



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 9, Issue 1

Summer 2026

Review: L. Onerva, *Mirdja: A Decadent New Woman*, trans. by Eva Buchwald
(Modern Humanities Research Association, 2025)

Tiina Ann Kirss

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 May 2026

Date of Publication: 22 July 2026

Citation: Tiina Ann Kirss, 'L. Onerva, *Mirdja: A Decadent New Woman*, trans. by Eva Buchwald (Modern Humanities Research Association, 2025)', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 9.1 (2026), pp. 181-90.

volupte.gold.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

L. Onerva, *Mirdja: A Decadent New Woman*, trans. by Eva Buchwald
with introduction and commentary by Viola Parente-Čapková,
Jewelled Tortoise 11 (Modern Humanities Research Association, 2025)
vii + 292 pp. ISBN 9781839541261

Tiina Ann Kirss

Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu

In 2025 the English translation was published of L. Onerva's *Mirdja*, a major Finnish decadent novel, which first appeared in 1908. The critical edition comprises the elegant prose translation by Eva Buchwald and an excellent, in-depth Introduction by Viola Parente-Čapková, who has also written the commentary accompanying the text. The volume also contains a selection of contemporary reviews of the novel. This is the first translation of *Mirdja* into one of the major languages.

L. Onerva, pen name of Hilja Onerva Lehtinen (1882-1972), was a prolific Finnish writer of poetry, long and short prose, and a translator from French into Finnish of the works of writers from the French Romantic and decadent traditions, including the poetry of Alfred de Musset, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Théophile Gautier, Hippolyte Taine's *Philosophie de l'Art*, and writings by Paul Bourget and Marcelle Tinayre. In her poems, the novel *Mirdja* and short story collections *Murtoviivoja* [Broken lines] (1909) and *Nousukekita* [Social climbers] (1911) she explores disparate topics related to gender, including independent women characters of different social backgrounds and the 'fatal' aspects of sexual difference. Onerva is also the author of two other novels, *Inari* (1913) and *Yksinäisiä* [The lonely ones] (1917). Indeed, her most prolific years were the 1910s though she continued to write poetry throughout her life. In the 1920s she worked on an extensive biography of the poet Eino Leino, which was published in 1932.

In the opening, framing chapter of the novel *Mirdja*, the protagonist is introduced by hearsay while a group of society women led by a professor's wife, Elli Kailo, are preparing the programme for a patriotic social event with a cultural soirée. The name Mirdja Ast is mentioned as a promising young singer who might be included in the event, but others among the women

organisers say she is also reputed to be of 'bad character' and 'bad blood'. It is also clear that Elli's son Eino, a university student, knows of Mirdja, and the reader rapidly learns that Eino is enamoured of her. The second scene shows Mirdja waiting on a park bench for Eino's belated appearance; she is ill-humoured, already quite bored with the relationship and wants nothing of the serious marital prospects he has in mind for them: in a moment of cruelty she snubs Eino when he arrives. While she is waiting for Eino the narrator refracts Mirdja's 'inner fancies': she plans a career as a singer and actress which would make her invincible:

Her future would rise like a whirl of fire. She herself would soar on wings of flame above the crowds, who would bow to her glory. She was going to be a singer, an actress, she would enchant the world, and she would never have to beg for anything from anyone (p. 61).

Quickly, however, Mirdja's imagination comes to resemble decadent fantasies: alone on her bed, she has a nightmare of red spiders and longs for darker realms of experience: 'Mirdja's entire being begged and screamed for morbid pleasure, for the wild, fervent gratification of the senses, for the light, intoxicating frolic of the spirit' (p. 79). *Mirdja* is an erotic and artistic novel about a female protagonist who embodies the New Woman of fin-de-siècle European literature and her decadent quest against conventionality.

Mirdja's ambitions to become an actress and singer do not cancel out her pursuit of love, fraught as it is with ambivalence, the double impulse she had with Eino Kailo of frustration leading to cruelty and a repentant wish to be good and kind. The novel proceeds with a carefully composed series of *études* of Mirdja's encounters with different men among her university acquaintances, each of which ends in failure. The introspective narrative treatments of these exposures lead the reader to ask whether Mirdja is unwilling or unable to love; whether this a defect or an excess, or whether it points beyond social limitations to a different configuration of a relationship more in keeping with the needs and desires of an emergent 'new' woman.

The scenes of Mirdja's encounters with a series of men are marked by musical headings under the general title 'Madrigal Tales': Allegro appassionato (Mauri Etso), Andante con dolore

(Eero Selinä), Allegretto capriccioso (Yrjö Särkkä), Barcarola (Torild), and Nocturno (Rolf Tanne). The headings evoke the settings and moods of the encounters, the pace and rhythms of evocation and disintegration. Taken together, these scenes or exposures constitute a parody of the narrative of *l'éducation sentimentale* with a female protagonist. The encounters are narrated as multi-layered dialogues, which at first posit, then deconstruct, the possibilities of love. While the dialogues sparkle with potential, they ultimately subvert conventional roles and the archetypes that underpin them. Mirdja prevails by not succumbing to the gender games and disentangling herself from the relationships.

The erotic challenges come to belie conventional attitudes and expectations, from which Mirdja recoils. Indeed, the male figures at first seem to embody romantic fantasies: life alongside Mauri Etso is 'a delirium, a dream banquet' and Mirdja 'is transported by the (Nietzschean), hypnotic power of a man's iron will' (p. 83). Etso, however, proves to be no dreamer and Mirdja does not fall for the bait of the myth of love as offering a means to wholeness. She shifts, recognising a trap, and the dynamic of the relationship is unmasked: 'And now a perfect stranger stared at him, from behind her stone armour' (p. 83). The narrator intervenes: 'This is a brief account of exiting a delirium' (p. 83). For Mirdja 'truth is a kaleidoscope of sparks fired by the gods' (p. 85). Mauri Etso rings the changes of conventional beliefs about love: he insists that the test of love is a 'ten-year experiment' and stresses the virtue of constancy, claiming that life should be woven from one continuous thread. Mirdja is unimpressed:

Now Mirdja felt quite liberated from this man, quite a stranger to him, quite indifferent to his happiness or unhappiness. Now she was able to lampoon him, deceive him, lash out at him in her thoughts, test him [...]. And unadulterated joy pulsed through her veins... (p. 85).

Another dynamic of the narration of the musical scenes of Mirdja's exposures to different masculinities is the glimmering possibility of a 'new woman', who is first evoked ambivalently in the dialogues as the coexistence of masculine and feminine attributes. These individual men, by turns in love with Mirdja, judge her for being out of line with social definitions of femininity as

well as with feminine archetypes. Yrjö Särkka, for example, articulates Mirdja's impassivity as a spiritual and erotic defect: 'If you love me, why don't you ever burst into bloom, into that florid, red, queen of the night lily that I know grows within you?' (p. 105) He insists that she actually loves him: otherwise she would be 'like the flighty wretches', an 'immoral woman'. Though he owns his mistake ('I tried to make you fit the mould of bourgeois convention'), this is neither an affirmation of Mirdja nor a declaration of her victory. Besides the offence of being classified among the immoral women, there is another price to pay: 'her emotions pick at her heart like birds of prey' (p. 106). These individual men have judged her for being out of line with social definitions of femininity. The sequential exposures come to a climax at the Walpurgis night celebrations, where Mauri Etso, Eero Selinä, and Yrjö Särkka revel at the table with Rolf Tanne and in Mirdja's presence.

Mirdja's mentor Rolf Tanne, appears as both the next man in the sequence of musical scenes (Nocturno) and as a counterpoise, recognising and extolling her extraordinariness. Rather than a lack, being a new woman is its own kind of plenitude, but this is still articulated as the paradoxical summation of masculine and feminine qualities:

You are a strange girl, in your egotistic altruism, your shattered wholeness, your carelessly proud self-esteem [...]. You have the courage of a man and the gentle, multi-subtle soul of a woman, you are as intellectual as a man and as feminine as the most feminine woman in the world [...]. You dare to look at the world through men's eyes and yet feel it with the finely tuned sensitivity of a woman. (p. 114)

We learn from the commentary that 'shattered wholeness' is a key metaphor, given that 'striving for "wholeness" was a recurrent motif in Finnish fin-de-siècle literature; wholeness was seen as an (unattainable) ideal, opposite to Decadent fragmentation' (p. 114). Despite Mirdja's protestations to Rolf that she is 'very bad, very unstable, very complicated', Rolf insists that these are aspects of her wisdom: she is 'rich and strong-willed, impossible to conquer, unlike those eternal feminine ones' (p. 64). In addition, Mirdja is the rare woman who can enter into friendship with men, a relation customarily, almost invariably offered by men to other men.

The episodes of Mirdja's encounters with the various men take place in decadent landscapes or interiors. Some of the men are stock decadent characters, particularly Eero Selinä, the failed student who sits in the pavilion restaurant brooding over his tall glass of absinthe. The narrator sets up Selinä's character as a 'born dandy, every tiny fault merely accentuates the overall effect, giving him the gentle appeal of modern jadedness' (p. 90). He is also a misogynist: Mirdja's interest is piqued by the 'eyes that play the blind man': 'I want to look into that terrible soul, which denies everyone, and I want to govern that man, who hates women' (p. 90). By a process of transference she makes contact with Selinä's inner state. Rolf invokes the decadent prototype with Selinä at the Walpurgis night celebration: 'We're of the same weak and sickly stock, you and me, we lack any great drive, but instead we have a nervous life rich in a myriad of subtle sensations' (p. 125). What Mirdja has done is to mobilise the 'ailing knight' from his torpid state of mind, but her efforts to heal him backfire: she is unwilling to perpetuate the role of nursemaid that would be required to maintain this healing, or make it possible for him to overcome his addiction. She is fundamentally unwilling to take on this limited role.

The text poses the question of whether women can be artists on a level of parity with men. On one level, the novel buys into the romantic image of the artist as the beautiful soul, suffering due his or her creativity, but on another, this image is ironized, hollowed out, and deconstructed. At the beginning of the novel, at the gathering hosted by Elli Kailo, Mirdja is evoked as an excellent singer. She is also an accomplished actress, with the potential to make a brilliant career. Creativity is discussed on one level as child-like play, but being an artist entails a relationship with an audience:

And Mirdja would play with her eyes the way other children would play with the glint in glass globes or shiny toys, but she amused herself with caution and skill, always slipping through the fingers of her observer like a lie, or a shadow. (p. 78)

In the role of actress there is considerable self-pleasure, which is limited by the pressure to succeed:

She was both actress and her own audience. She would watch the harmony of her gestures and hues in the mirror, and soon her sensory pleasure and emotional sensitivity blended into a strange kind of intensity of being which could have offered the delirium of happiness, were it not crying out so painfully for recognition, recognition. (p. 78)

The predicament of this lability, we find out, is shared by men and women artists. The painter Bengt Iro, one of Mirdja's 'comrades in art' (friend, but not lover) acknowledges, albeit ironically, that Mirdja has 'the temperament of a rare artist' (p. 128). Mirdja stands in the stairwell of the atelier she has shared with Iro, and her interior monologue undercuts the romantic image of the artist, pointing to decadence: 'Memories of moments when her soul was full of bold artistic conviction, when her brain was boiling over with self-assured motivation, and her imagination floated blissfully in the lofty gardens of the *Übermensch*' (p. 128). Characteristic of decadent texts, the novel is infused with a rich 'programmatic' intertextuality consisting of both 'indirect allusions and direct quotations from historical and contemporary authors including Shakespeare, Goethe, Verlaine, Bourget, Leino and Nietzsche, but also artists and composers' (p. 24).

Lumiluoto is a liminal space located at the margins, at a distance from society, where Mirdja visits her uncle Arnold Ast, who raised her after she was orphaned at a young age. She travels to Lumiluoto in the springtime, after the Walpurgis night revels. At Lumiluoto, a landscape reminiscent of fairy tales, Mirdja initially finds a space where she can be replenished and return, however briefly, to a childlike state. However, her 'draining cross-examinations' soon return and Mirdja enquires into her origins. Her uncle gives her a letter that he received from his brother, Mirdja's father, when he entrusted Arnold Ast with her care, a letter that Arnold Ast believes she is finally ready to read. Mirdja learns of her father's longings and unfulfilled ambitions: 'I was a fantasist and a poet, whole-hearted in my commitment, indiscriminate, excitable, and sickly' (p. 145). His fundamental quest, paradoxically, was for a new woman 'a woman, as an all-encompassing spirit, resilient as reason, as ingenuous as instinct, profound and light, everything at once, and above all human, a human being who can declare: I hold no facet of humanity alien to me!' (p. 148) Mirdja's suspicions that there might be madness in her bloodline receive confirmation: she sees herself in the letter as in a mirror: 'I belong to a fantastic bloodline of eternal dreamers, budding artists, and madness' (p. 148).

It is significant that Mirdja returns to Lumiluoto as an old woman at the end of her life, when she is a madwoman obsessively seeking the child she never had. In the final scene of the novel she walks into the marsh. The Introduction to the novel reminds the reader that the marsh is both a topos in Finnish folk poetry and a symbol of the subconscious in Nordic decadent literature. By taking refuge in the marsh, Mirdja both invokes and participates in the deconstruction of the Finnish national landscape: the marsh herbs are conflated with Baudelaire's 'fleurs du mal' and Swedish decadent Ola Hansson's 1887 text 'Sensitiva amorosa'. At its culmination, the novel 'engag[es] with the textual politics of representing and (re)creating place in Decadent writing' (p. 33).

From her first sojourn at Lumiluoto Mirdja goes abroad, to go out into the world and to seek her calling in the 'bright lights of colossal cities' (p. 163). The text again begins to resemble a novel of quest, this time a search for spirituality and for oneself. 'Soliloquies Abroad' is narrated in long monologues in the first person, in a particularly digressive and polyphonic style. Mirdja announces her intention to realise her potential as an artist through work: she is bored with experiencing and analysing her manifold psychological states and with what she refers to as 'les sensations' (p. 162). However, she lacks the purposefulness to achieve her goals and the resoluteness to engage in artistic work. Instead, in an 'ekphrastic chapter' of the novel (p. 259) she discovers Venetian Renaissance painter Crivelli's Madonna in an art gallery and becomes obsessed with it, identifying narcissistically with the figure in the painting and 'stealing' the painting little by little by copying it. As a result of her encounter with a strange male painter who interrupts her contemplation of the Madonna and wants to turn Mirdja into his model, she loses contact with the image, which metamorphoses from Madonna into Medusa. The image of Crivelli's Madonna connects with the topic of motherlessness that recurs throughout the novel in various guises.

Upon her return from abroad, Mirdja gives a brilliant performance at a fundraising event in Helsinki in the leading role of a new play entitled 'Odalisque', which she feels cuts 'all too close to the bone' of her own image (p. 178). That same evening she meets Runar Söderberg, who later

becomes her husband. Runar is introduced by his voice, which is ‘masculine and resonant, but so calm and controlled that it sounds almost monotonous’ (p. 180). The reader is struck by the contrast with Mirdja’s own ‘voice of myriad colours’ (p. 179). Runar’s solidity is attractive, in conjunction with his ostensible depth of understanding of the artistic temperament: ‘everything about this man ran deep, every move was deliberate and permanent, it was written in every feature of his face’ (p. 180). Runar believes that ‘the artist is a great god who can bring our imagination to life and make beauty real’ (p. 183). He appeals to Mirdja in a psychological sense as an anchor whose ‘inner holistic peace [...] would melt all my myriad impulses into one resilient whole’ (p. 191), though this would prove elusive, if not misguided.

The longer narrative trajectory of Mirdja’s engagement and marriage to Runar, her subsequent rebellion against Runar’s conventionality and her allergy to the confining framework of bourgeois marriage itself point to the discontents of the New Woman. Mirdja survives the limitations of wedlock only through the performance of neurotic (if not hysterical) scenes and at the price of illness. At the beginning of the relationship the narrator sums up the dynamics of the prior sequence of potential lovers in the musical scenes, evoking this pattern: ‘Mirdja was about to win a man’s heart and surrender to love. All very familiar so far; and this would be followed by the usual sequel: The rift. A new rupture’ (p. 194). However, Runar dreams idealistically of ‘a kindred spirit, the companion [...] a bright light of a woman, whose unquenchable inner fire burns with tall flames’ (p. 192). Further, he envisions the relationship as a partnership aligned with the greater good of humanity:

And together they burn with one sacred flame, the flame of love for truth and love for one another, and with flaming wings they soar to impossible heights [...] their hearts beat with humanity’s great purpose and they leave a golden ring on the chain of progress. (p. 192)

Already from the double valence of the figure of the ‘golden ring’ and the ‘chain of progress’, this vision is ironized. Nevertheless, the account of Mirdja and Runar’s relationship has considerable complexity. The possibility of deep conflict as a basic condition is acknowledged by the maxim ‘May the friction begin!’ (p. 204) At a critical moment prior to their marriage Runar – who in the

scene of his first meeting with Mirdja has alluded cryptically to the years he has spent abroad – shows Mirdja the manuscripts he wrote in Paris, entitled ‘Diary of a Sick Man’ (197), containing a decadent short story about a woman named (aptly) Parisetta: ‘It was night-time on the streets of Paris. But your flame-red hair glowed with demonic glory in the haze of the lamplight and your crater-like eyes reflected the last lanterns of the inferno’ (p. 199). The decadent Runar may, in fact, hold the key to the survival of the relationship. Mirdja identifies with Parisetta, claiming that she is ‘doomed to the same fate’, but she nevertheless does not leave Runar. Psychologically, the turning point here is Mirdja’s recursion to her root vulnerability, a motherless child’s longing for connection and safety:

She feels better, though her chest still heaves with the occasional sob, and she feels safe. Runar is a good, strong giant carrying her, a small tired child, on his shoulders up a steep hill. Runar will shield her from everything, from herself even, and the terrible prostitution that life is. (pp. 203-04)

Gradually, however, the everyday realities of marriage wear both partners down and their shared life becomes a series of crises and reconciliations tolerated with the belief that one is the other’s ‘Destiny’, a life lived in the mode of irony, at the price of creativity. Mirdja comes to despise Runar’s belonging to ‘the middle-way lineage’, his penchant for negotiation and compromise. Mirdja declares: ‘I recognise no concept of marriage. I am yours for every day that you still rally to conquer me, and for every night that I can still choose you freely for my lover over all others (p. 226). Yet the partnership is hardly this rational; it is ridden with conflict interspersed with rare moments of ‘spontaneous harmony’ (p. 223). When Runar’s parents come to visit, Mirdja falls ill and her mother-in-law Anna nurses her; the narrator describes her illness allegorically as Mirdja carrying a ‘chequered carnival in her soul’, and by using one of the many decadent flower images deployed in the novel: ‘She was a poisonous flower cultivated in an unnatural habitat, sick to the breaking point, helpless and incurable. Sick in that every caress and smile on her nurse’s lip inflamed her and made her worse. Such was her sickness’ (p. 232). Towards the end of the novel, at a chance meeting Rolf Tanne excoriates Mirdja for being married, which always entails choosing someone

less than oneself, and at a soirée she meets Bengt Iro, who treats her with ‘condescending dismissiveness’ (p. 257). In an interesting twist, she is able to meet the elusive Genius Norkko, the presumed librettist of the play *Odalisque*, but it turns out that the real author of the play is Runar himself. This strongly points to the paradox of his own suppressed artistic potential – as also seen in the ‘Diary of a Sick Man’. The reader is reminded of the ever-so-brief evocation of the concept of ‘Wahlverwandschaften’ at Mirdja and Runar’s first meeting. In its final scenes before Runar’s death, the marriage metamorphoses into a kind of mythical one, a ‘new relationship that subverts the idea of radical heterosexuality as well as the plot of romantic love’ (p. 18).

In the Introduction, Viola Parente-Čapková states that *Mirdja* most closely approximates a decadent *Künstlerroman* with a woman protagonist, in the tradition of Madame de Staël’s *Corinne ou l’Italie* (1807) and George Sand’s *Consuelo* (1842-1843). Onerva wrote a short book about Madame de Staël in 1920 and referred frequently to Sand’s characters in her 1905 thesis on Musset’s female characters (p. 30). Indeed, *Mirdja* is one of the first *Künstlerromans* in the Finnish context to be written by a woman (p. 31). Crucial to the novel’s armature of concepts about gender are Nietzsche’s ideas on women and femininity which ‘often lead the protagonist to an impasse’ (p. 20). Equally significant are the ‘Nietzschean textual strategies’ that the novel employs: ‘violating narratological norms, questioning the hierarchy and the very difference between the original and the copy, frequently using irony, parody, and paradox’ (p. 21).

Onerva’s *Mirdja* is a key work of Nordic decadence, now available to the English-language reader, furnished with an eminently helpful introduction, scholarly apparatus, and critical texts help situate it in the scholarly reception of fin-de-siècle and decadent literature.