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The Devil in the Detail: An Introduction to Decadent Occultism from the Editors

Alice Condé and Jessica Gosling

The double meaning of ‘occult’ refers to the secret and the supernatural, and, just as ‘Decadent’ was both a pejorative term and a badge of honour in the nineteenth century, accusations of affiliation with the dark arts are being re-appropriated and celebrated by marginalized groups. The historical association of the occult with non-normativity and transgression means it has particular significance as a form of protest or protection in today’s era of ‘small-d’ decadence. There has been a recent extreme political swerve to the right, climate change denial threatens to end the world as we know it, and social media platforms are subject to deep corruption and involvement in a neo-Cold War, but bubbling under this surface is a queer rebellion associated with witchcraft and occult magick. For example, we might think of the symbolic efforts to counteract patriarchal control by the #MagicResistance collective on Twitter, who use spells to channel their energy towards curtailing the power of Donald Trump, or the celebration of horror and transgression exemplified by the ‘Deep Trash in the Underworld’ club night and exhibition accompanying the *Performing the Occult: Magick, Rituals and the Monstrous in Live Art* symposium at Queen Mary, University of London.¹ The club night, held at the Bethnal Green Working Men’s Club in London on 21 October 2017 featured magickal and monstrous queer performance, music, and artwork.² Decadence has always been a countercultural, subversive movement, and it is no surprise, therefore, that connections are emerging between Decadence scholarship and the growing interest in occult and esoteric practices.

In recent years there has been a flourishing of scholarly interest in the occult, with publications bridging the gap between the esoteric library and the ivory tower of academia. Recent additions to Oxford University Press’s Very Short Introduction series, for example, include *Witchcraft* (2010) by Malcolm Gaskill, *Paganism* (2011) and *Magic* (2012) by Owen Davies, and *Ritual* (2015) by Barry Stephenson. In the past two years numerous monographs and edited

collections have been published, and these new works indicate a turn away from a consideration of the occult purely as a subject of theological study towards a more interdisciplinary literary, artistic, and cultural approach known as ‘occulture’, a term coined by Christopher Partridge in his two-volume *The Re-Enchantment of the West* (2004-2005) and characterized by a topical focus on the intersection between mystical and the cultural practices. Partridge explains his notion of ‘occulture’ in popular culture thus:

Expanding the narrow, technical definition of the term ‘occult’ to include a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology and a range of beliefs emanating out of a general interest in the paranormal, occulture is the new spiritual atmosphere in the West[.]³

Alongside Partridge’s 2016 *Occulture and Everyday Enchantment*, recent academic publications that tap into the zeitgeist (ghostly double meaning intended) of the ‘new spiritual atmosphere’ through reflection on nineteenth and early twentieth-century manifestations of the occult include the *Oxford Illustrated History of Witchcraft and Magic*, edited by Owen Davies (2017); Dionysios Psilopoulos’ *The Prophets and the Goddess: W. B. Yeats, Aleister Crowley, Ezra Pound, Robert Graves, and the Chthonic Esoteric Tradition* (2017); Per Faxneld’s *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (2017); Laurence Wuidar’s *Fuga satanae: musique et démonologie à l’aube des temps modernes* (2018); *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous*, edited by Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani (2018); and Victoria Clouston’s *André Breton in Exile: The Poetics of ‘Occultation’, 1941-1947* (2018). *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875-1947*, edited by Christine Ferguson and Andrew Radford (2018) is part of the *Occulture in Britain, 1875-1947* project based at the Universities of Glasgow and Stirling which organized three workshops in 2016-2018, focusing in particular on the occult in journalism, literary fiction, entertainment, and political movements.⁴

Alongside these publications, there have been a wealth of conferences and exhibitions including, but by no means limited to, the *Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult* conference at Goldsmiths, University of London (July 2018); a two-day international conference on *The Occult*

Revival organized by the Theosophical Society (September 2018); the *Berlin Occulture Esoteric Conference*, including workshops, rituals, and divination (November 2018); the *Spellbound* exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford; and an exhibition of photographs from The Museum of Witchcraft and Magic at The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities in Hackney, London. The market for Magickal and Pagan books is also thriving, with the increasing availability of aesthetic self-publishing options turning book publishing back into a magical art. As a reflection of this highly fecund academic and creative landscape, this winter solstice edition of *Volupté* includes academic articles from established and emerging scholars, reviews of exhibitions and books, new translations, and visual art.

The lively and broadening interest in the occult, however, has not yet focused substantially on its relationship with Decadence, despite the obvious connections between the two. Nineteenth-century Decadence coincided with a resurgence of esotericism, alternative religions, and a belief in magic as a rejection of secularism and science. Until now, this intersection has been most richly considered in relation to Catholicism, notably by Ellis Hanson in *Decadence and Catholicism* (1998), but there are also occult roots in Decadence, a tradition that celebrates the perverse, the otherworldly, the antinormative, and the blasphemous. Occult symbolism is as appealing as the robes and rituals of Rome.

Scholarship on Decadence and the occult has traditionally been dominated by two nineteenth-century icons, W. B. Yeats and Aleister Crowley, who are synonymous with the paradoxical elements of the *fin-de-siècle* occult revival. Yeats's romantic mysticism and Crowley's perversity seem like strange bedfellows but they are united through their fascination with Decadence. For both figures, the amalgamation of the spiritual and the profane created either a portal into the unknown or an aesthetic world-renunciation. As we know from following Durtal's journey across J.-K. Huysmans's tetralogy, from damnation in *La-bàs* (1891) to religious salvation in *L'Oblat* (1903), this fascination is a cornerstone of Decadent art and literature.

Difficulties arise due to the fact that just as ‘Decadence’ refuses to fit comfortably within definitional limits, it also exceeds the boundaries of the occult. However, there is ‘devil in the detail’, and we can identify engagement with the occult within intricate Decadent narratives. We move away from Crowley and Yeats, and focus instead on some of the other significant figures of Decadent occultism: Jean Lorrain, Vernon Lee, Remy de Gourmont, Arthur Machen, and Robert Smythe Hichens. We hope that this issue of *Volupté* will go some way towards reconciling the worlds of Decadence studies, where the occult is often relegated to a curious embellishment, and occult studies, where Decadence has not yet been brought to the fore. The articles originate from the *Decadence, Magic(k), and the Occult* conference held at Goldsmiths on 19-20 July 2018, which explored the rich and complex relationship between Decadence and the occult, supernatural, and magical, in literature, visual art, performance, and politics, from ancient Rome to the present day. The diverse range of creative and critical material in this issue reflects the conference as a meeting of minds between practising witches, magicians, Thelemites, aesthetes, Decadence scholars, and Modernists.

Occult practices – and witchcraft in particular – have long been codified as specifically female transgressions against patriarchal order, and this is reflected in Decadent texts, for instance in the poems of Baudelaire or the novels of Huysmans, where the female and the feminine are linked with the allure and repulsion of the mystical and magickal. However, as Mathew Rickard argues in “‘Vers le sabbat’: Occult Initiation and Non-Normative Masculinity in Jean Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas*”, the relationship between maleness and the occult also deserves consideration. With reference to the work of Lorrain, one of the leading figures of French Decadence, Rickard explores the often-overlooked occult connections with male homosexuality in *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901). He illustrates the ways in which traditional aspects of the Witches’ Sabbat – invocations of gods and goddesses, intoxication or poisoning, eroticism – are appropriated by Lorrain as symbols of his male characters’ non-normative sexualities. The subtle yet deliberately subversive association of non-normativity with the Sacred Feminine and

homoerotic deities in Lorrain's novel challenges patriarchal control, and occulture emerges as a site of resistance and rebirth akin to our modern notion of the 'coming out' narrative.

A similar observation about Decadent expression of non-normative desire – in this case lesbian desire – is made by Mackenzie Brewer Gregg in 'Vernon Lee's Occult Beauty'. Paying attention to the importance of the occult (hidden) and supernatural, as well as resonances of the past in her Gothic fiction and art criticism, Gregg interrogates Lee's fascination with marginalized figures in histories, archives, and folklore. Lee's conception of beauty hints at the decadence of unhealthy taste, imbuing her art criticism with traces of the so-called 'inversion' (a nineteenth-century term for same-sex desire) of queer sexuality. Lee's short stories emerge as triumphantly feminist when characters engage in revisions of anti-female narratives or submit to the otherworldly power of beauty. Gregg exposes Lee's 'guerrilla tactics' of disrupting 'official' historical narratives as a queer feminist rebellion with contemporary resonances.

It is interesting to compare Lee's delicate, vague handling of beauty and sexuality with the more explicit, perhaps because more heteronormative, sexuality and eroticism at the heart of Remy de Gourmont's fiction. In 'The Line of Lilith: Remy de Gourmont's Demons of Erotic Idealism', Robert Pruett explores the relationship between the occult and sexual desire in *Lilith* (1892) and 'Péhor' (1894), but also considers a pseudonymous treatise entitled *Les Incubes et les succubes* (1897), drawing on Gourmont's working partnership with J.-K. Huysmans arising from their shared interest in the occult. In typical Decadent fashion, Gourmont's depiction of heterosexual sexuality is related to sterility: sensual rather than sexual pleasure. In *Lilith*, Satan introduces to mankind not an awareness of intercourse, which Adam and Eve already possess, but reveals to them a world of sins and pleasures. Sexual awareness results from the Fall, but the demon is an emancipatory figure who is removed from the animalistic carnality of sex in the world and the baseness of natural desires.

In Alexandre Burin's article we encounter a more self-conscious engagement with the scandalous aspects of the occult in which fictional texts, rather than demonic or supernatural

forces, are held to blame for Decadent perversion. In ‘*The Poison of Literature: On the Social and Literary Construction of Baron Jacques d’Adelswärd-Fersen’s “Black Masses” Scandal*’, Burin investigates the link, manufactured by the French press, between accusations of immoral sexual practices and the occult in the 1903 case of Adelswärd-Fersen and Count Hamelin de Warren. Both men were accused of indecent and ritualistic behaviour with underage boys recruited to take part in orgiastic ‘ceremonies’ in Adelswärd-Fersen’s apartment. Burin points out the complex interconnections between the way Decadent literature was held responsible in the press for ‘poisoning’ and inciting its readers including Adelswärd-Fersen to perversion, the means by which the press disseminated rumour and fiction about him, and how he ultimately used this to his own advantage in the semi-autobiographical novel *Lord Lyllian, Messes noires* (1905).

Literature and the occult have a special relationship. Arcane knowledge is held within texts, and words take on new power when used as incantations that connect the speaker or reader with mystical and magical entities or realms. Sophie Mantrant pays attention to this in ‘Textual Secrecy: Arthur Machen and “The True Literature of Occultism”’. Turning to Machen’s late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century work, Mantrant explores the ways in which the Welsh writer uses occult strategies, such as obscure symbolism or esoteric references that deliberately alienate the uninitiated, in his fiction and criticism. Machen provokes the reader’s desire to know the unknown through playful veilings and unveilings of truth. In this way, Mantrant suggests, Machen re-enchants the ordinary world with a sense of wonder and mystery, but he also leads the reader through a series of textual mazes that result only in frustrating encirclings or dead-ends. In *Hieroglyphics: A Note upon Ecstasy in Literature* (1902), Machen describes the ‘ecstasy’ of ‘fine literature’ as a substitute for ‘wonder, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown, desire for the unknown.’²⁵ The secrecy in his fiction offers readers the chance to achieve this ecstasy while also affording the writer a sense of superiority and prestige.

Patricia Pulham’s article returns to the trope of the occult relating to unarticulated homosexual urges. In ‘Occultism and the *homme fatal* in Robert Smythe Hichens’s *Flames: A*

London Phantasy’, she compares the work of neglected Decadent and occult author Hichens with the most famous figure of the British *fin de siècle*, Oscar Wilde. Pulham draws out the rich intertextual allusions in Hichens’s 1897 novel *Flames*, observing not only the notable similarities with Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890-91), but also the incorporation of references to Pre-Raphaelite works to suggest homoerotic desire. Against a Decadent backdrop, the homoerotic is coded through the homosocial interaction between the novel’s protagonists, bachelor friends Julian and Valentine, especially relating to their contact at séances and religious worship of one another in which the preoccupation with the body of Christ equates to a homoerotic longing for male beauty. As in all the other articles in this issue, the occult is suggestive of hidden yet alluringly transgressive aspects of Decadence.

Volupté is committed to publishing original creative and critical works, and we are delighted to feature two creative pieces in this issue: a survey essay on ‘Literary Decadence and the French Occult Revival’ and two new translations of Joséphin Péladan by Brian Stableford, a pioneering scholar of Decadence and the occult, and ‘The Magickal Body – Text and Image’, an artwork by Geraldine Hudson whose ‘Topography of the Witch’ project unites the Decadent concerns with space, place, sexuality, and the Sacred Feminine from a contemporary occult perspective. By focusing on her own body as a site of resistance in her personal magical practice, Hudson’s work reminds us of the Decadent fascination with the body and its functions, and of the importance of reclaiming both physical and spiritual spaces from under normative, bourgeois, or patriarchal control. Similar strategies are foregrounded in the textual analyses of Decadent works by all our contributors.

A strong sense of interconnection between Decadence and the occult emerges from this issue. Certainly there is a spiritual element at play; the fascination with magic and the supernatural is akin to the aesthetic curiosity towards Catholicism, but we might also say that the dark arts are part of the wider ‘occulture’ of Decadence. The occult is not merely another aspect of the ‘naughty’ Decadent rejection of mainstream ideologies, but, as the contributors to this

issue demonstrate, it emerges as a more significant tool through which to explore queerness and non-normativity, whether this relates to male homosexuality, lesbianism, ‘perverse’ or sinful sexual pleasures, or textual ecstasy.

As Pulham’s reading of *Flames* reminds us, the stifling Victorian socio-cultural climate accounts for the veiled allusions to queerness in British Decadence, and Burin highlights the way in which the French press framed the occult and homosexuality as scandalously Decadent. In the present day, of course, we can be more explicit in our modes of self-expression. As Stableford concludes in his survey essay, only from our current perspective is it truly possible to reflect on the correspondences between the decadent worldview and the appeal of the occult. Today’s moment of global unease is not unlike the ‘*fin du monde*’ atmosphere at the turn of the twentieth century, and mapping our own contemporary concerns on to historical Decadent works goes some way towards satisfying our desires to tease out occluded or implied meanings relating to ‘transgression’.

This issue of *Volupté* suggests there is great potential for future scholarship on Decadence, magic(k), and the occult, particularly in work by queer or marginalized figures. Both Decadence and the occult emerge as defiant strategies against normativity that celebrate darkness, transgression, and ‘otherness’, but also work towards new, more enlightened ways of being. Rather than pessimistically welcoming the ‘*fin du globe*’ as Wilde’s Dorian Gray does,⁶ Decadent works might be read as invitations to renewal and revision. The intersection between Decadence and the occult suggests a countercultural rebellion; new scholarship on this intersection sidesteps the ennui of Decadence and infuses the field with vitality and urgency that is especially resonant today.⁷

¹ *Performing the Occult: Magick, Rituals and the Monstrous in Live Art*, Queen Mary, University of London, 19 October 2017 <<http://www.blogs.sed.qmul.ac.uk/event/performing-the-occult/>>.

² ‘Deep Trash is back with a reincarnation of a to-die-for night of live art! Punk witches, cruising and cursing, afro-futurist Voodoo, leaky rituals, feminist sigil magick, queer zombies, camp vampires, anti-capitalist hell-raising, blood-spilling ... and many other supernatural experiences!’ Advertisement for ‘Deep Trash in the Underworld’,

Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, 21 October 2017 <<https://cuntemporary.org/deep-trash-in-the-underworld/>>.

³ Christopher Partridge, 'Alternative Spiritualities, Occulture and the Re-Enchantment of the West', *The Bible in Transmission*, Summer 2005, 2-5 (p. 3)

<https://www.biblesociety.org.uk/uploads/content/bible_in_transmission/files/2005_summer/Bit_Summer_2005_Partridge.pdf>

⁴ For a complete list of the *Occulture in Britain* workshops, visit <<https://www.stir.ac.uk/about/faculties-and-services/arts-humanities/literature-and-languages/literature-and-languages-research/english-studies/popular-occulture-in-britain/workshops/>>

⁵ Arthur Machen, *Hieroglyphics: A Note upon Ecstasy in Literature*, in *Arthur Machen: Decadent and Occult Works*, ed. by Dennis Denisoff (Cambridge: MHRA, 2018), pp. 283-92 (p. 283).

⁶ 'I wish it were *fin du globe*' sighs Dorian at a party, 'Life is a great disappointment.' Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), p. 198.

⁷ We wish to express our gratitude to Jane Desmarais and Robert Pruett, our co-organizers for *Decadence, Magic(ℓ), and the Occult*, the healing waters of the White Spring at Glastonbury, Luke Paisley of Sorry Design who provided illustrations for this issue, and all who joined us at the Goldsmiths conference for two days of illuminating discussion.