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Decadent New Woman's Ironic Subversions: L. Onerva's Multi-layered Irony

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Miten kaunis mies oli Bengt! Miten ylhäinen oli viiva, joka yhdisti pään ja olkapään! Liian kaunis mies! Se panee helposti epäilemään miehen neroa... Sitä paitsi oli kai todellakin Bengtin neron laita niin ja näin, mutta sivistynyt oli hän ainakin sen sijaan, ei yhtään viljelemätöntä kohtaa, ei muokkaamatonta maata.

[How beautiful a man was Bengt! How sublime was the line that connected the head and the shoulder! Too beautiful a man! That makes one easily doubt his genius... Apart from that, Bengt's genius was, indeed, so and so, but he was educated at least, no uncultivated place, no unworked land.]¹

This extract is taken from the novel *Mirdja* (1908) by the Finnish writer L. Onerva (pen name of Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, 1882-1972), often referred to as the most Decadent novel and one of the first 'subject-centred novels' in the literature written in Finnish.² One of the minor characters, the painter Bengt Iro, becomes the object of the female protagonist Mirdja's gaze. Mirdja tries to upend the usual dynamics of the man as an artist-creator and woman enjoying the role of *musa inspiratrix*. The text feels ironic at first sight – upon closer reading, the novel appears literally permeated by irony. However, after a second reading, the irony appears to work on various levels, leaving the reader in a state of confusion.

The exclamations at the beginning of the paragraph feel exaggerated, but when rereading the extract, one understands that the irony expressed is not simply verbal, based on saying the 'opposite' of what one means. The sentence 'How beautiful a man was Bengt!' does not imply that Bengt was not beautiful; it is the gendered concept of beauty that is being ironized here, as are the ideas of (in)compatibility of physical beauty with genius, and stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity in *fin-de-siècle* artistic discourses. The irony is also directed at the concept of the androgynous artist, who, however, was supposed to be a man. Only men were supposed to exhibit a modern 'harmony of soul and body'³ – this was not to be shared or evaluated by women. Irony acquires humorous and comic overtones when we learn that the main issue with Bengt's genius is not the artist's excessive beauty. The metaphor of workable land ironizes the idea of Bengt's artistic

subjectivity, referring, again, to feminine features incompatible with the desired effeminacy of the Decadents. Moreover, the ironic meaning is closely tied to the fact that the subject of the gaze is a woman.

In this article, I show how irony functions in L. Onerva's Decadent novel *Mirdja*, with brief reference to some of her other early texts. I discuss the workings of various kinds of irony, from verbal irony, extended or complex irony⁴ to dramatic and tragic irony,⁵ intertextual irony, which often intermingles with parody, contextual or context-determined irony,⁶ emphasizing historical, social and aesthetic context. In *Mirdja*, different kinds of irony serve as devices for constructing the Decadent female subject, disturbing and shattering gender boundaries within the ethical and political framework of the surrounding world. I pay attention to the narrative irony in the text, as well as to how the text ironizes various literary strategies, figures, motifs, ideas and whole genres, intertwining the rhetorical devices of irony with the parody and intertextuality so typical of the Decadent mode. Multiple ironic voices, levels, and hierarchies of irony subvert each other and are supported by the devices of Decadent poetics. I argue that the analysis of irony in this novel gives us important insights into the gendered dimensions of this Decadent text.

L. Onerva – A Finnish Decadent New Woman Writer

L. Onerva published *Mirdja* at the age of twenty-six, after studying French literature and art history at the University of Helsinki. She belonged to the liberal cultural circles of writers well-versed in European culture and interested in cosmopolitanism, but she also cared about the 'national awakening' in Finland and was concerned with developing the Finnish language culture. Hence she is a good example of various tensions and contradictions encountered by *fin-de-siècle* women writers who lived in countries marked by the nineteenth-century national renaissance, whose work was influenced by Decadence, and who were concerned with women's emancipation. L. Onerva began her career as a poet in 1904; *Mirdja* was her debut as a prose writer. She went on publishing poetry and prose, writing essays, contributing to newspapers and journals, translating and

mediating the culture of France and wider Europe; she has been called the most prolific mediator of French culture of her generation.⁷

L. Onerva's main concern in her early twentieth-century writing was the search for new humanity and, especially, for figurations of it from the point of view of women. She mapped and tested various ways of constructing female subjectivity with an emphasis on women's opportunities as artists and intellectuals. L. Onerva would also explore various kinds of queer subject figurations with patterns of identifications and desire shifting constantly, impossible to pin down. Irony plays a key role in this enterprise, 'since it does not simply negate the utterances it conditions [...]. [I]t is the ambivalence of irony, this double movement of positing and negating its effects in one and the same utterance'⁸ that, added to the poetics of ambivalence inherent in the Decadent mode, achieves the effect of destabilization of any kind of fixed gender identities.

However, it makes sense to discuss L. Onerva's heroines within the debates about the *fin-de-siècle* New Woman. While experimenting with various ways of questioning gender identities and gender politics, L. Onerva was deeply concerned with women's emancipation; she was one of the first women in Finland who did not need the special permit to study at university. At the turn of the twentieth century, Nordic women enjoyed relatively more freedom than women elsewhere; in Finland, they were given the right to vote and stand for election in 1906. However, many women writers of L. Onerva's generation felt that there was still much to be achieved. The 'Women's question' was part of the agenda of the Finnish patriots, but seen as secondary to the 'liberation of the nation' (Finland gained its independence in 1917).⁹

L. Onerva's writing was received positively within her own cultural circle assembled around the Finnish radical cultural weekly *Päivä*; outside it, it was commented upon rather negatively. Like many other women authors who employed the Decadent mode in their writing – the Norwegian Dagny Juel Przybyszewska, the Russian Zinaida Gippius, or the Baltic German Laura Marholm – L. Onerva was treated by literary historians as a muse and epigone of a male Decadent: the versatile *fin-de-siècle* writer Eino Leino, who entered the Finnish literary canon during his lifetime. L. Onerva

was accused of lacking originality, objectivity and clarity; the alleged subjectivity of her works was regarded as feminine and negative, though other critics labelled her work as ‘unfeminine’ or ‘masculine’, which was also considered negative. The conservative critic V. A. Koskenniemi accused L. Onerva of being incapable of irony and analytical thought;¹⁰ this view was perpetuated later by other critics including the liberal humanist Lauri Viljanen.¹¹ Irony in L. Onerva’s works went largely unnoticed; the only critic who mentioned it before twentieth-century feminist scholars was the literary historian Rafael Koskimies, who was also the first to notice the centrality of the Decadent mode in L. Onerva’s early twentieth-century writing and to connect it with the author’s concern for women’s emancipation.¹²

L. Onerva’s complex heroines have been called Decadent New Women.¹³ This label is something of an oxymoron and a paradox, discord or dissonance typical of women writing Decadence.¹⁴ As such, it perfectly fits L. Onerva’s protagonist of *Mirdja*. The whole novel can be described by various oxymoronic or paradoxical characteristics as a female Decadent *Künstlerroman*/dilettante novel or Decadent *picara* novel.¹⁵ The generic analysis of *Mirdja* leads us to see it as a parodic or ironic mutation of the *Bildungsroman*, where the development of the main character ends with her madness and death. The whole novel oscillates between depicting empowering and debilitating realities and choices for a woman (artist).¹⁶

The book begins with the heroine as a young orphan educated by her uncle and other male Decadent dilettantes, Pygmalion figures who decided to create a ‘kaikkeusolento’ [universal creature], a kind of an Overman in the figure of woman.¹⁷ Mirdja tries to appropriate various male roles as a Decadent Don Juan or a *flâneur*, while simultaneously styling herself as a *femme fatale* or the sphinx. As an aspiring singer and actress, she searches her art, self, love, sexuality, motherhood (both her mother’s and her own) or some higher ideas she can identify with and for spirituality, while exploring various physical and mental environments. After many disappointments, she ends up in a marriage with an enigmatic man named Runar, a teacher who is, nevertheless, also inclined to be a Decadent dilettante. After a period of torment in the marital relationship, Mirdja and Runar

achieve a kind of total symbiosis or fusion, in which all the tensions of gender and other differences cease to exist. However, this amorous mimicry happens too late: Mirdja becomes mentally ill and Runar dies.¹⁸ The novel ends with Mirdja slowly sinking into a bog, covered by its ‘valkeaan käärinliinaan’ [white shroud].¹⁹

Irony within the Polyphonic Narrative

Though (self-)irony is one of the founding strategies of Decadent writing²⁰ that has been tackled and explored vis-à-vis individual writers such as Wilde or Huysmans, according to Peter Butler, ‘nobody has ever seriously proposed Decadent irony as a type’.²¹ Irony, Decadence, and women (writers) form an especially challenging triad,²² since traditionally, women were supposed to be neither ironists nor Decadent authors and subjects. No matter which of the many definitions of irony we adopt, we find much of it in the work of Decadent women authors. L. Onerva’s principal mode of narration is extradiegetic. In *Mirdja*, only one section (called ‘Yksinpuheluja maailmassa’ [Monologues in the World]) is narrated in the first person, while the rest of the novel (like almost all of her other prose works) is a third-person narrative. The extradiegetic narrator is omniscient; focalization happens mostly, but not only, through the main character whose thoughts and dreams the narrator seems to know, although, in accordance with the poetics of Decadence, there is no certainty about anything.

All narration is pronouncedly polyphonic. Various voices compete, as if (often ironically) commenting on the protagonist’s thoughts as well as on each other’s utterances; this polyphony makes the irony multi-layered. All these devices are familiar from the earlier modes of authorial narrative with the perspective ‘from above’,²³ but, combined with the inherently ambivalent, at times oneiric mode of Decadent narratives, it is often unclear who is speaking. Neither the narrator nor the other voices are a concealed presence as in Realist or Naturalist texts. On the contrary, although L. Onerva does not use metanarrative devices, narrative voices are highlighted and foregrounded, emphasizing the materiality of language and the artificial nature of literary artefacts.

The competing voices sometimes seem to depart from the heroine's thought, or her inner monologues, on which they often comment. At times, in tune with the Symbolist mode, the voices belong to natural phenomena such as the sea waves, or inanimate sources of sounds like (church) bells. Occasionally, the ironic style involves a kind of 'doubling': either when one voice affirms and then negates something, suggesting narratorial unreliability,²⁴ or when two parties or voices quarrel.

The ironic narrator, who dominates many sections, steps forward at the closing chapter of the first, nameless, part of the novel, when Mirdja is indulging in contemplating the *sisällistä sielun mysteriaa* [inner mystery of her soul], her *'pahat ajatukset'* [wicked thoughts] about plunging *'rikollisissa bakkanaalijuhlissa'* [into criminal Bacchanalia] and the longing for *'sairasta nautintoa'* [sick pleasures].²⁵ She feels frustrated that she does not have the opportunity to commit as many sins as she would like to; but she is even more frustrated knowing that if the opportunity arose, she would not be able to realize her fantasies. They would demand too much cruelty and Mirdja knows that, in principle, she is good. *'Oi kuinka kalpea ja voimaton oli hyvyys! Ja Mirdja rakasti nautintoa ja voimaa ... Mirdja raukka!'* [Oh, how pale and weak goodness was! And Mirdja loved pleasure and strength ... Poor Mirdja!]²⁶

Closer analysis reveals various levels of irony. First, a young girl's *naïveté* is ironized: her longing to be 'bad', or 'wicked', which feels more appealing than being 'a good girl'. The exclamation 'Poor Mirdja!' which could come from a patronizing, ironic narrator, points to the same level. The next paragraph concludes with a question: *'Miksi ajatella aina, punnita aina? Sellaisilla taipumuksilla ajatella ja punnita! ... Mirdja raukka!'* [Why contemplate all the time, why ponder? To contemplate and ponder when having such inclinations! ... Poor Mirdja!]²⁷ The allusion to the idea of the (Decadent) subject being passive, unable to act and inclined to unrealized perversion evokes the Decadent concept of 'cerebral lechery'.²⁸ Since a female cerebral lecher was not easily imaginable as a figure of Decadence, we can read the exclamation 'Poor Mirdja!' as ironic with regard to woman's problematic position in Decadent discourses of sexuality. At the same

time, within the context of the novel, the sentence about ‘inclinations’ can be read as an allusion to queerness, which elevates the narrator’s irony to yet another level.

The closing sentences of the third paragraph with the final exclamation give us an image of congregations in ‘tuhansissa kirkoissa’ [thousands of churches], singing a heartfelt hymn about raising one’s soul to God, after which the chapter closes with the third exclamation, ‘Poor Mirdja!’²⁹ The primary irony here lies in the juxtaposition of one young girl’s ‘sinful thoughts’ with the thousand-times-greater power of the discourse of institutionalized religion. Within the context of the novel, this extract appears cataphorically ironic as, despite Mirdja’s contempt of religious institutions, years later she will be married, although unwillingly, in church by her husband’s father, who happens to be a Lutheran minister. Finally, the exclamation following the church image reads as tragic irony, since Mirdja’s lifelong and most painful search will be for spirituality, a vain quest for her own kind of deity, till the tragic end of her life, which evokes the concept of the irony of fate.³⁰

Decadent Heroines and Ironization of Nationalism and of the *kansa*

The narrator of *Mirdja* appears strongly ironic from the very first chapter. The novel opens in a bourgeois home, where ‘Kaikki puolueen terävimmät päät olivat kokoontuneet neuvottelemaan pian toimeenpantavan iltaman ohjelmasta.’ [all the sharpest minds of the party gathered to discuss the programme for a [cultural] evening they were soon to organize.]³¹ The leading figure is Elli Kailo, the committed wife of a secondary school teacher, who could:

hyvällä omatunnolla olisi saattanut arvata kaikkien jalojen aatteiden yleisen asianajotoimiston. Mutta sitä hän ei kuitenkaan tehnyt. Hän oli vaatimaton eikä koskaan tuonut esille ansioluetteloaan. Sen takivät hänen edestään muuta, ja itsestään oli selvää, että hänelle aina annettiin etusija, kun oli kysymyksessä jonkin uuden yrityksen onnistuminen. Niinpä toimi hän nytkin puheenjohtajana.

[in good conscience, open a general law office of noble ideas. However, she did not do that. She was modest and she would never show off her achievements. Others did that for her, and it went without saying that she was always given precedence, should a new undertaking be successful. That was why she was also acting as chairperson now.]³²

The bourgeois ladies, evoking the negative dilettantism of Goethe's 'semi-knowledgeable patrons and half-competent enthusiasts',³³ are discussing the programme of the evening and decide to invite only singers whose surnames are Finnish, regardless of their artistic abilities. All participants are happy with the decision. The absent Mirdja Ast is said to be a most talented singer, but she is quickly disqualified due to her 'foreign' surname as well as the bad influence she could exert on the patriotic young men. Ironization of the conservative bourgeois strata of *fin-de-siècle* Finnish society, with their nationalist zeal and lack of understanding of art, is rather straightforward here. The irony is partly verbal – the narrator means the opposite of what s/he is actually saying (cf. Elli Kailo's 'noble ideas' and her alleged modesty) – and partly contextual or context-determined. Knowledge of the historical context helps us to appreciate the irony more fully, but, on the whole, the ironic tone can be grasped even without any specific knowledge of Finnish history.

The ironization of the patriotic zealots' incapacity to understand art appears in more of L. Onerva's early texts. The best example is the short story 'Kuvittelija' ['Fantasy (Wo)Man'], from the collection *Murtoviivoja* [*Broken Lines*] (1909). Its protagonist Tuulos makes up an ideal androgynous creature in his fantasy, incomprehensible to the petite bourgeois narrator of the story whose lack of understanding Tuulos' aestheticizing fantasies finally becomes the target of the irony in the text. As such, this is not that thematically different from Decadent writing from France and elsewhere. However, Decadents from the European peripheries adopted far more complex stances towards nationalism and its gendered aspects.³⁴ A key aspect was the way in which the patriotic, mainly Swedish-speaking upper and middle classes (the active force in the Finnish 'national project') venerated the ordinary, mostly Finnish-speaking countryfolk, the *kansa*, which in Finnish, stood for nation, people and folk. As in some other 'awakening nations' in Europe,³⁵ the ideal of pure Finnishness was the *kansa*, cherished, celebrated and serving various aspirations of Finnish patriotic circles.

L. Onerva also ironized the often-hypocritical relationship of the middle and upper classes to the *kansa* in her early short stories, both before and after *Mirdja*. In ‘Veren ääni’ [‘The Voice of Blood’] from the collection *Nousukkaita* (1911), the protagonist Kaarina appears first as a passive, languid variant of the Decadent New Woman, a second-generation upstart from a Finnish-speaking merchant family who climbs the social ladder through marriage to an old, Decadent, but ardently patriotic Swedish-speaking aristocrat. When Kaarina’s Finnish-speaking father comes to visit his in-laws, he ‘yritti puhua ruotsia, jota hän äänsi yhtä virheellisesti kuin aatelisperhe suomea. Se oli kansallinen kuolemansynti tässä vastaperustetussa fennomaanitaloudessa ja vanha vapaaherra, periaatteen mies, osoitti mieltään uhkaavalla vaikenemisella.’ [he tries to speak Swedish, which he pronounces just as inaccurately as the Swedish-speaking family pronounced Finnish. That [speaking Swedish] was a deadly sin in this newly established Fennoman home and the old baron, a man of principle, demonstrated his disdain by threatening silence.]³⁶ The narrator’s irony escalates further when s/he comments on the way the upper classes venerate the abstract notion of the *kansa* but despise real people from a humble background, especially social climbers. The narrator’s ironic and ambivalent stance towards the character of Kaarina shows the ‘impossible’ position of this kind of a female parvenu in relation to the discourse of Decadence and nationalism.

Mirdja is also ambivalent towards her own roots; she searches for them by travelling to the countryside and visiting the poor countrywoman Loviisa, who used to be her nanny. Loviisa is dying, ill and abandoned by all, and *Mirdja* finds her in an isolated, dilapidated hut. Loviisa can be read as a bitter parody of the ideal of sacrificial motherly femininity, revered in Finnish patriotic rhetoric as a reminder of the realities of hardworking countrywomen, old mothers abused by alcoholic husbands and suffering their fate in silence.³⁷ At the encounter with Loviisa, *Mirdja* is a proud young (New) woman, raised by male bohemians and Decadent dilettantes and indoctrinated with ‘Over(woman)’ egotism, unable to recognize another woman in need, even her former nanny. Loviisa’s character appears ironic when considered in the context of *Mirdja*’s desperate search for a mother figure and her laments about being a motherless daughter.

Hence in *Mirdja*, the ironization of the hypocritical relation towards the *kansa* concerns not only upper- and middle-class patriots, but also the more liberal circles of bohemian artists, including Decadents, and, in a way, also the heroine who is educated by them. All Mirdja's 'intimate' encounters with the *kansa* end in disaster, presented through multi-layered irony by the narrator. After the Loviisa episode Mirdja visits a folk festival, where she is, again, in search of herself, trying to identify with the *kansa* as something higher or greater than she is. Her question: 'Mitä on tuo ns. kansa?' [What is that so-called folk?]³⁸ sounds strongly ironic, given that Mirdja oscillates between the disgust she instinctively feels for the *kansa* and the desire to merge and fuse with this overwhelming, liberating force.³⁹ Typically for a Decadent text, Mirdja's mental ideals resounding with pathos and exaltation turn into their opposites in reality. Mirdja feels threatened by the crowd, and experiences the situation as a kind of collective rape. However, after running away and overhearing a patriotic song sung by the 'folk', she feels enchanted again. The confused, ambivalent feelings towards the folk, which are the main source of irony here, appear as L. Onerva's response to the various contemporary discussions about the *kansa*, expressing the impossibility of functional communication between the mostly middle-class Finnish patriots and the 'people'. Mirdja's thoughts, reported by the narrator, range from ecstatic exclamations like, 'Jumalan juhla!' [God's feast!] to expressions of distance and disgust as 'tuo kansalle niin ominainen yhteistuoksu (...) työn hikeä, likaisia vaatteita, tupakkaa, lapsia' [this common smell, so typical of the people (...) the sweat of hard labour, dirty clothes, tobacco, children].⁴⁰ They oscillate from considerations mirroring the discourses of decadence and degeneration 'Me olemme eri lailla sairaita' [we are sick in different ways] to a conclusion that, after all, the *kansa* is the only strong and vital force in mankind.⁴¹

By means of mixing various voices, the (Decadent) aesthetes' discourse is juxtaposed with a socialist one, conveyed through revolutionary rhetoric. Cutting irony is aimed at the very discourses of 'disappointment' of Finnish *fin-de-siècle* intellectuals and artists whose own roots were, very often, in the *kansa*, but who had denied them when moving to the city. The gendered reading

of the passage adds another layer of irony, foregrounding the protest against the restrictive constructions of femininity within all available discourses.⁴²

The multi-layered irony in the passages I have discussed is mostly determined by the historical and cultural context, targeting the incompatibility of various contemporary discourses. The prism of the Decadent opposition between the ideal and reality and the highlighted gender dynamics of the respective situations add extra layers of tragic irony, showing the complex position of a female (Decadent) subject in the historical context.

Echo, Irony, and the Decadent Woman Artist

A gender-sensitive reading of *Mirdja* reveals the ways in which ironic attention is paid to male Decadent aesthetes who indulge in Decadent effeminacy and ‘gender parasitism’⁴³ but do not want to allow women to become creative subjects of the gaze. In the scene in the artist’s studio involving the painter Bengt,⁴⁴ quoted at the beginning of this article, Mirdja tries to appropriate the objectifying gaze and act as a Decadent Don Juan. However, the dynamic eventually changes and the man becomes the master again, delegating the woman to the position of an objectified muse. When he celebrates Mirdja’s beauty, complexity and undecidability and asks ‘[I]ell me, who you are!’ she answers: ‘sano minulle, mikä sinä olet!’; ‘Älä kysy, mikä mina olen, enpä sitä itsekään tiedä ... tai ... mina olen kaikkea, mitä uskot...’ [Don’t ask who I am, I don’t know that myself ... or ... I am everything that you believe me to be.]⁴⁵ The answer sounds bitterly ironic in the context of their previous interaction when Mirdja seemed to be in control, commenting ironically on Bengt’s beauty and genius. However, Bengt obviously does not understand the irony on any level.

The homosocial artistic milieu is ironized when depicting the circle around Mirdja’s most important Decadent educator-Pygmalion, the ‘pub philosopher’ Rolf, who was allegedly modelled on Eino Leino, L. Onerva’s aforementioned mentor and partner. A chapter in which Mirdja’s exceptionality and complexity are once again discussed in her absence suggests that her persona, a subject of the bourgeois ladies’ gossip at the beginning of the novel, now serves as a disposable

conduit for bonds between men.⁴⁶ The chapter ironizes a whole set of specific intertexts⁴⁷ and suggests the difficult, often impossible, position of a Decadent woman artist among Decadent men. Eventually, Rolf assumes responsibility for his detrimental Pygmalion-like authority. When, as usual, he indulges in inventing various paradoxes to describe Mirdja, she exclaims: ‘Oh, sinä filosofi!’ [You philosopher!]⁴⁸ Rolf obviously does not understand this rather ‘easy’ example of verbal irony, since he replies: ‘Minä! Kaikki ihmiset ovat enemmän tai vähemmän filosofeja.’ [Me! All people are more or less philosophers.]⁴⁹ Rolf’s continued dialogue is an explicit repetition (including a quote from a French song) of that which occurs in a scene at the beginning of the novel. Mirdja says she remembers their earlier conversation and Rolf’s quoting the song and he answers: ‘Niin, niin, mina olen sanonut sen jo ennen. Siitä nyt näet, miten kulunut mina olen, en keksi enää mitään uutta. Aina mina vain siteeraan ja kopioin.’ [Yes, yes. I have said it before. Now you see how worn out I am, I don’t come up with anything new. I am just quoting and copying all the time.] Mirdja snaps: ‘Ja mina kopioin sinua. Kaksinkertainen kunnia!’ [And I am copying you. A double honour!]⁵⁰

This time, irony is verbal and direct; the statement expresses Mirdja’s painful awareness of being an Echo, a copy of a copy, endlessly recycling worn-out quotes, a female imitator of a tired male Narcissus-dilettante, unable to produce her own original thoughts. When Mirdja says ‘I am copying you’, she refers directly to the ‘pedagogy of seduction’⁵¹ and processes of identification in her childhood and early youth. She is not only copying Rolf’s ideas, but identifying with him, imitating a dilettantism which in his case is pallid and unproductive. However, though the restrictive role of Echo is emblematic of woman’s fate as an unoriginal imitator, emphasized in Decadence, it affords Mirdja the opportunity to interrogate the gender dynamic by being ironic about the very Narcissus-Pygmalion whose words she repeats. As Echo, Mirdja can, through repetition, become an ‘initiator of the ironic’,⁵² evoking the relationship between Echo and irony: ‘Oh Echo, yes Echo, thou great master of irony!’⁵³ Frustration turns into ironizing (exploring, from still another viewpoint, the association of irony and dilettantism),⁵⁴ which sustains the ambivalence

and multiplicity of meanings within the text, enriched by the asymmetry between male and a female dilettantism. ‘Ah, miksi minä ajattelen toisten ajatuksilla? Siksikö että olen nainen vai siksikö että olen kaksinkertaisuus?’ [Oh, why do I still think with the thought of others? Is it because I am a woman or because I am mediocre?]⁵⁵ asks Mirdja.

The gendered asymmetry of artistic creativity and originality within the Decadent framework is a key theme in *Mirdja*, as in L. Onerva’s other early works, including the novel *Inari* (1913) about an aspiring woman intellectual, which addresses similar questions with a similarly bitter irony. Mirdja, praised for her extraordinary talent in acting and singing, is asked to play a leading role in a new play called *Odalisque*, but, after she learns its author comes from the provinces, she makes many ironic and sceptical judgements about him and about the name of the play. She ends up fully identifying with the character she plays, proclaiming she will ‘itseäni näytellä’ [play herself], ‘eikä sinun odaliskillasi saa muuta sielua olla kuin minun.’ [the odalisque would not ever have a soul different from hers, Mirdja’s.]⁵⁶ She gives a brilliant performance and is very disappointed when she cannot meet the playwright. Instead, she meets his friend Runar, her future husband, and later learns that in a way he had ‘co-created her’, that is, he had in fact written the play, as well as other texts she had identified with.

In their conversation after the performance, Mirdja alludes to debates on the ‘paradox of the actor’, the actress in Decadence, and *fin-de-siècle* artistic and aesthetic discourses.⁵⁷ She ironizes actors, or, better, actresses, as creatures who just ‘ihmissielun apinoita’ [ape human souls], who ‘Kaikkea he antavat ja omistavat paitsi itseään, se on varma.’ [give and own everything apart from themselves.]⁵⁸ Runar reprimands her for her excessive self-irony and offers a much more empowering vision of what an actor can be: the most magnificent talent in all humankind, ‘suuren ihmisen suuri sielu’ [a great soul of a great human being], ‘uudestisyntymisen luova taito joka sekunti,’ [a creative will of being reborn every second] – s/he is ‘hän onkin sielujen mahtavin hallitsija ja kasvattaja.’ [the most magnificent ruler and educator of souls.]⁵⁹ The conversation ends in a feeling of profound mutual comprehension. Within the context of the novel, however, the

positive and encouraging moment appears as another case of tragic irony, being subverted by the fact that the empowering view is held by the most enigmatic, and, eventually, the most powerful of Mirdja's Pygmalions.

Conclusion

The novel concludes with Mirdja's sinking into the bog.⁶⁰ The aspiring Over(wo)man, a kind of an upstart, who tried to 'rise' in all possible ways, meets a slow death by drowning, which can be easily viewed as dramatic and tragic, or even cosmic irony, and/or an irony of fate.⁶¹ The bog is much more ambivalent than the 'hells' which threaten Mirdja and laugh at her, contributing to the choir of ironic voices which torture the heroine with their paradoxical outcries throughout the novel:

Mikä altruisti sinä olet, sinä paha, itsekäs Mirdja!
Miten tyhmä sinä olet, kun et löydä parempaa ratkaisua, sinä visas, itsekylläinen Mirdja!
Miten heikko sinä olet, kun sinut kärpänen kaataa, sinä voimakas, ihmisiä hallitseva Mirdja!
Kummallisia ajatuksia!
Mirdja naurahtaa.
Helvetit nauravat myös.

[What an altruist are you, you bad egoist Mirdja!
How stupid you are, if you don't find better solution, you wise, complacent Mirdja!
How weak you are, when a fly can overturn you, you strong Mirdja, who dominates people!
Strange thoughts!
Mirdja laughs.
Hells laughs as well ...]⁶²

L. Onerva's irony is set in motion, 'made [to] happen'⁶³ by the polyphonic nature of the text, a technique intertwined with parody and intertextuality, typical devices of Decadent poetics. The irony is employed to convey the endless chain of undecidable, ambivalent, and paradoxical discords and dissonances brought about by the dilemmas of the female Decadent subject. As Claire Colebrook points out, 'in any collection of competing voices it is always possible that the underlying or unifying intention is undecidable.'⁶⁴ In the case of *Mirdja*, irony can often be understood as self-irony and, in accordance with the Decadent aesthetic, as a shield of the multiple self.⁶⁵ Irony itself is being ironicized on many levels.

The multi-layered irony in L. Onerva's text shows the complex web of contradictory discourses and the uncertainty in which the Decadent New Women writers/artists and creative female subjects had to operate. The shifting edge of irony allows for scrutiny of a large scale of *fin-de-siècle* discourses: from those expressing the paradoxes of the nationalist idealizations of Finnish *kansa* to those showing the paradoxes in the gendering of the artistic discourse; from those showing bourgeois narrowmindedness to those exposing the narrowmindedness of homosocial bohemian circles. Analyses of the uses of irony by women writing Decadence help us to foreground 'the social, conventional and political aspects of language,'⁶⁶ and of the whole society in the given context. They show us new ways of seeing irony 'as a phenomenon that serves both discursive activism and critical disruption'.⁶⁷ Many of these elements are continued in the queer aesthetic of recent decades.⁶⁸

¹ L. Onerva, *Mirdja* (*Valitut teokset*, Helsinki: Otava, 1956), p. 102. All translations in this article, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

² Leevi Valkama, *Proosan taide. Viisi tutkielmaa* (Helsinki: WSOY, 1983), p. 216.

³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990; Berkeley: University of California Press 2008), p. 137.

⁴ Irony is a notoriously elusive concept; see for example Peter Butler, *Beyond Decadence: Exposing the Narrative Irony in Jan Opolsky's Prose* (Prague: Karolinum Press, 2015), p. 52. In verbal irony, the ironic meaning is 'local', originating from the incongruity of the surface meaning and the intended meaning of a word or a sentence, the 'irony of words'. See D. C. Muecke, *Irony and the Ironic* (New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 11. However, irony tends often 'to extend across a whole idea' (Claire Colebrook, *Irony*, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 9) and involves larger units than words or sentences.

⁵ Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 14.

⁶ There are various ways of looking at contextual or context-determined irony – see for example Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 3; Dan Shen, 'Non-Ironic Turning Ironic Contextually: Multiple Context-Determined Irony in "The Story of an Hour"', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 38 (2009), 115-30.

⁷ L. Onerva translated and/or wrote about a wide range of francophone authors, from Voltaire to Philippe Soupault, including Madame de Staël, Alfred de Musset, George Sand, Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Paul Bourget. The heroine of *Mirdja* shares some features with Sand's Lélia and Consuelo, as well as with Hellé, the protagonist of Marcelle Tinayre's eponymous novel from 1898.

⁸ Damon R. Young, 'The Living End, or the Love without a Future', in *Queer Love in Film and Television: Critical Essays*, ed. by Pamela Demory & Christopher Pullen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 17.

⁹ The Finnish patriots spoke mostly in favour of women's education and even of their literary activities. Finland's 'national philosopher' J. V. Snellman (1806-1881) considered women's education very important, but he expressed his reservations about signs of any 'excesses' in women's public and artistic activities. See Pertti Karkama, *Järkevä rakkaus. J. V. Snellmanin kirjallisuuspolitiikka* (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura 1989), p. 228.

Originally the Eastern province of the Swedish kingdom, Finland existed as a Grand Duchy within the Russian Empire from 1809 to 1917 and the turn of twentieth century can be considered the period of culmination of the Finnish national movement. See, for example, Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, trans. by Ben Fawkes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985); Hroch, *Hledání souvislostí. Eseje z komparativních dějin Evropy*, 2nd edn (Prague: SLON, 2018); and Matti Klinge, *Let Us Be Finns – Essays on History*, trans. by Martha Gaber Abrahamsen, Mary Lomas, Mirja Lavanne and David Morris (Helsinki: Otava, 1990).

¹⁰ V. A. Koskenniemi, 'Mirdja', *Aika* (1908), 876-78 (p. 877).

¹¹ Lauri Viljanen, 'L. Onerva 50-vuotias', *Helsingin Sanomat*, 28 April 1932.

¹² See Rafael Koskimies, 'L. Onerva (s. 1882)', in L. Onerva, *Valitut teokset*, ed. by Rafael Koskimies (Helsinki: Otava, 1956), pp. 5-14 (especially pp. 5-7); Rafael Koskimies, *Der Nordische Dekadent. Eine Vergleichende Literaturstudie* (Helsinki: Suomalainen tiedeakatemia, 1968), p. 105. For more on L. Onerva's reception, see Viola Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound: Mimetic Strategies in L. Onerva's Mirdja* (PhD Thesis, Turku: University of Turku, 2014).

¹³ Viola Parente-Čapková, 'Decadent New Woman?', *NORA – Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, 6.1 (1998), 6-20; and *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*: L. Onerva's work was 'rediscovered' by Finnish feminist literary critics (Lea Rojola, Päivi Lappalainen) and included in the new wave of the scholarship on literary Decadence, mostly in the 1990s; see, for example, Pirjo Lyytikäinen, *Narkissos ja sfinksi. Minä ja Toinen vuosisadan vaihteen kirjallisuudessa* (Helsinki: SKS, 1997). My own studies from the last two decades have explored figurations of gender and the gendered subject in L. Onerva's work within a transnational, intertextual framework of what Matthew Potolsky (2012) has called the 'Decadent Republic of Letters', and within *fin-de-siècle* writing by women in the European centres and peripheries (for example Katja Mihurko Poniž and Viola Parente-Čapková, 'The New Women from the Margins', *Interlitteraria*, 20.2 (2015), 184-98).

¹⁴ One of the collections of George Egerton's short stories was called *Discords* (1894); L. Onerva's poetical debut was entitled *Sekasointuja* [Dissonances/Discords] (1904).

¹⁵ See Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*.

¹⁶ Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 219.

¹⁷ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 125.

In her early texts, L. Onerva lead an intense dialogue with Nietzsche, including the gendered idea of the Overman (see Viola Parente-Čapková, '(Un)Masking Woman: Decadent and Nietzschean Figurations of Woman in the Early Work of L. Onerva', in *The New Woman and the Aesthetic Opening. Unlocking Gender in Twentieth-Century Texts*, ed. by Ebba Witt-Brattstrom (Stockholm: Södertörn högskola), pp. 67-81. *Mirdja*'s Overman fantasies are connected to her artist aspirations, but they end up in failure, since she is unable to free herself either from the stereotypical *femme fatale* images or from the encumbering aspects of decadent dilettantism.

¹⁸ See Viola Parente-Čapková, 'Free Love, Free Love, Mystical Union or Prostitution? The Dissonant Love Stories of L. Onerva', in *Changing Scenes. Encounters between European and Finnish Fin de Siècle*, ed. by P. Lyytikäinen (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society), pp. 54-84 (pp. 60-61), and *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 167.

¹⁹ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 297.

²⁰ See Robert 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 Pynsent (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 111-248, and *Questions of Identity. Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality* (London: Central European University Press, 1994).

²¹ Peter Butler, *Beyond Decadence*, p. 83.

²² Rachilde wrote a novel called *La Sanglante Ironie* [*The Bloody Irony*] (1891). For discussion of irony in the work of Rachilde, see Melanie Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Diana Holmes, *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender, and the Woman Writer* (Oxford: Berg, 2001). For Vernon Lee and irony, see Andrew Eastham, *Aesthetic Afterlives: Irony, Literary Modernity, and the Ends of Beauty* (London: Continuum, 2011).

²³ See Monika Fludernik, *An Introduction to Narratology* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 124-30.

²⁴ Compare with Sari Salin, *Hullua hurskaampi. Ironinen kahdentuminen Jorma Korpelan romaaneissa* (Helsinki: WSOY, 2002).

²⁵ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Cerebral lechery or 'mental erethism' was one of the typical ways in which the Decadents distanced themselves from reality, especially from 'lower' sexuality, associated with heterosexual intercourse and therefore despised. Cerebral lechery was a kind of 'higher sensuality', perverse and morbid stimulation of the senses with metaphysical overtones, reserved, of course, for men. See for example A.J.L. Busst, 'The Image of the Androgyne in the Nineteenth Century', in *Romantic Mythologies*, ed. by Ian Fletcher (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 1967; Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination 1880-1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Pynsent, Robert Pynsent 1989: 'Conclusory Essay: Decadence and Innovation', in *Decadence and Innovation: Austro-Hungarian Life and Art at the Turn of the Century*, ed. by Robert Pynsent (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989). On the possibilities of a female cerebral lecher see Parente-Čapková, 'Free Love', pp. 60-61.

²⁹ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 45.

³⁰ According to Claire Colebrook's discussion of ironic endings, 'the word irony refers to the limits of human meaning; we do not see the effects of what we do, the outcomes of our actions, or the forces that exceed our choices. Such irony is cosmic irony, or irony of fate. Related to cosmic irony [...] is the more literary concept of dramatic or tragic irony', when we see the character at the mercy of the plot or destiny. Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 14.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

³² *Ibid.*

- ³³ See Richard Hibbitt, *Dilettantism and Its Values: From Weimar Classicism to the Fin de Siècle* (Oxford: Legenda, 2006).
- ³⁴ See Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 12; on Decadence and nationalism see Matthew Potolsky, 'Decadence, Nationalism and the Canon Formation', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 67.2 (2006), 213-44 (p. 215).
- ³⁵ See for example Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006).
- ³⁶ L. Onerva, *Nousukkaita* (Helsinki: Yrjö Weilin & Kump., 1911), p. 204-05. In ethnonationalistic manner, the Fennomans identified the Finnish nation with the Finnish language, advocating the process of nationalizing (ie. Fennicizing) the Swedish-speaking educated classes (Reetta Eiranen, Fennomania. In *Encyclopaedia on Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, ed. by Joep Leerssen, Study Platform on Interlocking Nationalisms, Amsterdam 2016 <<http://ernie.uva.nl/viewer.p/21/56/object/122-250804>>).
- ³⁷ In an unpublished manuscript, L. Onerva wrote about the patriotic icon and folk singer Larin Paraske who 'died of hunger and misery'. See Viola Parente-Čapková, 'The Old Woman, Decadent and Folkloristic', in *States of Decadence. On the Aesthetic of Beauty, Decline and Transgression across Time and Space*, Vol. 1, ed. by Guri Barstad and Karen P. Knutsen (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), pp. 61-79, and 'Vanhan naisen hahmo 1800- ja 1900-luvun vaihteen kirjallisuudessa: kansanrunouden ja sen tekstualisaation kaikuja', in *Satuperinteestä nykyrunoon. Suullisen perinteen ja kirjallisuuden yhteyksiä*, ed. by Niina Hämäläinen, Hanna Karhu and Silja Vuorikuru (Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura 2019), pp. 209-36.
- ³⁸ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 134.
- ³⁹ Mirdja's desire points to many *fin-de-siècle* tendencies in various currents of thought and art. The Finnish writer Arvid Jämfelt popularized the image of the 'sea of life', into which the individual dissolves in the desire for symbiosis and longing for 'wholeness'. As Robert Pynsent has pointed out, the Decadent often perceived 'his self as an expression of the history of his nation or of the human race as a whole'. Robert Pynsent, *Questions of Identity*, p. 110.
- ⁴⁰ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 135.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- ⁴² See Parente-Čapková, 'Decadent Women Telling Nations Differently: The Finnish Writer L. Onerva and Her Motherless Dilettante Upstarts', in *Women Telling Nations*, ed. by Amelia Sanz, Francesca Scott, and Suzan Van Dijk (Amsterdam: Rodopi 2014), pp. 247-70.
- ⁴³ See Ebba Witt-Brattström, *Dekadensens skön. Ola Hansson och Laura Marholm* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2007).
- ⁴⁴ An allusion to Christina Rossetti's poem, see Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 118.
- ⁴⁵ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, pp. 108-09.
- ⁴⁶ Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 131.
- ⁴⁷ See Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, p. 118.
- ⁴⁸ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 87.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.
- ⁵¹ See Gunter Gebauer and Christoph Wulf, *Mimesis: Culture – Art – Society*, trans. by Don Reneau (1992; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 213-14; Parente-Čapková, *Decadent New Woman (Un)Bound*, pp. 42, 49-50. For the concept of 'erroneous apprenticeship' vis-à-vis dilettantism, see Hibbitt, p. 20.
- ⁵² Denise Riley, *Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 157.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 160, quoting Kirkegaard. The thematization of the issue of imitation, typical of Decadent texts (see for example Matthew Potolsky, 'Pale Imitations: Walter Pater's Decadent Historiography', in *Perennial Decay: On the Aesthetics and Politics of Decadence*, ed. by Lisa Constable, Dennis Denisoff and Matthew Potolsky (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), pp. 235-53) is ironized here by the pronouncedly gendered perspective.
- ⁵⁴ Compare with Richard Hibbitt, 'Dilettantism and Irony: Jules Laforgue and C. M. Wieland', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 43.3 (2007), 290-300.
- ⁵⁵ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 145.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- ⁵⁷ L. Onerva knew Diderot's essay as well as the debates around it; her teacher, aesthetician Yrjö Hirn wrote on the subject and L. Onerva translated his essay from Swedish into Finnish. She was also familiar with Baudelaire's and other Decadents' views on the actress, and followed the international developments in theatre and the strategies of the famous actresses and divas. See Lucia Re, 'D'Annunzio, Duse, Wilde, Bernhardt: Author and Actress between Decadence and Modernity', in *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, ed. by Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 86-129.
- ⁵⁸ L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 167.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- ⁶⁰ For the meaning of the bog in Nordic Decadent literature see Rafael Koskimies, *Der Nordische Dekadent*; for the gendered reading of the bog as a Decadent space see Viola Parente-Čapková, 'Spaces of Decadence: A Decadent New Woman's Journey from the City to the Bog', in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, ed. by Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková and Mirjam Hinrikus (New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2020).

⁶¹ See note 26, Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 14.

⁶² L. Onerva, *Mirdja*, p. 233.

⁶³ See Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 6.

⁶⁴ Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 12.

⁶⁵ See Pynsent, 'Decadence and Innovation' and *Questions of Identity*.

⁶⁶ Colebrook, *Irony*, p. 16.

⁶⁷ Tarez Samra Graban, *Women's Irony: Rewriting Feminist Rhetorical Histories* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015), p. 2.

⁶⁸ See Kristin Mahoney, *Literature and the Politics of Post-Victorian Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 195.