

Preface

The variety of Nordic decadence extends from naturalistic portraits of decadent individuals to hybrid works that flirt with fantasy, dreams, and hallucinatory visions [...]. naturalism becomes grotesque and symbolic scenes imbued with philosophical pessimism and melancholy combine with Nietzschean and neo-Romantic impulses that find expression through oxymorons, paradoxes, and contradictions.¹

In perfect continuity with the previous issue of *Volupté* (8.2) and its focus on the fairy tale, this current issue steepens its readers in the magical and mythic realms of Estonian and Finnish decadence. We encounter dark forests and deep lakes, symbolic of the darker and deeper emotional states of isolation, ecstasy, disgust, and despair. Old worlds are ambivalently and affectively tied to accelerated states of transition and change and are succeeded by new, young Nordic nations that feel ‘the appeal of the metropolis and a strong urge to participate in European trends’.² We are invited to explore the (Euro)peripheries of the Baltic and Nordic countries and the interconnections between fin-de-siècle culture and nationalism and between different forms of nationalism and decadent literature and art. ‘[D]ecadent aesthetics in these contexts’, our guest editors argue, ‘were neither merely derivative nor belated imitations of metropolitan models, but active reconfigurations shaped by processes of nation-building, cultural translation, and uneven modernization’.

This current issue on Estonian and Finnish decadence is an output of the five-year research project launched in 2022, ‘Tsiviliseeritud rahvuse teke: Dekadents kui üleminek 1905-1940’ [The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as Transitionality, 1905-1940], supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PRG1667 and comprising an international team of researchers including our fabulous guest editors, Mirjam Hinrikus, Hasso Krull, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Riikka Rossi. Carried out at the Under and Tuglas Literary Institute in Tallinn and in its final year (2026) at Tallinn University, this project investigates the relationship of narrative and visual strategies through which old, decadent Europe and the young nation are constructed, and the extent to which the discourses of decadence and naturalism are entangled. It considers decadence in terms of renewal and rebirth, foregrounded by the rise of the Young Estonia movement which tasked literature with representing the transition from a rural to urban milieu.

Alongside DECADOCS, a pioneering Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Doctoral Network (MSCA-DN, 2025-2030) that explores decadence through sustainability, transnationalism, and sensoriality, ‘The Emergence of a Civilized Nation’ marks a significant shift in the standing of decadence studies. It signifies increasing recognition of the field by major funding bodies and the acknowledgement of decadence studies as having potential societal impact. By exploring the complex relationships between cultural decline, aesthetic innovation, and historical change, academics and creative practitioners continue to generate new insights and perspectives about the complex world in which we live. Of course, a major contribution of projects like ‘The Emergence of a Civilized Nation’ and DECADOCS is, as the British Academy states in its 2023-2027 Strategic Plan, to ‘put the humanities and social sciences at the heart of understanding the world and shap[e] a brighter future’. However trite that may sound, especially given the dark humanism of decadence studies, prioritising the arts and humanities for a ‘brighter future’ has at no time since the Second World War been more urgent than now.

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
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¹ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ‘Nordic Cultures: From Wilderness to Metropolitan Decadence’, *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 209-26 (p. 209).

² *Ibid.*, p. 209.