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Foreword

Golden alchemies: gold in British art and literature

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- 1 In his recent anthology, Gérard-Georges Lemaire observes that gold is omnipresent in the history of art from the early Bronze Age. Among contemporary artists too, the art critic notes the renewed fascination for gold in works by Yves Klein, Anish Kapoor, James Lee Byars, Jean-Pierre Raynaud, or Orlan (Lemaire 2). This is further evidenced in several recent art exhibitions, such as “Gold” (Belvedere, Vienna, 2012), “Going for Gold” (Seattle Art Museum, 2013), “Beyond El Dorado: power and gold in Ancient Columbia” (British Museum, 2013-2014), “Gold” (Queen’s Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, Edinburgh, 2015), “Gustav Klimt und Adele Bloch-Bauer: the Woman in Gold” (Neue Galerie, New York, 2015), “Gold!” (Galerie Agnès Montplaisir, Paris, 2015), or “Woven Gold: tapestries of Louis XIV” (J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 2015-2016). Similarly, in literature, the reference to gold is extremely frequent, from Ovid, Apuleius, Shakespeare or John Donne to Rudyard Kipling, Oscar Wilde, William Butler Yeats, Doris Lessing or Jeanette Winterson.
- 2 The present volume examines the unique position of gold across literature and the arts in Britain from the end of the sixteenth century to the contemporary period. A mineral like no other, gold is commonly associated with a host of ideas, sensations, values, affects and effects. Its materiality inevitably conjures up a paradoxical symbolism which negotiates tensions between the tangible and the immaterial, the beautiful and the commercial, the sacred and the profane, the mythical and the political, the ephemeral and the untarnishable, virtue and lucre. Both a highly ductile material and an elusive, malleable sign, gold lends itself to multiple uses and interpretations.
- 3 The contributors to this issue of *Polysèmes* explore the treatment and values of gold in painting, myth, drama, poetry, fiction, and non-fiction prose, from Elizabethan drama to contemporary art. Through their analyses of the writings of Shakespeare, George Eliot, Walter Pater, William Morris, George Du Maurier, Bram Stoker, or Arthur Symons, they demonstrate that gold generates its own rhetoric, its own poetics, its own symbolic economies, its own erotics, and its own politics. In painting too, the use of gold leaf, the representation of gold myths and legends, and of real vs. fake gold, are

shown to have been variously employed to consolidate or challenge mystical, aesthetic, philosophical and ideological values. In eighteenth-century works by Joseph Wright of Derby, in Victorian paintings by Frederick Leighton or Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale, and in contemporary canvases by Patrick Scott, gold appears under various guises, as colour or as light, as a token of wealth, a sign of corruption, or an index of superior value.

- 4 The volume surveys the transformative power of gold and its role in conceptualizing systems of belief and processes of valuing/devaluing/revaluing at work in literature and the arts. The authors examine the symbolism of gold in building nationhood and consolidating the monarchy. They tackle changing ideas about the importance of gold in the eighteenth century, during the Industrial Revolution. They address nineteenth-century understandings of gold in relation with mercantilism, consumerism, colonial expansion, gender roles, and historical development. They explore Baudelairean transubstantiations of mud into gold and the subsequent fin-de-siècle reconfigurations of the modern urban experience. Finally, they analyse various forms of chrysophilia – i.e. love of gold – and how gold participates in contemporary articulations of spirituality and critiques of capitalism.
- 5 Above all the essays included in this issue suggest that gold functions as a major factor of intermediality, a facilitator of medial transposition and transgression, converting textual elements into visual, tactile, sensorial effects and absorbing the pictorial into the discursive or the metaphysical. Such “golden alchemy”, in Walter Pater’s phrase, is the subject of the studies that follow (Pater 104).

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Catherine Delyfer is Professor of English at the University of Toulouse, France. She focuses on British fin-de-siècle culture and literature. Her recent published essays deal with the representation of speculation and financial crises in late-Victorian literature. She is also the author of a monograph on Lucas Malet’s pictorial poetics, *Art and Womanhood in Fin-de-Siècle Writing: the Fiction of Lucas Malet, 1880-1931* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2011); the editor of a special October 2011 issue of *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* on British female Aestheticism; and the co-editor of *Aesthetic Lives* (High Wycombe: Rivendale Press, 2013) and *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism* (Routledge 2016).