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# Introduction: Late-Victorian Decadence as Mode, Theory and Attitude

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**Abstract:** In the last couple of decades Decadence studies, perched between the demarcation lines of Victorianism and Modernist studies, have evolved as an independent field of research. This special issue directs its attention to late-Victorian Decadence as mode, theory and attitude in literary texts. The introduction surveys the latest applications of the term to denominate literary research spanning from ecological to feminist issues. The special issue gathers five articles showcasing how varied authors such as Vernon Lee, Lionel Johnson, Robert Louis Stevenson, Alice Meynell, Rosamund Marriott Watson and Marie Corelli saw an opportunity to query Decadence in its conflicting aesthetics, as well as embrace Decadence as a controversial attitude towards cultural and social norms.

**Key terms:** late-Victorian Decadence, Decadent mode

This cluster directs its attention to late-Victorian Decadence as mode, theory and attitude in literary texts. In order to highlight the specific socio-cultural context, we have added the qualifier ‘late-Victorian’ which foregrounds the simultaneous indebtedness of the studied texts to prevalent mores of the time and an intellectual and aesthetic Decadent breaking away from them. We claim that it is at the junction of journalistic, essayistic, philosophical, socio-critical and lyrical writing that a distinctly late-Victorian Decadent attitude manifests itself. Notably, while the discussed authors can be classified as aesthetes, they at the same time take on a critical stance toward Decadence as such, offering intellectual interventions that also function as meta-reflections on the field as it is evolving.

The idea to this compilation of articles was born out of a sense of absence: Decadence studies, while a serious field of enquiry in Anglo-American contexts, seemed to be just in the formation in German-speaking academia. In the UK, the

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recent decade has seen a surge in the interest of Decadence studies as a distinct field of enquiry uncomfortably perched at the cusp between late-Victorianism and early Modernism. In 2019, the editors of the *Cambridge Critical Series on Decadence and Literature*, Jane Desmarais and David Weir, attested to the temporal elasticity of Decadence, claiming that the “study of decadence has been extended well into the twentieth century, and some would argue, [...] that the concept has contemporary relevance as well” (2019: 1).

Indeed, as Kate Hext and Alex Murray’s *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (2019) finds, Decadence has bled into successive literary periods in a way that prompts the question whether it has ever been truly ‘over’. As a consequence, Decadent modes of enquiry prove illuminating in topical twenty-first-century debates. For instance, Benjamin Morgan’s essay “Fin du Globe: On Decadent Planets” in *Victorian Studies* outlined the potential of Decadence to function as a critical tool in an attempt to historically re-evaluate the planetary and historical dimension of the climate crisis: “figures of the planet within the cultural production of the fin-de-siècle decadent movement can help us understand the promise as well as the limitations of a widely held view that criticism oriented by climate change requires expanded scales of analysis that are cognizant of planetary space and deep time” (2016: 610).

Similarly pointing to the expansive aftermath of Decadence, Regenia Gagnier has alerted us to its global dimensions and the imperial implications of literature subsumed under that umbrella term arguing that “Decadence and modernization are mutually constituting, global, and subject to ongoing renegotiations that have their own varying rhythms when viewed geographically” (2014: 11). While thus affording a seemingly trans-historical and global potential, the term ‘Decadent’ also warrants a reassessment. In *Vexy Thing – On Gender and Liberation* (2018) Imani Perry highlighted the problematic aspects of Decadent literature by celebrated (queer) icons like Oscar Wilde. Racialisation, sexuality, class and imperialism find themselves in unholy allegiances in Decadent writing, pointing to Wilde’s problematic entanglement in a colonial “fantasy of domination” despite his rebellion “against the constraints of gender for a European with recognized personhood” (Perry 2018: 79). Problematising the complex implications of Decadence as simultaneously defying (post)colonial power structures and reiterating them, Robert Stilling’s 2018 monograph *Beginning at the End* argues that Decadence became a key idea in postcolonial thought, describing both the failures of revolutionary nationalism and the assertion of new cosmopolitan ideas about poetry and art.

Not belonging either to the preceding or the succeeding period turns Decadence studies into an enigmatic field characterised by tensions, and its authors and approaches always-already into unconventional agents. The cluster gathers these different approaches to form (fiction, poetry, essayism), concepts (in particular history

and time), material and matter and social transformation. The contributions in the cluster establish connections between some well-known authors of the late nineteenth century, such as Alice Meynell and Vernon Lee – notably, female or queer authors and creators who often defy being labelled in just one generic way – and present other authors, such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Lionel Johnson, in a new, Decadent light. We are especially interested in how these authors indeed re-define concepts such as time, history, productivity and (im)morality and thus suggest distinctly Decadent attitudes towards texts and histories and history-writing.

Considering the predominantly British scholarship and the discussed array of transgressions in it, ‘Decadence studies’ appear as a global, transhistorical, potentially decolonial train of thought. The five contributions in the cluster may also point us in the direction of the field as a conceptual and theoretical approach that takes historicist and ethical concerns off their hinges and offers new trajectories, perhaps also characterised by their in-between-ness. The five articles shed new light on aspects of Decadence as aesthetic, social and historical corrective. By assembling works by lesser-known authors or authors whose works are not commonly classed as ‘Decadent’ the cluster outlines the scope and reach Decadent aesthetics had as a way to perceive and create literary texts.

Jill Walters demonstrates in her piece on Lionel Johnson’s early journalism the versatility of Decadence as a literary genre. Walters makes the case that, while he was writing for a variety of magazines at the time, Johnson explored notions of Decadence at once criticising and stylistically inhabiting them.

Burkhard Niederhoff argues that Robert Louis Stevenson took a shine to aestheticism and, to a lesser extent, Decadence in his early writings. Examining essays from the 1880s, this article identifies how Stevenson relates his writing to field-defining texts on aesthetic sensibilities by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde.

In turn, James Dowthwaite’s article outlines the correlation between waste and possibility as seen in Vernon Lee’s work. Taking a closer look at her play *Satan the Waster*, Dowthwaite extracts Lee’s view of history to be determined by the combination of decay, which is followed by the rise of the new; waste, in this instance, produces new aesthetics, social forms of living and new perspectives on Decadence as a synonym for ‘historical opportunity’.

Martina Allen examines absinth and the figure of the *absintheur* as Decadent symbols in Marie Corelli’s *Wormwood: A Drama of Paris*. Following Kirsten McLeod’s view that the novel form acts as a sort of ‘counter-Decadent discourse’, Corelli’s novel and the figure of the *absintheur*, as Allen finds, serve as a critical tool to decipher Decadence as a term that was specially applied to public debates on addiction, racial, sexual and cultural deviancy.

The theme of alternative reproduction modes takes centre stage in Sarah Wegener’s article investigating the intricate connections between idleness, repro-

duction and Decadence in the poetry of Alice Meynell and Rosamund Marriott Watson. Taking on poetry produced by non-reproducing women Wegener finds that women (and celibate aesthetes) often used poetry to indulge in their status as “breeders of incurable hereditary idleness” (480) and wreckers of the social system. The mood of such poetry could easily fuel Victorian anxieties about social and biological progress and efficiency. More often than not, women poets viewed their literary begetting of poetry to replace an obligation for biological reproduction.

As we hope to show Decadence is – to stay with Vernon Lee – an opportunity in regard to understating the periodisation of literature, its conflicting aesthetics, an attitude towards cultural and social norms. Many of the authors presented in this cluster have experimented, rejected and celebrated the unique set of qualities Decadence promises to artistic production. Far from being limited to a nineteenth-century phenomenon, Decadence and Neo-Decadent texts continue to inspire writers on a global scale. This becomes evident in the scholarly interest in neo-Victorian Decadence (see *Volupté* 7.1, autumn 2024; Canani and Soccio 2024) and the rise of the contemporary artistic movement of Neo-Decadence since about 2005 (when the term was first used in Brendan Connell’s novel *The Translation of Father Torturo*). What both neo-Victorian Decadence and Neo-Decadence have in common is their enactment of a tension between the past and present: they take playful attitudes but they also attest to a genuine yearning for a not so distant past in which critical dissent was thriving in different fields of public life and diversity was not annihilated but creatively explored. Such a direct, unabashed and productive confrontation with diversity is what, too, points to the surprising aftermath and ongoing socio-critical urgency entailed in Decadence. We hope that the research cluster will be the beginning of a discussion among scholars also in the D-A-CH region that a) showcases the diversity of Decadent literary styles, b) reconsiders the potential of Decadence as a critical and aesthetic framework also for contemporary literary, cultural and political discourses and c) addresses questions of how Decadence may help us rethink Victorian canonicity in particular.

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