

*Decadence and the Senses* edited by Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé. Cambridge: Legenda, 2017. xii + 243 pp. ISBN: 978-1-781884-81-2. £75.00; \$99.00.

“The Poet makes himself a seer,” insisted the sixteen-year-old Arthur Rimbaud in 1871, “by a long, gigantic and rational derangement of all the senses.” The formal innovations and thematic fixations of decadence might be understood as a record of this derangement: perspectives shrouded in an impressionistic haze; sound sliding into scent amongst intersensorial elisions; taste on the tongue sharpened to the pleasurable pitch of pain. Jane Desmarais and Alice Condé’s collection delights in these dynamics, illuminating the significance of the language of sensuality and the senses in English and French literature of the fin de siècle.

A central focus of a number of chapters is how the language of the senses is used to express perverse or non-normative erotic desire. Kostas Boyiopoulos’s discussion examines how the material text is figured as a body in decadent texts. Drawing upon Susan Sontag’s “erotics of art” and Roland Barthes’s writings on aesthetic pleasure, Boyiopoulos skillfully unpacks the desiring interplay of fleshly and textual materiality in Arthur Machen’s *The Hill of Dreams* (1907) and Peter Greenaway’s film *The Pillow Book* (1996). There is much of interest here to scholars of sensory studies. Boyiopoulos’s analysis would lend itself to further development in dialogue with theoretical material engaging with skin, touch, and hapticity – the work of Didier Anzieu or Michel Serres, for example. The erotics of sensory experience is also the focus of Sarah Parker’s fascinating exploration of the “flavours” of female same-sex desire in the poetry of Michael Field. Her focus is on the poems included in *Long Ago* (1889) and *Wild Honey from Various Thyme* (1908). Parker skillfully situates her discussion in the context of fin-de-siècle sexuality, particularly the connections it draws between synaesthesia and pathologized homosexuality. She builds upon substantial work on the queerness of the Victorian Sapphic tradition, eloquently demonstrating how Field’s texts use Sappho to develop a language attuned to sensory experience. In tracing the prevalence of the term “bitter-sweet” in Field’s texts, Parker might do more to untangle the ways in which this term functions as both a marker of sensory plenitude and an emblem of poignancy and loss. In this respect, her work could also speak to recent scholarship in queer theory engaged with negative affect.

Liz Renes’s work on the sculptural female body in John Singer Sargent is also concerned with visual representation and desire. Renes focusses on the distinctive “whiteness” of Sargent’s *Madame X* (1883-84) and *Mrs. Henry White* (1883). She suggests that these paintings invoke a masculine aesthetic