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Guest Editors' Introduction to Neo-Victorian Decadence: Questions, Trajectories, Paradigms

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Neo-Victorian decadence is one of the most fascinating and complex areas of scholarly research, lying at the core of an extremely lively debate where literature, history, the fine and the applied arts, the entertainment industry, and new and digital media converge. This is hardly surprising when one thinks of the clusters of ideas conveyed by the adjective 'neo-Victorian' coupled with the noun 'decadence'. The conventions and the idiosyncrasies of decadent and Victorian cultures are subsumed under a label whose complexity is only enhanced by the prefix 'neo-'. On the one hand, neo-Victorian decadence unambiguously recalls the tension between history and the present, or between historicism and presentism, that Frederic Jameson construed as a pivot of postmodern literature and its cannibalization of past styles.[1] On the other hand, however, this attitude to the past demands self-conscious acts of '*(re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision*'[2] that are as hard to pinpoint as 'Victorian' and 'decadence' are hard to define from a critical viewpoint.

In his study of late nineteenth-century Scottish poet John Evelyn Barlas, Philip K. Cohen rightly foregrounds the discursive and heterodox nature of decadence, emphasizing its intrinsic attempt to challenge normative models. Decadence, Cohen argues, meant to undermine the 'prevailing values and sensibilities' of the late Victorian period, waging a 'guerrilla war against the dominant culture'.[3] For a long time, this countercultural attitude was correctly but somewhat simplistically perceived as the basis of an aesthetic paradigm directed against bourgeois values, opposing its dominant ideology, its morality, and its materialism.[4] In keeping with Cohen's argument, the supremacy of aesthetic disinterestedness, the search for sensual beauty, the social escapism embodied by the dandy and the *flâneur* are indicative of what Michel Foucault termed 'reverse' discourses. In the French philosopher's definition, these are 'tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations' and finding manifold expressions in sociopolitical

dynamics as well as in cultural and artistic productions.[5] As discourse, decadence was a site of resistance acting against dominant ideologies and providing social and political challenges through aesthetic innovation.

The political gesture inscribed in decadence, after all, was already clear to its early detractors, who introduced the label to suggest political decline, which, in turn, was progressively associated with profligacy and dissidence.[6] Yet, the subversive and nonconformist values embedded in decadent aesthetics was to survive the 'Morbid Nineties'. Framed in a freshened up, enlivened past aesthetics that provided writers and artists with the necessary historical distance, decadence is perhaps most effectively defined as a creative framework that deftly conveys aversion to the values shaping the present. In this regard, decadence reveals one of its founding paradoxes, the seemingly reactionary criticism of modernity that Alex Murray interestingly calls 'Decadent conservatism': a set of values and principles that prompted the reimagination of the past to come to terms with modernity and to envisage alternatives to the present.[7]

To account for the persistence of the cultural politics of decadence and its criticism of dominant ideologies, Kristin Mahoney's *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (2015) introduces the concept of *post*-Victorian decadence. This label does not identify a terminus *post quem* in the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetics, but an aesthetic category *per se* – one that is distinct, yet closely related to, postmodern and neo-Victorian practices. Post-Victorian decadence, Mahoney states, 'provides a backstory for Neo-Victorianism and the postmodern turn to the Victorian period', and in so doing it preludes to the appropriation of the past as a means to re-negotiate the cultural values of the present through specific representational paradigms.[8] This is a point that Matthew Potolsky similarly argues in 'Decadence and Politics' (2020), so far as to suggest that decadent politics contributed to Julia Kristeva's and Jacques Derrida's deconstruction, postcolonial theory, camp aesthetics, and even queer theory in the aftermath of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s.[9]

'Much as we read Victorian texts as highly revealing cultural products of their age,' Marie-Luise Kohlke stated in the first issue of *Neo-Victorian Studies* in 2008, 'neo-Victorian texts will one day be read for the insights they afford into twentieth- and twenty-first century cultural history and socio-political concerns'.[10] Neo-Victorian and neo-Victorian decadent aesthetics are entangled with a sense of nostalgia for the past that is not at odds with, but functional to, the ways in which intellectuals, writers, and artists explore, scrutinize, criticize and represent issues that are central to contemporary society. The revival of themes, tropes, and styles that characterize the late twentieth-century neo-Victorian vogue raises issues that are also central to neo-Victorian decadence.

For one thing, neither decadence nor neo-decadence are the expression of coherent or organised movements. In *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (2012), Matthew Potolsky perceptively suggests that decadence should be understood as a community whose members shared interests, purposes, and practices.[11] As a cultural mindset endorsing specific perspectives and stances about society and the individual in ways which disclose their proximity to fin-de-siècle aesthetics, the label 'neo-decadence', like 'neo-Victorian', eschews safe and uncontroversial definitions.[12] 'Practically everyone who writes about decadence', David Weir stated in *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* back in 1995, 'begins with the disclaimer that the word itself is annoyingly resistant to definition'.[13] Likewise, the endeavour to define the chronology and the geography of neo-Victorian decadence would necessarily encompass such a wealth of issues that its porosity is only proof of the impossibility of neat classifications. It seems reasonable, or at least cautious enough, to apply to neo-Victorian decadence Emily A. Rabiner's definition of historical decadence as 'an ever-expanding network of texts and intellectuals'.[14] What distinguishes neo-Victorian decadence is, in fact, the multifaceted web of encounters that it rests on – transcultural and transhistorical encounters that challenge customary representational strategies, experiment with media, hybridize genres, and blur chronology.

The multidisciplinary, cosmopolitan, cross-cultural and interart nature of neo-Victorian decadence are the object of a research group that was established in 2021 by the Decadence

Research Centre (DRC) at Goldsmiths, University of London, and the University Centre for Victorian and Edwardian Studies (CUSVE) at the 'G. d'Annunzio' University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy.[15] Directed by Jane Desmarais and Anna Enrichetta Soccio, the project investigated the multicultural and multilingual aspects of decadence in its Neo-Victorian afterlives. At the same time, it interrogated periodization by extending the temporal boundaries of Neo-Victorianism backwards in order to understand what qualifies as a Neo-Victorian text. The 1890s was a self-conscious period, one that was instantly mythologized and culturally consumed, even by its Edwardian successors. By studying the Interwar period to the present day across geographical boundaries, the research group aimed to examine the nature of Neo-Victorian decadence and explore its rich transcultural and cosmopolitan dimensions.

This issue of *Volupté* presents part of the results of this research, following two seminars that were held in April and July 2021 and the first international CUSVE-DRC joint conference, *Neo-Victorian Decadence*, hosted at the 'G. d'Annunzio' University of Chieti-Pescara on 26-28 October 2022. The contributions included embrace a wide range of perspectives in order to discuss neo-Victorian decadence as an aesthetic category in terms of temporal boundaries, artistic framework and inter-artistic output, thus foregrounding its rich transcultural and cosmopolitan dimensions.

In the opening article, Francesca Orestano addresses several issues that are pivotal to understanding neo-Victorian decadence and its complexity. Gabriele d'Annunzio's *Il Piacere* Orestano argues, contains numerous elements that are paradigmatic of decadence, from aristocratic characters and settings to objects and bibelots. In so doing, the novel projects its long shadow on neo-decadence, including its fascination with the poetry – and the poets – of the Romantic period. In *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica*, published in 1930 and translated into English as *The Romantic Agony* three years later, Mario Praz famously argued that fin de siècle and early twentieth-century aesthetics concluded a developmental pattern that had begun with the Romantics, tracing fascinating parallelisms between Sade and Byron, Shelley, and Keats,

and between Swinburne, Pater, Huysmans, Mallarmé, and d'Annunzio.[16] Significantly, the nineteenth-century revival of Romantic aesthetics is addressed as a neo-Victorian phenomenon by Francesca Caraceni, who focuses on the early nineteenth-century origins of Oscar Wilde's and Walter Pater's social realism before examining John Henry Newman's debt to key tenets of Romantic culture such as immaterialism and idealism, and James Stephens's influence on decadent aesthetes.

With a dual focus on poetry and music, Enrico Reggiani explores Derek Mahon's 'Decadent Dilemma', and his articulation of neo-Victorian decadence in *Yellow Book*. A central element of Mahon's poetics, Reggiani contends, is a process of poeticization that is ultimately intersemiotic, resting on the careful imbrication of the musical and the literary codes. The concepts of 'reinvention' and 'amplification' are also key to Kostas Boyiopoulos' article on Jeremy Reed's *Dorian: A Sequel*. Published in 1997, the novel does away with the stereotypical nostalgic evocation of decadent atmospheres. Through a process of intertextual artificiality, Reed exploits rhetorical effects in emulating and re-inventing Wilde's microtext, recounting readers a new, insightful version of his decadent style.

As the prototype of the decadent dandy, a fin-de-siècle celebrity, and a global icon of contemporary pop culture, Wilde provides writers and artists, film writers and playwrights, and musicians and singers with an inexhaustible repository of themes and images. This is an aspect that Pierpaolo Martino tackles in his contribution, which focuses on David Hare's play *The Judas Kiss* (1998) and Rupert Everett's film *The Happy Prince* (2018). While Hare adopts a biographical approach in representing Wilde's days before and after his two-year imprisonment, Everett rewrites Wilde's story beginning from his downfall. Despite their different focus, the movie and the play succeed in creating yet another version of Wilde that is instrumental in reading and deconstructing contemporary concerns such as individualism and the quest for success. The afterlife of writers, artists, and works is a core theme of much neo-Victorian and neo-decadent literature, as Sally Blackburn-Daniels illustrates by focusing on another artist embodying the

cosmopolitan and intellectual sides of decadence, Vernon Lee. The article examines Lee's 'decadent Renaissance' in the supernatural tale 'Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady' (1896) and Mary F. Burns's mystery novel *The Unicorn in the Mirror* (2020). Shifting from the fin de siècle to the present, this metamorphosis of the Victorian fascination with the Renaissance brings about aesthetic and political implications that recur in twenty-first-century neo-decadent writings.

Three contributions shed light on two popular genres that are key to the neo-decadent artistic agenda, that is, comics and graphic novels. Both are characterized by visual efficacy, which offers artists and illustrators diverse strategies for revisiting the past as well as for interrogating the present. The result is a new multimodal whole that has proven able to attract a large and affectionate readership, often leading to spin-offs and media franchises. Darcy Sullivan engages in a fascinating examination of the often neglected but close connections between comics and decadence. With a dual focus on words and images, the article brings to the fore multiple appropriation strategies that range from the adaptation of canonical authors and texts – the French *poètes maudits*, Gabriele d'Annunzio, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* being paramount examples – to allusions and echoes. Verbal and visual intertextuality also serves Matthew Creasy's perceptive discussion of the first two volumes of *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman*, the cross-over comics series created by writer Alan Moore and artist Kevin O'Neill in the late 1990s. As Creasy argues, their work purposefully replicates the community of interests and practices that scholars such as Potolsky see as key to decadence. In so doing, *The League of Extraordinary Gentleman* gives new legitimacy to late-Victorian countercultures and reverse discourses, but it also reassesses ideologies of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity that are all the more compelling at the present.

The representation of the female body is explored by Motomu Yoshioka's article, which presents a detailed case study of the manga adaptations of *Salomé* in Japan. Overlapping cultural and aesthetic paradigms, blurring traditions and negotiating between visual and verbal media, these works offer representations of attractive, seducing women that defy the conventions of manga when it comes to gender. Needless to say, the aestheticization of gender is a central and ever-

present element in Western cultural productions as well, with the cinema and the TV industries providing many an example. Anja Meyer centres on the successful TV series Penny *Dreadful* (2014-2016), a pastiche of literary heroes which, in their role as contemporary cultural memes, re-negotiate the identity and the agenda of women that were long silenced by male and female writers alike. In particular, Lily, the creature's companion that Victor Frankenstein refused to give birth to in Mary Shelley's novel, embodies the prototype of the Gothic New Woman. As Meyer argues, she stands out as a champion of female empowerment against patriarchy despite – or probably because of – the suffering and trauma that she endures.

Addressing topics as diverse as cosmopolitan influences, the cross-cultural and cross-national circulation of texts and ideas, their multiple afterlives across time, genres, and media, this issue of *Volupté* intends to contribute to the current scholarly debates about neo-Victorian decadence. As the articles that follow illustrate, this may ultimately be seen as a cultural phenomenon that has developed distinctive characteristic and features – political and aesthetic, among others – challenging our understanding of the Victorian civilization, as well as our perception and cognizance of the present.

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[1] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 18.
[2] Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewelyn, *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 4 (emphasis in the original).
[3] Philip K. Cohen, *John Evelyn Barlas, A Critical Biography: Poetry, Anarchism, and Mental Illness in Late-Victorian Britain* (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2012), p. 214.
[4] See, for example, Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).
[5] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), p. 102.
[6] Matthew Potolsky, 'Decadence and Politics', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 154.
[7] Alex Murray, *Decadent Conservatism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 131 and *passim*.
[8] Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 24; also see Alex Murray, 'Introduction: Decadent Histories', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, p. 1
[9] Potolsky, 'Decadence and Politics', p. 163.
[10] Marie-Luise Kohlke, 'Introduction: Speculations in and on the Neo-Victorian Encounter', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 1.1 (Autumn 2008), p. 13.
[11] Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters*, pp. 8-10.

[12] Daniel Corrick notes the same difficulty in defining neo-decadence, which, he points out, should not be reduced to 'Decadence updated to a contemporary setting and tackling or at least incorporating modern preoccupations'. Daniel Corrick, 'Introduction', in *Drowning Beauty: The Neo-Decadent Anthology*, ed. by Justin Isis and Daniel Corrick (Sacramento: Snuggly Books, 2018), p. 5.

[13] David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), p. 1.

[14] Emily Anne Rabiner, *The Decadent Renaissance: The Antimodern Seductions of Gabriele D'Annunzio and Vernon* Lee, unpublished doctoral thesis, UC Berkley, 2017, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3gm8r02t [accessed 24 February 2024], p. 8.

[15] See the 'CUSVE-DRC Neo-Victorian decadence research group' webpage at https://www.dilass.unich.it/cusve-researchgroups [accessed 05 November 2024].

[16] Mario Praz, *La carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1930); English transl., *The Romantic Agony* (London: Oxford University Press/Humphrey Milford, 1933).