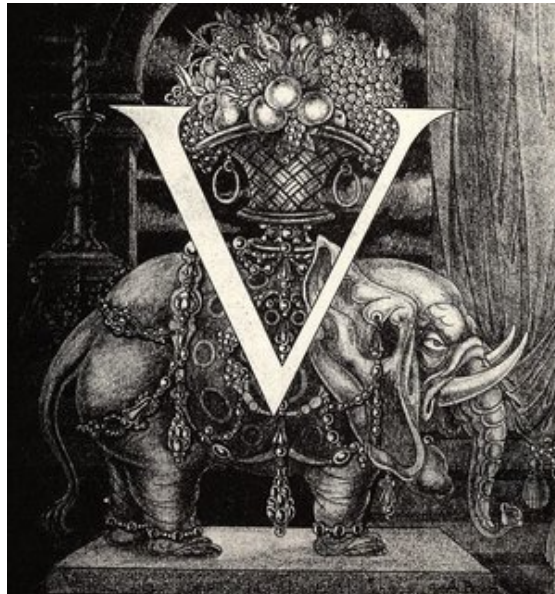


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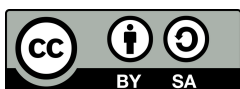


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Estonian and Finnish Decadence

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Volume 9, Issue 1, Summer 2026

Estonian and Finnish Decadence

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Preface

The variety of Nordic decadence extends from naturalistic portraits of decadent individuals to hybrid works that flirt with fantasy, dreams, and hallucinatory visions [...]. naturalism becomes grotesque and symbolic scenes imbued with philosophical pessimism and melancholy combine with Nietzschean and neo-Romantic impulses that find expression through oxymorons, paradoxes, and contradictions.¹

In perfect continuity with the previous issue of *Volupté* (8.2) and its focus on the fairy tale, this current issue steepens its readers in the magical and mythic realms of Estonian and Finnish decadence. We encounter dark forests and deep lakes, symbolic of the darker and deeper emotional states of isolation, ecstasy, disgust, and despair. Old worlds are ambivalently and affectively tied to accelerated states of transition and change and are succeeded by new, young Nordic nations that feel ‘the appeal of the metropolis and a strong urge to participate in European trends’.² We are invited to explore the (Euro)peripheries of the Baltic and Nordic countries and the interconnections between fin-de-siècle culture and nationalism and between different forms of nationalism and decadent literature and art. ‘[D]ecadent aesthetics in these contexts’, our guest editors argue, ‘were neither merely derivative nor belated imitations of metropolitan models, but active reconfigurations shaped by processes of nation-building, cultural translation, and uneven modernization’.

This current issue on Estonian and Finnish decadence is an output of the five-year research project launched in 2022, ‘Tsiviliseeritud rahvuse teke: Dekadents kui üleminek 1905-1940’ [The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as Transitionality, 1905-1940], supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PRG1667 and comprising an international team of researchers including our fabulous guest editors, Mirjam Hinrikus, Hasso Krull, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Riikka Rossi. Carried out at the Under and Tuglas Literary Institute in Tallinn and in its final year (2026) at Tallinn University, this project investigates the relationship of narrative and visual strategies through which old, decadent Europe and the young nation are constructed, and the extent to which the discourses of decadence and naturalism are entangled. It considers decadence in terms of renewal and rebirth, foregrounded by the rise of the Young Estonia movement which tasked literature with representing the transition from a rural to urban milieu.

Alongside DECADOCS, a pioneering Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Doctoral Network (MSCA-DN, 2025-2030) that explores decadence through sustainability, transnationalism, and sensoriality, ‘The Emergence of a Civilized Nation’ marks a significant shift in the standing of decadence studies. It signifies increasing recognition of the field by major funding bodies and the acknowledgement of decadence studies as having potential societal impact. By exploring the complex relationships between cultural decline, aesthetic innovation, and historical change, academics and creative practitioners continue to generate new insights and perspectives about the complex world in which we live. Of course, a major contribution of projects like ‘The Emergence of a Civilized Nation’ and DECADOCS is, as the British Academy states in its 2023-2027 Strategic Plan, to ‘put the humanities and social sciences at the heart of understanding the world and shap[e] a brighter future’. However trite that may sound, especially given the dark humanism of decadence studies, prioritising the arts and humanities for a ‘brighter future’ has at no time since the Second World War been more urgent than now.

Jane Desmarais
Editor-in-Chief
21 June 2026

¹ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ‘Nordic Cultures: From Wilderness to Metropolitan Decadence’, *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 209-26 (p. 209).

² *Ibid.*, p. 209.

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

Mirjam Hinrikus, Hasso Krull, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Riikka Rossi

Tallinn University, University of Turku, and University of Helsinki

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Estonian-Finnish Cultural Transfers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transitionality, Nationalism, and Nietzscheanism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Overview of the Contributions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Spiritual Naturalism in A. H. Tammsaare's *Kõrboja peremees*¹

Mirjam Hinrikus and Riikka Rossi

Tallinn University and University of Helsinki

In art, I love realism to the point of the fantastic. [...] What could be more fantastic and unexpected for me than reality?

– Fyodor Dostoevsky²

When A. H. Tammsaare (1878–1940)³ completed *Kõrboja peremees* [The Master of Kõrboja] (1922), Estonia's most canonized author was forty-four years old and had already enjoyed a literary career spanning nearly two decades. Frequently hailed as his first truly mature work, *Kõrboja peremees* is regarded as the novel in which Tammsaare discovered his authentic voice.⁴ Set in a distinctly Estonian rural landscape, the novel is often described as rooted in the realistic or naturalist tradition and saturated with (national) symbolism. Furthermore, this so-called authentic voice has also been described as lyrical, poetic, mystical, irrational, and decadent⁵ – qualities that challenge the conventions of the naturalist novel and its realistic representation.⁶

At the centre of *Kõrboja peremees* lies a strange love story between the heirs of two rival farms, Villu and Anna. Their intense attraction is shaped by an unresolved past, ancestral rivalry, and the commitment to the land, unfolding a cycle of passion and destruction which ends in Villu's suicide. The power relationships and emotional turmoil – love, hatred, shame, guilt, and alienation – align Tammsaare's narrative with the fin-de-siècle sensibility and more precisely the aesthetics of literary decadence. While the agrarian setting and peasant characters evoke the traditions of realism and naturalism,⁷ Tammsaare's narrative moves from external and ordinary realities to explore inner conflicts of the characters and uncanny fatality that escapes rational explanation. Although *Kõrboja peremees* is set in a recognizable historical moment – shortly after the First World War, Estonian War of Independence (1918-1920) and the early years of the first Republic of Estonia (1918-1940, see the final sub-chapter) – its treatment of time, space, and causality resists realist transparency. The linear progression of time is disrupted by contradictory narratives of the past and narrative

gaps which complicate the understanding of the present moment. The novel has often been praised for its artistic composition, which reflects the result of the author's long and deliberate intellectual effort.

The tension between the realistic frames of the novel and its lyrical, philosophical undercurrents makes *Kõrboja peremees* a compelling case study in the transformation of Estonian prose of early twentieth-century literature. In this article, we examine how Tammsaare's novel at the same time consolidates and undermines the conventions of realism and naturalism by seeking a spiritual dimension beyond the visible, material world. We situate the novel in relation to the aesthetics of decadent fiction, particularly in its preoccupations with poetics of ambivalence and transgression. Central to our analysis is the concept of spiritual naturalism – a paradoxical term that captures the novel's fusion of realism with a metaphysical, even mystical, sensibility. Originating among French decadents in the late nineteenth century, the notion of *spiritual naturalism* emerged as a critical response to the deterministic rationalism and empirical aesthetics of naturalist literature. First coined by J.-K. Huysmans in *Là-bas* (1891), the term was used to describe a revolt against materialist realism in favour of a deeper, i.e., more psychologically complex, and often even mystical understanding of reality.⁸ Authors such as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Walter Pater, Maurice Maeterlinck, Thomas Mann, and August Strindberg articulated an alternative aesthetic: one that sought transcendent truths beneath the surface of everyday life, drawing on mysticism, religion, and occultism.⁹ In contrast to the scientific worldview of the time, spiritual naturalism fostered sensitivity to unseen forces, metaphysical experience, and psychological complexity.

In the early twentieth century, this sensibility began to resonate with Nordic writers and artists. The Finnish critic and poet Kasimir Leino was among the earliest proponents of what might be called a 'synthetic' style in Finland. His article 'Naturalism and Spiritualism in Literature' in *Päivälehti* (1890), written during his trip to Paris, implicitly aligns his thought with the French pioneers of spiritual naturalism.¹⁰ In Estonia, Friedebert Tuglas emerged as a key figure articulating a similar vision. During the second decade of the twentieth century, he began to argue for a

‘spiritualized’ or ‘noble’ naturalism as part of his call for a future synthetic literature.¹¹ Although Tammsaare never explicitly used the term ‘spiritual naturalism’, his early short stories and essays already demonstrate both a command of naturalist techniques and a critical distance from them. By the time of the third *Noor-Eesti* [Young Estonia] album in 1909, he was articulating a synthetic position close to what Tuglas and others had described. In essays from the early 1900s, he critiques the limitations of realism, romanticism, and naturalism, advocating instead a hybrid aesthetic. As he wrote in 1914:

Tahaksime ilu, mis mitte armsaks ja haledaks ei tee, vaid mis tunda laseb: minus on algamine ja ots; minus on elu ja surm; [...] minu kaudu saad sa sünnitajaks, loojaks. Nõnda mõistaksime, kuidas haldjad võisid eksitada ja näkid uputada. Nõnda märkaksime, et meil rabas on palju mände ja hiites oli kord tusedaid tammesid, püsides veel meie päevini.

[We long for a kind of beauty that does not merely make us tender or sentimental, but that allows us to feel: within me is the beginning and the end; within me is life and death; [...] through me you become a begetter, a creator. Thus we would understand how fairies could lead astray, and water-nymphs could drown. Thus we would notice that in our bogs there are still many pines, and that our sacred groves once had mighty oaks, which have endured into our time.]¹²

This yearning for spiritually charged beauty and an intense tonality, where contrasting emotions and affects intertwine, marks a shift away from materialist naturalism toward a poetics that embraces the mythic and the invisible. In essays from the first decade of the twentieth century, Tammsaare is already reflecting on naturalism’s limitations – notably, its inability to capture the complexity and unpredictability of the human psyche. His early stories (the so-called university novellas, 1908–1910; 1917) often combine naturalist observation with decadent stylization, revealing his resistance to the limitations of both currents. Influenced by European authors such as Émile Zola, Gustave Flaubert, French and Belgian symbolists and Nordic decadents, Tammsaare saw literary naturalism as necessary but incomplete.¹³ In the first decade of the twentieth century, he offers an increasingly explicit critique of the determinism and moral cynicism of realism, observing that ‘tormatakse katsetades igasse serva’ [there is a headlong rush to experiment in every possible direction] yet one becomes lost in the chaos of a transitional age.¹⁴

The theorist and writer who exerted a significant influence on Tammsaare and on many of his contemporaries – alongside Fyodor Dostoevsky and the French and Scandinavian authors mentioned above – was undoubtedly Friedrich Nietzsche. In works published shortly before *Kõrboja peremees*, there are clear indications that Tammsaare was particularly influenced by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Yet, when considered in the context of Tammsaare's entire body of work, it can be argued that he was already deeply familiar with Nietzsche's thought by the early twentieth century.¹⁵ For this reason, *Kõrboja peremees* also refers to Nietzsche's texts at several points; however, compared to some of Tammsaare's earlier works of fiction, the novel contains fewer explicit references. Rather, Nietzschean allusions tend to merge with other ideas central to the fin-de-siècle intellectual context. Nevertheless, the manner in which Tammsaare's narrative challenges the nineteenth-century realist epistemology of truth and objectivity operates largely in Nietzschean terms.

This, in turn, means that rather than positing a unified and transparent subject capable of objective knowledge, the novel foregrounds a conception of subjectivity that resonates with Nietzsche's understanding of the self as a dynamic constellation of competing affects, drives, and impulses.¹⁶ In this sense, the narrative aligns with Nietzsche's critique of metaphysical subjectivity and his rejection of truth as correspondence. Furthermore, Tammsaare's perspectival narrative structure parallels Nietzsche's doctrine of perspectivism, according to which knowledge is always situated, interpretive, and dependent on particular standpoints rather than grounded in a single, objective viewpoint.¹⁷

This kind of epistemological stance also underpins the novel's logic of style. Drawing on the aesthetics of ambivalence associated with decadent literature,¹⁸ we argue that *Kõrboja peremees* is structured around a network of dynamic tensions and paradoxes that operate across narrative, symbolic, and philosophical levels. Anna and Villu, the novel's central figures, are presented as internally conflicted, deeply ambivalent subjects, whose motivations resist full psychological transparency. Their relationship is represented as a fatal and tormented love typical of decadent

literature charged with negative emotions, obsessions, and an interplay of power. Moreover, the use of oxymoronic imagery – already suggestively articulated in phrases such as ‘within me is the beginning and the end; within me is life and death’ from the 1914 article cited above – contributes to a broader tendency toward spiritual expression. In particular, the novel’s stylistic features cultivate a spiritual mood characterized by fusion and transcendence. Features such as repetitions enhance the emotional intensity of scenes in which an ecstatic-manic and Dionysian atmosphere dominates, imitating a dissolution of boundaries between self and world that is characteristic of the emotion of ecstasy that is typical for mystic poetry and religious experiences.¹⁹

Finally, this article examines how Tammsaare’s ‘spiritual naturalism’ negotiates the ambivalent relationship between decadence, national culture, and nationalism. While *Kõrboja peremees* partially distances itself from historical realities through symbolism and a turn toward spirituality, it nonetheless reflects the turbulence of modernization, which in the Estonian, Finnish, and more broadly Nordic context, was marked by a rapid transition from rural to urban culture.²⁰ The novel addresses the challenges of modernity not only through its portrayal of characters living in a society in transition, but also through its aesthetic composition, which integrates European philosophical currents and the metropolitan repertoire of decadence into an agrarian setting. In this sense, the transition to modernity manifests itself both in the novel’s thematic concerns and in its formal and stylistic strategies.

Transitions to decadence

In *Kõrboja peremees*, the narrative unfolds over a relatively short time span, centring on the reunion of Anna and Villu during one summer, approximately ten years after their youth. Anna is around twenty-five years old and Villu twenty-seven. The novel consists of twenty-three chapters of roughly equal length, in which the story is structured through temporal shifts that move both forward and backward in time. Villu, the restless heir to the Katku farm, returns home after serving a prison sentence for killing a man during a fight. Known as a drunkard, sexually attractive, and a

passionate brawler, he has shown little interest in agricultural work and has previously attempted to acquire wealth through peddling and the illegal distillation of spirits. His past is further complicated by the illegitimate child he fathered with Eevi, a former servant at the Kõrboja farm.

Villu can be read as a Nietzschean decadent figure, embodying the fin-de-siècle reception of Nietzschean philosophy and reflecting the Dionysian²¹ male anti-hero characteristic of decadent aesthetics – an individualistic and rebellious force driven by instinct, passion, and an intensified relation to nature.²² In the first chapter, it is suggested that Villu is driven by ‘miski nimetu’ [something unnamed],²³ which may be read as an allusion to his strong sexual drive and, more broadly, to its Nietzschean-Dionysian nature. His sexuality is closely linked to his creative energies, manifested above all in his impulse to shape both himself and his surroundings, most strikingly through his determination to clear his ancestral land of stones and transform it into fertile ground.²⁴

Villu’s rebellious spirit and existential struggle, closely tied to his attachment to Kivimägi [Stone hill],²⁵ thus align with Nietzsche’s vision of the individual – often figured as the decadent artist – who pursues authenticity even at the risk of self-destructive behaviour.²⁶ A skilled hunter and tracker, Villu is profoundly attuned to the natural world, reading traces left by animals, birds, and even humans, a sensitivity memorably captured in the opening scene in which he discovers Anna’s footprints by the lake.

Anna, by contrast, is introduced as a cultivated and emancipated ‘New Woman’ from the wealthier Kõrboja manor. In her youth, she studied in the city, that is, in St. Petersburg. She has now returned home at her ageing father’s request to assume responsibility for managing the estate. Her urban education and experience stand in marked contrast to Villu’s restlessness and rebellious disposition. As the narrator notes, she had attended school in the city from early childhood and later ‘mõni teab missuguseid suuri saksu teenis’ [served some great lords, who knows what kind].²⁷ A distinct economic difference exists between Villu and Anna. Kõrboja, a well-established estate, is sustained predominantly through hired labour and embodies the social hierarchies and privileges of the wealthier rural people. In contrast, Villu’s family farm, Katku, is impoverished, personified

by Villu, who bears the weight of his family's low social status. The prosperous Kõrboja estate seeks to acquire Katku's land. Despite the economic differences,²⁸ reflecting the internal stratifications of peasant society and psychological divisions, Anna remains fatally drawn to Villu.

Kõrboja peremees thus introduces us to two complex figures whose relationship develops into a web of tension and dependency, reminiscent of ambivalent characters in fin-de-siècle literature rather than the psychology of realism. Their complexity is further deepened by the narrative that gradually unveils their relationship's past. Like many core texts of decadent and modernist fiction,²⁹ Tammsaare's novel undermines unified narration and the linear flow of time, moving toward fragmentation and narrative opacity. The linear progression of time is disrupted by memories that shed new light on tragic love and complicate the tensions of the present moment. Of particular significance is an incident related to their youth in which Villu suffers an injury that ultimately leads to the loss of sight in his right eye. This episode, which is situated in the earliest days of their acquaintance, is recalled and narrated several times from different perspectives, with both Anna and Villu returning to it at various occasions. Each re-narration reframes the episode, introducing layers of ambiguity that complicate its meaning. The scene's dense symbolic texture, together with narrative gaps and indeterminacy about what actually occurred, intensifies epistemological uncertainty and further complicates the interpretation of the novel.

The incident is first introduced through the perspective of Villu's mother in Chapter One. Released from prison, Villu revels in his regained freedom, running with wild abandon toward the forest and the lake. His mother, however, views his restlessness with apprehension, fearing that he 'võiks oma teisegi silma metsas pimedaks joosta' [would run another eye off in the forest].³⁰ In Chapter Two she revisits the matter in conversation, alluding to the event by remarking that Villu had run his eye off.³¹ Villu recalls that while they were picking berries and playing in the forest, Anna had run ahead, seized a thorny branch, bent it back 'nagu vibud' [like a bowstring],³² and then released it so that it struck him in the eye:

Nagu ma mäletan, oli see nõnda, et tema jooksis ees, mina järel, tema kahmas puuokstest kinni, kiskus nad nagu vibud vinna ja laskis nad siis mulle vastu silmi, nõnda oli see. [It happened like this, as I remember it: she ran ahead, I was following, she grabbed the tree branches, pulled them back like the string of a bow, and then let them snap right into my eyes – that's how it was.]³³

Although the reader is informed of Anna's role at this point, Villu himself has never told Anna that it caused the blindness in his right eye, until the novel's conclusion. His mother, who loves her son unconditionally, is aware of Anna's involvement and warns him against her influence: 'Ja kui ma kuulsin, et Anna koju tuleb, ning mõtlesin, et ka sina nüüd vangist lahti saad, siis hakkas mul hirm, öösel nägin teist kahest uneski!' [And when I heard that Anna was coming home, and thought you would be released from prison as well, I became afraid – I even had dreams about the two of you!]³⁴

The event's significance as a site of conflict and violence is further intensified through Anna's perspective. Her memory reveals a different version, one imbued with a deeper, more troubling trauma. The narrative hints that the eye injury was preceded by a sexual encounter against her will, implying that Villu may have raped her. Reflecting on this moment, Anna remembers:

Siis istus ta ja oli kuri, oli vihane, oli kuri häbi pärast, millele ei saanud leida seletust või põhjust. Ta oli seekord nii hirmus vihane häbi pärast, et ta kiristas hambaid, et ta mõtles eluvõtmise peale, mõtles, et ta enam kunagi ei taha näha teda, ega teisi inimesi, teisi mehi.

[Then she sat there, furious, angry, seething with shame – a shame for which she could find no explanation or cause. She was so terribly angry about her shame that she gnashed her teeth and harboured thoughts of suicide; she thought she never wanted to see that man or any other people, any other men ever again.]³⁵

Despite its significance, this reading of the incident – where Anna's intense anger and shame suggest the presence of sexual violence – has been largely neglected in previous scholarship on Tammsaare's novel.³⁶ The interpretation that the memory of the eye injury ties with sexuality gains further support from its intertextuality, which is densely symbolic and draws on biblical references, notably the Book of Genesis and the narrative of the Fall. The forest in which Anna and Villu play during puberty, when they are around ten years younger, becomes an analogue of the Garden of Eden – a space of innocence disrupted by transgression. The allusion to the myth of the Fall is

also indicative of the novel's transition to decadence, as this myth was repeatedly reimagined in decadent literature, particularly through the figures of the *femme fatale* and the 'fallen woman', and was frequently invoked as an allegory for cultural decline – a symbolic fall of humankind.³⁷

The biblical dimension is further developed by another detail from the same episode, disclosed by the narrator later in the novel: Anna is said to have been bitten by a snake,³⁸ and Villu, in an act cast as heroic, saves her life by sucking the venom from her wound. The motif of the serpent elaborates further the myth of Genesis, temptation and fall. Yet later, in the ending of the novel, Anna undermines this heroic narrative by confessing that no snake had bitten her; instead, she had inflicted the wound herself with a thorny branch to test Villu's reaction.³⁹

This revelation illuminates the undercurrent of tension and mutual power play in terms of Nietzsche's *Wille zur Macht* [*Will to Power*]⁴⁰ that defines their relationship. At the same time, it further destabilizes the truth of the episode, reinforcing a symbolic layer of representation that transcends the novel's realist surface. The narratives told from different perspectives challenge ideas of truth and shared reality which characterize the epistemology of traditional realism. Rather than presenting an objective reality, the novel embraces a relativistic framework grounded in Nietzschean perspectivism, which appears in Tammsaare's works among many other Nietzschean ideas. On the one hand, the emphasis is placed on the subjective nature of knowledge and thus on the particularity of individual vantage points.⁴¹ On the other hand, it underscores the fact that knowledge is always laden with emotions and affects, above all through what Nietzsche conceptualizes as the 'Wille zur Macht'.

In this light, Anna and Villu emerge as contrasting yet deeply ambivalent figures, whose relationship evolves into a distorted or tormented love, marked by a peculiar obsession and masochistic dependency reminiscent of characters in decadent literature.⁴² Their encounters are persistently shadowed by memories of violence, including the implied rape, and grotesque injuries, that tie love with suffering, and are even occasionally toned with sadomasochistic pleasure in pain. This aligns *Kõrboja peremees* with a poetics of emotions and affect characteristic of decadence. The

intense and tormented love resonates with what Mario Praz famously termed ‘romantic agony’: a fin-de-siècle aesthetic in which pleasure and pain are inseparably entwined.⁴³ In this tradition, love is bound to death and melancholy; corruption, and decay become integral to beauty.⁴⁴ The emotional effect of this agony is further heightened through a juxtaposition of contrasts, exemplified in Tammsaare’s depiction of the strange attraction between Anna representing an unattainable ideal, and the grotesque, crippled Villu, thereby evoking a tension between the sublime and the Satanic. Such ambivalence pervades the novel’s affective atmosphere, where the sense of tragic merges with fatal mutual attraction. As Praz notes, ‘the more bitter the taste, the more abundant the enjoyment’, encapsulating the decadent paradox of delight found in pain.⁴⁵ This dynamic in Tammsaare’s work is encapsulated by the Finnish-Estonian decadent-modernist author Aino Kallas in her collection of essays⁴⁶ on the authors of Young Estonia, where she observes: ‘Tammsaare armastuses on suur määr pünamishimu, nagu on tähendet, piinategemine kuulub oluliselt ta armastusnaudingusse.’ [In Tammsaare’s conception of love there is a considerable element of a desire to inflict suffering; as has been noted, the production of suffering forms an essential part of his erotic enjoyment.]⁴⁷

Return to myth, effects of ecstasy

Tammsaare’s rendering of Estonian rural life builds a layered reality with references to biblical episodes, folkloric elements, and cyclical, seasonal time.⁴⁸ These allusions constitute an important part of the novel’s spirituality, which suggest a deeper reality beyond ordinary life. A mythic, primordial bond between human beings and nature is reflected in several scenes. When Anna and Villu meet again after the events of their youth, the description of their reunion by the village lake is described as intensely corporeal and emotionally charged though, paradoxically, their bodies never physically touch. When Anna sees Villu leap naked into the water, crying out in ecstatic freedom, their meeting becomes, as Tõnu Õnnepalu observes, ‘*keha*de kohtumine *hing*es, kohtumine ihas, ilma et vahetataks ühtegi sõna, aga ometi nii, nagu oleks kõik juba toimunud, kõik otsustatud

ja kõik räägitud' [a meeting of bodies in spirit and in desire, without a single word exchanged, and yet as if everything had already happened, everything decided and everything said].⁴⁹ The fact that they return to their native village on the exact same day – after years apart and without knowledge of the other's arrival – suggests a kind of fated pattern aligned with natural and spiritual cycles. Symbolically, it is significant that this day coincides with the Feast of the Ascension in the Christian calendar – a day commemorating Christ's ascent to heaven.⁵⁰ Their attraction is portrayed as instinctive force, which, as it is characteristic of mystic experiences, can be grasped by intuition, although it escapes verbal expression.⁵¹

References to spiritual and mythic realities are further developed and intensified in a pivotal scene depicting the Midsummer celebration, which culminates in Villu's second injury. This episode, resulting in the accident in which Villu also loses his left eye, replicates the accident of his youth. The scenery of the injury is charged with emotional intensity and symbolic resonance, as Midsummer in the Nordic tradition signifies not only fertility and the abundance of summer but also rites of transformation. In Nordic decadence, the idyllic motif of Midsummer, is employed in the service of the decadent imagination and in accordance with the ambiguous poetics of decadence and its move towards transgression.⁵² The decadent potential of the mystical Nordic summer night (the nightless night, a paradox itself) was employed by many authors and artists of the Nordic fin de siècle: from August Strindberg's *Fröken Julie* [*Miss Julie*] (1888), to Anders Zorn's midsummer paintings, or to Knut Hamsun's novels.⁵³ In a way, the summer night encapsulates a central aspect of Nordic decadence: it frequently combines a spirit of transgression stemming from nature imagined as an abode of primitive instincts and simultaneously creates a melancholic sense of vanishing beauty. The contrasting dimensions of Midsummer are elaborated in *Kõrboja peremees*, where the idyllic celebration devolves into violence and tragedy. The narration gradually intensifies the emotional tension leading up to the accident, through the portrayal of the Midsummer dances – a scene charged with heightened affective intensity. Tammsaare amplifies the drama through the

passion of dance in terms of Nietzschean Dionysian decadence and celebration,⁵⁴ especially by describing Villu's intoxication and increasingly wild dance with Anna. He writes:

Villu keerutas nüüd Kõrboja perenaist ennastki tema toodud laternate ja kirevate tulede ringis, keerutas teda teist kordagi, keerutas, nagu polnud teda täna õhtul veel keegi keerutanud. Villu sai hoosse, Villul tõusis tuju, Villusse hakkas hull uimastus, nii et ta tantsis, hüppas ja trampis nagu meeletu. Ei ta hoolinud teistest, ei ta hoolinud enam suurt sellestki, kellega ta tantsis, ta tantsis ainult ja kriiskas vahetevahel, nagu oleks ta mõni metslane, kes kuulutab tantsul oma sõjakisa, oma võitlushimu. Villu tantsis pillimehe väsinuks, Villu tantsis tantsumuru lagedaks, sest Villut kardeti, kui ta nõnda tantsis.

[Now Villu was spinning the mistress of Kõrboja herself beneath the lanterns and coloured lights she had brought – spinning her as no one else had done that evening. Villu gained momentum, Villu's spirits rose, and a mad intoxication seized Villu, so that he danced, jumped, and stomped like a lunatic. He didn't care for the others, nor did he much care who he danced with; he just danced and occasionally shouted as if he were some wild man, proclaiming a war cry, a battle cry with his dance. Villu danced until the musician was exhausted, Villu danced the lawn bare, for Villu was feared when he danced like this.]⁵⁵

Here, Villu's dance develops into an ecstatic transformation, reflecting similar scenes in Tammsaare's other works. A certain Dionysian atmosphere is created, in which the intoxicating, drowsy-erotic and ecstatic-manic instincts merge. Moreover, the description reflects the dual nature of ecstasy – *ek-stasis*, or standing outside oneself, and its Janus-faced nature. Ecstasy fuses the boundaries between self and world. It may offer renewal and transcendence or, alternatively, a descent into chaos, confusion, and the breakdown of agency, or disintegration and madness.⁵⁶

Interestingly, Tammsaare's musical style,⁵⁷ closely aligns with this thematic focus. The narration accelerates in rhythm and tone, mirroring Villu's altered state of consciousness. Lexical and syntactic iteration takes over, suspending linear time and anchoring the scene in an intensified present. Such narrative immediacy – looped syntax, rhythmic cadence, and sensory fixation – generates a mantra-like rhythm that holds time rather than advancing the linear progress of narrative.⁵⁸ This fusion of textual rhythm and emotional atmosphere exemplifies the decadent aesthetic, in which excess and sensation override narrative causality. Central to the understanding of this effect is the concept of mood: an emotional tone that pervades the text, encompassing diffuse affective intensities that transcend the boundaries of individual character psychology. As

theorized by Noël Carroll (2003), Sianne Ngai (2005), Marco Caracciolo (2017), and others, mood is not reducible to discrete emotions experienced by characters or readers.⁵⁹ Rather, it emerges through the interplay of narrative form, stylistic choices, and rhythmic structures. While mood is significant across many literary genres or modes of expression, it holds particular importance for the decadent style, which frequently relies on implication and suggestive imagery that transcend realistic language⁶⁰ and resist interpretation, echoing the Freudian unconscious and aiming to evoke effects like those of music. As John R. Reed argues, repetition in decadent literature functions analogously to musical composition, fostering sensibility and suspended anticipation.⁶¹ This type of musicality, along with its sensual and ambiguous effects, constitutes an essential aspect of the dense mood in Tammsaare's writing.

Through this ecstatic crescendo in the Midsummer dance, *Kõrboja peremees* shifts to the tragic accident. Intoxicated and driven by a need to prove himself, Villu attempts to blast rocks in honour of Anna's birthday. Although Villu had previously shown little interest in farming, he has recently begun clearing the land by removing stones that obstruct cultivation. However, this gesture of (Nietzschean-Simmelian) creative strength quickly turns disastrous. The explosion goes off prematurely, severely injuring Villu's right arm and left eye. As in many episodes of the novel, the focalization is deliberately unstable, shifting fluidly between the old Rein (who wakes at the precise moment of the blast), the external narrator, and Anna, whose perspective inflects the scene with emotional immediacy. The narrative's intensity is heightened by the forceful images and by intertextual allusions that link the grotesque accident to both destiny and Fall and to the promise of redemption. The narration refers to the fabricated story that Villu once saved Anna's life by sucking venom from a snakebite – reinforcing the sense of fatality and the idea of an early, blood-sealed bond that now drives her to assist him. Anna tears her skirt to bind Villu's wounds and offers him alcohol to ease his pain: 'Jooge veel, [...] jooge niipalju kui läheb, niipalju kui on.' [Drink more, [...] drink as much as you can, as much as there is.]⁶² This scene can be interpreted as a decadent adaptation of the Gospel narrative of Jesus' baptism by the John the Baptist. Villu is then

taken by horse-drawn cart to the town infirmary for in-patient treatment. After weeks of treatment in the hospital, Villu returns to the countryside as a grotesque, crippled figure, who has now injured both eyes and his hand. His physical capacity and strength – emblems of masculinity within peasant society – are fractured.⁶³ This rupture is conveyed through a destabilized depiction of his altered vision:

Villu ümbrus on selguse kaotanud, jooned on muutunud ähmaseks ja virvendavaks. Igal pool tabab Villu mingisugust vöörast, tüütut virvendust: virvendav järv, virvendavad puud järvekaldal, virvendavad pilved järve kohal, virvendavad järve põhjaski ja kisuvad taevagi kaasa virvendama ...

[Villu's surroundings had lost their clarity; their outlines had become blurred and flickering. Everywhere Villu looked, he encountered a strange, unpleasant shimmer: the lake shimmered, the trees on the shore shimmered, the shimmering clouds above the lake, and even the shimmering depths of the lake, pulling the sky itself into the same shimmering movement.]⁶⁴

Villu's loss of sight is imbued with multilayered symbolism. On one level, it recalls mythic archetypes such as Oedipus or the blind seers of folklore, figures for whom blindness signals an encounter with prophetic wisdom, heightened perception, or the tragic recognition (*anagnorisis*) through which the hero attains self-knowledge and insight into the forces shaping his fate. Yet in Villu's case, this transformation is deeply ambiguous. Within the cultural lexicon of the fin de siècle, vision frequently functioned as spiritual category associated with transcendence and Symbolist idealism.⁶⁵ Rather than leading toward illumination, however, Villu's altered perception draws him increasingly toward transgression and self-destruction, marking not redemption but a deeper entanglement with decadent sensibilities. A more convincing explanation for Villu's blindness may therefore lie in a Nietzschean frame of reference. Nietzsche's perspectivism explicitly links knowledge to vision, insisting that there is no single or objective mode of seeing but only multiple perspectives shaped by affects and interpretative positions.⁶⁶ Once Villu loses his sight, he also loses the capacity to shift between perspectives and to function as the dynamic Nietzschean subject striving toward self-overcoming. Instead of approximating the ideal of the

Übermensch through the interaction of Dionysian and Apollonian forces, Villu gradually assumes the role of a nihilistic decadent figure.

Despite his disfigurement, Anna persistently urges Villu to marry her and assume the role of master at Kõrboja. Villu, however, experiences the proposal as a form of entrapment, emblematic of the mutual power dynamic: ‘aga ei pääse Villu tundmusest, et tema ümber kujutakse mingisugust võrku, et Kõrboja perenaine kujub tema ümber võrku. Milleks? Kui Villu seda teaks!’ [It felt as though some kind of net was being woven around him, that the mistress of Kõrboja was weaving a net around him. For what purpose? If only Villu knew!]⁶⁷ His resistance arises not only from wounded pride but also from a refusal to assume a role that would bind him to the social order he increasingly seeks to transgress. In a gesture characteristic of the decadent hero – whose pursuit of love often unfolds outside the sanctioned institution of marriage⁶⁸ – Villu instead contemplates a continued relationship with Eevi, the mother of his illegitimate child, and a marginal existence on the impoverished Katku farm.

Towards the closure of the novel, the narrative intensifies again during the celebration of the nut crop. This scene culminates in frenzied, ecstatic dancing which echoes the Midsummer scene in both tone and structure. Villu is provoked into drinking and dancing again with primitive force. ‘Villu poolpime silm välgub, Villul välgub pimegi silm’. [Villu’s half-blind eye glimmers – even his blind eye glimmers.]⁶⁹ He implores Anna to join him in the dance; although she initially resists, Villu’s persistence prevails. Their dance, reminiscent of the frenzied energy of the Midsummer celebration, builds to an ecstatic crescendo ending in a grotesque physical collapse. As the floor grows increasingly crowded, the momentum overwhelms the dancers, culminating in Villu falling together with the mistress of Kõrboja – only to be buried beneath the weight of other couples who tumble on top of them. Anna and Villu then leave the dance together and return once again to the lake, the scene which serves a scenery for their intensive dialogues in the novel. The dynamic between them shifts again: Anna, who had earlier resisted Villu’s invitation to dance, now

becomes the one who pleads. She implores him to become the master of Kõrboja.⁷⁰ Villu, however, resigns.

The conclusion of *Kõrboja peremees* encapsulates Villu's Nietzschean spirit of authenticity:⁷¹ by rejecting Anna's proposal and the prescribed role of master at Kõrboja, he chooses suicide as a radical self-determination. Following the nut festival, Villu's suicide is discovered, prompting his father's austere reflection that, though 'Villu ei osanud küll elada, aga surnd on ta kui täismees.' [Villu did not know how to live, his final act was the first act of a real man.]⁷² In this view, Villu's suicide becomes a tragic affirmation of individual will and existential authenticity. This resonates with fin-de-siècle representations of suicide⁷³ as a radical solution to restricted freedom, also echoing Nietzsche's view of suicide, voluntary death as a consolation and transgression against Christian conceptions of death.⁷⁴ Thus, Villu's death stands as an assertion of selfhood against external and social demands. The limits of knowledge implied by Nietzsche's perspectivism are further echoed in Villu's mother's response to her son's suicide: 'Kes teda teab, miks ta enda maha laskis, [...] kes teise sisse näeb' [Who knows why he killed himself – who can truly see inside another].⁷⁵

And yet, within the cyclical temporality that governs *Kõrboja peremees*, Villu's death marks not merely an end but aligns with a mythic rhythm of decline and renewal. In the wake of his suicide, Anna's decision to take in Eevi and raise Villu's illegitimate son as the future master of Kõrboja reorients the narrative from tragedy toward regeneration.⁷⁶ The child, as both a biological heir and a symbolic figure, embodies the possibility of restored order – not only within the farm but also as a broader allegory of the nation. The ending can be read as an allusion to mythic births: the biblical narrative of Christ, and the Finnish national epic *Kalevala*'s myth of Marjatta's son, who is miraculously conceived and ultimately declared the new ruler (eelmine viide). Tammsaare reinforces this intertextual connection through symbolic imagery within the narrator's discourse: 'ta oli Kõrbojale peremehe leidnud punaste marjade keskelt' [The mistress of Kõrboja had found

the master of Kõrboja among the red berries],⁷⁷ echoing both the Virgin Mary and its folkloric variants – for example, Marjatta’s miraculous pregnancy after eating a lingonberry in *Kalevala*.⁷⁸

The mythical layers and the integration of cyclical time also tie *Kõrboja peremees* with ideas of cyclical temporality and history prevalent in the fin-de-siècle philosophy (Taine, Bourget, Nietzsche, Spengler, etc.), which was nourished in turn by the philosophy from the period of Enlightenment and Romanticism (e.g., Humboldt, Herder), and which interpreted Western society, or culture (including art), or language as a bearer of culture, in terms of a biological organism. According to many fin-de-siècle theorists, cultural development is cyclical: it has a beginning, a rise, a period of maturity, and a decline. This perspective also holds true in the case of Tammsaare, in whose literary works beginnings and endings are often interwoven, both symbolically and thematically. Tammsaare depicts the highest forms of civilization and their representatives as natural objects or organisms – comparable to other living beings, yet more highly evolved – one of the underlying assumptions in his work is that culture is governed by a natural life cycle, or that culture undergoes a life course similar to that of animals.⁷⁹ This cycle follows the rhythms of days and seasons, passing through periods of emergence, maturation, and decline.

Spiritual and transnational dimensions

Interpreters of *Kõrboja peremees* have paid little attention to the First World War,⁸⁰ instead situating the novel – often implicitly – against the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920), largely because it was published in 1922. The text itself, however, refers explicitly only to the so-called Great War, whose devastating consequences, rooted in aggressive nationalism, Tammsaare repeatedly criticized throughout his work, including his journalism.⁸¹ The novel can therefore be read as intertwining its tragic love story with broader and deeper reflections on nationalism and its limits.

Like many of his contemporaries, Tammsaare was acutely aware both burdens of the past and of the new political realities that emerged with the birth of the Republic of Estonia (1918–

1940). In *Kõrboja peremees*, as throughout his work, he portrays the people as heirs to a complex historical legacy shaped by serfdom and by the harshness of the natural environment.⁸² Wetlands and rocky, difficult-to-cultivate soils play a symbolically charged role both in *Kõrboja peremees* and in the *Truth and Justice* series (1926–1933),⁸³ as does the absence of an heir at the Kõrboja farm – a condition that threatens continuity and stability and gestures toward the fragile aspiration for permanence in a newly independent state.

Such conditions place pressure on national-romantic ideals formed during the nineteenth-century National Awakening and intensified during the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920). These ideals are nostalgically projected in the imagination of Anna's father, the old Rein, who envisions Kõrboja as a magical or mythical land of limitless possibility – an imagined place known not through direct experience but through patriotic poetry, and thus more familiar than the real one.⁸⁴ The agrarian reality depicted in *Kõrboja peremees*, however, offers a clear counter-narrative to this vision, exposing decay, degeneration, and social as well as psychological fragmentation, even if the novel's conclusion gestures ambiguously toward continuity.

This critical distance from romantic nationalism has often prompted accusations of insufficient patriotism or idealism in Tammsaare's work: the peasantry is portrayed unflatteringly, and his characters fail to serve as moral or intellectual exemplars.⁸⁵ Yet this erosion of idealism situates the novel within a broader interwar European literary tendency, particularly in works from rural peripheries, such as Knut Hamsun's *Markens grøde* [Growth of the Soil] (1917) and the Finnish neo-naturalist novels of Joel Lehtonen and Frans Emil Sillanpää. Lehtonen's *Villi* (1905), for instance, features a Nietzschean protagonist, Villi [wild] who recalls Tammsaare's Villu. Like *Kõrboja peremees*, these texts dismantle the pastoral myth by exposing violence, moral ambiguity, and existential instability beneath the veneer of rural order, aligning the countryside not with national romantic regeneration but with decline and disillusionment.

Yet, while *Kõrboja peremees* participates in these broader tendencies, it shifts the emphasis from externally transformed realities brought about by rapid modernization to internal, emotional,

and affective change. The novel registers the transition from rural to urban culture and engages with contemporary debates surrounding the tensions between countryside and city that accompanied Estonia's accelerated modernization. Although this shift is marked by social indicators – most notably Anna's education in St. Petersburg – the narrative is less concerned with social transformation as such than with the characters' inner conflicts. Through the figures of Anna and Villu, Tammsaare explores the ambivalent affective identities and heightened self-reflexivity that fin-de-siècle thinkers such as Baudelaire, Bourget, and Nietzsche associated with the modern urban mentality. Rather than foregrounding the material manifestations of modernization, the novel focuses on its psychological consequences, often articulated through a Nietzschean lens. Within the context of early twentieth-century Estonian literature, Tammsaare thus gives compelling form to what Friedebert Tuglas described as the growing influence of the 'urban spirit' on rural life.

vahest mitte seevõrra tähtis pole meie linnade kasvamine, kui just linna vaimu, mõtlemisviisi, linnalise psühholoogia maale tungimine ajalehe, rahvahariduse, poliitika ja kõigi uue aja ideede kaudu. [...] Tekivad hoopis uued ühiselulised ja isikulised vahekorrad, kujuneb hulk uusi olemasolu tingimusi, muutub täielikult endine usuliste, kõlbeliste ning poliitiliste väärtuste tasakaal.

[but perhaps the growth of cities is not as important as the penetration of the urban spirit, mindset, and urban psychology into the countryside through newspapers, public education, politics, and all the other ideas of the modern age. [...] Completely new social and personal relations are emerging, a set of new conditions of existence is being formed, as the balance of former religious, moral, and political values is completely changing.]⁸⁶

In this respect, and in Tammsaare's own terminology, the key psychological categories are *mats* and *vurle*, concepts he elaborates in his often-cited, manifesto-like essay 'Avalik kiri kirjanik A. H. Tammsaarele' [An Open Letter to A. H. Tammsaare] (1927).⁸⁷ *Mats* denotes 'a steadfast, tough, and enduring bearer of life's core values' and is thus associated with a peasant mentality, whereas *vurle* lacks both character and form – nothing is sacred to the *vurle*.⁸⁸ Tammsaare argues that *mats* has become socially marginalized across Europe, 'Mats on nurka surutud' [is driven into a corner] as an urban mentality spreads into rural life.⁸⁹ Drawing on a later formulation by the acclaimed Estonian writer, critic, and theatre director Mati Unt (1944-2005), the modern individuals in

Tammsaare's terms are *matsvurle* – figures defined by profound ambivalence.⁹⁰ Many of Tammsaare's protagonists, including Anna and Villu, can thus be read as emblematic *matsvurle* figures, negotiating the tension between traditional rural values and the pressures of modernization.

This tension resonates with broader Nordic concerns about rapid modernization. The concept of *matsvurle* is closely related to the figure of the upstart – *tõusik* in Estonian and *nousukas* in Finnish (see the introduction, as well as the articles by Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková plus Huusko in this special issue). While Friedebert Tuglas initially criticized his own generation – the Young Estonia movement – for being 'teoreetilised eurooplased' [theoretically European]⁹¹ and producing literature that was overly artificial and detached from lived experience, during the First World War he had reframed these concerns as a problem of 'tõusiku kultuur' [upstart culture], explicitly linking them to questions of Estonianness. However, the most influential literary embodiment of both excessive Europeaness and problematic Estonianness appears in Tuglas' novel *Felix Ormusson* (1915), whose protagonist combines 'European' decadence with the traits of a 'local' or 'national' upstart.⁹²

Yet on a philosophical level, the notions of theoretical Europeaness and/or Estonianness point to a crisis of language and, more broadly, a crisis of representation: an acute awareness that language and other sign systems are no longer capable of representing reality directly or reliably. In this sense, the critique extends beyond psychological change brought about by rapid urbanization to a deeper epistemological uncertainty. Against this background, one can recognize the influence of fin-de-siècle thinkers, most notably Nietzsche, but also Ernst Mach, Sigmund Freud, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal, whose works were certainly familiar to Tammsaare, Tuglas, and other Nordic artists.

These points are further clarified in Tammsaare's essay 'An Open Letter to A. H. Tammsaare' to which we referred above.⁹³ There, he makes it clear that he is ultimately not concerned with doctrinal or ideological systems as such: 'kõik need pisitillukesed asjakesed, mida

püüame temasse istutada usu, kõlbluse, rahvuse, karskuse ja jumal teab mille nimel' [all those tiny little things which we try to instil into us in the name of faith, morals, nationality, abstinence, and God knows what].⁹⁴ Even 'Europeanness', he argues, is merely another belief system – one 'tiny little thing' among many others.⁹⁵ In this sense, the emotionally intense psychodrama of *Kõrboja peremees* signals a clear shift away not only from nationalism toward epistemological concerns, but also toward a universal conception of humanity – a concern that would later become central to existentialist writing. Like several of Tammsaare's philosophical positions, this orientation finds its clearest articulation in 'An Open Letter to A. H. Tammsaare'.

What interested Tammsaare most – even early in his career – was the human psyche, which he regarded as fundamentally unchanged over millennia. In a 1936 article reflecting, among other things, on what kind of theatre might appeal to audiences, he argues: 'Kirevat hulka võivad ühtlaselt rabada ainult kired, mis ühised kõigile [...] kõiki neid huvitab väikeste teisenditega armastus, kadedus, viha, võimuiha, omakasu, auahnus, varandusehimu.' [The motley crowd can be equally stirred only by passions common to all [...] what interests them all, with only minor variations, is love, envy, hatred, the lust for power, self-interest, ambition, and the desire for wealth.]⁹⁶ This emphasis on enduring emotional structures – clearly influenced by Nietzschean psychology – further underscores his conviction that literature's most significant task lies not in representing social programmes or ideological identities, but in probing the persistent psychological forces that shape human existence.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined Tammsaare's *Kõrboja peremees* through the lens of spiritual naturalism, situating the novel within the broader currents of realistic and naturalistic prose that sought innovative forms of expression in the early twentieth century. *Kõrboja peremees* exemplifies Tammsaare's effort to expand the boundaries of naturalistic documentation towards a mystical, spiritual reality charged with decadent sensibility. References to myth and the conversions of

biblical narratives – particularly those favoured by decadent aesthetes – along with cyclical conceptions of time, create a layered reality that distances the narrative from the documented surface of ordinary life. The novel's focus on inner conflicts and its depiction of tormented, obsessive love in the spirit of decadence forms an important part of this tendency, which marks a shift away from external documentation of characters determined by their milieu toward the exploration of psychological paradoxes – an approach that would later inform the conception of the absurd in modernist aesthetics.⁹⁷ While much scholarship on spirituality and religion in fin-de-siècle and decadent literature has focused primarily on their thematic manifestations,⁹⁸ our analysis has emphasized the formal and subtler, more indirect means through which spirituality is evoked in Tammsaare's work. These include narrative structures that obscure fully knowable reality, the intensification of emotion through stylistic devices, and the use of decadent oxymorons embedded in characterization and other narrative tropes. In this way Tammsaare's spiritual naturalism is shaped by both in its formal structures and thematic concerns.

Together with these formal and thematic innovations, the novel illustrates Tammsaare's challenge to simplified truths and his embrace of Nietzschean ideas, including perspectivism. *Kõrboja peremees* resists reductive ideas of truth and schematic readings of characters as merely ideological symbols or singular messages. At the same time, the novel's turn toward questions of universal humanity creates a distance from narrowly national (romantic) concerns and the realistic representation of the family epic.

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² This quotation from Fyodor Dostoevsky is taken from an article written about him by A. H. Tammsaare in 1924. See A. H. Tammsaare, 'Sissejuhatuseks', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed 16. köide. Publiitsistika II (1914-1925)* (Eesti Raamat, 1988), pp. 619-48 (p. 648). Dostoevsky was one of Tammsaare's favourite authors, whose influence is frequently noted by Estonian scholars. See, for example, Marina Grišakova, 'Mõtteid Tammsaarest, Nietzsche ja Dostojevskist', *Vikerkaar*, 1-2 (2005), pp. 80-86.

³ A. H. Tammsaare was born as Anton Hansen. Around 1903, he began using the pseudonym "A. H. Tammsaare", adopting the name of his family's farm in central Estonia (Põhja-Tammsaare, or North Tammsaare). Thus, the initials "A. H." refer not to the first names of the pseudonym, but to his birth name, Anton Hansen. For the sake of

clarity and consistency, however, we refer to him simply as Tammsaare, following common practice in English-language scholarship.

⁴ See Tõnu Õnnepalu, 'Saateks', in A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* (Tänapäev, 2018), pp. 177–223, (p. 177).

⁵ Epp Annus 'Kõrboja peremees – romaan väikese algustähega', A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* (Avita, 2007), pp. 141–51; Toomas Haug, 'A. H. T. lahkumine Koitjärelt. Lapse sünn "Kõrboja peremehe"', *Klassikute lahkumine. 25 kirjatööd* (Eesti Keele Sihtasutus, 2010), pp. 18–38; Mirjam Hinrikus, *Dekadentlik modernism A. H. Tammsaare ja nooreestlaste loomingus*. Dissertationes litterarum et contemplationis comparativae Universitatis Tartuensis, 10 (Tartu ülikooli kirjastus, 2011); Maarja Vaino, *Irratsionaalsuse poeetika A. H. Tammsaare loomingus*, Tallinna ülikool. Humanitaarteaduste dissertatsioonid, 26 (Tallinna ülikooli kirjastus, 2011); Õnnepalu, 'Saateks', Arne Merilai, 'A. H. Tammsaare's Epic Musicality', *Interlitteraria*, 26.1 (2021), pp. 265–80.

⁶ The setting of the novel can be described as an agrarian family epic, which links it to a set of metaphors recurring in narratives of the nation across literary traditions, such as the relationship between the people and the land. See Patrick Colm Hogan, *Understanding Nationalism: On Narrative, Cognitive Science, and Identity* (Ohio State University Press, 2009), pp. 148–49. However, the fact that Tammsaare both mobilizes and challenges these metaphors in the spirit of decadence was already noted by his contemporary critics. In 1916, Tuglas argued that Tammsaare's work published up to that point constituted a mixture of naturalism, neo-romanticism, and symbolism. See Friedebert Tuglas, 'A. H. Tammsaare', *Kriitika III* (Noor-Eesti, [1916] 1935), pp. 81–136. This assessment was later reiterated by several critics, including Gustav Suits, *Eesti kirjanduslugu* (Ilmamaa, [1936] 1999).

⁷ In this article, we understand realism as a transhistorical mode of representation, one that has existed since antiquity but whose techniques were largely developed and codified in nineteenth-century classical realist fiction. The nineteenth-century naturalist novel adopts many of these realist conventions – such as narrative objectivity and transparency, linear plot progression, a serious tone, and an anchoring of the narrative in concrete historical time and place – while also introducing its own specific themes. These include a focus on scientific determinism, hereditary degeneration, and the influence of environment and biology on human behaviour, reflecting the broader influence of the scientific worldview of the late nineteenth century. See e.g., Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, [1946] 2003). See Philippe Hamon, 'Un discours contrain', *Littérature et réalité*, ed. by Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov (Éditions du Seuil, 1982), pp. 119–81.

⁸ A related concept, *surnaturalisme*, appears in Charles Baudelaire's diary, where he uses it to describe moments marked by an intensified perception of time and space, combined with a strain of satanic irony (see Charles Baudelaire, *Mu alasti kistud süda: päevikumärkmed. Loomingu Raamatukogu*, 30. trans. by Kristjan Haljak (SA Kultuurileht, 2014), pp. 16–17; see Jaan Undusk, 'Tuglase sümbolistlik manifest', *Friedebert Tuglas. Kogutud teosed*, 12 (Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2013), pp. 472–79 (pp. 477–78).

⁹ See Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press, 1997), and Riikka Rossi, 'Primitivism and Spiritual Emotions: F. E. Sillanpää's Rural Decadence', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), pp. 119–35.

¹⁰ See Päivi Lappalainen, *Koti, kansa ja maailman tabraava lika: Näkökulmia 1880–1890-luvun kirjallisuuteen* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2000), p. 76–77. On spirituality in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Finnish literature and art, see also Maarit Leskelä-Kärki et al., *Uuden Etsijät: Salatieteiden ja okkultismin suomalainen kulttuurihistoria 1880–1930* (Kustannusosakeyhtiö Teos, 2021).

¹¹ Friedebert Tuglas, *Juhan Liiv. Monografia* (Noor-Eesti, 1914); see Jaan Undusk, 'Tuglase sümbolistlik manifest', *Friedebert Tuglas. Kogutud teosed*, 12 (Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2013), pp. 476–77.

¹² A. H. Tammsaare, 'Uued raamatud', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed 15. Publiksistika I (1902–1914)* (Eesti Raamat, [1914] 1986), pp. 303–05 (p. 304).

¹³ Besides the Russian writers, especially Fyodor Dostoevsky, most often discussed in Tammsaare scholarship, Tammsaare also wrote essays and reviews on Oscar Wilde, Maurice Maeterlinck, F. E. Sillanpää, Henrik Ibsen, Aino Kallas, August Strindberg, and many others.

¹⁴ A. H. Tammsaare, 'Pilguk kirjanus', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed 15*, [1907], pp. 210–14 (p. 214).

¹⁵ A. H. Tammsaare, 'Friedrich Nietzsche. Linnulennult', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed 15*, [1909], pp. 226–34; 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.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by Judith Norman (Cambridge University Press, 2002, [1886]), §12 and §19.

¹⁷ Ibid., §34; Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (Vintage, 1974, [1882]), §374; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. by Adrian del Caro (Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. by Angus Davidson (Oxford University Press, 1970, [1952]); John R. Reed, *Decadent Style* (Ohio University Press, 1985).

¹⁹ According to Reuven Tsur, mystic poetry aspires to create a sense of fusion by using abstract images that render clear-cut categorization less distinct – by blurring the borders between categories, softening the limits, and

establishing a new uncategorized unity in our perception. See Reuven Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness: Space, Rhythm, and Semantic Structure in Religious Poetry and Its Mystic-Secular Counterpart: A Study in Cognitive Poetics* (Imprint Academic, 2015), pp. 36-37.

²⁰ Friedebert Tuglas, 'Kirjanduslik stiil', *Noor-Eesti*, 4 (1912), pp. 23-100; see also Aino Kallas *Noor-Eesti. Näpolid ja sihtjooned*, trans. by Friedebert Tuglas (Noor-Eesti, [1918] 1921).

²¹ Friedrich Nietzsche connects the Dionysian with transgression, irrationality, and the darker, instinctual aspects of human nature, in contrast to Apollonian order, reason, and individuation. He discusses the Apollonian and Dionysian dimensions of Greek culture most extensively in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

²² Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi: Minä ja Toimen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1997).

²³ A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees, Kogutud teosed*, 5 (Eesti Raamat, 1980), p. 8. Here and throughout this article quotations from *Kõrboja peremees* are cited from this edition. We have also consulted the Finnish translation (A. H. Tammsaare, *Korpiojan isäntä*, trans. by Juhani Salokannel (Aviador, 2022)). Unless otherwise indicated, all English translations from *Kõrboja peremees* and the secondary literature are our own.

²⁴ In this respect, it is also useful to bear in mind the influence of Georg Simmel, whose thinking – shaped in dialogue with Nietzsche – conceptualizes masculinized creativity as the imposition of form upon the flux of gendered (i.e. feminized) life. See Angelika Sendlinger, *Lebenspathos und Décadence um 1900: Studien zur Dialektik der Décadence und der Lebensphilosophie am Beispiel Eduard von Keyserlings und Georg Simmels* (Peter Lang 1994); See Mirjam Hinrikus, *Dekadentlik modernsuskogemus A. H. Tammsaare ja nooreestlaste loomingus*, pp. 88-92. Creativity in Tammsaare's works is almost everywhere masculinized; see Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Tammsaare's Constructions of Femininity in Light of Weininger's Concept of Sex Difference', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 46.2, pp. 171-97.

²⁵ In the Estonian landscape, where natural elevations are generally low, a *mägi* ('hill') denotes a modest rise rather than a mountain. In the novel, however, Kivimägi ('Stone Hill') is far more than a geographical location: it functions as a symbolic place representing Villu's existential bond with the land and his commitment to an authentic way of life. See e.g. Epp Annus, 'Kõrboja peremees – romaan väikese algustähega', pp. 141-51.

²⁶ See Antti Ahmala, *Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on? Autenttisuus ja itsestä vieraantuminen Joel Lehtosen varhaistuotannossa* (University of Helsinki, 2016), see also Ahmala's article in this issue.

²⁷ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 30.

²⁸ In this regard, *Kõrboja peremees* – like many other works by Tammsaare (see also the article by Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková in this issue) – draws on the prototypical structure of romantic narratives from Shakespeare to Jane Austen to modern romantic fiction. As Hogan (*Understanding Nationalism*, p. 90) articulates, a prototypical romantic plot begins with two individuals falling in love, yet this love is fraught with difficulties. Central to these conflicts is the tension with social hierarchy – most often familial, but occasionally religious or political. Such conflict typically arises for one of two reasons: either the relationship contravenes the preferences of an authority, such as the parents' opposition, or the lovers belong to socially antagonistic or hierarchically divided groups (e.g., rival nations or disparate social classes), rendering their union taboo within the prevailing social order.

²⁹ Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 22; David Weir, *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Afterword: The Specters of Decadence in Later Nordic Literature', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), pp. 257-72 (pp. 258-59).

³⁰ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 13.

³¹ Ibid., p. 20.

³² Ibid., p. 19

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 44.

³⁶ However, Önnepalu suggests that they may have had a physical relationship but does not address the possibility of violence, See Önnepalu, 'Saateks'.

³⁷ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

³⁸ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 74.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

⁴⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage Books, 1968).

⁴¹ However, a certain narrative asymmetry (see Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton University Press, 2003) characterizes the representations of these views, as Villu's perspective, rendered through free indirect discourse, is more amply opened than Anna's view. In contrast, Anna's viewpoint is less developed within the narrative. The narrative gender hierarchy extends to the other characters; for instance, the focalization of the old Rein occupies narrative space. About sexism and misogyny in Tammsaare's works, see Hinrikus, 'Tammsaare's Constructions of Femininity in Light of Weininger's Concept of Sex Difference'

⁴² Reed, *Decadent Style*, pp. 24-26. Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi: Minä ja Toimen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1997). On love and desire in Tammsaare's work from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, see also Maire Jaanus, 'Tammsaare and Love', *Interlitteraria*, 10 (2005), pp. 179-95.

⁴³ Praz, *The Romantic Agony*.

⁴⁴ According to Jaan Undusk, love in the works of Tammsaare is always bound up with death, because an intense emotion can endure only as long as there is distance between the two lovers. See Jaan Undusk, 'Armastus ja sotsioloogia. Sisesevaade Tammsaare maailma', *Armastus ja sotsioloogia. A. H. Tammsaare 'Ma armastasin sakslast'*, ed. by Mirjam Hinrikus, Jaan Undusk, (Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2013), pp. 244-344; (pp. 252-61 & 286).

⁴⁵ Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, p. 36.

⁴⁶ See Aino Kallas, Noor-Eesti. Näopildid ja sihtjooned. On this collection and its connections to decadence, see Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadent Modernism and the Imprint of Taine in Aino Kallas' Young Estonia: Portraits and Trajectories', *Aino Kallas. Negotiations with Modernity*, ed by Leena Kurvet Käosaar and Lea Rojola (Finnish Literature Society, 2011), pp. 66-90.

⁴⁷ See Aino Kallas, *Noor-Eesti. Näopildid ja sihtjooned*, p. 133.

⁴⁸ Haug, 'A. H. T. lahkumine Koitjärevelt. Lapse sünn "Kõrboja peremehe"'.
⁴⁹ See Önnepalu, 'Saateks', p. 190.

⁵⁰ The original manuscript title of *Kõrboja peremees* was *Metsjesuke* [*The Little Jesus of the Forest*]. See Maarja Vaino, 'Kõrboja peremees' – romaan unistamisest ja eksitustest', in A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, with commentary by Maarja Vaino (Tallinna kirjanduskeskus, 2022), pp. 165-76 (p. 165).

⁵¹ Tsur argues that mystic poetry tends intuitively to evoke a sense of invisible background or the existence of an unseen presence. See Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, pp. 13 & 66.

⁵² Rossi, 'Primitivism and Spiritual Emotions', p. 127.

⁵³ In 1923, Estonian writer and critic Albert Kivikas argued even that *Kõrboja peremees* was a plagiarism of Knut Hamsun's *Pan*. It is nevertheless important to note that Hamsun is only one of many authors to whom Tammsaare's works allude. See also Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková in this issue.

⁵⁴ See Mirjam Hinrikus & Merlin Kirikal, 'Decadence as Dynamism and Mutability: The Nietzschean-Bergsonian Imprint in the Early Works of A. H. Tammsaare and J. Semper; See also Mirjam Hinrikus, Merlin Kirikal, 'Dekadents ja elu. Nietzsche'lik-bergson'lik liikumise ning voolamise esteetika Tammsaare ja Semperi varases proosas', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 67.1-2 (2024), pp. 108-43 (p. 127).

⁵⁵ A. H. Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, pp. 61-62.

⁵⁶ Chris M. Meadows, *A Psychological Perspective on Joy and Emotional Fulfilment* (Routledge, 2014), pp. 193-95; Tsur, *On the Shore of Nothingness*, p. 20.

⁵⁷ See Vaino, *Irratsionaalsuse poeetika A. H. Tammsaare loomingus*; see Merilai, 'A. H. Tammsaare's Epic Musicality'.

⁵⁸ See Ben Etherington, *Literary Primitivism* (Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 116-20, on the effects of repetition in primitivistic poetry.

⁵⁹ On the concept of tone and mood, see Noël Carroll, 'Art and Mood: Preliminary Notes and Conjectures', *The Monist*, 86.4 (2003), pp. 521-55; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard University Press, 2005); Marco Caracciolo, 'Perspectives on Narrative and Mood', in *How to Do Things with Narrative: Cognitive and Diachronic Perspectives*, ed. by Jan Alber and Greta Olson (De Gruyter, 2017), pp. 15-27.

⁶⁰ Transparency, coherence, and a certain ease of reading have been considered key aspects of 'readerly' realistic texts; see e.g., Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Éditions du Seuil, 1970).

⁶¹ Reed, *Decadent Style*, p. 28.

⁶² Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 75.

⁶³ About masculinity, sexuality and peasant society, see, e.g., Kirsi Pohjola-Vilkuna, *Eros kylässä. Maaseudun luovaton seksuaalisuus vuosisadan vaihteessa* (Suomen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1995).

⁶⁴ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 95.

⁶⁵ See Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi*, p. 31.

⁶⁶ 'There is only a perspective seeing, only a perspective "knowing"; and the more affects we allow to speak about one thing, the more eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our "concept" of this thing, our "objectivity", be'; see Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (Vintage, [1887] 1989), third Essay, section 12, p. 119.

⁶⁷ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 95.

⁶⁸ On the opposition between positive love and negative marriage in Tammsaare's works, see Undusk, 'Armastus ja sotsioloogia. Sisesevaade Tammsaare maailma'. It should be added that this opposition applies primarily to the male characters rather than to the female character, see Hinrikus, 'Tammsaare's Constructions of Femininity in Light of Weininger's Concept of Sex Difference'

⁶⁹ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 114.

⁷⁰ 'tulge Kõrbojale peremeheks [...]. Tulge või täna sisse, tulge jalamaid, tulge pühapäevariietes' [Please, come to Kõrboja to be the Master of Kõrboja [...]. Come even today, come straight away, come in your Sunday clothes]. (Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 120).

⁷¹ As Ahmala (*Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin olen?* pp. 33-4) argues, the Nietzschean pursuit of authenticity involves questioning established meanings and embracing creativity. Nietzsche posits that while shared values provide safety for the masses, the quest for authenticity is a challenge meant for a higher individual – one who shapes their life as a

work of art, guided by a strong, unbreakable will that enables them to create a meaningful existence. See also Ahmala's article in this issue of *Volupté*.

⁷² Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 127.

⁷³ In the fin-de-siècle literature, suicide emerges as a recurrent motif notably in Henrik Ibsen's plays, where it is often similarly portrayed as a radical solution to existential anxiety and a pathway to freedom. Several male characters in Tammsaare's works also commit suicide. See also Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková in this issue.

⁷⁴ See also Paolo Stellino, 'Nietzsche on Suicide', *Nietzsche Studien*, 42.1 (2013), pp. 151-77.

⁷⁵ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees* p. 129.

⁷⁶ Those scholars whose perspective is shaped by national romanticism tend to emphasize precisely the aspect of rebirth (e.g., Haug, 'A. H. T. lahkumine Koitjärvelt. Lapse süünd "Kõrboja peremees"', Vaino, *Irratsionaalsuse poeetika A. H. Tammsaare loomingus*.) The author's original title, *The Little Jesus of the Forest* (*Metsjeesuke*), also alludes to rebirth and redemption. The novel was later retitled *Kõrboja peremees*. See also endnote 50.

⁷⁷ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 134.

⁷⁸ See Haug, 'A. H. T. lahkumine Koitjärvelt. Lapse süünd "Kõrboja peremees"'.

⁷⁹ Neville Morley, 'Decadence as a Theory of History', *New Literary History*, 35.4 (2005), pp. 573-85 (p. 573);

Hinrikus, *Dekadentlik modernsuskogemus A. H. Tammsaare ja nooreestlaste loomingus*, pp. 59-63.

⁸⁰ For example, *Kõrboja peremees* refers to Villu's older brother, who died in the First World War, and to the calendar reform, which involved the change from the Julian to the Gregorian system in February 1918. In Chapter Six there is an allusion to the calendar change, which allows Anna for the first time this year to celebrate her birthday on St John's (Midsummer) Eve (p. 38).

⁸¹ Tammsaare's pacifist ideas are clearly reflected in his 1919 collection of articles, 'Sõjamõtted' [Thoughts on War].

⁸² For discussions of the complex (post)colonial relationship between the Estonian population, largely of serf origin, and the ruling Baltic German cultural elite, see the article by Hinrikus and Parente-Čapková in this issue.

⁸³ Between 2014 and 2025, Volumes I-III of *Tõde ja õigus* appeared in English translation as *Truth and Justice*.

See also Piret Peiker, *Discourses of Modernity: The Case of Estonian Literature* (Saint Helena, CA: Helena History Press, 2024), pp. 210-25. Peiker reads Tammsaare's '*Tõde ja õigus*' [*Truth and Justice*] primarily through the lenses of postcolonial modernity and the philosophy of history, in line with a tradition of Tammsaare scholarship that tends to privilege motifs of rebirth and redemption over a decadently ambivalent aesthetic.

⁸⁴ Tammsaare, *Kõrboja peremees*, p. 31.

⁸⁵ Johannes Aavik, 'Tõde ja õigus I', *Eesti kirjandus*, 12 (1926), pp. 662-64.

⁸⁶ Friedebert Tuglas, in *Noor-Eesti IV* (1912), pp. 23-100, (pp. 95-97).

⁸⁷ This 'Open Letter' (See A. H. Tammsaare, 'Avalik kiri kirjanik A. H. Tammsaarele', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed*, 17, *Publitsistika III (1926-1940)*, (Eesti Raamat, [1927] 1990), pp. 273-84 (pp. 278-79) was written in response to the partly critical reception of the first volume of '*Tõde ja õigus*' [*Truth and Justice*]. Among Tammsaare's most outspoken critics was the Young Estonia writer, Francophile, and language reformer Johannes Aavik. See also the introduction to this issue.

⁸⁸ The word *mats* derive from a common peasant given name (Mats < *Matthias*) and originally functioned as a neutral designation for a 'simple person' or a peasant. Within the estate-based Baltic German social order, however, it acquired a pejorative connotation, becoming a condescending and hierarchical label for the Estonian peasantry. The word *vurle* most likely originates from Baltic German colloquial speech and is associated with the German word *Wurzel* [root], which was used ironically to denote a rootless, superficial, and imitative urban individual. In Estonian usage, the term thus came to express a critical judgement of lifestyle and attitudes rather than of social or ethnic origin.

⁸⁹ See Tammsaare, 'Avalik kiri kirjanik A. H. Tammsaarele', p. 279.

⁹⁰ Mati Unt, 'Matsvurle', *Sirp* 42 (2000).

⁹¹ Tuglas, *Kirjanduslik stiil*.

⁹² Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Theoretically European and/or Upstart? Decadence in an Estonian Key', *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 233-47.

⁹³ Tammsaare, 'Avalik kiri kirjanik A. H. Tammsaarele'; see endnote 88 above.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Tammsaare, 'Näidend, rahvas ja arvustaja', *A. H. Tammsaare. Kogutud teosed*, 17, pp. 486-92, (p. 487).

⁹⁷ As Ástráður Eysteinnsson observes, modernism is driven by a desire to disrupt and problematize the communicative conventions of realism. Ástráður Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernity* (Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 238.

⁹⁸ E.g., Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*.

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

Mirjam Hinrikus and Viola Parente-Čapková

Tallinn University and University of Turku

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Complex interactions in a mirror of self-reflection

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Perspectives on truth and artistry

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹² See endnote 2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

²⁹ See also endnote 6.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 26; in English p. 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Finnish Journeys Through Vitality and Depression: Uuno Eskola's Self-Perception as an Artist and Social Climber¹

Timo Huusko

Ateneum Art Museum, Helsinki

Alhaiso minua irvailee. Porvarit pitävät tyhjätoimittajana, loiseläjänä. Sivistyneistö on suosiollinen, mutta ei voi tukea, koska on köyhää. Heidänkään piirissä en viihdy: en voi olla sovinainen.

[The lower classes mock me. The bourgeoisie see me as an idle, a loafer. The educated class is sympathetic but cannot support me because they are poor. I do not feel at home even among them: I cannot be conciliatory.]²

– Uuno Eskola to Ludvig Wennervirta, undated letter (c. 1920)

Uuno Eskola (1889–1958) was a young Finnish artist and writer who saw himself as a misfit, not belonging to any fixed community or social class. As an artist, he was certainly an outsider. Like many other young male artists who started their careers in the first two decades of the twentieth century, Eskola came from a rural background and was the child of uneducated parents. However, he was an aesthete and a dandy who was aware of his good looks and often posed for photographs. His writings, which reveal a sense of insecurity and a desire for life, fluctuate between confidence and despair. His paintings, on the other hand, are characterized by imagery associated with agrarian nationalism. He painted both rural landscapes and works inspired by the Finnish national epic, the *Kalevala*.³

At first glance, Eskola is difficult to classify within the framework of decadence, especially if the archetype of a decadent artist is considered to be an urbane upper-class aesthete like Jean Floressas des Esseintes in J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884), disillusioned with the superficiality of an industrialized and materialistic society and seeking refuge in themes and pleasures deemed degenerative in petty bourgeois circles. However, this quintessential decadent figure appears somewhat different when the analysis is expanded to the Nordic context, particularly given the progressive thinking that influenced Finland, Norway, and Estonia.⁴ In these cultural frameworks,

material progress was regarded as a sacred mission, an ideal national task which could not be tainted by extreme naturalism or societal, decay-driven pessimism. Inner weakness or unsuitability for such a national endeavour may then have appeared as decadent and anti-modern traits.⁵ Although decadence is traditionally associated with the *fin de siècle*, it can be observed that industrialization and societal materialization arrived belatedly in countries such as Finland, and the belief in progress and the decay it caused extended into the interwar period.⁶

A notable feature of Finnish history is the bloody Civil War that followed the collapse of the German and Russian empires. Combined with a new Nietzschean vision of humanity, this brought the Spenglerian visions of Western decline and the vitality of young nations to the forefront. Feelings of degeneration and regeneration played a significant role in Finnish cultural life after the First World War and the Civil War between January-May 1918.⁷ These sentiments are evident not only in the work of Eskola, but also in the work of another painter, Mikko Carlstedt

(1892–1964), a bohemian who admired Vincent van Gogh and Paul Cézanne in his youth. However, in 1924, he moved from Helsinki back to the countryside in Sääksmäki, where he was born, and thereafter focused on themes depicting rural landscapes and rural ways of life.⁸ Nevertheless, his writings reveal a sense of artistic inferiority and an inability to adapt to the duties of a model citizen or to promote the national good, connecting him to the concept of decadence.

In this article, I analyse Eskola's artistic identity as well as Carlstedt's identity formation, to some extent, and their possible connection to Finland's late and marginal decadence. I will also explore how their reflection on degeneration and regeneration relates to the agrarian-centric nationalist ideas of the period. My main sources include Eskola's unpublished autobiography and his biographical novel *Veren viettelyksestä* [The Allure of Blood] (1923), as well as Carlstedt's correspondence with the art historian Ludvig Wennervirta.

Eskola's upstart profile

Eskola was born near the market town of Salo in south-west Finland. His father was a merchant who had failed in business and his mother came from a peasant family. His volatile father did not allow him to attend school, instead encouraging him to become a tailor. The boy moved away from home to live in Salo, where he attended elementary school privately. He later returned to his childhood home, where he and his father bonded over making clothes and caricatures. According to Uuno Eskola, they were both ridiculed for this.⁹ After his father was stabbed to death, Eskola's childhood home was auctioned off and the family moved to a rented house in Salo. Uuno took over the shop that his brother had started, but he was more interested in organizing theatre evenings and learning the basics of the visual arts. He took lessons in poetry recitation and painting in Turku, where his painting teacher was the artist Edvin Lydén. Located about 50 kilometres from Salo, Turku was the former capital of Finland and, alongside Helsinki, the second Finnish city to offer art education. In 1912, Eskola had a cover illustration accepted for the *Karisto* Christmas magazine, and his poems were published in local newspapers. In Salo, he had befriended Erkki Karu, a future pioneer of Finnish cinema, and together they founded their own theatre company. Among the visual artists in Salo, Matti Warén became a close friend of Eskola's. However, according to Eskola's family members, it was time for him to stop fooling around with the arts. Karu told him to decide quickly whether he wanted to be a businessman, a writer, or a painter., and in August 1914, aged 25, Eskola was accepted to study at the Finnish Art Society's drawing school in Helsinki.¹⁰ When his friend Warén left for a study trip to Paris at the same time, Eskola found it almost incomprehensible that anyone could go there 'full of faith in the future, certain of his purpose in life and skilled in his profession'.¹¹ Eskola's uncertainty gradually eased towards the end of 1914 when he started to paint with Warén, who had just returned from Paris. Even before then, Eskola had received special permission to attend the opening of the autumn salon exhibition at the Ateneum in Helsinki, where he was impressed by Tyko Sallinen's paintings. He was inspired by the fact that the work had 'a new vision and a burst of primal energy'.¹² The following year, Eskola participated in a joint exhibition of artists from Salo, and, confident in his artistic abilities,

he gave up his merchant business in 1916. However, his artworks did not sell well, and he began to doubt his artistic talent again. To support himself, he made covers for hospital stretchers required during the war.¹³

This brief biography highlights the many challenges faced by emerging artists during a transitional period following the dissolution of the estate society.¹⁴ Firstly, they had no inherited wealth from their families and their income relied solely on the sale of their art. Secondly, beyond their immediate circle of fellow artists, the profession of an artist was generally not understood by their wider community. Thirdly, their life was characterized by uncertainty about their own skills and, more broadly, about their identity as an artist and the importance of their profession. Eskola's situation was also typical in Finland at the time, where artistic pursuits were less about gaining financial wealth and more about rising from the lower classes to join the educated elite.¹⁵

Ideals of the Young Republic

Social events also shaped Eskola's identity. The labour movement's strike that began in spring 1917, which foreshadowed civil war, food shortages, and high inflation, caused him great distress.¹⁶ During the brief period of revolutionary rule by the Reds – the revolutionary socialists in Finland – some of Eskola's friends were detained and he himself felt persecuted as though he was a criminal. After the Whites – those who supported the bourgeois senate in the country – took control of Turku and organized a parade there in April 1918, Eskola wrote the poem 'Vapaudelle' [To Freedom].¹⁷ The Finnish Senate had actually declared the country independent on 6 December 1917. However, it was not until the end of the Civil War in April 1918 that the institutions necessary for public administration could be established. Additionally, the threat of falling under the influence of the German Empire meant that the United States and Britain did not recognize Finland's independence until spring 1919. The nation-building project of the young republic truly commenced only in July that year.¹⁸

The way Eskola and Carlstedt saw themselves was similar to the ideas that were most common in Finland during the 1920s and 1930s. In this context, Oswald Spengler's idea of the vitality of Finland's emerging culture in relation to a mature Europe and its old cultures is worth highlighting. The idealization of physical sports culture that developed in Finland, and the successes of Finnish athletes at the Olympic Games in the 1920s and 1930s, symbolized and reinforced the idea of the vitality of young Finland. Another ideological undercurrent was the agrarian-nationalist and Protestant interpretation of civic virtues. This was linked to emphasizing the Finnish language, sanctifying one's own country, maintaining a strict work ethic, and upholding *Sittlichkeit* [high moral standards] in family life. In Finland, there is a tradition of referring to a period of national consolidation which aimed specifically to ensure that the perception of the people by the educated and cultural elite would once again emphasize their virtue, hard work, and eagerness to learn. At the same time, there was a desire to forget the fear of the people's primitiveness that had been created by the activities of the Reds during the Civil War.¹⁹ In terms of cultural policy, this also meant that certain groups sought to make Finnish culture more accessible to the peasantry.²⁰ The period of national consolidation in Finland (*Kansallinen eheytyminen*) is a unique phenomenon within the European context, shaped by a fear of the urban proletariat, on the one hand, and an emphasis on agrarian community and high moral standards, on the other. Traces of this kind of idealization of work and fatherland can be seen in countries such as France during the interwar period, but Finnish development is closer to that of countries which, like Finland, had recently gained independence, such as like Norway, Estonia, and Latvia, and where the majority of citizens were able to receive an education in their native language.²¹ There are also examples of agrarian nationalism in Eskola's paintings, as in *Perunannosto* [Potato Harvesting] (1936), held in the Finnish National Gallery.

Perhaps one manifestation of Finland's peripheral and temporarily delayed decadence can be seen in the experience of personal weakness and decline in relation to the normative, masculine ethics of the young republic described above. In the summer of 1918, after the Civil War, Eskola

invited Sallinen to paint at his home in Salo. According to Eskola, Sallinen had been in military uniform, ‘niinkuin yleensä miehet siihen aikaan’ [as men usually were at that time].²² Under Sallinen’s leadership, they began to work diligently. Eskola describes Sallinen’s temperament as strikingly turbulent and expressive, while portraying himself as a melancholic and quiet mystic at heart. Eskola notes that Sallinen’s primal energy, revolutionary manner, and fierce enthusiasm for creating something new gave him clarity and courage to assert his own means of expression. They also discussed art extensively, even though Sallinen was generally of the opinion that one should not get stuck on talking nonsense but just paint.²³

The primeval power and rawness evident in Sallinen’s art are connected to the popularity of Expressionist art, which was enabled by the widespread interest in Wilhelm Worringer’s ideas in Finland during the late 1910s. Influenced by life philosophy, Worringer played a vital role in this movement. In 1915, art critic Ludvig Wennervirta introduced Finnish newspaper readers to Paul Fechter’s book *Der Expressionismus* (1914), which highlighted the inner expression and primitivism of form in Expressionism. This was based on Worringer’s ideas about the drive towards abstraction in the art of northern peoples, contrasting with the ‘empathy’ or *Einfühlung* of the Mediterranean peoples, meaning their ability to relate confidently to the surrounding world. Fechter’s book traces the tendency towards abstraction from ancient times through the Gothic and Baroque periods to Expressionism, reflecting the psyche or national spirit of northern peoples. In 1922, in the first biography written about Sallinen, Aaro Hellaakoski discussed Sallinen’s painting *Hibbulit* [Fanatics] (1919). Many believed that Sallinen conveyed ancient Finnish instincts through his art, which was deeply rooted in Finnish soil.²⁴ Eskola was often accused of imitating Sallinen’s painting style, which, as he stated, embittered him and led to physical illness.²⁵ There are indeed similarities in their modes of painting, which can be seen, for instance, in Eskola’s painting *Maisema Salosta* [Landscape from Salo] (1917).

From today’s perspective, the notion of national character and the idea that art could embody the spirit of a nation seems odd, to say the least. However, in the early years of the

twentieth century, it was commonplace. The Swedish-language art critic Signe Tandefelt, for example, might mention national traits as a standard reference point, but she did not disapprove of incorporating foreign influences. She also accepted the idea that northern artists were less advanced than those in the south, who were associated with colour, sensuality, and rationality. Like Worringer, she believed that wildness, lack of control, and the unconscious belonged to the more irrational north, particularly German culture. In contrast, art critic and painter Sigrid Schauman stated at the Artists' Association's anniversary exhibition in 1924 that '[d]et är inte svårt att förstå huru nära kubism i förening med expressionism står för oss, ty tyngd och uttryck är väl egentligen vår väsen' [it is easy to understand that Cubism and Expressionism are well suited to us when combined, as there is a heaviness and expressiveness in our very essence]'.²⁶

The individuality and collectivity of vitalism

The vitalist philosophy of life emphasized primal energy and introduced the ideas of a spiritual connection between humans and nature, presenting it as an immediate experience and a source of empathy. In *L'Évolution créatrice* [*Creative Evolution*] (1907), Henri Bergson contrasted reason and intuition, with the latter emerging victorious as it leads to the truth and essence of life through its instinctiveness.²⁷ The ideas of the German philosopher Ludvig Klages were also known in Finland. His philosophy of life emphasized the distinction between the soul and the rational mind, favouring the former. Soulfulness expressed a rediscovered connection to the roots of the earth. Klages' work *Der Geist als Widersacher der Seele* [The Spirit as the Adversary of the Soul], published between 1929 and 1932, in which *der Geist*, means 'the spirit', was opposed to the vitalist 'soul', *die Seele*, and was also linked to the ideology of the German National Socialists.²⁸ This way of thinking, or a more or less superficial adoption of it, is clearly evident in the views of Carlstedt's acquaintance, the painter Väinö Kamppuri, who said:

Vuonna 1924-1925 tein syvän ja tiukan päätöksen ruveta ilmentämään töissäni suomalaista luontoa. Hartain toiveeni on ollut, osaltani Suomen kansalaisena saavuttaa ammattialallani parhainta, sellaista minkä rehellisellä mielellä voin tälle kansalle jättää. Maalaustaiteenkin

tulisi olla kansansa kasvattaja ja kasvattaja siten, että rehellinen kansalainen löytää ja näkee siinä syvästi kaipaamaansa sielun ja hengen väijäämätöntä totuutta. Eikö niin? Suomen kansallahan on erikoisen voimakas rehellisyyden jano. Kyllä sielullinen ilmaisu täytyy näyttäytyä työstä. Luonnostahan on turvallista lähteä.

[In 1924-1925, I made a deep and firm decision to begin expressing Finnish nature in my work. My heartfelt wish has been, as a Finnish citizen, to achieve the best in my profession, something that I can leave to this nation with a clear conscience. Painting, too, should be an educator of the people, so that honest citizens can find and see in it the inevitable truth of the soul and spirit that they deeply long for. Is that not so? The Finnish people have a particularly strong thirst for honesty. Yes, soulful expression must be evident in one's work. It is safe to start from nature.]²⁹

Liisa Lindgren has observed that the emphasis on individuality typical of vitalism has resulted in an imprecise, unanalytical doctrine that highlights personal character and the simplicity and innocence of impulses. This is presumably connected to Kamppuri's discussion of honesty. After viewing the works of Finnish artist Marcus Collin in Copenhagen in 1919, Eskola remarked that an artist who uses honest means of expression reveals their roots unintentionally.³⁰

The vitalistic ethos aligned effortlessly with the era's depictions of nature, particularly when influenced by Nietzsche. However, it conflicted with national interests to a certain extent. The agrarian-nationalist image of the people at that time was also shaped by the neo-humanist and bourgeois ethics of nineteenth-century Finnish social thinkers J. W. Snellman and Zacharias Topelius, who both significantly influenced Finnish upper-class culture. According to this ideal, people should be educated to understand what benefits the nation and, in the spirit of Hegel, they should become part of the national spirit under divine providence – first as members of their families and then as members of their work communities.³¹ In the 1910s, this idealism was replaced by many younger artists with Nietzsche's concept of the superhuman. In 1907 Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra* [*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*] (1883-1885) was published in Finnish. In this context, a key feature of Finnish decadence emerges: a somewhat vague emphasis on individuality rather than the collective good of the nation, inspired by Nietzsche. Kamppuri, a close friend of Carlstedt, noted that they knew the works of Rabindranath Tagore, Nietzsche, and Spengler by heart.³² Tagore's inclusion here may seem surprising, but he is remembered for saying that people express

themselves through art, not objects. In the Finnish context of the 1910s, self-expression in art often meant creating unrestrained, emotionally powerful works. Nietzsche's view aligned well with the emotionalist aesthetics of that era. His perspective was partly based on the idea that life is governed by instincts and desires, which he considered to be animalistic and primitive. According to Nietzsche, the deepest core of beings, the *Ur-Ein*, which art aims to reach, can be attained through instinctive immediacy. The purpose of art is not to depict reality as it is, but to actively enhance life, transferring vitality from the artist to the receiver.³³ Adopting these philosophical doctrines in a non-analytical, seemingly straightforward manner and relying on hearsay or second-hand information from artist friends, reduces these artists' fundamental principles to a kind of vulgar philosophy. This makes it difficult to trace their thinking back to its primary sources and undermines their intellectual validity. Conversely, it could be argued that this kind of 'vulgar thinking' is precisely what makes peripheral art forms unique and that they should be studied in light of their specific characteristics in, as Piotr Piotrowski, who introduced the concept of horizontal art history, has noted.³⁴

However, in 1920s Finland, there was a desire to restrain passions because popular movements, particularly mass gatherings associated with the labour movement and the desire for change they expressed, tended to increase suspicion between the upper classes and the first-generation educated intelligentsia descended from the lower classes. These gatherings also took on characteristics of mass hysteria. Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* [*The Crowd*] (1895) was translated into Finnish in 1912 and emphasized how crowd behaviour and propaganda can cloud the individual's consciousness and impair their ability to reason. Judgement and emotional control, or the ability to regulate one's passions and instincts, were considered hallmarks of the educated Westerner. In contemporary Finland, ideas about racial heritage were connected to class distinctions and one's native language. These ideas also led to the first generation of educated artists being regarded as too primitive and weak to be civilized because the 'veren ääni' [voice of the blood] – a metaphor widely used in Finland to describe the psyche of the social climbers – was

still too strong and the wild, primitive instincts remained dangerously close.³⁵ Artists like Eskola faced the challenge of rising social status, where the desire to become civilized conflicted with the need to unleash what was deemed to be primitive, atavistic life energy.

The allure of blood

Eskola's novel *Veren viettelyksestä* [The Allure of Blood], published in 1923 and regarded as a coming-of-age story, exemplifies his vitalistic worldview but also reveals his inferiority complexes and unstable artistic identity. Initially, the main character, Eskola's alter ego Esko Haapala, is pessimistic, asserting that one should not pursue art because it does not provide a livelihood and fails to make one a wealthy gentleman. Conversely, he considers school knowledge useless and believes one should not see oneself as special but rather be content with one's lot.³⁶ He thought self-study was a waste of time when there was no solid foundation to build upon.³⁷ Yet, he possessed an innate need for rigorous self-improvement and recognized that his striving was not for reputation but to become a good person and broaden his mind. His fellow artist Antti Vares (Matti Warén), who had gone to Paris, directed him to focus his intellect on capturing the spirit of the modern age in art.³⁸ His view of art thereafter emphasized indomitable will and healthy vitality, as the materialistic petty bourgeoisie had scorned him and seen him as a useless beggar living on charity.³⁹ In his view, freedom in art was always attained through suffering and pain. Eskola's perspectives were also influenced by the renowned German painter Oskar Kokoschka, to whom the narrator of the book refers, and who was a professor at the Dresden Art Academy from 1919 to 1920, during which time Eskola attended the private art school *Der Weg – Schule für Gestaltung*, founded by Edmund Kesting.⁴⁰ The book suggests that the ideas about the inner life of painting and fighting for artistic freedom through the power of love originated from Kokoschka himself: 'Maailman tahraiset kädet puristavat sitä, joka uskaltaa tallata auki vapauden tietä – kohti valoa ja totuutta.' [The world's dirty hands squeeze those who dare to tread the path of freedom – towards light and truth.]⁴¹ At the end of the book, there is a dreamlike scene in which the ill Esko

Haapala imagines people in his Finnish homeland accusing him of wastefulness and debauchery because he rejected his fiancée, who belonged to an estate family. In his dream, he watches the lifeblood of the earth drying up until a light or a love comes from the sky, and the earth begins to melt. However, hatred, envy, and the devil prevail, and Haapala dies. At his funeral, a friend emphasizes that people like Haapala, who have succeeded through their own efforts, need understanding, compassion, and forgiveness, even if they sometimes go too far due to the allure of their blood because they cannot be conciliatory by nature.⁴² This view unties Eskola's vitalistic artistic ethos, which yearns for new creation, with its opposite: a bourgeois, conciliatory world that has been corrupted by materialism. In this sense, Eskola is truly decadent, albeit peripheral.

The relationship between Eskola, who was seeking spiritual enlightenment, and Sallinen was not always smooth. Eskola recalls that when they were in Salo in 1925, he had agreed to read poems to the local gentry. While he was doing so, however, Sallinen shouted, 'Älä helvetissä! Lopeta jo!' [For God's sake, stop!]⁴³ When Eskola continued, Sallinen pushed him so forcefully that Eskola's jacket was torn. In other words, Sallinen, who embodied the traditional male ideal, found Eskola's behaviour too effeminate. Eskola was something of a dandy and probably did not want to conform to prevailing masculine norms.⁴⁴ Carlstedt, however, seems to have had a complex relationship with his own masculinity. As early as 1913, he wrote to his fellow student Arvo Makkonen that 'Usein ajattelen mikäköhän tällaisella miehellä on tarkoituksena elää, sentimentaalisen epämiehekäs kun olen joka hermoani myöten ja harmittaa niin sanattomasti se, etten voi peittää sentimentalisuuttani.' [I often wonder what the purpose of life is for a man like me, who is sentimental and unmanly to the core, and it annoys me so much that I cannot hide my sentimentality.]⁴⁵ Later, in 1928, Carlstedt envied Ludvig Wennervirta for being a Snellmanian nation-builder who devoted his time to public service and moved the world forward. He felt like an invalid because he could not build anything himself.⁴⁶ Still, he valued rural life, perhaps as a necessary form of self-affirmation, as evidenced in his 1930 assertion that human life is at least worth something in the country. He did not want to travel abroad because if, as he wrote, '[j]os on

tyhjät sisusvärkit, niin ei hyödytä mennä sisuksia täyttämään kaikenmaailman ihanuuksilla, sillä kyllä se niin on ettei kannettu vesi kaivossa pysy' [you are empty inside, there is no point in going to fill yourself with all the wonders of the world, because it is true that water carried in a bucket will not stay in the well].⁴⁷ The previous year, he had been invited to participate in an exhibition of Finnish art in Stockholm, but he felt he had nothing to send there. It would have taken a great deal of self-overestimation for him to send his scribbles all the way there, as he put it. In any case, he did not understand why the Finns would have anything to show in the field of art at that time. In his opinion, Stockholm was still acceptable, but he could not comprehend the idea of exhibiting Finnish art in Paris.⁴⁸ It is worth noting here that Carlstedt's feelings of inferiority align with the sentiments of backwardness common among artists in Northern countries and are indicative of decadent pessimism.⁴⁹ Like Eskola, Carlstedt also painted agrarian landscapes and motifs, of which one example is a Cézanne-like *Jänis, asetelma* [Still-life with Hare] (1921).

Carlstedt's fear of primitivism

During their painting trips in the summers of the 1920s and 1930s, many artists visited Carlstedt in Sääksmäki and writers also enjoyed staying there with his brother Kalle. The location's popularity can be seen as one of the less-explored aspects of the appeal of the agrarian community and anti-modern centres in Finnish art history. In Carlstedt's case, instinct and the countryside seem to be interconnected principles guiding his art. In 1932, he wrote to Wennervirta that they shared a very similar approach to painting, which he indicated was largely based on instinct. He added that he felt instinct, 'if not overly restricted, could serve as a sensitive and reliable guide [...] pointing you in the right direction when you listen to it – otherwise, I am not very keen on discussing "art matters"'.⁵⁰ This comment also perfectly illustrates how hesitant people were to discuss the deeper aspects of intuitive experience. Carlstedt's view aligns with Bergson's idea that there is a sort of veil between truth and humans, which only some exceptional individuals can lift

through the power of intuition.⁵¹ However, I have found no evidence that the artists discussed here have directly mentioned Bergson in their speeches or writings.

Carlstedt was a close friend of Ilmari Vuori, whose painting style was closer to the *Neue Sachlichkeit* than Carlstedt's. Vuori attempted to persuade Carlstedt to move to Helsinki. The Carlstedt family often spent the winter months (probably because Carlstedt's wife was born) in Helsinki. In October 1929, Vuori wrote from Porvoo about wintering in Helsinki:

eläähän siellä muutkin. Työntekomahdollisuudet täällä ovat yhtä hyvät, stilleben mahdollisuudet paremmat – ajattele H:gin toria! Laitakaupunkiaiheita ym! Keväällä voit matkata maalle...

[move to Helsinki for the winter, others live there too. The job opportunities are just as good here. The opportunities for still life painting are better – just think of Helsinki Market Square! Suburban themes, etc.! In spring, you can travel to the countryside...] ⁵²

It is reasonable to suppose that Carlstedt was partly delaying his move to the city because he feared losing his natural instincts amid urban culture. In 1914, Carlstedt, who described himself as being in a state of decline, moved away from Helsinki and worldly temptations but he could not always maintain his ideals.⁵³ This was particularly evident in his remorse regarding his alcohol consumption during the summer of 1937. They had promised not to drink with Sallinen during his visit, but, according to Carlstedt, they drank heavily on Midsummer's Eve. This led to Carlstedt making embarrassing mistakes while he was intoxicated.⁵⁴ In the 1930s, Carlstedt's political role model was actually English liberal democracy. It is precisely this idea of the English gentleman that is strongly associated with emotional self-control in all situations.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the primal instincts characteristic of Finnish folk culture were associated with Russian influence, at least since the Civil War.⁵⁶ Put bluntly, Carlstedt wanted to be Western but perhaps feared his Eastern side.

In the 1920s, Finnish aesthetic ideals shifted towards a distinction between the concepts of 'soul' and 'spirit', with the latter gradually gaining prominence. This ideological divide stemmed from the Civil War in which the soul represented the unformed, natural, emotional, and instinctive core of the individual and nation, rooted in national romanticism. In contrast, the spirit was viewed as a more conscious and developed form of thought, considered to be rational and ethical. It was

believed to be capable of organizing life and the world according to humane and civilized principles. It was also believed that the actions of the Reds during the civil war reflected the influence of foreign Slavic blood on Finland's healthy, uncorrupted soul. According to Juhani Ihanus, by the 1930s at the latest, science, art, education, politics, and religion had been reclaimed for the realm of the spirit, escaping primitivism, cosmopolitanism, and the 'viettien evankeliumi' [gospel of passion].⁵⁷ However, the emergence of German National Socialism with its anti-modern *Blut und Boden* [Blood and Soil] rhetoric heralded the arrival of a new type of vitalism.⁵⁸ As early as 1932, Carlstedt told Wennervirta, a supporter of the Finnish far-right movement, that lasting change could not be achieved through violence and that education should promote morality.⁵⁹ Later that year, Carlstedt warned Wennervirta, who had received a research grant to visit Germany, not to fall under Hitler's spell, having already detected such tendencies in him.⁶⁰ Subsequently, Wennervirta publicly supported National Socialist Germany, which strained his relationship with Carlstedt.⁶¹ It is interesting to note that Carlstedt's high morals and admiration for democracy collided with Wennervirta's Nazi sympathies and made Carlstedt seem less decadent than Wennervirta.⁶²

Conclusion

An examination of the confessional images of Eskola and Carlstedt reveals that they both engage with certain ideological currents that were common in the Finnish-language culture of their time, expressing ideas of social progress. On the one hand, there was a vitalistic ethos that emphasized intuitive understanding and downplayed the importance of academic training. On the other hand, there was a strong pursuit of spiritual growth, linked to the German-influenced bourgeois ideal of education that had long been dominant in Finland. The focus was on spiritual development and the expression of the nation's spirit or *Geist* through art. Eskola's vitalistic view of art was an intriguing blend of an ethical focus on the life force. This is clearly communicated through his various metaphors involving liquids, such as blood and the deep waters of life. However, Eskola

also expressed an idealistic desire for goodness and love in his work. The core of an artwork needed to be uncovered – to show its inner life – which would reflect the spirit of the era and society. This aim was inspired more by Bergson's *élan vital*, the universal creative force driving life forward, than by nationalism, which reflects the spirit of the people. A common theme in Eskola's self-perception as an artist, hinting at decadence and personal fragility, was his uncertainty about his capacity to endure the suffering inherent in the creative process. Related to this were an inferiority complex caused by social ambition, the metaphor of the 'voice of blood', and a perceived lack of education in previous generations. All these were seen as barriers to achieving a higher civilization. In this context, the vitalistic disdain for academic education served as a somewhat vague protective mechanism aimed at counteracting the perceived lack of cultural background.

Carlstedt's self-perception as an artist, however, highlights the perceived tension between rural and urban lifestyles. Having moved from Helsinki to his home region, Carlstedt expressed agrarian-nationalist values through his artwork. Nevertheless, he maintained a complex relationship with, and a somewhat self-deprecating view of, his inability to promote the culture of emerging Finland or attain world-class recognition. In this sense, he was a typical decadent: he recognized greatness, but was himself unable to achieve great deeds due to his weaknesses or apathy. He felt undermined by his inability to control his primitive side, which was evident in his excessive alcohol consumption with Sallinen. An intriguing aspect of Carlstedt's stance on social progress is his attitude towards German National Socialism, as reflected in his correspondence with Wennervirta. While Wennervirta embraced National Socialism with its vitalistic blood-and-soil rhetoric, which many contemporaries also found tempting and progressive, Carlstedt rejected it and instead aligned himself with British culture and democracy. In a certain sense, defending democracy in that context, which emphasized irrationality and power, might have been seen as a weakness. Nevertheless, judging by his letters, Carlstedt himself did not view it as such.

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

² Uno Eskola to Ludvig Wennervirta, undated letter (c. 1920). Ludvig Wennervirta's private archive, National Library, Helsinki. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

³ *Uno Eskola. Taiteellisen veren viettelys*, ed. by Pirjo Juusela-Sarasmo, Tatu Jännäri, and Laura Luostarinen (Salo taidemuseo Publications 26, 2016).

⁴ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Taylor & Francis, 2020), p. 8; Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Nordic Cultures: From Wilderness to Metropolitan Decadence', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 209-12.

⁵ On decadence and its connection to anti-modern traits, which resist social progress, see Antti Ahmala, 'Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on?' *Autenttisuus ja itsestä vieraantuminen Joel Lehtosen varbaistuotannossa* (Helsingin yliopisto, 2016), pp. 7 & 144-46.

⁶ For more about the interconnection of the fin-de-siècle and decadence, see Lola Annabel Kass, *Inetuse ilu. Eesti dekadentsikunst, 20. Sajandi esimesel poolel* (Tallinna Ülikool, 2024), pp. 53-54.

⁷ See, for example, Lea Rojola, 'Vastakohtien sekasortoinen maailma. Järkiuskosta vaistojen kapinaan', in *Suomen kirjallisuushistoria*, 2, ed. by Lea Rojola (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), pp. 108-35.

⁸ About Carlstedt's youth, see Max Fritze, *Unstill Life – Mikko Carlstedt's Correspondence and Art, 1911–1921*. FNG Research, Issue 1/2018. <<https://research.fng.fi/2018/01/25/unstill-life-mikko-carlstedts-correspondence-and-art-1911-1921/>> [accessed 28 January 2026].

⁹ Uno Eskola's unpublished autobiography *Routainen tie*. Salon taidemuseo manuscript collection, p. 37.

¹⁰ Eskola, p. 59.

¹¹ Eskola, p. 58.

¹² Eskola, p. 63.

¹³ Eskola, pp. 76-78.

¹⁴ This refers to the society, where your position and life was determined by your estate or profession. There were four estates in Finland: nobility, clergy, bourgeoisie, and the land-owning peasantry. The majority of the people did not belong to these estates.

¹⁵ V. Parente-Čapková, 'Gendering seekers and upstarts in early twentieth-century Finnish literature', in *Approaching Religion*, 11, pp. 30-31, doi:10.30664/ar.98282.

¹⁶ In the spring of 1917, imports of bread grain from Russia to Finland almost ceased, causing food shortages.

¹⁷ Eskola, p. 80.

¹⁸ Risto Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland* (Brill, 2018).

¹⁹ Riikka Rossi, *Alkukantaisuus ja tunteet. Primitivismi 1900-luvun alun suomalaisessa kirjallisuudessa*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 1456 (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2020); Timo Huusko, *Alkuperäisyyden kaipuu ja alkukantaisuuden pelko. Kansa, luonto ja rodullistaminen Suomen modernissa taiteessa vuosina 1915–1930* (Turun yliopisto, 2025).

²⁰ Erkki Sevänen, 'Ensimmäisen tasavallan poliittinen tilanne ja kirjallisen älymystön toimintastrategia', in *Älymystön jäljillä. Kirjoituksia suomalaisesta sivistyneistöstä ja älymystöstä*, Tietolipas 151, ed. by Pertti Karkama & Hanne Koivisto (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1997), pp. 33-63.

²¹ I refer especially to the Parti social français (PSF), which gained popularity in the 1930s.

²² Eskola, pp. 80-81.

²³ Eskola, pp. 80-83.

²⁴ Timo Huusko & Tutta Palin, 'Nationalism, Transnationalism, and the Discourses on Expressionism in Finland. From the November Group to Ina Behrsen-Colliander', in *The Routledge Companion to Expressionism in a Transnational Context*, ed. by Isabel Wünsche (Taylor & Francis, 2019), pp. 222-42.

While the models in the painting were interpreted as representing the uneducated and primitivist Finns, the painting actually depicts a religious sect, the Fanatics, who were known for their uncontrolled ecstasy.

²⁵ Eskola, pp. 96 & 109-10.

²⁶ Timo Huusko, 'Alkuperäisyyden kaipuu ja avantgarde. Piirteitä suomalaisesta taideajattelusta 1920–1930-luvuilla', in *Avantgarde Suomessa*, Tietolipas 267, ed. by Irmeli Hautamäki, Laura Piippo, & Helena Sederholm (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 2021), pp. 171-75. The original quote is from newspaper article 'Jubileumsutställning II.', *Svenska Pressen* 30.9.1924.

²⁷ Bergson's thinking spread to Finland in the 1910s: see Katariina Lipsanen & Lauri Myllymaa, 'Bergson, Henri', *Ensyklopedia Logos*, 30 June 2023. <<https://filosofia.fi/fi/ensyklopedia/bergson-henri#Bergson%20Suomessa>> [accessed 17 January 2026]. On the manifestation of Bergson's vitalist philosophy in the art of Finnish Magnus Enckell and on the emphasis on colour as a Bergsonian mediator between matter and one's own consciousness, see Marja Lahelma, 'Colour Revolution, Vitalism and the Ambivalence of Modern Arcadia'. *FNG Research*, Issue 6/2020,

- 1-7. <<https://research.fng.fi/2020/11/27/colour-revolution-vitalism-and-the-ambivalence-of-modern-arcadia/>> [accessed 18 January 2026].
- ²⁸ On Klages in this connection, see Kari Sallamaa, 'Madonna infructuosa – T. Vaaskivi ja moderni ruumiillisuus', in *Ajan paineessa. Kirjoituksia 1930-luvun suomalaisesta aatemaailmasta*, ed. by Pertti Karkama & Hanne Koivisto (Suomalainen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), p. 423.
- ²⁹ Väinö Kamppuri's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 14 June 1943. National Library, Helsinki.
- ³⁰ Eskola, p. 86.
- ³¹ Heli Rantala, *Sivistyksestä sivilisaatioon. Kulttuurikäsitys J. V. Snellmanin historiallisessa ajattelussa* (Turun yliopisto, 2013), pp. 85-89.
- ³² Hertta Tirranen, *Suomen taiteilijoita Alvar Cavénista Väinö Aaltoseen* (WSOY, 1955), p. 306.
- ³³ On Nietzsche in this context, see Timo Huusko, 'Boheemlastest kunstnikud üleminekuseisundis. Klassiühiskonna murenemisest ja noorte kunsnike dekadentsist Soomes', in *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 2025, kd 34 / 1-2. Eriteema: Dekadents, pp. 77-79.
- ³⁴ See Edit Andrés, 'Provincializing the West: Interview with Piotr Piotrowski', *ARTMargins Online*, 10 September 2012. <<https://artmargins.com/provincializing-the-west/>> [accessed 22 January 2026].
- ³⁵ Rojola 1999; Rossi 2020.
- ³⁶ Uno Eskola, *Veren vietteleksestä* (WSOY, 1923), pp. 28-31.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 81.
- ³⁸ Ibid., pp. 82-91.
- ³⁹ Ibid., pp. 115-17.
- ⁴⁰ Some sources, like Eskola's unpublished autobiography, suggest that Kokoschka may even have been Eskola's teacher in Dresden. However, there is no certainty about this.
- ⁴¹ Eskola, *Veren vietteleksestä*, p. 160.
- ⁴² Ibid., pp. 160-63 & 176.
- ⁴³ Ibid., p. 114.
- ⁴⁴ About gender norms inherited from peasant culture in Finland, see Jan Löfström, *Sukupuoliero agraarikulttuurissa* (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), pp. 160-83.
- ⁴⁵ Fritze, *Unstill Life*, p. 7; Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Arvo Makkonen, 27 August 1913. Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki.
- ⁴⁶ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 18 September 1928. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁴⁷ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 3 April 1930. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁴⁸ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 6-7 January 1929. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁴⁹ Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Theoretically European and/or Upstart? Decadence in an Estonian Key', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, pp. 179-80.
- ⁵⁰ 'ellei sitä liaksi 'karsinoi', voi olla herkempi ja varmempi mittapuu [...] joka kääntää nokan oikeaan suuntaan kun sitä vähän koputtelee – muuten en kovin mielelläni 'taite-asioista' keskustelekaan.' Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 6 May 1932. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁵¹ Riitta Ojanperä, *Taidekriitikko Einari J. Wehmas ja moderni taide* (Valtion taidemuseo, 2010), p. 234. Bergson's statement comes from his 1900 publication *Le Rire [Laughter]*.
- ⁵² Ilmari Vuori's letter to Mikko Carlstedt, 7 October 1929. Finnish National Gallery, Helsinki.
- ⁵³ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 17 June 1943. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁵⁴ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 23 June 1937. National Library, Helsinki. Carlstedt also refers to his drunken rage in his letter to Wennervirta, 3 December 1933. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁵⁵ See Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 27 January 1934. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁵⁶ For example, Lasse Koskela, 'Kansa taisteli – valkoiset kertoivat', in *Järkiuskosta vaistojen kapinaan. Suomen kirjallisuushistoria* 2, ed. by Lea Rojola (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), pp. 222-36.
- ⁵⁷ Juhani Ihanus, 'Jos sinä likaat ja turmelet, niin minä puhdistan, kirkastan ja jalostan' eli viettien teologinen puhdistus ja kulttuuritaistelu 1930-luvun Suomessa', in *Ajan paineessa. Kirjoituksia 1930-luvun suomalaisesta aatemaailmasta*, ed. by Pertti Karkama and Hanne Koivisto (Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura, 1999), pp. 394-96.
- ⁵⁸ On Nazism and masculinity in decadence, see Ahmala, 'Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on?', pp. 75-76 & 142-46.
- ⁵⁹ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 6 May 1932. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁶⁰ Mikko Carlstedt's letter to Ludvig Wennervirta, 12-13 November 1932. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁶¹ On Wennervirta's Nazi sympathies, see Mikko Carlstedt's letters to Ludvig Wennervirta, 3 December 1933, 27 January 1934, and 30 August 1935. National Library, Helsinki.
- ⁶² Wennervirta was actually anti-modern in many respects. He was Tolstoyan, Catholic, and Populist, but in the light of Carlstedt's correspondence he considered Wennervirta as more progressive and superior and himself as more primitive and decadent until Wennervirta showed admiration for Hitler's regime. On Wennervirta's thinking, see Yrjänä Levanto, *Kirjoitetut kuvat. Ludvig Wennervirran taidekäsitys* (Taideteollinen korkeakoulu, 1997).

Revolution and Decadence in the Poetic Universe of Gustav Suits¹

Hasso Krull

Tallinn University

In Estonia, Gustav Suits (1883–1956) is the first name to be associated with nationalism and literary innovation at the beginning of the twentieth century. This article will analyse his early poetry in connection with his political activities. Suits was the initiator of the Young Estonia movement [Noor-Eesti] (1905–1915) that focused on aesthetic innovation and brought into Estonian literature many new features that have been associated with decadent style. As John R. Reed has remarked, it is important to make a distinction between decadent style and decadent manner, because the former is a ‘verifiable technique’, while the latter is a loose combination of ‘idealistic yearning’ and ‘trappings’.² Although decadent style became more and more dominant in Suits’s poetry, decadent manner is notably missing – Suits obviously had no intention of *épater le bourgeois* with dirty details or perverse imagination.

As an outstanding innovator in the field of poetry, he was also a political revolutionary, who had already attracted suspicion as a schoolboy.³ In 1905, a wave of strikes and peasant revolts swept across the Russian Empire, including Estonia. In January, a total of 15,000 industrial workers went on strike in Estonia. These strikes were accompanied by political demonstrations and meetings, and casualties were reported in clashes with the police and military. In February, students at Tartu University joined the political strike of the students in St. Petersburg. Meanwhile, the peasants’ struggle against the landlords began in the countryside and, from January to March 1905, strikes and riots by manor workers broke out in nearly 120 manors. The Social Democrats called on the people to overthrow the autocracy and establish a democratic republic, the most common slogan was ‘Down with the autocracy!’ The revolution reached its peak in autumn, when the workers of Tallinn joined the general strike, in which 20,000 industrial and railway workers in Estonia took part, i.e., three-quarters of the total number of workers. After the revolutionary

movement became active in the cities, unrest began again in the countryside, only being eliminated by the arrival of Cossacks and penal squads. These violent repression measures forced many intellectuals to flee Estonia and to remain abroad for several years.

During and after these turbulent events, Suits remained in Helsinki to study, but stayed in touch with the refugees and was quick to offer help to save them from death sentences.⁴ After some time, he felt like a refugee himself, although remaining in Finland spared him many hardships. In 1917, immediately after the October Coup in St. Petersburg, Suits proposed the idea of a Finnish-Estonian political union, aiming to create a transimperial form that could become 'lõplikult ehk saab selleks suurpoliitiliseks kompromisskujuks, millega niihäästi kõigi maade rahvavõimu tunnistajad kui strateegid ja diplomaadid oleksid valmis leppima' [a major political compromise that both the witnesses of popular power in all countries and the strategists and diplomats would be ready to accept].⁵ Influenced by Karl Kautsky's ideas, Suits believed that '[r]ahvusriik on demokraatlikust seisukohast kindlasti kõige täielikum riigi kuju' [the nation-state is undoubtedly the most perfect form of state from a democratic point of view].⁶ As a radical social democrat, Suits was openly critical of Marxism and presented a draft of an Estonian Workers' Republic, thereby making the first gesture towards the political independence of Estonia.⁷ At the same time, Suits's poetry became increasingly complex, refined, and ambivalent.

A man with gigantic desire

Gustav Suits's first major work *Elu tuli* [The Fire of Life] (1905) is widely regarded as the most revolutionary and militant poetry collection in contemporary Estonian literature, although it bears many hallmarks of nineteenth-century Romanticism. The overall tone of the book is extremely affected and rebellious, predicting a social upheaval and occasionally announcing creative destruction. Suits's poetry clearly demonstrates that decadence can be refurbished 'as a second useful container term for the profound sense of breakup and change during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries'.⁸ However, as Suits heralds the imminent collapse of the Russian

Empire with a thinly disguised vehemence, his political poems irrevocably approach the prophetic tendencies evident throughout Europe at that time.⁹ Suits is not criticizing the establishment or hoping for any reforms; he is openly calling for war:

Las kasvame, me tõusev sugu,
ja ootame, et tuleb tund:
kord neile, kes veel näevad und,
me müristame kõrvu sõjalugu!

[Let us grow, we, the rising race,
let us wait for the coming hour:
once we will thunder the melody of war
into the ears of the dreamers!]¹⁰

Epp Annus has highlighted the Nietzschean tendencies in Suits's concept of history. Like Nietzsche, Suits detests the antiquarian type with a scientific and impartial interest in history, and looks to the spirit of the Renaissance as a model for future activities. She writes:

Suits kasutab selliseid üldisi väljendeid nagu Eesti iseteadvus, millega võiks igal järgmisel põlvkonnal olla võimalik suhestuda. Aga jätkutaotlust me ei leia. Siin on katkestus, järsk ärapöördumine, eitus - meil, uuel põlvkonnal, pole vanadega midagi ühist. Sellisena öeldakse õigupoolest: meil ei ole ajalugu, enne meid ei olnud midagi. Meie oleme algus. Või veelgi provokatiivsemalt: meie ei mõtle ajalooliselt, meie elame olevikku, intensiivset nüüdhetke, milles osaleb minevik vaid halva näitena ebaõnnestunud aegadest.

[Suits uses such general expressions as Estonian self-consciousness, which every next generation could relate to. But we find no request for continuation. Here there is a break, a sudden turn, a denial – we, the new generation, have nothing in common with the old ones. As such, it is effectively said: we have no history, there was nothing before us. We are the beginning. Or even more provocatively: we do not think historically, we live in the present, an intense now-moment, in which the past participates only as a bad example of failed times.]¹¹

It is easy to notice that in Suits's imagination, revolution is both preceded and followed by hard work. With a perplexing naivety, he declares 'Italia – nii olgu Eesti tulevik' [Italy – that should be the future of Estonia], and insists on the 'nõiasõna' [magic word] to reach that goal – 'Töö selle nimi on, töö ilma võitja on' [It is called *work*, for work is the winner of the world]. Nonetheless, here an obvious ambiguity creeps in, because '[n]ii mõnelgi tööst kahvatanud palged | ja rinnas idanevad haigus-idu alged [many people look pale because of the work | and miasmas will sprout inside their breasts].¹² This hints at a deeper ambivalence in his revolutionary project. Although

Suits often is sincerely naive, he also uses naivety as a mask. In other words, naivety is a device that supports militant activism, but the poet cannot help but acknowledge its darker side. Indeed, the dark side becomes more visible through the mask of innocence, and Suits revels in sombre and sinister moods. This creates an ambiguous mode, where optimism also carries a pessimistic undertone and vice versa.

The keyword to this ambiguity is *iha* [desire], a word that was not common in the poetic vocabulary of the nineteenth century. In Estonian, *iha* can denote both longing and sexual attraction, but its connotations can be taken much further. Put simply, desire involves a spiritual aspiration in Suits's early poetry. This can be seen in his epic poem 'Üks ennemuistne jutt' [A Primordial Tale], in which a man wanders through a dark forest in search of the meaning of life. After encountering mocking fairies from the underworld, he arrives at a large oak tree that requests a sacrifice of his heart's blood. The man consents to the sacred tree's request:

Ohverdas siis rinna seest
punast, sooja südameverd,
mees, kel hiigla-iha paisus.
Kõrgele tõstis ta ülesse
vaimumõõga välkuva,
vandus siis vannet vägevat:
Et ei taha ta puhata
enne kui pannud päikse paistma
Üle selle õudse metsa,
metsa musta ja magava.

[So he offered from his breast
the red, warm blood of his heart,
that man with bulging, gigantic desire.
Rising high up above his head
the shining sword of the spirit,
he took a powerful oath:
That he won't have any rest
before he has made the sun to shine
Over this gloomy forest,
this black and sleeping forest.]¹³

The man with the gigantic desire appears to be Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald, the author of the epic *Kalevipoeg* [Kalev's Son], as Suits's poem is written in commemoration of him. However, it

could also be an alter ego of the poet himself. In a simple lulling poem ‘Ühte laulu tahaks laulda’ [I’d like to sing a song], Suits says that he would like his song to be ‘kui vägev merelaene’ [like an enormous wave of the sea] that would flood the whole country and rumble through the soul of the nation ‘hiigla-ihana’ [as a gigantic desire].¹⁴ Desire is directly connected to the idea of patriotism, and the poet can rekindle it, or otherwise drown.¹⁵ In any case, he can never forget ‘vägev merd, | suuruse aated | sügavus-ihad’ [the mighty ocean, | the ideas of greatness, | desires for the depths] that swelled within him when he reached the high seas.¹⁶

Desire can also lead to madness. This is most evident in ‘Pöörase laul’ [Song of a Madman], in which the speaker is tied up and imprisoned yet continues to rail against the social order. The poem is actually based on Sándor Petőfi’s venomous ‘Az őrült’ [The Madman] (1846), which Suits had read in a German translation, ‘Der Wahnsinnige’.¹⁷ Despite being subjected to involuntary treatment in a mental institution, the madman predicts a great fire that will burn the house down:

Kuid, oodake, korra,
 kui hullusid enam
 siin koguneb kokku:
 missugune mürin,
 kui pistetakse põlema
 hullude maja!
 Las’ põlevad sisse
 kõik tervise-targad,
 kõik kelmid ja vargad!
 Hahaha!

[But wait, until here
 the number of madmen
 will multiply:
 imagine the uproar,
 once the whole madhouse
 will be ignited!
 Let them burn inside,
 all them wise doctors,
 all them scoundrels and thieves!
 Hahaha!]¹⁸

After the fire, the madmen will sing a victory song, the rhythm of which will be suggested by ‘hullude südameveri’ [the heart’s blood of the madmen],¹⁹ and which will echo the roaring sea, the cheering hurricanes and the drumming of a thunderstorm. The sacrifice of blood is invoked once

more, and revolutionary madness is glorified as the only solution to the social impasse. However, the storm of destruction alone is not enough: even the sun must be augmented because the current one is 'liiaks on väike | ja valgustab vähe' [too small | and scarce of light].²⁰

In the 'Song of a Madman' [Pöörase laul], the symbolism of fire meets the symbolism of water. Both are pivotal in *Elu tuli* and both are deeply ambivalent. The sea symbolizes spiritual power and the 'sügavus-iha' [desire for the depths],²¹ but it also represents the great flood, the symbol of social upheaval and a return to the very beginning, where everything can be erased and restarted. Fire symbolism is even more complicated. Fire symbolizes youth and erotic desire, as well as spiritual aspiration and the essence of human existence. However, it also symbolizes revolutionary violence and creative destruction in the Nietzschean sense. Suits read Nietzsche extensively in 1904 and, besides revelling in *Götzen-Dämmerung* [Twilight of the Idols] and *Also sprach Zarathustra* [Thus Spoke Zarathustra], he was particularly impressed by *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* [Beyond Good and Evil].²² In the eponymous poem 'Elu tuli', this multifaceted fire burns like the sun, flashes like thunder, illuminates thoughts, and ignites the 'ihalduste tulised tunglad' [torches of desires], but also 'inimeste südameid sööb' [eats away the hearts of men] and dies out, extinguishing everything. All that remains is 'peotäis tuhka' [a handful of ashes]. However, although the ashes are holy, 'elu tuli punane püham on ise' [the red fire of life is more holy itself].²³

Borderline narcissism

This multiple symbolism creates an atmosphere of unrest, abundant possibilities, emotional uncertainty, frustration and rage. Revolutionary activity is simultaneously inevitable and unreliable, because it may not achieve anything. Suits has certainly reflected on this ambivalence in his literary work. While living in Finland, he discovered a correlative of similar feelings in Eino Leino's poetry. In *Elu tuli*, several translations are included, among them a translation of Leino's poem 'Kumpi on kauniimpi?' [Which One Is More Beautiful?]²⁴ Here the ambivalence is distilled into a series of antitheses. Leino asks – and Suits echoes the question – is it more beautiful to fight for freedom

in the hope for change, or to fight for freedom despite the lack of hope? Another pair of antitheses is even more puzzling because the alternatives now stem from the idea of hopelessness: would it be more beautiful to give up the fight as unreasonable, or to keep fighting without reason because this is your destiny?: ‘olen päikese loode laps, ei koidu, | olen valguse mees, ei küll võidu, | murduda on minu elu?’ [I am the child of sunset, not sunrise, I am the man of light, though not victory, that’s why I’ll have to collapse?]²⁵ Suits has translated Leino’s poem almost literally, but has added a question mark that is missing in the original. In a sense, he sidesteps Leino’s pessimism, yet he enhances the scorching ambiguity of the poem, rendering it even more devastating. He is undoubtedly a man of immense desire, but it is split, like his revolutionary fervour, oscillating between the urge for creative destruction and a sense of impending doom.

After *Elu tuli* was published in Helsinki, Eino Leino wrote a review for the daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. Although he was quite content with the younger poet’s debut collection, he hoped that Suits’s love poems would become more refined in future. Suits later confessed in a personal letter that the day he read Leino’s review was the most terrible day in his life.²⁶ This confession is telling. Suits had undoubtedly met Leino several times in Helsinki, and he idolized the Finnish poet, who was five years his senior and already a celebrity. One might have expected him to be happy with Leino’s recognition and friendly criticism. However, Suits seems to have had a borderline personality disorder characterized by an acute fear of abandonment. This brings him even closer to the Baudelairean atmosphere of ‘borderline narcissism’, which Eugene W. Holland has analyzed as ‘a historical rather than a psychological category’, arising from the disillusionment caused by ‘the recurrent failures of the democratic ideal promised by modern society to prevail over the continually resurgent authoritarianism’.²⁷ Democracy is a mirage looming on the horizon that is never fully attained. For Suits’s decadent sensibility, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between personal crises and societal failures, or, as Aino Kallas succinctly puts it, ‘ajan nousu on hänenkin nousunsa, ajan taantumus hänenkin lamaannuksensa’ [if the times are ascending, it’s his ascent also, and if they are declining, it’s his depression also].²⁸ The line of separation between

politics and personal turmoil becomes blurred. At the same time, his multifarious desires are torn between two opposing forces, sometimes soaring to great heights and sometimes sinking to great depths. This is clearly visible in Suits's earliest work and is elaborated in his subsequent oeuvre.

The Estonian day

Suits's second book of poetry *Tuulemaa* [Wuthering Land] was published in 1913. It is a solemn, gloomy, agonizing, and bleak work. Most of the poems were written after the bloody repressions of 1906 and before the outbreak of the First World War. Suits graduated from the University of Helsinki in 1910, but could not find a job in Estonia, where his revolutionary ideas had no impact.²⁹ He therefore remained in Finland, developing a cold and perspicacious attitude towards his homeland that was not altogether devoid of rancour. In 1912, he published a fierce and agonizing lament about the state of the liberal arts in Estonia, complaining that he had no 'meelepäralist korterit' [suitable apartment] there for his spirit or his body. The only possible solution, he argues, is Nefelokokkygia, the imaginary Cloud Cuckoo Land from Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds*. Suits continues, explaining the current situation in terms of the pragmatic mindset and scarcity of symbolic capital among intellectuals:

Kunstitegewus eeldab nii walmistaja kui ka tarwitaja kohta palju waba aega. Meie inimesed on äri inimesed. Elu ei ole neile mitte estetikaline, waid majandusline problem. Äri kihutab tagant, tulu ja praktika wangistab meeli, mitte waatlemine, mitte teadus, kunst, kirjandus. Meie haritlased on haritlased esimeses, harwa teises põlwes. Üks Inglise tarksõna aga ütleb: *Three generations are necessary to bring up a gentleman* – kolme sugupõlwe on tarwis täieliku aumehe tekkimiseks, mis täiesti ka meie tõusikutekihi kohta sünnib.

[Artistic activity requires a lot of free time from both the maker and the user. Our people are business people. Life is not an aesthetic problem for us, but an economic one. Business is our driving force, profit and practice captivate the senses, not observation, not science, art, literature. Our intellectuals are intellectuals in the first, rarely second generation. But as an English proverb says: *three generations are necessary to bring up a gentleman*.]³⁰

The final sentence of Suits's text is written in English. To a reader of the newspaper *Päevaleht*, in which it was published, this must have seemed snobbish and precocious, given that the second language of Suits's contemporaries was usually German, occasionally supplemented by Russian or

French. However, Suits did not care about sounding provocative – on the contrary, he embraced provocation as a means of disseminating his ideas. Moreover, he associated English with Thomas Carlyle, the major influence on his ideas about political revolution. Of course, accusing the local population of being ‘business people’ and not caring about aesthetics are exaggerations, as one could hardly find a nation in Europe that would not primarily treat life as an economic problem. However, Suits knew that this would strike a chord with the local readers and chose this approach quite deliberately to express his frustration.

Perhaps the peak of his poetic expression of frustration and resentment is ‘Laul Eestist’ [The Song of Estonia].³¹ First published in 1907 in the Tartu student calendar *Sirvilauad* when Suits was still studying in the University of Helsinki, the viewpoint of the poem does not belong to an insider, but to a deeply involved outsider, trying to convince others of something he himself is reluctant to believe. The speaker seems to be situated outside of history, detached from any earthly determination yet he is affected by his subject and unable to escape the focus of abjection. The first three stanzas sound like an epitome of doom:

Õudne kui needmine ajalugu,
maha tallatud jõuetu sugu,
kõverad, küürakad vaevakased,
juurtega, juurteta mädasoo mülkas
See on Eesti.

Kes küll kuivatab korra neid soosid?
Noorelt ju närtsivad põskede roosid,
roostetab tegude haljas teras.
Rängalt rabavad hallaöö piitsad.
Oleme Eestis.

Kes küll heledalt naerda siin suudaks?
See, kes mured kõik rõõmuks muudaks.
Koorma all kummargil õhkab elu
veel aga Hādaoru küla kohal.
Eesti elu.

[History terrible, like a curse,
a downtrodden, enfeebled race,
crooked, hunchbacked dwarf birches,
rooted, rootless in quagmire morass.
This is Estonia.

Who shall ever drain those swamps?
Roses of cheeks wither, still young,
the bright steel of action corrodes.
The whips of frost strike ruthlessly.
We are in Estonia.

Here, whoever might merrily laugh?
She, who could turn all worries to joy.
Life bent under burden, moaning
over the village of Destitution.
Estonian life.]³²

The poem goes on to contrast images by comparing Estonian pines and willows with imaginary oak groves and 'viinapuulehestikus' [vine foliage] in the Mediterranean – nobody places a laurel wreath on the head of an Estonian singer and this is the meanest of all possible fates. In the final stanza, Suits switches to the first-person plural, evoking images of sinking into the 'neetud sohu' [cursed morass], while '[m]illest aga unistame, surmalapsed? | Paremast teistele elupäevast' [we, the children of death, | dream of a better day for the others]. In a grotesque reversal, that day would be called 'Eesti päevast' [the Estonian day].³³ However, this sudden reversal is not so surprising when we consider Suits's affection for urban culture and his belief in the transformative power of modernity. As Pirjo Lyytikäinen has observed, 'Estonian decadence was linked to the young artists' aim to be modern and "metropolitan"; they were influenced by Taine's ideas emphasizing the need for a proper milieu and were therefore concerned about the "backwardness" of Estonian life and society'.³⁴ Nevertheless, the vision is so bleak that it is difficult to believe that Suits is writing about a country that was once his homeland, which he often visited during his time in Finland. Suits does not write these lines as a cold and nonchalant farewell, but with a fervent desire to return.³⁵ He yearns for the 'mädasoo mülgas' [quagmire morass] and the 'Hädaoru küla' [village of Destitution], even under the 'hallaöö piitsad' [whips of frost]. This desire is irrevocable.

Aino Kallas, who often met the young poet during these uncertain years, characterized the overall emotional pattern of his poems as a 'morituri-tunteen täyttämä' [morituri-mood], but she nonetheless thought that Suits has here 'pääsee monta vertaa lähemmäksi rotunsa paineenalaista

psyykeä' [got much closer to the oppressed psyche of his race] than in his previous militant poetry.³⁶ Her comment seems to be an attempt to excuse Suits's tendency to veer from one extreme to another. Kallas portrays Suits and other members of the Young Estonia movement from various angles, angles that do not always converge. As Mirjam Hinrikus has observed:

[i]n Kallas' essay collection on Young Estonia, reciprocal influences between modern ways of speaking, thinking, behaving, and perceiving give rise to an unusual synthesis, which bears Kallas' unique signature, but also evokes a more general European experience of modernity. This multiple ambivalent modernity spans many contradictions: an Enlightenment vector aligned with positivism and belief in progress, and a vision of regression, fed in the fin de siècle by discourses of decadence and/or degeneration.³⁷

Hinrikus maintains that Kallas is particularly attentive to the second term of this polarity: 'a hereditary lack of psychic vitality, reverse natural selection, and an overheated, accelerated tempo of modernization accompanied by forms of moral, physical, intellectual, and psychic decline'.³⁸ Undoubtedly Suits found a certain narcissistic pleasure in his repulsive vision of the 'quagmire morass', but he remains on the borderline, never taking the final step to wallow in the mire or identify with decline and lack of vitality.

Youth already old

On 16 August 1908, Suits visited Kallas in Kihelkonna, Saaremaa, where she was spending the summer with her husband and children. That night, Kallas wrote the following entry in her diary:

Gustav Suits oli meillä puolitoista päivää. Meillä oli hyvä ilta yhdessä, puhelimme kuin kaksi ihmistä, mutta seuraavana päivänä jäi kuitenkin outo tunne jäljelle hänen mentyvään.

Suits on käynyt merkillisen kyynilliseksi, johtaa aina puheen naisiin, joista hän muuten puhuu suurimmalla halveksumisella. Mitä se on hänessä? Kai miehekkyyden ilmausta.

Kuitenkin, tiedän, ettei se ole pohjakerros hänessä, vaan että sen alla on taas jotain muuta, suuripiirteisyyttä, hienoa runoutta, tosin nuoren ylimielisyyden ja uhman peitossa vielä.

[Gustav Suits spent a day and a half with us. We had a nice evening together, we talked like two human beings, but the next day there was still a strange feeling after he left.

Suits has become remarkably cynical, always directing the conversation to women, whom he otherwise speaks of with utter contempt. What is wrong with him? An expression of masculinity, I suppose.

However, I know that it is not the fundamental layer in him, but that underneath there is something else, a grandeur, a fine poetry, although still covered with youthful arrogance and defiance.]³⁹

Suits spent his summer on the island of Vilsandi, but maintained an intense correspondence with several female partners, which was often extremely affectionate.⁴⁰ The ‘suurimalla halveksumisella’ [utter contempt] that startled Kallas was the result of inner confusion and Suits found it difficult to make final decisions in his intimate relationships. His attitude towards other people was often controversial, oscillating between extremes while also remaining dissatisfied. Aino Thauvón-Suits, his lifelong companion, recounted a visit to a rented apartment in Helsinki on Eriksgatan 3, where the landlady had a lively, cheerful daughter aged about five or six. Suits complained that the child annoyed him because she often came to his room and asked what the ‘uncle’ was doing. However, Suits also said that it was this same child who had inspired him to write a poem celebrating the joyful, infantile delight of life.⁴¹ The first three stanzas are exhilarating:

Su hele naer mu tuppa äkki põikas,
su hele naer
mu raamatute nukrust läbi lõikas
kui järve aer.

Kaks palmikut ja lohud kenad põskis,
kaks palmikut
ja silmad säravad (need ema mõskis):
kaks salmikut.

Ja karg ja kihk su rõõmsais tantsujalus
ja karg ja kihk:
nüüd mängib tuulispääna terves talus
su elu ihk.

[Your bright laughter swerved into my room,
your bright laughter
cut through the melancholy of my books
like an oar cuts the lake.

Two braids and nice dimples in cheeks,
two braids
and shining eyes (that mother washed):
two little poems.

And leap and zeal in your dancing feet
and leap and zeal:

now like a hurricane moves in the house
your desire for life.]⁴²

Of course, the poem soon becomes moribund again. Suits contrasts the infantile joy with the grief of a man who must 'leina naerdes kanda' [carry his mourning with a smile] and 'vilistades käia Lethe randa | kui langeb öö' [walk by the shore of Lethe, whistling, | in the fall of night]. Such a conceit makes even this poem gloomy, while preserving the borderline ambivalence of affirmation and negation. The joy of life intrudes upon ponderous melancholy, irritating the recluse in his study, yet also rejuvenating him almost against his will.

In *Tuulemaa*, Suits's poetic voice gradually becomes more encrypted, elliptical, and enigmatic. While it is never impenetrable, it rarely becomes self-evident or straight-forward. Something always remains hidden because one line often obscures the previous one and then takes a different turn again. The eponymous poem, 'Tuulemaa', comprises four parts, each part expressing a simple idea – my poetic production is scarce; my revolutionary ideas have failed; I must strive towards the solitary heights; but there a lonely spirit will freeze. However, these simple ideas are expressed in condensed, hermetic language that leaves much room for conjecture. The conclusive lines, 'Vaim üksik vaatlemise leinas kangub | ja üle aja, ruumi tõstleb und' [The lonely spirit freezes in the mournful observation | and uplifts the sleep over time and space] cannot be interpreted unequivocally.⁴³ It has been suggested that the Wuthering Land is a refuge created by the poet himself – a 'homeland without a homeland'.⁴⁴ But it seems to be somewhat bleak and eerie to be a permanent residence.

Perhaps the least controversial poem in the whole collection is 'Vanad noored' [Youth already old],⁴⁵ a nostalgic reflection on revolutionary times when young intellectuals were full of energy, enthusiasm, and fresh ideas. The poem is written in the past tense, describing a period of youthful activism, when anything seemed possible. Suits refers to the youth as 'otsijad, trotsijad katusekambritest' [defiant seekers from the garrets], who never lacked 'suurtest sõnadest, suurtest sõnadest' [the magnificent words, the magnificent words].⁴⁶ This unadorned repetition is not

ironic. Suits evidently does not think that the young seekers of freedom and democracy were wrong. His case is quite the opposite. He believes they were right, and even more right than they could have imagined. They simply could never have known that because acquiring that kind of knowledge takes time. In fact, experience needs time to become what it really is – or, more precisely, what it truly was from the outset. In ‘Kevade aimdus’ [The Anticipation of Spring], Suits confesses to having studied Henri Bergson, comparing his work to ‘mere põhjast helmed’ [pearls from the bottom of the sea].⁴⁷ Bergson’s concept of pure memory appears to underpin the poem philosophically. This makes ‘Vanad noored’ somewhat exceptional.

Conclusion

In Suits’s poetry, nationalism and decadence are united – one could even argue that they are inextricably linked as his poetry would be inconceivable without either. Suits’s poetic language is not a regular Estonian at all – it is an artificial, refined, elliptical, and innovative new creation, containing lavish neologisms, inverted syntax, and an abundance of polysemic shifts. However, Suits believed that he could express all of his revolutionary fervour through this artificial medium. Yet his concept of a revolution is inextricably connected to his vision of national independence.

Suits did not think of himself as a decadent poet and was probably more accustomed to the label ‘neo-Romanticism’, not just because this term tends to ‘hide the connections of foreign impulses’,⁴⁸ but as a Nietzschean who was somewhat uneasy with the notion of decadence. Nonetheless, his body of work aligns perfectly with the broader ideas of decadence at the fin de siècle, and he was not accepting of vanguard movements such as Futurism or Surrealism, which found their way into Estonian literature during and after the First World War.

Autobiographical traits are often clearly visible in Suits’s work. He was a complex character, whose personal ambiguities left a deep imprint on his poetry. This is evident in both his more intimate poems and his revolutionary statements and political sarcasm. Enthusiasm and frustration are often intertwined, and even the most sincere declarations are never definitive. The landscape

can always change, and the youth will change the world, but this youth is already old. For Suits, this realization evokes an overarching sense of melancholy, yet melancholy can also be comforting. There is no permanence – Suits’ universe is one of constant change, so there is no reason to persist in decay or hopelessness. Indeterminacy prevails.

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

² See John R. Reed’s oft-quoted description of decadent style, in *Decadent Style* (Ohio University Press, 1988), p. 116.

³ See Eduard Roos, ‘Gustav Suits ja “Eesti Külvaja”’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 8 (1974).

⁴ See Leili Iher, *Gustav Suitsu jälil: fakte ja mõtisklusi* (Varrak, 2011), pp. 56-59.

⁵ Gustav Suits, *Vabaduse väraval* (Ilmamaa, 2002), p. 79. All the English translations of Suits’s work are my own.

⁶ Gustav Suits, *Eesti Töömabariik: Eesti Sotsialistide-Revolutsionäride Partei märgukiri Eesti iseseisvuse küsimuses* (Töö ja võitlus, 1918), p. 8. See also Karl Kautsky, *Befreiung der Nationen* (Verlag von J. H. W. Dietz, 1917), p. 46.

⁷ Mati Graf, *Eesti rahvusriik: ideed ja labendused ärkamisajast Eesti Vabariigi sünnini* (Linn, 1993), p. 209. See also Hasso Krull, ‘Luxembourgias: Gustav Suits ja Euroopa Liit’, *Looming*, 12 (2019), pp. 1765-66.

⁸ See Gerald Gillespie, ‘Decadence and Modernism’, in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 333.

⁹ For more discussion see Chris Baldick, ‘Modern Prophetic Poetry and the Decadence of Empires’, in *Decadence and Literature*, pp. 347-48.

¹⁰ ‘Noorte laul’, Gustav Suits, *Elu tuli: laulud 1900–1904* (Weilin & Göös, 1905), p. 9.

¹¹ Epp Annus, ‘Noorte püüded ja rõõmus ajalugu: Gustav Suits ja Friedrich Nietzsche’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 7 (2005), p. 529.

¹² ‘Tulevik’, Suits, *Elu tuli*, p. 13.

¹³ ‘Üks ennemuistne jutt’, *ibid.*, p. 31.

¹⁴ ‘Ühte laulu tahaks lauda’, *ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁵ ‘Mis oli see, mis juba lapsepõlves’, ‘Laulik’, *ibid.*, pp. 35 & 40.

¹⁶ ‘Meri’, *ibid.*, p. 42-43.

¹⁷ Mart Mäger, ‘Väliseid vastuhelke ‘Elu tules’ (Sandor Petöfi – Gustav Suits)’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 1 (1975), pp. 10-11.

¹⁸ ‘Pöörase laul’, Suits, *Elu tuli*, p. 57.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

²⁰ The tendency to glorify madness and rage is equally observable in Finnish decadent prose. For more discussion see ‘Passions against the Grain: Decadent Emotions in Finnish Wilderness’, in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riika Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), p. 118.

²¹ ‘Meri’, Suits, *Elu tuli*, pp. 41-43.

²² Nigol Andresen, ‘Elu tuli: Gustav Suitsu tule luulesse’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 10 (1977), p. 605.

²³ ‘Elu tuli’, Suits, *Elu tuli*, p. 1.

²⁴ See Eino Leino, *Talviyö: runoja* (Otava, 1905), pp. 10-11. The date under the poem is 1903.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁶ Aino Thauvón-Suits, *Gustav Suitsu noorus kirjade, luuletuste ja mälestuste põhjal* (Eesti Kirjanike Kooperatiiv, 1964), p. 30.

²⁷ Eugene W. Holland, *Baudelaire and Schizoanalysis: The Sociopoetics of Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 173 & 276.

²⁸ Aino Kallas, *Nuori-Viro: muotokuvia ja suuntaviivoja* (Otava, 1918), p. 67.

²⁹ Iher, *Gustav Suitsu jälil*, pp. 66-81.

³⁰ Gustav Suits, ‘Meie kunstnikkudest ja nende töövõimalustest II’, *Päevaleht*, 146 (2012).

³¹ Iher, *Gustav Suitsu jälil*, p. 370.

³² ‘Laul Eestist’, Gustav Suits, *Tuulemaa: luuletused 1905–1912* (Noor-Eesti, 1913), pp. 15-16.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁴ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, ‘Nordic Cultures: From Wilderness to Metropolitan Decadence’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 222.

³⁵ The speaking subject in the poem is not first-person singular but plural and Suits seems to identify with an anonymous community. However, the implicit relation to the context of the utterance cannot be obscured: the poet is obviously expressing his personal feelings under the guise of an impersonal subject.

³⁶ Kallas, *Nuori-Viro*, p. 86.

³⁷ See Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Decadent Modernism and the Imprint of Taine in Aino Kallas' Young Estonia: Portraits and Trajectories', in Aino Kallas: Negotiations with Modernity, ed. by Leena Kurvet-Käosaar and Lea Rojola (Finnish Literature Society, 2011), p. 70.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Aino Kallas, *Päiväkirja vuosilta 1907–1915* (Otava, 1954), p. 90.

⁴⁰ Thauvón-Suits, *Gustav Suitsu noorus*, pp. 270-89.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴² 'Ühele lapsele', Suits, *Tuulemaa*, p. 49 & 50.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁴ Nigol Andresen, 'Tuulemaa: pilguheite Gustav Suitsu luule teise perioodi', *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 11 (1973), p. 662.

⁴⁵ The Estonian title of the poem is 'Vanad noored'. This is untranslatable, because *vanad* is a plural form of the adjective 'old' and *noored* is a plural form of the adjective 'young'. Both adjectives can take the position of substantives, but here the emphasis lingers on *noored*, so that it can mean either 1) young people who have grown old, 2) old people who have been young, or 3) the people who are still young despite being old. However, from this conundrum we can also derive one more meaning, 4) young people already old while still being young. Here I have relied on the fourth possible meaning in my translation of the title because of its Bergsonian echoes and the retroactive implications of the poem.

⁴⁶ 'Vanad noored', Suits, *Tuulemaa*, pp. 29-30.

⁴⁷ 'Kevade aimdus', *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁴⁸ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riika Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková and Mirjam Hinrikus 'Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, p. 4.

Slave of a Harsh God:
Nietzscheanism and the Nation in Joel Lehtonen's *Perm: Syysyön unelma*

Antti Ahmala

University of Helsinki

The less well-known debut work of classic Finnish author Joel Lehtonen (1881–1934) is the narrative poem *Perm: Syysyön unelma* [Perm: An Autumn Night's Dream] (1904). It begins in a melancholic tone. The narrator tells the tale of a long-gone mythical past, a medieval Fenno-Ugric land known in Old Norse as Bjarmaland or Bjarmia, or Finnicized as Perma, which was believed to have existed on the coast of the White Sea or the Arctic Ocean.¹ The poem begins:

Perma, sammunut sävele,
illan rusojen ilo mennyt,
aarrehelmien helinä!

Kansa kullassa kulisi,
paahtui arojen päivän alla,
kamppaili Ruijan rajoilla,
jäihin suisti järeän turjan.
Kulki, loisti ja katosi.

[Perma, an extinguished melody,
the joy of evening's red glows gone,
the chime of treasure-pearls!

The folk would wander clad in gold,
scorched beneath the steppes' sun,
struggled at the borders of Ruija,
drove the stout turja into the ice.
They journeyed, they shone, and vanished.]²

Perm features a third-person narrator who at the beginning positions himself temporally in the future in relation to the medieval land, perhaps in the present time of the young author Lehtonen. The verses capture the essential ingredients of the myth of Perma, which was well known among the Finnish intelligentsia of the turn of the twentieth century: the land was both materially wealthy and rich in culture, and the people showed great endurance and strength in the face of hardships. They achieved peace through victory in glorious battles. The denomination of the enemy, 'turja', probably refers to Sami people of the Kola Peninsula and carries the connotation of sorcery and

witchcraft.³ Perma was depicted in Icelandic sagas and medieval Scandinavian sources as a peaceful land of great prosperity.⁴ Similarly, Lehtonen depicts the land as ‘rauhainen, raheremuva’ [peaceful, money-laden] (p. 6).

The beginning of Lehtonen’s debut work sets the stage for the story of an *Übermensch* type of character, Perm, a tragic hero who is named after the mythical land. The influence of Eino Leino’s *Kalevala*-inspired national neo-Romanticism is strong in the poem. The verse form of *Perm* – a metrical form that I have not tried to emulate in my translations – is based on the *Kalevala* metre of the Finnish national epic, and *Perm* depicts a mythical Fenno-Ugric past. Like the characters and events depicted in the *Kalevala* (complete edition published in 1849), Perma as it appears in Lehtonen’s poem represents a dream of a glorious past. The poems of the *Kalevala* were believed to date back to the glory days of Perma.⁵ The folklorist Martti Haavio wrote in his 1965 study on the legend of Perma that for his grandfather’s and even for his father’s generation the land was not a myth but reality and its history was proof of the intellectual strength of the Finns.⁶ The classic authors Eino Leino and Juhani Aho similarly depicted Perma in some of their early works, and according to the literary scholar and Lehtonen’s biographer Pekka Tarkka, Leino’s 12-part sequence of poems ‘Perman taru’ [The Tale of Perma] in the collection *Kangastuksia* [Mirages] (1902) is an important subtext of Lehtonen’s *Perm*. Similar to *Perm*, Leino’s poems depict the affluence and glory of the medieval realm. Leino was known for his *Kalevala*-inspired works, among others his famed collection of epic poems *Helkavirsiä I* (1903) and his verse-form play *Sota valosta* [War for the Light] (1900), both of which appear to have influenced Lehtonen’s Karelianist fantasy in *Perm*.⁷ The depiction of *Übermensch* characters and the Nietzschean juxtaposition of the powerful individual and a herd mentality constitute significant elements of Leino’s thematics.

In this article, I analyse the intertwining of Nietzscheanism and nationalism in *Perm* and present an interesting case of Nietzschean nationalism, which combines an *Übermensch* fantasy, the depiction of the decadence of the people of Perma, and an allegory of national struggle, set in a mythical ‘neo-Romanticist’ story world like many other works of Finnish Symbolism of the time.

Nationalism is a defining characteristic of what has traditionally been called the neo-Romanticist or ‘national neo-Romanticist’ current of the Finnish fin de siècle,⁸ until Pirjo Lyytikäinen’s studies in the 1990s interpreted literature of the time in relation to the international currents of Symbolism and decadence.⁹ Whether the dominant literary current of the period is characterized as neo-Romanticist or Symbolist and decadent, Nietzscheanism has always been identified as a central philosophical and literary-aesthetic current in literature of the time.¹⁰ Among Lehtonen’s works, his debut work *Perm* is arguably the most Nietzschean. The depiction of the Übermensch character and the whole story of the poem can be criticized for a lack of complexity and depth, and *Perm* is generally not considered one of Lehtonen’s best works.¹¹ However, its appeal as an object of scholarly interest lies in its peculiar blend of Nietzscheanism and nationalism and in the interpretation of its allegorical setting, particularly the depiction of the decadence of the people of Perma.

Nietzscheanism and Nietzsche’s influence in Lehtonen’s early works

Lehtonen began his literary career with four Symbolist-decadent works: *Perm* was followed by the novels *Pabolaisen viulu* [The Devil’s Violin] (1904), *Villi* [Wild] (1905), and *Mataleena* [Magdalena] (1905).¹² The novels are strikingly different from *Perm* in terms of their content. They represent a special brand of fin de siècle decadence, which Pirjo Lyytikäinen has characterized as Dionysian decadence.¹³ In the context of the fin de siècle, the concept refers above all to Nietzsche’s analysis of the Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of Greek culture presented in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).¹⁴ The Dionysian represents excess and transgression, the untamed ‘nightside’ of man, as the opposite of Apollonian order and reason. Expressing a Nietzschean-Dionysian tendency to break boundaries, the most distinguishing thematic feature of Lehtonen’s early novels is an attitude of transgression and provocation against the Christian and patriarchal order of society. Moreover, Lehtonen’s early novels represent a form of rural decadence, in which the typically urban motifs and themes of literary decadence are transported into the Finnish countryside. In Finnish literature,

the countryside has often been presented as morally purer than city life. The main characters of the novels are in some ways very different from the paradigmatic core decadence of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884): they are half-primitive, and yet they also show signs of life-weary decadent sensibility and aestheticism just like Des Esseintes.¹⁵ In their decadence, they are a far cry from the Nietzschean nationalism and the Übermensch fantasy of *Perm*.

Nietzsche is critical of nationalism in many of his texts, for instance in his magnum opus *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–1885) and in *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1887), and in the posthumously published autobiographical *Ecce Homo* (1908) he speaks very negatively of German nationalism in particular.¹⁶ In Finnish literature of the fin de siècle and in Lehtonen's early novels, Nietzscheanism appears above all as a philosophy of individualism and even rebellion, as in Lehtonen's first novel *Pabolaisen viulu* [The Fiddle of the Devil] which features a Zarathustra-like preaching character called Viuluniekka [The violin player] who is known for his anti-Christian aphorisms, reminiscent of Zarathustra's, and for his decadent way of life. The Nietzschean decadence of Lehtonen's early novels can be seen as antithetical to the nationalist concern with the health of the body of the nation – to use a metaphor that is very common in the literature of the time. Literary decadence as well as Naturalism, two artistic currents that depict decay, have traditionally been downplayed in the literary history of the young nation, which has been concerned with the health and purity of the so-called 'Maiden of Finland'. Among Lehtonen's four early works, *Perm* seems to represent a dose of anti-decadent and nationalist sensibility – albeit in the estranging form of myth, fantasy, and allegory – only to be followed by three novels in which nationalist themes are nearly absent and the protagonists defy everything that is decent and wholesome.

Finnish literature of the turn of the twentieth century shows vibrant connections to Western artistic and intellectual currents, while at the same time themes concerning the nation and its battle for survival in the face of Russification efforts were central during the *Ensimmäinen sortokausi* (1899–1905), the so-called First Period of Oppression. I conceive of the literary

Nietzscheanism of the time as selectively adopting Nietzsche's ideas and receiving inspiration from them, and/or as influenced by Nietzscheanism as a discourse circulating in the culture of the fin de siècle. In young Lehtonen's case, his debut work combines Nietzscheanism with a nationalist theme: the medieval land of Perma, a symbol of past Fenno-Ugric greatness, is threatened by foreign invaders, and the fate of the people hangs on the actions of the character Perm, a Nietzschean personification of masculine will and vitality.

As Esko Ervasti shows in his 1960 study on Nietzscheanism in Finnish literature of the fin de siècle, Nietzsche's influence in Finland began during the last decade of the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Eino Leino's brother Kasimir Leino, for instance, contemplates Nietzsche's conception of the Übermensch in his 1892 essay on new trends in French literature, published in the influential cultural journal *Valvoja* [The Overseer].¹⁸ Perhaps surprisingly, Leino ponders whether the overrefined decadent individual of French decadence might be a prerequisite for Nietzsche's Übermensch. Nietzscheanism became fashionable among Finnish literary circles particularly in 1903 and 1904, which coincides with the beginning of Lehtonen's literary career, and Ervasti considers the popular Nietzscheanism of the time as a central influence for young Lehtonen's worldview.¹⁹ Crucial for Lehtonen's interest in Nietzsche was becoming acquainted with the authors Volter Kilpi, Eino Leino, and Aarni Kouta.²⁰ As Tarkka states, becoming friends with Aarni Kouta has been considered a central source of Lehtonen's 'Nietzsche contagion', particularly the time Lehtonen spent with Kouta in Porvoo in 1903.²¹ Kouta later translated into Finnish *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in 1907, *The Antichrist* in 1908, and *Dionysian Dithyrambs* in 1909.²² He wrote dithyrambic poems himself. Kouta can be considered the most thoroughly Nietzschean author of the Finnish fin de siècle, even to the point of not appearing as very original.²³

According to Tarkka, an important idea Lehtonen learned from Nietzsche is that an individual must break free of conventional morality in order to create something positive.²⁴ The opposition between the individual and society, essentially the quest for authenticity and the levelling tendencies of societal life, is the core of Nietzscheanism in Lehtonen's three early novels,

which depict rebellious young men. The morally strong ‘lion’ is forced to confront a society of selfish ‘dogs’, as Tarkka describes the situation.²⁵ *Perm*, on the other hand, is as much concerned with the collective being of the people as the protagonist’s individual authenticity. The tragic main character Perm is torn between humane feelings, his compassion and affection for others, and the demands of his ‘jylhä jumala’ [majestic God] (e.g., p. 16), a personified voice that tells him to obey his masculine will to power and subject everything to it. The unity of will is the driving force of Perm’s life. It is the core of his authentic being and constitutes his wholeness, which together with unity, are goals for his people to achieve.

I argue that some of the central characteristics of Nietzscheanism in all of Lehtonen’s early works, and even in Finnish literature of the fin de siècle in general, are an ‘aristocratic’ attitude – a pathos of distance between the strong individual and the common man – and on the other hand immoralism or amorality, being ‘beyond good and evil’. *Perm* can be characterized as anti-decadent in the sense that it describes a national struggle led by a strong and, in his own twisted way, heroic character. Perm’s actions defy common conceptions of morality, particularly his inhumane and even absurd-seeming decision to kill his wife who is pregnant with his child. The main characters of Lehtonen’s early novels are of a different breed, a strange blend of exceptional mental and physical abilities – Übermensch-like characteristics – and immoral decadence, which is in a way beyond good and evil. The stories are set in the contemporary reality of the Finnish countryside at the turn of the twentieth century, although there are many fantastical elements in the story worlds, most notably in *Mataleena*, which is paradoxically also the most auto-fictional work in Lehtonen’s lengthy œuvre.²⁶ In *Mataleena*, Lehtonen’s fictional alter ego tells a story, which is based on the young author’s experience of recently meeting his biological mother, from whom he had been separated since the age of six months. The novel is named after the narrator’s mother. However, the narrator is more interested in talking about the formation of his own nonconformist identity. He is in search of his authentic self, which paradoxically is presented as a figment of his imagination, ‘valheellinen satu’ [an untruthful tale].²⁷ Lehtonen’s early prose style is pathos-filled

and lyrical, which he shares with Volter Kilpi, one of his major sources of influence. An attitude of rebellion and moral transgression dominates in the novels, the most extreme instance of which is the ending of *Mataleena*. The novel ends with a dreamlike episode titled ‘Hullujen laulu’ [The song of the mad], in which the narrator sees his ancestors as ghosts gathered in a kind of Dionysian symposium, around a table surrounded by wine groves. Satan himself is among them, a figure with black wings arcing out of his shoulders. The ‘hullujen suku’ [family of the mad], as they call themselves, deliver a sort of manifesto in which they oppose everything decent and normal. They bombastically proclaim, among other provocative things, that they ‘ja dekadentteja me tahdomme olla, jos muut terveydellään pöyhkeilevät’ [wish to be decadent, if others flaunt their health] and ‘[m]e emme ole lainkuuliaisia lapsia, me hullut. Me nousemme vanhempiamme vastaan, meissä on kapinoitsijain rikollinen henki’ [we, the mad, are not law-abiding children. We rise against our parents, in us is the criminal spirit of rebellion].²⁸

At the early stage of his literary career, Lehtonen is not thoroughly, unequivocally Nietzschean, but Nietzscheanism is an important aspect of all of his early works. *Perm* represents a rather straightforward Nietzschean Übermensch fantasy, while Lehtonen’s early novels with their more complex narratives express no coherent worldview or philosophy of life. Rather, they are permeated by contradictions and the search for a satisfactory way of life, above all freedom and authenticity. The Nietzschean quest for authenticity represents an anti-decadent ideal in the novels, and at the same time it is paradoxically a central ingredient of Lehtonen’s morally rebellious literary decadence.²⁹

Nietzsche does not use the word *Authentizität* [authenticity], but he is very much concerned with authenticity and alienation as understood in the existentialist tradition. According to Jacob Golomb, Nietzsche’s notion of *Wahrhaftigkeit* [truthfulness] is practically synonymous with what has been called authenticity in later existentialist literature.³⁰ From a Nietzschean point of view, authenticity can be defined in a broad sense as wholeness of an individual’s life and self-identity. Rather than discovering a fixed, static self, becoming authentic entails a continuous dynamic

process of self-creation. Alienation, in turn, means not realizing the potential of one's existence. Alienation can be caused in various ways, for instance through the influence of upbringing or by succumbing to the temptations of a comfortable life, thus not growing to one's full potential. Literary decadence generally cultivates experiences of alienation and presents human life as fragmented. In Lehtonen's early novels, the Naturalist-decadent depiction of entropy and determinism puts into question even the possibility of freely constructing oneself. Heredity becomes a curse, like it does in Zola's paradigmatic Naturalism and Huysmans's decadence. The paradoxical Nietzschean decadence of the Finnish fin de siècle is a genre that manifests itself mainly in Lehtonen's early novels and in the early works of L. Onerva, particularly her novel *Mirdja* (1908), which depicts a decadent female character in an urban setting.³¹ The neo-Romanticist story world of the poem *Perm* is far less complex and nuanced. The main character can be described as rather flat, somewhat reminiscent of the characters of Leino's short epic poems in the collection *Helkavirsiä I* [Whitsongs I] (1903), such as the Übermensch characters Ylermi and Kouta, or the rebellious slave Kullervo, known from the *Kalevala* and many re-interpretations by Aleksis Kivi, Leino, and others.

Nietzsche's Übermensch, as the idea is described particularly in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), can be interpreted as the realization of the ideal of authenticity, of becoming whole by actualizing one's potential and organizing one's life and identity as if one is a work of art. The same applies to the potential of collective entities like nations. According to Golomb, the Übermensch is a 'regulative idea', meant as the antithesis and counterweight of inauthenticity, alienation.³² It is never fully realized but instead always points to the future as it entails a continuous re-evaluation and overcoming of oneself. The Nietzschean *pathos of authenticity*, the drive to become what one is, is a yes-saying, life-affirming pathos, and it is meant for the 'higher men', those actual human beings who possess the courage necessary to realize their full potential and the potential of human existence.³³ In fin-de-siècle literature, however, concrete representations of exceptional mental and/or physical prowess and immoralism are often – though not always or exclusively, as I will

argue – inspired by readings of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* and/or interpretations of the Nietzschean ideas that circulate in the culture of the time. Lehtonen’s character Perm is a tragic Nietzschean hero of willpower, vitality and authenticity.

The *Übermensch* is not always presented as a positive ideal. Volter Kilpi’s novel *Bathseba* (1900) is a version of the biblical story of King David falling in love with a woman called Bathseba who is married to a man named Uria.³⁴ In Kilpi’s version, David orders the death of Uria by sending him to the front line in a battle. Kilpi presents David as a narcissistic ruler of the world who thinks of himself as an *Übermensch*, beyond morality and the constraints of ordinary men. In this respect he is reminiscent of Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (1866). In both stories, immoralism and narcissistic *Übermensch* fantasies conclude with the defeat of the main character.³⁵ Kilpi expresses his fascination with Nietzsche for instance in his 1902 essay collection *Ihmisestä ja elämästä* [On Being Human and Life] and in his 1905 essay ‘Nykyaikaisista taidepyrinnöistä’ [On Contemporary Artistic Endeavours], in which he considers Nietzsche an immensely important influence for the whole of Kilpi’s contemporary culture and literature, not only in terms of his philosophical ideas but also as a stylistic influence.³⁶ As far as philosophy is concerned, Kilpi can be interpreted as more in line with Schopenhauer’s thought than Nietzsche’s.³⁷ All of his early works present a view of earthly existence as a realm of irrational Will and endless suffering. In a sense, Lehtonen’s *Perm* seems to express an opposite Nietzschean take on the harsh realities of life: hardships and struggle are embraced as necessary conditions for both the personal growth of the individual and the strength and unity of the collective will of the people.

The *Übermensch* and the weakened people

Perm represents a mix of *Kalevala*-inspired neo-Romanticism and Nietzscheanism, but it presents the once mighty people of Perma as decadent: a weakened people that seems to be at the late stage of a civilization’s life cycle. Early in Lehtonen’s poem, ‘Päärilivaaran vanha vaari’ [the old man of

Päärilivaara] (p. 6),³⁸ a leader among his people, reminisces how his generation defeated foreigners who invaded the land. Independence and freedom came at a great cost: the man himself lost his wife and his entire 'poikaparven' [flock of boys] (p. 10). The young generation now lives in peace and abundance, paid for by the blood of the older generation. The leader sees the youth as weakened, the men in particular made effeminate by the blessings of wealth and peace. Culture seems to thrive still as the young people play their traditional *kantele* instruments, but the leader sees that the young are not ready to defend themselves against enemies.

An important historical context of *Perm* is the First Period of Oppression, a period of Russification efforts in Finland, which was at the time an autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire. The threat to the autonomy of Finland and the development of its young culture began with the February Manifesto issued by Czar Nicholas II in 1899. The Finns were divided into three political camps viz-à-viz the oppressive efforts: one favoured acceptance of the new demands, while the other two opted for either passive or active resistance. Lehtonen himself was part of the passive resistance movement, which refused to follow the new laws and rules set by the authorities.³⁹ Lehtonen refused mandatory conscription into the Russian army, and as a punishment he was expelled from the University of Helsinki, which was at the time called the Imperial University of Alexander.

The story of *Perm* has distinct allegorical elements relating to the situation of Finland during the First Period of Oppression, although the allegory is not completely straightforward. It is somewhat surprising that the work did not end up censored by the authorities, as was feared by the publisher Otava.⁴⁰ In the story, the land of Perma loses its independence when foreigners from the south led by a 'pajari' [boyar] come to demand taxes. Boyar is a word used for Russian nobility.⁴¹ The depiction of the weakness and lack of unity of the people clearly reflects the political divisions among the Finns at the turn of the century. In addition to the different views on acceptance of the new demands and the two forms of resistance, the political differences between working-class and bourgeois institutions and Finnish- and Swedish-speaking Finns divided the will of the people.

The allegorical setting of *Perm* and the depiction of the decadence of the people is highly reminiscent of Eino Leino's play *Sota valosta* [War for the Light] (1900), which is set in the land of Kalevala. In both works, the strong protagonists, in Leino's case the leaders of Kalevala, are ready to fight for independence, but their people are passive and weak in the face of danger. The works share in common a Nietzschean juxtaposition of the exceptional individual – or individuals, in Leino's case – and the masses. At the same time, the decadence of Kalevala or *Perma* reflects a historical change in the perception of the common people at the turn of the century in Finland, as Pirjo Lyytikäinen has argued in the case of Leino's play: negative views of the common people, who were idealized in nineteenth-century national Romanticism, began to gain more ground particularly after the general strike of 1905, which not only brought an end to the First Period of Oppression but also saw the rise of tensions between the Finnish working class and bourgeois society, anticipating the horrors of the Finnish Civil War that broke out after the declaration of independence in the Spring of 1918.⁴² Leino's play is in one sense ahead of its time in its negative depiction of the people as it was published five years before the general strike.

The depiction of decadence in Leino's *Sota valosta* is much more complex than the allegory of *Perm*. Leino presents the people of Kalevala as driven by a herd morality that only seeks material comfort, welfare and equality, and knows nothing of higher values, much like the people at the beginning of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* who turn down Zarathustra's preachings of the *Übermensch* and want instead 'the Last Man', the antipode of the *Übermensch* and the personification of modernity's most banal material blessings. Like Nietzsche, Leino presents both socialism and Christianity as symptoms of herd morality, *ressentiment*, and as interpretations of good and bad or good and evil that suit the psychological needs of those who lack genuine power. At the same time, the people of Kalevala are presented as driven by primitive, animal instincts, under the influence of the dark northern realm of Pohjola. In Lehtonen's *Perm*, the people are presented simply as weakened by peace and affluence. The idea that opposition and hardships build character (the notion that that which does not kill you makes you stronger), can of course be interpreted as

Nietzschean. For instance in *The Gay Science* (1882, aphorism 19) Nietzsche argues that strong individuals and peoples welcome struggle as necessary for one's growth into full potential, and in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886, aphorism 262) he similarly states that without struggle and external opposition 'a species' grows weak.⁴³

The protagonist of *Perm* is born a slave but rises in the ranks and ultimately becomes a viceroy working for the foreign prince who enslaves his people. 'Näki Päärliivaaren vaari' [The old man of Päärliivaara] notices his strength of character already when he is a child:

Näki Päärliivaaren vaari
orjapoikasen pahaisen,
nimettömän repaleressun
kisoissa kultakujilla.

Rehki ressu rajumpi muita,
tuli kulmista kimoili.
Käski itseä isommat
kivet käsin kääntämähän
kartanoiksi kultaisiksi.'

[Old man of Päärliivaara
saw a wretched little slave-boy,
a nameless ragged waif
among the games in the golden lanes.

The ragged one toiled fiercer than the rest,
fire flashed from his brows.
He ordered those bigger than himself
to turn stones with their bare hands
into manors of gleaming gold.] (p. 14)

Beginning from an early age, Perm shows exceptional ambition and willpower, being somehow even able to command those physically much stronger than himself. It is clear that he is destined for greatness. Later the young Perm frees himself of slavery by threatening to kill the old man of Päärliivaara. The old man is forced to acknowledge Perm's strength of character: '

Itse jo ylenit, Perm!
Otit jo osasi uhallalla
väkevän veresi annon.
Siksi sukesit vapaaksi!
Kellä on sitehet sille,
ken ei siteitä suvaitse!

[You have risen now, Perm!
You took your share with daring,
with the offering of your mighty blood.
Thus you broke yourself free!
Who can bind the one
who will not suffer any bonds?] (p. 28)

Perm's willpower becomes personified in his personal majestic god, who demands that he subjects everything to the pursuit of concrete power – wealth, status or whatever there may be left to conquer in the world. Manly life is constant struggle:

Lapselle on lepo rinnoilla äidin,
vanhalle kalman kamea multa,
muita ei lepoja uroilla.

[A child finds rest on its mother's breast,
for the old, grim grave-soil is their rest,
and men have no other resting places.] (p. 50)

Once he is free, Perm amasses wealth for himself as a hunter and trader of furs, and with the status he gains, he becomes the husband of Sulemi, the daughter of the old man of Päärlivaara. Ultimately, however, Perm must abandon the temptation to settle and build a home with a woman by his side. This 'feminine' sphere of life runs contrary to his amoral Nietzschean will to power, which seeks continuous growth and expansion. As fate would have it, Perm's wedding is interrupted when a messenger arrives and tells that a boyar from the south has attacked the land. In one of his brutal acts, Perm kills the messenger because he sounds desperate and weak.

As the foreign invader arrives to demand taxes from the Permians and subjugates them, Perm sees the weakness of his people and devises a plan. He becomes a viceroy for the invaders and in his position of power torments his own people so that they will get angry and start a rebellion. The plan succeeds, and Perm is ultimately killed in a graphically brutal way by his own people who gain back their strength and free their land. The tragic character, in a strange way a hero, sacrifices himself for the future of the nation. At the moment of his execution, Perm is haunted by his inhumane actions:

Koston kammot kamalat
kuiskuttivat korvissansa.

Kosto veren valutun,
taaton kosto, kosto Perman
naisensa, sukunsa siiton.

[Dreadful terrors of revenge
whispered in his ears.
Vengeance for blood once spilled,
a father's vengeance, and the vengeance of Perma
for his woman, for the seed of his kin.] (p. 86)

Perm has turned his back on his father who is still a slave and in his most bizarre act killed his own pregnant wife so that no human bond stands in the way of his will to power and his mission to gain back the freedom of his people. In his haunting sense of transgression against basic humaneness and morality, even Perm is not ultimately completely whole.

Lehtonen's poem depicts a Nietzschean 'blonde beast', a personification of masculine will to power that is also presented as strength of the people as a collective. Material welfare causes decadence, the decline of the nation. *Perm* seems to present war and violence as expressions of cosmic willpower and vitality, forces greater than Perm himself or his people, personified in Perm's harsh god. In this sense even a quasi-fascist tone can be read in the poem, even though Lehtonen was certainly never a fascist in terms of his political views. For Perm, war itself, regardless of what the fight concerns, is '[s]ota on kostava, nostava vaisto | häitä voiman ja elämän' [an instinct that avenges and lifts | the wedding of power and life] (p. 50), and 'Verten leimu suurin juhla' [the blaze of blood is the grandest feast] for the 'children of the stern god' [lapsille jylhän jumalan] (p. 9). Nietzsche seems to similarly glorify war as an outburst of vitality in some of his texts, for instance in *Zarathustra*, although as for instance Ervasti notes, Nietzsche's ideal person is not a brutal warrior but instead a philosopher who leads the people with his mental abilities, creating new values.⁴⁴ *Perm*'s Nietzscheanism is simplified, concretized as the depiction of willpower, ambition, and even violence and war as vitality.

Perm is in his own way a tragic hero of authenticity: a relatively flat character who personifies the Nietzschean ideal of wholeness and realizing one's potential. Two intertwined models of authenticity can be discerned in Nietzsche's works: the biological and the artistic model

of authenticity.⁴⁵ The artistic model means that a person constructs oneself as if one were a work of art or a literary text in which style and intentional composition is crucial. The combination of wholeness and depth of substance is the ideal. The biological model, in turn, means that one realizes one's potential in the same way a plant actualizes the potential inscribed in the seed. Like the *Übermensch*, these are both regulative ideas, meaning that they are in practice never completely realized. Becoming authentic involves taking a critical stance towards socialization and the moral values transmitted by tradition. Secondly, becoming what one is – to quote aphorism 270 in *The Gay Science* and the subtitle of *Ecce Homo* – means using one's creative powers in the construction of one's identity.

The rebellious main characters of Lehtonen's early novels express a pathos of transgression, which is aimed at the conservative Christian-patriarchal values of society. Still, having rebelled against tradition and society, the protagonists of *Paholaisen viulu*, *Villi*, and *Mataleena* – unlike the strong hero of *Perm* – feel they have become at least partly alienated from what they could have been, from their innate potential or from what they perceive as their ideal self. Constructing oneself is identified with artistic creation. The main characters have grandiose fantasies of creating art, but they are doomed to remain dilettantes, only artists of their own lives. Literary decadence, in general, similarly puts into question the possibility of creating authentic and original art and at the same time the Nietzschean ideal of constructing an identity that is original, coherent, and whole. In the case of Lehtonen's antiheroes, degeneration, decay and the lust for pleasure are the leitmotifs of their existence. Even the desirability of the kind of will to power over the self, advocated by Nietzsche, becomes questionable as the protagonists, particularly the eponymous main character of *Villi*, express a decadent desire to free themselves of the burden of life, indulging in numbing sensual pleasures and ultimately contemplating suicide. Villi, the most decadent of Lehtonen's characters, is in the end too weak even to kill himself.⁴⁶ As his decay intensifies, he becomes the polar opposite of Perm's overflowing Nietzschean will to power.

It is noteworthy that everything that looks Nietzschean or closely related to Nietzsche's thought in fin de siècle culture does not necessarily trace back only to Nietzsche's influence. Of particular interest in regard of Lehtonen's *Perm* is that the Norwegian author Henrik Ibsen's early play *Brand* (1866) depicts an uncompromising hero of authenticity who is in some ways similar to Nietzsche's Zarathustra. A Finnish translation of *Brand* by Kasimir Leino was published in 1896, and the play was performed in Helsinki's Finnish Theatre in 1899. Ervasti compares *Brand* to Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and even argues that Ibsen's play came to represent a symbol of the voice of conscience for an entire generation.⁴⁷ Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, published a year later in 1867, depicts an opposite kind of character, an opportunistic and hedonistic man who has no lasting principles.⁴⁸ Ibsen's works were influenced by Søren Kierkegaard, whose ideas concerning authenticity are in many ways close to those of Nietzsche. One common element is that both Nietzsche and Kierkegaard view the ideal of self-creation, authenticity, as if the human being is a work of art or a literary text, ideally a person whose life is as complex and full as it is coherent and whole.⁴⁹ Ibsen's *Brand*, in his quest for wholeness and authenticity, is almost as uncompromising as Lehtonen's *Perm*, and he has his own view of Christianity as a demanding faith.⁵⁰ In the end, however, the play seems ambivalent about whether *Brand*'s harsh faith should be a model of ethical life and authenticity. According to Ervasti, early-phase Ibsen could not be regarded as a credible prophet of individualism by Finnish intellectuals of the turn of the century because in *Brand* absolute duty seemed to stifle the individual self and Ibsen failed to resolve the contradiction between collective duty and individual freedom.⁵¹ The inhumaneness of Lehtonen's character *Perm* is even further from a viable model of authenticity, and the character can be best understood as a Nietzschean fantasy combined with the theme of national struggle. *Perm* achieves wholeness and strength – authenticity, essentially – by submitting himself to his harsh god, which is paradoxically the personification of his own egoistic drive to power.

The ending of *Perm* echoes the beginning, but the mood is slightly different:

Perma, sammunut sävele,

illan ruseiden riemu mennyt,
aarehelmiä helinä!

Kansa kullassa kulisi.
Tuli vainooja väkevä,
verikourin kuristi kansan.

Kansa kultansa kokosi:
soihutäsin, soitatellen
tulivyönä välkkyväisnä
katosi kallion kupuihin,
alle vuorten vinkaloitten.
Vuoret velhoten kumosi
syksyönä synkeänä
yli itsensä, ilojen.

Synkehinä syksyöinä
tuikehtivat tulet lietten
läpi kumpujen kameitten,
lyövät kulkijan jaloissa.

Pitää pitkiä iloja
kansa alla öisen kummun.
Siellä sarkojen kimellys,
raharyntäiden välähdys,
kirkas kannelten helinä.

Laulu kumma kuului yöstä,
tuuli haikeesti tohahti.

[Perma, an extinguished melody,
the joy of evening's red glows gone,
the chime of treasure-pearls!

The folk would wander clad in gold.
Then came a mighty persecutor,
with bloodied hands he strangled the people.

The people gathered up their gold:
with torches in hand, playing their songs,
as a gleaming belt of fire
they vanished into the hollows of the cliff,
beneath the mountains' twisted roots.
The mountains, with sorcery, toppled
on a gloomy autumn night
over themselves and over all joys.

On the darkest autumn nights
the fires of their hearths flicker
through the humpbacked mounds,
flare beneath the traveller's feet.

Long joys they keep
under the night-bound mound.
There the shimmer of chalices,
the flash of coin-reeds,
the bright ringing of kanteles.

A strange song rose from the night,
the wind sighed wistfully.] (pp. 89-90)

The ending of *Perm*, 'syysyön unelma' [an autumn night's dream], as the subtitle goes, presents a vision of a long-gone people just like the beginning of the work. It seems that after the people rid themselves of their oppressor, a new 'persecutor' arrived and ultimately subdued the land. The people have gone into hiding inside a mountain, where they spend their time in endless jollification. The question arises, whether they have abandoned their path of newfound strength and reverted back to their comfort-seeking complacency, the antithesis of Nietzschean self-overcoming. The narrative seems ambivalent in this regard. On the one hand, it glorifies war as the expression of will and vitality and, on the other, it extols the material affluence of the medieval Fenno-Ugric realm. The people gain the unity of their collective will through suffering, but it seems that they have not adopted Perm's masculine will to power as the guiding principle of their life. They live through a life-cycle that consists initially of their rise to power and wealth, but which then becomes their decadent state of affluence and flourishing culture, somewhat reminiscent of the often-envisioned decline and decadence of the Roman Empire.⁵² A newfound show of vitality is brought about by Perm's brutal actions but finally, it seems, Perma is defeated and fades away from the stage of history as a distant memory.

Conclusion

Perm combines some key literary tendencies of the Finnish fin de siècle: the allegorical presentation of a nationalist theme, the use of the modified *Kalevala* metre as a verse form, and a Nietzschean fantasy of a tragic hero of authenticity and willpower. There is also a thin autobiographical dimension in *Perm*. This is nowhere near as pronounced as in the novel *Mataleena*, the last and the

most appreciated of Lehtonen's early works. Lehtonen himself was 'nimetön repelaressu' [a nameless ragged waif] (p. 14) like Perm, orphaned at the age of half a year, but unlike the character of the poem, Lehtonen did not actually have to fight for a better life as he was adopted by a wealthy clergy family.

Through his allegorical narrative, Lehtonen seems to be calling for national unity, willpower, and decisiveness in the face of Russian oppression, and Tarkka even interprets the 'tone' of the poem as 'quite activist'.⁵³ The active resistance movement during the First Period of Oppression favoured direct and even violent resistance to the Russification efforts. The most (in)famous act of the active resistance was the murder of the Russian General Governor of Finland, Nikolai Bobrikov, in 1904 by Eugen Schauman. The fact that *Perm*, which depicts a Fenno-Ugric people struggling against Russians, was not banned as seditious is a small wonder. At the turn of the century, allegorical narratives had the potential function of presenting political themes in a way that would avoid censorship, but in *Perm*'s case the interpretation of the allegory seems quite obvious.

¹ The folklorist and poet Martti Haavio has authored a study on the knowledge and beliefs associated with the land of Perma: *Bjarmien vallan kukoistus ja tubo: historiaa ja runoutta*, poems trans. by Aale Tynni (WSOY, 1965).

² Joel Lehtonen, *Perm: syysyön unelma* (WSOY, 1904), p. 1. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. Subsequent references to the poem are given inline.

³ Haavio, pp. 14-15, 55-56, & 78.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 159, 176-79, 185, & 196.

⁵ Elias Lönnrot, *Kalevala*, 100-year anniversary edition of the new *Kalevala* (first pub. 1849; Finnish Literature Society, 1949), p. 11.

⁶ Haavio, p. 6.

⁷ Eino Leino, *Sota valosta*, in *Tuonelan joutsen; Sota valosta; Väinämöisen kosinta; Karjalan kuningas* (first pub. 1900; Finnish Literature Society, 1999); Eino Leino, *Helkavirsiä I* (Otava, 1903). The fascination with the *Kalevala*, folk poetry, and the Fenno-Ugric past, which is a salient tendency in Finnish literature of the time, particularly of Symbolist (or neo-Romanticist) literature, is called Karelianism, referring to the region of Karelia in eastern Finland and beyond the Russian border that was romanticised as the birthplace of Finnish folk poetry and the *Kalevala*.

⁸ See, for example, Kai Laitinen, *Suomen kirjallisuuden historia*, 4th rev. edn (Otava, 1997), pp. 233-36. Laitinen's literary history was first published in 1981, and the latest revised edition from 1997 retains the concept of neo-Romanticism, although Laitinen also uses the concept of Symbolism.

⁹ See Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi: Minä ja toinen vuosisadanvaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (SKS, 1997).

¹⁰ See Esko Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I: 1900-luvun vaihte ja siihen välittömästi liittyvät ilmiöt* (University of Turku, 1960).

¹¹ See, for example, Pekka Tarkka, *Joel Lehtonen I: Vuodet 1881–1917* (Otava, 2009), p. 80.

¹² Joel Lehtonen, *Paholaisen viulu* (WSOY, 1904); Joel Lehtonen, *Villi: kuvitteluja* (Otava, 1905); and Joel Lehtonen, *Mataleena: laulu synnyinsuudulle* (first pub. 1905; Finnish Literature Society, 1998).

Lehtonen is better known and more appreciated for his later neo-Naturalist works, most notably the one-day novel *Putkinotko* (first pub. 1919–1920; Finnish Literature Society, 1995), which depicts in a comical light the hardships of the crofter Juutas Käkriäinen and his family and the tensions between Käkriäinen and his landlord Aapeli Muttinen, Lehtonen's alter ego.

¹³ See, for example, Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Decadence in the Wilderness: Will to Transgression or the Strange Bird of Finnish Decadence', *Nordlit*, 28 (2011), pp. 245–56 <https://doi.org/10.7557/13.2062> (pp. 251–53).

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Francis Golffing (first pub. 1872; Anchor Books, 1956).

¹⁵ See Lyytikäinen, 'Decadence in the Wilderness', and Antti Ahmala, *Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on? Autenttisuus ja itsestä vieraantuminen Joel Lehtosen varbaistuotannossa* (PhD thesis, University of Helsinki, Unigrafia, 2016).

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. by Adrian Del Caro (first pub. 1883–1885; Cambridge University Press, 2006); Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. by Francis Golffing (first pub. 1887; Anchor Books, 1956); and Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How One Becomes What One Is*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale, intro. by Michael Tanner (first pub. 1908; Penguin, 1992).

¹⁷ See Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*.

¹⁸ Kasimir Leino, 'Uusia suuntia Ranskan kaunokirjallisuudessa', *Valvoja*, 1 (1892), pp. 25–41.

¹⁹ Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*, p. 116.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Tarkka, *Joel Lehtonen I: Vuodet 1881–1917*, p. 75. Tarkka does not specify his sources here, but Ervasti's study *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche* (1960) is one source that points in this direction.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Näin puhui Zarathustra: kirja kaikille eikä kenellekään*, trans. by Aarni Kouta (first pub. 1883–1885; Otava, 1907); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Antikristus*, trans. by Aarni Kouta (first pub. 1895; Otava, 1908); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Dionysos: valikoima runoja*, trans. by Aarni Kouta (first pub. 1891; Otava, 1909).

²³ Kouta is not as appreciated as an author as for instance Joel Lehtonen, Eino Leino, or Volter Kilpi.

²⁴ Pekka Tarkka, *Putkinotkon tausta: Joel Lehtosen henkilöt 1901–1923* (Otava, 1977), p. 75.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁶ For a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of *Mataleena* in English, see Lyytikäinen, 'Decadence in the Wilderness'.

²⁷ Joel Lehtonen, *Mataleena*, p. 75.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 88 & 86.

²⁹ See Ahmala, *Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on?*

³⁰ Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (Routledge, 1995), p. 68.

³¹ On L. Onerva's *Mirdja*, see Viola Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound: Mimetic Strategies in L. Onerva's 'Mirdja'* (University of Turku, 2014).

³² Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity*, p. 83.

³³ Ibid., pp. 68–88.

³⁴ Volter Kilpi, *Bathseba: Daavidin puheluja itsensä kanssa* (first pub. 1900; Finnish Literature Society, 1995).

³⁵ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. by David McDuff (first pub. 1865; Penguin Classics, 2002).

³⁶ Volter Kilpi, *Ihmistä ja elämästä* (first pub. 1902; Finnish Literature Society, 1990); Volter Kilpi, 'Nykyaikaisista taidepyrinnöistä', *Valvoja*, 9 (1905), pp. 454–70.

³⁷ Kilpi is highly international in terms of the storyworlds of his early works and his sources of influence, and he was well versed in philosophy, particularly German thinkers, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche ranking as the most important ones. National neo-Romanticism is a concept that is not very well suited to describe Kilpi's early works.

³⁸ Päärilvaara translates roughly as 'pearl hill', which is a place in the mythical land of Perma.

³⁹ Tarkka, *Joel Lehtonen I: Vuodet 1881–1917*, p. 47.

⁴⁰ See *ibid.*, p. 79. There is a text on the verso of *Permi*'s title page confirming that the book has been accepted for publication by the censorship authorities.

⁴¹ The boyars ruled in Russia before Ivan the Terrible forced them to obey the central authority of the Czar in the sixteenth century.

⁴² Pirjo Lyytikäinen, 'Kansa ja dekadenssi: Eino Leinon *Sota valosta*', in *Dekadenssi vuosisadanvaihteen taiteessa ja kirjallisuudessa*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen (SKS, 1998), pp. 32–57 (p. 33).

⁴³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (first pub. 1882; Vintage Books, 1972); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. by R. J. Hollingdale (first pub. 1886; Penguin Classics, 1990).

⁴⁴ Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*, p. 58.

⁴⁵ See Ahmala, *Miten tulla sellaiseksi kuin on?*, pp. 33–50; Golomb, pp. 68–87.

⁴⁶ On Lehtonen's novel *Villi*, see Antti Ahmala, 'Alroy and Uncas in the Finnish Countryside: Decadent Bovarism in Joel Lehtonen's *Villi*', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (Routledge, 2020), pp. 102–18.

⁴⁷ Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*, p. 100.

⁴⁸ Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt: A Dramatic Poem*, trans. by Kenneth McLeish, Drama Classics (first pub. 1867; Nick Hern, 1999).

⁴⁹ Alexander Nehamas has studied this aspect of Nietzsche's thought in his study *Nietzsche – Life as Literature* (Harvard University Press, 1985), and the idea of the person as a work of art is also central in Jacob Golomb's (*In Search of Authenticity*) interpretation of Nietzsche as one of the philosophers of authenticity. On Kierkegaard and the poetic life see, for example, Sylvia Walsh, *Living Poetically: Kierkegaard's Existential Aesthetics* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

⁵⁰ See Otto Reinert, "The Ending of *Brand*", *Scandinavian Studies*, 85.1 (2013), pp. 67-78.

⁵¹ Ervasti, *Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche I*, p. 46.

⁵² Cyclical views of history, discernible in literary decadence and more broadly in antimodern thought, stand in opposition to modernity's insistence on linear progress. See, for example, Peter King, *The Antimodern Condition: An Argument Against Progress* (First pub. 2014; Routledge, 2016) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315612461>, p. 14.

⁵³ Tarkka, *Joel Lehtonen I: Vuodet 1881–1917*, p. 79.

The Poetics of Affect beyond Good and Evil: Nietzsche's Philosophy in the Prose Poetry of Jaan Oks¹

Leo Luks

Tallinn University, Estonian University of Life Sciences

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,² a status that was also affirmed by his contemporaries.³ 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 decadence⁴ – 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.⁵ 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.⁶

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.⁷ Both Conservative and leftist intellectuals approached the term ambivalently, often employing it in a pejorative sense.⁸ In his criticism of modern Estonian literature, Oks endeavoured to construct a more radical conception of decadence, conceiving it also as a literary venture.⁹ 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.¹⁰

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.¹¹

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.¹² The Finnish scholar Pirjo Lyytikäinen characterized this state as one in which ‘pathos and mania take over; resignation and analytical coldness disappear’.¹³

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.¹⁴ His works also received some attention from literary scholars before the Second World War.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ However, this misogyny is not often mentioned during Oks’s lifetime in public discourse.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

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,¹⁹ but it took two more decades for the first scholarly research to appear.²⁰ However, the Estonian diaspora in exile ignored this exclusion of Oks and published representative, though incomplete, editions of his work in Sweden.²¹ 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.²²

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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ Oks only mentions Nietzsche explicitly once in his writing.²⁶ In the following I aim to illuminate these interesting parallels between the poet and the philosopher.²⁷

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.²⁸ 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!]²⁹

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

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.³¹

This evaluation characterizes much of Oks's prose, but his texts depict an uninterrupted stream of consciousness in a more radical way.³² This style emerged with modernism and, for Oks, literary decadence and modernism were synonymous. He notably conceived of himself as a modernist.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.]³⁵

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).³⁶ 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').³⁷

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.]³⁸

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].³⁹ 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.]⁴⁰ 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.⁴¹

Nietzsche also reinterprets the 'soul' as a natural, biological phenomenon throughout his work.⁴² However, it is most direct in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), the title of which Oks paraphrases in 'Emased'.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ 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.'⁴⁶

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.⁴⁷ 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.]⁴⁸ 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.⁴⁹ 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? ...⁵⁰

The literary works of Oks are fragmentary and lack such compact ideations, though a passionate rebuke of reason can still be found in them.⁵¹ 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].⁵² 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’.⁵³ 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.]⁵⁴

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

What are the implications of this for humanity? For Nietzsche it is *amor fati*: a Dionysian anticipation and affirmation of the eternal return.⁵⁶ 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.]⁵⁷

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.⁵⁸

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...]⁵⁹

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*.⁶⁰

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'.⁶¹ That is, one can overcome nihilism through the binding of beautiful symbols – this is the highest expression of the will to power.⁶²

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...]⁶³

The affective-sexual feeling of life, 'elu kui loov põhikirg' [life as a creative urge]⁶⁴ or lust cannot appease the questioning voice, does not relieve the seeker, does not engage him enough nor satisfy his conceptual mind.⁶⁵ Similarly, the message in 'Nimetu elajas' that 'Elu on ila' [Life is spittle]⁶⁶ is disgusting, revolting, and altogether insane.⁶⁷ 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...]⁶⁸ 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.⁶⁹ 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.’⁷⁰

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

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...] ⁷²

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.⁷³ In Oks’s œuvre, God remains a spectre, taking on various phantom-like forms.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ 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...] ⁷⁶

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.]⁷⁷

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

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.⁸⁰ In 'Emased', he is violently brought into sexuality, being demanded to breed and procreate.⁸¹ 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.]⁸²

Oks takes the position of a decadent aesthete, and has both a blasphemous and a parodic, satirical relationship to God.⁸³ He dislocates religious vocabulary, such as the words for sin and angel.⁸⁴ 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...] ⁸⁵

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].⁸⁶ 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'.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸ 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.⁸⁹

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.⁹⁰ 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.]⁹¹

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.⁹²

According to Nietzsche, the inevitable misunderstandings and struggles between men and women derive from differences in their emotional tempos.⁹³ 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.⁹⁴ 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.⁹⁵ 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.]⁹⁶

What about men? In Oks’s œuvre, men are usually depicted as unfeeling and unattainable for women, in control of their desires.⁹⁷ ‘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].⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰

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.]¹⁰¹

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.¹⁰² 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.]¹⁰³

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.]¹⁰⁴

According to these views, women are seen as disturbers of the peace, as mere chattel or chicken created only for consumption.¹⁰⁵ Oks describes multiple scenes of sexual violence against women, according to these views.¹⁰⁶ 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...].¹⁰⁷

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.¹⁰⁸ The second describes decadent art, which is ugly, sick, negates life, and is fragmentary.¹⁰⁹ 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.¹¹⁰ 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.¹¹¹

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.¹¹²

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.¹¹³ 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.¹¹⁴

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:¹¹⁵

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.]¹¹⁶

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.¹¹⁷ 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.]¹¹⁸

Oks's particularly decadent misanthropy stems from his will to overcome everything human.¹¹⁹ 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.¹²⁰

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.]¹²¹

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.]¹²²

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...]¹²³

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.¹²⁴ 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.]¹²⁵

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].¹²⁶ 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].¹²⁷ 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.

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. This article has been translated by Ian T. Gwin and is partly based on Leo Luks, ‘Mõõnav sugu sealpool head ja kurja. Friedrich Nietzsche vitaalsed afektid Jaan Oksa loomingu kõverpeeglis’, *Keel ja Kirjandus*, 1-2 (2024), pp. 74-94. I would like to thank Mirjam Hinrikus, Merlin Kirikal, Kristjan Haljak, and Ian Gwin for the detailed critical comments. On the *Volupté* website, the thumbnail used for this article is by the Estonian artist Leo Lapin (1945–2022).

² Jaan Oks, *Orjapojad* (Ilmamaa, 2004), p. 283.

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

⁴ 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.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶ 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.

⁷ Max Nordau, *Entartung* (Duncker, 1892).

⁸ 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.

⁹ Oks, *Orjapojad*, pp. 219-21.

¹⁰ 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).

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

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

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

¹⁴ 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.

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

¹⁶ 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.

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

¹⁸ 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, ‘Naisküsimus 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.

¹⁹ Jaan Oks, *Vaevademaal* (Perioodika, 1967).

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

²¹ Jaan Oks, *Kogutud teosed* (Vaba Eesti, 1957).

²² 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.

²³ 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’

²⁴ 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*.

²⁵ Vahing, ‘Valetage enne, mitte aga pärast’, p. 139.

²⁶ Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 213.

²⁷ 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'.

²⁸ 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).

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

³⁰ Haljak, *Jaan Oks ja Lautreamont*.

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

³² See also Lind, *Dekadentlik esteetika Jaan Oksa proosaloomingus*, p. 62.

³³ Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 201. See also Süvalep, 'Modernist Jaan Oks'.

³⁴ Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 273.

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

³⁶ 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).

³⁷ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 295 & 299.

³⁸ Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 223.

³⁹ 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).

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

⁴¹ Oks, 'Emased', p. 270, and 'Nimetu elajas', p. 331.

⁴² 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.

⁴³ Oks, 'Emased', p. 255.

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

⁴⁵ See Lind, *Dekadentlik esteetika Jaan Oksa proosaloomingus*, pp. 11 & 63.

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

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

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 271–80 (p. 278).

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

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

⁵¹ See Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 312 & 321–22.

⁵² Ibid., p. 297.

⁵³ Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', p. 12.

⁵⁴ Oks, 'Emased', p. 246.

⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 569–70.

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

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

⁵⁹ Oks, 'Emased', p. 252.

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

⁶¹ 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.

⁶² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, p. 353.

⁶³ Oks, 'Emased', p. 262.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 253.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 235 & 270.

⁶⁶ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas' p. 329.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 329, 284, 327 & 314.

- ⁶⁸ Oks, 'Emased', p. 247.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 244-45.
- ⁷⁰ Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', p. 14.
- ⁷¹ See also Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 286.
- ⁷² Oks, 'Emased', p. 245.
- ⁷³ Ibid., p. 239.
- ⁷⁴ See also Paul Reets, 'Jaan Oksast ja tema loomingust', *Mana*, 37 (1970), p. 3.
- ⁷⁵ 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.
- ⁷⁶ Oks, 'Emased', p. 247. See also Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 314 & 319.
- ⁷⁷ Oks, 'Emased', p. 250.
- ⁷⁸ Nietzsche, 'The Anti-Christ', p. 16.
- ⁷⁹ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy And Other Writings*, pp. 6-9.
- ⁸⁰ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 331 & 321.
- ⁸¹ Oks, 'Emased', p. 244.
- ⁸² Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 304.
- ⁸³ See Irving H. Buchen, 'Decadence as Blasphemy', *Modern Language Studies*, 2.1 (1972), p. 22.
- ⁸⁴ See Oks, 'Emased' and 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 254 & 319; and Oks, 'Ihu', p. 274.
- ⁸⁵ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 309.
- ⁸⁶ Oks, 'Emased', p. 241.
- ⁸⁷ Oks, *Orjapojad*, p. 356 & 355.
- ⁸⁸ 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.
- ⁸⁹ 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.
- ⁹⁰ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 286 & 290.
- ⁹¹ Oks, 'Emased', p. 245.
- ⁹² Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 143.
- ⁹³ Ibid., p. 67.
- ⁹⁴ 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.
- ⁹⁵ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 140-43.
- ⁹⁶ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 287. See also Oks, 'Emased', pp. 244, 262, & 270.
- ⁹⁷ Oks, 'Emased', p. 255.
- ⁹⁸ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 290.
- ⁹⁹ See Mirjam Hinrikus, 'Naisküsimuse lahendus Weiningeri moodi. Otto Weiningeri minatud naised Tammsaare loomingus', *Vikerkaar*, 1-2 (2005), pp. 87-118.
- ¹⁰⁰ Nietzsche, 'Beyond Good and Evil', in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche in 19 volumes*, 8, pp. 137-38
- ¹⁰¹ Oks, 'Emased', p. 242.
- ¹⁰² Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 286.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 299.
- ¹⁰⁴ Oks, 'Emased', p. 243.
- ¹⁰⁵ See Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 297, and Oks, 'Emased', p. 244.
- ¹⁰⁶ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 288, 291 & 309.
- ¹⁰⁷ Oks, 'Emased', p. 270.
- ¹⁰⁸ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 456-60.
- ¹⁰⁹ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 470-472. See also Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Art* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).
- ¹¹⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 449-50.
- ¹¹¹ See Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, pp. 164-97.
- ¹¹² Ibid., p. 190.
- ¹¹³ 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).
- ¹¹⁴ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, pp. 474-75 & 466-67.
- ¹¹⁵ Oks, 'Emased', p. 260.
- ¹¹⁶ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', p. 299.
- ¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 308, 325.
- ¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 300.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 309, 320, & 324-25.

¹²⁰ 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.

¹²¹ Oks, 'Emased', p. 254.

¹²² Ibid., p. 241.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 269.

¹²⁴ Oks, 'Nimetu elajas', pp. 326 & 330.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 331.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 298, 319, & 328.

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

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

Merlin Kirikal

Under and Tuglas Literary Institute (Tallinn) and University of Tartu

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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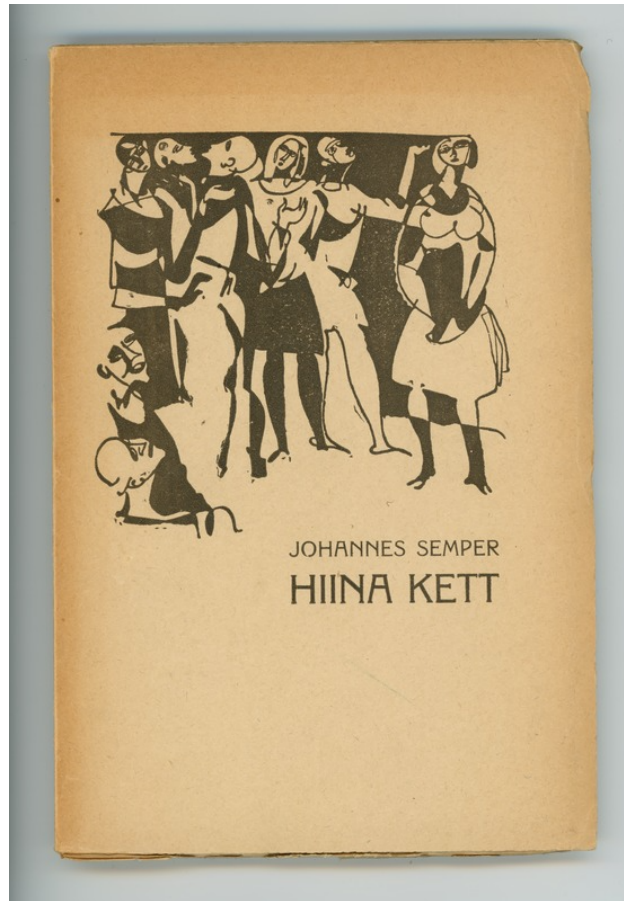


Fig. 2: Cover design by [Ado Vabbe](#) for Johannes Semper, *Hiina kett* (Odamees, 1918).
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What makes the story and its core – Alla's figure – unique in Estonian and perhaps even in global literary history is that she is mostly (albeit not exclusively) 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.

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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.

‘A Sacred Weed’ (1918)

Johannes Semper

Translated by Adam Cullen

She paused in the centre of the room. Listened.

Through the open window, she could hear the cascade’s monotonous roar like the muffled bass of a distant organ, accompanied by the *pizzicato* of clinking glasses and peppered cadences of laughter coming from the adjacent room.

Approaching the large mirror with short steps, she observed:

An orange-yellow veil draped over her coal-black hair and from its shadow, her eyes, wide and naïve, appeared timid. It should have been a purple veil that she’d stretch to lift high above her head and wave in the breeze to the rhythm of dance steps.

She recognized in her appearance something reminiscent of Zuloaga’s *Señoritas* whom she’d seen in a recent exhibition.

Sliding her hands along the curve of her hips, she turned to profile. Her stubby button nose dispelled the illusion of a *Señorita*. She disliked it, though the unpleasantness was softened by black curls cascading from her cheeks to the white of her neck.

She leaned in close to the mirror to inspect the pale Nordic eyes rimmed by sets of long, brownish lashes beneath dark, arcing brows.

Gazing into her own eyes at length, she scrutinized them until she felt a little disconcerted before the frozen reality in her reflection.

Bright laughter erupted from the adjacent room again, irritating her.

She heard tipsy cheers.

Sitting down on a chair, she rested her hands in her lap and felt like a discarded object.

Why had she been invited along on this excursion when she only knew a couple of its party? How could she enjoy Imatra when not one of the university students had noticed her withdraw from their company and disappear into another room?

She looked out onto the Finnish landscape. Here were yellow-green dots dabbed with a Japanese brush between the dark-green tops of spring pines; in the distance stood solitary bluish coppices. Children played on the grass. The windless, still nature exuded endless melancholy, listless.

Just as she approached the windowsill to sniff wild violets arranged in a squat vase, the door opened.

Ado stood there for a moment, regarding the young woman at the window with surprise. Then, as if dispelling a slight illusion, he pulled the door shut behind him and came closer.

‘Is the young lady daydreaming?’

‘Why on earth did you invite me here? I’m truly a fifth wheel. You all drink and amuse yourselves, but where is my place in your company?’

The student set his cognac glass on the table, fetched a chair, and sat close to the young woman, starting to agree with her on the sense of the excursion.

Wine was soon brought from the other room when the students there began leaving, growing restless indoors when it was springtime outside. They trickled out: young men in grey and vibrant colors, canes in hand and hats on head, young women in white and yellow – tiny chicks emerging from cracking eggshells.

Oh, that double *kümmel*¹ of spring and wine! It makes the blood rush and the eyes twinkle. The woods ring in response with unfettered bells of wantonness.

So what that some students, chubby and genteel, entirely fail to blend with the pine-trunk decor, formality having soaked into their dress: to them, every tree and bush is a posh lady at a café who blushes when you extend your elbows.

So what that some have brought mounted movements? Others are sprier and more disposed to run and shout, the newly verdant alder branches slapping their faces.

And in the end, not one feels out of place in that landscape. They find joy in the drifting butterflies, white, yellow, and brown, which are playfully pursued; in frogs the colour of pine bark, crawling lazily across the leaves. Long lizards slide silently through last summer's dried grass. The beetles still shine, wearing freshly stitched costumes. A starling's cheerful whistle sprinkles over you from some direction.

The group of students has scattered: some sit atop the hill, some at the base of its slope, others on the riverbank, gazing at the perpetually coaxing cascades.

Alla and Ado are still inside, so wrapped up in their yarn of conversation and coquetry that they know nothing of the others. Nor do they want to know, as the rest of the party has, in fact, encroached as an unnecessary burden.

'To your health and mine!'

And the glasses ring brightly as they meet, making the two laugh. Alla's lips are as red as a fresh wound. But the young man only tastes them in his fantasies. Alla squeezes her eyes shut and murmurs that she is intoxicated by everything, everything. When she opens them again, she leaves her eyelids low. The Nordic mien has disappeared for now: black molten metal sparkles in its place.

Yet, Ado is tormented by the glint of irony that comes through the drooping eyelids. The young woman giggles incessantly, metal-bright, then lights a cigarette, boasting that now, at university, she suddenly feels more grown. Ooh, she can even blow smoke through her nostrils. Ooh, how intelligent she wishes to be someday, much more intelligent than this Ado is right now. Right now, she is still silly and naïve, albeit an adult. Imagine that: a young woman of nineteen already, no longer a schoolgirl. But age is intimidating! When she looks into the mirror, she first checks to see whether the first crow's feet have formed at the corners of her eyes. She massages her face to keep wrinkles from appearing. A girlfriend of hers once said that age is best judged by the neck. Imagine that: the neck, just like horses by their teeth! And she hadn't cared for it in the least. She asks Ado – if his vision is clear – to look and see if there are any creases on her neck.

When the boy leans in to check, she jerks her head back and the cautionary irony reappears in her eyes. And then that laugh again, sharply piercing, coming from the shadows of black curls.

Abruptly turning serious:

'But now imagine me in four years' time! Oh, how dreadful: I'll walk the streets carrying a strap of books under my arm. I'll teach children. Haha, a schoolmarm! Me? The lines that'll no doubt appear on my face then! Perhaps I'll even don spectacles that hang from a black cord and enter the classroom damp, chilled to the bone, and with hollowed cheeks. You know, I feel as if all schoolteachers have hollowed cheeks and damp, unusually cold skin, as if they inhabit a cellar. My black hair will be even frizzier, and I'll look like a total owl, as my boyfriend already says now. Tell me, do I have an owl face? And in just four years' time! It makes chills run down my spine. You know, some nights I dream that I'm an actual owl: ugly, disgusting, screeching like a child being pinched. The ugliness wakes me up and I go to the mirror to stare in horror. I can't fall back asleep afterward.'

That was several times now she'd mentioned some kind of a boyfriend. Who might he be, Ado wished to know.

Oh, he was a very silly, milk-white, flushed-cheeked boy who always loved to send long letters written in green ink. He was fighting in the war now, apparently. He'd invited Alla to join the effort, too: scrap that idea of graduating from university (studying only makes you ugly) and come to work as a nurse instead. She even considered doing so at one point, but when dressed in a nurse's uniform, she found it didn't suit her look one bit – particularly, her unruly hair refused

to stay straight beneath the white kerchief. And how can you have a nurse with messy hair?! So, she abandoned the idea.

The background of the boy who wrote in green ink remained quite obscure to Ado, though the young woman's candour only increased the longer they sat and imbibed.

Finally, they rose and went outside.

The sun poured yellow wine from a blue crystal glass, quenching the springtime surroundings. Lustfully, nature's womb had spread wide and the green trees stiffened.

The Vuoksi spun frothy water over the boulders and chunks of eroded cliff, winding through the pines until its arm wrapped around the craggy landscape's mighty chest in a heaving embrace – *Vallinkoski* manifested.

Frolicking, cavorting, and chasing each other in turns, the student and his young woman ran down to the foot of the hill, where they both suddenly became solemn, sober, and silent in the face of that roaring power.

Everything here seethed, frothed, and rioted. Great threads of black velvet unwound from an invisible spindle and furled together to form a giant mass that smashed into the boulders and bluffs at the riverbend, shot up into the sunlight as a rainbow-riddled pillar of foam, and then wound back together below as white, roiling tears to repeat the same game all over again.

Here, speech was like a whisper from an echoing cave.

Ado gazed at the foamy rainbows and noticed the green bands. They looked not like the glint of sunlight on tears, but an unbroken green thread coming from Imatra above and flowing onward... It was like the green ink on that curious boy's...

Was everything that was casually revealed up there behind the wine glasses true? That Alla and the boy had been together the whole last summer, and the summer before that, day and night in the countryside, somewhere in the woods, somewhere in haylofts, in haystacks? That he was handsome, strong, and bold? That there is nothing lovelier than giving yourself up beside a stream where you just swam, bodies still moist from the invigorating water? And afterward to bask and lounge in the sunshine like little salamanders? Was it all true?

What duality, Ado mused: on the one hand utter naïveté, childishness, innocence, and on the other, a wealth of experience and worldly wisdom? Was it true, or merely a pose of truth? Or something akin to Daphnis and Chloe?

Dusk was already falling when the group of students came to Imatra Bridge.

Although the cascades thrashed and roared in their bed of steep cliffs below, twirling tar-black trunks against submerged stones and turning them into a frothy white flour that attempts in a futile way to rise against the current, the shadows of those on the bridge stretched distinctly and motionlessly across the water, undisturbed by the riotous struggle. Cool air rose from the crashing, entwining currents.

The students took in the scene for many long minutes, as if frozen in place by enchantment. When they finally walked away, Alla remained, tilting over the guardrail.

One of the students called out:

'Look, look, a young woman leaning over life's abyss! If I were an artist, I'd certainly paint that pose!'

Another replied:

'Yes, just that – a pose. The pose would be nice if she weren't aware of it. But she's not so naïve in the least. She thinks we're a photographer's cameras. Let's go!'

Ado only heard fragments through the roar of the cascades.

True, he thought, this young woman isn't naïve. Otherwise she wouldn't appreciate the value of poses. But now, I can tell she senses my gaze upon her.

The pair lingered behind the others again.

They climbed down from the bridge, sat on a large granite boulder and watched the cascades from that vantage. In the evening light, the bridge and those upon it cast a strange shadow

over the dark waters further along, scattering golden flashes across the surface that resembled steel mesh. The bundles of olive-green thread folded as they approached jagged underwater barriers and crashed into them, crumpling into sparkling white wine.

Then, they resembled the tangled arms of thousands of drowning souls, reaching upward and screeching wildly in the throes of death. Even the mightiest log would be a mere stalk if tossed in, pulled straight to the bottom by the thousands of hands. It was a giant den of snakes charging with a roar, at the sight of which one would freeze in extraordinary enchantment.

'I could leap in. Oh, how I wish to cast myself into the water!' Alla exclaimed.

'Do you know what would become of you? Five minutes later, all that'd remain downstream in the placid waters would be an arm or a leg, your skull crushed against the base of the cliff.'

'No, I'd never wish for such an ugly death!'

A young boy appeared, peddling postcards, albums, and pocketknives as mementos.

They bought them all.

Then, the pair rose and strolled downstream along the craggy shore until the cascades ended and spread into smooth, placid waters.

It was a peculiar evening. The sun already hung in the crowns of the pines, descending gently through the reddish branches. The shore of the sky glowed. Waves of warmth undulated in the air like lost flocks of invisible caresses and embraces.

To Ado, the young woman bathed in evening light was like a vision one should not touch: even the slightest brush could dispel Alla's ethereality and transform her into an experienced woman conscious of her every movement. And as many times as he clasped the young woman's hand, so many times did he feel his *own* hand more than hers. Like colliding with a *mask*.

Alla, meanwhile, was captivated by the gorgeous moment into which she wished to dissolve and disappear. She felt a vague nervousness before her companion, a sense of guilt that she wished to drown in the boy's enrapturing gaze, in the beautiful evening that draped lust in every direction, and in the cascades' roar, monotonous, calming, lulling.

They stopped next to a burly pine.

'Let's carve something wonderful into the bark to remember, for eternal memory!'

'Let's do it at the same time, across from each other!'

'Let's!'

'Just a single word, the most beautiful of all!'

Their pocketknives peeled rough bark from the trunk before plunging into the sap-soft cambium.

'*Amor*' appeared on one side, 'Alla' on the other.

The young man tingled with his candour. What was this *amor*, though – 'love' or 'I am loved'?

'So, you love love more than you do people?'

'Yes!' the young woman replied.

'And that means you also love the state of being loved?'

'What's wrong with that? It's so grand!'

Her gauze jacket flapping in the wind, she'd run to the edge of the cliff that protruded furthest into the sea, rising amidst a maze of scattered skerries, and now stretched her arms high above her head like flowers reaching for the sun and sang her dearest song: Grieg's *Jeg elsker dig*...²

Half-awake, she could still hear it. She'd stretched her bare arms above her pillow, through the bars of the headboard and into the sunlight.

The light's weight bore down on her eyelids; they were painful to open. Still, it was sweet and sublime to allow her neck, young breasts, and bare arms to bathe in the rays. It gave her sensual pleasure when the edges of her fingers appeared transparent when held up to the light, or when a tickling ray slid unexpectedly through a hole in her blouse's lace.

Alla's rented room was that of an ordinary university student: long, narrow, and sparsely furnished. Perfume bottles, powder boxes, manicure tools, and other toiletries stood on her dressing table. Next to them was a little black box that contained an array of amulets and keepsakes: wilted blossoms, love letters, loose ribbons, scraps of paper, a railway ticket.

An abundance of nudity caught the eye: above the bed hung a reproduction of a Styka painting – a young body, a shyly enticing sparkle in her hetaera-like eyes, outstretched arms suspending a dark purple veil over the bursting beauty of her breasts; similar postcards were tacked here and there to the wall, and a whole pile of them showing body art was scattered across the desk. Alla would have acquired Rodin's *The Kiss* if she were wealthier, but she could only sample it in reproduction for now. The whole room could have been a pagan temple of the flesh, sacred and sublime, and she would dub it – the kissing room.

To lie this way in the sunlight, partaking of rum-filled chocolates, occasionally reading from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, pondering absolutely nothing, simply enjoying her state of being, the chrysanthemum in the vase, the bottle of Japanese-scented perfume, yes, even the coffee that the landlady delivered to her nightstand...

She suddenly heard someone crossing the narrow board outside her window below. Who could it be? The milkman? No, his high-booted footsteps fell as heavily as barrels in a milk cellar. The mailman? Yes, these were the nimble steps that always made her heart pound. She knew them all too well.

The landlady brought to her bedside a bluish envelope inscribed in green ink.

She unfolded a long, long letter. It contained everything – from sentimentalism to heroic feats in a trench, bullets whining above like mosquitoes, and shrapnel screeching a Judgement Day cacophony. That rosy-cheeked boy crouching in a potato furrow, squirming in the mud like a fly on flypaper! And now, he was returning from all of that on leave. Oh, tomorrow, already! Tomorrow, here!

Jangling again. Then, a knock on the door.

When Ado approached to greet the young woman, she extended five long, pretty fingers from under the blanket. Then, her dressing as always: Ado's back was turned towards the bed, and he was handed a book.

It was Balmont's collection of poetry.

The young man read several aloud while Alla attended to her toilet. Finally, he paused at a poem titled 'The Mermaid'.³

'Here's one of the finest in the collection. Listen!'

'And you enjoy that!' The boy could sense the young woman's eyes widen behind him.

'Yes, it's a nice poem! And the mermaid herself is very interesting, too!'

'Interesting, interesting! Well, there's a word I'd never have imagined to hear you say! Could there be any other word that's so... Truly, I'd never have expected it from you!'

At first, Ado couldn't understand why the word irritated the young woman so. Then, he realized. Her outspokenness discomfited him.

This tall, slender, dark-eyed young man named Ado penetrated the deepest corners of Alla's heart, occasionally making her truly afraid. Her eyes were peculiar: sometimes a ghastly, enticing, daemonic fire burned within them; other times, they brimmed with an intolerant scorn, injurious, which she wished to banish with all her persuasive feminine means. When she spotted him on the street, an enervating pulse sometimes struck her knees and her gait, her every movement, became disjointed. Not once had Alla walked past the house where Ado lived: she was even aware that the neighbouring apartment was occupied by a young woman who took Latin lessons from a certain university student, for otherwise they wouldn't be seated across from each other at the table at a certain hour, and what other lessons could a young woman be taking from a young man? When they bumped into each other at the theatre or a social gathering, Alla would avoid meeting the young man's gaze. She didn't even look up in conversation, feeling strangely shy and simultaneously the effect that modesty and submission exerted. But then, she would suddenly

shake off every trace of submissiveness, extend her proud, pliant body defiantly, disparagingly, lean haughtily against the back of the sofa, and, narrowing her eyes sarcastically, laugh a spasmodic laugh, sprayed like hail against tin. Occasionally, just as now, she would seize upon a casually uttered word, reevaluate it, and fling it back with taunts and jeers, using it to confuse, as if in revenge.

But when Alla had dressed and Ado turned around, the mood was unlike what it was with his back turned. The young woman treated him to everything within reach, handing him new bottles of perfume and flowers in a vase to sniff, showing him new postcards and the edge of the fresh letter written in green ink.

Yes, now she could look him in the eyes without feeling afraid.

They had a long and lively chat about nothing of consequence, competing with the chirping of sparrows beneath the eaves that came through the open window.

Periodically, growing absentminded and leaping from one topic to another, the young woman would rise and rummage in a drawer or sift through postcards and books.

Then, her movement would freeze into a stance suspended in aspic, as if to allow him to sample the graceful, incidentally adopted poses.

The young woman would trail off at the windowsill, next to the chest, above a flower vase. Searching, searching for something on the bookshelf and then remain sitting there. Even sticking a finger into her mouth.

Perceiving this artistic trait, the young woman's consciousness of the beauty of a gesture, Ado grew excited, for feigning naïveté (and that is what those assumed poses and movements were) was the most dangerous game.

Alla instinctively sensed Ado's nearly imperceptible flicker of emotions, too, and their whole interaction became a tightrope dance: one tiny misstep, a next-to-indecipherably conveyed truth, frank, undisguised, unacted, and everything would collapse.

They often stalked each other like predators; often, a verbal game would begin, and the words could pierce perilously to the core like hot water on a tooth's delicate nerve ending. But then it would all recede and turn as innocent and mundane as walking, eating, sitting.

They soon went out to wander the city's more attractive sites, galleries, and museums together, just as they'd often done. Ado believed they were connected by an appreciation for art: they felt much more intimate when delighted by a violinist or a pianist at a concert.

Even later discussions of the concert they'd attended lifted their good spirits. Both enjoyed Nordic music above all, especially Grieg, Sibelius.

They often spoke of modern dance, which both believed was the finest form of art.

'Oh, I could lose my mind from the elation dance gives me. Duncan, Preobrazhenskaya, Pavlova... Ah, and take the latter! How she controls herself, rises into the air, leaving only the teensiest tip of toenail on the ground, how she sweeps you along, captivates, passes through the heart, through the soul! Oh, it cannot be put into words!'

'When did you see them?'

'Well, I haven't seen any of them personally, of course.' Alla replied. 'But I've read about them in newspapers. And what was written there was something delightful, immediately intoxicating.'

Alla was fascinated by the abstract concept of art, by its point and meaning. What's more, her understanding developed whenever the art explored a human subject, or when the subject, especially their erotic side, was in the art's foreground.

To her, life, beauty, and art were, in fact, the three faces of eroticism.

Women knew no art but erotic art, and even in that, appreciated only the erotic – Ado's presumption became a conviction when they took a stroll through the Hermitage.

First, they stopped before the sculpture of Cupid and Psyche.

'Ah, what fine bodily contours! Like living statues!'

Alla seemed to like the sculpture almost without reservation. They stood before the stonemasonry for several minutes while she inspected the bodies' individual proportions, finding one to have legs that were too thick and the other too short in turn.

There was little in the painting galleries that could compare. Cranach's madonnas lacked eyelashes. And oh, how she adored long, dark eyelashes that cast shadows over the face! No, Cranach didn't know how to paint! Furthermore, those excessively long fingers were rather unnatural.

And these? What kind of blubberballs were they? Rubens's women. And this was meant to be beauty? Even attractive to some? Perhaps even to Ado? Just look at how the women's fingernails widened at the tip; slim fingernails are much more appealing.

Rembrandt's *Danaë*. What a dreadful woman! What thighs! Like tree trunks. That's not attractive, is it?

After working their way through several rooms, they finally came to the Spanish gallery where they wearily sat down on a red sofa. Clumps of visitors stood before the paintings, observing them. It was fascinating to pay attention to their faces, to their expressions of artistic reception. Alla mainly scrutinized the women's clothing, their hairstyles, the fashion of their dresses and shoes, praising the proportions of some bodies and criticizing those of others.

There was truly a *single* criterion, Ado realized, egotistical, by which Alla evaluated persons and artwork, originating from the era of manicures, pedicures, and fashion magazines. He now recalled that even at concerts, Alla enjoyed the violinist himself more than the piece he performed. And she only liked the performance insofar as it lulled her into a state of sweet lustfulness, into a fancy of romance.

Wait, wait, Ado thought, for all that, I do not wish to consider your figure – tall, slender, winding – as an ideal! Oh, I am a hundred times more attracted to healthy women whose trunk-like legs are prepared to carry the sins of the whole world to the gates of hell and whose Rubens-like wrists can lift you, the thin women, ten times, you women with the weight of three *poods*!⁴ Is my ideal perhaps the smiling, ruddy woman with cheeks so chubby they narrow her eyes, that mounded womb from which dozens of thickset clans can sprout, or those locks of hair that fall heavily like ripe fruit? And may her feet be as big as burdock leaves! And why shouldn't she have extremely long fingers, as slender as wax candles? And wide fingernails at their tips, like little lights?

Ado's daemon approached then, too, as timid as a thief and as ironic as Mephisto:

'Look at the fanatic being stabbed in the chest with a bayonet, Alla. I wonder how long his pants are beneath that long coat? It'd be ghastly if he weren't wearing any. The Russian priests are wearing knee-high boots, at least... And that lantern on the ground. It can only be burning fat, naturally, as I suppose they didn't have petroleum back then. I enjoy electrical lights the best, to tell the truth...'

The grey-clothed mummy-servant was already approaching with his little bell, informing them it was time to leave. Time once again to descend the long staircase between two shiny walls painted a frozen vanilla sauce with stripes of pink cream.

As they strolled along the bank of the Neva, Alla brought up the boy on the battlefield anew. But Ado showed no interest. Who knows, however – there could come a day when her walking companion's words swell and notes of jealousy begin to strum the young man's nerves.

There was a tingling in Alla's heart, but she decided then and there: Ado must never meet the officer, nor even find out about his visit.

'I'll be unable to meet you tomorrow and in the coming days,' Alla sighed.

'Why? Are you travelling? Preparing for exams?'

'Yes, I must go away. I received a letter this morning saying my mother is ill.'

Another day, after the lieutenant had rested in Alla's bed from his travels, the couple went out for a stroll.

This rosy-cheeked officer has somehow become a drowsy being who treats me as if he doesn't know me, Alla thought.

The young man used to be tall and straight-backed. His soft shadow of a moustache tickled titillatingly when they kissed, but now, there was a stiff haughtiness in his expression, infatuating at first but turning detestable over time.

It was like a spouse's accustomed sweetness, sensing by their side someone who fulfils all their wishes and desires, no matter what they might be.

And the abject impassiveness with which he rose from bed, stood before the mirror, and yawned! As if Alla were a lifeless item of furniture.

First of all, the young man should find his own apartment. She couldn't allow him to spend the night in hers as she had before, because of exams and so forth.

The lieutenant yielded to that demand casually as well, showing no offense to such treatment.

This infuriated Alla further. She steered the conversation to the Imatra excursion, embellishing every detail of her relationship with Ado, praising his keen understanding, his refined manners, and going so far as to gush about his taste, his dark eyes.

Gradually, the lieutenant started to show an interest in the topic, inquiring about various details. Finally, finally, Alla thought in delight.

She sang endless praises of the student's qualities, ones that people who studied at university had and officers lacked.

It was so delightful to eulogize one man before one and the other before the other, trying to stoke jealousy between them.

While on a stroll with the officer later, Alla suddenly recognized Ado's figure approaching on the opposite side of the avenue. Yes, that was him: grey coat and grey hat.

A searing current coursed through her body. She felt the lieutenant squeeze her wrist. Yes, best to stop and stand before a display window; he wouldn't recognize her so easily from behind.

Fortunately, it was a flower shop.

'Be a doll, go inside and fetch me a red rose. But go down into the cellar, that's where they keep the prettiest. I'll wait here.'

Alla remained at the window when the officer entered the shop.

Ado had already crossed the street.

'You're here, I see. You haven't departed yet?'

'I meant to, but then I received another letter telling me my mother's condition has improved.'

Alla peered through the window pane. The shop was crowded, things could still play out well. But every moment was precious.

'You must excuse me, however. I'm in a hurry. I'll stop by your place tomorrow; we'll have a longer chat.'

'Which way are you headed? Ah, that way. No worry, I'm going in that direction, too.'

It was as if Alla were treading hot coals.

'Fine. But if you wish to be a good boy, then go into this flower shop first and buy me a red, red rose. It'd be a terrible shame if someone else were buying the prettiest right now. But go down into the cellar. There's a very, very large selection there.'

Aha, now was the time to disappear. Both were in the cellar.

She hurried onto a tram without looking back, just managing to grab onto the handrail.

Ado spent an entire day waiting for the young woman to visit. She entered his apartment when dusk was already falling.

'First, forgive me for not being outside the flower shop when you returned.'

'No, you must forgive me. I knew that you were in a hurry but there were very many customers in the cellar, and an officer and I nearly came to fisticuffs over a red rose as it was the very last big, burgundy flower left. His moustache was nothing but peach fuzz!'

'Hahaha. And what became of the rose?'

'I gave up in the end. Who knows what coquette's breast it might adorn now!'

The young woman pulled off her black leather gloves to reveal long, white fingers with sparkling, well-manicured nails, and extended them in greeting.

'Then even more so. I promised to explain something to you at greater length. But now, it turns out that was a mere expression.'

'Everything with you is purely an expression. But I do have something to explain to you in turn. I'll visit tomorrow to tell you.'

Ado himself had no idea what it might be. Still, that was how he felt.

'Ah, I believe I can guess!'

'What on earth could you guess? No, no, it's something entirely different!'

'Different? Does that mean it's something unpleasant? Serious? Ha, ha, ha! Me and serious? That'd be quite the jest. But who else is mixed up in it?'

How to reply to that? Ah, let it unfold! Allow a legend to sprout!

'A third!'

He knows now, he knows, Alla thought in alarm.

'And no more? Then it isn't what I think.'

'There are four, though there could well be more. Yet, that's neither here nor there. Tomorrow, I will reveal something strange and unexpected.'

'What could it possibly be? I truly don't know. Oh, but wait. Could it really? And now! Well, that would be quite the shock. My jaw would certainly drop. It'd be quite the joke; no, the tragicomedy. I might laugh myself to death.'

'And you truly believe that?'

'What, what? You can't even guess. What, tell me!'

'I know what you think.'

'It'd be bizarre if you were to know!'

'I'd bet I do. We're thinking the exact same thing.'

The wordplay, mutually provocative, continues along its path.

'I'd bet you're thinking the very same thing that I am thinking right now. Would you like me to say it?'

'Do!'

'But think for a moment. It'd be highly embarrassing for you if I were to speak it now.'

'Yes, you're right. Best not to, then.'

'Well, there you have it. There's no doubt.'

'If you genuinely plan to tell me tomorrow, then I don't know what I'll do. I'd simply laugh you out of the apartment!'

'And you are so bold as to think of me that way!'

The latter was spoken in anger. Alla poured a little comfort into the exchange.

'Strange, isn't it, that you can never know what a person is thinking. I certainly wouldn't know what to do if the serious question that you wish to discuss tomorrow is the same as mine. But you do not know what I am thinking. Right now, you might be thinking and speaking of something else, but tomorrow, you'll say exactly what I am thinking right now.'

'No, rest assured that the thought is identical. Everything you've just said only bolstered my conviction. Only one thing amazes me: how you could have come to such a belief. Have I given you any cause?'

'I don't know, but I thought... Regarding some circumstances... Sometimes...'

As they bid farewell:

'I'll await you tomorrow. You'll speak of the matter then? With me? Could it be so serious and tragic that we don't even extend a hand to each other afterward?'

It was said jokingly, as she was holding out her hand in farewell at the doorstep.

'It's entirely possible that we no longer will. Who knows what else might come', Ado said slowly as the young woman descended the stairs.

He locked the door, returned to his room, and lit an unfiltered cigarette. Then, he stopped in the middle of the space and burst out laughing.

Tomorrow, he would don a long coat, buy a bouquet of white roses from the same flower shop, go there, kneel before that holy virgin, declaim words of romance from the Sacred Heart, and then ask for the goddess's hand to walk their eternal journey through this world's vale of woe.

But then, suddenly:

You! You! You might believe, might dare to think for an instant, might perceive... You, who are full of lies... Is your opinion of yourself so great that you think you wear no mask? I despise you! That's what I came to tell you! I cannot stand you; I abhor you! Do you hear me? I hate your curly Jewish hair, your owl-like face with its stubby little nose like the knob on a teapot, your ugly mouth and stunted chin! I hate your tall, supple body! Your tiny brain, which is as empty and as helpless as a bit of mollusc! I hate your dresses, which wish to be short and youthful but are baggy, unattractive, and old when worn by you! I hate your voice when you drawl the word at the end of a sentence and flirt by way of it! Your taste in art, your aestheticism dictated by pathetic erotic instinct! How you pose naïveté, the shrewdness that you pointlessly veil in youth and ineptitude!

I even hate the powder that you sometimes apply down along your nose! I hate your room, cramped and empty, bookless and soulless! I hate your pose on the armchair, on the sofa, on the bed when you fold your long legs beneath you and act as if you're a little girl! I hate your little feet in your black patent shoes and your beautiful ink-stained fingers! I hate your laugh and your smile, your elation and enthrallment with all that is trivial, which I do not believe in the slightest. I hate your impertinent self-conceit and the childishness that ages you!

I hate you from head to heels!

That's what he declares.

But what would the young woman do? That comedian of life?

Amen, she would say at the conclusion of his tirade, and then start laughing loudly: *bis, bis*, she'd cry through her applause.

Alla found her lieutenant waiting when she arrived home.

She received him coldly, indifferently, though the officer paid it no mind. This irritated Alla even further: ah, so this friendship has corroded so deeply that he has a right to act familiar!

Pouring a mug of hot water from the big samovar, Alla exclaimed:

'You know, I get the impression that you didn't see a single woman out there in the war. You've been a very good boy, sitting alone in a trench and only dreaming of me...'

'What makes you think that?'

'No, no. It could also be that I've grown older and wiser, oh, so wise, and that's the reason it seems that way.'

'Seems what way?'

'That you're foolish! No, don't be upset. But really, spending a couple of years without concerts, without books, without art galleries... It will have an effect. Won't it? You can turn into a proper bear cub out there after a while.'

The lieutenant felt his face redden. But the young woman carried on in the same tone:

'I feel like I've almost grown taller than you. Oh, how fascinated I am with, for instance, philosophy! But that doesn't interest you, does it? I, however? I sometimes sit in my armchair, legs drawn beneath me like a little categorical imperative, reading and thinking, thinking and reading. And suddenly, a whole new world reveals itself to me, totally new, beautiful, and unprecedented!'

I adore the philosophy book I'm reading as much as rum chocolates; I even slide it beneath my pillow at night. There's so much I'd like to discuss with you, much about everything, the *Monadology*⁵, for example, but you wouldn't understand.'

'Enough with your "gonads" logic. A smart woman is truly disgusting. Women should be foolish and pretty. That's all. And to tell you the truth, life on the front isn't at all as bleak as you think. I just don't blather as much in my letters as you do when you write about your refined young men. And if you really want to know the truth, then I'll tell you: a Polish woman and her passion can outdo the most philosophical *betaira* any day.'

'If you think I want to try to hold you down here somehow, then you're mistaken. You can go do cartwheels with your Polish women if you want, for all I care!'

They antagonized each other equally. The mood could not be repaired, at least not for that day.

After Alla bid farewell to him who was once her closest friend, she was overcome by grief and a sense of abandonment. Where had all the earlier days gone, so calm, carefree, happy, and without doubts or insults!

And what was the point of it all?

What compelled Alla to act so carelessly? Would the boy perhaps leave and never return?

The following morning's prelude was likewise in a minor key. Alla had been already lurking around the tram stop near her building for half an hour, waiting nervously for Ado. What would he say? Perhaps their relationship would end as well? Perhaps the very opposite would occur?

She paced back and forth in quick steps, aimless and agitated, a seriousness in her eyes.

Yet as a fair omen, Ado appeared to smile casually. It still didn't help to unravel the knot of solemnity.

So, both were silent.

They were almost timid of each other when they entered Alla's apartment, but then adopted a formal air as if each had arrived on an official visit.

'Please be so kind as to take a seat!'

'Thank you!'

And both had a creeping feeling like they didn't know where to place themselves.

Ado then spotted a dark red rose in a vase on the bookshelf, identical to the one he'd intended to buy the previous day. And just like that, it all became clear. He could barely contain himself.

'Ah-ha! *Now* I figured it out!'

Alla slightly pale and leaned back in the chair, staring intensely and unblinkingly at a point ahead while Ado tried to read anything from her expression.

Having nearly not slept a wink, Alla was more pallid than usual. A cascade of white powder stood out too starkly on her face, drawn along her little capricious nose.

The new manner in which Ado now observed the young woman was strange. She, serious? She, sad? She as herself for once, not only a mask? Not playful, emotional, optimistic?

The timid eyes were still focused on a single point; the long, playful fingers were suddenly still and sombre.

She was like a flower fallen from a vase. Helpless.

Even a smile would have seemed like a frown at that moment.

She seized the pocketknife from the table, the blade they bought in Imatra, and began toying with it. Then, she jabbed its tip into the skin of her hand.

She presses it a quarter inch into the web between her thumb and index finger, not blinking an eye or furrowing a brow. Immediately, she sucks away the blood that seeps from the white skin. And then, she begins peeling the skin away from the edges of the wound, unyielding like willow bark before spring.

As she sat there alone, legs drawn beneath her on the chair, holding the knife, staring intently at the skin she was flaying, she reminded Ado of a miserable derelict, a vagrant without a harbour, one whose emotions flutter in the air as butterflies, failing to find anyone or anything.

Her head sank even lower, and Ado suddenly noticed a glassy bead drop onto the wound – round, large, and transparent.

‘You’ll get blood poisoning that way, my young lady!’

‘So what! It’ll be a lasting memory either way.’

Ado glanced at the black drawer in the dresser: there were memories less permanent than the wound between her thumb and index finger, in any case.

‘But why a lasting memory? What separation are you planning?’

‘You are the one planning it, not I. I can’t imagine what you were thinking yesterday. It can’t be anything else, I suspect. And now...’

Now, I might finally get a little closer to her heart, Ado thought.

‘It could end up being the very opposite, as I see it...’

‘The opposite? Hahaha!’

Alla was suddenly in high spirits. She wrapped a handkerchief around the wound, lifted her damp eyes, and continued laughing as if to find a cause for the dampness in laughter. Irony accompanied the laughing:

‘I *did* tell you yesterday that I’d laugh you out of the room. You didn’t believe me. Oh, if only my boyfriend were here right now, that zealous young officer. He’d challenge you to a duel at once. My boyfriend says he once shot a rooster in a farmyard from a verst⁶ away. I would be your second. I would pity you and require that you both aim from a distance of no less than two versts, as otherwise you’d end up killing each other, and then who would buy me roses from the flower shop? Hahaha! Oh, come now, don’t get so serious again. No, no, I will shoot myself, you can count on that. Or I’ll take poison, as I possess more than enough of that.’

It was spoken so softly and naïvely, as if uttered playfully by a child who ultimately wishes it to be true.

No, there was nothing Ado could say to counter the irony. Even the acerbic part of yesterday’s planned admission would have been bland in this situation. No matter how dearly he wished to retaliate, anything would have been weak. It was impossible for him to strain hard enough to tear away Alla’s mask. At last, he exclaimed:

‘Laugh all you want! Laughter is certainly fine armour. But do you know what I came to tell you? First, that I no longer believe a single word you say. You’re simply pitiful when you pose your childishness before me, you worldly, much experienced, ugly woman! That’s what I came to tell you, and furthermore, that you can now send your boyfriend to every flower shop without fault!’

He rose, dressed, lifted his hat, and left.

Not a single word more.

So now, they were both gone. Both right hand and left were empty. But the Chinese chain⁷ weaves on: the officer would grab the hand of a Polish manor lord’s daughter to waltz, and the university student would seize the arm of a Ukrainian. And then another Polish girl would join the dance, and the Ukrainian would float with a third. And so on and so forth. Forever.

Alla felt alone amidst that dance hall. She had released both hands and exited the circle.

Should she begin looking for new connections? No, no. The Russian student she’d met on the train was too melancholy and worried about mundane things. The group of Estonian students on their excursion was boring. And none of them understood life in the way that Alla wished.

They all scrape away at the soul. Just like these two boys. One sears with a red-hot poker. And the other sears. And sears them both. And then each goes off to his separate corner, heart aching, mind dour. And life is suddenly empty.

Again, the future materialized before her. You study and study and then, a bundle of notebooks beneath your arm, face creased, body frozen, you go and teach children. And you are so ugly, so ugly.

What had Ado said? Ugly? Ugly!

She stepped before the mirror and dove into it.

Messy, frizzy locks curling around her forehead without sheen. Like a mane, stiff and thick. She could make out tiny wrinkles around her reddish, unslept eyes. Three quite discernible dashes crossing her forehead beneath the powder. She noticed something similar on her neck, even more horrid.

She was reminded of the image of Dorian Gray's face. Oh, if only this mirror were able to suck away age and the ugly features that compound with each day, allowing you to live ever young, merry, lighthearted! Yes, lighthearted!

Yet now, you are abandoned, cast into a corner. Like a broken, useless toy. And what's more, you'll soon lose the right to feel young anymore because you'll be an adult, you must be polite, mustn't laugh as much as you'd like, mustn't draw your legs beneath you or arc your back like the Greek dancers on vases...

Wouldn't death, a beautiful death, be far lovelier right now than dragging on an ugly life?

Gently, she opened the small chest of keepsakes on her dresser. It held dried flowers, brief letters bound to memories, a whole diary of the past...

And it held a tiny bottle, always with her, filled with a strange medicine that would lull you to sleep.

But no! She wouldn't relinquish her life so alone, without some wonderful movement, without a grand gesture.

To die proudly, to even perform death – that was a task worth living for!

She rose at once and went out to the street.

The gesture, the gesture!

The audience was greatly impeding: there were too many people. It crowded around display windows, pushed against her, and jostled her from the sidewalk to where coachmen threatened her in turn.

She moved purposefully through the mass, hands thrust into coat pockets, lips compressed tightly like someone with a certain goal. She even felt a certain right to shove others from her way without apology.

For she was the one carrying a dreadful idea inside of her like an explosive. If they were to know it, if they were to know, then they'd seize her. But an idea cannot be seized. No one could read it on her face.

She finally came to St. Isaac's Cathedral.

The higher she ascended along the wide, uneven, cold stairs, the more her faith in her own strength diminished and was replaced by another will, another desire, vague and timid at first, a longing to undergo in her imagination the moment at which she would put substance, even if merely evident, into the gesture of throwing herself down from above.

She was weary by the time she reached the first roof. The surrounding tin landscape had a hallucinatory affect. Still, she paid little attention to her environment, focusing only on the destination. She crossed a narrow board over the tin roofing, entered a small doorway, and climbed even tighter steps.

The dome's vaulting intersected in the dusty gloam beneath the giant roof.

One more little set of vertical steps, basically a ladder, and out through the hatch that opens onto a narrow walkway circling the dome, bordered by iron grating.

Lightheadedness, heart pounding from the climb. Thoughts frozen. Body transformed into a lifeless object no longer able to feel anything.

A northern wind howled around the tower, forcing the young woman to hold her hat against her head. She then removed it and held it.

Alla was totally alone, her chaperone having sheltered below out of the wind.

A peculiar intoxication washed over her, the lustful taste that comes before throwing oneself down. There is probably nothing sweeter than the first blinks when you're hurtling through the air, still conscious.

She peered over the edge of the grating. The tower's golden cupola bulged everywhere, as if expectant. Long lines ran down the giant, shining surface and disappeared somewhere below.

Alla pried at the cast iron bars, but they didn't even flex beneath her delicate fingers. How was she to throw herself down, then? Vault over it? What a silly thing that would be – climbing over a chest-high fence to soar in somersaults. Her dress might even get caught somewhere.

She was devastatingly disappointed. All that time, she'd imagined a lofty, beautiful death from the tower above: standing on the edge of the hatch, the city beneath her, and then the slightest leap, like that of a swimmer from a diving board. You would fly through the air and the people below would stop and stare, mouths agape. And when you finally made it down, all you'd leave on the hard, coarse ground was a bloody mass, the elements of which no one could distinguish.

But now, you face a fence and the dome is wider than it seems: if you were to leap, then you'd land right here on the slope, along which you'd slide like a sledge down a hill, only to collide into the first tin roof. And the wind is blowing so hard that who knows – maybe it'll just pin you to the dome like a splinter.

And yet, it was so grand to feel oneself above the rest, above the city, above life and death. Down below, elves drove tiny horses, matchboxes crawled along tram tracks, people scurried along like ants, each towards their own nest, along the bandage of a street, which looked like the scabrous skin on the covers of a book.

And more than ever before, she was gripped by a desire to return, light-footed, to that beautiful, motley earth, to the stage, to the fertile ground to become a sacred weed, deep-rooted; one that no hand could ever pluck.

‘Püha umbrohi’⁸

Johannes Semper

Seisatas kesk tuba. Kuulatas.

Läbi avat akna kuulis kose ühetoonilist kohinat, kui kauge oreli sumbutet basse, mille sekka teisest toast mängiti klaaside klirina pizzicatot ja naeru pudenevaid kadentse.

Siis ligines väikeste sammudega suurele peeglille ja nägi:

Süsimustile juuksile oli heidet apelsiinkollane loor, mille varjust silmad, suured ja naiivsed, paistid argadena. Lilla oleks pidanud see loor olema, mille ta kõrgelle tõstaks sirutet käsivarsil üle oma pää ja leeves tuules hõljutaks kaasa tantsusammudelle.

Aimas omas kujus olevat midagi Zuloaga hispaanlannadest, keda oli näinud hiljutisel kunstinäitusel.

Lasi käed üle puusade kumeruse ja käanis end profiili. Vähekesi tõmp nina hajutas kujutluse hispaanlannast. See ei meeldinud talle, kuigi seda ebameeldivust mahendid mustad juustehapsed, mis põsilt rõngastetult alla langesid kaela valguseni.

Siis asus aga peeglille õige ligidalle, et vaadata oma kahvatuid põhjamaalase silmi, kergelt bistreerit, pikkade ripsendega tumedate kulmukaarte all.

Vaatles kaua oma silmi, süvenedes neisse, kuni vähekesi hirm hakkas reaalsuse ees, mis peeglis tarretas.

Siis kuulis jälle kõrvaltoast heledaid naere, mis teda närveldid.

Kuulis pooljoobnud eladalaskeid.

Istus toolile, pani käed rüppe ja tundis end asjaks, mis kõrvale pand.

Miks ta oli selle väljasõitkonna hulka kutsut, kellest ainult paari inimest tundis? Mis läheb talle Imatra korda, kui ükski üliõpilasist tähele ei pannud, et ta nende hulgast kõrvaltuppa kadus?

Vaatas välja Soome loodusse. Siin olid Jaapani pintsliga visat kollakasrohelist täpid kevadet mustroheliste männalatvade vahele, taamal sinetid üksikud metsatukad. Murul mängisid lapsed. Vaikne, tuuletu maastik melanhoolitas aina, loiutas.

Kui parajasti aknalauale ligines, et kannikesi nuusuta, mis sinna madalasse vaasi olid korjat, avanes uks.

Ado seisatas vähe, vaadates üllatanult neidu akna all. Siis nagu eemalle peletanud silmist väikse virvenduse, tõmbas ukse kinni ja astus ligemalle.

„Preili unistab?“

„Miks te mind üleüldse ligi kutsusite? Ma olen tõesti siin liigne. Te joote, lõbustate, aga kus ma kõlban teie seltskonda?“

Üliõpilane pani konjaki klaasi lauale, tõi tooli ja istus neiu ligidalle, hakates teda usutlema väljasõidu väärtuses.

Varsti toodi ka teisest toast vein, kuna säälolejad varsti välja läksid, püsimata olla kaua kinnises ruumis, kui väljas kevade. Pudeneti toast: noormehed hallid ja kirjud, kepistet ning kaabustet, neid valged ja kollased – tillukesed kanapojad murduvast munakoorest.

Oh seda kevade ja veinide doppelkümme! Paneb vere põksuma ning silmad hergama. Metsad rõkkavad vastu vallatuse lahti päästet kuljustest.

Mis sellest, et mõni üliõpilane, tüse ja soliid, kuidagi ei oska ühte sulada männatüvedest dekoratsiooniga, viisakuse olles riietesse imbunud: iga puu ning põõsas on talle seltskonna daam kohvilauas, kes punastab kui küünarnukid enesest kaugeile sirutad.

Mis sellest, kui mõni on kaasa toonud ära raamatet liigutused? Selle eest on teised vilkamad ja nobedamad jooksmas ning kilkamas, nii et leppade vastrohetanud raad vastu nägu löövad.

Ja lõpuks ei tunne ükski end ülearuseks selles maastikus. Tuntakse rõõmu hõljuvaist liblikuist, valgeist, kollasist, pruunidest, kellele kelmilt järele jookstakse, konnadest pedajakoore

värvi, kes loiuult üle lehte liiguvad. Kulus libisevad kuulmatult pikad sisalikud. Sitikad on alles läikivais, nagu nõelalt tulnud kostüümides. Kuskilt niisutakse sind üle koldnoka rõõmsa vilega.

Üliõpilaskond on laiali hargunud: muist istub mäe otsas, muist nõlva all, muist on jõe kaldal, vahtides ühtesoodu kaasameelitavasse kärestikku.

Allat Adot on ikka veel toas, keerdunud seda võrd vestlus- ja koketeerimislõngusse, et ei teatagi teistest midagi. Ei tahetagi teada, sest õigupoolest on ülejäänud seltskond asjata koormaks ligi tulnud.

„Meie kahe terviseks!“

Ja klaasid annavad kokku lüües heleda, naerma paneva heli. Alla huuled punetavad kui värsked reig. Aga noormees maitseb neid ainult ilutsedes. Alla pigistab vahel silmad, öeldes joobunud olevat kõigest, kõigest. Kuid silmi lahti tehes jätab ta laud koomalle. Nende vahelt on kadunud selleks korraks põhjamaa kahvatus: sääl särab nüüd must sula metall.

Aga Adot piinab irooniahelk, mis ülestõstet laugudest tulnud. Neid naerab vahetpidamata väikest metallheledat naeru, siis suitsetabki vahel, hoobeldes, et ta nüüd ülikoolis olles korraga tunneb end suuremaks. Oo, läbi ninagi võib ta suitsu lasta. Oi, kui targaks ta veel kord tahab saada, palju targemaks kui seda Ado praegu on. Nüüd on ta veel rumal ja naiivne, kuigi täiskasvanud. Mõeldagu, juba 19-aastane neid, mitte enam mõni kooliplika. Aga hirm tuleb vanuse eest!

Kui vaatab peegli, otsib kõige päält, kas silmi alla veel pole esimesed kanavarbad tulnud. Masseerib nägu, et kortsud ei ilmuks. Ühel päeval öelnud ta naissõber, et vanust võida kõige paremini kaelajoonist tunda. Mõeldagu, kaelajoonist, nii kui hobuseid hambust! Selle eest ei olnud ta aga sugugi hoolitsenud. Vaadaku Ado, kui tal selged silmad, kas ta näeb mõne vaokese ta kaelal.

Kui poiss asub seda vaatama, tõmmatakse pää järsku taha poole, ja silmisse ilmub jälle endine hoiatav iroonia. Siis veel see naer, teravpisteline, mustade kiharate varjust.

Järsku tõsinedes:

„Aga nüüd kujutage mind ette nelja aasta pärast! Oi, kui hirmus: lähen mööda uulitsaid, heftikimp kaenlas. Õpetan lapsi. Haha, koolipreili! Mina? Mis jooned siis küll näkku ilmuvad! Panen ninale vahest näpitsadki musta nõõri otsas, ja astun niiske, külmetanud, nurgelise näoga klassituppa. Teate, koolipreilid näivad mulle kõik olevat kandilise näoga, niisked ja imelikult külma nahaga, nagu ära kellerdunud. Mu mustad juuksed sasinevad veel enam ja ma olen siis täiesti öökull, nagu mu poiss mulle juba nüüd ütleb. Kas ma olen öökulli nägu, öelge? Ja veel nelja aasta pärast! Hirmujudinad jooksevad üle keha. Kuulete, vahel ööseti näen und, kuidas ma olen päris öökull, inetu, kole, kisa tegev, nagu laps keda näpistakse. See inetus ajab mind üles ja ma vaatan siis hirmunult peegli. Magada ei saa ma siis enam.“

Mitu korda oli mainit mingisugusest poisist. Kes see küll on, huvitas Adot.

Ah, see olla üks väga naljakas, piimavalge, rõõsk poiss, kes alati pikki kirju armastab saata roheline tindiga. Nüüd olla ta sõjas. Allat kutsuda ta ka sõtta: visaku ta mõte maha ülikooli lõpeta, õppimine teha ainult inetuks, ja tulgu parem halastajaks õeks. Kord olnudki mõte nii teha, kuid õeks ehtides leidnud, et ülikond sugugi ei sobi, iseäranis ta sasis juuksed ei olla kuidagi siledalt pääsinud valge päärati all. Aga kuidas oleks siis öde sasis juustega?! Nii jätnud ta selle mõtte katki.

Adole jäi aga see poisi lugu, kes roheline tindiga kirjutab, kaunis tumedaks, kuigi neiu avameelsus suurenes, mida kauem nad istusid ning jõid.

Viimaks tõusid nad ja läksid välja.

Päike kallas kollast veini sinisest kristallklaasist ning jootis sellega kevadist loodust. Iharuses oli maaüsk end lahti löönud ning rohelised puud enesest püsti ajanud.

Vuoksa keerutas vahuseid vesi üle kivide, kaljutükkide ning läbi pedastikkude, kuni ta oma käsivarre ümber kaljumaa tugeva rinna mässis lõõtsuvas kallistuses – Vallinkoseks.

Vallatelles, mängides ja teine teist taga ajades oli üliõpilane oma neiega mäelt siia alla jõudnud, kus nad mõlemad järsku selle müriseva jõu ees said tõsiseks, kaineks ning vaikivaks.

Kõik kees siin, mässas ja vahutas. Suured mustad siidieied argusid nägemata koonlast ja mässisid end hiiglamassideks, mis enne käänakut tehes järsku vastu kaljusid ja kive pörkasid,

päikses üles löid vikerkaaritava vahusamba ja siis uuesti eespool kokku rullusid keevate valgete pisaratena, et sama mängu korrata.

Rääkimine oli siin kui sosin kumedast koopast.

Ado vaatas vahu vikerkaari ja nägi säääl rohelisi vööte. Talle näis koguni, et need mitte pisarate vastuhelgid ei olnud, vaid üks pidev roheline niit, tulev ülevalt Imatra poolt ja valgub edasi. . . See oli kui roheline tint selle naljaka poisi . . .

Oli see siis kõik õige, mis säääl üleval, veini klaaside juures oli välja lobiset: et see poiss ja Alla terve mineva ja ülemineva suve koos maal veetnud, päevad ööd läbi kuskil metsis, kuskil heinaküünides, heinasaadudes? Et see poiss oli ilus, tugev ja julge? Et ei ole midagi kaunimat, kui anduda kuskil oja ligidal, kus äsja supeid, kehad alles niisked karastavast veest? Et pärast siis päikse paistel küpseda ja loiduda nagu väiksed salamandrid? Oli see kõik õige?

Milline kahepoolsus, mõtles Ado: ühel pool äärmine naiivsus, lapsikus, süütus ja teisel pool kogemusrikkus ja elutarkus? Kumb on poos ja kumb tõde? Või on see midagi Daphnis ja Chloe laadilist?

Oli juba õhtu tulemas, kui väljasõitkond jõudis Imatra sillale.

Hoolimata sellest, et all kaljurankade voodis kosk viskles ja mürises, keerutes tõrvmusti lonte vastu veealuseid kive valgeks vahujahuks, mis asjata vastu voolu tahtsid tõusta, pikenid sillal olijate varjud väga selgelt ja liikumata üle vee, eksitamata selle mässulisest rabelemisest. Põimlevaist, peksvaist voogudest tuli jahedat õhku.

Vaadeti kaua nagu paigale manatult seda pilti. Kui aga teised ära läksid, jäi Alla veel sinna, kumardes üle käsipuu.

Üks üliõpilastest hüüdis:

„Vaadake, vaadake, noor plika kumardab üle elu sügavuste. Oleksin ma kunstnik, küll ma maaliksin seda poosi!“

Teine lausus:

„Jah, just poosi. See poos oleks ju hää, kui ta ise seda ei tunneks. Aga ta pole sugugi naiivne. Ta arvab, et meie oleme fotografi aparaadid. Lähme!“

Ado kuulis sellest ainult mõne katke kose mühinas.

Tõsi, mõtles ta, see plika ei ole naiivne. Muidu ei hindaks ta pooside väärtust. Nüüd aga tunnen, et ta minu pilku enesel tunneb.

Nad jäid jälle teistest maha, kahekesi.

Läksid sillalt alla. Istusid suurele graniitkivile ja vaatasid koske siit. Sild inimestega viskas õhtu päikeses imeliku varjukatte taamalle mustale voolule, mille teraskangalisel toime valgus pildus kuldläikeid. Liginedes kurdusid üksikud tumerohelised niidivihud ja murenid valgeks vahtveiniks, põrgates vastu teravaid veealuseid tõkkeid.

Siis oli see kui tuhande uppuja käestik, surmahirmus üles poole ringutav ja metsikult kisav. Kõige suurem palk oleks sinna visatuna õlekõrs, mida uppujad kohe tuhandete kätega põhja vajutavad. See oli kui hiigla madude kari, mürinal edasi sööstev, mida nähes tardud iseäralisse võlutulga.

„Tahaks sinna hüpata, ah tahaks vette viskuda!“ hüüdis Alla.

„Teate, mis teist saaks? Minutit viis hiljem oleks säääl all, tasavees, teist veel mõni käsi või jalg, kuna pääлуу puruneb vastu kaljuseina.“

„Ei, niisugust inetut surma ma ei tahaks iialgi!“

Kuskilt sigines nende juure väike poiss, pakkus sünnikäigu mälestuseks müüa piltpostkaarte, albumid, tillukesi pussnuge.

Võtsid omale kõike kaasa.

Siis tõusid ja kõndisid piki kaljulist randa perivett, kuni kosk täitus ja laius siledaks tasaveeks.

Imelik oli see õhtu. Päike rippus juba pedajate ladvul ja vajus aegapidi punaste okste vahele. Taevarand õhetas. Õhus ujus soojuselaineid, mis olid kui eksinud parved nägemata paitusi ning kallistusi.

Ado vaatas neidu õhtuvalguses nagu nägemust, millesse aga ei tohtinud puutuda: väheimast riivamisest oleks nagu kadunud ta eeterlikkus: Alla oleks saanud siis selleks kogenud naiseks, kes teadev on igast liigutusest. Ja nii mitu korda, kui ta ka neiu käest kinni haaras, iga kord tundis ta oma kätt rohkem kui tema. Põrkas nagu mingi maskest vastu.

Alla aga oli vallat ilusast momendist, millesse tahtus ära kaduda ja sulada. Temal oli mingi ebamäärane kartus oma kaasaskäija ees, mingi süüdlustunne, mida nüüd tahtis kaota poisi vaimustet pilku, ilusasse õhtusse, mis iharust igale poole looritas ning kose mühinasse, ühetoonilisse, rahustavasse, suigutavasse.

Ühe jämeda männa juures jäid nad seisma.

„Kirjutame siia midagi õige ilusat mälestuseks, igaveseks mälestuseks!“

„Kirjutame ühel ajal, teine teisel pool!“

„Olgul!“

„Üheainsa sõna, selle, mis kõige ilusam!“

Noad koorisid tüvelt krobeline korra ning laskusid siis vaikpehmesse mähka.

„Amor“ ilmus ühele poole, „Alla“ teisele.

Noormees tundis kipitust omast avameelsusest. Mis oli see amor siis, kas „armastus“ või „mind armastakse?“

„Teie armastate siis armastust enam kui inimesi?“

„Jah!“ vastas neid.

„Ja siis armastate ka seda, et teid armastakse?“

„Mis selles siis halba on, see on ju nii ilus!“

Õhukese gaasülikonna hillerdes briisis oli ta siia jooksnud, kõige kaugemale vette ulatavale kaljule laialipillat karide rägestikus ja nüüd sirutas ta käsivarred kõrgelle nagu lilled päikse poole ning laulis oma armsamat laulu: Griegi „Jeg elsker dig“ . . .

Laulu kuulis ta veel poolärkvel. Oli paljad käsivarred üle padja sirutanud, läbi süngi võrede päikese paistesse.

Valguse raskus rusus silmalauge: neid oli valus lahti teha. Kuid siiski ihar ja magus oli lasta kiirtes supelda kaela, noori rindu ning paljaid käsivarsi. See oli aisteline nauding, kui vastu valget sõrmeääred näisid läbipaistvad, või kui mõni kōditav kiir ootamata läbi puged särge pitsiaugust.

Alla tuba oli harilik üliõpilase üürituba: kitsas, pikk, vähe möbleerit. Kummutil peegli all olid lõhnaõli pudelid, puudrikarbid, küüntepuhastuse riistad ja muud toalettasjad, ning nende ligidal must väike kastike, milles asent olid leidnud igasugused amuletid ja mälestusmärgid: närbinud õied, kallimad kirjad, mõni paelake, paberitükike, raudtee sõidu pilet.

Iseäranis torkas toas silma alastuse rohkus: voodi kohal rippus reproduktsioon Stycka maalist – noor keha, hetäärilise silmis häbelikult avatlev läige, kuna sirgunud käed parajasti tumelilla loori olid hõljutamas üle rindade pakitseva ihu; siin sääl seinal mõni samalaadiline postkaart ja laual laiali terve kuhi kaarte kehadege. Oleks Alla rikkam olnud, oleks omale muretsenud Rodini „Suudluse“, mida nüüd ainult jälgenduses maitses. Terve tuba oleks pidanud olema paganlik ihutempel, püha ja ülev, ning ta ristiks selle toa – suudlustoaks.

Nii lamada päikse paistes, süüa schokolaadi rummiga, vahete vahel lugeda „Dorian Gray näopilti“, mitte millegi üle mõelda, ainult rõõmu tunda omast olemisest, krüsantheemist vaasis, lõhnapudelist Jaapani aroomiga, jah, isegi kohvist, mida perenaine voodi ääre lauale toob. . .

Korrage kuulis, et keegi kõnnib akna all mööda kitsast lauda. Kes see võiks olla? Piimamees? Ei, selle säärsaapalised asted oleksid rasked nagu tõrred piimakeldris. Postiljon? Jah, need on selle nobedad asted, mis südame alati panevad põksuma. Neid tunneb seda liig hästi.

Perenaine ulatas süngi sinkja ümbriku roheline tindiga.

Avas pika, pika kirja. Selles oli kõike – sentimentaalsusest vägitegudeni laskekraavis, mille kohal kuulid vinguvad kui sääsed ja shrapnellid teevad viimse päeva kisa. Kuidas see punapõsk küll kartulivaos põõnab, küll mudas sipleb nagu kärbes liimipaberil! Ja siis tuleb ta säält puhkusele. Oo, homme juba! Homme siin!

Kõlisteti uuesti. Siis koputati uksele.

Kui Ado neidu läks teretama, andis see vaiba ääre alt viis pikka ilusat sõrme. Siis sündis riide panek nagu ikka: Ado selg käändis voodi poole ja poisile anti raamat kätte.

See oli Balmonti luuletuskogu.

Kuni Alla end toaleteeris, luges noormees hulga luuletusi ette. Viimaks jäi peatama ühe „Näkingeid“ nimelise juures.

„See on üks ilusamaist selles kogus. Kuulake!“

„Ja see teile meeldib!“ Poiss tundis, kuidas neid selja taga suured silmad tegi.

„Jah, tore luuletus! Ja see näkingeid on ka ise väga huvitav!“

„Huvitav, huvitav! Noh nüüd saite sõna, mida ma teilt ei uskunud! Kas võib veel sõna olla, mis nii . . . Tõesti, seda ma ei uskunud teist!“

Eialgu ei saanud Ado aru, miks see sõna neidu nii närveldas. Siis aga mõistis. Et see nii teravalt oli lausut, pani poisi piinlema.

See pikk, kõhn ja tumesilmaline noormees Ado tungis iseäraliselt Alla hinge kurudesse, nii et ta vahel tõsiselt pani kartma. Imelikud olid ta silmad: vahest põles neis võigas, avatlev, däämonlik tuli, vahest paistis neis väljakannatamata põlgus, haavav, mida tahab eemalle tõrjuda kõigi naiseliste avatlusabinõudega. Kui mõnikord seda poissi uulitsal silmas, käis põlvist läbi nõrgestav tuksatus ning käik, liiked said seotuks. Mitte kord ei olnud Alla mööda käinud sellest majast, kus Ado elas: teadis isegi, et kõrval korteris elab noor neid, kes ühelt üliõpilaselt ladina keele tunde võtab, sest ega nad muidu ei istuks määrat tunni ajal teine teisel pool lauda, ja mis tunde muud võiks üks neiu noormehelt võtta. Vahest teatris, seltskonnas kokku puutudes põgenes Alla noormehe pilke. Vestlusel ei löönud silmigi üles, tundes imelikku argust ja ühtlasi seda, kuidas säärase tagasihoid, allaheit mõjub. Aga säälsamas raputas enesest väheimagi aldumuse, välja sirutes oma uhke, nõtkke keha trotsivalt, etteheitvalt, kõrgilt nõjates kuhugi sohva leenile, ja alumisi lauge ironiseerivalt üles tõstes naeris katkenut naeru, pildudes kui raheteri vastu plekki. Vahel haaras, nagu nüüd, kinni mõnest kogemata poetet sõnast, et siis seda, ümber hinnates, pilke ja teravusega tagasi visata ning sellega meeli segada otsekui kättemaksuks.

Aga kui Alla oli enese riide pannud, Ado end ümber pöörnud, sai meeoleolu teisemaks kui selja taga. Neid kostitas poissi kõigega, mis tal oli käepärast, andis talle nuusuta uusi lõhnaõlised, lilli vaasis, või näitas talle uusi postkaarte või äärekest värskest kirjast roheline tindiga.

Jah, ta võib nüüd otsagi vaadata, ilma et kartust tunneks.

Nad vestlid kaua ja elavalt tühjast tähjast võidu varblaste sädistusega räästa all, läbi avat akna.

Aga vahel, saades hajameelseks, hüpatas ühelt ainelt teisele, tõusis neid ja otsis midagi sahtlist, soris kaarte ning raamatuid.

Siis hangusid need liigutused mingi tarretusasendiks, nagu selleks, et neid kogemata kujunenud, gratsiööse poose saadaks maitsta.

Nii unustas neid enese aknalauale, kummuti ääre, üle lillevaasi. Otsib, otsib midagi raamaturiulilt ja jääb nii istuma. Sõrmegi pistab suhu.

Tajudes seda artistlikku joont, shesti ilu teadvust neiu juures, erutus Ado, sest mängida naiivsust – seda olid need võet asendid ja liiked – oli hädaohtlikuim mäng.

Ka Alla taipas seda vaevalt-vaevalt tuntavat tunnetevirvet Ado juures instiktüviselt ja nüüd oli kogu olemine kui tants nõõril: väikene väärtus, vaevalt tunda ant tõeelu, otsekohene, varjamatu, mängimatu, ja kõik on kokku varisenud.

Tihti hiilisid nad teine teist, otsekui kiskjad loomad, tihti algas sõnade mäng, vahel nii hädaohtlikult üdini tungiv, kui kuum vesi õrna hamba närvin. Siis aga taandus kõik, saades süütuks ja igapäevaseks, nagu käimine, söömine, istumine.

Varsti läksid nad välja, et üheskoos hulkuda linna ilusamail kohil, kunstinäitusil, muuseumides, nagu seda sagedasti olid teinud. Ado arvas, et mõlemaid kuidagi ühte seob kunsti austus: tundsid end teine teisele palju ligemal olevat, kui mõnel kontserdil vaimustused mõnest viiulimängijast või klaverikunstnikust.

Pärastised harutusedki läbielatud kontserdist tõstid neid hähe tuiju. Mõlemalle meeldis kõige enam põhjamaa muusika, eriti Grieg, Sibelius.

Tihti kõnelid nad plastilisest tantsust, mis nende arust ülem kunst oli.

„Oo, ma võin hulluks minna joovastusest, mis mulle tants annab. Nii Duncan, Preobrashenskaja, Pavlova . . . Ah see viimane, näituseks! Kuidas ta enese ära võidab, üles õhku tõuseb, maa päälle jättes ainult suure varba tibatillukese küüne, kuidas ta kaasa viib, vaimustab, südamest, hingest läbi käib! Oi, seda ei saa sõnadega öelda!“

„Millal teie neid nägite?“

„Ei,“ vastas Alla, „ise ma küll pole veel neist ühtki näinud. Aga ajalehist olen nende üle lugenud. Ja see oli midagi imeilusat, mis sääl kirjuteti; see pani mind kohe joovastusse.“

Abstrakt kujutelm kunstist, selle mõte ja mõiste vaimustas Allat. Päälegi, see arusaamine kunstist sügenes alati siis, kui kunstis oli tegemist inimesega, või kui kunsti eeks oli inimene, iseäranis tema erootiline külg.

Elu, ilu, kunst oli talle, tõtt öelda, erootika kolm palge.

Naine ei tunne muud kunsti, kui erootilist, ja selleski ainult erootikat, see oletus muutus Ados veendumuseks, kui nad nüüd jalutuskäigu tegid läbi Ermitaashi.

Siin seisatid kõige päält Amor ja Psyche kogukuju ees.

„Ah, kui ilusad kehavormid! Kujud nagu elus!“

Skulptuur näis Allale meeldivat, peaaegu väljavõtteta. Seisatid kaua raidkujude ees, kuna Alla üksikute kehade proportsioone mõõtis, mõnel leides liig paksud jalad olevat, teisel jälle liig lühikesed.

Maalidesaalides selle vastu oli vähe, mida vaadata. Cranachi madonnadel puudusid ripsmed. Ja oi, kuidas talle meeldivad pikad mustad ripsmed, mis varju heidaksid näole! Ei, Cranach ei oska maalida! Päälegi, üsna ebaloolumikud need liig pikad sõrmed.

Ja need? Mis rasvavõllid need olgu? Rubensi naised. Ja see olla ilus? See võida kellelegi meeldida? Vahest ehk Adolegi? Vaadaku, kuidas sääl nende naiste sõrmeküüned eespoolt laiemaks lähevad, kuna ju kitsad küüned on palju kaunimad.

Rembrandti Danae. Milline hirmus naine! Mis puusad! Kui pakud. Ega see ei meeldi ju?

Läbi käinud suur hulk saale, tulid lõpuks Hispaania saali, kus väsinult istusid punasel sohvale. Piltide ees jäi seisma ja vaatlema hulk inimesi. Oli huvitav tähele panna nende nägusid, nende kunsti vastuvõtte avaldusi. Alla vaatles enamasti huvitetult riietat naisi, nende frisuure, kleidimoodi ning kingi, kiites ühede kehavolüümi, arvustes teiste omi.

See oli täiesti üks kriteerium, Ado leidis, et egoistlikki, millega Alla hindas inimesi ja kunstitöid, pärit maniküüride, pediküüride ning moelehte ajajärgust. Nüüd tuletas Ado meele, et kontsertideski oli Allale enam meeldinud viiulikunstnik ise kui see, mis ta ette kandis. Ja ettekantavast ainult see, mis suigutas magusasse iharusse, unistusse armastusest.

Oodake, oodake, mõtles Ado, just kiuste ei taha ma ideaaliks lugeda teie keha, pikka, ahtakest, looklevat! Oo, sada korda enam meeldivad mulle terved naised, kelle pakkjalad on valmis kogu maailma pattu kandma põrgu väravateni ja kelle rubenslikud käsivarred võivad teid, kõhnu naisi, kümme üles tõsta, teid, kolmepuudalisi! Vahest on minu ideaal just too naerata, punane rasvapõsk, mis näos silmad ahendab, see kumer üsk, millest võivad idaneda kümned kõvalihakselised suguharud, või need juustevihud, mis rasketena alla langevad kui valminud viljad? Ja olgu labajalg suur kui takjaleht! Ja miks ei või sõrmed olla ülipikad ning ülipeened kui vahaküünlad? Ja küüned laiad, kui tulukesed nende otsas?

Adole ligines siis ka elu däämon, arg nagu varas ja irooniline kui Mefisto:

„Vaadake, Alla, seda usumäratsejat, kellele puss rindu torgatakse. Ei tea, kas ta pika mantli all ka pükse peaks olema? Oleks kole, kui tal neid ei oleks. Vene pappidel on vähemalt pika säärega saapad . . . Ja too latern, maas põlev; ega selles küll muu ei põle, kui loomarasv, sest petrooleumi siis vist ei olnud. Aga õigust öelda, mulle meeldivad elektrilambid kõige paremini . . .“

Juba tuli halli riidet muumiast-teener kellukesega märku andma, et oleks aeg lahkuda. Tuleb siis uuesti alla minna mööda pikka treppi kahe läikiva seina vahelt, mille värv on kui hangunud vaniljekaste roosamannaliste vöötidega.

Kui nad mööda Neeva kallast kõndisid, tuletas Alla jälle midagi meele sellest poisist, kes sõjaväljal. Kuid Adot see ei huvitanud. Aga kes küll teab, võib ju ka kord aeg tulla, kui kõrvalkäija sõnad suureks paisuvad ja noormehe närvidel hakkavad klimberdama armukadeduse noote.

Alla südames pakitses midagi, kuid siis otsustas: Ado ei tohi igatahes ohvitseriga kokku puutuda, ega teadagi tema siiatulekust.

„Homme ega ligemal päivil ma teiega kokku ei saa,“ lausus Alla kurvalt.

„Miks? Sõidate ära? Valmistate eksamite vastu?“

„Jah, mul tuleb ära sõita. Sain hommiku kirja, et ema haige on.“

Kui leitenant teisel päeval oma reisiväsimuse Alla voodis oli välja puhanud, läksid mõlemad välja jalutama.

Miskipärast on sellest punapõskesest ohvitserist saanud unine olevus, kes mind kohtleb, nagu ei tea kes ma oleksin, mõtles Alla.

Pikk ja sirge oli see poiss, pehmed vurrudemed kõditid ergutavalt suudlustes, kuid nüüd paistis näost mingi tardunud üleolek, esialgu küll vallutav, pärast aga vastikuksminev.

See oli kui abielulase panetanud magusus oma kõrval tunda seda, kes sinu himudelle ja soovidelle vastu tuleb, olgu need millised tahes.

Ja mis blaseerumusega oli ta voodist tõustes peegli ette läinud, sääl haigutanud! Nagu oleks Alla elutu mööbel.

Kõige päält, otsigu noormees omale ise korter, nüüd ei saa ta, kui ennemini, teda oma juures ööd lasta olla, sest eksamid ja nõnda edasi.

Leitenant oli ka sellele kerge järele andma, ilma et oleks võõrastust tundnud sarnase kohtlemise vastu.

See õrgutas veel enam Allat. Juhtis jutu Imatra reisi poole, suurendes kõike Ado ja enda vahekorras, kiites selle peent arusaamist, rafineeritust, vaimustusega koguni jutustes selle maitsest, selle tumedaist silmist.

Vähehaaval hakkas leitenant ka asja vastu huvitust tundma, üht ja teist pärima. Ometi, ometi, mõtles rõõmuga Alla.

Ja ikka rohkem hakkas ta omadusi kiitma, mis üliõpilasel olla ning mis ohvitseril puududa.

Nii hää oli ühe ees ühte, teise ees teist ülist ja katsuda üht meest teise vastu üles kiivata.

Hiljem ohvitseriga uulitsal jalutes nägi Alla järsku eemal, teisel pool prospekti, Ado kuju. Jah see ta oli: hall palit ja hall kaabu.

Kuum viirg jooksis läbi keha. Tundis käsivarrel leitenandi käe pigistust. Jah, kõige parem, mõne kaupluse akna juure seisma jääda, ega siis seljast nii kergesti ära ei tunne.

Õnneks oli see lillekauplus.

„Mine, ole hää, siia sisse ja too mulle üks punane roos. Aga mine alla keldri, sääl on ilusamad. Ma ootan seni.“

Kui ohvitser kauplusse läks, jäi Alla akna juure seisma.

Ado oli aga juba üle prospekti tulnud.

„Noh, siin, ega polegi ära sõitnud?“

„Pidin sõitma, aga sain uue kirja, et ema paraneb juba.“

Alla lõi silmad läbi aknaruudu. Sees oli palju inimesi, nii võis veel kõik hästi minna. Aga iga silmapilk oli kallis.

„Aga nüüd vabandate mind, ma ruttan. Homme astun teie poole, kõneleme pikemalt.“

„Kuhu poole? Ah sinna, pole viga, ma lähen ka sinna poole.“

Alla oli kui tulisil sütel.

„Hää küll. Aga kui tahate pai poiss olla, minge enne siia lillekauplusse ja ostke mulle üks punane, punane roos. Ah, kahju, see kõige ilusam on just praegu ära ostet. Aga minge alla keldri, sääl on õige, õige suur väljavalik.“

Soo, nüüd oli paras aeg ära kaduda. Mõlemad on nüüd keldris.

Ruttas tagasi vaatamata tramvaile, sai kuidagi veel käepidemest kinni haarata.

Teisel päeval ootas Ado kogu päeva neidu oma poole. Juba hämardudes astus see üle ukse.

„Andke kõige päält andeks, et mind enam lillekaupluse juurest ei leidnud.“

„Ei, teie peate mind vabandama. Teadsin et teil rutt on, aga all oli väga palju inimesi ja ühe ohvitseriga läksime ühe punase roosi pärast peaaegu kiskuma, sest üksainus suur tumepunane oli veel järele jäänud. Niisugune piimahabel!“

„Hahaha. Ja kuhu see roos jäi?“

„Lõpuks andsin järele, Kes teab, millise kokoti rinnal see võib nüüd olla!“

„Neid tõmbas mustad nahkkindad käest, vabastes säält pikad, valged sõrmed peente läikivate küüntega ja sirutas need teretuseks. Siis veel. Lubasin teile midagi pikemalt seleta. Aga nüüd tuleb välja, et see oli lihtne fraas.“

„Teil on ju kõik puha fraas. Aga omakorda on mul teile midagi seleta. Selleks teen visiidi teile homme.“

Mis see pidi olema, sellest ei teadnud Ado isegi midagi. Aga nii tundus.

„Ah, ma aiman midagi!“

„Mida siis õieti aimate? Ei, ei, see on hoopis midagi muud!“

„Muud? On see siis midagi paha? Tõsist? Ha-ha-ha! Mina ja tõsist? See oleks alles naljakas. Aga kes sellesse veel on segat?“

Mis selle pääle vastata? Aga las hargub! Las võrsub legend!

„Veel üks kolmas!“

Nüüd ta teab, teab, ehmatas Alla.

„Ja rohkem mitte? Siis ei ole see, mis mina arvan.“

„On neli, aga võib ju enam olla. Aga see ei puutu asjasse. Homme räägin aga teile midagi ootamatut ja imelikku.“

„Mis see küll võiks olla? Ei tea tõesti mitte. Ah, siiski. Kas see võiks tõesti olla. Ja just nüüd! Noh, see oleks alles pöörane. Ajaksin suu tõesti ammuli. See oleks alles nali, ei tragikomöödia. Võiksin enese surnuks naerda.“

„Ja tõesti, teie arvate seda?“

„Mida, mida? Teie ei või seda arvata. Mida, öelge!“

„Tean mis arvate.“

„Noh, see oleks imelik, kui te seda teaksite!“

„Võin pää anda, et tean. Me mõtleme ühte ja sedasama.“

Sõnademäng, vastastikku provotseeriv, läheb sama rada edasi.

„Võiksin pää anda, et sedasama mõtlite, mis minagi nüüd mõtlin. Tahate, ütlen!“

„Öelge!“

„Aga mõelge, see oleks teile väga piinlik, kui seda praegu ütleksin.“

„Jah, õige. Ärge parem öelge.“

„Näete ongi nii. Ei mingi kahtlust.“

„Kui te homme seda tõesti mõtlete teha, ma ei tea siis mis teha. Naeraksin teid lihtsalt välja!“

„Ja teie võtate julguse tõesti minust nii mõelda!“

See oli juba vihaga öeldud. Alla kallas vähe rahustust sekka:

„Eks ole imelik, et iial seda teada ei saa, mis kumbki mõtles. Ma ei teaks tõesti, mis teha, kui see tõsine küsimus, mis homme tahate puuduta, seesama oleks. Aga teie ei tea, mis mina mõtlin. Praegu võite te hoopis muud mõelda ja sellest kõnelda, aga homme räägite just seda, mis mina nüüd mõtlen.“

„Ei, võite kindel olla, et see mõte just sarnane on. Kõik mis olete kõnelenud, kindlustas mind ainult ses veendumuses. Hämmastab ainult üks asi, kuidas võisite niisugusele arvamisele tulla. Olen ma selleks kuidagi põhjust annud?“

„Ei tea, aga ma arvasin . . . Mõnest asjaolust . . . Teinekord . . .“

Jumalagajätul:

„Homme ootan teid. Selle küsimuse räägite siis, mulle? On see vahest nii tõsine ja traagiline, et me pärast seda kättki ei anna?“

See oli lausut naljatoonil, kuna käsi lävel jumalagajätkuks sirgus.

„Võib ka olla, et pärast seda kätt ei anna. Kes teab, mis veel võib tulla,“ lausus Ado pikkamisi, järele trepist alla astujalle.

Siis keeras välise ukse lukku, tuli tuppa ja pani paberossi suitsema. Jäi siis seisma kesk tuba ja pahvatas naerma.

Homme läheb ta tõepoolest sinna, paneb enne pika kuue selga, ostab samast lillekauplusest kimbu valgeid roose ja selle püha neitsi ette põlvili langedes hüüab armusõnu, mis pärit kõige paremast südame käsiraamatust, ja palub siis selle jumalanna kätt igaveseks teekonnaks läbi selle maailma hädaoru.

Ja siis korraga:

– Teie! Teie! Teie võisite uskuda, võisite silmapilgukski juleta seda mõelda, seda aimata. . . Teie, kes täis valet . . . On siis teie enesearvamine nii suur, et arvate, nagu poleks teil mingi maski ees? Vihkan teid! Seda tuln teile ütlemale! Ma ei salli teid, põlgan teid! Kas kuulete? Vihkan teie kõveraid juudi juukseid, teie öökulli nägu väikese tõmbi ninaga nagu teekannu tibi, inetu suu ja nöbi lõuaga! Vihkan teie pikka vedurjat keha! Teie väikest pääaju, mis on tühi ja aitamatu nagu tükk molluski! Vihkan teie kleite, mis tahavad olla veel lühikesed ning noored, kuid on teie seljas lohakad, inetud ja vanad! Vihkan teie häält, kui te lause lõpul sõnu pikaks venitate ja selle iseäraldusega koketeerite! Teie kunstimaitset, teie estetismi, mida teile ette dikteerib teie väiklane erootiline instinkt! Teie naiivsuse poseerimist, teie elutarkust, millele asjata nooruse ja oskamattuse näokatte ette tõmbate!

Vihkan puudritki, mida vahel pikuti nina olete tõmmanud! Vihkan teie tubagi, kitsast ja tühja, raamatuteta ja vaimuta! Vihkan teie poose leentoolis, sohval või sängis, kui omad pikad jalad enese alla kogute ja siis arvate, et väike tütarlaps olete! Vihkan teie väikseid jalgu mustis lakkkingis ja teie ilusaid sõrmi, mis tindiga määrit! Vihkan teie nalja ja naeru, teie elevel olekut ja vaimustust tühjast-tühjast, millesse ma sugugi ei usu. Vihkan teie ninatarka iseteadvust ja lapsikust, mis teid vanastab!

Vihkan teid pääläest jalatallani! –

Nii lausub ta sääli.

Aga mis teeks plika? See elu komödiand?

Aamen, ütleks ta selle tiraadi lõppu ja hakkaks siis naerma suure häälega: bis, bis, karjuks ta käteplagina vahel.

Koju jõudes leidis Alla oma leitenandi eest.

Võttis tema vastu külmalt, ükskõiksel, kuigi ohvitser sellest midagi välja ei teinud. See äritas. Allat veel enam: siis nii sügavale on sõprus sööbinud, et õigus on familjäärne olla!

Suurest teemasinast teevett klaasi valades, hüüdis Alla:

„Tead, mulle näib, et sa sääli sõjas sugugi naisi pole näinud. Oled olnud päris pai poiss, oma ette laskekraavis istunud ja ainult minust unistanud . . .“

„Kuidas sa nii võid arvata?“

„Ei, ei, võib olla, see tuleb ka sellest, et ma hakkan juba suureks saama, targaks, oi, kui targaks, ja sellepärast näibki see nii olevat.“

„Mis näib nii olevat?“

„Et sa rumal oled! Ei, ära nüüd pahaseks saa. Aga tõesti, paar aastat elada ilma kontsertideta, raamatuteta, kunstinäitusteta . . . See mõjub ikka ka. Eks? Sääb võib lõpuks päris karupojaks muutuda.“

Leitenant tundis, kuidas puna näkku tõusis. Aga neid jätkas endisel toonil:

„Tunnen, et olen sinust nagu pikemaks kasvanud. Oo, kuidas mind, näituseks, filosoofia huvitab! Aga ega see sind ei huvita? Aga mina? Istun vahel leentoolis, jalad oma alla tõmmat, nagu mõni väike kategooriline imperatiiv, loen ja mõtlen, mõtlen ja loen. Ja korraga avab end uus ilm, täiesti uus, ilus ja enneolemata! Ma armastan siis loetavat filosoofilist raamatut nii kui mõnda schokolaadi rummiga, panen ööseks selle raamatu koguni padja alla. Räägiksin sulle palju, palju kõigest, monadoloogiast näituseks, aga sa ei mõistaks mind.“

„Jäta oma munade loogika. Tark naine on ikka vastik. Naine peab rumal olema ja ilus. See on kõik. Ja kui ma sulle õige ütlen, siis ei ole frondil see elu sugugi mitte nii kõle, nagu arvad. Ma ei lobise sulle kirjades aga nii palju, kui sina oma rafineerit noormehist oma kirjades oled kirjutanud. Ja kui sa õige teada tahad saada, siis ütlen sulle, et mõni Poola naine oma kirega kõige filosoofilisemad hetäärid üle lööb.“

„Sa eksid, kui arvad, et mina sind kuidagi tahan kinni hoida. Võid minu pärast oma Poola naistega hundiratast lüüa, kui soovid.“

Nii äritid nad teine teist vastastikku. Vähemalt tänaseks ei võidud enam meeleolu paranda.

Kui Alla oma senise parema sõbra oli ära saatnud, haaras teda kurbus, mahajäetus. Kuhu olid jäänud endised ajad, rahulikud, muretumad, õnnelikud, mil ei olnud kahtlusi ega etteheiteid!

Ja milleks see kõik?

Mis sundis Allat nii hoolimatta olema? Võib olla sõidab see poiss veel ära, ilma et tagasi tuleks?

Järgmise hommiku präluudium oli samuti minoorne.

Juba pool tundi käis Alla tramvai peatuspaiga kohal oma maja ligidal, oodates ärevuses Adot. Mis ütleb see? Vahest lõpeb temagagi vahekord? Vahest aga ümberpöördukt?

Käis edastagasi, väikseil sammel, närvilisil ja sihituil, tõsidus silmis.

Aga hääks ennustuseks tundus Ado kerge naeratus. Siiski sellest ei mõikanud, et lahti aruta tõsiduse keerdsõlme.

Ja nii vaikisid mõlemad.

Tuppa astudes peaaegu kartsid teine teist, siis aga said ofitsiaalseks, nagu oleks kumbki tulnud kellelegi tegema mõnda ametlikku visiiti.

„Olge hää, võtke istent!“

„Täna!“

Ja kummaldi sügenes tunne, et ei teadnud kuhu end ära panna.

Järsku nägi Ado raamatu riivli pääl vaasis suure tumepunase roosi, just samasuguse, kui ta eile oli tahtnud osta. Ja nüüd oli tal järsku kõik selge. Vaevalt suutis end vaol hoida:

„Ah nii! Nüüd alles saan asjast aru!“

Alla kahvatas veidi ja tooli leenile nõjates, vahtis kogu aeg teravalt ühte punkti oma ette, kuna Ado tema näolt tahtis midagi välja lugeda.

Õo peaaegu magamata, Alla oli nüüd kahvatum harilikust. Liig äredalt eraldus valge puudri juga, mis veet pikuti ta pisikest kapriisi nina.

See oli imelikult uus pilt, millena Ado nüüd neidu nägi. Tema tõsine? Tema kurb? Tema kord ta ise, aga mitte ainult mask? Mitte mänglev, pateetiline, optimistlik?

Arad silmad fikseerisid ikka veel ühte kohta, pikad mängivad sõrmed olid jäänud korraga vait ja raskemeelseks.

Oli kui vaasist välja langenud lill. Abitu.

Naergi oleks nüüd tundunud kõverdusena.

Nüüd haaras ta laualt noa, lmatralt tood pussnoa ja hakkas sellega mängima. Siis torkis selle otsaga oma käenahka.

Pistab veerandtulli võrra pöidla ja nimetissõrme vahele ihhu, silmi pilgutamata ning kulme kortsutamata. Valgest nahast immitseva vere imeb kohe ära. Ja siis hakkab haava ümbert nahka koorima, mis on kinni, nagu pajukoor enne kevadet.

Kui ta sääli nii istus oma ette, vaikiv, jalad üles toolile tõmmat, käes nuga, vaadates ainult nülitavat kohta, siis tuli ta Adole ette nagu igavesti kodutu, hulkaja, kellel ei ole sadamat, kelle tunded õhus lendlevad liblikutena, leidmata kedagi-midagi.

Pää oli veel madalamale vajunud, ja Ado nägi äkki, et haavale langes helm, ümargune, suur ja läbipaistev.

„Nii saate veel verekihvitus, mu preili!“

„Mis sellest! See jääb nii kui nii igaveseks mälestuseks.“

Ado lõi pilgu mustale sahtlile kummutil: need sääli olid igatahes vähem kestvad mälestused, kui see arm nimetissõrme ja pöidla vahel.

„Aga miks siis igaveseks mälestuseks? Mis lahkuminekut te valmistate siis?“

„Seda valmistate teie, mitte mina. Ega tea, mis eile mõtlite. Midagi muud see igatahes olla ei või. Nüüd veel . . .“

Nüüd võib siiski, hingele vähe ligemalle tulla, mõtles Ado.

„Minu arvates võiks asi just ümberpöörduvalt kujuneda . . .“

„Ümberpöörduvalt? Hahaha!“

Alla sai korraga rõõmsaks. Mähkis taskurätiku haava ümber, tõstis niisked silmad üles ja naeris edasi nagu seks, et silmi niiskusele naerus põhjendust leida. Naeruga ühes tuli iroonia:

„Aga ma ütlin ju teile eile, et ma siis teid välja naeran. Teie ei uskunud. Ah, oleks mu poiss praegu siin, see tragi ohvitser, see kutsuks teid otsekohe kahevõitluselle. Mu poiss ütleb, et ta kord versta kauguselt talu hoovist kuke maha lasknud. Mina tuleksin teile sekundandiks. Ma halastaksin teie peäle ja nõuaksin, et peate teine teist sihtima mitte vähem kui kahe versta tagant, sest muidu laseksite lõpuks teine teise maha ja kes mul siis veel lillekauplusest roose ostab. Hahaha! Nonoh, ärge saage jälle nii tõsiseks. Ei, ei, mina ise lasen enese maha, olge selles kindel. Või võtaksin mürki, sest seda on mul küllalt tagavaras.“

See oli nii pehme ja naiivse tooniga lausut, nagu oleks seda teinud laps mängides, kellele kõik see lõppude lõpuks tõsi tahab olla.

Ei, sellele irooniale ei oskaks Ado midagi omalt poolt vastu seada. Eilne sapinegi osa plaanisetavast tunnustusest oleks praegu lahja. Nii palju kui ka noormees midagi omalt poolt tahtis salvata, kõik oli nõrk. Ta ei saanud kuidagi end seda võrd pinguta, et Allalt maski eest kiskuda. Viimaks hüüdis ometi:

„Naerge nii palju kui tahate! Naer on ju ikka hää kaitsesoomus. Aga teate, mida ma tulin teie juure ütlema? Kõige peält seda, et ma enam ei usu ühegi teie sõnasse. Teie olete lihtsalt hale, kui oma lapsikust minu ees poseerite, teie elutark, palju kogenud, inetu naine! Seda tahtsin teile öelda ja veel, et nüüd võite oma poisi ilma eksimata igasse lillepoodi saata!“

Tõusis, riietas end, tõstis kübarat ja läks.

Ei ühtki sõna rohkem.

Nüüd olid nad siis mõlemad läinud. Nii parem kui pahem käsi oli tühi. Aga Hiina kett põimub edasi: ohvitser haarab valsiks Poola mõisniku tütre kae, ning üliõpilane hakkab mõne väikevenelase käsivarrest kinni. Ja siis tuleb mõni teine poolakat tantsitama, ning väikevenelane hõljub kolmandaga. Nii edasi. Lõpmatuseni.

Alla tundis enese kesk seda tantsusaali üksi olevat. Mõlemad käed oli ta vabaks lasknud ja tantsuringist välja astunud.

Või hakata uusi lüüsid vaatama? Ei, ei. See Vene üliõpilane, kellega rongis tuttavaks saanud, on liig ilmamureline ja õnnetu. See salkkond Eesti üliõpilasi, kes ta ümber hulkunud, on igav. Ja ükski ei saa elust nii aru, kuidas Alla tahab.

Kõik nad urgitsevad hinge kallal. Nagu nüüdki need poisid. Üks kõrvetab tulise oraga. Ja teine kõrvetab. Ning kõrvetad ise kõiki. Ja siis läheb igaüks ise nurka, hing haige, meel pahane. Ja elu on korraga tühi.

Jälle kangastus tulevik silmi ette. Õpid ja õpid, ning siis lähed, heftikimp kaenlas, kortsunud näoga ja külmenud kehaga, lapsi õpetama. Ja oled ise nii inetu, nii inetu.

Mis Ado oli öelnud? Inetu? Inetu!

Asus peegli ette ja sukeldas sellesse.

Sasis ja keerdu lõõnud juustekiharad ringlid ümber otsaesise ilma läiketa. Nagu jõhvid, karedad ja jämedad. Silmade magamata ja punaste ümber oli märgata väikseid kortse. Otsaesist põigitid puudri alt kolm õige aredat joont. Kaelalgi märkas midagi sellesarnast, mis veel kõige hirmsam.

Meele tuli Dorian Gray näopilt. Oo, kui see peegel oleks võimas endasse imema vanuse, inetused, mis päev päevalt juure tulevad, ja kui ise edasi elaksid alati noorena, lustilisena, kergehingelisena, jah, kergehingelisena!

Agas nüüd oled maha jäet, nurka visat. Nagu tarbetu, katkilööd mängukann. Ja päälegi tulemas veel, et sul pole enam õigust tunduda noor, sest oled täiskasvanud, pead olema viisakas, ei saa naerda kui palju tahad, ei saa jalgu oma alla tõmmata ega selga looka painuta nagu Greeka tantsijannad vaasidel . . .

Kas ei oleks surm, ilus surm praegu kaunim, kui inetu elu edasivedamine?

Ettevaatlikult avas kummutil oma väikese mälestuslaeka. Siin olid kuivanud lilled, mälestustega seot kirjakesed, terve mineviku päevaraamat . . .

Ja siin oli pudelike, alati kaasas olev, imeliku magama uinutava rohuga.

Agas ei! Nii enda ette, ilma toreda liigutusega, uhke shestita ta oma elu käest ei anna.

Uhkelt surra, näidelda isegi surma, see on ülesanne, väärt et elada!

Tõusis kähku ja läks välja, uulitsaile.

See shest, see shest!

Palju takistas teda publikum: seda oli liig palju. See rühmus vaateakende all, tuli vastu ning kõrvaldas ta jalgteelt, kust voorimehed oma puhku minema ähvardid.

Liikus selles massis iseteadvalt, käed palitu taskus, huuled kokku pigistat, nagu see, kel oma kindel eesmärk. Tundis enesel teatava õigusegi olevat inimesi teelt kõrvale tõugata ilma vabandamata.

Sest tema oli see, kes enesega hirmust mõtet kaasas kannab, nagu lõhkepommi. Kui nad seda teaks, kui nad teaks, nad püüaksid ta kinni. Agas mõte on kinni püüdmata. Seda ei osanud keegi ta näolt üles lugeda.

Jõudis viimaks Isaaki kiriku juure.

Mida kõrgemale ta tõusis mööda kõverduvaid, laiu, külmi treppe, seda enam kadus usk enese jõusse, mille asemelle agas teine tahe tuli, teine soov, esialgu küll ebamäärasena ja häbelikuna, iha kujutlustes läbi elada momenti, mil ta saab sisu panna, kas või ainult aimatava, ülevalt alla viskumise shesti.

Kui esimesele katuselle jõudis, oli ta juba väsinud. Plekist maastik ümberringi mõjus viirastavalt. Kuid palju ta siin ümber ei vaadanud, et agas jõuda sihile. Astus siis mööda kitsast lauda üle katuse pleki, väikesest uksest sisse, et kitsamaid treppe käia.

Kupli tugipalgid ristlid hiigla katuse all tolmus hahkjatena.

Veel väike püsttrepp, peaaegu redel ja siis oled luugist väljas, mis end avab kitsalle torni ümberkäigu platsile, raudvõre sees.

Pää oli uimane, süda kloppis ülesronimisest. Mõtted ei töötanud. Keha oli muutunud mingi elutuks asjaks, mis enam midagi ei tunne.

Põhja tuul puhus valjusti ümber torni, nii et neil tuli kübarat pääs kinni hoida. Pärast aga võttis selle pääst ja hoidis käes.

Ta oli täiesti üks, sest saatja oli alla jäänud tuule varju.

Iseäralik joobumus valdas teda, allaviske ihar eelmaitse. Ei ole vist midagi magusamat, kui esimesed silmapilgud, kui läbi õhu lendad, alles veel meelemõistusel.

Vaatas üle võre ääre alla. Torni kullat kuppel paisus igal pool ette, nagu oleks ta raskejalgne. Mööda säravat hiiglakere jooksid pikad vöödid ja kadusid kuhugi alla.

Alla kangutas rõo varbu. Raudpulgad aga ei nõtkunudki õrnade sõrmede all. Kuidas siis end alla visata? Üle hüpata? Milline rumal liigutus see oleks, üle rinnakõrguse aia ronida, et siis veel uperpalli lennata. Võib veel kleiti pidi kuhugi rippuma jääda.

Oli täiesti pettunud. Kogu aeg oli kujutlenud kõrget ja ilusat surma ülevalt tornist: seisad kuskil luugi äärel, all on linn ja siis teed väikese hüppe, nagu supleja, kes lauvalt vette hüppab. Lendaksid läbi õhu ja inimesed jääksid all vahtima, suud ammuli. Ja kui sa ükskord alla saaksid, ei oleks kõvadel, krobelisil kivil muud kui verine mass, millest keegi midagi aru ei saaks.

Aga nüüd on sul aiad ees, kuppel on laiem aimatavast: alla hüpates kukud siiasamasse, katuselle, mida mööda alla libised nagu kelguga mööda mäge, et siis vastu esimest plekkkatust lennata. Ja kes teab, puhub tuul veel nii kõvasti, et jääd pilpana kupli külge.

Oli siiski nii hää tunda ennast üle teiste, üle linna, üle elu ja surma. Uulitsal ajasid päkapikumehed väikseid hobuseid, tikukarbid liikusid mööda tramvai rööpaid, inimesed siblisid sipelgatena igaüks oma pesa poole, mööda uulitsa plaastert, mis nägi välja kui krobeline nahk raamatu päradel.

Ja teda valdas äkki suurem kui iial enne lust tagasi alla minna kerge sammu sinna ilusalle, kirjule maale, näitelavale, taimelavale pühaks umbrohuks, mida sügavajuurelist, ükski käsi iial ei suuda välja kitkuda.

¹ A sweet herbal liqueur made with caraway seeds, cumin, and fennel.

² Edvard Grieg's 1865 song with the lyrics of H. C. Andersen (1833). The title means 'I love you' in Danish.

³ Konstantin Balmont's 'Rusalka', written in 1902, published in 1903 in the collection *Budem kak solntse* [Let Us Be Like the Sun].

⁴ An archaic unit of Russian measurement equal to 16.38 kg (3 *poods* = 49.14 kg).

⁵ A work of later philosophy by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), published in 1714.

⁶ A Russian Imperial unit of measurement equal to 1066.78 metres.

⁷ *Hiina kett* [Chinese Chain], the title of Semper's full 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.

⁸ Johannes Semper, 'Püha umbrohi', in *Hiina kett* (Odamees, 1918), pp. 7–36.

Poems

Hasso Krull

Tallinn University

Introductory note

Hasso Krull has been one of the most prominent voices of Estonian poetry since the 1990s. Krull has published twenty books of poetry and received numerous awards. His best-known work is the epic poem *Meeter ja Demeeter* [Metre and Demeter] (2004), which received the Baltic Assembly Literary Prize in 2005. Krull is a communitarian anarchist and his religious preferences tend towards the Estonian movement of the *Maausk* [Earth-believers]. Krull has been fighting against the ongoing deforestation of the Estonian landscape, including going to the European Court as a plaintiff to change the law of renewable energy in the EU, without any success. He has offered a conclusive overview of his ecological ideas in a short manual *Tänapäeva askees* [Modern Asceticism] (2020).

‘Alice käis imedemaal’ [‘Alice went to Wonderland’] and ‘Päike ja kuu tahtsid abielluda’ [‘The sun and the moon wished to marry’] are from *Ava* [Opening] (2021). The collection does not have a continuous narrative structure, but is inspired by a Yanomami cosmological myth in which the earth was originally the fallen sky, while the previous earth sank underground. If we cannot stop it, the next sky will fall upon us again. While Alice certainly alludes to Lewis Carroll’s classic, the love story of the sun and the moon originates from Khanty mythology. Both poems have been translated by Adam Cullen.

‘Hõbedases metsas elab kuldne loom’ [‘A golden beast inhabits a silver forest’] and ‘Mu keha on mu esivanemate’ [‘My body is the dream of’] are part of *Euroopa* [Europe] (2018), a collection focused on the possible destiny of the continent. There are three possible outcomes: a bare survival, total collapse, and a mythical renewal. Two ghost stories, one Livonian and the other Estonian, represent survival and collapse, while a Nkamtci’nemux and Nlak’apamux’o’e myth from

North America represents renewal. The motif of Europa sacrificing a white bull has been elaborated by Robert Graves in his compendium *The Greek Myths* (1955). Both poems have also been translated by Adam Cullen.

‘tigu tõusis ja käis’ [‘the snail stood up and walked’] and ‘hüperaktiivsus’ [‘hyperactivity’] are from the collections *Sulalumi* [The Melting Snow] (2023) and *Hämaruse meespea* [Twilight Remembrance] (2025), respectively. The idea of creating a valley by sleeping comes from the Estonian trickster tales, in which the trickster is sometimes called Jesus. The issue of hyperactivity needs no comment today. Both poems have been translated by the author.

‘Ariadne from Neanderthal’ is a lyrical theme for a transmedial artwork by Monika Mattiesen, featuring a hybrid instrument and four performers. The world premiere by Ensemble Musikfabrik took place in Cologne on 23 August 2024. The text in three parts was written simultaneously in German, Estonian, English, and Spanish (other languages were added later). The version published below is the author’s original English text.

Alice käis imedemaal / Alice went to Wonderland

Alice käis imedemaal
ta kasvas suureks
aga mängukaarte ei sallinud
eriti vastik oli ärtu emand
selle eemaldas Alice igast ette juhtunud pakist
ja pistis külmkappi sügavkülma
emandad jäätusid tõmbusid kahkjassiniseks

ühel päeval suitsetas Alice piipu
see oli väike india piip
heledast sandlipuust
ta täitis piibu uuesti süütas kaheksa korda
siis hakkas Alice'il palav ta tegi lahti
külmkapi ukse et jäätist võtta

tuppa astus pikk kahvatu näoga naine
ta huuled olid härmas silmalaugudel tuhkjas lumi
naine naeratas hambad helkivad ja läbipaistvad
nagu jääkuubikute rida
sa ootasid mind ütles ta
ja sirutas käe
peopesal väike sinine süda
selle võid sa nüüd endale võtta
see on ühe suure merikarbi hing
mille sa lapsena leidsid rannast
enam ei pea sa mere kohinat kartma

*

Alice went to Wonderland
she grew up
but loathed playing cards
she found the Queen of Hearts to be particularly vile
Alice always removed it from every deck she came across
and stuck it into the freezer
the queens froze turned waxen blue

one day Alice smoked a pipe
it was a little Indian pipe made of
light sandalwood
she refilled the pipe lit it eight times
then Alice felt hot she opened up
the freezer to grab ice cream

a tall pale-faced woman entered the room
her lips were frosted colourless snow on her eyelids
the woman smiled her teeth glittering and translucent
like a row of ice cubes

you were expecting me she said
and reached out a hand
in her palm a tiny blue heart
you may have this now
it is the soul of a great seashell
you found on the beach as a child
you needn't fear the sea's roar any longer

Päike ja kuu tahtsid abielluda / The sun and the moon wished to marry

päike ja kuu tahtsid abielluda
õhtuti kammis päike mererannas
oma kuldseid juukseid
ja heitis need sillana lainetele
varsti ilmuski kuu lõbus nagu herilane

maa all elas vanaeit
kes armastas kuud
ühel õhtul varastas ta mõõga ja lõi maa ihusse prao
kuupaistel ronis ta välja ja ütles
sinust peab saama minu mees

ei ütles päike kuu peab elama taevas
ta on minu kaaslane ja kõnnib vee peal
nad kaklesid rebisid kuud kuni see kärises
vanaeit lõi aga mõõgaga
ja krahmas kuu südame endale

nii sai päike mehe kellel polnud enam südant
ta on kahvatu kasvab ja kahaneb jälle
kuni kaob oma pesasse ära
see-eest on maa all ka öösiti küllalt valgust
kuu süda kiirgab ja näitab rändajale teed

aga merepõhja kukkunud mõõk
tuikab vetikate ja merikarpide all
ta igatseb kuu südant tagasi

*

the sun and moon wished to marry
in the evening the sun combed her golden locks
on the seaside
and cast them into the waves as a bridge
soon the moon appeared as joyful as a wasp

underground there lived an old crone
who loved the moon
one evening she stole a sword and cut a fissure into the body of the earth
by the light of the moon she climbed out and said
you are to become my husband

no said the sun the moon must live in the sky
he is my companion and walks on the water
they fought and pulled at the moon till it tore
the old crone struck with her sword
and seized the moon's heart for herself

thus the sun got a husband without a heart
he is pale grows and wanes again
until he vanishes into his nest
underground however there is light galore even at night
the moon's heart glows and shows travelers their way

but the sword that sank to the seabed
pulses beneath the seaweed and seashells
it yearns to have the moon's heart back

Hõbedases metsas elab kuldne loom / A golden beast inhabits a silver forest

Hõbedases metsas elab kuldne loom.
Tal on kuldsed hambad: kui ta hammustab,
jääb haava servale kuldne viirg,
kuldne okastraat, mis valusasti torgib,
isegi kuu ei keera seda ümber sõrme.
Ekslen metsas. Mu veri on punane nagu
vein. Poolmagus, mitte päris kuiv,
üks sõõm, ja sinu suu on must
nagu murjanil, ainsast sõõmust jääb huulile
tumepunane okastraat.

Kuldne loom tuleb. Ta on väsinud.
Väsinud, oi nii väsinud kuldne loom,
kuldne looming, ta astub ligi ja paljastab
hambad, paljastab oma punase suu.

Minu kael on rauast. Ma ei näita seda.
Hõbepuude oksad tilguvad tõrva.
Kas see oli meehaisune mets? Oli küll,
vaik nõrgub mööda tüvesid alla,
naksub, iga samm naksatab nagu traat.

*

A golden beast inhabits a silver forest.
Its teeth are golden: when it bites,
a golden band is left along the wound;
golden barbed wire that throbs painfully.
Not even the Moon wraps it around its finger.
I wander the forest. My blood is red like
wine. Semi-sweet, not quite dry,
one sip and your mouth is black
like a Nubian; dark red barbed wire
is left on your lips from that single sip.

The golden beast approaches. It is tired.
Tired, oh, such a tired golden beast,
a golden creation; it approaches and bares
its teeth, bares its red mouth.

My neck is made of iron. I do not expose it.
The branches of silver trees drip with tar.
Was it a honey-stenched forest? It was indeed,
sap seeps down the trunks,
they rasp, every step rasps like wire.

Mu keha on mu esivanemate / My body is the dream of

Mu keha on mu esivanemate
unenägu. Luu ja nahk, karvad
ja rasv: nemad nägid seda juba
ammu, aga mööda on läinud
nii vähe aega, et keegi ei usu
seda. Mu perse ei ole ilmaasjata
selline vetruv ja ümmargune:
keegi on tema peal juba tuhandeid
aastaid istunud, siis laenati kanni-
kad minule, ära kuluta neid
lihtsalt ära, kui istud, siis istu
mõnuga. Istu kohe mõttega.

Nõnda nüüd teengi. Aga mõte
ei püsi paigal. Nihelen. Tõusen
püsti, lähen akna juurde, uksest
välja, ruttan randa ja seal kõnnid
sina, imekaunis Euroopa, vana
pagana armuke, aga ütle, miks
sul see verine nuga on käes.

*

My body is the dream of
my ancestors. Bone and skin, hair
and fat: they saw it long ago,
but so little time
has passed that no one believes
it. My ass isn't bulbous and springy
just because: someone sat upon it for
thousands of years, then lent me
the cheeks – don't just wear
them down; when you sit, then sit
with pleasure. Sit with a purpose.

And so now, I do. But my thoughts
won't stay still. I fidget. I stand
up, go to the window, out
the door, hurry to the shore, and there
you walk – gorgeous Europa, the old
pagan's lover; but say, why do you
hold that bloody knife.

tigu tõusis ja käis / the snail stood up and walked

tigu tõusis ja käis
sest Jeesus ütles nõnda
tigu küsis: kulla Jeesus
kas tohib ma limpsin sind natuke

no muidugi vastas Jeesus ja heitis pikali
kõik teod tulid ta ihule maiustama
kus Jeesus norskas hakkasid ööbikud laulma
tema asemest saigi Ööbikuorg

väike roheline taim kerkis sita seest
ja harvester ütles: mina olen tee tõde
ja surm

me läheme maailma äärele rääkisid teod
seal ripub ju Jeesus jalgupidi üles poodud
juuksed langevad alla nagu mürisev kosk

*

the snail stood up and walked
because Jesus told him so
the snail asked: dear Jesus
can I lick you a little

of course said Jesus and lay down
all the snails came to relish on his flesh
where Jesus snored the nightingales broke
into singing thus the Nightingale Valley was created

a tiny green plant sprout from the shit
and the harvester said: I am the way the truth
and the death

we shall go to the edge of the world said the snails
that's where Jesus is hanging upside down
his hair rushing roaring like a waterfall

hüperaktiivsus / hyperactivity

hüperaktiivsus
hüperpassiivsus
hüperreaalsus kui käitumis-
häire-
kell

mõtlemishäire tundmishäire
hüper

spiraalselt kulgevate
valgete tähnidega
sõna

hüper-
modernsus

ja ainult kaks mõistlikku
poliitikut
üle kolme põlvkonna

Greta Thunberg
Subcomandante Marcos

*

hyperactivity
hyperpassivity
hyperreality as a
behaviour-
al disorder
alert

thinking disorder feeling
disorder
hyper

a word made of
white spiralling
dots

hyper-
modernity

and just a couple
of sensible politicians
over three generations

Greta Thunberg
Subcomandante Marcos

Ariadne from Neanderthal

There will be a time for making changes. But no one is ready yet. People merely try to save anything that can be saved. But nothing can be saved anymore. It is already too late.

A human being has three souls: masculine, feminine, and one more, a primordial soul. This soul is older than humans themselves; it is as ancient as Neanderthals or even older. If the masculine and feminine souls don't know what to do, the Neanderthal soul comes to their aid. She is the Ariadne from Neanderthal.

Although we are not ready to make changes, the earth is always ready. The earth is waiting. But inside of the earth is a labyrinth unknown to us. Therefore, we need some guidance. The masculine and feminine souls cannot be this guide.

Ariadne from Neanderthal is the guide. The stuff of the new life will be woven on her loom. The sources of that stuff are very old. The patterns of that stuff will create the code for life. Mad honey, meli mænomenon, is a part of those patterns. Whoever has tasted it is awaited to attend the wedding of Dionysus and Ariadne.

1

the earth is a dream
the earth is a lucid dream
the earth is the nest of a lucid dream
the earth is the stuff of a lucid dream in the realm of waters

you are a thread
you are the nightfall of a thread
you are the nightfall of a thread red
you are the dark night of the life of a thread

ne an der ne
ne an der ne ne an
der thal ne ar

one man one woman and one
Neanderthal woman
one soul and one more soul and one
more soul
a Neanderthal soul

we'll weave by three we'll weave
you by three
we'll weave your dream your stuff we'll weave
the stuff of your dream in the realm of waters

ari ari
ari ari de ne
de ne de ar
ne an der ne

2

you step onto the earth as if onto a carpet
soul shivering under the bush shivering in the wind
a tiny plant sprouts by the nest in the wind

primula Ariadne's primula
globeflower Ariadne's globeflower
azalea azalea

meli mænomenon

you step onto green earth
as if onto a green carpet
a tiny soul sprouts under the bush surges under the bush
blooms under the bush and the stuff
of the earth is sleeping the pattern the code of the earth
is sleeping under the earth

3

the code of the red thread
the nightfall of the red thread over shimmering waters
green dawn of the waters inside the dark night

says the tired earth: I am sleeping
in the veins of the tired earth the mad honey
of the nightfall is sleeping

bumblebees buzzing in the calyxes of flowers
Ariadne from Neanderthal
and Dionysus the Old Pagan celebrate their wedding

L. Onerva, *Mirdja: A Decadent New Woman*, trans. by Eva Buchwald
with introduction and commentary by Viola Parente-Čapková,
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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.

Sarah Parker, *Form and Modernity in Women's Poetry, 1895-1922: A Line of Her Own*, (Routledge, 2024), pp. vii + 232. ISBN 978103234877

Adrianna M. Paliyenko

Colby College

The work of recovering voices that have been marginalized – whether by dominant narratives of literary history or hierarchical discourses of gender, sexual orientation, and race, or both – requires painstaking archival research to forge innovative pathways from the present to the past. Reception history, in particular, read deftly against the grain by Sarah Parker in her new book, exposes the legacies of poets Alice Meynell, Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), Dollie Radford, and Katharine Tynan truncated not only by misogyny but also periodization and ageism. A revisionist project, *Form and Modernity in Women's Poetry, 1895-1922: A Line of Her Own* ‘sets out an alternative poetic history for the period 1895-1922, focusing on the twentieth-century careers of [these] women poets who continue to be primarily associated with the late nineteenth century’, as Parker elaborates in her erudite introduction richly framing the book’s thesis (p. 2). Each of the four chapters, equally documented with ample notes for further study, examines how the mature work of one of the focal poets responds to the experience of modernity. Read individually, and yet knit together collectively, this later corpus shows nimble continuities with the era of Aestheticism and decadence, rather than breaks from ‘the poetic forms, modes and genres associated with the 1890s’ (p. 3). In reassessing the selected poets’ modern use of forms developed in their fin de siècle production, Parker asks, ‘might there be a value in conventional poetic forms that we have overlooked due to our critical fixation with formal innovation?’ (p. 25)

Throughout this meticulously documented and beautifully written book, Parker draws on the ‘affordances of [these poets] preferred poetic forms’, meaning the potency or creative work of inherited forms when used ‘to treat diverse modern subject matter’ and ‘deployed in different contexts’

(p. 26). Chapter One, evocatively titled “‘Trysts with Time’: Alice Meynell, Metre and the Temporalities of Modern Poetry’, exhumes the arc of Meynell’s reception and, by way of contestatory response to her reputation as a belated Victorian, draws out temporal themes that increase and deepen across her œuvre. ‘Meynell’s negotiation of time’, argues Parker,

is articulated through her manipulation of poetic metre, which she saw as linking her to poets of the past and future. Through her use of poetic form, Meynell thus asserts women’s right to enter tradition, and in the process remaking poetic conventions from the inside. (pp. 41-42)

Using a chronological cursor, Parker systematically relates the concept of time in Meynell’s early verse to her later poems. Parker judiciously adds essential theoretical components from Virginia Woolf’s notion of moments of being and Henri Bergson’s idea of time as an ongoing state of becoming to nuance Meynell’s approach to time ‘as cyclical, overlapping, and relative’ (p. 46). In harnessing shared poetic rhythms, notably iambic and trochaic metres, Meynell claims her place among past and future poets all the while forging ‘her own rhythms’ (p. 48), as Parker illustrates via elegant readings of selected poems, among others wartime poems ‘Length of Days’, 1915 (pp. 53-58) and ‘A Father of Women’, 1917 (pp. 58-63). Interestingly enough, Meynell adamantly rejected *vers libre*, which other women poets at that time viewed as emancipatory from the constraints of the patriarchal canon. Astutely read by Parker against ‘a critical orthodoxy that regards free verse as the only twentieth-century poetry of value and complexity’, Alice Meynell transforms poetic form from within by subtly varying the rhythm of a poem to reflect humans’ ‘trysts with time’ (p. 73).

Chapter Two, “‘Women are ever captive’: Michael Field and ‘Twentieth-Century Verse Drama’, titled, like Chapter One, with a thematic signpost from the focal poet’s œuvre, relates to modernity the way Katharine Bradley (1846-1914) and her niece Edith Cooper (1862-1913), who shared the pseudonym Michael Field, used blank verse in their plays, thus ‘capturing’, asserts Parker, ‘the conflicted position of the modern woman on a formal as well as thematic level’ (p. 85). Not only do Bradley and Cooper link historical settings to contemporary issues, notably women’s struggles for

authority, liberty, and freedom of expression. They also harness blank verse in their later verse dramas to ‘think through and enact themes of duty, desire, restriction, and autonomy’ (p. 85). Judicious reference to the theoretical underpinnings of blank verse enriches the critical dialogue Parker maintains between the focal poets’ reception history, metacommentary, and mature work. Parker’s sharp analyses of Michael Field’s representative dramas alongside that of their contemporaries foreground the clever way Bradley and Cooper put restriction and freedom in tension, showing ‘the complex ways in which [they] used blank verse to chart, to channel, to move with and against the tides of modernity’ (p. 111). Restored for posterity is the fuller legacy these fin de siècle poets left behind as twentieth-century dramatists.

Chapter Three, “‘The snatch of a song that is sung’: Dollie Radford’s Lyrics of Modernity’, delves, like previous chapters, into the vicissitudes of reception history to shift the focus from this ‘forgotten’ fin de siècle poet’s gender sensitivities to her technical skill. As Parker summarizes, Radford (1858-1920), born Caroline Maitland, promoted as a new Sappho among some twentieth-century critics, ‘embodied an aestheticized version of the poetess, pouring out her feelings in improvised melodies’ (p. 121). To the contrary, as Parker’s fine analysis of the representative ‘Song’ (from *A Light Load*, 1891) demonstrates, Radford’s lyrics showcase prosodic control, the trochaic tetrameter in this case. That Parker’s archival research yielded drafts of Radford’s lyrics explicitly supports how carefully the poet composed and revised her poems, a quality linking her early and late verse. Among Parker’s findings is the surviving manuscript of *An Unfinished Sheaf*, poems composed during the period from 1911 to 1918. As in the two previous chapters, Parker turns to the mature poet’s output overlooked by critics until now. From Radford’s twentieth-century verse Parker gleans her engaged lyric that addresses contemporary issues such as women in the cityscape, reconciling individual and collective identities, and bearing witness from a ‘home-front perspective’ to the wartime experience (p. 123). The British poet was also a dramatist whose *The Ransom* (1915), like the verse dramas of Michel Field,

mobilizes blank verse to ‘approach contemporary feminist issues obliquely’ (p. 125). Against the horizon of readers’ expectations, then and now, the savvy Radford, who had specific venues in mind, exploits lyrical regularity and counters its association with individual subjectivity to unify and thus foster solidarity, for example, among commuters on the underground (‘From the Suburbs’; ‘Spring in the Tube’), suffragists (‘Westminster’), and all denizens affected by the First World War (‘At Home’; ‘London in Shadow’; ‘Peace’). In concluding this chapter, Parker rightly calls for ‘a historically situated and formally sensitive feminist re-evaluation of [Radford’s and Katharine Tynan’s] war poems [that] would acknowledge their restorative affective value, which is inseparable from the lyric’s formal qualities’ (p. 152).

“‘I am the pillars of the house’: Katharine Tynan’s Fortifying Ballads’, the fourth and final chapter, follows neatly, by way of comparison, from the discussion of how Radford, a socialist, worked the lyric for politicizing ends. Across her career, the conservative Irish writer and poet Tynan (1859-1931) ‘used the quatrain as a simple therapeutic device, employing this stanza to both express and contain painful feelings’, on the one hand, and on the other, ‘use[d] the ballad to forge confined yet comforting spaces for working through pain’, advances Parker (p. 160). Reviewers largely disparaged Tynan’s conventional subject matter: ‘her poems celebrate nature, extol the glories of motherhood and childhood; praise God and express her Roman Catholic faith; and eulogize her beloved Ireland’ (p. 161). Obliquely feminist, however, as Parker reveals, Tynan encodes a revaluing of maternal experience. Recourse to the parallels John Hollander has drawn between poetry and architecture supports Parker’s astute reading of Tynan’s poem ‘Any Woman’ (originally published as ‘The Mother’ in *New Poems*, 1911), a poem, among others, that ‘buttresses her ideology of motherhood as form, constructing a protective domestic space through her repetitive quatrains’ (p. 171).

From maternal grief, reflecting Tynan’s own loss of two children, to bereaved mothers of dead soldiers, her ballad quatrains repeat therapeutically, expressing and yet containing painful feelings. As

in previous chapters, Parker draws in the poet's metacommentary, for example, Tynan's memoir *The Years of the Shadow* (1919) which enriches understanding of the reach and impact of her most popular wartime ballad, 'Flower of Youth', first published in 1914. Tynan's work does not fit a critical frame 'privileging standards focused on formal innovation – of the kind promoted by modernism – over adherence to traditional forms, which offer comfort, familiarity, and sustainment' (p. 191). A deeper view of the affective labour of Tynan's architectural verse requires the fresh critical lens Parker offers.

Reception determines a poet's reputation and how her work survives literary history. Interrogating the silences of the recent poetic past, Sarah Parker has made a compelling case for the long view of the individual contributions of Alice Meynell, Michael Field, Dollie Radford, and Katharine Tynan. Each writer examined in this ground-breaking study reworks a traditional poetic form in her mature work, thus responding to the cultural upheavals and shocks of modernity with 'a line of her own'. From the perspective of these poets' collective legacy, one could quibble that Parker missed an opportunity to call for transnational, if not transgenerational, alternative literary histories. Women poets in France and elsewhere, who, like Parker's focal poets, launched their careers during the *fin de siècle* and wrote into the first decades of the twentieth century, also 'assert[ed] their right to participate in poetic traditions, but they rema[de] those traditions on their own terms' (p. 207). In recovering how leading women poets of the late Victorian era reshaped their late verse to consider modernity, Sarah Parker has achieved her stated aim of 'offer[ing] a richer and more representative picture of twentieth-century poetry as a whole' (p. 32). Her impressive book has also set new ground upon which to build innovative ways of reading between the lines of poetic form and understand more broadly that, as put by the modern Irish poet Eavan Boland, 'the poetic past is unfinished business'.

Evanghélia Stead, *Grotesque and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley* (Open Book Publishers, 2024), xii + 280 pp. ISBN 9781805113454

Frankie Dytor

University of Exeter

In Evelyn Sharp's story 'A New Poster', published in *The Yellow Book* in July 1895, Mrs Angelo Milton is at her wits' end.¹ She is in love with 'the new black and white artist' Adrian Marks but loving him means giving up her fortune and her good name. Should she choose the bohemian love of this 'dandy artist', or the comfortable life promised by a steady man? Sharp's story seems to dramatize a recognisably fin-de-siècle dilemma: that of the modern woman who must reckon with her own independence and the limitations of marriage. But in its depiction of a disreputable 'decadent' poster artist, appearing only months after the shock dismissal of Aubrey Beardsley from *The Yellow Book*, the story also stages a covert declaration of alliance to the disgraced poster artist. 'A New Poster' provides the striking opening to Evanghélia Stead's study of Beardsley, inviting us to approach 'Beardsley' – that strange complex of image, word, and performance that fascinated the late nineteenth century – as a sum of many shifting parts. Nothing, Stead insists, 'should be taken at face value' (p. 5).²

Grotesque and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley moves in three, occasionally competing, directions. The first is to re-centre Beardsley's lifelong fascination with the margin and the marginal through his engagement with the grotesque, border art, and marginalia, as he appropriated and transformed motifs from a range of artists, styles, and periods throughout his career. The second is to argue that Beardsley can be understood as a proto-performance artist, pre-empting later 'body art' by manipulating his own image through appearances in printed media, sometimes for canny self-promotion, other times for wickedly subversive play (and many times for both). Finally, the book proposes that Beardsley's designs should not be seen as isolated, finished works, but *processes* in dialogue with each other and the work of other artists, during and beyond his own lifetime. The 'Beardsley Period' named by Max Beerbohm appears in this account

not so much made up by one artist, but a composite of many shifting forms. 'In fin-de-siècle skies speckled with numerous stars', Stead asserts, 'he is a meteor no less dazzling' (p. 205). *Grotesque and Performance* therefore builds on what Jane Desmarais named the 'Beardsley Industry' in her influential account of the same name.³ Desmarais influentially repositioned Beardsley from an outlier in British art to an important contributor to European, and particularly French, art in the late nineteenth century. Stead, too, considers an 'international Beardsley' (p. 205), tracing the translations and transformation of Beardsley and his work by the intersecting forces of the artist himself, his contemporaries, and later followers and critics.

This not a conventional artist's monograph, nor does it seek to be. Following Beardsley himself, it dwells in the margins. The first chapter is indicative of this approach, exploring the 126 grotesques that made up the three volumes of witticisms by Sydney Smith and Charles Lamb, *Bon-Mots*. Often overlooked as secondary works and described by Beardsley himself as merely 'very tiny little things' in a letter to his old headteacher, Stead repositions the *Bon-Mots* as the critical testing ground for Beardsley's emerging artistic style, offering him an aesthetic and iconographic freedom that saw him ransacking the whole history of art for material. Beardsley, Stead argues, appropriated, reinterpreted, and frequently abandoned images and motifs from classical and Renaissance grotesques, medieval marginalia, as well as more recent explorations by artists such as Odilon Redon. In Stead's evocative writing, Beardsley gleefully 'hijacks' (p. 21) material from across the history of art. With his deliciously errant pen, everything is transformed into marginalia, as stray lines curl into recognisable shapes, letters can also be read as wings and tails. Even images on the margin, Stead provocatively suggests, contain their own margins, creating forms that may be endlessly read anew. Yet in this praise of Beardsley, Stead follows a well-trodden path to see Beardsley as a disruptor of an apparently prudish and conservative Victorian art world, and, surprisingly enough considering the Pre-Raphaelite fascination with marginalia, as a radical break from an undefined Pre-Raphaelite tradition, a 'style he would master, transform, and transgress' (pp. 7 & 13).

If the grotesques of *Bon-Mots* were the unwieldy ‘breeding tanks’ (p. 13) for Beardsley’s developing style, the foetal motif found in these grotesques became a ‘graphic laboratory’ (p. 57). One of the most arresting vignettes of the *Bon-Mots* is *Two Figures by Candlelight Holding a Fetus*, which shows two figures gathered by candlelight (fig. 1). The left figure is Pierrot-ish: drooping eyelids, pronounced bottom lip and obstinate cowlick, they are a beautiful and terribly tired clown. Inert and impassive, they present a small foetus of bristling energy for inspection to a second witchy figure. Shocking and playful in equal measures, Beardsley used the foetus as a crucible not only for his own practice but ‘as the basis for a collective Decadent identity’ (p. 70), seized on by artists across Europe. Stead places this fascination with unborn, protean forms against a broader scientific culture of embryology, which found its way even to Alfred Loos’ famous diatribe against ornament, *Ornament and Crime*. I would have liked to see a more careful consideration of intersex and classical ‘hermaphrodite’ figures in Beardsley’s work beyond their apparently self-evident existence as ‘monstrosity incarnate’ (p. 64) – a somewhat surprising claim considering the chapter’s focus on Darwin and embryology, in which the question of primal hermaphroditism and bisexuality became a subject of considerable attention.



Fig. 1: Aubrey Beardsley, *Two Figures by Candlelight Holding a Fetus*, BM-SS:26, in Evanhélia Stead, *Grotesque and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley* (Open Book Publishers, 2024), p. 38.

In the third chapter, we move from decadent *grotteschi* to grotesque performance. Beardsley's 'intellectual dandyism', Stead argues, is evident not only in his art but his life performance, as the artist staged *himself* as a margin through photography and self-portraiture, ironically seeking to resemble the monsters of his pen. In 'Portrait of Himself', published in 1894 in *The Yellow Book*, Beardsley presents himself as a miniature figure in bed, almost swallowed up by vast swathes of drapery, peering out absurdly from his sumptuous setting. Slowly 'losing substance' (p. 119) within these folds, Stead argues that such self-portraits have the effect of rendering the artist himself as a 'modern-day monster' (p. 118). Beardsley further exploited this monstrosity to great effect in photography, such as the photographs by Frederick H. Evans where the artist posed as *Le Stryge* after Charles Meryon's celebrated 1853 etching of a gargoyle of Notre-Dame gazing over Paris. For Stead, it is notable that Beardsley did not identify himself with the whole cathedral, but with a 'monstrous detail' (p. 138), playing on his own ill health to celebrate the monster and to merge with the margin and the grotesque of medieval tradition. In using his body for his art, and by turning his body into an artform, Stead argues that Beardsley's life-practice anticipates and heralds avant-garde experiments in performance and body art.

The final chapters place Beardsley in the 'Europe of Reviews' (p. 141), concentrating on the role of English, Italian, and French periodicals in mythologizing Beardsley and his work, as well as the artist's own attempts to manipulate the periodical press. This was risky business, and the artist's crafty wit could easily be misinterpreted. After his death, Beardsley's image quickly slipped out of his control, epitomized in the transformation of 'Death of Pierrot' into a misguided self-portrait in the French press. The art critic Joseph Pennell launched Beardsley's career with his feature on the artist in *The Studio*. In it, Pennell made a direct connection between the 'Beardsley age' and technical revolutions in printmaking, writing that the artist 'has recognised that he is living in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and he has availed himself of mechanical reproduction for the publication of his drawings'.⁴ The implications of this emphasis on process for Beardsley, however, are left somewhat underdeveloped, although Stead does highlight the importance of

photomechanical reproduction for the portability and availability of Beardsley's designs. Pennell's article became a practically obligatory reference point for all subsequent criticism. Yet, as Stead shows, it was adapted and revised too. Italian periodicals such as *Emporium* shifted attention towards biography, frequently scolding Beardsley for the qualities of childish precociousness that the artist had himself playfully cultivated in another English magazine, *The Sketch*. Such shifting forms, Stead deftly argues, demand an approach which recognises publications as 'shared practices and processes through which individual artists and communities engage, barter, and trade' (p. 143).

In the final chapter we encounter Beardsley as, in the words of Julius Meier-Graefe, 'the first Englishman who turned whole-heartedly to France', to consider the artist's reception in French periodicals and the press.⁵ Whilst Beardsley's self-avowed Francophilia is familiar ground, Stead contributes important new directions by focusing on the role of illustrations in press reviews, and once again highlighting the ever-shifting transnational exchange between periodicals.

No doubt because it is composed of previously published essays and articles, read as a whole the book can feel occasionally repetitious. Certain details and premises are re-introduced as if new from chapter to chapter, whilst central theses, such as Beardsley's mobilisation of 'media-driven modernity' (pp. 8, 54 & 205) recur without much development. Whilst it 'calls on histories of culture and aesthetics' (p. 7), it is not always clear what these histories are, with a bibliography largely centred on Beardsley scholarship (although curiously no discussion of Linda Gertner Zatlin's 1997 article on 'Beardsley's "Japanese" grotesques').⁶ Ultimately, however, this book contributes welcome new directions to Beardsley scholarship, richly illustrated and available open access, revealing the astonishing lives of Beardsley's designs as they were continually reimaged and remade into a 'grotesque vocabulary' (p. 205) by his own pen, performances, and the work of others. His afterlife at the margins of the body and work of art is neatly captured in a final anecdote on a tableau of his work staged at the mansion of Winnaretta Singer, the Princess de Polignac, in which Beardsley's figures seemed to 'escape' (p. 207) from sheets of paper to be brought to life in three-dimensional form.⁷ At every turn, Stead presents her reader with an artist who delights,

dazzles, and confounds the beholder, a visual alchemist who transfigured his own form and the creatures of his marginal imagination. At its heart, the book is a cheeky provocation to be more Beardsley: to think in swirls and curls, past linear models of genealogy and reception into more germinal and protean forms of transmission.

¹ Evelyn Sharp, “A New Poster,” *The Yellow Book*, 6 (June 1895), pp. 123–66.

² Evanhélia Stead, *Grotesques and Performance in the Art of Aubrey Beardsley* (Open Book Publishers, 2024). All references are cited parenthetically in text.

³ Jane H. Desmarais, *The Beardsley Industry: The Critical Reception in England and France from 1893-1914* (Routledge, 2018).

⁴ Joseph Pennell, ‘A New Illustrator: Aubrey Beardsley’, *The Studio* 1.1 (April 1893), pp. 14–19.

⁵ Julius Meier-Graefe, ‘Aubrey Beardsley and his Circle’, in *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics*, trans. by Florence Simmonds and George W. Chrystal, 2 vols. (G. P. Putnam’s Sons; William Heinemann, 1908), II, 253.

⁶ Linda Gertner Zatlin, ‘Aubrey Beardsley’s “Japanese” Grotesques’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 25.1 (1997), pp. 87-109.

⁷ Alexandre de Gabriac, ‘La Vie à Paris: Un spectacle d’art’, *Le Figaro* (1 June 1908), p. 1.

Notes on Contributors

Antti Ahmala is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Helsinki, Finland. His doctoral dissertation (2016) examines the themes of authenticity and alienation in the early symbolist and decadent works of Joel Lehtonen (1881–1934). In his more recent research, Ahmala has studied antimodernism in Finnish literature of the fin de siècle and in Finnish essayistic literature from the early twentieth century to contemporary authors. Ahmala's research interests also include the Finnish Civil War (1918) and the study of literature and emotions.

Adam Cullen is a poet and translator of Estonian prose, poetry, children's literature, and theatre into English. His translation of the late Estonian president Lennart Meri's epic *Silverwhite* was published by Hurst in 2025. Cullen's other recent translations include *I Am an Illustrator* (Graffeg 2026), *Between Two Sounds* (Plough 2024 – American Library Association's Top Ten 2025 Best Graphic Novels for Adults, 2025 IPPY Awards Gold Winner), and *John the Skeleton* (Restless Books 2024–2025 Kirkus Prize finalist, winner of the American Library Association's 2025 Batchelder Award). Originally from Minnesota, he has lived in Estonia for nearly two decades.

Frankie Dytor is a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in English at the University of Exeter. They received their PhD in History of Art from the University of Cambridge in 2023. Their work has been published in *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, and *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*. Frankie's first book, *Queer Practices of Art History: The Renaissance Lives of Decadent Aesthetes*, is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press.

Timo Huusko is Chief Curator of Collections at Ateneum Art Museum/Finnish National Gallery in Helsinki. He has written art-historical articles for exhibition catalogues and scientific publications, and curated and co-curated art exhibitions. He specializes in primitivism and nationalism in early twentieth-century Finnish and European art.

Merlin Kirikal is Researcher at the University of Tartu and Senior Researcher-Department Lead at the Under and Tuglas Literary Institute of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. In 2022–25, she was a member of the decadence project 'Tsiiviliseeritud rahvuse teke: Dekadents kui üleminek 1905-1940' [The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as 'Transitionality, 1905–1940] (PRG1667). Her research topics are literary decadence and modernism; interart aesthetics; feminism, gender, and queer studies. Recently she has published articles and chapters about feminist decadence. Together with Mirjam Hinrikus she has published on the impact of Nietzsche and Bergson on Estonian fiction during the first half of the twentieth century and co-edited a special issue of *Keel ja Kirjandus* on Estonian literary decadence (2024).

Tiina Ann Kirss (PhD in Comparative Literature) is a Senior Researcher at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu. Her research focuses on the European historical novel in the modern period, exile and the formation of Baltic diasporas following World War II, trauma theory, life stories and epistolary writing, incorporating gender perspectives in her work. She has written on the Young Estonia movement, the New Woman in Estonian literature and history, and postcolonial approaches to modern Estonian literature. She is currently translating 'Torn' [Tower], a collection of Estonian poet Ene Mihkelson's poetry into English.

Leo Luks is a researcher at Tallinn University, teaches philosophy at the Estonian University of Life Sciences, and is a member of the decadence project 'Tsiiviliseeritud rahvuse teke: Dekadents kui üleminek 1905-1940' [The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as 'Transitionality, 1905–1940] (PRG1667). His research focuses on phenomenology and Nietzsche's philosophy,

especially nihilism. He is also interested in the philosophy of literature. His monograph *Nihilism and Literature* appeared in 2015, and he has published numerous essays and articles.

Adrianna M. Paliyenko is Professor of French and holds the Arnold Bernhard Professorship in Arts and Humanities at Colby College, Maine, USA. She is the author of *Genius Envy: Women Shaping French Poetic History, 1801-1900* (Pennsylvania State UP, 2016), which appeared in French translation (by Nicole Albert) under the title *Envie de génie: La contribution des femmes à l'histoire de la poésie française (XIXe siècle)* (PURH, 2020). Her recent publications include: *The Stoics: A Bilingual Critical Edition* of Louisa Siefert's 1870 poetry collection, with translations by the late Norman Shapiro (Pennsylvania State UP, 2023); *Redécouvrir Louisa Siefert: richesse d'une œuvre de femme à l'ère de la modernité*, a volume of essays co-edited with Aimée Boutin and Catherine Witt (Honoré Champion, 2024); and a modern critical edition of Marie Krysinska's fin-de-siècle novel, *La Force du désir* (1905) with Ewa Wierzbowska (Honoré Champion, 2025). Paliyenko is currently writing a literary biography of the poet-philosopher Louisa Siefert

GUEST EDITORS

Mirjam Hinrikus is Senior Research Fellow at Tallinn University and Principal Investigator of the research project *The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as Transitionality, 1905–1940* (PRG1667). Her research focuses on decadence, modernism, Nietzsche's reception, gender, and Baltic–Nordic literary cultures. Her publications include the collective monograph *Nordic Literature of Decadence* (2020); the co-edited handbook *Sissejubatus kirjanduse uurimise teooriasse ja praktikasse* (2026); and the special issues of *Keel ja Kirjandus* (2024) and *Methis* (2025), both devoted to Estonian literary decadence and co-edited with members of the decadence project.

Hasso Krull is an Estonian poet, translator, and literary scholar at Tallinn University (the decadence project *The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as Transitionality, 1905–1940* (PRG1667)). Krull has published twenty books of poetry and nine collections of essays that include literary criticism as well as writings concerning art, cinema, and society. From 1990–2017 he taught cultural theory at the Estonian Institute of Humanities and in 2021–2022 he was a Professor of Liberal Arts at the University of Tartu.

Viola Parente-Čapková is Professor of Finnish Literature at the University of Turku and member of the decadence project *The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as Transitionality, 1905–1940* (PRG1667). Her research focuses on Finnish decadence in transnational contexts, fin-de-siècle women's writing, and the theory of literary history. Her publications include *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound* (2014), a critical edition of the English translation of L. Onerva's novel *Mirdja* (2025), and co-edited volumes on *Nordic Literature of Decadence* (2020) and *Redrawing Europe's Literary Map: Transnational Circulations of Women's Writing 1850–1920* (2026)

Riikka Rossi is Professor of Finnish Literature at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and a member of the decadence project *The Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence as Transitionality, 1905–1940* (PRG1667). Her research focuses on Finnish and Nordic naturalism and decadence, and more recently on literature and emotions. Her publications include *Le naturalisme finlandais* (2007), a monograph on Finnish literary primitivism (2020), and the co-edited volumes *Nordic Literature of Decadence* (2020) and *Arctic Hysteria and Other Strange Northern Emotions* (2024).

EDITORIAL

Jane Desmarais (Editor-in-Chief) is Professor of English and Director of the Decadence Research Centre in the School of Music, English, and Theatre at Goldsmiths, University of London, and she is currently Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies in the School of Advanced Study at Senate House, London. She is Editor-in-Chief of *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, and Chair of the British Association of Decadence Studies (BADs). She has published numerous books and essays on decadence, including *Monsters under Glass: A Cultural History of Hothouse Flowers, 1850 to the Present* (Reaktion, 2018), *Decadence and Literature* (with David Weir, Cambridge University Press, 2019), *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (with David Weir, Oxford University Press, 2021), *Decadent Plays* (with Adam Alston, Bloomsbury, 2024), and *Classic Stories from the Age of Decadence* (Pan Macmillan, 2025). She is currently in a velveteen rabbit-hole researching textural decadence, decadent humanism, and the decadent Weird.

Alice Condé (Deputy Editor) is Lecturer in English and Co-Deputy Director of the Decadence Research Centre at Goldsmiths, University of London. She has published work on nineteenth-century decadent poetry and prose, contemporary decadence and popular culture, and, most recently, 'Neo-Victorian Decadence in the 1920s: the Case of Ben Hecht' appears in Kostas Boyiopoulos and Joseph Thorne's *Neo-Victorian Decadence: Media, Genres, Eras* (2025).

Jessica Gossling (Deputy Editor) is Co-Deputy Director of the Decadence Research Centre and Lecturer in English at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is also Treasurer of the British Association of Decadence Studies and Deputy Managing Editor of *The Literary Encyclopedia*. Jessica is co-editor with Alice Condé of *In Cynara's Shadow: Collected Essays on Ernest Dowson (1867–1900)* (Peter Lang, 2019) and her most recent work includes a chapter on '[French Decadence](#)' in *Michael Field in Context*, edited by Sarah Parker (Cambridge University Press, 2025), and *The Decadent Bestiary (Strange Attractor, 2025)*, edited with Sam Kunkel. Jessica and Alice are the webmistresses of volupte.gold.ac.uk.

REVIEWS EDITORS

Sam Kunkel is originally from the United States but has lived in Paris since 2010. He double-majored in French and Russian languages and literature at Oberlin College and holds a Master's degree from the Sorbonne as well as a doctorate from the University of Paris-Saclay in the field of comparative literature. His work is centred around the intersection of religion and nineteenth century European decadence and symbolism. His book, *L'Orphisme et le Roman post-romantique* was published by Éditions Otrante in 2023. He also works as a translator and has published English translations of *The Solar Circus* by Gustave Kahn, as well as selected mystical prose pieces by Édouard Schuré. *Know Me To Be Your Superior in Everything: Erik Satie and the Metropolitan Church of Art of Jesus the Conductor* was published by First to Knock in 2025. Sam is the editor of *Faunus*, the journal of Arthur Machen studies.

Sandra M. Leonard is Associate Professor of English at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania. She is editor-in-chief of the COVE edition of Oscar Wilde's *The Portrait of Mr. W. H.* and is the author of a number of articles and book chapters on Wilde including 'Vera's Sister Play *Czeka*' in *The Wildean*. Her chapter "'Too greedily and too deep": Decadence and the Relics of Empires in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*' is published in *Tolkien's Medievalism in Ruins: The Function of Relics and Ruins in Middle-Earth* (Bloomsbury, 2025). Sandra is currently working on a monograph on Oscar Wilde and aesthetic plagiarism.