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## *Mal d'archive?*: Introduction by the Guest Editor<sup>1</sup>

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What does the decadent do in a pandemic? I write this from isolation in Western Canada, not a place conventionally associated with decadence, but the place I chose to flee to during the COVID-19 pandemic. I am far from my collection of books and beloved objects here, so am not so easily able to create the kind of decadent retreat enacted by Des Esseintes in Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours*. I am not the first to invoke Huysmans's iconic hero when contemplating self-isolation in these pandemic times. Indeed, Des Esseintes is trending as a model for how to self-isolate in style in the midst of the latest *maladie du siècle*.<sup>2</sup> Des Esseintes, of course, faced nothing near as drastic as this. His flight into self-isolation was not from a *maladie du siècle* but, rather, more self-indulgently, from the *mal du siècle*, a psychological illness that manifested itself in ennui, loss, disillusionment, world-weariness, and plagued French Romantic writers and decadents of the nineteenth century. Des Esseintes's response to the *mal du siècle* was, of course, to retreat into a world of objects, books, art, and sensory experiences.

*À rebours* has long been called the Bible of decadence, but it can equally be understood as an archive of decadence. It is a text motivated by a highly self-conscious drive to collect, catalogue, document, and curate decadent artefacts and sensations. Indeed, Des Esseintes is the most famous of a large body of hero and anti-hero aesthete collectors, and the novel is part of a broader tradition of a decadent catalogue aesthetic found in the novels of writers including the Goncourt brothers, Huysmans, George Moore, Oscar Wilde, James Gibbons Huneker, and Carl Van Vechten. Notably, such decadent texts seem driven by an obsession to document their own histories and origins, repetitively and compulsively. It would seem, then, that a notable aspect of the *mal du siècle*, at least in its decadent iteration, is what Jacques Derrida calls '*mal d'archive*' [archive fever]. "To be

*en mal d'archive*, he writes, 'is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin'.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps equally pertinent to decadence, especially in a COVID-19 context, is Carolyn Steedman's provocative riposte to Derrida's abstract concept of the archive. Steedman asks us to consider the archive in epidemiological terms. Archival encounters can be dangerous. The documents and books of the past are marked by 'many of the industrial hazards and diseases' of the era. Handling them, one breathes in 'the dust of the workers who made the papers and parchments; the dust of the animals who provided the skins for their leather bindings. [...] the by-product of all the filthy trades that have, by circuitous routes, deposited their end-products in the archive'.<sup>4</sup> One expects that decadents like Des Esseintes and Dorian Gray would have revelled perversely in this knowledge as they pored over the books and ancient manuscripts in their libraries.

These conceptions of the archive, of course, differ significantly from its discipline-specific usage in archival science as a collection of historical records relating to a place, organization, or family, or to the place where such records are kept.<sup>5</sup> They speak, rather, to the 'archival turn' in scholarship across the humanities and social sciences and in popular culture, which has led at once to 'the conflation of archives, libraries, and museums' and to 'the inflation of the term "archive" [...] as a kind of loose signifier for a disparate set of concepts'.<sup>6</sup> In scholarship, for example, the archive is now of interest not only as a research resource but as an object of study and theorization in itself. In popular culture, meanwhile, the appropriation of the verbs 'to archive' and 'to curate' is rife in the age of blogging, social-media platforms, the boutique hotel, the pop-up shop, the pop-up exhibition, and the internet archive.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, the archive's status as an inviolable representation of institutional and state power has been destabilized: first, through scrutiny of the political and social contexts that determine what is included and what excluded from the archive; second, through the democratization and popularization of the archive brought about by increased public awareness and engagement with these practices.

The archival turn for decadence studies provides fresh avenues for research as well as a new lens through which to consider more established fields of study within the discipline – scholarship, for example, on the preoccupation of decadence with history and temporality, and on collecting and connoisseurship as aspects of the decadent sensibility.<sup>8</sup> These concerns intersect in Matthew Potolsky’s *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (2012), which conceptualizes decadent writers as mining the past with a creative and connoisseur-like approach:

Decadent writers sort incessantly through the materials of the cultural past, defining their relationship to others in the movement by collecting disparate themes, tropes, and stylistic manners from around the globe and binding them together according to their tastes and proclivities. Foregrounding acts of selection, juxtaposition, and critical discernment, they piece together ostentatiously borrowed parts, rather than purporting to create in any traditional sense or according to a clearly delineated doctrine.<sup>9</sup>

Potolsky is predominantly concerned with demonstrating that, contrary to the established notion of decadents as isolated and withdrawn, their writing is actually invested in community. We can see, however, by his wording (‘sort’, ‘materials of the cultural past’, ‘binding’, ‘collecting’, ‘selection’, ‘juxtaposition’, ‘critical discernment’), why many scholars, including contributors to this issue, have taken this work as a prompt to think in more explicit terms about the archival impulses of decadence. Frederick D. King was among the first to do so in characterizing Potolsky’s conceptualization of decadence as ‘a creative archival methodology for reading and disseminating literary and artistic texts’.<sup>10</sup> King uses this understanding as a means to consider how decadence draws on the past to make sense of the present and how it does so with a high degree of self-consciousness about media forms. More recently, Robert Stilling likewise posits decadence as an ‘archival methodology’ in *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism and Postcolonial Poetry* (2018). Stilling draws on Foucault to theorize the anarchic potential of the archive in his discussion of the production of Derek Mahon’s *The Yellow Book* in the context of the archiving of the author’s own papers. The decadent archive that in Potolsky had positive connotations in its documentation of ‘cosmopolitan community’, becomes suspect in Stilling’s postcolonial approach:

when viewed under the shadow of literary decadence, [the archive] has a reversionary, atavistic quality, one that bites back at modernity. The decadence of the archive can be found in the archive's propensity to unsettle received understandings of literary inheritance as old documents rise up from their dusty coffers to accuse the living of complicity in modernity's barbarism.<sup>11</sup>

This special issue of *Volupté* on the theme of 'Decadent Archives' was prompted by a desire to generate further productive thinking about decadence in relation to the archive, broadly understood. It invited potential contributors to write about decadence, decadents, and decadent collections in the archive, library, or museum; decadent art as archive; decadence and archival, counterarchival, or anarchival practices; decadence as an archival aesthetic; decadence as an intermedial archive; decadence and the digital archive; decadence and archival practices; lost or hidden decadent archives or collections; etc. The essays included here were presented in earlier and shortened iterations alongside a host of other papers at a conference on 'Aesthetic Time, Decadent Archives' held at Goldsmiths, University of London, in July 2019, which was more broadly concerned with aesthetic and decadent notions of history, temporality, and periodization and featured an array of exciting new research in these areas.

The first contribution to the issue, Joseph Bristow's 'Decadent Historicism', is based on his conference keynote. Bristow's work in this essay speaks both to decadent literary studies and queer studies, notably the latter's early, productive, and longstanding engagement with the notion of the archive.<sup>12</sup> Ann Cvetkovich's conception of an 'archive of feelings' as an exploration of 'cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions which are encoded not only in the content of texts themselves, but in the practices that surround their production and reception' has been particularly influential in this respect.<sup>13</sup> In the tradition of such scholarship, Bristow, in his essay, identifies a 'historicist impulse to recover the queer past' (p. 10) as a central concern of literary decadence, which he explores in detailed, nuanced readings of Oscar Wilde's 'Portrait of Mr. W. H.' (1889); Vernon Lee's 'A Culture Ghost: or, Winthrop's Adventure' (1881), 'A Wicked Voice' (1890), 'An Eighteenth-Century Singer' (1891); and Michael Field's *Roman Trilogy* (1898, 1901, 1903). For the authors of these works and, in a number of cases, for their protagonists, queer

traces sought out in the historical and archival record are rich resources for constructing and defining noncompliant sexualities.

If Bristow is interested in how decadents, including Wilde, make use of the past to retrieve ‘genderqueer icons’ (p. 5), Frederick D. King and Alison Lee show in their essay how Wilde himself becomes iconic for twentieth- and twenty-first century postmodern queer and decadent engagements with the past. More explicitly, they assert, Wilde has become an archive, subject to different forms of ‘curation’ as part of the present’s conversation with the past. This essay, which builds upon King and Lee’s previous work, provides a provocative new way of understanding the relationship between decadence and postmodernism that identifies a similarly subjective and non-linear critical and creative approach in their engagement with the past. Decadence serves for postmodernism both as a collection on which to draw and a ‘mode for reading the collection’ (p. 32).

Gregory Mackie’s contribution, ‘Aubrey Beardsley, H. S. Nichols and the Decadent Archive’, meanwhile, focuses on a most audacious curation of forged art that shows that decadence was available for creative repurposing well before postmodernism came along. Mackie recounts the details of publisher H. S. Nichols’s circulation in 1919 and 1920, in both exhibition and print format, of what was purported to be a lost archive of Beardsley drawings. Mackie represents these projects as archival in impetus but, more tellingly, understands the forged images as themselves archival, in ways resonant with King’s and Stilling’s notion of decadence as ‘archival methodology’. The forged images draw on and synthesize authentic and plausible Beardsleyan visual tropes that, by this time, had come to be recognizably decadent. New works, then, are created and passed off as old. The forger or forgers of these images might be said to be engaged in a version of the kind of ‘decadent historicism’ defined by Bristow – one ‘that places greater faith in the power of fiction-making than hardnosed evidence’ (p. 11). In this instance, however, rather than serving the interests of decadents in finding queer and transgender allies in the past, the forged images fed the

early twentieth-century bibliomania that was an integral part of the nostalgia for and revival of decadence in the period.

Like Mackie's essay, Jonathan Stone's 'The Journal as Archive: *Vesy* and the Russian Reader's Encounter with Decadence' explores the circulation and production of decadence in the early twentieth century. Stone deploys and broadens Potolsky's sense of how a decadent republic of letters operated by considering the periodical as a canon-forming and community-building medium. Specifically, Stone argues that the Russian magazine, *Vesy* [*Libra*], functioned strategically as a decadent archive in publishing existing foundational texts of decadence from across Europe alongside new Russian material. In so doing, it at once educated a readership in the tenets of decadence and promoted a move away from Russian literature's long investment in psychological realism and towards the more individualist and subjective mode of decadence.

With Sally Blackburn-Daniels's contribution, "'Struggling with the tempter": the Queer Archival Spaces of Vernon Lee, Mary Robinson, and Amy Levy', we return to the concerns – as well as one of the subjects – of Bristow's opening essay. In the piece, Lee is invoked again as a textual chronicler of queer desire, but Blackburn-Daniels's interest is in exploring the queer autobiographical and biographical contours of the published and private writings of Lee's friends and lovers. Along with conceptions of the archive posited by queer theory, Potolsky again provides a framework for thinking about communitarian aspects of decadent interrelations, this time in a highly personal and, indeed, intimate form. Blackburn-Daniels analyses the queer traces, hesitations, intertextualities, and erasures in these women's texts, mapping out their expression of a 'community of queer influence' and desire (p. 95). Ultimately, Blackburn-Daniels proposes a convincing case for the potential of prosopography to illuminate concepts of decadent community in new and productive ways.

This issue's creative contributions also bear on the theme of decadent archives in implicit and explicit ways. Jennifer Higgins's translation of a section of Rachilde's lesser-known and never-translated novel *La Tour d'amour* (1899) reminds us that there are many potential textual pleasures

lying neglected and forgotten in the decadent archives waiting to be integrated into our critical and creative engagements with and construction of decadent literary history.

Kristin Mahoney and Elizabeth Adams, meanwhile, showcase treasures from the archive in their discussions of lesser-known collections of relevance to the history of decadence. While our scholarly work tends to exploit the archive as a source of evidence and truths, the reality, as we all know, is that it often raises as many questions as it solves. Mahoney's musings on photographs contained in the papers of decadent modernist Harold Acton thoughtfully document her encounter with the mysteries and uncertainties the archives throw up as well as the lure and fascination they hold for us. At the same time, she introduces a potentially rich mine of materials for decadence studies that she aims to put to future use in her work on decadent cosmopolitanism. Adams's piece, meanwhile, draws attention to a fairly overlooked Wilde collection – the Robert Ross Memorial Collection at University College Oxford. This collection is not Ross's but was named after him by the somewhat eccentric Wilde collector Walter Edwin Ledger, friend of Ross and of another, more famous, Wilde collector and bibliographer, Christopher Millard (Stuart Mason). The collection consists of books by and about Wilde and a vast array of correspondence, bookseller's catalogues, prospectuses, and other ephemera that testify to a concerted effort to preserve and memorialize Wilde. A collection of this kind has many uses for the scholar of decadence, particularly in light of themes raised in this issue to do with decadent historicism and the desire to recover a queer past and communities of queer influence. Indeed, Mackie's recent book *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (2019), which draws on this collection as well as the more famous Oscar Wilde and his Literary Circle Collection at the Clark Library (UCLA), uses this material to argue that 'Wilde was instrumental in community formation' for these queer bibliophiles.<sup>14</sup>

Returning to the opening question of this introduction – what would the decadent do in a pandemic? – these essays, as a collection, propose some surprising and counterintuitive claims about decadence and about the archive. Notably, they go against the grain of the iconic image of

the decadent I invoked in the opening of this introduction – a Huysmansian decadent in isolation suffering from *mal du siècle* and *mal d'archive*. In place of this, these essays suggest – in different ways – that a decadent engagement with the past and with textual and cultural archives can be oriented towards community-building, self-affirmation, and generative creative activities and practices. Even the forgeries of Mackie's discussion, derivative though they may be, speak to the enduring and iconic status that decadence achieved as early as the 1910s and that continues today.

In *À rebours*, the doctor orders Des Esseintes to return to Paris and to live an ordinary life as a cure for his neurosis. His prescription might well be different for pandemic times. Could it be that, in this context, a decadent course of self-isolation, of immersion in art and sensation, is just what the doctor would order? The essays collected in this issue suggest that decadents need not suffer from *mal d'archive* but might instead experience a *joie d'archive* that is life-affirming and generative. I hope these essays will encourage you to engage with decadent archives – whether they be on your own shelves, on digital platforms, or, when possible, in real libraries and institutions – with a view to continuing the critical conversation begun here. In the meantime, stay safe and, by all means, stay decadent.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Samuel Rutter, 'A Dandy's Guide to Decadent Self-Isolation', *Paris Review*, 4 May 2020. <<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2020/05/04/a-dandys-guide-to-decadent-self-isolation/>> [accessed 14 June 2020], and 'The Art of Confinement?: J. K. Huysmans' Against the Grain', *French Literature Daily*, 7 April 2020. <[https://medium.com/@salvadorlopez\\_34862/the-art-of-confinement-j-k-huysmans-against-the-grain-13e46fef57ff](https://medium.com/@salvadorlopez_34862/the-art-of-confinement-j-k-huysmans-against-the-grain-13e46fef57ff)> [accessed 14 June 2020].

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> See the entry for 'archive' and 'archives' in the *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*. <<https://dictionary.archivists.org/>> [accessed 14 June 2020].

<sup>6</sup> Marlene Manoff, 'Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines', *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 4 (2004), 9-25 (p. 10).

<sup>7</sup> Manoff covers this to some extent, though the article was written before the explosion of social media. For a consideration of this topic in the mainstream media, see Alex Williams, 'The Word Curate No Longer Belongs to the Museum Crowd', *New York Times*, 2 October 2009.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/04/fashion/04curate.html>> [accessed 14 June 2020].

<sup>8</sup> The subject of collecting in relation to decadence is a fairly well-established field that is dominated by approaches foregrounding consumerism and mass culture, fetishism and perversity, bibliophilia, and materiality.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), pp. 4-5.

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 tastes.

<sup>10</sup> Frederick D. King, 'The Decadent Archive and the Long History of New Media', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 49 (2016), 643-63 (p. 647).

<sup>11</sup> Robert Stilling, *Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism and Postcolonial Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 234.

<sup>12</sup> Kate Eichorn notes that the interest of queer studies scholars in the archive predates the archival turn in the humanities and social sciences. See Kate Eichorn, 'Queer Archives: From Collections to Conceptual Framework', in *The Routledge History of Queer America*, ed. by Don Romesburg (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 123-34 (p. 123).

<sup>13</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory Mackie, *Beautiful Untrue Things: Forging Oscar Wilde's Extraordinary Afterlife* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019), p. 58.