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The View from Strasbourg
Translational Readings of Decadence by the Guest Editors

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This special issue of *Volupté* turns to France at the end of the nineteenth century to consider the ways that artists, writers, and critics associated with decadence probed and strained at the limits imposed by received linguistic and artistic forms through translation. The articles gathered here derive from a broader project to explore decadence and translation, funded by the AHRC during 2018 and 2019. Specifically, contributions relate to an event held at the Collège doctoral européen de Strasbourg within the University of Strasbourg during June 2019.¹ The aim of this event was to bring together scholars from the United Kingdom and across Europe in an attempt to establish a comparative understanding of how decadence and translation are approached in different institutions within different countries and in different languages. Translation activity from the nineteenth century was an object of study at this event; it was also a mode of communication for scholars, who came from Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Norway, and Russia.

From the establishment of the Council of Europe and its role as seat for the European Parliament to the intimate philosophical gatherings and discussions around Jacques Derrida that took place there in 2004, Strasbourg has been a place of conversation and debate on questions of language, international relations, and identity.² Simultaneously, it also has a long history as a place of tensions and disputes along the borderlines between languages and countries. Indeed, the loss of Strasbourg during the Franco-Prussian war was central to that sense of historical and political crisis within France which drove the emergence of modern decadence in the final decades of the nineteenth century. For these reasons, Strasbourg seems an apt point of origin for a collection of readings that draws out the ‘translational’ nature of decadence. Drawing on influential work in translation studies by Lawrence Venuti, Emily Apter, Barbara Cassin, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, and others, this approach posits that the crossings between languages are never simple or invisible.

Wail S. Hassan has defined ‘translational literature’ as consisting of ‘texts that straddle two languages, at once foregrounding, performing, and problematizing the act of translation’.³

Contributions to this issue interrogate the translational nature of decadent literature by exploring the consequences of attending to the frictions, overlaps, borrowings, and interconnections between languages, literary texts, and artistic forms in France at the fin de siècle. In so doing, they present French decadence as a transnational space, with several of the essays concentrating specifically on Anglo-French literary relations. This introduction will set out some of the tensions inherent in decadence itself that emerge through such a ‘translational’ understanding, in order to frame the readings and case studies in the articles that follow.⁴

Consider Anatole Baju’s opening proclamation in the first issue of *Le Décadent* in April 1886:

Se dissimuler l’état de décadence ou nous sommes arrivés serait le comble de l’insenséisme. Religion, mœurs, justice, tout décade, ou plutôt tout subit une transformation inéluctable. La société se désagrège sous l’action corrosive d’une civilisation déliquescence. [...] C’est dans la langue surtout que s’en manifestent les premiers symptômes.

[To fool ourselves about the state of decadence at which we have arrived would be the height of stupidism. Religion, morals, justice – everything is decaying, or rather undergoing an ineluctable transformation. Society is breaking down under the corrosive influence of a deliquescent civilisation. [...] It is in language above all that the first symptoms manifest themselves.]⁵

Baju places language at the heart of a widespread social and historical crisis: it is where society is most vulnerable to decadence and where decadence is ‘manifest’ as ‘symptoms’. Simultaneously, language is also the medium through which decadent aesthetics spread in response to that broader malaise. Baju’s remarks, however, also epitomize the conditions they seek to describe. Translating the unusual coinages ‘l’insenséisme’ and ‘décade’ as ‘stupidism’ and ‘decaying’, our English version here draws on Patrick McGuinness’s subtle account of Baju’s politics, which makes an important distinction between the idea of ‘the new’ (as ‘natural, fresh, vigorous’), and ‘the neologism’, which is ‘hybrid, ambiguous, a perversion produced by injecting dead material with an atavistic spasm of creation’.⁶

The unsettlingly ‘hybrid’ quality of Bajou’s writing does not stop, however, at his confection of new words. This version of decadence is born from a deep indebtedness to recent and not-so-recent precursors. Bajou’s linguistic perversions recall the style and preoccupations of *Des Esseintes* in Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *À rebours* (1884), particularly his fondness for the late Latin writings of Petronius and Apuleius, rich in linguistic borrowings and neologisms. Huysmans famously established a correspondence between ancient and modern decadent styles that hinged on the image of linguistic ‘decomposition’:

Au demeurant, la décomposition de la langue française s’était faite d’un coup. Dans la langue latine, une longue transition, un écart de quatre cents ans existait entre le verbe tacheté et superbe de Claudien et de Rutilius, et le verbe faisandé du VIII^e siècle. Dans la langue française aucun laps de temps, aucune succession d’âges n’avait eu lieu; le style tacheté et superbe des de Goncourt et le style faisandé de Verlaine et de Mallarmé se coudoyaient à Paris, vivant en même temps, à la même époque, au même siècle.

[Incidentally, the decomposition of the French language had been effected suddenly. In the Latin language, a long transition, a distance of four hundred years existed between the blotchy and magnificent epithet of Claudian and Rutilius and the gamy epithet of the eighth century. In the French language, no lapse of time, no succession of ages had taken place; the blotchy and magnificent style of the de Goncourts and the gamy style of Verlaine and Mallarmé rubbed elbows in Paris, living in the same period, the same epoch and the same century.]⁷

Although Huysmans invokes Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé here, the ‘gamy style’ and fascination with late Latin literature is directly indebted to Théophile Gautier’s description of Charles Baudelaire, which ascribes the discovery of ‘la langue marbrée déjà des verdeurs de la décomposition et comme faisandée’ [a language already veined with the greenness of decomposition, as if gamy] to his friend’s readings in decadent Classical writers.⁸ In form, style, and content, then, Huysmans and Bajou enrol themselves in an implicit ‘imagined community’ of writers, characterized by Matthew Potolsky as the Decadent Republic of Letters.⁹

As part of that imagined community Bajou’s broad pronouncements about social collapse (‘decading’) are suffused with an interlinguistic and transhistorical way of thinking, inherited from the work of Désiré Nisard, via Baudelaire, Gautier, and Huysmans. This framed a present sense of historical crisis through foundational comparisons between modern France and the culture of

the late Roman Empire.¹⁰ In the aftermath of the military defeat against Prussia of 1871, French history seemed to many to be a living translation of Roman decline. Decadence offered a clue to understanding that feeling of loss as well as a means of creative response. This may explain why so many works associated with decadence seem to be translations from some lost original. Across the Channel, literary decadence in Britain has been identified by Linda Dowling as the expression of a similar crisis within nineteenth-century understandings of language, brought about by the rise of comparative philology.¹¹ Dowling traces the shock waves of this crisis within the prose of Walter Pater, which enacted a self-conscious, highly elaborate style that aspired towards the condition of Latin. In common with Huysmans, Bajou, and Baudelaire, Pater thus transfigured his national literary idiom by endowing it with a ‘hybrid’ or translational quality. Criticising translators who focus exclusively on ‘idiom and sentence construction’, in his essay ‘Style’ (1888), Pater urged them to pay closer attention to the individual word, or the ‘elementary particles’ of a text: ‘Plato, for instance, being often reproducible by an exact following, with no variation in structure, of word after word, as the pencil follows a drawing under tracing-paper’.¹² Pater advocates here an extreme method of translation that stretches and moulds English, which is imagined as following the contours of classical Greek, acquiring a new power from the very loss of idiomatic individuality. By doing so, Pater creates new potentialities for the translational, which can also be understood as a mode of attention – a form of critical discipline and deep reading that moulds the decadent writer’s relationship with language, reminding readers of Paul Bourget’s well-known theories about the pre-eminent importance assigned to the word in decadent style.

The ‘tracing-paper’ analogy deployed by Pater also opens up vital questions about the relationship and hierarchy between source and target language that have come to the fore within the modern discipline of translation studies. Debate has shifted in this field from a concern with how to assess the fidelity of a translation (what remains of the original outline), towards an attempt to understand translation as a distinctive mode of cultural production, for instance by mapping publication practices and histories of circulation and reception. Following Pater’s analogy, we

might say that whilst it aids transfer of the original, the ‘tracing-paper’ also obscures it. Lawrence Venuti’s theories regarding the translator’s invisibility have been highly influential here, as have his paradigms of domestication and foreignization.¹³ The impact of translation studies is now making itself felt within literary criticism more broadly. In tandem with a renewed close scrutiny of ideas of cosmopolitanism and world literature, literary scholars have started to draw on translation studies in order to create multivalent, decentred approaches that seek to overcome the ingrained national bias of literary studies as practised in universities, but also to question traditional methods of literary comparison. Emily Apter, for instance, has argued that the very notions of ‘non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability’ can be used to re-energize the field of comparative literature, which she sees as too invested in a myth of easy cultural equivalence and/or fluffy celebrations of cultural diversity.¹⁴ Apter wants critics to be suspicious of translation. Her advocacy of ‘untranslatability’, however, is by no means an invitation to stop translating: it is, rather, a call to pay increased attention to the act of translation as an aesthetically open-ended and politically charged act. Her work partly builds on Barbara Cassin’s *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (2004), known in English as *Dictionary of Untranslatables*. This large collaborative project collected philosophical terms that resist translation – terms such as the Greek *polis*, the German *Dasein*, and the English *feeling*, which, in the editor’s words, become ‘sign[s] of the way in which, from one language to another, neither the words nor the conceptual networks can simply be superimposed.’¹⁵ For Apter as for Cassin, instances of translation failure reveal the most profound truths about intercultural transmission: they are the fault lines of the system, where ideologies and material conditions show through most clearly, where critics can intervene most effectively.

Both the cultural politics of literary transmission and the aesthetics of resistance of the untranslatable come into play in a ‘translational’ understanding of decadence. Viewing translation as folding together linguistic, cultural, and often intermedial acts of international dialogue, the essays collected in this issue interrogate the affinities, tensions, and complexities underpinning

relationships between France the rest of the world. Bertrand Marquer's essay on Max Nordau and Cesare Lombroso, for example, revisits some of the foundational critical narratives that have shaped our understanding of decadence in relation to notions of genius, criminality, and psychopathology. His contribution identifies the rise of a 'medico-literary' translation at the heart of scientific and pseudo-scientific discourse about degeneration theory. Examining French and English translations of Nordau and Lombroso, Marquer uncovers a complex pattern that mixes translation and non-translation, shaping and re-shaping their theories as they spread across Europe. The scientific text is thus revealed as an ambivalent space of deployment and regulation of decadent translation.

Guy Ducrey's essay brings to bear a similar sensitivity on the role of translation in his account of the multiple 'lives' of one particular translator. Whilst Gabriele D'Annunzio is widely recognized as the foremost decadent writer in Italian, his French translator, Georges Hérold, is a more ambiguous figure. Ducrey examines the overlap of different identities within Hérold's career: these span his public work as a historian and as a translator, but they also include his less well-known researches into the history of homosexuality. Hérold's esoteric work into the homosexual archive was, Ducrey shows, co-extensive with his public activities as a translator, just as there were intimate links between his acquisition of the Italian language and his relationships with young men. These interests might be thought to align Hérold with the transgressive qualities associated with decadence more generally but, as a translator, he believed that his practice should be informed by achieving intelligibility rather than rendering the contours of literary experiment and formal innovation in his source material. This is why D'Annunzio objected to the 'banalization' of his writings in translation, of which he believed Hérold of being guilty. The issue is further complicated by evidence that, despite these disagreements, D'Annunzio also collaborated with Hérold in toning down his own writings for a French audience.

In comparison, Emily Eells identifies a 'decadent resonance' that can be found in Marcel Proust's translations of John Ruskin in spite of Proust's declared resistance to decadence ('Je ne

suis pas *décadent*). For Eells, this arises through a paradoxical tension between the generative power of Proust's translation as a creative activity and the degenerative effect of translation upon Ruskin's original text. Ruskin's *The Bible of Amiens*, the work that Proust selected for translation, is deeply concerned with art and notions of decay. The mixture of profit and loss that occurs in shifting Ruskin's art criticism into finely tuned tonalities of Proust's French, Eells suggests, amplifies the English writer's Aestheticism into a form of decadence that had future repercussions for his own masterpiece, *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Eells's account of Proust's versions of Ruskin highlights the fact that a translational understanding of decadent literature must take into account this writing's pervasive engagement with visual culture, across disciplinary divides. Two further contributions underscore the important role played by the arts in the international dialogue around decadence. In a series of subtle readings, Sophie Basch explores the resonance, for French writers and readers at the fin de siècle, of the English term 'modern style', used to describe contemporary architecture and design. As a shorthand for a distinctive brand of turn-of-the-century Anglophilia, 'le modern style' became a vehicle to articulate concerns about various forms of foreign influence upon French culture. Cyril Barde uncovers a related set of anxieties about linguistic degeneration and neologism in French turn-of-the-century reactions to art nouveau. The attacks on art nouveau and modern style carry with them a criticism of modern practices of cosmopolitanism, international collaboration, and de-nationalization prevalent in literature as well as the visual arts. Translation emerges here, not simply as a means of acknowledging the cross-over between formal disciplines, but also as a rhetorical weapon in the hands of fin-de-siècle critics keen to police national borderlines. There is an important irony here: Barde draws on Cassin's work to show that such expressions of anxiety about untranslatability are precisely where translational activity proliferates.

As well as acknowledging the frictions between languages and cultures and the interests that jostle between texts and translators, our understanding of decadence as 'translational' is also informed by a strong sense that such debates are not closed. Translation is never a final or

finalizing act. The essay by Richard Hibbitt demonstrates how the critical study of literary translation and the creative practice of translation inform one another in productive ways. Hibbitt explores the difficulties of translating the prose of Paul Verlaine for a modern audience. The essay begins by considering the formal and thematic resources offered to Verlaine by prose over verse. In style and subject matter, the short stories in *Histoires comme ça* (1888-90) may look similar to the naturalism of Émile Zola, but Hibbitt suggests that their presentation of sexual mores and identity is closer in spirit to the poems that earned Verlaine a reputation as a decadent writer. In order to make this point, Hibbitt takes on the challenge of translating some extracts from one of Verlaine's short fictions. Responding to Venuti's arguments about the invisibility of the translator, he provides a series of practical examples to show that any contemporary translation needs to take account of Verlaine's shifting lexis, as he deploys informal and demotic registers in his depiction of the seedy underside of Parisian life.

The final cluster of contributions closes the gap between translation theory and practice by presenting a series of original English translations of French decadent works. Here translation figures not only as a living phenomenon but as crucial to the ongoing effort to create new readerships, and therefore new opportunities of engagement, for decadent literature. We are delighted to be able to include Derek Mahon's new English versions of seven poems by Verlaine. In a brief note Mahon, who sadly passed away only a few weeks before we went to press, sets up the productive relationship between poetry, music, and untranslatability that inspired his work on Verlaine. Peter Manson turns to another towering figure of the French fin de siècle with his translation of Mallarmé's 'Monologue d'un faun', which is part of a fragmentary first version of what was to become the poet's impressionist masterpiece, *L'Après-midi d'un faune* (1876). Finally, Matthew Creasy and Jennifer Higgins present a fascinating hybrid text: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's highly crafted decadent prose poem 'Vox Populi' (1880). These translations remind us of how much of French decadent literature, even by major authors, remains untranslated into English. The need for translation is arguably even more acute when it comes to 'minor' languages, which

have traditionally been marginalized both in the international publishing market and within academia. Today more than ever, there is a renewed political as well as cultural urgency to the imperative to keep translating decadence: as public discourse is once again saturated by divisive nationalisms, engaging with the translational is a modest gesture of dissent against the closing borders of the early twenty-first century, especially in Britain, where the study of foreign languages is under threat as never before.

¹ We would like to record our gratitude to the AHRC and the Collège doctoral européen de Strasbourg. Particular thanks should be extended to Guy Ducrey, whose role in facilitating debate and exchange amongst scholars and across languages was exemplary.

² See Jacques Derrida, *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, trans. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

³ Wail S. Hassan, 'Agency and Translational Literature: Ahdaf Soueif's "The Map of Love"', *PMLA*, 121.3 (2006), 753–68 (p. 754).

⁴ The 'translational' understanding of decadence we outline here is discussed in greater detail within Stefano Evangelista's 'Translational Decadence: Versions of Flaubert, Pater, and Lafcadio Hearn', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 49.1 (2021), forthcoming.

⁵ 'La rédaction', 'Aux Lecteurs!', *Le Décadent littéraire & artistique*, 10 April 1886, p. 1. Our translation.

⁶ Patrick McGuinness, *Poetry and Radical Politics in fin de siècle France: From Anarchism to Action française* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 49, 50.

⁷ J.-K. Huysmans, *À rebours*, in *Romans et Nouvelles*, ed. by André Guyaux, Pierre Jourde, et al. (Paris: Gallimard, 2019), p. 696; translation quoted, with modifications, from *Against the Grain*, trans. by John Howard; intro. by Havelock Ellis (New York: Lieber & Lewis, 1922), p. 301.

⁸ Théophile Gautier, 'Charles Baudelaire', in Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Michel Levy, 1868), pp. 16–17. Translation quoted, with some modifications, from Théophile Gautier, *Charles Baudelaire: His Life*, trans. by Guy Thorne (London: Greening & Co., 1915), pp. 19–20.

⁹ Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Regarding Nisard and the evolution of attitudes towards decadence in France during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1979), and Ben Hutchinson, *Lateness and Modern European Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

¹¹ Dowling defines decadence as 'an attempt to save something from the wreck by turning to literary advantage what had otherwise appeared only as one of the incidentally bleak implications of the new linguistic science: the idea that written language [...] was simply another dead language in relation to living speech.' Linda Dowling, *Language and Decadence in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. xv.

¹² Walter Pater, 'Style', in *The Library Edition of the Works of Walter Pater*, 10 vols (London: Macmillan, 1910), vol. 5: *Appreciations*, pp. 5–38 (pp. 14–15).

¹³ Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995); and, for an overview of the field, Lawrence Venuti, ed., *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁴ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 4. Another theory of translation that lends itself very readily to literary applications is the 'prismatic' model articulated by Matthew Reynolds in *Prismatic Translation*, ed. by Matthew Reynolds (Cambridge: Legenda, 2019).

¹⁵ Barbara Cassin, 'Introduction', in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. by Barbara Cassin, trans. by Emily Apter et al. (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. xvii–xx (p. xvii).