



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 5, Issue 1

Summer 2022

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 June 2022

Date of Publication: 21 June 2022

Citation: Karólína Rós Ólafsdóttir, 'Davíð Stefánsson's 'Delirium' (1919): A New Translation with Introduction', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 5.1 (2022), 95–97.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v5i1.1625.g1739

volupte.gold.ac.uk



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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Davíð Stefánsson's 'Delirium' (1919): A New Translation with Introduction

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Davíð Stefánsson was an Icelandic poet born in 1895 in Fagriskógur, a farm in the North of Iceland.¹ He was an ambitious and esteemed poet, whose work occupied a central place in the Icelandic literary canon and borrowed from many traditions including folklore, Romanticism, Symbolism, the Gothic, and, in the poem translated into English here, decadence. Given that Davíð was writing from a remote island in the North Atlantic Ocean, a place with more sheep than people, it is not obvious how or why he started exploring decadent themes, which traditionally tend to reflect preoccupations with plenitude, artifice, and urban cityscapes. It is the pervasive nature of decadence itself, however, and its parasitic relationship with other major movements and tendencies like Romanticism, Realism, and Symbolism, that ensured that decadent aesthetics found their way into the work of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writers like Davíð.

Davíð published his first collection, *Svartar Fjaðrir* [*Black Feathers*] in 1919 when he was twenty-four years old. He had previously published several poems in magazines, but *Svartar Fjaðrir* was specifically praised for its exciting and original style. Themes of death and violence within beauty and sexual fantasy, best described as masochistic, and mixed up with religion and descriptions of women that resemble the decadent *femme fatale*, were new attributes in Icelandic lyric poetry. While written in a traditional lyrical style and borrowing from traditional myths and folk style, Davíð's collection brought new perspectives to the general Icelandic reader. Some poems created controversy, but the collection as a whole received great praise and was, within a few weeks, nationally renowned.²

'Óráð' ['Delirium'] was one of the most controversial poems. It presents a lustful scene, the mystical and dangerous world of a masochistic and violent relationship wherein the speaker forces the woman to descend with him into physical pleasure and inebriety (drinking 'the poison wine'). The poem's self-conscious title makes the reader immediately aware of the speaker's altered

state of mind. The delirium, or dream, is manifested in rich erotic and repetitive imagery. The repetition of the word ‘then’ in the poem creates a momentum; the speaker cannot help but take pleasure in the way he indulges himself with the woman’s body. As the listing goes on, the reader is trapped within the speaker’s own delirium, unable to look away because another ‘then’ indicates that there is more to see. The subject in ‘Óráð’ is a woman without autonomy, who submits to the speaker’s complete power over her body, which he both mistreats and elevates in the ritual-like proceedings of his dream. The last two lines of the poem describe their descent into hell, where the speaker becomes Lucifer and the woman is forced to become his Lilith.

The mixing of symbols of violence and religion in this poem recalls the striking and sacrilegious juxtapositions found in the work of continental European decadent writers. They were fascinated by provocative contrasts, particularly the alliance of pain and pleasure. Davíð’s contrary images of the maltreated body, a beautiful fabric and a crown of ice, and shoes of fire, remind us of the paradoxical imagery decadent writers found in Catholic ritual: thorns and ornamental garments, saints in simultaneous agony and ecstasy, references to devotion, punishment, and sexual pleasure.

¹ We have chosen to follow Icelandic convention in referring to the author by his first name, Davíð.

² Friðrik G. Olgeirsson, *Snert börpu mína: Ævisaga Davíðs Stefánssonar frá Fagraskógi* (Reykjavík: JPV útgáfa, 2007), p. 107.

From *Svartar Fjaðrir* [*Black Feathers*] (1919)

Daðið Stefánsson

Delirium

Since it is so deathly quiet
now I fall asleep,
and meet, O in a dream
tonight, the queen.

I give her a crown
I have fashioned from ice,
and she will soon dance
as a queen should.

I give her a midnight veil
to shroud her body,
so no one will witness
how I've dishonoured it.

Then I give her red shoes
stolen from the flames,
and bind her pale neck
with a crown of pink thorns.

Then I smear her breast
with a cross of my blood
and kiss her cheek like Jesus –
no, like Judas.

Then we spin and spin
and drink poison wine
... I become the king of demons
and take my queen.

Óráð

Ha, ha - nú sofna ég,
fyrst svona er dauðahljótt;
svo hitti ég í draumi
drottninguna í nótt.

Þá gef ég henni kórónu
úr klaka á höfði sér.
Hún skal fá að dansa
eins og drottningu ber.

Svo gef ég henni svarta slæðu
að sveipa um líkamann,
svo enginn geti séð,
að ég svívirti hann.

Svo gef ég henni helskó,
hitaða á rist,
og bind um hvíta hálsinn
bleikan þyrnikvist.

Svo rjóðra ég á brjóst hennar
úr blóði mínu kross
og kyssi hana í Jesú nafni
Júdasarkross.

Svo dönsum við og dönsum
og drekkum eitrad vín.
... Ég verð konungur djöflanna,
hún drottningin mín.