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Decadence and the Making of the Nation in the Estonian and Finnish Context: An Introduction by the Guest Editors¹

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The recent resurgence of scholarly interest in decadence has expanded the field beyond its traditional metropolitan focus on fin-de-siècle Paris, London, or Vienna.² Research on European regions long perceived as ‘peripheral’ from British or French perspectives has, of course, existed for decades. More recently, however, studies of Finnish, Estonian and, more broadly, Nordic decadence have gained increasing visibility within English-language academia, thereby expanding and reshaping the broader field of decadence studies.³

Such research has demonstrated that decadent aesthetics in these contexts were neither merely derivative nor belated imitations of metropolitan models, but active reconfigurations shaped by processes of nation-building, cultural translation, and uneven modernization.⁴ At the same time, the growing visibility of so-called ‘peripheral’ decadence has been closely connected to the rewriting of national literary histories, many of which long marginalized, subsumed, or altogether neglected decadent and naturalist currents within broader narratives of realism, symbolism, or national awakening.⁵

In Estonia, this re-evaluation has resulted in several recent special issues devoted specifically to decadence and/or decadent modernism.⁶ This special issue of *Volupté* contributes to that broader scholarly reassessment by foregrounding Estonian and Finnish artistic decadence and its complex entanglements with nationalism. While the volume focuses primarily on Estonian case studies, it situates them within a comparative Nordic framework that places Estonian developments in dialogue with parallel tendencies in Finnish literature and visual culture. Taken together, Estonian and Finnish decadence form a distinctive regional configuration of Nordic decadence. Rather than a coherent ‘school’, this formation is better understood as a constellation of intersecting discourses and aesthetic practices shaped by concerns with decay, degeneration,

fragmentation, and historical exhaustion, while simultaneously reworking fin-de-siècle models through rural landscapes, local mythologies, national traditions, Nietzschean reception, and the specific temporalities of ‘young’ cultures confronting accelerated modernization.⁷

It is precisely this hybridity and internal tension that make decadence in small cultures a particularly revealing arena for aesthetic experimentation and cultural negotiation, where transnational influences were selectively adapted to local cultural and political contexts. In Estonia, decadence emerged in the wake of the First Russian Revolution and in close connection with the Noor-Eesti [Young Estonia] movement (1905–1915).⁸ This was the first major cultural formation to introduce a distinctly modern and aesthetically ambivalent sensibility into Estonian national culture. Yet Estonian decadence cannot be adequately understood without reference to its sustained and reciprocal relationship with Finnish culture. Fostered by geographical proximity, Finno-Ugric (Baltic Finnic) linguistic affinities, intertwined cultural histories, and at times asymmetrical cultural dynamics, intellectual and artistic exchanges between Estonia and Finland played a crucial role in shaping local responses to modernity, particularly under the shared conditions of accelerated modernization and a pervasive sense of cultural belatedness.⁹

Rather than treating decadence merely as a stylistic label or a bounded historical period, this special issue approaches it as a discursive formation and an aesthetic regime of transition. In the Estonian and Finnish contexts, decadence emerges within a temporality marked by rupture: the disintegration of imperial structures, the rise of national movements, and the reconfiguration of social and cultural hierarchies. Decadent discourses and aesthetic practices take shape in environments where modernization is experienced less as an accomplished reality than as an anticipated, internally contradictory process, generating tensions between nationalist ideals of cultural growth and decadent imaginaries of decline. Bringing together literary and artistic case studies, this issue of *Volupté* examines some key representatives of Estonian and Finnish decadence, including the Young-Estonian writers Gustav Suits (1883–1956), A. H. Tammsaare

(1878–1940)¹⁰, and Jaan Oks (1884–1918), alongside the Finnish writer Joel Lehtonen (1881–1934) and the artist Uno Eskola (1889–1958).

In addition to the scholarly articles, readers of this special issue will encounter the first English translation of 'Püha umbrohi' ['Sacred Weed'] (1918), a short story by the Estonian decadent-modernist writer and Francophile Johannes Semper (1892–1970). The translation is accompanied by an introductory essay by Merlin Kirikal, which places the text in the context of fin-de-siècle decadence and its interartistic connections. Among other influences, Kirikal highlights connections with the music of the renowned Nordic composers Edvard Grieg and Jean Sibelius, as well as the impact of the Anglo-Irish tradition, including Oscar Wilde, whose works and aesthetic ideas recur throughout Estonian and Finnish decadent literature.

Estonian-Finnish Cultural Transfers

As mentioned previously, Estonian decadence emerged in close dialogue with Finnish culture and the Finnish national movement. Throughout the nineteenth century, and particularly during the first half of the twentieth century, Finland simultaneously served as both a model and a mediator of Estonian cultural modernization. While Estonia remained more firmly embedded within the imperial structures of the Russian Empire and under the dominance of Baltic German elites, Finland's comparatively autonomous status as a Grand Duchy enabled the earlier development of national institutions, literary culture, and a self-conscious nationalist movement. For many Estonian intellectuals Finland – and particularly its cultural centre, the university city of Helsinki – thus appeared as a model of cultural modernization and national development, embodying possibilities that Estonia itself was only beginning to pursue.

Identification with Finnish and, more broadly, Nordic culture assumed particular importance in the early twentieth century. Before the establishment of independent nation-states – Finland in December 1917 and Estonia in February 1918 – and throughout the interwar period, Estonian decadent-modernists increasingly distanced themselves from the cultural authority of

Baltic German and Russian traditions, both associated with political dependence and cultural constraint. In search of new cultural affiliations, the members of Noor-Eesti and the later inheritors of its aesthetic programme looked consciously toward Finland and the Nordic countries, while simultaneously engaging with intellectual and artistic developments across Eastern, Central, and Western Europe. The institutionalization of these Nordic connections after 1919, particularly through the University of Tartu, further strengthened Estonia's integration into the Nordic cultural sphere.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the University of Helsinki served as an important intellectual centre for Estonian writers, artists, and other Baltic-Finnic intellectuals, especially in fields associated with Finno-Ugric kinship and Herderian ideas of nationhood.¹¹ The exile of many Estonian writers, artists and intellectuals following the 1905 Revolution, often to Finland, further strengthened these connections, while members of the Noor-Eesti movement encountered broader European intellectual currents through their years there. Although not all Estonian authors associated with decadent aesthetics – including Tammsaare and Oks, both discussed in this special issue – resided in Finland, they nevertheless belonged to the same transnational intellectual and artistic networks shaped by shared aesthetic ideals.

The dense cross-border networks linking figures of the Noor-Eesti movement, such as Suits and Friedebert Tuglas, with Finnish writers including Eino Leino, L. Onerva, and Aino Kallas were particularly important. Through her marriage to the folklorist Oskar Kallas and her active involvement in the Noor-Eesti circle, the Finnish-born Kallas became one of the most influential mediators between Estonian and Finnish literary cultures, which reflects the important role of women writers and thinkers in the Nordic decadence. In sum, the circulation of decadent and modernist ideas across the Gulf of Finland was facilitated through personal networks, as well as through translations, literary criticism, editorial collaboration, and literary periodicals. Yet naturalism, Symbolism, and decadence did not simply travel unchanged from European centres to the Nordic and Baltic peripheries; rather, they were reshaped in response to local historical

circumstances and cultural aspirations. In this process, decadence became intertwined with the ambitions and anxieties of ‘young’ nations.

Unlike Baudelairean decadence – which often gravitated toward reactionary politics, anti-egalitarianism, and, in some cases, Catholic-inflected conservatism – Nordic decadence developed under markedly different political and historical conditions.¹² Although French decadent literature and its leading figures, especially Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Paul Bourget, exerted a strong influence on Estonian and Finnish writers through translations, criticism, and cultural mediation, decadent aesthetics in the Nordic region became intertwined less with monarchist or clerical reaction than with national emancipation movements, anti-authoritarianism, Tolstoyan pacifism, and forms of cultural primitivism.¹³ In the small and politically vulnerable cultures of Northern Europe with their complex linguistic situation, the decline of empires was therefore not necessarily experienced as cultural catastrophe.

Transitionality, Nationalism, and Nietzscheanism

In the Estonian and Finnish aesthetics of decadence, modernization and the reconfiguration of national identity were often represented through the lens of transitionality. Because nationalism was equated with vitality, progress, and cultural regeneration, decadent pessimism could seem alien or even threatening, unsettling dominant narratives of collective advancement. Yet it was precisely this tension that rendered decadence a particularly fertile way of negotiating the contradictions of modernity. Different forms of expression and identity thus emerged as fluid, ambivalent configurations that were simultaneously national and transnational, rooted and displaced, immature and over-ripe. As noted above, the historical conditions that shaped Estonian and Finnish culture differed markedly from those of the cultural centres of East and West European decadence.

This paradoxical coexistence of emergence and exhaustion was reinforced by the organic conception of culture, nationhood, and language that permeated fin-de-siècle thought. Influenced

by thinkers such as Charles Darwin, Hippolyte Taine, Paul Bourget, Friedrich Nietzsche, and later Oswald Spengler, many early twentieth-century Estonian and Finnish intellectuals conceived of nations, cultures, and languages as living organisms subject to emergence, differentiation, maturation, and decay.¹⁴ Emphasizing cyclical processes of growth, decline, and recurrence, these perspectives were largely rooted in deterministic notions of heredity, environment, and cultural evolution, further strengthened by the influence of naturalism.¹⁵ Yet the discourse of decadence simultaneously opened a space for individual agency, self-fashioning, and conscious cultural renewal. Consequently, competing understandings of freedom and its limits became inextricably intertwined.

This perspective converged with contemporary theories of historical transition. Drawing, among others, on Taine's conception of intermediate periods, several Estonian and Finnish decadents understood their own historical moment as one in which immaturity and over-ripeness coexisted, while inherited and emergent cultural forms overlapped.¹⁶ Their reflections were shaped by a sense of spatial and temporal dislocation: on the one hand, they perceived themselves as arriving too late, burdened by feelings of belatedness and cultural marginality; on the other, they often felt prematurely thrust into a rapidly modernizing (metropolitan) world for which neither individuals nor cultures seemed fully prepared.

Such a transitional identity is articulated in numerous examples of Estonian and Finnish literary decadence. A particularly revealing case is provided by the intellectual affinity and correspondence between Kallas and Suits. At the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, when Estonian artistic decadence began to circulate more widely, both reflected on their position between cultures, languages, and historical temporalities, identifying themselves in many respects as intermediary figures. This sense of in-betweenness became central to the self-understanding of a generation of cultural reformers in Finland and Estonia, and its persistence well into the 1920s and 1930s is clearly visible in the cultural criticism of Tammsaare, the most canonical figure of Estonian literature.

The tensions of historical and cultural transition are perhaps most vividly embodied in the figure of the cultural ‘upstart’, or *parvenu*, familiar from nineteenth-century literature.¹⁷ We use the term *upstart* to translate the Estonian *tõusik* and the Finnish *nousukas* because it conveys the idea of social and cultural advancement, while its semantic range differs from that of the better-known concept of the *parvenu*.¹⁸ Typically emerging from a rural background, he (as the upstart-*parvenu* is usually male) seeks to enter the world of urban intellectuals, students, and artists, while simultaneously identifying with the sensibilities of the metropolitan decadent. Positioned between peasant origins and cosmopolitan aspirations, the upstart becomes a particularly revealing figure through which Estonian and Finnish literature explores the contradictions of modernization, cultural mobility, and peripheral self-fashioning. The upstart’s recurring presence reflects the broader predicament of ‘young’ cultures negotiating their relationship with the diverse and often ambivalent meanings associated with the category of the ‘old’, ranging from cultural maturity and/or refinement to exhaustion and decline.

In the Estonian and Finnish context the adjective ‘old’ was not associated solely with the prestigious yet crisis-ridden metropolitan centres of European civilization that attracted many Nordic writers and artists. Through the figure of the upstart, the associations of the ‘old’ with the rural milieu become especially apparent. Agrarian society was often perceived as ‘old’ not only because its social, cultural, and linguistic forms were understood to have attained historical completion. Evidently, these inherited forms appeared incapable of expressing the experiences, rhythms, and sensibilities of a rapidly urbanizing and modernizing world. The upstart typically occupies an intermediate position between rural context, on the one hand, and the province and/or the metropolis, on the other. Dependent on an agrarian tradition increasingly regarded as outmoded, he nevertheless strives to find a place within an urban (provincial) culture that was itself still in formation, often perceived as lacking stable forms, stylistic coherence, and cultural maturity. Thus, within this framework, the categories of the ‘old’ and the ‘young’ acquired profoundly ambivalent meanings. ‘Old’ could signify maturity, refinement, and cultural achievement, but also

exhaustion and an inability to keep pace with the accelerating transformations of modern life, whether in culture, technology, or social organization. In the context of agrarian society, it could likewise denote rigidity and the diminishing expressive capacities associated with inherited social, cultural, and linguistic forms.

Thus, these perceptions of liminality and in-betweenness, often crystallized in the figure of the upstart, extended far beyond the social sphere to shape debates about culture, language, and style. The upstart figure became associated with imitation, hybridity, and contested forms of authenticity, reflecting broader anxieties surrounding cultural borrowing and self-fashioning. Such concerns were shared by prominent Estonian and Finnish cultural reformers, including Johannes Aavik, Friedebert Tuglas, Tammsaare, Eino Leino, L. Onerva, and Aino Kallas.¹⁹ In both Estonia and Finland, contemporary discussions frequently referred to the phenomenon of an ‘upstart culture’ (*tõusikukultuur*; *nousukaskulttuuri*), highlighting widespread concerns about cultural aspiration, imitation, and the formation of new national identities. Significantly, Johannes Aavik, one of the principal architects of Estonia’s early twentieth-century language reform movement, even referred to certain expressions as ‘upstart words’. As Aavik argues:

Prantsuse stiili ülevus tuleb osalt just sõnadest, keele Ladina elemendist. Ladina-Greeka sõnad, juba oma kuju poolest nii plastilised ja kokkukõlalised, on aastasadade jooksul otsatu täpipealsed ja kindlad tähendused saanud ... Samade mõistete nimetused teistes mitte-Romani keeltes on sagedasti ainult tõlked, jäljendused, sõnatõusikud, mis kunagi originaali ülevust ei saavuta.

[The grandeur of French style derives in part precisely from its Latin element. Latin and Greek words, already by virtue of their form so plastic and harmonious, have over the centuries acquired remarkably precise and stable meanings ... The corresponding terms in other, non-Romance languages are often merely translations, imitations, or *upstart words*, which can never attain the grandeur of the original.]²⁰

As we see, Aavik’s approach transforms and adapts French and British decadents’ ideas about translation and cultural transfer, including Walter Pater’s highly self-conscious and ‘elaborate style that aspired towards the condition of Latin’.²¹

Our claim is that this heightened awareness of transitionality and the accompanying preoccupation with authenticity were further intensified in Nordic ‘peripheral’ cultures by the reception of Nietzsche’s philosophy, which offered a powerful conceptual language for articulating crisis, transformation, self-overcoming, and the instability of both individual and collective identities. Indeed, the strong presence of Nietzscheanism may be regarded as one of the distinguishing features of Nordic, Baltic, and Russian decadence. In the Nordic contexts, Nietzschean ideas – the critique of herd morality, perspectivism, eternal recurrence, Dionysian vitality and the pursuit of authenticity embodied in the figure of the *Übermensch*, including transgression and ecstatic self-loss – became deeply entangled with debates concerning nationalism, accelerated and asyncretic modernization, the figure of the New Woman, and projects of cultural renewal, often producing highly ambivalent and contradictory constellations.

Nietzschean influences emerged earlier and more prominently in Finland than in Estonia, becoming a major intellectual and literary force by the turn of the twentieth century whereas, in Estonia, decadent and Nietzschean motifs gained broader prominence mainly around the First World War. This early reception is especially visible in L. Onerva’s novel *Mirdja* (1908), characterized as the most important example of Nietzschean decadence in Finland and bringing up the complex and contradictory issue of gender *vis-à-vis* both decadence and nationalism.²² Nietzschean echoes and tones can be found in the works of Leino, Lehtonen, Aarni Kouta, and Volter Kilpi, whose writings combine national concerns with explorations of individuality, vitality, and transgressive selfhood. Particularly influential in this regard was Leino’s play *Sota valosta* [The War for Light] (1900), which stages a conflict between creative life-forces and spiritual stagnation through a distinctly Nietzschean vocabulary of struggle, renewal, and self-overcoming.²³ The work anticipates several themes later developed in Lehtonen’s narrative poem *Perm* (1904), where the regeneration of the community likewise depends upon exceptional individuality and heroic will. More broadly, Finnish fin-de-siècle literature frequently intertwines nationalist discourse with what Pirjo Lyytikäinen has termed ‘Dionysian decadence’ – a mode characterized by excess, instability,

and the dissolution of established structures, often relocated from metropolitan environments to the rural Finnish landscape.²⁴

The Finnish case demonstrates that decadence can enhance life, affect and creative energy, rather than simply signifying decline. This corresponds to Nietzsche's idea of 'Steigerung des Lebens' [enhancement of life] and his revaluation of values.²⁵ However, such intensification also carried within it the possibility of fragmentation, as the emphasis on individual will and transgression threatened the cohesion of the social and national body. Comparable tensions can be observed in numerous Estonian literary and art works informed by Nietzschean and decadent aesthetics. Their broader significance, however, has only just begun to attract sustained scholarly attention. In this respect, the present special issue offers an important contribution to the study of how Nietzschean discourses of decadence intersected with diverse forms of nationalism and cultural self-fashioning in Estonia and Finland.

Overview of the Contributions

The first two articles in this special issue introduce international readers to the work of Tammsaare, Estonia's most canonical writer and a central figure of Estonian literary modernity. His œuvre can be productively situated within the broader traditions of European decadence, modernism, and Nietzschean thought. Both contributions focus on works written outside the period most explicitly associated with Tammsaare's engagement with Nietzschean decadence, namely the years surrounding the First World War, when decadent aesthetics reached their peak in Estonia. Yet they demonstrate that many of the tensions characteristic of this intellectual and aesthetic horizon – between vitality and decline, individual autonomy and collective belonging, reality and interpretation – continued to shape Tammsaare's later prose.

The first article explores Tammsaare's novel *Kõrboja peremees* [*The Master of Kõrboja*] (1922) through the lens of spiritual naturalism. While rooted in rural Estonian reality, the novel transcends conventional realism by combining psychological introspection, mythic symbolism, and

philosophical reflection. Mirjam Hinrikus and Riikka Rossi argue that through its treatment of desire, ecstasy, suffering, and the limits of knowledge, the novel engages with the European and Nordic legacy of fin-de-siècle decadence, Nietzschean Dionysian affective atmosphere, and Nietzschean perspectivism. The article shows how Tammsaare transforms the traditional village novel into a meditation on existential uncertainty and the fragility of human understanding, thereby linking local cultural experience to broader European intellectual currents.

The second article turns to Tammsaare's novel *Ma armastasin sakslast* [*I Loved a German*] (1935, translated by Christopher Moseley in 2018), a work that revisits similar concerns through the figure of the upstart – the socially mobile (male) student and intellectual whose position between social, cultural, and national worlds exemplifies the forms of in-betweenness discussed above. Moving beyond postcolonial readings and interpretations of the novel primarily as an asymmetrical love story, Hinrikus and Viola Parente-Čapková interpret the novel as a sophisticated example of Nordic literary decadent modernism, Nietzschean perspectivism, and the upstart-*parvenu* novel. Central to the analysis is the figure of the cultural upstart – as already mentioned above a recurring type in Estonian and Finnish decadence and a symbol of 'young' cultures – whose attempts at self-realization are inseparable from experiences of social displacement, cultural in-betweenness, and existential uncertainty. Through irony, ambiguity, and competing perspectives, Tammsaare portrays identity and modern society as unstable and constantly contested, revealing how the formation of small modern cultures was deeply entangled with questions of authenticity and imitation, anxieties about cultural purity and mixed origins, and the paradoxical reliance on borrowing as a means of cultural renewal.

The theme of the upstart is developed further in Timo Huusko's contribution on the Finnish artist Uuno Eskola. Unlike the classical Western European *parvenu*, whose ambitions were typically tied to wealth and social advancement, the Estonian and Finnish upstart often sought self-transformation through education, art, and participation in the making of national culture. In this respect, Eskola represents a striking Finnish counterpart to the Estonian upstart figures.

Emerging from a modest rural background, Eskola sought artistic and cultural refinement while remaining haunted by feelings of inadequacy and social exclusion. Like similar protagonists in Estonian literature, Eskola and the painter Mikko Carlstedt, with whom Huusko places Eskola's case in dialogue, embody the contradictions of a generation situated between rural origins and cosmopolitan aspirations, collective nationalist ideals and individual self-fashioning.

Questions of national identity and cultural modernization become even more explicit in Hasso Krull's study of Suits, the leading figure of the Noor-Eesti movement. Traditionally celebrated as a poet of cultural renewal and national emancipation, Suits emerges here as a writer profoundly shaped by decadent sensibilities. Krull demonstrates how fragmentation, melancholy, heightened desire, emotional instability, and a persistent awareness of decline coexist with revolutionary aspirations and nationalist commitments throughout Suits's oeuvre. According to Krull, Suits embraced Nietzsche's critique of antiquarian historicism, his vision of creative destruction, his emphasis on becoming and the future-oriented renewal of culture. His poetry transforms the predicament of the 'young' nation into a drama of longing, frustration, and historical self-consciousness. Engaging in a sustained dialogue with European fin-de-siècle currents as well as with Leino's poetry, Suits's work reveals how decadence, Nietzscheanism, and nationalism could function not as opposites but as mutually reinforcing modes of cultural expression.

A similar constellation of decadence, nationalism, and Nietzschean thought occupies a central place in Antti Ahmala's contribution on Lehtonen's early narrative poem *Perm* (1904), albeit in a more overtly mythic form. Against the backdrop of Russian imperial domination and the mythical memory of the ancient Fenno-Ugric realm of Perma, Ahmala demonstrates how Lehtonen combines Nietzschean concepts of will, authenticity, and self-transcendence with concerns about collective weakness and national decline. Here, the figure of the upstart makes way for that of the exceptional individual, who is envisaged as the redeemer of a weakened nation.

If Ahmala's article explores the regenerative possibilities of Nietzschean decadence, Leo Luks's study of Oks exposes its most radical and destructive potential. Oks occupies a unique position in Estonian literature as perhaps its most uncompromising decadent writer. Through close readings of a selection of Oks's prose poems, Luks demonstrates how Nietzschean themes – including perspectivism, the critique of morality, the death of God, and the primacy of affects – are transformed into a poetics of fragmentation, transgression, nihilism, and existential collapse. Unlike the socially mobile protagonists of Tammsaare and Eskola, the nationalist visionaries of Suits, or the heroic figures of Lehtonen, Oks offers no viable path toward regeneration. Instead, he pushes the decadent fascination with crisis and disintegration to its logical extreme. His work reveals the darker underside of the same Nietzschean and modernizing impulses that animate the other contributions in this volume, demonstrating that decadence could serve not only as a language of cultural regeneration but also as a relentless exploration of meaninglessness and dissolution.

Taken together, these studies reveal decadence as a privileged language for negotiating the contradictions of cultural emergence, historical belatedness, and modern experience in Estonia and Finland. Rather than signifying decline alone, decadence appears here as a dynamic field in which questions of national identity, artistic innovation, authenticity, and self-transformation were continuously reimagined. The volume thereby offers a new perspective on the entanglement of Nietzscheanism, nationalism, and cultural modernization in the Eastern part of the Nordics.

¹ This article was supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PRG1667, 'Tsiviliseeritud rahvuse teke: Dekadents kui üleminek 1905-1940' [The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as Transitionality, 1905–1940], www.decadence.ee.

² See David Weir, *Decadence: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ For example, Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi: Minä ja toinen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (SKS, 1997); Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ed., *Changing Scenes: Encounters between European and Finnish Fin de Siècle* (SKS, 2003); Mirjam Hinrikus, *Dekadentlik modernisuskogemus A. H. Tammsaare ja nooreestlaste loomingus* (Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2011); Viola Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound: Mimetic Strategies in L. Onerva's Mirdja* (SKS, 2014); Mirjam Hinrikus, Lola Annabel Kass and Liis Pählapuu, eds, *Kurja lillede lapsed. Eesti dekadentlik kunst. Children of the Flowers of Evil. Estonian Decadent Art* (Eesti Kunstimuuseum, Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2017); and Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, eds, *Nordic Literature of Decadence. Among the Victorians and Modernists*, (Routledge, 2020).

⁴ Scott Ashley argues that the cultural history of the nineteenth century is focused on great cities, but the decadents were always somewhere else, either imaginatively or physically. See 'Primitivism, Celticism, and Morbidity in the Atlantic fin de siècle', in *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin de Siècle: French and European Perspectives*, ed. by Patrick McGuinness (University of Exeter Press, 2000), pp. 175–93.

⁵ Decadence was incorporated into Finnish literary history at the end of the twentieth century. See Lea Rojola, ed., *Suomen kirjallisuushistoria 2: Järjenskoosta vaistojen kapinaan* (SKS, 1999). In Estonian literary historiography, by contrast, Neo-Romanticism continues to function as the dominant umbrella term. Decadence receives passing attention in only one monograph, Tiit Hennoste's *Eesti kirjanduslik avangard 20. sajandi algul. Hüpped modernismi poole I*. (Tartu Ülikooli kirjastus, 2016).

⁶ The complex relationship between decadence and modernism has become an increasingly important subject of scholarly debate over the past several decades. See, for example Kate Hext and Alex Murray, eds, *Decadence in the Age of Modernism* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), and Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková and Mirjam Hinrikus, 'After-word: The spectres of decadence in later Nordic literature', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 257–72. Thanks to the support of the Estonian Research Council grant PRG 1667, three special issues on Estonian artistic decadence have also been published: *Keel ja kirjandus*, 1-2 (2024),

<https://www.keeljakirjandus.ee/ee/archives/issues/2024-1-2>; *Kunstiteaduslike uurimusi*, 1-2.34, (2025),

<https://ktu.kty.ee/arhiiv/2025-1-2>; and *Methis*, 36 (2025), <https://www.methis.ee/arhiiv/methis-nr-36-sugis-2025>.

⁷ See Pirjo Lyytikäinen Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková and Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadence in Nordic literature: An overview', *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 3–37.

⁸ The Noor-Eesti was not merely a literary or artistic circle, but a much broader cultural phenomenon whose significance has also been emphasized by historians. For more discussion, see Toivo Raun, 'The Estonian Engagement with Modernity: The Role of Young Estonia in the Diversification of Political and Social Thought', *Tuna: Past, Special issue on the History of Estonia* (2009), pp. 114–26.

⁹ The relationship between Finland and Estonia has often been described through the gendered metaphor of a 'big brother' and a 'little brother', reflecting both cultural affinity and asymmetrical patterns of influence, particularly during the formative decades of Estonian nation-building. See, for example, Seppo Zetterberg, 'Kultuurikontaktide raam: poliitiline Soome sild', in *Kultuurisild üle soome lahe. Eesti-Soome akadeemilised ja kultuurisuhet 1918- 1944*, ed. by Sirje Olesk (Eesti kirjandusmuuseum, 2005).

¹⁰ For an explanation of the pen name A. H. Tammsaare, see endnote 3 in Hinrikus and Rossi's article in this issue.

¹¹ See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková and Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview', in *Nordic literature of decadence*, pp. 7-8.

¹² For more discussion of this, see Michel Butor, *Histoire extraordinaire: Essai sur un rêve de Baudelaire* (Gallimard, 1961); and Eugene W. Holland, *Baudelaire and Schizoanalysis: The Sociopoetics of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Andrea Schellino, *La pensée de la décadence de Baudelaire à Nietzsche* (Classiques Garnier, 2015), pp. 123–30.

¹³ Riikka Rossi, 'Primitivism and Spiritual Emotions: F. E. Sillanpää's Rural Decadence', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 141–57.

The influence of Baudelaire, and of French decadence more broadly, has been quite extensively studied in both Estonian literature and art. See, for example, Katre Talviste, *La poésie estonienne et Baudelaire* (L'Harmattan, 2011); Kaia Sisask, *Noor-Eesti ja prantsuse vaim* (Tallinna ülikooli kirjastus, 2018); and see Mirjam Hinrikus et al., *Kurja lilledelapsed*.

¹⁴ Whitney Davis, 'Decadence and the Organic Metaphor', *Representations*, 89 (2005), pp. 131–49.

¹⁵ Naturalism remains relatively understudied in Estonia, unlike in Finland, where a number of systematic studies have been published. See, for example, Riikka Rossi, *Le naturalisme finlandais: Une conception entropique du quotidien* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2007).

¹⁶ Taine's notion of 'transitional periods', characterized by the coexistence of traits belonging to both the past and the future, was introduced to Finnish readers through L. Onerva's 1915 translation of *La Philosophie de l'art* and was familiar to both Finnish and Estonian decadents. See Hippolyte A. Taine, *Lectures on Art*, trans. by John Durand (San Diego: University of California, 1875), p. 284. About Taine's influences see also Mirjam Hinrikus 'Theoretically European and/or Upstart?: Decadence in an Estonian key', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 175–91.

¹⁷ Sarah Juliette Sasson, *Longing to Belong: The Parvenu in Nineteenth-Century French and German Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

¹⁸ Unlike the Finnish term *nousukas* (upstart), which derives straightforwardly from *nousu* (rise, ascent, or advancement), the Estonian term *tõusik* carries additional semantic associations. While *tõus* likewise denotes upward movement, advancement, or social ascent, the stem *tõu-* also evokes *tõug* (race, or breed), a term historically used in discussions of heredity and collective identity.

¹⁹ L. Onerva's name was Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, but she published all her works under the pen name 'L. Onerva'. The L. is an abbreviation of the author's surname Lehtinen, and, contrary to appearances, does not stand for a first name. In Finnish, it evokes the form 'Lehtisen Onerva', or 'Lehtinen's Onerva', that is, it uses the possessive case of the surname and the first name – here, the middle name – as an informal way to refer to a person.

²⁰ Johannes Aavik, 'Prantsuse stiili iseäraldustest', *Noor-Eesti*, 5–6 (1911), p. 621. See also Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Linguistic innovation and literary decadence as the beginning of the avant-garde: the Estonian case', *Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in Central Europe II*, ed. by Petra James and Cristian Camara Outes (Brill, forthcoming).

²¹ See Matthew Creasy and Stefano Evangelista, 'The View from Strasbourg: Translational Readings of Decadence by the Guest Editors', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 3.2 (2020), ii–x, p. v. DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v3i2.1445.g1558

²² See the critical edition of the English translation of the novel *Mirdja*: L. Onerva, *Mirdja: A Decadent New Woman*, translated by Eva Buchwald with an introduction and notes by Viola Parente-Čapková (MHRA, 2025). For a review of this volume, see Tiina Ann Kirss's contribution in this special issue.

²³ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Kansa ja dekadenssi: Eino Leinon *Sota valosta*', in *Dekadenssi vuosisadanvaihteen taiteessa ja kirjallisuudessa*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen (Finnish Literature Society, 1998), pp. 32–57.

²⁴ See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Passions against the Grain: Decadent Emotions in Finnish Wilderness', *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 87–101.

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. by Walter Kaufmann, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage, 1968), see for example p. 195.