



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 9, Issue 1

Summer 2026

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 May 2026

Date of Publication: 22 July 2026

Citation: Merlin Kirikal, 'Decadent Interart Aesthetics in Johannes Semper's "A Sacred Weed" (1918): Introduction to the First Translation', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 9.1 (2026), pp. 132-41.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



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Decadent Interart Aesthetics in Johannes Semper's 'A Sacred Weed' (1918): Introduction to the First Translation¹

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In the fast-paced, linguistically refined, and at times unmistakably comic decadent short story 'Püha umbrohi' [A Sacred Weed], first published in 1918, the globally unknown and locally rather misunderstood Estonian writer Johannes Semper (1892–1970)² draws the reader into a brief but emotionally and aesthetically intense period in the lives of two art-loving students. At the centre of the swift narrative stands Alla, a charismatic and unpredictable New Woman, whose unstable relationship with her fellow student Ado and a nameless officer drives the story forward. On top of beginning *in medias res*, the narrator keeps omitting personal pronouns to accelerate the overall tempo and carve out the uniqueness of Alla. This exclusion, which is tricky to express in English, emphasizes the impatient nature of the protagonist's intimate ambitions and the restless originality of her creative potential. The shifting of viewpoints between Alla, Ado and the nameless narrator-artist – each with their own peculiar perspective – further enhances the text's vibrant, hasty nature.

The story can be situated within the wave of anti-oppressive movements that emerged across the Czarist empire during and after the First Russian Revolution (1905). 'A Sacred Weed' is set primarily in the capital of imperial Russia, of which Estonia was a colonial borderland until sovereignty was declared in 1918. In Estonia, alongside unfolding contra-Russification sentiments, a new generation of young urban intelligentsia – the first of its kind – sought to emancipate itself from Baltic German cultural dominance, turning instead for inspiration to other rapidly modernizing cultures. For example, the author of 'A Sacred Weed', Semper, was among the first in Estonia to introduce Henri Bergson's philosophy and Futurism. In addition to Nordic writers (e.g., Aino Kallas, Jens Peter Jacobsen), he was amazed by the work of Émile Verhaeren, Georges Rodenbach, and André Gide. He presented his admiration for these Francophone authors to the local audiences by translating their work and/or writing introductory essays.

In the local context, Semper was a disciple of the first modern art movement, Noor-Eesti [Young Estonia] (1905–1915). Although the group formally dissolved in 1915, its influence has shaped Estonian culture well into the early twentieth and even the twenty-first century. For example, one of Estonia's most prestigious literary prizes for short prose was established by and is named after Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971), one of the lead members of Young Estonia and its successor, the coterie Siuru (1917–1919). This circle was known for celebrating the Nietzschean spring drive, *carpe diem* moods, sensuality and hedonism. Under the aegis of Siuru, Semper's debut short prose collection *Hiina kett* (Chain of China, 1918) (Figs. 1 and 2)³ – a cycle of five stories exploring desire, art, artificiality, the New Woman, and beauty – was published. The collection opens with 'A Sacred Weed', which first appeared in the same year in the coterie's eponymous 'little magazine'.



Fig. 1: Cover design by Ado Vabbe for Johannes Semper, *Hiina kett* (Odamees, 1918).
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 Catalogue number UTKK R 10520/T

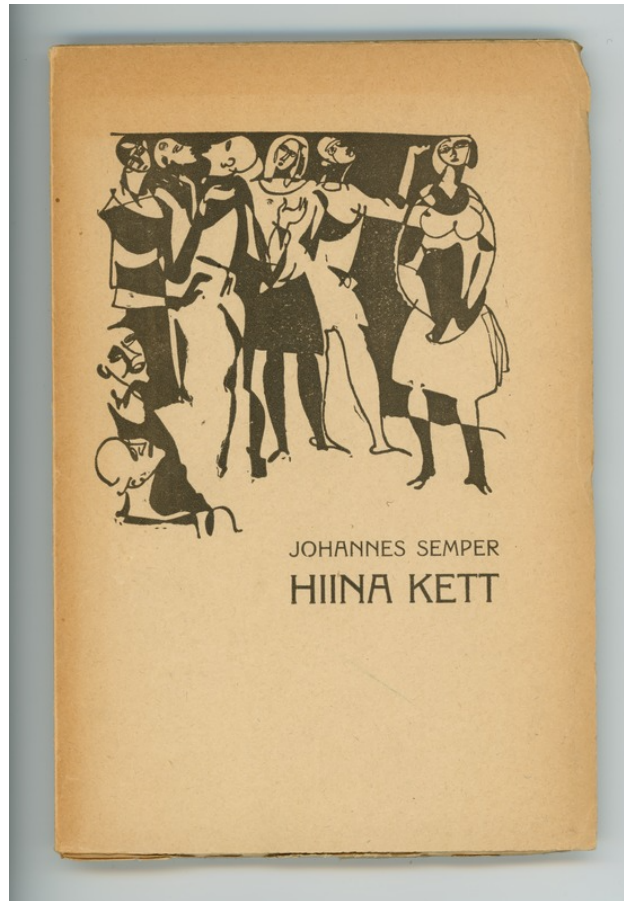


Fig. 2: Cover design by [Ado Vabbe](#) for Johannes Semper, *Hiina kett* (Odamees, 1918).
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What makes the story and its core – Alla's figure – unique in Estonian and perhaps even in global literary history is that she is mostly (albeit not exclusively) shown through a sympathetic gaze. Semper was among the few Estonian male writers of the first half of the twentieth century whose textual voices identify more or less supportively with liberal New Woman figures such as Alla.⁴ Even though the feminist stances found in 'A Sacred Weed' merge with antifeminism *à la* Otto Weininger,⁵ the former viewpoint is played out in a more nuanced way. Alla dominates the story, her ironic and comic disposition escapes rigid value systems (especially visible when contrasted with the male characters) and her creative capacities form the crux of the story. Perhaps this pro-feminist stance blended with a peculiar interart aesthetic, which will be discussed below, can be counted as one of the reasons for the hesitant reception of Semper's *Hiina kett* (Chain of China).⁶

The autofictional dimension is important to understand the story. Namely, from 1910 to 1915, the young author Semper, born in the countryside of present-day Southern Estonia, studied in the Germanic-Romance languages department of the University of St. Petersburg.⁷ During the 1910s, the imperial capital with its multiethnic inhabitants and blossoming art scene functioned as a metropolitan gateway for Estonian urban intellectuals (mostly men), towards higher education, social networks and desirable career choices. Due to its size and infrastructure, St. Petersburg was also a hideaway for Estonian female revolutionaries. These Estonian women had been sent to Tobolsky, Siberia because of active participation in the 1905 uprising, but escaped and lived in the capital with forged identification documents. Some of them, for example Marta Lepp (1883–1940) and Alma Ostra (1886–1960)⁸ who were also writers, were acquaintances of Semper. Beyond greater anonymity, revolutionary women remained there as St. Petersburg's academic life was more egalitarian and diverse than at the *alma mater* in Tartu, where women could participate only as auditors until 1915.⁹ In contrast, St. Petersburg offered institutions, such as the Bestuzhev courses, with high-quality curricula open to women, as well as student societies that welcomed them. The sassy pedagogy student Alla in 'A Sacred Weed' expressively represents this type of New Woman, demanding and to an extent also enjoying the long sought-after possibilities: studying, participating in public discussions, and diving into versatile cultural life. Semper's story, imagined and composed during and straight after his St. Petersburg period, vividly reflects this change in gendered social structures.

The reader of the story quickly notices that the charisma of Alla relies heavily on intermedial and intertextual webs that the character embodies and is surrounded by. Indeed, the cumulation of references is essential in works aligned with fin-de-siècle decadence as an aesthetic phenomenon and a wider timebound attunement to the surrounding world which achieved its peak in Estonia during the First World War. That is precisely when 'A Sacred Weed' was published. Abundant cues in Semper's story range from ancient myths, Peter Paul Rubens, and *japonisme* to Oscar Wilde, Konstantin Balmont, and Anna Pavlova. Given the references, 'A Sacred Weed' with

its memorable New Woman protagonist demonstrates literacy in various art forms, including modern dance, music, sculpture and painting. In this regard, the story takes full advantage of the perks of its *locus*. By the 1910s, St. Petersburg had become an industrial-commercial hotspot and a fulcrum of cultural exchange and entertainment avenues.¹⁰ With multiple halls and galleries – such as the Hermitage Museum, an important strolling spot for Alla and Ado – both the newest, including radical, and classical artworks were directly accessible.

Indeed, Alla comes forward as a colourful emblem of transnational artistic interactions. The arcane descriptions of her Isadora Duncan-imitating¹¹ body dynamics (e.g., she stretches ‘her arms high above her head like flowers reaching for the sun’)¹² which contribute to her excessive image are paired with references to European visual art. For example, Alla takes extravagant and promiscuous poses, mimicking the sexualized young women in the orientalist-colonialist paintings of the French-Polish artist Adam Styka. Alla’s dark, wavy hair and curvy hips are to the narrator and to herself reminiscent of the Basque master Ignacio Zuloaga’s paintings of *señoritas* that Alla has recently seen in an exhibition.¹³ She emulates artworks in her everyday life as if putting on and changing masks. A continuous playful self-creation via identifications with various figures from different cultures and art forms brings Alla forth as a striving Nietzschean New Woman.¹⁴ This flaunting performance drives one of Alla’s partners, the sincerity-seeker Ado furious.¹⁵ Alla’s nickname ‘Sacred Weed’ which emphasizes vitality and re-budding also hints of Nietzschean impacts.¹⁶

The New Woman’s extravagant behaviour and the overall ardent temper of the story together with the repeating motifs and linguistic choices contribute to the key topic both in the story and in Semper’s whole intertextually and intermedially loaded *œuvre* written before the Second World War. This core idea is to investigate and articulate the incessant search for states of affective, sensuous intensity, while criticizing tepid, overtly rational and pragmatic modes of perception, behaviour and communication. This search is played out mainly in the above-mentioned Nietzschean but also in the Bergsonian vein, marked with a yearning for everlasting movement

and continuous change, conceptualized by the aforementioned thinkers as Dionysianism, *durée*, and *élan vital*.¹⁷ One's search for aliveness and invigoration through theorizing and embodying being as eternal striving towards heightened awareness of selfhood is also enhanced by the techniques used at the beginning of the story (omission of personal pronouns, stress on verbs, discernibly dynamic pace). On the one hand, the characters pursue intense perception and cognition through accumulating meaningful, fervent experiences in galleries and concert halls, but also through collecting reproductions, reading out poetry and sharing impressions with peers. On the other hand, this intensity is traced through risky, often masochistic or untrustworthy and toxic relationships usually interpreted through Nietzschean ideas about gender relations as a constant war.¹⁸ Semper continuously addresses love as an eternal chain of pleasure, betrayal, and pain. This repetitive hedonistic tension between lovers is also reflected on the front covers of the story collection created by the Estonian avant-garde artist Ado Vabbe. Alla intentionally makes both of her lovers jealous and refuses to communicate earnestly. Ado at the same time is afraid of Alla's ironic disposition and previous sexual experiences which makes him scornful and bitter. Both act in ways which lead towards a conflict and breakup. The pleasures of intimacy as an experience of rebirth and joy mix with decline and negative affects creating a decadent mixture of constant, tiring and then again energizing fluctuation. This is also noticed in the reception of Semper's short stories during the Soviet era, in the 1970s,¹⁹ especially in comparison with the more symmetric and reciprocal conceptualization of love by the Estonian-Finnish writer Aino Kallas (1878–1956) who was an inspiration for Semper.

In connection with experiences of erotic bliss and pain, the allusion-rich text repeatedly alludes to music, explicitly to the Nordic composers Edvard Grieg and Jean Sibelius.²⁰ Even though this sympathy did not start or end with the decadents, many writers of decadence especially cherished music. For example, one of the leaders of British decadence and an intellectual godfather of Oscar Wilde, the traces of whom are also significant in Semper's story,²¹ Walter Pater in his *School of Giorgione* (1877), presented music as the fusion of form and content and as arguably

emotionally the most unmediated of arts, the highest position in the hierarchy of arts.²² Slightly earlier, in his *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (*The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872), the young Nietzsche emphasized the Dionysian inspiration of music, describing music as a direct conduit to untamed vitality and thus a means of cultural renewal and meaningful self-cultivation. At least partly, Nietzsche appreciated music because of its immediacy, imagelessness, and resistance to analytical examination. This authentic feeling that music ought to bring about is aligned with the sense of intensity Alla and her many doppelgängers in Semper's works are searching for through art and erotic connections.

Music found its way into 'A Sacred Weed' in many ways. For example, the verbal texture of the story is suffused with musical terms, such as *pizzicato*, cadences, minor or prelude which suggest reading the text as if it were a score. Alla's erotic intentions are reflected by the representation of the Imatra waterfall in Finland, whose force is further intensified by the on-site playing of Sibelius' (one of Alla's and Ado's favourite composers) *Karelia* series (1893). Indeed, it is by the Imatra waterfall during a party that Alla and her fellow student Ado first spend time together which kickstarts the story's conflict. As a metaphor of incessant vital forces which seduce Alla to dream of diving into the fatal stream, the narrator associates the waterfall with the muffled bass of a distant organ. This alludes to the beginning of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "The dim roar of London was like the bourdon note of a distant organ."²³ The incorporation of these sounds should add depth, power, low-frequency vibration (as rather felt than heard) to the reading experience. Semper's narrator's depiction of the Imatra waterfall presents (musicalized) nature not as a threat, but as a vital potential – a conception characteristic of Nordic decadence more broadly.²⁴ The centrality of the horrible, seductive, and loud waterfall suggests multiple inevitable (positive) destructions: on the plot level Alla's paradoxical tendency to undermine her erotic relationships and on a meta level the outdated unambiguous patterns of aesthetic expression and rigid gender norms. Both ruptures are also preconditions to cultural innovation.

Thus, in the context of fin-de-siècle decadence, artistic authority was already by the pioneering supporters of decadence defined in two closely related ways. On the one hand, the highest value was accorded to works that forged dense, multilayered connections among celebrated texts and art forms. On the other hand, particular admiration was reserved for authors who demonstrated mastery of several arts within a single medium. In literature, this ideal manifested itself in the proliferation of artists' names and texts' titles, motifs and myths, and in experimental techniques such as ekphrasis or deliberate rhythmization. By converging different art forms through acts of naming and stylistic imitation, Semper's story amplifies its expressive reach, drawing the reader into a thick web of associations. The resulting sense of overload is thus deliberate: the text does not distil meaning from self-contained entities but instead creates aesthetic effect through juxtapositions. In this respect, (Semperian) literary decadence presupposes a learned reader – one who actively gathers, recognizes, and recombines cultural signs.²⁵

Similarly to many of his contemporaries who cultivated interart aesthetics, Semper's story suggests that the effort to approximate other arts opens up new imaginative possibilities: when artistic forms converge, something liminal and unprecedented comes into being. 'A Sacred Weed' with its recycling of diverse influences – including those of major Estonian literary figures such as Kallas, Tuglas, and A. H. Tammsaare – offers a textbook example of this aesthetic. The juxtaposition of art forms and the excessive accumulation of works and authors is evident not only at the level of style, but also in characterization.

Like Dorian Gray, who is mentioned twice in connection with the cult of youth and hedonism, Alla is a decadent collector who constructs her identity through the selection of recognized artworks.²⁶ She owns inexpensive reproductions of Auguste Rodin and Styka, and in her rented room, alongside memorabilia and perfumes, lies a volume of poetry by Konstantin Balmont. Both the form and content of this assemblage reveal her yearning for heightened erotic intensity. The logic of collection mirrors Alla's promiscuity, exposing Ado's gendered prejudices and prompting his departure. When another lover also abandons her, Alla falls into despair.

Yet the story concludes on a different note: it is through creative comparison and the continual aesthetic remodelling of the seemingly mundane or even painful aspects of existence that an intensified, vital perception of reality becomes possible. At the top of the wind-swept tower of St. Isaac's Cathedral in St. Petersburg, a space of transition, Alla confronts the ambiguity of existence and ultimately refuses suicide, despite the loss of her lovers and the absence of hope for either romantic fulfilment or professional self-realisation. From this bird's-eye perspective, the street below resembles the back of a book, and its passers-by appear as miniature figures moving across a stage. Life turns into art. Through Alla's gaze, the aestheticization of life becomes a means of preserving it: reality, continually refracted through artistic perception, acquires multidimensional richness. Through art, we as Alla, yet again grow open to the world.

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; by the Estonian Research Council grant PSG1106, 'Rahvusriigid, etnilisus ja kuuluvustunne: transnatsionaalse modernismi tekke uurimine Eesti ja Iiri kirjanduses' [Nation States, Ethnicity and Belonging: Tracing the Emergence of Transnational Modernism in Estonian and Irish Writing] and the Under and Tuglas Literary Institute of the Estonian Academy of Sciences.

² Johannes Semper and his work are often defined through his voluntary collaboration with the Soviet occupation forces since 1940. His preceding cultural achievements have oftentimes been overshadowed by this political choice and his open acknowledgement of Socialist Realism as a creative method. A brief overview about Semper's life and *œuvre* can be found here: Katre Talviste, 'On the Way Towards Modernity: An Estonian Poet's Relationship with the City', *Interlitteraria*, 12 (2007), pp. 361-70, <<https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=224818>> [accessed 25 February 2026].

³ The title of Semper's collection is inspired by the typically decadent exoticism, that is a tendency to associate the othered 'East' with uncivilized, savage sexual desires. The word 'chain' hints to intimate connections which are based on betrayal and the urge to incessantly change partners.

⁴ At the same time Semper's textual voices do not identify with queer characters. See Merlin Kirikal, 'Viriloid Women and Bodiless Men: On Modern Sexualities in the Œuvre of Johannes Semper', *Interlitteraria*, 26.2 (2021), pp. 448-63, doi:10.12697/IL.2021.26.2.9.

⁵ Otto Weininger's *magnum opus*, *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903), much adored by Estonian male decadents, was mostly read in German but it was also quickly translated into Russian (see Evgenii Bershtein, 'The Notion of Universal Bisexuality in Russian Religious Philosophy', in *Understanding Russianness*, ed. by Risto Alapuro, Arto Mustajoki, and Pekka Pesonen (Routledge, 2012), pp. 210-31 (p. 212).

⁶ A national and gender-conservative writer and critic Karl August Hindrey described this collection, including 'A Sacred Weed' pejoratively as the artificial quintessence of European culture. Karl August Hindrey, 'Mõned uued raamatud', *Päevaleht*, 4 July 1919.

⁷ In 1914, the city was renamed Petrograd.

⁸ Merlin Kirikal, 'Naisküsimus ja dekadentsi mustrid Sophia Vardi novellis "Esimesed tuuled" (1914) ja Alma Ostra jutustuses "Aino" (1923)', *Methis. Studia Humaniora Estonica*, 29.36 (2025), pp. 104-25.

⁹ Lembi Anepaio & Janet Laidla, 'Esimesed doktorikraadiga naised tänapäeva Eesti aladelt', in *Õpetatud Eesti Seltsi aastaraamat / Annales Litterarum Societatis Esthonicae*, ed. by Andres Andresen, Brita Melts, Heiki Valk, Kristo Oks, Marju Luts-Sootak, Taavi Pae and Tõnu Tannberg (Learned Estonian Society, 2022), pp. 28-67 (p. 64).

¹⁰ About St. Petersburg before and during the First World War, see Olga Matich, *Petersburg/Petersburg: Novel and City, 1900-1921* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2010); Mark D. Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin de Siècle: The Darkening Landscape of Modern Times, 1905-1917* (Yale University Press, 2011). A short overview in English about Estonians in St.

Petersburg from the last decade of the nineteenth century until 1917 can be found here: Raimo Pullat, *Lootuste linn: Peterburi ja eesti baritlaskonna kujunemine kuni 1917* (Estopol, 2004), pp. 315-21.

¹¹ One of Semper's and his peers' favourite artist, Isadora Duncan, had been performing in Russia since 1904. See for example Elizabeth Souritz, 'Isadora Duncan's Influence on Dance in Russia', *Dance Chronicle*, 18.2 (1995), pp. 281-91.

¹² All excerpts of 'A Sacred Weed' are from the translation by Adam Cullen published in this issue.

¹³ In 1913, Zuloaga's exhibitions were held in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

¹⁴ About the *prima facie* oxymoronic term 'Nietzschean New Woman', see for example, Carol Diethe, 'Nietzsche's New Woman after a Century', *The European Legacy*, 2.2 (1997), pp. 271-76, doi:10.1080/10848779708579726; Viola Parente-Čapková, 'Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound: Mimetic Strategies in L. Onerva's *Mirdja*' (doctoral dissertation, University of Turku, 2014). See also Viola Parente-Čapková, 'Introduction: L. Onerva's Decadent New Woman Seeker', in L. Onerva: *Mirdja. A Decadent New Woman*, ed. by Stefano Evangelista and Catherine Maxwell, trans. by Eva Buchwald (Modern Humanities Research Association, Jewelled Tortoise, 11, 2025), pp. 1-36.

¹⁵ Semper develops this snappy, chameleonic New Woman type further in his innovative short story collection *Ellinor* mediated fully through the first-person perspective of the eponymous female protagonist (1927). This was the first literary text in Estonian written by a man and narrated chiefly by a woman.

¹⁶ A deeper interpretation of the name can be found here: Mirjam Hinrikus & 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 (p. 730), doi:10.3406/rbph.

¹⁷ Hinrikus & Kirikal, 'Decadence as Dynamism and Mutability'.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 106.

¹⁹ Toomas Liiv, 'Eesti novell aastail 1917-1925', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 4 (1977), pp. 205-18 (p. 217).

²⁰ This Nordic thread is part of a wider admiration and sustained interest in Nordic culture by Estonian first-generation urban intellectuals. This has been partly explained as caused by the need of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century (nationalist) thinkers to search for new models of identification instead of (Baltic-)German and Russian influences. See Mart Kuldkepp, 'The Scandinavian Connection in Early Estonian Nationalism', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 44.3 (2013), pp. 313-38, doi: 10.1080/01629778.2012.744911.

²¹ Mirjam Hinrikus & Merlin Kirikal, 'Dekadents ja elu. Nietzschelik-bergsonlik liikumise ning volamise esteetika Tammsaare ja Semperi varases proosas', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 67.1-2 (2024), pp. 108-43 (p. 127), doi:10.54013/kk794a6.

²² Emma Sutton, "'Restless Mystical Ardours': Decadence and Music', in *Decadence: A Literary History*, ed. by Alex Murray (Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 218-33 (p. 221), doi:10.1017/9781108640527.

²³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, n.d. <<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/174/174-h/174-h.htm>> [accessed 27 February 2026].

²⁴ Rikka Rossi, 'Primitive Passions and Nostalgia for Nature. Decadence and Primitivism in Maria Jotuni's Work', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 2.1 (2019), pp. 100-19 (p. 111).

²⁵ Matthew Potolsky, 'Decadence, Nationalism, and the Logic of Canon Formation', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 67.2 (2006), pp. 213-44 (p. 225), doi:10.1215/00267929-2005-003.

²⁶ Potolsky, 'Decadence, Nationalism, and the Logic of Canon Formation', p. 225.