artists and authors recognized as key contributors to its best-known current, such as Swinburne, Wilde, Symons, Walter Pater, and Aubrey Beardsley. The capitalization was to distinguish this cultural movement from the more general uses of "decadence" that had existed for centuries. But with scholars recognizing the coy insidiousness of decadence as an epistemological system for engaging the modern world, the context of a particularly British, nineteenth-century decadence has proven a deterrent to a richer understanding of the phenomenon even in the Victorian period itself. As the articles in this issue of *VLC* suggest, more individuals and cultural artifacts than previously recognized took advantage of decadent obliqueness for their political maneuverability. What we discover in recent analyses of the movement is no longer the exclusion of the decadents from some holistic notion of a coherent order operating on the level of the individual, the society, and the world. Rather, they are presented as embodying simultaneous, incompatible understandings of social politics and values. It is for this reason, Jane Desmarais explains in an editorial for the recently founded journal of decadence studies, *Volupté*, that her editorial team has "decided from here on in to go 'small-d' decadence[.] . . . For many years, I, and others too, capitalized the word 'Decadence' as a way of signalling its significance as a distinct field of scholarly enquiry. As *Volupté* and the extraordinary burst of scholarly activity over the last decade attest, however, decadence studies has arrived and is now a defined field of considerable depth and complexity."[19] The latest expansions of decadence into other fields of

study, and vice versa, reflect the cross-pollinations that had also characterized decadence for Gibbon and others, including members of non-Western societies, before the movement became prominent. And, of course, it continued in such fashion during the movement and on to the present day. This has always been the way with decadence—the phenomenon mutating, degenerating, regenerating while acknowledging, even flaunting, what have often been assumed to be outdated, uninfluential values and practices as a way of encouraging transhistorical comparativism. The latest developments are thanks in large part to Victorianists' ongoing theorization and politicization of our general object of analysis through fresh approaches in, for example, gender and sexuality studies; historicism and the study of historicization; global, cosmopolitan, and postcolonial studies; media studies; and the environmental humanities, all of which have reconfigured decadence as transhistorical, international, and spatially expansive.

As I suggest above, there is a conceptual affinity between decadence and queerness as politically invested scholarly formulations. In an 1891 article, William Barry condemns "the school known as Decadent" as no more than a passing aberration, an interest among the academic elite for a sensualist paganism not in fact reflected in classical culture. "The nearest approach an English lad makes to Paganism," he proposes, "is when he gives himself to athletics; and in doing so he is delightfully ignorant of the tradition of the palaestra"—the site where, in ancient Greece, athletes practiced wrestling in the nude. "If there is one thing which he hates and does not understand," he goes on, "it is effeminacy."[20] It was particularly Pater (whom Barry explicitly attacks) who articulated for Victorians a relationship between the idealized male body in ancient Greek athletic culture, burgeoning homosexual identity, and the aesthetic philosophy that would characterize the British decadent movement.[21] In Barry's formulation, the hypermasculinity of nude sports is mixed with effeminacy, a conflation of same-sex desire with nonnormative gender identification that, for him, is the degenerate mark of decadence. At the same time, Barry celebrates homophobia as a positive result of wholesome ignorance, the ideal youth of his time failing to comprehend either classical masculinity or modern effeminacy in men.

With regard to dissident sexuality, decadence studies frequently overlaps with scholarship on the more populist British phenomenon of aestheticism, which developed not only from authors such as Pater and Swinburne but also from female aestheticists, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and others involved in the arts and crafts movement,

such as John Ruskin and William Morris. Many of the same authors and artists became recognized as key contributors to both decadence and aestheticism, and the two aesthetic models affirm similar values such as art for art's sake and the aesthetic appreciation of unconventional passions. Dellamora's *Masculine Desire* (1990) and Linda Dowling's *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (1994) are the first monographs to have focused on the crucial role that academic classical scholarship played in the formulation of queer-positive models within British culture. With Kathy Psomiades's *Beauty's Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (1997) and Yopie Prins's *Victorian Sappho* (1999), decadence and aestheticism remained the dominant context for considerations of Victorian sexual dissidence in general, a correlation developed and complicated further by scholars such as Joseph Bristow, Catherine Maxwell, Patricia Pulham, and others, one that continues to the current moment. It is especially important to recognize that this is not simply because authors such as Pater, Swinburne, Vernon Lee, Michael Field, and Wilde addressed same-sex attraction, which is seen as a decadent subject, but because they each approached sexuality through discourses of misalignment that allowed for a freer expression of their own desires. From a theoretical standpoint, queer decadent texts rely less on sexological or other institutionalized frameworks; instead, they encourage readings sensitive to the commingling of aesthetic philosophy with innuendo, allusion, and models of time and space detached from notions of normativity. Since all of these are so diverse as to differ from desire to desire and context to context, scholars have in recent years begun to recognize the ways in which decadence itself is marbled through a broader range of British literature, art, and culture. As Barry's observations attest, and as I have argued elsewhere, the queerness associated with decadence circulated among Victorians outside academia as well, often through relatively unnuanced popular media.[22] Meanwhile, many scholars including Linda Dowling ("Decadent"), Elaine Showalter, Sally Ledger, and Kirsten MacLeod have noted not only thematic but also stylistic and political elements of decadence in the popular genre of New Woman writing, albeit also crucial points of discord. Recognizing that New Woman writing ran its course in tandem with decadence and aestheticism, Molly Youngkin has recently proposed reading such works "from a 'trans' perspective . . . across gender, but also across genre and technology," the last of these richly addressed in Lena Wänggren's *Gender, Technology and the New Woman* (2017).[23] Meanwhile, Alicia Carroll's *New Woman Ecologies*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1060150320000194 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(2019) explores historically situated, destabilizing strategies within Victorian and modernist feminist literature and early green socialism's interest in "the power of more-than-human things" that, while not explicitly addressing decadence, engages with what can be understood as decadent concerns and approaches (28).

The fact that decadence was appreciated by Victorians for its strategies of gender deflation and queering (foreshadowing camp, kitsch, and postmodern irony) means that recent scholarship on post-Victorian decadence and the resulting redefinitions of decadence assist in our revisiting of the nineteenth century for similarly complex appropriations of what would have been recognized as decadent methodologies. Such insight can be found in Catherine Maxwell's analysis in this issue of the New Woman author Sarah Grand in relation to Wilde. As Maxwell demonstrates, although the two authors are often contrasted for their sociopolitical views, Grand's more realist work *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) incorporates a complex formulation of identity that heavily signals Wilde, most notably in its use of doubling to explore issues of gender performance and queer desire. In his article for this collection, Joseph Bristow points out the Swinburnean heat in the erotic poetry of an author who has to date rarely been affiliated with decadence—the occultist Aleister Crowley. As Bristow argues, Crowley's own interests in the British decadent tradition were stimulated in part by his friend Herbert Charles ("Jerome") Pollitt, famous at Cambridge as a drag performer. The seemingly far swing from the New Woman writer Grand to the occultist of sex magick Crowley shows just how broad a range of people engaged with decadence, suggesting in turn that many other authors, artists, and public personalities have still to be considered through this lens.

Approaches such as Maxwell's and Bristow's do not simply modify our understanding of decadence but demonstrate its potent presence across a greater range of concerns, methodologies, and histories than is usually assumed. They show decadence to be a cultural phenomenon that is temporally and geographically more widespread, as well as integrated across a broader spectrum of subjects, than most Victorianists to date have recognized. This awareness has resulted in decadence studies taking a particular interest in recent years in global and cosmopolitan approaches, crucial in light of the fulsome use that French and British decadents had made of orientalist tropes, objectifying exoticism, and nationalist politics. In recent decades, the theorization of the geopolitical by Tanya Agathocleous, Amanda Anderson, and others has offered new ways of engaging with decadent transnationalism. The British movement

arose as a cosmopolitan phenomenon, with its practitioners acknowledging debts to Egyptian, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, and other cultures, while exoticizing some of these same cultures as well as others. Consider Henry Harland, literary editor of a pinnacle of the British decadent movement, *The Yellow Book* (1894–97). Often imagined as a collection of works by canonical British male authors and artists, the periodical actually had many female contributors, and the responsibilities and contributions of Ella D'Arcy, who served as a subeditor, call into question how *sub* her role actually was. Moreover, the periodical published authors and artists from, among other places, Canada, Cuba, Denmark, England, France, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Russia, Scotland, Serbia, South Africa, the West Indies, and the United States. An American, Harland was an intense francophile, but he pretended for the first half of his literary career to be Russian before finally establishing himself in London. His story "Mercedes," which he chose to include as his contribution to the inaugural issue of *The Yellow Book*, reflects the same cosmopolitan spirit; it describes an English boy who trains a French mouse with the Spanish name Mercedes to perform on the stage, prodding the pampered rodent's limbs into contortions of operatic convention. As is the case with so many decadent heroines, Mercedes ultimately dies before her time, in St. Petersburg, having gorged herself on the high-fat sour cream known as *smetana*. The very internationalism of the rodent and the boy mark them as stereotypical decadents, as having the privilege of living lives of cosmopolitan travel and oversatiated desires characterized by political disregard and privileged routine.

One of the most constant characteristics of decadent cosmopolitanism has been its earnest, complex engagement with its own historical community and the notion of history more broadly. Some have seen this as an impotent nostalgia, yet it is more accurately understood as a contemporary rebuttal that had value principally in the moment of its articulation, although this comes with its own set of problems. Lauren Goodlad has recently called for "a dialectics of long and short-term history which simultaneously negotiates the disparate ethical demands of a responsibility to otherness and the responsibility to act." For the sake of a future currently under threat by environmental disruption and rising wealth disparity among humans, she argues, "historicism cannot but be part of our critical practice. For it is that aspect of the critical enterprise which strives to illuminate the concrete conditions from which our aspirations spring and in which they either take root or fail."[24] Matthew Potolsky, in *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (2013), envisions nineteenth-

century decadent cosmopolitanism as a development of the Enlightenment notion of the Republic of Letters, where philosophers and other thinkers primarily from across Europe and the United States created an epistolary community with its own set of values and concerns as well as its own international, intellectual identity. Rather than a culture of withdrawal, disengagement, and eccentricity, Potolsky demonstrates, nineteenth-century decadence likewise thrived as an international, virtual community of engaged individuals invested in a historically situated understanding of their own political moment. In his article for this issue of *VLC*, Potolsky problematizes the common separation of nineteenth-century decadence from realism by demonstrating that some decadents looked back to classical Republican political theory to argue for the artist's role as an arbiter of beauty outside the rougher experience of modern daily life. While scholars have often emphasized the subversiveness of decadence, Potolsky notes, they have overlooked the seemingly more traditionalist tendencies that reflect a historically sensitive, collective approach to modern politics and aesthetics. Rachel Teukolsky's article in this issue likewise extends British decadence back in time, as she too considers the creative potency of cosmopolitanism. Focusing specifically on the influence of *Japonisme* and rococo on Aubrey Beardsley's art, Teukolsky stretches both the geographic and temporal boundaries of canonical decadence. As she points out, however, despite Beardsley's interest in and adaptation of cross-cultural influence, and despite his countercultural statements, his artistic reconceptualization of history often operates in tandem with a stereotyping of racial and cultural difference. Alex Murray's contribution to this issue demonstrates the important coexistence within decadent culture of, on one hand, modernist innovation and rebelliousness and, on the other, a hitherto underanalyzed traditionalist conservatism that operates in part as a rebuttal of key aspects of modernity. The image of the decadents as rebels unanimously committed to countercultural alternatives, Murray makes clear, has fostered not only an erasure of some contributors to the movement but also misrepresentations of individuals such as Michael Field and Lionel Johnson who have more recently been added to the canon.

The engagement with cosmopolitanism's historical situatedness cannot be readily separated from its interests in geopolitics and global ecology. As Regenia Gagnier has demonstrated in *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization* (2010), the decadent relish in cosmopolitan internationalism is as political as it is aesthetic. Extending Montesquieu's and Gibbon's global conceptions of societies' organic decay and

reconfiguration, she addresses the notion of the decadent subject operating as a citizen of the world. In this formulation Gagnier finds precursors of our own contemporary notions of globalizing systems. Particularly groundbreaking is her exploration of decadence as a notion of self-interest that has the potential to operate for the social good on a geopolitical level. In her essay in this collection, Gagnier demonstrates that the *longue durée* of globalization beginning with British industrialization marks our own age with the populist disaffection, nostalgia, and regression that generally defines a decadent era. Engaging Kobayashi Hideo's "Literature of the Lost Home" (1933) among other works, Gagnier demonstrates that, despite a century of seemingly progressive governmental humanitarianism, we remain today reliant on a political economy much like that which gave rise to the nineteenth-century decadent movement. Benjamin Morgan, meanwhile, in his recent "Fin du Globe: On Decadent Planets," has shifted the analysis into an ecological framework, drawing attention to the fact that decadent authors such as the West Indian British author M. P. Sheil offered narratives of climate change to explore the scaling of the individual's point of view to the level of global geopolitical systems of human economic and political interactions and conflicts.[25] Meanwhile, my contribution to this issue of *VLC* turns from the association of decadence with cosmopolitanism and a city-centered world to address its equally extensive engagement with a natural environment that distends the very notions of culture, time period, and nation. Looking at works by Vernon Lee and Algernon Blackwood, I propose that these authors formulated a decadent ecology, one that they understood to be operating on transhistorical and transspatial scales that destabilize the humanist perspective, working against the comfort of a holistic organicism by evoking an ontological invitation coming from outside of recognized modes of human communication.

Such cosmopolitan, historical, geopolitical, and ecological approaches all require sensitivity to those individuals who, already socially and politically marginalized, become further erased by grand conceptual gestures that risk deindividuation and distantiation. In fact, it may be at these sites of potential erasure (whether speaking nationally, ecologically, philosophically, or aesthetically) that decadent strategies of oblique misalignment and queering have proven most effective. In *Affective Communities* (2006), Leela Gandhi works against the "monochromatic landscape of imperial division" to articulate the ways in which anti-imperialists around the time of the fin de siècle developed systems of mutual support.[26] In

the process, she notes, decadent covertness abetted the efforts of anticolonialists in Britain and elsewhere. Michael Shaw's recent *Fin-de-siècle Scottish Revival* (2020) analyzes the political and conceptual interchanges among decadence, Celtic identity, *Japonisme*, neopaganism, and the occult, demonstrating the importance of a historically and geographically sensitive awareness of differing late-Victorian perspectives on decadence. Meanwhile, Robert Stilling's *Beginning at the End* (2018) demonstrates that diverse authors such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and Derek Walcott envisioned the aesthetics of their own nations through the lens of decadence. In some cases, decadence is challenged as embodying the decrepitude of a dying imperial regime, but in others it is adapted to reflect the innovations and new visions of their own homelands, whether African, Caribbean, Irish, or South Asian. As Stilling points out, the uncomfortable skew that decadence had developed to carve out a place for itself within the European imaginary proved a methodology that inherently acknowledged and encouraged the originality of its users. Kristin Mahoney's article in this issue likewise acknowledges historical and geographical extensions of decadence, turning to post-Victorian works created by Harlem author Richard Bruce Nugent and Sri Lankan writer Lionel de Fonseka. Mahoney asks how decadence—with its historical engagement with both cosmopolitanism and Orientalism—goes about engaging racialized difference. She notes, for example, the racist callousness that arose at times as part of decadent cultural elitism. The focus of her article, however, is on the ways in which writers of color and colonial subjects took control of decadent tropes and reworked them for the purpose of anticolonial and antiracist critique. As Mahoney makes clear, the strategies themselves are not limited to acts of subversion but, from author to author, offer unique self-affirmations marked by decadent conviction.

Despite the emphasis in decadence studies over the past 120 years on the literary and the Victorian, the recent increased investment in theorizing decadence through its multimedia manifestations has shaken up the textual canon on which the field has relied. Pater writes, in "The School of Giorgione," that "the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any other, an order of impressions distinct in kind."[27] As Lene Østermark-Johansen has argued, for Pater, sculpture operated as a formative trope for his understanding of aesthetics itself, leading him to recognize the hybridity of his aesthetic criticism. Thus, Pater appreciates the importance of looking beyond written texts while recognizing

that a multimedia analysis must result in an aesthetic hybridity rather than conceptual cohesion. In *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (2009), Catherine Maxwell insightfully extends this argument in her analysis of the Romantic visionary perspective that various decadents and other British authors engaged in response to what they saw as the limits of materialist approaches. In her analysis, the unseen or imaginary was not configured by these authors as in direct conflict with the material but rather as an essential element, undermining an understanding of the material and immaterial as discrete categories. Meanwhile, in *Scents and Sensibility* (2017), she turns to perfume not simply to address an underacknowledged medium but to argue that decadent authors recognized mood and atmosphere as personality, one's environment as part of one's sensibility, desire, and spirit. Østermark-Johansen's and Maxwell's analyses evoke both the hybridity for which Pater argues while, at the same time, speaking to the ways in which the decadent spirit so readily permeates diverse media, giving some explanation to the evanescence of decadence that so many have found disconcerting.

The recent scholarly engagement with decadence in diverse media has encouraged a stronger awareness of its manifestations in the modernist period. In *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (2014), Vince Sherry tracks the development of decadence from the Romantics through to the modernists, including Djuna Barnes, Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, arguing for a recognition not only of decadence in twentieth-century works but also in the aesthetics that we have come to recognize as part of high modernism and the historical avant-garde. Meanwhile, in *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015), Kristin Mahoney demonstrates that individuals turned to various media to use decadence as a strategy for engaging with the politics of their day: "The spectre of the Yellow Nineties haunted the theaters, the galleries, the bookstalls, the cinemas, and the airwaves, operating as a divergent strain of modernism that exercised a remarkable draw on the twentieth-century cultural imagination."[28] In the introduction to their collection *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (2019), Kate Hext and Alex Murray similarly note "the dizzying multiplicity of decadence in the early twentieth century" and the impact of decadence on, among other developments, high modernism, the Harlem renaissance, and camp culture.[29] As they argue, decadence and modernism "are not diametrically opposed but mutually constitutive and thoroughly implicated in each other's aesthetic development and textual politics."[30] As the essays

in their collection make clear, decadence readily adapted to new media developments, including music, dance, fashion, radio, and cinema.

This issue of *VLC* engages the multimediality of decadence as it operated both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Mahoney's article, already mentioned, addresses the way in which Bruce Nugent turned not only to literature but also to fashion design to imagine a queer Black aesthetic. Kate Hext's offering, from her work on decadent cinema, demonstrates the amazing vitality of Wilde in early Hollywood, with American audiences in fact often coding the Victorian period and Victorians themselves as all decadents à la Oscar. We find here not the picture but the motion picture of Dorian Gray—a series of images of decadence commoditized through the horror genre as a Wildean persona. As Hext argues, it is not only Wilde's infamy that translated to popular cinema but the decadent ethos of sensation as a ready formula for cinematic appreciation. Jane Desmarais, meanwhile, in her article in this issue, turns to Victorian and early twentieth-century adaptations of decadent poetry to music, focusing on the compositions of Frederick Delius, Adela Maddison, and Cyril Scott. John R. Reed has argued that one cannot assert any particular form of music as decadent because "unlike the other arts, music can never be conceptual in the sense that its elements will convey specific intellectual meanings."[31] The distinction is warranted, although decadent works in some other media are likewise rarely specific in their meanings. Moreover, Desmarais's consideration of the decadent poetry that musicians were inspired to put to music, and then the form of that music, does allow a greater understanding of how some Victorians and Edwardians interpreted decadence. As she notes, recent developments in the digital humanities have more readily allowed for an experiential comprehension of music as a lived experience. As such, her article reveals a rich tradition of translation from one medium to another as well as across countries and cultures, a cosmopolitanism that Stefano Evangelista expands upon in his piece. Pater had noted that various artistic media can never be wholly translated into each other. In accord with this claim, Walter Benjamin proposes that translation itself be viewed as an autonomous literary form. Taking up the spirit of Benjamin's claim, Evangelista turns to Pater's "Style" (1888) and a translation of Flaubert's *La tentation de Saint Antoine* (1874) to recognize a decadent theory and practice committed to respecting, both ethically and aesthetically, the foreignness of the text being translated. And lastly, with Charlotte Ribeyrol's contribution, we shift from artistic media to the very material of creation—in this case the ingredients used to make

various colors in the Victorian period. Taking a chromatic perspective to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Ribeyrol looks back to the classical notion of the *pharmakon* in order to explore how chromatic mutability enacts the decadent tension between estrangement and mimesis.

3. No End in Sight

The articles found here offer innovative formulations of not only what constitutes decadence itself but also its integration into a broader spectrum of Victorian and post-Victorian cultures than generally recognized. One might ask whether the methodologies that have recently been introduced into this area of study risk unmooring decadence from what the Victorians themselves understood as the sociopolitical and stylistic characteristics of the movement. This is not to suggest that any one of these newer approaches within the field in itself constitutes a misapplication but to wonder whether, for any reason, it is necessary always to engage Victorians' own notions of decadence, as opposed to using only recent articulations, for analyzing works of the nineteenth century. Rather than interpret the fact that decadence—even Victorian decadence—has never been known for its fixity or stasis as somehow justifying ignoring historical roots, I believe it is crucial to recognize that this innate multiplicity of perspectives strongly suggests that there remain unique sociopolitical interpretations and applications that Victorians themselves had made and that we have yet to discover. The articles collected here are keenly engaged with history and historicity, even as they test the elasticity and scales of decadence and its influences. That is, decadence studies has altered not only by being engaged by new theoretical developments but also by continuing to reach out and engage them. As this issue of *VLC* demonstrates, the obliqueness, extensibility, and adaptability of decadence and decadence studies are proving useful for the analysis of a wide variety of texts as well as for the validity of scholarly approaches and sociopolitical frameworks that have only recently gained focus. To say that we are, at this moment, encountering shifting paradigms that challenge our understanding of the world is putting it mildly. To note just some of the recent issues for which decadence offers useful analytical approaches, we now live in a reality where media are increasingly in charge of defining nations and choosing leaders, where sexualities proliferate while bathroom genders disappear, where other species attain human legal status just as an increasing number of dispossessed humans lose it, and where viruses have found it easier to travel and become cosmopolitan than people have. These examples are not parallel

to one another and, even individually, do not operate by the binary logic that my syntax implies. Rather, together, they suggest that decadence maintains political, ethical, and aesthetic value in our present moment precisely because of its oblique, destabilizing perspectives and its persistently skewed approaches to whatever may be deemed obvious.

Notes

I wish to thank Lauren Goodlad, Kristin Mahoney, and Matthew Potolsky for their help in preparing this introduction.

1. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, 20.
2. We have seen the formation of the Aestheticism and Decadence Network, the British Association of Decadence Studies, the Decadence and Translation Network, and the NAVSA Aestheticism and Decadence Caucus as well as the journals *Studies in Walter Pater and Aestheticism* (spawned from *The Pater Newsletter*) and *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadent Studies*. Recent related conferences and symposia include "Decadence and the Senses" (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014), "Walter Pater: Continuity and Discontinuity" (Université de Sorbonne, Paris, 2014), "Ernest Dowson (1867–1900): Poet, Translator, Novelist" (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2016), "Forgotten Geographies in the Fin de Siècle, 1880–1920" (Birkbeck, University of London, 2016), "George Egerton and the Fin de Siècle" (Loughborough University 2017), "Arthur Symons at the Fin de Siècle" (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2017), "Curiosity and Desire: Pater and Wilde" (University of California, Los Angeles, 2018), "Transnational Poetics: Aestheticism and Decadence" (New York University, 2018), "Women Writing Decadence: European Perspectives, 1880–1920" (University of Oxford, 2018), "Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult" (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2018), "Vernon Lee 2019: An Anniversary Conference" (British Institute, Florence, May 2019), "Aesthetic Time: Decadent Archives" (Goldsmiths, University of London, 2019), "Zooming Decadence" (University of Exeter, 2020), "Dickens and Decadence" (Stockholm University, 2021), "Victorian Apocalypse: The *siècle* at Its *fin*" (UCLA, 2021–22), and "Politics and Desire in a Decadent Age: 1860 to the Present" (Queen Mary, University of London, 2022).
3. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 1:57.

4. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 3:316.
5. Symons, *The Symbolist Movement*, 4.
6. Symons, *The Symbolist Movement*, 7, 6, 6.
7. Symons, *The Symbolist Movement*, 7.
8. Evangelista, "Decadence and Aestheticism," 106.
9. Symons, *The Symbolist Movement*, 7.
10. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 198.
11. Gilman, *Decadence*, 159.
12. Gilman, *Decadence*, 158.
13. The correlation of decadence and queerness as strategic concepts is also discussed in the introduction (12) and selected essays in *Perennial Decay*, edited by Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff, and Matthew Potolsky.
14. Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects*, 5.
15. Spackman, "Interversions," 35.
16. Spackman, "Interversions," 43, 40.
17. Dellamora, "Productive Decadence," 259.
18. While etymologically uncertain, "queer" most likely signified oddity, obliqueness, or suspiciousness for centuries before it arose in the United States as a slur against drag queens and homosexuals roughly a century ago (*OED*).
19. Jane Desmarais, "Preface," *Volupté*.
20. Barry, "Neo-paganism," 300.
21. Evangelista, *British Aestheticism*, 27.
22. Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody*.
23. Youngkin, "New Woman Writing," 296.
24. Goodlad, *Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 293.
25. Morgan, "Fin du Globe."
26. Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 6.
27. Pater, *The Renaissance*, 135.
28. Mahoney, *Literature*, 6.
29. Hext and Murray, *Decadence*, 8.
30. Hext and Murray, *Decadence*, 2.
31. Reed, *Decadent Style*, 186.

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