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The Ambivalent and Multifaceted Figure of the Upstart in
A. H. Tammsaare's *Ma armastasin sakslast*:
A Search for the Right Interpretation of Life and Literature¹

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A. H. Tammsaare's (1878–1940)² novel *Ma armastasin sakslast* [*I Loved a German*] was originally published in 1935, at a time when the author was already an established and widely celebrated figure in Estonian literature.³ Traditionally, the novel has been interpreted as a love story between two protagonists belonging to nations with unequal symbolic status: an Estonian and a German. This interpretive approach is encouraged by the title itself and has typically been expanded to encompass the broader social context, addressing the intersections of class and culture, external and internal inhibitions, student life, and the emulation of Baltic German traditions. However, the novel's complex structure and formal strategies, which amplify and deepen its intricate thematic concerns, have often been overlooked. Consequently, *Ma armastasin sakslast* has not yet been systematically situated within the tradition of literary decadence and the modernist currents from which it emerged.

Like many of Tammsaare's works, *Ma armastasin sakslast* can be read as a sustained reflection on the search for truth, or rather, the 'correct' interpretation of reality. The novel brings together and reworks, both implicitly and explicitly, many of the themes, ideas, motifs, and central concerns of Tammsaare's earlier fiction, developing them through intertextual allusions, generic experimentation, and innovative narrative strategies. In this respect, it aligns closely with his other prose works, exemplifying his 'hybrid aesthetic' – a characteristic feature of artistic decadence.⁴ This includes, for example, his engagement with spiritualism and naturalism (see Hinrikus and Rossi in this volume), as well as his use of modernist poetics – particularly multi-voiced narration and perspectival complexity, both of which are typical of early modernism.⁵

Today, scholars increasingly recognize the novel as one of Tammsaare's most sophisticated and significant works. Its dramaturgical potential has also ensured its enduring presence in Estonian theatre, with new adaptations continuing to be staged. Despite this prominence, however, the novel has not become central to the Tammsaare canon as defined within the national literary tradition. In educational contexts, high school students are more commonly assigned *Kõrboja peremees* [The Master of Kõrboja] (1922), selected parts of the five-volume cycle *Tõde ja õigus* [Truth and Justice] (1926–1933),⁶ or *Põrgupõhja uus vanapagan* [The Misadventures of the New Satan] (1939).⁷

The critical reception of *Ma armastasin sakslast* can be broadly divided into two strands. As noted above, the majority of scholarship has approached the novel primarily from a thematic perspective – most notably regarding love across national and ethnic differences⁸ – while offering only limited consideration of its structure and form. A considerably smaller body of research has attempted to relate these thematic aspects to the novel's formal dimensions.⁹ On the thematic level, the text has frequently been interpreted simultaneously within broader societal dynamics, as indicated above. In this context, scholars frequently highlight connections with paradigmatic examples of the European literary canon including early modernist works, from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Mikhail Lermontov, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Anton Chekhov, to Knut Hamsun, Eduard von Keyserling, and Thomas Mann.¹⁰ In what follows, we aim to demonstrate how the thematic dimension of the novel is inseparably linked to, and integrated into, a process of reflecting upon and commenting on its structure and mode of expression, often in a highly (self-)ironic manner. Our focus is the figure of the upstart, which we situate within the broader context of Nordic literary decadence and modernism.

***Ma armastasin sakslast* as an Estonian perspectivist *parvenu* novel**

The novel is composed of multiple voices and can rightly be described as profoundly polyphonic¹¹; it may even be termed a *roman conversant*. There are numerous dialogues, which is characteristic of

much of Tammsaare's work, and some passages take the form of extended monologues spanning several pages. These monologues can be interpreted as internal dialogues in which competing perspectives interact within the protagonist's inner world. Throughout most of the novel, the principal narrator is the protagonist Oskar, an Estonian 'peasant student', an 'upstart' of a particular kind (*tõusik* in Estonian). However, the first chapter (acting as a preface and titled 'Lugejale' [To the Reader]) is signed by the initials 'A. H. T.', corresponding to Tammsaare's own.¹² The final chapter consists solely of a letter written by the novel's female protagonist, the Baltic German Erika. Oskar's narrative is therefore framed by two other voices, pointing to various perspectives that shed light on one another.

Furthermore, the primary narrator, Oskar, who generally employs a first-person narrative, frequently adopts the first-person plural, with the use of 'we' further contributing to the narrative's plurality of voices. This naturally raises the question of on whose behalf he speaks. At times, he speaks as a *Korporant*, a member of a traditional German or Austrian student fraternity, and at other times the 'we' refers more broadly to Estonians, specifically the educated, Estonian-speaking population.¹³ Thus, even within the first-person plural, there are variations and polyphony. In addition, other voices continuously intervene within Oskar's narration, primarily through the direct dialogues that he recalls and quotes. Characters such as Erika and her grandfather, both of Baltic German noble descent and central to the present analysis, contribute to the text's polyphonic structure. However, the spectrum of characters' voices is much broader, including Oskar's landlady and her husband, the maid Loona, and Oskar's colleagues.

This polyphonic multiplicity and layering, drawing on the ancient strategy of the 'novel within a novel', is simultaneously reinforced and destabilized, questioned, and even ironized or parodied. The identity of the frame narrator ('A. H. T.') is blurred with that of Tammsaare himself, raising questions about narrative authority and authorial presence. Yet, the readerly expectation that the supposed frame narrator will return to conclude the story is subverted:

A. H. T. remains only the author of the fictional preface, and the final words of the novel belong not to A. H. T., but to a fictional character, Oskar's beloved Erika. Such a framing device resonates with Tammsaare's well-documented views on authorial freedom, as seen, for example, in his essay about August Strindberg's novel *Svarta fanor* [*Black Banners*] (written 1904, published 1907), a satire on the literary coteries of the time. At the end of this essay, Tammsaare quotes a passage from the Strindberg novel under discussion.

Kui luuletajal on sul õigus mõtetega mängida, seisukohtadega katseid teha, vaateid proovida, aga ilma et sa ennast millegagi seoksid, sest vabadus on luuletaja eluõhk. Sellepärast mitte ühegi kooli või püüdesihi juurde peatama jääda. Aine, mida sa käsitad, annab sulle tema vormi. Vabad kunstid ei kannata ühtegi seadust, vaid on ise oma seaduseandjad.¹⁴

[As a poet, you have the right to play with thoughts, to experiment with viewpoints, to test perspectives, but without binding yourself to anything because freedom is the lifeblood of a poet. It means not to stop at any school of thought (creed, belief, doctrine) nor destination. The subject you are handling gives you its form. Liberal arts do not tolerate any law but are lawgivers for themselves.]¹⁵

The dominant tone and mode of *Ma armastasin sakslast* is one of ambiguity, uncertainty, and in-betweenness, features typical of decadent literature that are supported both formally and thematically within the novel. The 'spirit' of the novel aligns with what Robert B. Pynsent has termed 'the ambivalence of decadence': a fascination with intermediate states and an acute awareness of existential, social, and cultural transition.¹⁶

A further key influence on the novel is perspectivism – particularly Friedrich Nietzsche's rejection of the correspondence theory of truth and his claim that all truth and cognition are perspectival and the world is open to infinite interpretations.¹⁷ The idea of questioning the notion of a single objective reality, which has shaped the thinking of countless writers and artists since Nietzsche's time, was of paramount importance for Tammsaare as well as for many of his contemporaries.¹⁸ The resulting shift from unified truth to subjective viewpoint, and from fixed meaning to multiplicity of interpretations, led to the disruption of master narratives and the emergence of non-linear, fragmentary literary forms. These developments are central not only to decadence but also to many currents of early and high modernism – exemplified, for instance, in

Cubist literature with its simultaneous perspectives and deconstructed representations.¹⁹ In this article, we build on Mirjam Hinrikus' reading of Tammsaare's work as one of the late manifestations of decadence in Estonian literature.²⁰ We ask how Tammsaare's treatment of the themes of social mobility and the national/ethnic difference, as embodied in his rendering of the upstart figure, intersects with decadent and fin de siècle thought and aesthetics, particularly in its preoccupation with the search for truth (evident in many of Tammsaare's works and emblemized in *Truth and Justice*), i.e., the 'correct' interpretation of life and (literary) text.

By the time *Ma armastasin sakslast* was published in 1935, the Republic of Estonia (1918–1940) had existed for seventeen years. The novel's action is set within the social and cultural context of the early 1930s and reflects both national and transnational cultural tensions. As the title indicates, one of the parties of the love story is a German, which, in this case, means a Baltic German. This designation refers to the German-speaking population of Estonia and the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea, who often identified themselves as 'Balts', sometimes 'German Balts' (*Balten*, *Baltendeutsche*, or *Deutschbalten*). They settled in the Baltic region during the Middle Ages (early thirteenth century) as Christian missionaries, traders and colonizers. Over the course of nearly seven centuries, they constituted the local elite and played a dominant role in the economic, social, political and cultural development of the area. German hegemony was left intact both under Swedish and Russian rule. The former lasted from the latter half of the sixteenth century and ended in 1710, during the closing phase of the Great Northern War. Russian hegemony was fully established in 1721 and lasted till 1918, the birth of the independent Estonian Republic. The German-speaking aristocracy remained the governing class, and the German language continued to serve as the language of trade, higher education, and culture. Most of the Estonian-speaking population, by contrast, was excluded from education and urban civic life. Until the early nineteenth century, the Estonian-speaking population consisted of land-bound serfs, whose circumstances improved only gradually under corvée labour. Although the situation changed dramatically with the declaration of Estonian independence in 1918 and both the Germans and

the Russians, who had dominated the government and political institutions for about two hundred years, were stripped of power, the transformation of social and cultural hierarchies proceeded more slowly. The 1919 Land Reform Act dispossessed the Baltic Germans of their landed estates, but old class divisions and colonial mentalities continued to shape everyday life and social attitudes.²¹

Ma armastasin sakslast is set against the backdrop of the early 1930s, a period marked by the aftermath of the Great Depression, which brought widespread economic hardship and rising unemployment. In a broader sense, however, the novel, as is often the case in Tammsaare's work, also alludes to the accelerating processes of modernization that began in Estonia in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.²² Within this context, *Ma armastasin sakslast* is not merely situated against the background of global modernization but also explores the stratified structure of Estonian society, foregrounding the historically rooted colonial relationship between the Baltic Germans and the Estonian-speaking population. As Kristina Jõekalda and Linda Kaljundi note, the Baltic Germans had only limited contact with the Estonian-speaking peasantry until the early twentieth century, excluding the often-brutal interactions within the framework of a master-servant relationship.²³ After the establishment of the Estonian Republic, the status of the Baltic Germans shifted from that of a ruling elite to that of a marginalized minority.

As is common with works permeated with decadent and modernist poetics, summarizing the plot of this novel presents a challenge, since the narrative frequently recedes from the foreground. However, one cannot speak about a total abandonment of plot, as with J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* or, in John Reed's words, the 'tapestries' of quintessential decadent works,²⁴ as a discernible story does evolve throughout the novel. Nevertheless, Tammsaare's work emphasizes the way in which, and the perspectives from which, the story is told. The reader follows the love story unfolding in Oskar's narrative, describing his affection for the Baltic German Erika. She works as a governess in an Estonian-speaking bourgeois household, where the landlord and landlady represent the typical upwardly mobile family. Their views are frequently articulated during protracted dinner-table conversations, transforming the table into a microcosm where social

ambitions and resentments are enacted. Dominating these conversations, the landlady articulates the worldview of the rising Estonian bourgeoisie, championing industriousness, social advancement, and national self-assertion, while simultaneously reproducing many of the values, traditions (such as culinary practices), and cultural hierarchies inherited from Baltic German society. Her remarks repeatedly turn the meal into an ideological arena, where questions of class, national identity, and cultural legitimacy are debated, and where the authority of the newly emerging Estonian middle class is asserted through moralizing commentary and confident judgements about others.²⁵

Oskar's love for Erika steadily intensifies, and she reciprocates his feelings. Both endure precarious financial circumstances, providing a bleak backdrop to their romance. Paradoxically, however, this shared poverty places them on an equal footing: the Estonian and the Baltic German find themselves in an identical economic position. Ultimately, Oskar resolves to ask Erika's grandfather, a dispossessed landowner who raised and educated her, for permission to marry her, hoping to transcend national and ethnic prejudice. Their extended encounter forms the novel's midpoint crisis. Oskar's courtship fails; although Erika is prepared to elope with him, she never reveals her intention, which Oskar discovers only when it is too late. She eventually marries a Baltic German man but dies at a childbirth. In the novel's conclusion, the reader is confronted with two major revelations. First, the maid Loona informs Oskar that the matters he believed he was keeping secret from her and the landlady were, in fact, not a secret at all. Second, the novel closes with a letter from Erika, which Oskar receives only after her death.

The upstart 'peasant student' figure: social and ethnic stratification in *Ma armastasin sakeslast*

Oskar, the novel's protagonist, serves as a prime example of the upstart or *parvenu* figure, a recurring literary type whose proliferation in fin-de-siècle European literature reflects a society in the throes of transition and turmoil. As Sarah J. Sasson notes, 'regardless of the specificity of

historical and social change, the parvenu as an enduring literary figure, and, indeed, a literary stereotype has remained relatively constant'.²⁶ Yet we argue that each instantiation of this figure must be understood within its specific historical and cultural context. The impossibility to define the upstart or *parvenu* figure in generalized terms begins with the terminology itself, which invariably reflects the social anxieties of the environment. Across various European languages, terms such as *upstart*, *parvenu*, *arriviste*, *nouveau riche*, *Emporkömmling*, *uppkomling*, or *выскочка* carry predominantly pejorative overtones. They typically refer to individuals who achieve upward mobility through wealth – whether by marriage, commerce, or other means – within the European frameworks of the recent centuries, particularly during the consolidation of capitalism.

Conversely, in societies, such as Estonia or Finland, undergoing processes of national revival in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the concept of the upstart acquired more complex and distinctly ambivalent connotations. In these contexts, social ascent – particularly through education – was often valorized as an integral component of a larger nationalist project. The vernacular-speaking populations, formerly marginalized both politically and culturally, were newly reimagined as the bearers of the national future. Consequently, local terms used to denote the upstart figure – such as *tõusik* in Estonian or *nousukas* in Finnish – did not necessarily carry the same severe negative implications as their Western European counterparts. Instead, they denoted the literal act of rising or ascending, without inherently ridiculing or condemning the pursuit.

Regarding Tammsaare's fiction, the highly canonized (post)modernist Estonian writer Mati Unt (1944-2005) proposed a more nuanced term at the beginning of the twenty-first century to describe the author's socially mobile yet internally conflicted characters: *matsvurle*.²⁷ The two elements of this compound noun – both highly derogatory – are *mats* (a heavily masculinized peasant figure; an uncultured, rude person; a boor) and *vurle* (an urban dandy or pretentious city dweller). Both entered broader circulation following the publication of the first volume of *Truth and Justice* in 1926. In 1927, Tammsaare addressed these concepts in an 'Avalik kiri kirjanik A. H.

'Tammsaarele' [An Open Letter to A. H. Tammsaare] (1927) to his readers, elucidating aspects of his work's philosophical background. Briefly stated, *mats* denotes agrarian society and its mentality, whereas *vurle* represents a superficial and pretentious urban mentality. Unt's compound term thus encapsulates the ambivalent and transitional nature of such characters: restless, dynamic figures caught between tradition and modernity.²⁸

The *matsvurle* is not merely climbing the social ladder but also embodies the broader societal flux and transformation characteristic of a rapidly modernizing nation. In Tammsaare's works, two distinct types of *matsvurle* can be identified. First, there are characters who represent the last generation of agrarian society, such as Villu from *Kõrboja peremees* and Andres, as well as the female characters Krõõt and Mari from Tammsaare's magnum opus, *Tõde ja õigus*.²⁹ Second, and much more prominently, Tammsaare focuses on the first generation of urban dwellers, such as Oskar – young people of rural or peasant backgrounds who migrate to cities or towns. In the case of men, they often arrive as students; for women, are more often portrayed as young women with a secondary-school education, members of the working class, or housewives. Within Tammsaare's oeuvre, Anna of *Kõrboja peremees* is something of an exception, as her background suggests a higher education.³⁰

In the case of 'rural' or 'peasant' students like Oskar, the notion of the upstart refers not merely to someone seeking economic advancement, but more profoundly to an individual striving for self-elevation through education. The objective is not solely material success but also cultural and intellectual refinement – the aspiration to join the intelligentsia. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Estonia and in Finland, rising through education was widely regarded as a patriotic duty, directly linked to the nation-building ethos of the era. Apart from 'peasant students', the upwardly mobile characters were also often depicted in literature as aspiring artists.³¹ These two roles frequently overlapped and often bore the autobiographical traces of the authors who created them. Among writers engaging even tangentially with the decadent mode, however, this figure becomes particularly complex. Decadent literature was often defined by its disdain for the

bourgeoisie, its ambivalent admiration for the aristocracy, and its contradictory portrayal of the lower classes and social outsiders. As such, the rural upstart emerges even more strongly as a conflicted figure – one who challenges class boundaries but does not necessarily fit comfortably within any new social position.

To complicate matters further, the fin-de-siècle atmosphere of weariness, cultural fatigue, nervousness and perceived civilizational decline profoundly influenced the self-perception of socially ascending literary protagonists in the works by Estonian writers.³² The idea of a culture having reached its final stage of development – exhausted and disillusioned – shaped how upward mobility was experienced and represented in literature. In her 1918 essay ‘A. H. Tammsaare’, the Finnish-Estonian writer Aino Kallas offers a particularly astute analysis of this dynamic. She writes: ‘Tammsaare noorsugu kuulub intellektirikkasse, kuid nõrganärvilisse põlve, kelle tõusiklus tundub kõige päält tahte ja iseloomu nõrkuses, kultuuriväsimuses, mida nad erandita põevad [...]’ [Tammsaare’s young generation belongs to an intellectually gifted yet nervous generation, whose upstartism manifests itself above all in a weakness of will and character, in the cultural exhaustion from which they all suffer without exception]. She continues, observing that these characters emerge ‘on üleüldiselt pärit esimesest põlvest, uue inimese õhkkond ümber. [...] ‘sellest hoolimata on neis midagi amfibilist, kahele poole kuuluvat’ [by and large from the first generation, surrounded by the atmosphere of the new human being. [...] they nevertheless have something amphibious about them, something belonging to two places at the same time].³³ Kallas is referring here to the protagonists – and several secondary characters – of Tammsaare’s so-called student stories: *Pikad sammud* [Long Steps] (1908), *Noored hinged* [Young Souls] (1909), *Üle piiri* [Across the Border] (1910), *Kärbes* [The Fly], and *Varjundid* [The Shadings] (both 1917), whose figures can be viewed as literary predecessors of Oskar in *Ma armastasin sakslast*.³⁴ Whereas the upstart figures in the major literatures of Europe often arrive in large, culturally established metropolises, Estonian peasant students like Oskar typically migrate to towns or university cities of far more modest scale – urban spaces still in the process of becoming. Characterizing this process, and drawing on

Hippolyte Taine, among others, the introduction to Kallas's essay collection *Noor-Eesti. Näöpildid ja sihtjooned* [Young Estonia: Portraits and Aspirations] (Finnish 1918, Estonian 1921),³⁵ presents concepts such as *tõusik-ühiskond* [upstart society] and *Eesti psüüke* [the Estonian psyche]. Kallas describes the urban milieu and the broader transformation of atmosphere in the works of the Young Estonia writers (including poets) such as Gustav Suits, Villem Ridala (Grünthal), Jaan Oks, Tammsaare, J. Randvere (the pen name of Johannes Aavik),³⁶ and Friedebert Tuglas as follows: 'See on [...] alles moodustumas, täis võõraid aineid, teadvusetu oma mina kohta [...] vastoluline, tihti üllatavasse kujudesse vormuv. Võiks seda pidada ta üleüldsuses neuroosihaigeks, nii rahutu on ta ilme.' [It is [...] still in the process of formation, full of foreign elements, unconscious of its own identity, turbulent, [...] contradictory, and often taking unexpected forms. One might describe it, in general, as neurotic, so restless is its character.]³⁷

Much like the fledgling urban space it inhabits, the first generation of urban intelligentsia in Tammsaare's novels appears in an embryonic state. These characters are, in many senses, too young³⁸: they belong to a still-developing urban culture that is searching for its identity, its norms, and its voice. Simultaneously, however, they remain deeply rooted in the peasant traditions from which they have only recently emerged – a culture centuries in the making, firmly established, and closely tied to the land.

In the words of Friedebert Tuglas, whose ideas also inspired Kallas and who translated the essay collection *Noor-Eesti* from Finnish into Estonian, these amphibious characters are, much like Oskar, simultaneously the first generation of urban students and the last generation of peasants.³⁹ They are concurrently rising and falling, their condition defined by motion and ambiguity rather than by arrival at a stable social or cultural position. Within the context of Estonian and Finnish artistic decadence, this older – and thus overripe and decaying – culture is frequently associated with both the metropolis and agrarian society. By contrast, urban space, particularly provincial towns, along with the culture and language of the first educated urban

generation (the emerging national cultural elite) appears young, unstable, immature, and subject to rapid transformation.⁴⁰

Complex interactions in a mirror of self-reflection

As a peasant student, Oskar epitomizes failed ambition, traversing the well-worn path of literary protagonists – initially men, later also women – who abandon the countryside for the town or city.⁴¹ For him, as for all *parvenus*, appearances are paramount. However, his precarious financial situation prevents him from engaging in the ostentation and social gaudiness that typically characterize *parvenu* novels.⁴² Nevertheless, specific details connected with appearance emerge prominently from the narrative flow, prompting lengthy meditations. The often-disproportionate length of these passages can be interpreted as a manifestation of the decadent strategy of foregrounding a detail or fragment at the expense of the whole.⁴³ This is evident in the protagonist's fixation on his long fingernail and the shape of his nose. He dwells on these details, contemplating the contours of his skull as well as 'ōilis' [noble] and 'laiavōitu' [plebeian] nose shapes.⁴⁴ Such fixations evoke the pseudoscientific doctrines of criminal anthropology, eugenics, and physiognomy popularized by Cesare Lombroso and others toward the end of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵

Oskar's student identity is similarly rooted in superficiality and based on appearance: he adopts the outer trappings of student life without any genuine commitment to academic pursuit. The reader learns little to nothing about his actual field of study; instead, he repeatedly mocks the very concept of diligence and joins many of his peers in openly deriding those who apply themselves. Yet, he simultaneously feels compelled to secure a degree, acutely aware of the sacrifices made by his parents and siblings to finance his move to the urban environment and the education expected to guarantee his success.⁴⁶ Disenchanted, Oskar rapidly grows cynical regarding education as a vehicle for self-advancement. Perceiving only corruption and the pursuit of profit, he – like many of his contemporaries – ceases to see any value in his studies:

Saavad need, kel on südant võtmiseks, aga õige õppimine nõrgendab võtmise-südant, seda arvasime mõistvat otse loomusunnilikult kõigest sellest, mis sündis meie ümber. Õige õppimine kasvatab südametunnistust, aga meie kasvasime ajal, kus kõik katsusid elada, nagu oleks see mõiste keeleline eksitus, mis tuleb võimalikult ruttu parandada. Õppimisega pidi meis ärkama hing ja vaim, aga kõik elasid, nagu oleks hing rumal muinasjutt lastele ja nagu ärkaks vaim ainult alkoholiuimas. Oli õpetajaid, kes ütlesid, et õppima peab sellepärast, et meis tekiks vastutustunne iseenda, omaste, sugulaste, tuttavate, kogu eesti rahva ja kodumaa ees, sest vastutustundest sõltuvat meie kõigi tulevik, aga meie ei uskunud seda või me unustasime selle, kui nägime, et just vastutustundetud lõikavad vilja, mille pärast meid kooli oli saadetud. Milleks pidime siis nii väga oma peaju pingutama? Kas selleks, et samuti pankrotti minna; nagu läksid kõik need, kes olid enne meid midagi õppinud? Lugesid isad ja emad ühes oma seapõrsastega selleks oma suutäisi kusagil laanekurus, sooserval või mäenukil, et me õpiksime pankrotti minema? Huvitas neid teadus või kunst? Huvitab neid tänapäevgi see? Nägid nad nendes meie paremat tulevikku ja võitlesid selle eest?

[Those who acquire things are acquisitive but proper learning lessens acquisitiveness. This was the unavoidable conclusion we had to draw from our experience. Real learning trains the conscience, but we were growing up at a time when everyone was behaving as though such concepts were a logical error in need of urgent correction. Learning was supposed to awaken our mind and spirit, but everyone was living as if the mind was a silly fairy tale for children, and the spirit was only awakened by alcohol. Some teachers said that we had to learn so as to gain a sense of responsibility for our families, or relatives, our acquaintances, the whole Estonian nation and the homeland, because our whole future depended on responsibility, but we didn't understand, or we forgot it when we saw that it was the irresponsible ones who were harvesting the fruit we'd been sent to school to obtain. Why worry our heads about it? So we could go bankrupt, like everyone else who had studied before us? Did our fathers and mothers study along with their piglets out in some remote forest, by a bog or on a hillock, so that we could learn to go bankrupt? Were they interested in science or art? Are they interested in it even now? Is that what they saw in our better future, and why they fought for it?]⁴⁷

The ideal of serving one's country by rising through education no longer appeals. Whereas many upstart peasant students at the turn of the twentieth century began with the best intentions but were drawn into the maelstrom of city life, drifting into drink or gambling, Oskar's intentions change almost immediately upon his arrival in the urban environment (indeed, the text does not specify whether the novel takes place in a city or in a provincial town). Having heard tales of student life as a perpetual holiday, he describes the university as 'karjamaa' [a pasture],⁴⁸ a space for continuous enjoyment – *Wein, Weib und Gesang* [wine, woman, and song].⁴⁹ Accordingly, the first step on arriving at the university is to become a *Korporant* – a member of a *Korporation*, a student social body and marker of status. Until quite recently, this had been the near-exclusive domain of German (male) students; the University of Tartu's organizations were traditionally German-

speaking and modelled on hierarchical German prototypes, such as fraternities.⁵⁰ From the late nineteenth century onward, however, the number of Estonian students grew, and after 1900, they founded their own corporations, such as student societies.⁵¹ Within these associations, they attempted to introduce customs and practices distinct from those of the Baltic German corporations, emphasizing a less rigid hierarchy and a more nationally oriented student culture. Yet Oskar highlights the urge among himself and his Estonian peers to imitate both the German corporations and the German lifestyle, which were widely associated with the region's former colonizers:

Me olime mõisad üle võtnud ja nüüd ruttasime ka mõisade eluviiside ülevõtmisega, ja seda mitte ainult õppiva noorsoo ringkonnis, vaid ka linnades, alevikkudes ja maal taludes. Me tahtsime end tunda tõsiste maa-peremeestena, maaisandatena ja ei osanud seda tundmust millegagi paremini ega selgemalt väljendada, kui et katsusime ise ja nägime meeleldi, et katsuksid ka meie pojad ja tütreid elada, nagu elasid endised maaisandad ja nende noorsugu. Me tegime, mis suutsime, et ühes mõisadega saaksime kaasa ka nende traditsioonid, kombed, eluviisid, ilmavaate, kogu eetilise ja esteetilise suhtumise ellu.

[We had taken over the manors, and now we were hurrying to take over their way of life too, not only among the young students, but in the towns, villages and farmhouses. We wanted to feel like real landowners, lords of our demesne, and we didn't know how to express that desire any better or clearer than by trying it ourselves and being pleased that our progeny were also trying to live like their former masters and their progeny. We did what we could to carry on the manorial traditions, manners, ways of life, outlook, the whole ethical and aesthetic attitude.]⁵²

From a postcolonial perspective, this passage invites a reading through Homi K. Bhabha's notion of mimicry and the production of a mimicry culture.⁵³ In other words, it portrays the imitation of the mentalities and value judgements associated with the former colonizer's culture.⁵⁴ Here, as well as elsewhere in the novel, irony and parody, implicit in mimicry, frame these imitative gestures, a common feature of *parvenu* novels.⁵⁵ The moment of self-irony, so typical of decadent writing, where self-consciousness is often viewed as inherently ironic, along with the strategic undecidability that leaves readers weighing whether the irony is implicit or explicit, enriches the novel's polyphony.⁵⁶ Questions of mimicry, intertwined with issues of identity, culminate in the novel's pivotal chapter, in which Oskar seeks permission from Erika's grandfather, a dispossessed Baltic German nobleman, to marry her. The scene is the most theatrical in the entire novel,

particularly in terms of its ambience. When Oskar enters the house, he briefly encounters Erika and composes himself in front of a mirror. The large mirror in a mahogany frame, reaching from the floor to the ceiling,⁵⁷ appears as an amplified *topos* for self-reflection and its complexities, addressing issues of outward appearance, inner life and identity, which form the major themes of the novel. Indeed, the enormous mirror situated at the centre of the narrative also acts as a reminder of the perspectives each character embodies; within the novel, one character does not convey a single perspective, but rather perspectives that shift when reflected upon retrospectively.

The mirror's mahogany framing invokes the symbolic import of this type of wood: it suggests strength and resilience, but also luxury, status, sophistication, wealth and power, carrying a direct reference to the dark history of colonial exploitation and slavery. The furniture in the adjacent room is also made of mahogany. The room itself is described as large, but, in a highly symbolic representation of dispossessed Baltic German nobility, it is 'nüi-öelda kuhjatud punapuust mööbliga, nagu poleks siin inimestele üldse tahetud ruumi jätta elamiseks või olemiseks.' [stuffed with the mahogany furniture as if they didn't want to leave space for any people to live or exist in].⁵⁸ Beyond the atmosphere signaling the inevitable end of the old era, the reader also senses something of the ambience of a Gothic novel. Features such as old, crumbling manors, sinister mansions or ancestral homes serve as typical settings imbued with an air of decay, anxiety and Angst – 'minu senine raske meeleolu muutus otseteed hingeliseks masenduseks.' [my already grim mood immediately changed into one of despair].⁵⁹ Here, the narrator, Oskar, also voices various temporal layers of perspectives on his impressions: 'Ainus pilk sellele rikkusele ja toredusele – sest nõnda mõistsin ma seda siis ja mõistan väikese teisendiga ka praegu' [A single glance at this wealth and finery – for that is how I appreciated it then, and still do now, with slight adjustments].⁶⁰ This atmosphere grows even denser when Oskar reaches the room where he finds Erika's grandfather sitting in a 'kõrges tugitoolis' [tall armchair].⁶¹ Once again carrying high symbolic import, the old baron sits with his back to the window, and his bright white hair and white hands contrasting sharply against the twilight-immersed room.

The dialogue between Oskar and the grandfather is that of a master and a slave, revealing a profound asymmetry of symbolic capital possessed by the two characters. Delivering long monologues, the grandfather constantly interrupts Oskar, preventing him from completing his sentences and formulating his arguments. The linguistic dynamics of their verbal exchange further underscore this asymmetry. The grandfather's command of Estonian is limited, although he repeatedly claims – in obviously heavily accented, broken Estonian – to love the Estonian language and its people – ‘mina armastap see keel’ [for I luff this lankuach] and ‘mina armastap see eesti rahvas’ [I luff this Estonian nation].⁶² Although limited linguistic proficiency typically implies vulnerability and disadvantages the non-native speaker in standard power dynamics, it functions inversely in this colonial master-slave setting. The grandfather also notes that he currently lacks anyone with whom to speak Estonian. This suggests that he historically used the language solely with his servants, never having socialized with Estonian speakers as peers. He repeatedly mentions, with palpable bitter sarcasm, that ‘Meie peap olema keik nüüd see kodanik, Eesti vabariigi kodanik, nenda käip see õige nimi.’ [[w]e should be all now that citizen, Estonian Republic citizen, so goes the right name.]⁶³

The grandfather remains unnamed throughout in the novel, identified only as Erika's grandfather, ‘Herr Baron’. However, he refuses to be addressed as such by Oskar. He scolds the protagonist first for failing to use the appropriately folksy form of the title, and then, with apparent sarcasm, reminds him that the ‘Eesti riik ja valitsus seda kõvasti ära keelama’ ‘Estonian state and government strictly forbid it’.⁶⁴ When Oskar assures him that the grandfather would always remain ‘Herr Baron’ in his eyes, the older man replies: ‘Siis olep teie mässaja oma Eesti riigi vastu’ [Then you is rebel against own Estonian state].⁶⁵ Viewed through Bhabha's theoretical lens, the colonial subject is cast as a poor imitation of the original: ‘colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other’; mimicry produces ‘an authorized version of otherness’.⁶⁶ However, unlike in Bhabha's context of European colonization in distant territories, this dialogue presents a different paradigm: an interaction between a formerly dominant landowner and a descendant of his former

serfs. Although the socio-political reality has shifted, the German nobleman obstinately adheres to the antiquated social order, while the upwardly mobile Estonian seeks to placate him to secure consent to marry his granddaughter.

Concurrently, the grandfather lectures Oskar about the importance of birth and blood as the sole guarantees for legitimacy.⁶⁷ He emphasizes 'tõug' [breeding], asserting that it is 'püsivam kui ajad ja olud' [more permanent than times and circumstances].⁶⁸ He refers to Erika as a baroness, 'kel on kaasavaraks vähemalt tema vana tõug, kui mitte muud praegusel korral' [whose dowry, despite her poverty, is at least an ancient pedigree, if nothing else under present circumstances].⁶⁹ Furthermore, the grandfather insists that an 'vana ja puh[as] tõu[g] ning nim[i], mis ikka veel pole kaotanud oma võlu ja väärtust' [old, pure pedigree and name [...] has not yet lost its power and dignity].⁷⁰ While he acknowledges the necessity of compromises under this "new regime", he views financial security as the only acceptable justification for a transaction in which Erika would marry beneath her station. Consequently, Oskar must offer far more than a German suitor would. Although Oskar repeatedly offers his love, the grandfather relentlessly probes his financial standing. Ultimately, Oskar lies to him, claiming he expects a raise when, in reality, he has already lost his job.

A significant portion of the dialogue revolves around Oskar's *Korporant* status, which, as previously established, is highly complex and fraught with contradictions. The old baron argues that Estonian student corporations are merely poor imitations of their German counterparts. He claims that in German corporations, young men were adequately prepared for their professional and social duties: 'Minule ja minu kaaslastele oli korporatsioon ja tema värv pühadus ning on seda surmani, samuti oli mul mu abieluga: mina kavatsesin ta kogu eluks.' [For me and my contemporaries the corporation and its colour were a shrine, and will be until I die; it was the same with my marriage.]⁷¹ By contrast, he asserts that Estonian corporations fail even to continue this tradition, as their members indulge exclusively in drinking and singing. Oskar is unable to mount a defense, clearly recalling his earlier self-critical reflections regarding his and his fellow students'

lack of responsibility toward the whole Estonian nation and the homeland. Thus, the grandfather exposes the failed imitation – the grotesque and tragicomic attempt at mimicry that, in his view, the Estonian students perform *vis-à-vis* the Baltic German culture. The old baron's values are clear and unshakeable. He repeatedly notes his advanced age, stating he is 'vana, mul on juba mullalõhn juures' [old, already approaching the smell of the soil], while simultaneously charging that Oskar and the Estonian youth possess no sacred foundations for their worldview and their lives, no God to worship.⁷²

Ultimately, the baron accuses Oskar of lacking any kind of authenticity whatsoever, even as 'a translation of the concept of *birth* at the social level.'⁷³ As an upstart – a student who never completed his studies and a precarious employee terrified of dismissal – Oskar is uprooted and homeless, helplessly stuck between the rural and urban worlds, and between the uneducated and the educated classes. He is devoid of any claim to authenticity in the Nietzschean sense, i.e. 'saada iseendaks' [becoming who one is] and thus achieving the intact, complete self, devoid of fragmentation.⁷⁴ He tries to deflect the baron's accusations by arguing that also the German-speaking young men manifest traces of decadence ('samasugune arenemine, sama [...] laostumine', [the same development [...] the same ruination])⁷⁵ but that it would not prevent the baron from consenting to their marriage with Erika. The baron concedes the point, as his primary motivation is to spare his granddaughter a similarly ambiguous, homeless existence defined by in-betweenness. In Estonian circles, she would remain forever the 'other' or a foreign element. Despite being of higher birth than Oskar, in the current socio-political climate, she could even prove to be a hindrance to his career in the Estonian Republic. Oskar gives up and leaves. The scene concludes with the old baron stretching out his hand 'mida ma peagu pidin suudlema, nagu oleks see mu armastatu käsi' [as if I were supposed to kiss it – as if it were my sweetheart's hand].⁷⁶

After humbling himself before the baron, Oskar mentally labels him – rather impolitely – a 'vanamees' [old man], unsure of his own motivations for doing so.⁷⁷ He immediately doubts the baron's intentions, noting that even now, while he is writing these lines, he remains curious to

uncover them.⁷⁸ However, he encounters the old baron once more after discovering Erika's death notice in the newspaper. The heartbroken grandfather glorifies the past in his monologues, but this time, he appreciates Oskar's love for Erika and gives him the "fatal letter" she left behind.

Perspectives on truth and artistry

One of the novel's most prominent motifs is hunger. Intertextually, the primary allusion is to Knut Hamsun's *Sult* [*Hunger*] (1890), which was first translated into English by George Egerton in 1899.⁷⁹ As in Hamsun's work (and, indeed, also in Tuglas' *Felix Ormusson*⁸⁰), Oskar's hunger is both literal and symbolic; in Tammsaare it is also additionally inflected by parody and irony. At one point Oskar admits, comparing himself and his fellow students to domestic animals:

Kui keegi oleks meilt otseteed küsinud, mis on see, mis meid nälgima ajab, siis oleksime vastuse võlgu jäänud või parimal korral vastanud: kõik. Ja selles kõiges oleksime mõistnud mõnda säravat kinoportaali või teatriust, kust rahvas sisse voolab, mõnda jõhkrat või kõditavat romaani, mõnda kahemõttelist, rõvetsevat või roppu salmi kusagil luuletuskogus, trahteri kuulutust lehes erakabinettidest, karusnahkade vahelt helkivat helmestikku peene daami kaelas, kirgavalt punaseks värvitud huuli, vastutuleva naise naervat suud keset tänavat, jazzimuusikat ühes tantsudega ja mingisugust öölokaali, millest juleti ainult kaks, kolm sosistada. See oli see, mis meid ümbritses ja mis torkas igal sammul silma või kõrva, olles ometi keelatud. See oli see, mis meid pures päev-päevalt, samm-sammult. Nõnda kasvas meis nälg millegi järele, mis peagu nimeta, ja me ootasime pikisilmi aega, kus võiksime oma nälga kustutama hakata. Me ootasime seda aega samuti, nagu ootasid ehk meie isade-emade härjavärsid ja lehmamullikad, kui nad kevadel pooltühja sõime ees laudas ammusid ja karjamaale kibelesid, et iseoma suuga mätta otsast niipalju võtta, kui kõhtu mahub, ja seda sealt valida, mille järele neelud käisid.

[If anyone had asked us directly what was driving our hunger, we would have been at a loss for an answer, or at best would have answered: everything. And by 'everything' we would have meant the glittering entrance of some cinema, or the door of a theatre with people pouring in, some rude novel, some ambiguous or obscene ditty somewhere in a poetry collection, an advertisement for a pub in a newspaper, a string of pearls glittering under furs around the neck of a fine lady, lips painted bright red, the laughing mouth of a woman approaching on the street, jazz music and dancing and some kind of nightclub, known by whispers to only two or three people. These were what surrounded us and what assailed our eyes and ears with every step, even though they were banned. This gnawed away at us day after day. This was what nurtured our hunger for something almost nameless, and yet we longed for a time when we could start to slake our hunger. We were waiting for that time in the same way perhaps that our fathers' and mothers' steers and heifers did, when in spring they bellowed in front of a half-empty fodder rack and they itched to get to a pasture and fill their mouths with as much of the last tussocks as would fit in their stomachs.]⁸¹

This is not a hunger for knowledge, but rather for the ‘karjamaa’ [pasture] the university offers – an appetite for entertainments that no indulgence can satisfy, as it is rooted in centuries of destitution and deprivation. Contemporary theories of race and heredity, such as those proposed by Taine and Bénédict Augustin Morel, insisted that the normal pace of development could not be exceeded and that one could not climb the social ladder too rapidly. Hence, there were recurrent warnings against social upstarts becoming ‘gluttons of things of the spirit, matter, and experience’, attempting within a single lifetime to compress the ‘natural evolution’ of several generations.⁸² The literatures of nations undergoing national movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are replete with such figures, whose hunger often corresponds, on the symbolic level, to a desire for artistic self-realization.⁸³

Whereas in Tammsaare’s so-called student novellas (1908–1910) the male characters are explicitly students and only subtly creators, in *Varjundid* [Shadings] and *Kärbes* [The Fly] (both 1917) they appear primarily as artists, mainly writers.⁸⁴ Similarly, Oskar is above all a writer who is composing a book about his own life, because ‘Iga haritud inimene võib vähemalt ühe romaani kirjutada — romaani iseenesest’ [[e]very educated person can write at least one novel – a novel about himself].⁸⁵ Only secondarily is Oskar also a (former) student and a civil servant. As a writer, Oskar constantly oscillates between the primary narrative level of recording events and various metalevels, reflecting on his own writing process and examining his thoughts during the act of writing. Thus, as a creator, he is continuously divided into both subject and object. Once again, the strategies of irony, self-irony, and parody rise to the forefront during this oscillation between the fictional and metafictional levels. The frame narrator, A. H. T., and the protagonist-narrator, Oskar, distance themselves from the themes they discuss, ironizing and parodying the aesthetics of the nineteenth-century realist novel, including the (auto)biographical writing and the positivist approach.

Towards the end of the novel, Oskar realizes that his assumptions regarding his landlady and the servant Loona were entirely incorrect. He is left to ponder who was deceiving whom, unaware that he will only later discover Erika's true feelings in the letter she wrote before her death. The reader never learns his reaction to the letter (apart from the allusion in the preface, suggesting that Oskar took his life), and there is no guarantee that the letter is true, though there are no indications to the contrary. The letter fulfils the role of the 'irony of fate',⁸⁶ revealing the unforeseen consequences of human actions alongside forces that exceed human choice. As Claire Colebrook writes, this more 'literary concept of dramatic or tragic irony' often appears when the characters seem to be at the mercy of the plot or of destiny.⁸⁷ Simultaneously, Oskar, functioning as a typical unreliable narrator, attempts to cultivate the impression that his destiny remains under his control – or, in other words, that he is 'seesmiselt vaba' [free within] himself.⁸⁸ However, the mode of uncertainty is ubiquitous and endless. It operates both on the symbolic level and through the narrative structure, leveraging multiple perspectives and interpretations of events to suggest that it is impossible to control either oneself or one's surroundings; moreover, we cannot be certain of the events themselves. Ultimately, all the reader possesses is Erika's letter, as quoted by Oskar, and Oskar's book, as published by A. H. T.

In decadent works, irony typically operates on many levels.⁸⁹ For Estonian society, the nationalist element has been of paramount importance since the 'national awakening' in the nineteenth century. Consequently, it is typical that in the work of writers engaging with decadent and modernist modes, themes connected to national identity are discussed both seriously and through various authorial poses, such as irony and self-irony. These poses concern not only the 'I' of the subject, but also the 'we' with which the subject so complicatedly identifies. As previously mentioned, the 'we' often refers to the students/*Korporants* and to the Estonians;⁹⁰ however, as the novel proceeds, there is a marked decrease in the use of the first-person plural and a corresponding increase in the first-person singular.

The way that the singular and plural perspectives merge can be easily interpreted as referring to Oskar's urge to be a writer: he calls himself a 'boheeml[ane]' [bohemian], which prompts him to act 'kodutu' [homeless], that is, avoiding his own home in favour of anywhere else.⁹¹ After the disappointment of losing Erika's love (or so he imagines) and subsequently losing his job, he attempts to write feverishly, using expensive paper and imported ink. This sign, or pose, of upstart behaviour epitomizes the character's megalomania, which is ironized by the reality that Oskar is merely a dilettante who never succeeds as a writer. The frustration caused by his feeling on inauthenticity is amplified during a stay in his home village, where he grows disillusioned with everything sooner than he could have anticipated: 'maalt sai rutem villand, kui olin osanud kujutellagi, sest seal oli nagu kõik teisiti, kui mina uskunud.' [in the country I was in for more than I could have imagined, for everything was different to what I'd believed.]⁹²

It is ironic that, in the apparent cure for this frustration caused by the failing as a creator of his own life in the Nietzschean sense,⁹³ it is the intense activity of writing, which leads Oskar to believe in himself. As he notes in one of his metafictional comments, '[s]ellest usust jätkus mulle isegi praeguse raamatu kirjutamiseks.' [I even had enough faith in myself to write this book.]⁹⁴ However, he never sees the book published, which delegates him to a parody of a decadent dilettante.⁹⁵ Like Julien Sorel in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1830), in John Fletcher's words, a 'parvenu character in a parvenu genre', Oskar 'must die when his life-novel or novel-life comes to an end'.⁹⁶

In *Ma armastasin sakslast*, Tammsaare created a *parvenu* novel in the Estonian key, commenting on numerous aspects of Estonian society during the first decades of the twentieth century while simultaneously addressing a much larger international audience. Oskar's search for authenticity, 'truth', and the 'correct' interpretation of life and (literary) text is subverted by his failing strategies of imitation and mimicry, situated squarely in the context of the Estonian-Baltic-German dynamic. These features are typical of *parvenu* novels but are further complicated by the use of irony, self-irony, and parody, symptomatic of the decadent aesthetic. In connection with

Ma armastasin sakslast, it is also crucial to acknowledge the backdrop of Nazi Germany, which by the mid-1930s was already a dictatorship under Adolf Hitler. Consequently, we can conclude that the novel simultaneously affirms a belief in democracy while exposing imminent dangers – such as the erosion of a shared reality in which individuals retreat into their own subjective worlds. Thus, the novel’s action is inextricably connected to the political context of its time, marked by the rise of totalitarian regimes, conservative nationalism, and hierarchical racial ideologies. In this way, we can also emphasize how the novel speaks powerfully to the present moment and why it remains strikingly relevant today.

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. We are very grateful to Tiina Ann Kirss and to the members of the decadence project for their valuable comments.

² For an explanation of the pen name A. H. Tammsaare, see endnote 3 in the article by Hinrikus and Rossi in this issue. Throughout the present article, however, we refer to the author simply as Tammsaare.

³ In this article, we have used the original Estonian novel, A. H. Tammsaare’s *Ma armastasin sakslast* (Eesti Raamat, 1935, [1984]), and consulted the Finnish translation *Rakastin saksalaista* (Aviador, 2019), translated by Juhani Salokannel. The English translation of the novel used throughout this article is *I Loved a German*, translated by Christopher Moseley (Vagabond Voices, 2018). Unless otherwise indicated, all other English translations, including those from secondary sources, are our own.

⁴ See Mirjam Hinrikus and Jaan Undusk, ‘Dekadents kui ambivalentside esteetika. Segunemised ja sünteesid’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 67.1-2 (2024), pp. 3-26.

⁵ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, ‘Afterword: The Specters of Decadence in Later Nordic Literature’, in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), pp. 257-72 (p. 266).

⁶ Between 2014 and 2025, Volumes I-III of *Tõde ja õigus* appeared in English translation as *Truth and Justice*.

⁷ The English version of *Põrgupõhja uus vanapagan*, *The Misadventures of the New Satan*, was translated by Olga Shartze and Christopher Moseley and published by Norvik Press in 2009.

⁸ As often in Tammsaare’s works, the romantic plot is highlighted on the surface level of the narrative, namely as the plot of love fraught with difficulties. For further detail see Hinrikus and Rossi in this issue, esp. endnote 28.

⁹ See Mirjam Hinrikus and Jaan Undusk, eds, *Armastus ja sotsioloogia. A. H. Tammsaare romaan ‘Ma armastasin sakslast’* (UTKK, 2013).

¹⁰ Ibid. See also Epp Annus, ‘Kubjas ja korporant: Armastusest ja rahvuslikust moraalist’, *Looming*, 4 (2002), pp. 576-87.

¹¹ Jaan Undusk, ‘Armastus ja sotsioloogia. Sisesevaade Tammsaare omailma’, in *Armastus ja sotsioloogia*, pp. 242-342 (p. 243).

¹² See endnote 2.

¹³ At several points, Oskar’s *we* seems to refer indirectly to Tammsaare’s own generation of writers and artists, namely the Young Estonia movement, which sought to renew Estonian culture.

¹⁴ Strindberg’s novel has not been translated into Estonian. Tammsaare may have read it in another language, most likely German or Russian.

¹⁵ A. H. Tammsaare, ‘Strindbergi “Mustad lipud”’, in *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed. 15. köide. Publiitsistika I (1902-1914)* (Eesti Raamat, 1986, [1910]), pp. 241-45 (p. 245).

¹⁶ Robert B. Pynsent, ‘Conclusory Essay: Decadence, Decay and Innovation’, in *Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century*, ed. by Robert B. Pynsent (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989), pp. 111-248 (pp. 159-164). See also pp. 196-211 & pp. 151-52.

¹⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. by Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. by Carol Diethe (Cambridge University Press, 2007, [1887]), III, §12, esp. pp. 86-87; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882/1887), §374 ('Our new "infinity"').

¹⁸ For more discussion of Nietzsche's influence, see Maudemarie Clark, *Nietzsche on Truth and Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Stephen D. Hales and Rex Welshon, *Nietzsche's Perspectivism* (University of Illinois Press, 2000); and Robert Anderson Lanier, 'What Is Nietzschean about Nietzsche's Perspectivism? Preliminary Reflections', *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*, 67.5 (2024), pp. 1193-219.

¹⁹ For example, Marilyn Gaddis Rose, 'Gertrude Stein and Cubist Narrative', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 22.4 (1976-77), pp. 543-55.

²⁰ Mirjam Hinrikus, *Dekadentlik modernsuskogemus A. H. Tammsaare ja nooreestlaste loomingus*. Dissertationes Litterarum et Contemplationis Comparativae Universitatis Tartuens, Volume 10, Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2011; Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Modernsuskogemuse kriisist A. H. Tammsaare loomingus', in *Armastus ja sotsioloogia*, pp. 11-49; and Mirjam Hinrikus and Merlin Kirikal, 'Dekadents ja elu. Nietzsche'lik-bergsonlik liikumise ning voolamise esteetika Tammsaare ja Semperi varases proosas', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 67.1-2 (2024), pp. 108-43.

²¹ The relationship between Baltic Germans and Estonians has frequently been discussed as a central theme in the cultural history of Estonian literature. Jaan Undusk has argued that early Estonian literature developed for a long time within the broader framework of Baltic German written culture and intellectual traditions. He also emphasizes that the Baltic German cultural sphere functioned simultaneously as both a dominant cultural model and an important interlocutor in the formation of Estonian literary identity. See Jaan Undusk, 'The Lutheran, Enlightenment and Romanticist Language Ideologies in Early Estonian Literary Culture', in *The Languages of Smaller Populations: Risks and Possibilities*, ed. by Urmas Bereczki (Hungarian Institute, 2014), pp. 153-70; and Jaan Undusk, 'Brevier der deutschbaltischen Literatur', in *Deutsche Akademie für Sprache und Dichtung. Jahrbuch 2013/2014* (Wallstein Verlag, 2015), pp. 76-90. For a broader analysis of the Baltic German literary field and its interaction with Estonian culture, see Liina Lukas, *Baltisaksa kirjandusväli 1890–1918* (Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2006). See also Liina Lukas, 'The Shifting Position of German Literature in the Estonian Canon of World Literature', *Interlitteraria*, 17 (2012), and Piret Peiker, *Discourses of Modernity: The Case of Estonian Literature* (Helena History Press, 2024). Approaching Estonian literature from a postcolonial perspective, Peiker argues that Baltic Germans both mediated European modernity and resisted Estonian political emancipation. (pp. 57-73.)

²² The first part of Tammsaare's *Tõde ja õigus* begins as follows: 'See oli läinud aastasaja kolmanda veerandi lõpul.' [It was toward the end of the third quarter of the past century.] See A. H. Tammsaare, *Tõde ja õigus I*, *Kogutud teosed* 6, (Eesti Raamat, [1926] 1981), p. 5.

²³ See Kristina Jõekalda and Linda Kaljundi, 'Sissejuhatuseks. Mõis kui Eesti ajaloo võtmenähtus / Introduction: The Manor as a Key Phenomenon in Estonian History', in *Mõisa fenomen Balti kultuuriloo. Vaatenurki üle uurimisväljade / The Manor as a Phenomenon of Baltic Cultural History: Crossdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Kristina Jõekalda, Linda Kaljundi, and Ulrike Plath (Tallinna ülikooli kirjastus, 2025), pp. 8-56 (p. 10). See also endnote 27.

²⁴ John R. Reed, *Decadent Style* (Ohio University Press, 1985), p. 35.

²⁵ For more discussion, see Ulrike Plath, 'Näljast ja näljapsühholoogiast A. H. Tammsaare romaanis "Ma armastasin sakslast"', in *Armastus ja sotsioloogia*, pp. 50-71.

²⁶ Sarah Juliette Sasson, *Longing to Belong: The Parvenu in Nineteenth-Century French and German Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

²⁷ Mati Unt, 'Matsvurle', in *Sirp*, 42 (2000).

²⁸ For further discussion of the context of A. H. Tammsaare's 'Avalik kiri ...' and the concepts of *mats* and *vurle*, see the article by Hinrikus and Rossi in this issue, especially endnote 89.

²⁹ See also endnote 6.

³⁰ Yet Anna's perspective is never fully developed. (See also the article by Hinrikus and Rossi in this issue.) More broadly, this reflects the asymmetrical gender structure of Tammsaare's representation of modernity. Through masculinized *matsvurle* characters representing the urban environment, the decadent experience of modernity appears in its most diverse forms as a crisis. In Tammsaare's works, intellectual male characters display heightened reflexivity and intense self-analysis in their attempts to understand their lives and identities under rapidly changing social conditions, whereas female characters' relationships to modernity are often explored less fully, reflecting the hierarchical gender order of the period. See Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Modernsuskogemuse kriisist A. H. Tammsaare loomingus'; and Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Tammsaare's Constructions of Femininity in Light of Weininger's Concept of Sex Difference', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 46.2 (2015), pp. 171-97.

³¹ See also introduction and Timo Huusko's article in this issue of *Volupté*. For the discussion of the phenomenon in a broader context, see *Läpikulkuihmisiä. Muotoiluja kansallisuuskista ja sivistyksestä 1900-luvun alun Suomessa*, ed. by Kukku Melkas, Heidi Grönstrand, Kati Launis and Maarit Leskelä-Kärki (Helsinki: SKS, 2009).

³² *Ma armastasin sakslast* maintains close intertextual connections with Friedebert Tuglas' novel *Felix Ormusson* (1915), a work that has been extremely influential in Estonian culture both before the Second World War and in the decades that followed. The protagonist of Tuglas' novel is also both an upstart and an aspiring writer, and this novel, like Tammsaare's, is metafictional in multiple ways and addresses similar themes. In addition to various self-critical reflections related to the adaptation challenges faced by the first-generation urban intelligentsia (i.e., upstarts) within

the context of small cultures, the novel contains extensive discussions about what writing means, the difference between decadent and/or modernist novels and nineteenth-century realist novels, and the ambivalent relationship between life and art. Indeed, Tammsaare's novel can be read as a response, a kind of rewriting of *Felix Ormusson*. See Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Theoretically European and/or Upstart? Decadence in an Estonian Key', in Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, eds, *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 175-91; See also Mirjam Hinrikus and Jaan Undusk, eds, *Mäng ja melanboolia. Friedebert Tuglase romaan 'Felix Ormusson'*, in *Moodsa eesti kirjanduse seminar 3* (Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2022).

³³ Aino Kallas *Noor-Eesti. Näopildid ja sihtjooned*, trans. by Friedebert Tuglas, (Noor-Eesti kirjastus, [1918] 1921), p. 131 & p. 133.

³⁴ See also Mirjam Hinrikus & Merlin Kirikal, 'Decadence as Dynamism and Mutability: The Nietzschean-Bergsonian Imprint in the Early Works of A. H. Tammsaare and J. Semper'; See also Mirjam Hinrikus, Merlin Kirikal, 'Dekadents ja elu. Nietzsche'lik-bergsonlik liikumise ning voolamise esteetika Tammsaare ja Semperi varases proosas', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 67.1-2 (2024), pp. 108-43.

³⁵ See endnote 33; on the collection's relationship to Taine and decadence, see Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadent Modernism and the Imprint of Taine in Aino Kallas's *Young Estonia: Portraits and Trajectories*', in Aino Kallas: *Negotiations with Modernity*, ed. by Leena Kurvet-Käosaar and Lea Rojola (Finnish Literature Society, 2011), pp. 66-90.

³⁶ Kallas discusses Aavik's *Ruth* (1909), the only work of fiction among the writings of the radical language reformer Johannes Aavik to have secured a lasting place in Estonian literary history. See Mirjam Hinrikus, 'J. Randvere's "Ruth" (1909) as an Example of Literary Decadence and the Quintessence of Young Estonia's (1905-1915) Modern Ideology', *Interlitteraria*, 20.2 (2015), pp. 199-214; Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Linguistic Innovation and Literary Decadence as the Beginning of the Avant-Garde: The Estonian Case', in *Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in Central Europe II*, ed. by Petra James and Cristian Camara Outes (Brill, forthcoming). See also the Introduction to this issue.

³⁷ Kallas, *Noor-Eesti. Näopildid ja sihtjooned*, pp. 10-11 & p. 17.

³⁸ One of Tammsaare's so-called university novellas is *Noored hinged* [Young Souls] (1909).

³⁹ Friedebert Tuglas, 'A. H. Tammsaare', in *Kriitika III* (Noor-Eesti, 1935, [1916]), pp. 81-136; see also Kallas, *Noor-Eesti*.

⁴⁰ In the background, we can recognize the concept of culture as an organism passing through different stages of development – a model widely employed in various theoretical traditions, including those associated with decadence, by writers such as Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Bourget, and Oscar Wilde.

⁴¹ In Finnish literature, we can recall, for example, Juhani Aho's protagonist of the novel *Helsinkiin* [To Helsinki], (1889) and, most of all, L. Onerva's tragic and grotesque characters from the collection of short stories *Nousukkaita* [Upstarts/Parvenus], (1911), namely from the short stories 'Pentti Korjus' or 'Naamiaiset' [Masked Ball].

⁴² See Sasson, *Longing to Belong*, p. 6.

⁴³ See Paul Bourget, *Essais de psychologie contemporaine. Baudelaire – M. Renan – Flaubert – M. Taine – Stendhal* (Alphonse Lemerre, 1886, [1883]).

⁴⁴ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, pp 13-18; *I Loved a German*, pp. 14-19.

⁴⁵ Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente in rapporto all'antropologia, alla giurisprudenza ed alla psichiatria* (Bocca Fr., 1897, [1876]).

⁴⁶ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, pp 22-23; *I Loved a German*, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 26; in English p. 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See e.g., Undusk, 'Armastus ja sotsioloogia'.

⁵¹ The first Estonian-minded student corporation, the all-male Estonian Students' Society (*Eesti Üliõpilaste Selts*), was founded as early as 1870, and several of its members became key figures in the founding of the Estonian state in 1918.

⁵² Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, p. 27; *I Loved a German*, p. 28; see also endnote 23.

⁵³ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994; repr. 2007), p. 122.

⁵⁴ See Liina Lukas, 'Matsimoraalist ja vurleneuroosist. A. H. Tammsaare ja Eduard von Keyserlingi loomingus ehk kas Erika võiks pärineda baltisaksa kirjandusest?', in *Armastus ja sotsioloogia*, pp. 122-33, (p. 124); Lea Rojola, 'Sivistyksen ihanuus ja kurjuus – suomalaisen nousukkaan tarina' (2009). *Läpikulkuibmisia. Muotoiluja kansallisuudesta ja sivistyksestä 1900-luvun alun Suomessa*, ed. by Melkas et al., pp. 10-38.

⁵⁵ See Sasson, *Longing to Belong*, esp. pp. 17-20.

⁵⁶ For more discussion of irony in decadent writing, see Daniel R. Adler, 'Socrates the Degenerate: Irony as Trope of Decadence', *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 23.4 (2021), pp. 1-12.

⁵⁷ See Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*; p. 92-93; *I Loved a German*, pp. 102-03.

⁵⁸ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*; p. 93; *I loved a German* p. 102. Liina Lukas has compared *Ma armastasin sakslast* with the works of the Baltic German writer Eduard von Keyserling. See Liina Lukas, 'Matsimoraalist ja vurleneuroosist. A. H. Tammsaare ja Eduard von Keyserlingi loomingus ehk kas Erika võiks pärineda baltisaksa kirjandusest?', in *Armastus ja sotsioloogia*, pp. 122-33.

⁵⁹ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, p. 93; *I Loved a German*, p. 102.

- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Ibid., p. 93; in English p. 103.
- ⁶² Ibid., p. 94 & p. 98; in English p. 103 & p. 108.
- ⁶³ Ibid., p. 94; in English p. 103.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶⁶ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 86 & p. 88.
- ⁶⁷ Sasson, *Longing to Belong*, p. 22 & p. 83.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 95; in English p. 105.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid. Christopher Moseley consistently uses the words ‘pedigree’ and ‘breeding’ in his English translation. In the original Estonian, ‘tõug’ or ‘rass’ and ‘veri’ are used, and the Finnish translation likewise mainly uses ‘rotu’ and ‘veri’.
- ⁷⁰ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, p. 102; *I Loved a German*, p. 112.
- ⁷¹ Ibid., p. 99; in English p. 109.
- ⁷² Ibid., p. 95 & 97-98; in English p. 104 & p. 109.
- ⁷³ Sasson, *Longing to Belong*, p. 4.
- ⁷⁴ Oskar admits with ruthless self-criticism: ‘Mul ei ole mingit tarvidust saada iseendaks, [...] nagu nõuab inimeselt keegi välismaine luuletaja, sest ma olen ikka näinud [...] otse vastupidist’. [I don’t have any use for becoming myself [...] as some foreign poet [i.e., Nietzsche] exhorts me to, because I have always seen [...] quite the opposite]. Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, p. 75; *I Loved a German*, p. 82; see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, trans. by Paul V. Cohn, Thomas Common, and Maude Dominica Petre, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche: The First Complete and Authorised English Translation*, 18 Volumes, ed. by Oscar Levy, VI (T. N. Foulis: 1910, [1882]); aphorism 270. See also Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1991); and Paul Franco, ‘Becoming Who You Are: Nietzsche on Self-Creation’, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 49.1 (2018), pp. 52-77.
- ⁷⁵ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, p. 100; *I Loved a German*, p. 110.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 102; in English p. 113.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 103; in English p. 113.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.
- ⁷⁹ See Plath, ‘Näljast ja näljapsühholoogiast A. H. Tammsaare romaanis “Ma armastasin sakslast”’ in *Armastus ja sotsioloogia*, pp. 50-71. Plath refers to Wilhem Raabe’s *Der Hungerpastor* (1864), Knut Hamsun’s *Sult* (1890), and Doris Lessing’s *Hunger* (1953).
- ⁸⁰ See endnote 32.
- ⁸¹ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, pp. 25-26; *I Loved a German*, pp. 26-27.
- ⁸² Päivi Molarius, “‘Will the Human Race Degenerate?’ The Individual, the Family and the Fearsome Spectre of Degeneracy in Finnish Literature of the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century’, in *Changing Scenes. Encounters between European and Finnish Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen (Finnish Literature Society, 2003), pp. 121-43 (pp. 130-31); Tuglas’ *Felix Ormusson* (1915) is full of similar lines of thought related to hunger and race. It should also be noted that the novel is in a strong dialogue with examples of Finnish literary decadence, see endnotes 41 and 83.
- ⁸³ In Finnish literature, these figures are to be found in many fin de siècle works, e.g., in those of Eino Leino, L. Onerva, Arvid Järnefelt, and many others. The comparable ethnic, linguistic, and class dynamics, though, of course, very different from that between Estonians and Baltic Germans, appear in encounters between the Finnish speaking population and the Swedish speaking aristocracy and upper classes. See e.g., Viola Parente-Čapková, ‘Decadent New Woman’s Ironic Subversions: L. Onerva’s Multi-layered Irony’, *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.1 (2019), pp. 82-99 (esp. pp. 89-90). See also Viola Parente-Čapková, ‘Gendering Seekers and Upstarts in Early Twentieth-Century Finnish Literature’, *Approaching Religion*, 11.1 (2021), pp. 28-44.
- ⁸⁴ For *Kärbes*, in which Tammsaare once again returns to the depiction of student life, see Hinrikus, Kirikal, ‘Decadence as Dynamism and Mutability: The Nietzschean-Bergsonian Imprint in the Early Works of A. H. Tammsaare and J. Semper.
- ⁸⁵ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, p. 11; *I Loved a German*, p. 11.
- ⁸⁶ Claire Colebrook, *Irony* (Routledge, 2004).
- ⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 14.
- ⁸⁸ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, p. 108; *I Loved a German*, p. 119.
- ⁸⁹ Peter Butler, *Beyond Decadence: Exposing the Narrative Irony in Jan Opolsky’s Prose* (Karolinum Press, 2015). See also Viola Parente-Čapková, ‘Decadent New Woman’s Ironic Subversions’.
- ⁹⁰ See also endnote 13 on Oskar’s aspiration to become a writer.
- ⁹¹ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, p. 162; *I Loved a German*, p. 179.
- ⁹² Ibid., p. 138; in English p. 151.
- ⁹³ See also endnote 74.
- ⁹⁴ Tammsaare, *Ma armastasin sakslast*, p. 161; *I Loved a German*, p. 178.
- ⁹⁵ See Richard Hibbitt, *Dilettantism and its Values: From Weimar Classicism to the fin de siècle* (MHRA, 2006).
- ⁹⁶ John Fletcher, ‘Parvenue Genre, Genre of Parvenus’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 15.2 (June 1978), pp. 193-202 (p. 202).