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# The Poetics of Affect beyond Good and Evil: Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Prose Poetry of Jaan Oks<sup>1</sup>

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The most characteristically decadent author of Estonian culture during the early twentieth century was Jaan Oks (1884–1918), due to his poetics and his overall attunement to decline. Oks declared himself a decadent,<sup>2</sup> a status that was also affirmed by his contemporaries.<sup>3</sup> Details of his biography – his mental instability, social marginalization, and torturous early death from osteoarticular tuberculosis – have also contributed to his reputation as a decadent.

Oks was closely associated with the early twentieth-century movement Young Estonia [Noor-Eesti], which sought to modernize Estonian culture. Yet while he published both fiction and criticism in their programmatic journals, he was marginal to the movement. Oks worked as a schoolteacher in rural Estonia, and later in the Russian Imperial province of Samara, and was thus spatially distant from his contemporaries. Most other Young Estonians travelled elsewhere, soaking up the new trends from the great capitals of Europe in order to recast them in their own works. By contrast, Oks's works can be considered an example of rural decadence<sup>4</sup> – his narratives of decay and degeneration take place in the traditional countryside milieux and the surroundings of Nordic nature, as it often happens elsewhere in the Nordic context.<sup>5</sup> However, unlike his contemporaries, who sometimes held a nostalgia for the primitive, Oks's work lacks the tension between modern urban and rural life. For Oks, the rural environment gives way, in increasing accents, to moods of decline.<sup>6</sup>

Oks was also exceptional within the context of early twentieth-century Estonian culture, which aimed to cultivate a new Estonian national identity. In this context, it was uncouth to advocate an attitude of decline as a life-philosophy. While many Estonian writers declared and developed a decadent aesthetic in their writings, they nevertheless treated it distantly, as merely

another lesson in European cultural education. For them, decadence had a negative valence in Europe, due to Max Nordau's theories of degeneration.<sup>7</sup> Both Conservative and leftist intellectuals approached the term ambivalently, often employing it in a pejorative sense.<sup>8</sup> In his criticism of modern Estonian literature, Oks endeavoured to construct a more radical conception of decadence, conceiving it also as a literary venture.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Oks's radicalism was also manifested in the strongly misogynistic attitudes that permeate his writings. This aspect has received considerable scholarly attention, as it reflects a broader tendency within the predominantly male-centred tradition of literary decadence, where anxieties concerning gender, sexuality, and modernity were often articulated through misogynistic discourse.<sup>10</sup>

Oks's literary output, of which 40 prose stories and as many poems are preserved, testifies to his exceptional status. The general mood of his work could be summarized by the comments of an early theorist of decadence, Paul Bourget, writing on Charles Baudelaire:

To begin with, he is a pessimist, which distinguishes him sharply from sensitive sceptics such as Alfred de Vigny. He has the deadly thrust, the satanic lightning-bolt, as Christians would say: a horror of Being, and a taste – indeed a voracious appetite – for Nothingness.<sup>11</sup>

Oks wrote most of his works during a short period (1906–1910), exploring themes of decadent decline and a sense of finality, despite alterations in his methods of representation and affective intensity. Many of his stories depict village life in a Naturalistic vein. The characters in these stories are depicted as automatons or the living dead; they are entirely passive, aimless, and emotionless. The authorial voice in the stories confirms this – the realization of the meaninglessness of life, the rush toward death, is the point where affective activity creeps into Oks's texts. In some tales (such as 'Vana madrus' [The Old Seaman] (1914), 'Hauakõne' [The Eulogy] (1908)) a male character wakes from lethargy and gives a powerful speech, mocking and disparaging life. Such awakening is indeed the turning point from which some of Oks's most sophisticated, but also most interesting prose pieces are born. In these pieces, affective hyperactivity, sexual transgressiveness, and a dispersive fragmentation of subjectivity prevail. This pathos could be described as Dionysian decadence, conceived in this case as the barbaric power of life, felt through orgiastic pleasure,

though by means of destructive, hysterical will to transgression.<sup>12</sup> The Finnish scholar Pirjo Lyytikäinen characterized this state as one in which ‘pathos and mania take over; resignation and analytical coldness disappear’.<sup>13</sup>

Contemporary writers associated with the Young Estonia cultural revival agreed that Oks was an original writer. Young Estonian writers such as Tuglas, Kallas and Tammsaare, were primarily interested in the decadent-modernist aesthetic in Oks’s works.<sup>14</sup> His works also received some attention from literary scholars before the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> Yet the interpretation of his works has been incomplete – two of the texts analysed in this article were not published until 1995. It is important to note that the misogyny of some of Oks’s texts (including the works discussed in this article) is evident.<sup>16</sup> However, this misogyny is not often mentioned during Oks’s lifetime in public discourse.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, some of the openly misogynistic texts were published after Oks’s death, and some of them not until the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

The Soviet Occupation was a significant obstacle to Oks scholarship, as decadence under Stalinism meant a diagnosis used for an institutional expulsion from literary life. By the 1960s, ideological pressure had loosened so much that it was possible to cautiously publish Oks again in Estonia,<sup>19</sup> but it took two more decades for the first scholarly research to appear.<sup>20</sup> However, the Estonian diaspora in exile ignored this exclusion of Oks and published representative, though incomplete, editions of his work in Sweden.<sup>21</sup> In independent Estonia in the 1990s, Oks made a comeback, with new editions appearing and scholarship being reinvigorated. Research on Oks has intensified over the last decade, where he has been treated in doctoral dissertations and interpreted as a decadent in a few Master’s theses.<sup>22</sup>

In this article, I analyse three prose poems, ‘Emased’ [Females] (1908), ‘Thu’ [Body-Flesh] (1908), and ‘Nimetu Elajas’ [The Nameless Beast] (1909), which represent Oks’s experimental writing at its most extreme.<sup>23</sup> The texts are quite complex and lack both plot and clearly delineated characters. Different voices emerge and intermingle. Among these the various voices, a prophetic-philosophic (masculinized) voice can be discerned, which presents metaphysical statements and

generalizations.<sup>24</sup> This voice also describes the thoughts and feelings of character-like aggregates, and sometimes takes on the imperative mode. In the present article, I examine this voice in particular, and read its statements as philosophical prose. A definite programme can be discerned from the thicket of chaotic moods: distinct constellations emerge that are essentially related to the philosophical positions of Friedrich Nietzsche. Though many researchers have argued that Oks was heavily influenced by Nietzsche, none have discussed this influence in detail.<sup>25</sup> Oks only mentions Nietzsche explicitly once in his writing.<sup>26</sup> In the following I aim to illuminate these interesting parallels between the poet and the philosopher.<sup>27</sup>

### Overview of the texts

The three prose poems run to 90 pages in total. Oks wrote them in Samara, a province of Imperial Russia at the time.<sup>28</sup> The texts form a coherent whole in terms of both form and content. They are stylistically fragmentary, and lack clear plots, actions, and characters. They lack chapters and are merely divided by asterisks. Various voices and grammatical persons (or quasi-persons), often blend in a single passage. For example:

Kustuvas taevas ja maas, läbi enese ihu näeb tema kõike seda, mis valitseb ja valitseda laseb. Näeb *tema* seda, kes tahab ja anda tahab, kes annab ja andes võtab. Ümberkogujad kui janused kitsed pärast ärkamist – aga sügavas, kitsa prao vahel on vesi, eluvesi. Et juua, ja mitte enam janutada. See, mis *mina* annan. Kus nii palju kokkukorjatud jõudu, puutumata janu on, et see peale langedes ahnuse kõige *su* olemasolemisega peab ära lõpetama. Palu, et ma sulle seda igavest janukustutamist pean andma!

[In languishing land and sky, he sees through his own body-flesh which governs and lets to be governed. *He* sees who desires and is willing to give, who gives and takes as he's giving. Those surrounding pinched as rabbits after waking – but water lies deep between the narrow fissure, the water of life. To drink and no longer thirst. This is what *I* will give. Where there is so much gathered strength, untouched thirst, that when it falls upon you, it must end greed together with all *your* existence. Beg that I may give you this eternal quenching of thirst!]<sup>29</sup>

In recent research, Kristjan Haljak has described the alternation of voices as a processual subject.<sup>30</sup>

In this way, the texts describe the expression of the inner drives of consciousness, which may

produce events or merely philosophical statements. As various scholars have shown, the shift in focus to inner consciousness occurs in the transition from Naturalism into decadence:

[T]he shift from naturalism to core decadence can be described as a radical move toward the subjective worlds of the decadent characters which downplays the role of narrators who observe the fictional world from outside. Typically, the sick mind of the protagonist becomes the main access to the fictional world while the allegedly objective or scientific – but also moralizing – voice of the observer falls away.<sup>31</sup>

This evaluation characterizes much of Oks's prose, but his texts depict an uninterrupted stream of consciousness in a more radical way.<sup>32</sup> This style emerged with modernism and, for Oks, literary decadence and modernism were synonymous. He notably conceived of himself as a modernist.<sup>33</sup> While his contemporaries viewed his prose poems as mere raw material assembled in a fit of inspiration, Oks wrote to Friedebert Tuglas, a leading figure of Young Estonia, that he had edited the prose poems several times.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, he proclaims a hallucinatory writing style that breaks down cohesive content as his creative credo:

Oma 'sisu' puudusest saan ise ka väga hästi aru. Kuid see on meelega nii. [...] Et ma kõiksugusi kirgedega Liisasi areenalke ei vea, et ma mõne inimese käiku, ta instiktilisi eluavaldusi küllalt tähtsaks ei pea ega korrespondentsiliselt ei ütle, mis lõpus sündis – sellep. on vast faabulid välja jäetud. Filosoofiline elu on niisama tühi, kui meie teda hallutsinatsioonidega ei sisusta. Mälu ei ole kunst, ja kopeerimine ei ole kunst. Keeleilu on kõik, kuna igatõuliste sündmuste vaheldumise kirjeldus ennegi haigeid inimesesoo närvisi vaevab.

[I understand what's meant by a lack of 'story' quite well. Yes, I even prefer it so. [...] So that I do not carry all sorts of sentimental Lizas to the arena, that I do not consider some person's behaviour, their instinctive expressions of life sufficiently important, nor correspondingly say what resulted in the end – that's why the plot has been omitted. Philosophical life is empty if we do not furnish it with hallucinations. Memory is not art, copying is not art. The beauty of language is the utmost, while the description of all kinds of changing events only strains the already sick nerves of humanity.]<sup>35</sup>

In the pieces I consider in this article, the multifarious drives do not become manifest in all their diversity, but focus on sexual desire. The prose poems revolve around *sugu*, a word for sex which has a range of meaning in Estonian: biological and cultural (sex/gender), grammatical gender, the sexual act (to replicate, to breed, [*sugutama*, *sugu tegema*]), generations, and any collection of objects (kind or sort).<sup>36</sup> Oks plays on all of these ambivalences in his works though sex differentiates into two primary meanings. The first is sexual difference, or division into two 'sexes', which is the main,

reality-splitting ontological marker in the texts under consideration, producing several philosophical and theological insights. The second is the sex-drive and its manifestation, which takes place in violent, transgressive sexual acts. Among these are sadomasochistic violence ('Emased', 'Nimetu elajas'), paedophilia ('Emased'), incest ('Emased'), and zoophilia ('Nimetu elajas').<sup>37</sup>

Oks depicts a sexual universe characterized by conflict: the sexes are in irreconcilable opposition, rendering the sexual drive inherently torturous. A decadent attunement to degeneration dominates the text, suppressing other conflicting voices that strive towards an ecstatic climax. Oks consciously included subject matter that was transgressive, even pornographic at points, according to the standards of the period. He explains his style as follows:

On halba pornograafiat ja modernset sellenimelist kirjandust. Võtete julgus lööb niisuguste voolude juures nähtavale. Endise eetika järele 'valjud', 'kõlbmatud' sõnad on meile ligemale kistud, vabadeks, loomulikeks tehtud.

[There is bad pornography and there is modern literature of the same name. The boldness of the techniques stands out in such trends. Words that according to former ethics were 'harsh', 'unsuitable', are drawn closer to us, made free, made natural.]<sup>38</sup>

In this article, I aim to reconstruct the treatment of human nature and sexual difference from the philosophical voice of Oks's texts, and compare this with Nietzsche's philosophical positions.

### **The 'Sexual' Nature of the Human Creature**

Oks's generalizing voice centres on sexual drives and their motivation for its action, namely the deconstruction of the soul and the naturalization of the human being as a collection of drives and emotions, where the sexual drives operate like the first violin in an orchestra. I describe this process through three interrelated theses.

Firstly, a person does not have an eternal soul, but merely *sugu* [breed-sex].<sup>39</sup> This thesis is repeated in the following example: 'Ei ole veel su eluülesanne täidetud – ihu. Tee sugule teed, sugule, kes su hing on. ' [Your life-task is yet incomplete – body-flesh. Make pathways for your sex-breed, for your sex-breed who is your soul.]<sup>40</sup> In the context of this quotation and other

statements, it can be inferred that Oks does not intend a division of 'sex', but rather the sexual drive, which he refers to as lust and identifies with life in other contexts.<sup>41</sup>

Nietzsche also reinterprets the 'soul' as a natural, biological phenomenon throughout his work.<sup>42</sup> However, it is most direct in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), the title of which Oks paraphrases in 'Emased'.<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche writes:

But the way to new conceptions and refinements of the soul-hypothesis stands open; and concepts like 'mortal soul' and 'soul as subject-multiplicity' and 'soul as social structure of drives and affects' want henceforth to have their citizens' rights in science.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, Nietzsche discusses affects and drives as being multiple and not entirely driven by the sex drive. In this sense, Oks's description resembles Freud's more closely. Marianne Lind has claimed that influences of Freud are recognizable in Oks's work.<sup>45</sup> However, for Nietzsche, the creative drive is also closely related to the sex drive: 'It is one and the same kind of strength which is spent in artistic conception and in the sexual act: there is only one kind of strength.'<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, as a consequence of my first thesis, a person cannot be defined by a combination of spirit and body, or soul and flesh. Rather, the human must be understood through fleshly embodiment.<sup>47</sup> Oks emphasizes this in the prose poem 'Ihu' [Body-flesh], though this idea appears throughout the three prose poems: 'Ja see ihu ongi hing – ja ei ole olemas ihu ja hinge, niisama nagu ka rumal oleks ihust unistada.' [And this flesh-body is the soul – and there exist neither body nor soul, just as a fool would not dream of a body.]<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche made the same argument in his works, including *Also sprach Zarathustra* [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*] (1883–1885), which was the most widely read of his texts in Estonia at the time.<sup>49</sup> Thirdly, affectivity and physical embodiment take precedence over reason. Human beings are afflicted not only by religious doctrines, but by intellectualism more broadly. Nietzsche poses this criticism in various places, especially in *Beyond Good and Evil*, though his most concise presentation of the argument can be found in the third treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887). The philosopher accuses those who adhere to the principle of pure reason of being incoherent. For Nietzsche, pure reason is like an eye that looks in no particular direction and lacks the power to make anything visible. He states:

There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival ‘knowing’; and *the more* affects we allow to express themselves on a given thing, *the more* eyes, different eyes we know how to engage for the same thing, the more perfect will be our ‘concept’ of this thing, our objectivity. But to eliminate the will altogether, to suspend each and every affect, supposing that we even could: what? Would this not amount to *castrating* the intellect? ...<sup>50</sup>

The literary works of Oks are fragmentary and lack such compact ideations, though a passionate rebuke of reason can still be found in them.<sup>51</sup> Similar declarations are also found in ‘Emased’, ‘Thu’, and ‘Nimetu Elajas’ which consistently and widely convey obscurity, a rejection of rationality, and disordered syntax.

The prior three theses can be summarized with Oks’s definition of the human: a human being is a natural entity, a beast – ‘kõige selle ühendus, surutud suurus, mis väljaspool – väljaspool hinge’ [a tremendous compression, an alloy of everything, which lies outside – outside of the soul].<sup>52</sup> This definition is especially Nietzschean. Nietzsche asserts: ‘We have stopped deriving humanity from ‘spirit’, from ‘divinity’, we have stuck human beings back among the animals’.<sup>53</sup> The life of a natural being exists beyond the concepts of good and evil, where everything is permitted, including acting on one’s most basic instincts. In Oks’s words:

See on looduse vaimustatud usutunnistus: et kõik inimestele lubatud on, nagu tema ennast igaühele häbenemata pakub, annab, lubab ja lahti teeb, et elu ainukesele tantsule ligineda, ligineda.

[This is the religious credo of spiritualized nature: that everything is permitted to human beings, as nature shamelessly offers to each one, gives and promises and unleashes, so that life may approach, come closer to the one and only dance.]<sup>54</sup>

Of course, Nietzsche (along with his self-proclaimed followers) boasts his own form of immorality, announcing that anything is permitted, including sexual pleasure.<sup>55</sup>

What are the implications of this for humanity? For Nietzsche it is *amor fati*: a Dionysian anticipation and affirmation of the eternal return.<sup>56</sup> However, for Oks, primal energy is inherently sexual, meaning that the whole world dances to the rhythm of a cosmic orgy. This level of experience appears briefly in the three prose poems, but does not dominate them entirely:

Loodus annab – see on ümmargune, harudeta soovgi ta peale. Ja põhjatü hea on – hea... Muud ei tea üteldagi. Inetulgi on pikemalt kõneleda. Ja elulauludes sumisevad salajased öötoonid, kõik ühteviisi tiirased ja põnevil nagu soovitavad naisterahvad, kellesse

mahutakse – naisterahvad, ja seal on ka tumedad, esialgsed, endised lämmatused nii väärtuslikud, vaimurikkad ja ulatavad, kes kõike pidustamisele julgustavad, kõike, mis arg, madal ja misäärne on.

[Nature will give – there is even a round, uninflected desire after her. And this is endlessly good – good... what else to say. It's hideous to speak more on this. And in the songs of life, secret nocturnal tones are humming, all equally horny and excited as the desirable ladies into whom one can fit – ladies, and there are all dark, ancient, primordial suffocations so valuable, spiritual and overarching, who encourage everything to celebration, everything that is mousy, miserable and low.]<sup>57</sup>

If it were possible to transform into a beast and dissolve into the lust of the universe, why does this not happen in Oks's prose poems? For Oks, a cosmic pessimism prevents the end of lust from arriving, and this is a core assumption that forms the basic milieu of his work and cannot be rationalized. In the works under discussion, two interrelated but unresolvable problems echo through the philosophical voice: the difference of the sexes and the problem of existential nihilism (the loss of *telos*, or contingency of the world after the death of God). Together, these form the basis of the pessimism in Oks's works. For the sake of clarity, however, I address them separately in the next two sections.

### **Contingent life in the shadow of the death of God**

In the three prose poems, as in his work as a whole, Oks's philosophical voice generally conveys the conviction that life is senseless and contingent, and therefore hideous and weird, or not worth living.<sup>58</sup>

Meie tunneme ju, kui väga lihtne ja arusaadav elu, selle kehastatud kire tükikese omadus on. Kogemata – see on elu, iseteadvuseta – see on elu, ja elajalises tujus, põlises lolluses valati ta – peale sajakordset asjata mängu...

[We know well how very simple and comprehensible is the essence of life, this puny little fragment of an embodied passion. Unconsciously – this is life, accidentally – this is life, and it was cast in a beastly mood, after a hundredfold futile games...]<sup>59</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche was the most prominent voice to convey life's existential purposelessness and we can therefore surmise that he influenced Oks. Nietzsche maintains:

It is *we* alone who have invented causes, succession, for-each-other, relativity, compulsion, numbers, law, freedom, grounds and purpose; and when our imaginations impose and mix this sign-world into things as an 'it-itself,' we're still doing things as we've always done them, namely *mythologically*.<sup>60</sup>

The problem of overcoming a meaningless existence was a challenge for Nietzsche throughout his philosophical work. His solution remained more or less the same over time: 'the existence of the world is *justified* only as an aesthetic phenomenon'.<sup>61</sup> That is, one can overcome nihilism through the binding of beautiful symbols – this is the highest expression of the will to power.<sup>62</sup>

As I have described, Oks's prose poems depict the pulsing activity of sexuality. Despite this, the storm of passions fails to silence the philosophical voice that enquires into the meaning of life. In 'Emased', Oks writes:

On siis elu muud – peale rüsemise, virelemise, mida tükikene kiretainast sünnitab, keda üles ja alla kistakse, kes sügavamale, sügavamale poeb, kaugemale, kaugemale ritsub ja kõrgemale-kõrgemale seab...

[What else is life – other than the hustling, aching, produced by a little fragment of lust, who is tossed here and there, who creeps deeper and deeper, presses further, further and aims higher-higher...]<sup>63</sup>

The affective-sexual feeling of life, 'elu kui loov põhikirg' [life as a creative urge]<sup>64</sup> or lust cannot appease the questioning voice, does not relieve the seeker, does not engage him enough nor satisfy his conceptual mind.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, the message in 'Nimetu elajas' that 'Elu on ila' [Life is spittle]<sup>66</sup> is disgusting, revolting, and altogether insane.<sup>67</sup> The pessimistic mood in Oks is stronger than the erotic.

At the fin de siècle, discussions about the meaning and purpose of life, the existence of the human soul, and so on, were not merely philosophical, but broader and certainly very emotional, particularly in the Christian cultural context. Nietzsche's ideas about the uses and abuses of Christianity were debated in newspapers. The metaphor of the 'death of God' was well known in Estonian cultural scene. The slogan even reached Oks's prose, though not as a definitive message: 'Ma ei räägi mitte jumalatest: nende sugu on välja surnud...' [We are not speaking of the gods, their breed-sex [*sugu*] has passed away...]<sup>68</sup> If sexual-affective entanglement is the whole truth

about the world, then the transcendent monotheistic God (even as a common belief or myth) does not fit into this system of global lustfulness.<sup>69</sup> Nietzsche also criticizes the monotheistic God for the same reason, making use of genealogy and comparative religion: ‘And when the most masculine virtues and drives have been chopped off the god of decadence, he will necessarily turn into god of the physiologically retrograde, the weak.’<sup>70</sup>

Oks treats the Christian God with similar metaphors. To be without the ability to breed is a deficiency and a weakness:<sup>71</sup>

Kõik muu looduse teotus – need juusteni uhked, väga ilusad ja kiimalised kuradid, see tursunud, tahtmisvõimes kohitsetud jumal – tunnevad häbi oma puuduliku hingeehituse pärast: neile pole ju sugu sisse lastud, ainukest elavat ilmade sees – sugu...

[All other blasphemies against nature – those radically proud, very beautiful and lustful devils, that swollen god with emasculated will – feel shame for the constitutional deficiencies of their soul: the breed-sex has not been inserted into them, the only vital element in the worlds – sex...] <sup>72</sup>

God is deficient in two ways: he lacks access to the drives and has no experience of sexual differentiation. Although Oks also considers the possibility of sexually differentiated nature emerging randomly, in which case God could be excluded entirely, this view is not predominant.<sup>73</sup> In Oks’s œuvre, God remains a spectre, taking on various phantom-like forms.<sup>74</sup> The spiritual tension in Oks’s works is not resolved through natural impulses, but progresses along a transcendent trajectory. Here, we may recall Nietzsche’s warning: from a naïve standpoint, the decline of religion seems like a minor matter that leads people to a carefree, relaxed life. In reality, however, one still has to fight for centuries against the shadow of the dead God and the decadent values instilled by the life-denying religion.<sup>75</sup> In Oks’s works, the ‘master’s voice’ intensely searches for a spiritual dimension. Sometimes the prose poems attempt to treat sex as a divinity:

Seal olgu ka Tema, sulle tundmata. Tema sellepärast, et ta kõik selle, mis mind piinab ja rahutuks teeb – loonud on. Ma ei räägi mitte jumalatest: nende sugu on välja – surnud... Ma kõnelen mõtteteadlisest tahtmisest elus, nagu sugutahtline Meeleolu on...

[Let Her also be there, unknown to you. Because She has created all that torments me and makes me restless. I do not speak of gods: their breed-sex [*sugu*] is finished – dead... I speak of the philosophical will in life, as a sex-breeding Attunement...] <sup>76</sup>

If this endeavour were to succeed and be amplified, it would lead to the spiritual consecration of natural sexuality, thus creating myths and new gods:

Päikesesoojus ja veeniiskus sünnitavad igast ülespressitud tilgast, mis taeva poole kargas – igast vikerkaare värvist seal sees, igast kirjust mõttest sünnib uus jumal, uued inimesed.

[The warmth of the sun and the moisture of water give birth from every forced-out drop that jumped toward the sky – from every colour of the rainbow inside it, from every colourful thought a new god, new humans are born.]<sup>77</sup>

This vision is like a creative revisioning of Nietzsche's critique: 'Almost two thousand years and not one new god!'<sup>78</sup> It also offers a parallel to his Dionysian vision of philosophical art.<sup>79</sup>

Yet these ideas are rather exceptional outbursts, and do not define the prose poems. Instead, an extravagant blasphemy predominates, most clearly in 'Nimetu Elajas'. Having taken courage, so to speak, from the natural sciences, the text presents a dialogue with the transcendent Deity: He is reviled with kisses and eulogized in dirty songs.<sup>80</sup> In 'Emased', he is violently brought into sexuality, being demanded to breed and procreate.<sup>81</sup> In 'Nimetu Elajas', Oks envisions:

Väsimata punasesse veresse vaadates ootad sa jumala ilmumist sinna, sinna. Ootad, et ta veres peaks sündima, kasvama, teise ära kägistama ja ennast piinama eemal. Ootad, et kõik mis olemas on, alla vajuks – ja siis läbi vaikiva valmimise sa vaataksid järelejätmata seda, mis pea nii raskelt ümber käima paneb. Värske, elav ihu, sugu vaim.

[Gazing tirelessly into the red blood there, you are waiting for a god to emerge, there. You wait for his blood-birth, for him to grow and suffocate another and torture himself in a distance. You wait for everything existent to sink—and then, through the silencing ripeness, you will watch incessantly what makes your head to spin so heavily. Fresh, living body-flesh, the spirit of sex-breed.]<sup>82</sup>

Oks takes the position of a decadent aesthete, and has both a blasphemous and a parodic, satirical relationship to God.<sup>83</sup> He dislocates religious vocabulary, such as the words for sin and angel.<sup>84</sup> Oks's narrators are intoxicated with the transgression of moral norms, defiling rituals:

Siis sa tõukaksid veel kord, et verd, rusuhunnikuid, piina ja jäänuseid näha – ja terveks saada teadmises: ma olen kõige enam saanud kurja teha. Issand neelaku see võimalus teist armastada, või lõpetagu algidudes niisugune meeleolu inimesega tükis, kus piina, põlgamist ja kägistamisevaeva lustiks ei ole, ei ole...

[Then you push one more time so to see the blood, ruins, remnants and torments – and become healthy in this knowledge: evil has been my greatest resource. Let the Lord swallow this chance to love another, or let Him primevally end that kind of mood along with the humans, where torment, disdain, and suffocating pain are no longer, no longer for fun...] <sup>85</sup>

The decadent nature of Oks's prose poems prevents readers from becoming intoxicated by the natural cycle of sexual drives. On the one hand, the fluctuation between active violence and passive fading away rejects the sacred and transcendent God. On the other hand, however, a need for transcendence also shines through this blasphemy, creating a tension that sparks creativity. This tension elevates pleasure itself into something transcendent and unachievable. However, as I noted earlier, there is also another voice with a different message: a naturalized life, and a God deprived of sexual plenitude, declared barren and dead. Thus Oks's blasphemy is merely shadow boxing, a schizophrenic situation. Although the struggle between man and God is sometimes declared non-existent, and then taken seriously again, it nonetheless recedes in the face of the intensity of the clash between the sexes.

### **The merciless conflict of the sexes**

The naturalized world of 'sex-breed' makes a religious spirituality inclined to transcendence impossible. For a moment, let us return to the main theme of Oks's prose poems: the status of human existence when freed from moral imperatives amidst the lustful propulsion of nature. Despite the dismay of a lost paradise and threatening shadow of the death of God, life could still be worth living through love, in either a spiritual or physical sense. In the following section, I treat the failure of this perspective in Oks's work.

The author's philosophical voice does not describe sexuality merely as based on drives, but also in a sense of dual differentiation: 'sest sugu on inimene, ja elu on isane või emane, nagu mõttedki, mis kahesugustes vormides tantsivad, suruvad ja iseennast sugutavad' [for the human is breed-sex, and life is male or female, like thoughts, which dance in dual-sexed forms, press and breed one another].<sup>86</sup> In his theological-philosophical treatise 'Mõistuse algamine' [The Beginning of Reason](2004) Oks also tries to explain this difference as well as discuss its emergence. The primary elements of matter and man's (God's) word separate, dividing into heaven and earth, the latter being 'passive, of female purpose'.<sup>87</sup> The credo of a dual sex-gender occurs throughout the

texts, which marks an important difference from Western-European decadent literature, which often describes homosexuality.<sup>88</sup> This element is lacking in Oks's texts. Although he makes various ambiguous allusions, everything remains within a heterosexual context. More precisely, the principle of heterosexuality applies to the layers of the text under consideration here; at the more ecstatic levels, sexual identity becomes blurred.<sup>89</sup>

Oks largely represents sexuality as follows: women are sensual and lascivious by nature, which threatens men, while men are neither interested in sex nor allow themselves to be tempted. and thus relate to sexual relations and partners with disdain. Consequently, they have a disdainful attitude towards sexual relations and partners. This is the main conflict for Oks: women are sexually desirous and men are not – a woman is natural, he writes, and conducts herself according to rhythms taken from deep within nature.<sup>90</sup> As he puts it in 'Emased': 'Loodus on emane: iga kehaosa ta alati särgita ihu küljes on niisugused, niisugused – voldid, juuksed ja silmad.' [Nature is female: each body part in the flesh is always nude – these folds, these eyes and hair.]<sup>91</sup>

Oks's depiction of the struggle of the sexes has a source in Nietzsche's treatment of sexual difference in *Beyond Good and Evil*. There, Nietzsche argues that women are more natural than men:

What inspires respect and often enough fear of woman is her *nature*, which is 'more natural' than that of man, her genuine predatory, cunning suppleness, her tiger claws beneath the glove, her naivete in egoism, her ineducability and inner savageness, the incomprehensibility, vastness, and roaming of her desires and virtues.<sup>92</sup>

According to Nietzsche, the inevitable misunderstandings and struggles between men and women derive from differences in their emotional tempos.<sup>93</sup> To him, the conflict between the sexes is not anomalous, but a struggle of opposing forces at the micro-level, akin to the will to power.<sup>94</sup> Writing in the context of modernizing urban European culture, Nietzsche saw women's emancipation as a problem. The desire to become equal citizens alongside men in a neutral public realm meant losing the 'natural allure' of their sexuality.<sup>95</sup> Oks's world, however, was a rural periphery without this problem. He vividly depicts women's sensuality and willingness to have sex, intoning the aphorism: 'Üksainus on inimese loomulik elukutse: hoor olla. Naisterahvas on seda sündimisest

saadik.’ [There is only one natural profession for a person: to be a whore. Women-folk are this profession’s natural born ambassadors.]<sup>96</sup>

What about men? In Oks’s œuvre, men are usually depicted as unfeeling and unattainable for women, in control of their desires.<sup>97</sup> ‘Pealekäiv himu on naiste jumal’ [The god of women is insistent lust], he writes, ‘see mõtetega “Võitud mees”, õnnistegija, aga meestele ei ole teda tarvis. Sest isane valitseb nimeta looma eneses ja teises [this thoughtful “Anointed man”, this saviour, but men have no need for this. For the male governs the nameless beast outside and within].<sup>98</sup> This was a well-circulated stereotype at the start of the twentieth century, of which Otto Weininger was be one of the most popular promoters and also an influence on Oks.<sup>99</sup> Nietzsche also shares this understanding:

From the start nothing is more foreign, repulsive, and hostile to woman than truth – her great art is the lie, her highest concern is appearance and beauty. Let us admit it, women: we honour and love precisely this art and this instinct in women: we who have it hard like to get some relief by associating with beings under whose hands, looks and tender follies our own seriousness, our gravity and profundity almost seem like foolishness to us.<sup>100</sup>

From the perspective of Oks’s world, which is defined by sexual desire, masculine control of the passions would seem to be a foolish kind of self-torture. This is exactly what happens: by distancing himself from his desires, man is unable to enjoy them (sexuality, for example), instead torturing himself and women. Despite the voice of the frame-narrator sometimes encouraging him to dive in, he remains a stranger to life:

Saa momendiks elajaks ja unusta oma valitsemise tung, jäta ta, tülikas takistaja, taha – ja siis ei ole sa enam üksi-üksi. Siis on kõik elu sinuga omadustes sugulane ja ühised tundemärgid, mis tulevikust aru ei saa, vaid ainult olevikku jumaldavad.

[Become a beast for a moment and forget your urge to control, leave that troublesome obstruction behind – for then you will no longer be all alone. Then you will belong to the breed of all of life and will share its features, which do not understand the future, worshipping only the present.]<sup>101</sup>

Though the men in Oks’s works find it impossible to be natural, they are *à rebours*, which is fitting for decadent protagonists. Similar to Nietzsche, such men seldom find anything praiseworthy in

women's naturalness, such as the capacity to bear children.<sup>102</sup> In an extreme example, a masculine voice places a woman on the empty throne of God as an act of blasphemy:

Jumalale töötad tegevuseplaani välja ja võtad tema nagu seotud lapse valitsemiseposti otsast ära. Voodi moodi troonile aga paned naise, kõige himukama, ilusate aeglaste liigutustega, soovitavas atitüüdis.

[You'll work out a plan of action for God and take him off the ruler's seat like a tied-up child. But on the bed-like throne, you'll place the woman, the most desirable one, with beautiful slow movements, in the desired attitude.]<sup>103</sup>

By and large, the masculine gaze in Oks's works portrays women through the prism of negative affects, cumulating in abuse and debasement:

Emane. Miks nemad kõik väga ühesugused, abita, taibuta ja iluta on, miks mõnedki austamiseni ei ulata. Nagu haiglane elajakene: lihtsalt ei taha. Majaski on õudne: määrib rohkem kui puhastab. Emane. Inimesesoo roomaja.

[Females. Why are they all engendered the same, so helpless, dull and ugly, why does honour not even broach some. Like a sick little creature: just don't want it. At home it's strange: they befoul more than cleanse. Females. Slithering human sex.]<sup>104</sup>

According to these views, women are seen as disturbers of the peace, as mere chattel or chicken created only for consumption.<sup>105</sup> Oks describes multiple scenes of sexual violence against women, according to these views.<sup>106</sup> The attitude towards the natural-divine woman can therefore also be described through the concept of blasphemy, which I examined in the previous section of this article. Just as, for a decadent sense of life, the theological difference collapses – where God once stood, there is now only emptiness and silence, which must be filled with screams mocking the shadows of the dead God – so too does the sexual difference collapse. For Oks, the female is a void with which it is impossible to make any contact: 'Emane – nagu himu, nagu andmine, nagu tühjus...' [Females – like lust, like submission, like emptiness...].<sup>107</sup>

According to the decadent view of life set out in the prose poems, the ascetic lifestyle is unjustifiable. A person cannot retreat from the duality of natural sexuality in the name of anything higher, because nothing else ever exists. Nevertheless, some of the characters in Oks's œuvre attempt to free themselves from the struggle of the sexes and escape. This too has parallels with

Nietzsche's philosophy too, though direct influences are difficult to ascertain. More obvious similarities can be seen in their respective visions of art, which I discuss in the next section.

### **The sublimation of the sexual drive through art**

In his later work, Nietzsche distinguishes between two concepts of art. The first describes art in its normative sense, that is art that is valuable or life-affirming.<sup>108</sup> The second describes decadent art, which is ugly, sick, negates life, and is fragmentary.<sup>109</sup> Based on these perspectives, one might conclude that Dionysian, life-affirming art would be free from moral constraints and natural instincts, and would therefore embrace sexuality. However, pessimism and the lack of an affirmative power, would prevent sexual ecstasy, which is problematical for Oks. However, things are not straightforward, even for Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, artistic and sexual drives derive from one and the same source, yet this does not entail that natural drives in their pure form come to play only in art.<sup>110</sup> More generally too, the endpoint of Nietzsche's objectives was not to free human beings from moral fetters, but to overcome the human condition. This means becoming an *Übermensch*: noble, venerable, and aristocratic, a state which implies the ability to control one's emotions.<sup>111</sup>

To live with tremendous and proud composure; always beyond. – To arbitrarily have and not have our affects, our pros and cons, to condescend to them for hours; to *sit* on them as we would on a horse or an ass: – after all, we have to know how to use their stupidity as well as their fire.<sup>112</sup>

Creative ability also functions in a similar way: to cultivate spiritual strength, it is necessary to refine and strengthen emotions through sublimation, which constitutes a form of asceticism.<sup>113</sup> For Nietzsche, sublimation does not mean a duty to turn everyday enjoyments and experience into art – what is needed is great style. At the same time, Nietzsche disapproves of excessive sensuality as a sign of decadence.<sup>114</sup>

It is unlikely that Oks knew these late passages on art, though in 'Emased', 'Thu', and 'Nimetu Elajas', his understanding is recognizably similar to Nietzsche's. He also shares the

trajectory of an aesthetically motivated sublimation of sexual passions, though departs decidedly from Nietzsche in his conclusions and vision of the future. For Oks, this trajectory has four aspects. I described the first of these above as the masculine voice's resistance to sexual drives. However, these are no longer considered to be unnatural abnormalities or deformities, but rather the programme-driven governance of affects and the desire for individuality:<sup>115</sup>

Kui sa siis niiväisi küllalt oled inimestest eemale hoidnud, oma nimetumat elajat tallinurka suudpidi sõnnikusse surunud, vastu päikest nii kaua vaadanud, kuni silmad pimedaks jäävad, või kuni päikene häbis ära kustub su pilkude eest, siis oled sa enesevaevaja, et kangelane olla, kangelane.

[If you have managed to stay far from human beings, pressed your nameless beast face-first into scat, stared at the sun so long you went blind, or until the sun went out in shame before your gaze, then you are self-afflicted to be a hero, a hero.]<sup>116</sup>

But how does Oks's assertion that humans are innately sexual cohere with the desire to transcend sexuality? Here, too, Oks follows Nietzsche: renouncing sexuality means overcoming human condition and that is the second aspect.<sup>117</sup> Oks describes this state as the 'uus inimene' [new human] which is undoubtedly only accessible for men:

Kui teie silmaveega ta jalad ära määriksite ja juustega kuivataksite, kui teie ka viimase varanduse odööriks ostaksite, et selles lõhnas mehe isast meelitada, ta siiski teie juurde alla ei tuleks, sest ta ei ole vigane, vaid uus inimene.

[If you'd smudge his feet with your tears and dried them with your hair, if you'd even purchase expensive perfume with your last fortune, to tempt his masculinity in its fragrance, he nonetheless wouldn't descend to you, for he is not crippled, but a new human.]<sup>118</sup>

Oks's particularly decadent misanthropy stems from his will to overcome everything human.<sup>119</sup> Although Nietzsche preaches active affirmation, he does not escape reactivity in his later work, particularly in his criticism of Christianity. This has been viewed as an aspect of Nietzsche's own implicit decadence.<sup>120</sup>

The third aspect unites the wish to overcome both sexuality and humanity with a longing for the beautiful:

Oleks tõesti kusagil mingisugust iludust ka väiksemalgi mõõdul, suudaks see ujuv, ritsuv ring vähem hale ja enam uhke olla – oo, siis mõjuksid kutsumised ja janud neelavas himus patt tagajärjekult. Elamine ei oleks enam mõnele häbistav. Leitakse kujud, mis omale ja

teistele reostavad ei ole. Ja siis, ei tea, korjaks vast elus mingisugust mõtet ja sisugi, nagu väikene põhjuski oleks olemas olemasolemise üle mitte häbi ja tuska tunda.

[If there would at least be some ounce of beauty somewhere, then that dripping, soaking circle would grow less sad and more brave – oh, then the invitations and desires, in devouring lustful sin, would take effect. Existence wouldn't be shameful any more, for some of them. Forms would be found that would pollute neither themselves nor the others. And then, who knows, some gist or content of life might appear, as if there was a slight reason not to feel shame or anguish about existence.]<sup>121</sup>

For Nietzsche, beauty is created by the instinct for power. However, it seems that Oks believes it is something to be sought after and lacking in the real world. As shown above, he finds all surroundings strange and ugly. Yet moments of cosmic affirmation and natural promises of beauty occur in the prose poems. However, this does not imply harmony between the sexes. On the contrary, beauty emerges from confrontation as domination and violence:

Vägisi – selles on terve jõud, tulede allikas, nagu see, kes viisakalt enesesse sisse tagasi vaatab, äkitselt mõtte leiab, mis ilu ülendamiseks, ajamoe täiendamiseks edasi hüppama sunnib. See on lõpmata, igavese elusundimise sees elajamõtte, loomavõime ilu kõrgendamiseks. Ja kõik on sellepärast, et ilu laiendada, raskendada, kõrgendada, sügandada.

[By force – all strength has its source here, a fountain of fires, like one who politely looks back into herself and suddenly finds the principle to elevate beauty, to refine the spirit of the age, which compels him to leap forward. This force is a beast-thought within the endless, eternal drive for life – for the heightening of animal-forces' gorgeousness. And all of it to broaden beauty, make it heavier, grander, wider, deeper.]<sup>122</sup>

The masculine, the desire for beauty, sexuality, and the transcendence of the human condition converge in the superhuman hero – the poet – to form the fourth aspect of the sublimation of sexual passion. As Oks puts it:

Ainult lähedane laulikukalju on südameni enesega rahul. Ta ennastvalitsev ümmargune pind on kahetsuseta, on ilma südame piinast. Temal ei ole hirmutavaid jumalaid ega halastavaid kuradeid ihus, mis kaela kaudu pähe roomaksid. Luuletaja ise vaikib tähendusrikkas valges öösärgis, mis niisama puhtalt ümber hoiab nagu luuleline-elus, kaja nahkkuju ümber vaimustuseks. Ta tundeline hing tahab mõnikord hoiatada, kinni katta – siis jälle ärritada, juurde juhatada. Nagu meeolelu: Vabalt ulatav ainukene ilmas...

[Only the rock of the poet can be at peace up to its heart. Its self-governing round surface is without regret, is without the torment of the heart. There are neither frightening deities nor wrathful demons in its body-flesh, crawling from the neck to the head. The poet himself is silent in a meaningful white nightgown, which flows around just as purely as the poetic life, an exalted echo around the skinny figure. His sensitive soul sometimes wants

to warn, to protect – then again to irritate, to guide. Like a mood; the single one freely reaching in the world...]<sup>123</sup>

From this passage, one might get the impression that Oks's work is a safe place for a lonely poet who has renounced sexuality, or that Oks declares the possibility of a community of 'sexless' beings. However, Oks does not develop these thoughts further. Instead, they transform into an apocalyptic mood through the negation of life and humanity, as mentioned above. Ultimately, the poet does not proclaim a new life, but only the end and the ruin of the old one.<sup>124</sup> In the vivid, symbolically rich finale of 'Nimetu Elajas' he comments:

Mis aga veel vaimustas, oli sügaviku algus ja igavik oma äärepealses kalduvuses nagu väga suure vankri ümberkerkimise silmapilk niisuguse sopase linnajõe kohal – ja oleks viimane sõit: ja inimkond istub sees.

[What was still somehow thrilling, however, was the beginning of the abyss and eternity inclining on the edge, like the moment when a very large wagon is tipping over above such a muddy city river – and this would be the very last journey: and humankind sits within.]<sup>125</sup>

Oks also plays with various rhetorical forms, modes of address, and descriptions to express the waning of consciousness, and depict its coalescence into the pre-consciousness of nature: 'seeneks sündima' [to be born as mushrooms], 'pehme udu peal kaduma' [to disappear into soft fog], and 'sügise sisse kasvama' [to grow into autumn].<sup>126</sup> One must consciously say goodbye to life, drown, and disappear – this is exactly where the extremity of human existence lies: 'Äärmine inimene' [the Extreme Man].<sup>127</sup> In summary, Oks's philosophical message is the opposite of Nietzsche's: art will not save the world nor offer any gentle promise of salvation. Rather, it destroys life itself. Human life is pointless, hideous, and expendable – a situation that is impossible to escape, even through the affectivity of the 'sexes' or desire. Dwindling 'sex' only succeeds in bringing life to its downfall. Thus, as I began this article, the identity of sexuality and life becomes itself the horizon of nothingness or non-existence itself.

## Conclusion

In this article I have sought to demonstrate how Oks portrays sexuality in the prose poems with a deeper philosophical dimension, rather than merely as drives. In ‘Emased’, ‘Thu’, and ‘Nimetu’, he portrays humans and all life in a secular context, where the human soul and religious dimension have been replaced by emotion, which, for Oks is reducible to sexuality. He depicts the unending struggle of the sexes similarly. Many of the philosophical premises in Oks’s text are the same as Nietzsche’s. Both authors attempt to naturalize human beings by depicting them as emotional, rather than rational creatures. Their work also involves the secularization of religion and a passionate assault on it, resulting in the experience of a baseless existence and aesthetic attempts to distance themselves from human nature and its natural, animalistic emotions. Based on this comparison, I would argue that Nietzsche was an important influence on Oks’s work.

Decadence stands as a problem in the work of both authors, though they have different perspectives on the future. While Nietzsche speaks with a vitalist pathos, posing the task of overcoming decadence for the philosophers of the future, Oks remains thoroughly decadent, both aesthetically and philosophically. He rejects life as a whole in developing his apocalyptic vision. While Oks’s prose poems do not fully embrace the re-evaluation of values called for by Nietzsche, they are entirely Nietzschean in their extreme experimentation with language and blending of philosophical thought with emotion. Further analysis of these qualities in his work is required, which would take far more than a single article to achieve.

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<sup>2</sup> Jaan Oks, *Orjapojad* (Ilmamaa, 2004), p. 283.

<sup>3</sup> Aino Kallas, ‘Jaan Oks’, *Siuru*, 2 (1918), pp. 99-110.

<sup>4</sup> See Part III, ‘Rural Decadences’, in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), pp. 85-136.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> As for the depiction of rural life in Oks’s works, the following comment by Lyytikäinen, Rossi, Parente-Čapková, and Hinrikus also applies: ‘At the same time, the rural setting frequently turns into an exploration of the primitive in its most negative sense: the naturalist descriptions of rural life tease out the savage forces of nature and the beast in

man, seen to be lurking in the natural paradise.’ *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, p. 26. More precisely, using the biblical metaphor, there is no such thing as a natural paradise; the setting of his stories would be more accurately described as a rural hell.

<sup>7</sup> Max Nordau, *Entartung* (Duncker, 1892).

<sup>8</sup> See Juhan Sütiste, ‘Meie uusromantika pärapoesia’, *Varamu*, 6 (1940), pp. 582-96. As to the cultural background of Estonian literary decadence, see Mirjam Hinrikus and Merlin Kirikal, ‘Decadence as Dynamism and Mutability: the Nietzschean-Bergsonian Imprint in the Early Works of A. H. Tammsaare and J. Semper’, *Revue Belge de philologie et d’histoire*, 100 (2022), pp. 717-40.

<sup>9</sup> Oks, *Orjapojad*, pp. 219-21.

<sup>10</sup> See Elaine Showalter, ‘Introduction’, in *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (Rutgers University Press & Virago Press, 1993), pp. vii-xx; Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the fin de siècle* (Manchester University Press, 1997); Dennis Denisoff, ‘Feminist global decadence’, *Feminist Modernist Studies*, 4.2 (2021), pp. 137-145. For comment on Oks’s misogyny, see Ian T. Gwin, ‘Põleva ihu sügis: märkmeid Jaan Oksa proosaluulest’, *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica. Dekadentsi erinumber*, ed. by Mirjam Hinrikus, Leo Luks, and Aare Pilv, 36 (2025) pp. 79-103; and Marianne Lind, ‘Dekadentlik esteetika Jaan Oksa proosaloomingus. Magistritöö’ (unpublished Master’s thesis, Tallinna Ülikool, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Paul Bourget, ‘The Example of Baudelaire’, trans. by Nancy O’Connor, *New England Review*, 30.2 (2009), p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ‘Decadence in the Wilderness: Will to Transgression or the Strange Bird of Finnish Decadence’, *Nordlit*, 28 (2011), pp. 245-56.

<sup>13</sup> Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ‘Passions against the Grain: Decadent Emotions in Finnish Wilderness’, in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, p. 87.

<sup>14</sup> See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, ‘The Specters of Decadence in Later Nordic Literature’, *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 257-72.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Palgi, ‘Jaan Oksa proosateoste stiil lingvistiliselt’, *Eesti keel*, 4 (1927), pp. 89-96; 5 (1927), pp. 116-33.

<sup>16</sup> Similarly to their European counterparts, misogyny and sexism were commonplace among the male members of the Young Estonians movement. One popular text among them was O. Weininger’s treatise *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903), which encapsulated the sexist prejudices and misogynistic attitudes prevalent at the turn of the century. During the same period, several significant examples of literary decadence emerged in Estonia, intertwining Weiningerian antifeminism with feminist tendencies. One example is J. Randvere’s *Ruth* (1909). See also 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, and Mirjam Hinrikus, ‘Tammsaare’s Constructions of Femininity in Light of Weininger’s Concept of Sex Difference’, *Journal of Baltic Studies* (2014), pp. 1-27.

<sup>17</sup> One of the three misogynistic texts, ‘Nimetu elajas’ was published for the first time in 1919, when Oks was already dead.

<sup>18</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, misogyny in Estonia was rarely criticized in the press. However, it was addressed critically in literary works and especially in the works of women writers. For example, the emancipated writer Alma Ostra criticised misogyny in her novel *Aino* (1923) by depicting a conservative nationalist and rapist named Jaan Oks. For more discussion, see Merilin Kirikal, ‘Naiskusimus ja dekadentsi mustrid Sophia Vardi novellis “Esimesed tuuled” (1914) ja Alma Ostra jutustuses “Aino” (1923)’, *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica. Dekadentsi erinumber*, 36 (2025) pp. 104-25.

<sup>19</sup> Jaan Oks, *Vaevademaal* (Perioodika, 1967).

<sup>20</sup> Vaino Vahing, ‘Valetage enne, mitte aga pärast’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 3 (1984), pp. 139-45.

<sup>21</sup> Jaan Oks, *Kogutud teosed* (Vaba Eesti, 1957).

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Marianne Lind, ‘Dekadentlik esteetika Jaan Oksa proosaloomingus. Magistritöö’, Indrek Ojam, ‘Stseeni poeetika ja eesti modernistlik romaan’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2023), Kristjan Haljak, ‘Jaan Oks ja Lautreamont: üleastuv-tume kirjandus ja luulekeele revolutsioon’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Tallinna Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2024), , Ian Tracy Gwin, ‘The Forbidden Tree: Jaan Oks and the Fall of Humankind’ (unpublished Master’s thesis, University of Washington, 2022). All the later works are inspired by M. Lind’s theses.

<sup>23</sup> Translator’s note: I have chosen to translate the genre of the three texts in question as ‘prose poems’ according to their status as poetic prose, and I have hyphenated the translation of ‘Ihu’ as ‘Body-Flesh’, due to its double meaning in Estonian, as both ‘body’ and ‘flesh’

<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, and in certain passages, the texts under consideration here are clearly misogynistic. On the other hand, however, a gender-neutral perspective emerges; that is, Oks is interested in human beings as such, in all their natural animalistic nature. See Haljak, *Jaan Oks ja Lautreamont*.

<sup>25</sup> Vahing, ‘Valetage enne, mitte aga pärast’, p. 139.

<sup>26</sup> Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 213.

<sup>27</sup> The misogyny evident in Oks’s work is linked to broader fin de siècle intellectual currents, in the development of which Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, and Weininger played significant roles. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche introduced the notion of women as the embodiment of sexuality and instinct, and of the feminization of culture as a symptom of decline. Weininger systematized these ideas in his influential work *Geschlecht und Charakter*, with which

the Young Estonians and their descendants were familiar. This text links the concept of gender with a moral philosophy opposed to sexuality, which brings Weininger closer to Tolstoy's later ethics. In Oks's texts, these influences intertwine with a decadent critique of culture and a crisis of the experience of modernity, see Lind, *Dekadentlik esteetika Jaan Oksa proosaloomingus*, Gwin, 'Põleva ihu sügis: märkmeid Jaan Oksa proosaluulest', Hinrikus, 'J. Randvere's "Ruth" (1909) as an Example of Literary Decadence and the Quintessence of Young Estonia's (1905–1915) Modern Ideology' and Hinrikus, 'Tammsaare's Constructions of Femininity in Light of Weininger's Concept of Sex Difference'.

<sup>28</sup> Though Estonians such as Oks demonstrated for sovereignty in 1905, Estonia declared independence from Imperial Russia in 1918, shortly after his death (translator's note).

<sup>29</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', in *Otsija metsas* (Ilmamaa, 2003), pp. 281–331 (p. 300). Author's emphasis.

<sup>30</sup> Haljak, *Jaan Oks ja Lautreamont*.

<sup>31</sup> Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadence in Nordic Literature. An Overview', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> See also Lind, *Dekadentlik esteetika Jaan Oksa proosaloomingus*, p. 62.

<sup>33</sup> Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 201. See also Süvalep, 'Modernist Jaan Oks'.

<sup>34</sup> Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 273.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 266. See also Lind, *Dekadentlik esteetika Jaan Oksa proosaloomingus*, p. 30.

<sup>36</sup> In translating the Estonian word 'sugu' I sometimes alternate between two primary meanings, 'sex' in the connotation of sex and gender, and 'breed' as familial or lineal, in correspondence with the decadent transgression (translator's note).

<sup>37</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 295 & 299.

<sup>38</sup> Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 223.

<sup>39</sup> Translator's note: In this article, the use of different forms 'breed-sex' and 'sex-breed' is intentional. 'Breed' doubles as a noun and verb, and indicates the Oks's transgression of the notion of heredity through its connotations with animal husbandry. Where Oks emphasizes this transgression, I use the order 'sex-breed' (as a noun and verb) and where he emphasizes sexuality more I use 'breed-sex' (primarily as a noun).

<sup>40</sup> Oks, 'Emased', in *Otsija metsas*, pp. 239–270 & p. 242.

<sup>41</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 270, and 'Nimetu elajas', p. 331.

<sup>42</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche in 19 volumes*, 8, trans. by Adrian Del Caro (Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 205–349; see pp. 273 & 318. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 1–68; see p. 50.

<sup>43</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 255.

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche in 19 volumes*, 8, pp. 1–203; p. 16.

<sup>45</sup> See Lind, *Dekadentlik esteetika Jaan Oksa proosaloomingus*, pp. 11 & 63.

<sup>46</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Kevin Hill & Michael A. Scarpitti (Penguin Books, 2017), pp. 461–462.

<sup>47</sup> See Oks, 'Ihu' and 'Nimetu elajas', in *Otsija metsas*, pp. 273 & 313.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 271–80 (p. 278).

<sup>49</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, trans. by Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 22–23.

<sup>50</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche 'On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic', pp. 308–09.

<sup>51</sup> See Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 312 & 321–22.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 297.

<sup>53</sup> Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 246.

<sup>55</sup> See Nietzsche, 'Beyond Good and Evil', in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche in 19 volumes*, 8, pp. 36 & 129, and Nietzsche 'On the Genealogy of Morality', p. 338, and Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', p. 67.

<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 569–70.

<sup>57</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 246; see also pp. 245–47 & 279.

<sup>58</sup> Oks, 'Emased', pp. 252, 257 & 263, and 'Nimetu elajas', p. 285.

<sup>59</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 252.

<sup>60</sup> Nietzsche, 'Beyond Good and Evil', in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche in 19 volumes*, 8, pp. 23–24.

<sup>61</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, trans. by Ronald Speirs (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 8. See also Brian Leiter, 'The Truth is Terrible', *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 49.2 (2018), pp. 151–73.

<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 353.

<sup>63</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 262.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 253.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 235 & 270.

<sup>66</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas' p. 329.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 329, 284, 327 & 314.

- <sup>68</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 247.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp. 244-45.
- <sup>70</sup> Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', p. 14.
- <sup>71</sup> See also Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 286.
- <sup>72</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 245.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 239.
- <sup>74</sup> See also Paul Reets, 'Jaan Oksast ja tema loomingust', *Mana*, 37 (1970), p. 3.
- <sup>75</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Josephine Nauckhoff (Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 109. See also Leo Luks, 'Dekadentsi mõiste tähendus ja kontekst Friedrich Nietzsche filosoofias', *Tuna*, 2 (2023), p. 118.
- <sup>76</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 247. See also Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 314 & 319.
- <sup>77</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 250.
- <sup>78</sup> Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', p. 16.
- <sup>79</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy And Other Writings*, pp. 6-9.
- <sup>80</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 331 & 321.
- <sup>81</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 244.
- <sup>82</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 304.
- <sup>83</sup> See Irving H. Buchen, 'Decadence as Blasphemy', *Modern Language Studies*, 2.1 (1972), p. 22.
- <sup>84</sup> See Oks, 'Emased' and 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 254 & 319; and Oks, 'Ihu', p. 274.
- <sup>85</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 309.
- <sup>86</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 241.
- <sup>87</sup> Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 356 & 355.
- <sup>88</sup> See Melanie Hawthorne, 'The Sexual Psychology of Decadence', in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 202-04.
- <sup>89</sup> Scholars interpret the role and definition of sexuality in Oks differently, with some reading pansexuality (Kristjan Haljak *Jaan Oks ja Lautreamont: üleastuv-tume kirjandus ja luulekeele revolutsioon*). Drawing on feminist and deconstructive readings, I have given a queer reading of gender in the prose poetry. See 'Autumn of the Body on Fire: Notes on the Prose Poetry of Jaan Oks's ('Põleva ihu sügis: märkmeid Jaan Oksa proosaluulest'), *Methis*, 36 (2025), pp. 79-103.
- <sup>90</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 286 & 290.
- <sup>91</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 245.
- <sup>92</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 143.
- <sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 67.
- <sup>94</sup> Although the majority of Nietzsche's fragments concerning the will to power remained unpublished during his lifetime, those ideas can be found throughout his work. See, for example, Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 38-40 & 169-70.
- <sup>95</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 140-43.
- <sup>96</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 287. See also Oks, 'Emased', pp. 244, 262, & 270.
- <sup>97</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 255.
- <sup>98</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 290.
- <sup>99</sup> See Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Naisküsimuse lahendus Weiningeri moodi. Otto Weiningeri minatud naised Tammsaare loomingus', *Vikerkaar*, 1-2 (2005), pp. 87-118.
- <sup>100</sup> Nietzsche, 'Beyond Good and Evil', in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche in 19 volumes*, 8, pp. 137-38
- <sup>101</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 242.
- <sup>102</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 286.
- <sup>103</sup> Ibid., p. 299.
- <sup>104</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 243.
- <sup>105</sup> See Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 297, and Oks, 'Emased', p. 244.
- <sup>106</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 288, 291 & 309.
- <sup>107</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 270.
- <sup>108</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 456-60.
- <sup>109</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 470-472. See also Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- <sup>110</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 449-50.
- <sup>111</sup> See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 164-97.
- <sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 190.
- <sup>113</sup> See Ken Gemes, 'Freud and Nietzsche on Sublimation', *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 38.1 (2009), pp. 38-59; Luke Phillips, 'Sublimation and the Übermensch', *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, 46.3 (2015), pp. 349-66; and Bruce Ellis Benson, *Pious Nietzsche: Decadence and Dionysian Faith* (Indiana University Press, 2008).
- <sup>114</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 474-75 & 466-67.
- <sup>115</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 260.
- <sup>116</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 299.
- <sup>117</sup> Ibid., pp. 308, 325.
- <sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 309, 320, & 324-25.

<sup>120</sup> Charles Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects: The Idea of Decadence in Art, Literature, Philosophy, and Culture of the Fin de Siècle Europe*, ed. by T. Jefferson Kline and Naomi Schor (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 19.

<sup>121</sup> Oks, 'Emased', p. 254.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p. 269.

<sup>124</sup> Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 326 & 330.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp. 298, 319, & 328.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p. 319; see also Haljak, *Jaan Oks ja Lautreamont: üleastuv-tume kirjandus ja luulekeele revolutsioon*, pp. 222-23.