

## DECADENCE IN ESTONIAN CULTURE: TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

Organised by the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, Tallinn  
University and Estonian Academy of Arts  
4–6 May 2023



The designer Tiiu Pirsko reused Friedebert Tuglas' ink drawing *Muinasjutt* (Fairy Tale, 1907) to create the visual motif. The Under and Tuglas Literature Centre

In the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the aesthetic content of 'decadence' was mainly created by the French writers C. Baudelaire and T. Gautier. It referred to a new approach to aesthetics which emphasised the formal structure and the ambivalent poetics of the literary work. This type of poetics undermined the heretofore canonical stylistic conventions, merging the beautiful and the ugly, the highbrow and the lowbrow. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, decadence was being discussed in many European cultural centres, and in addition to the arts, the concept had permeated scientific, pseudo-scientific and philosophical modes of expression. By then its implications were significantly wider, encompassing both negative and positive meanings. At the same time, a widespread stigmatisation of decadence began to gain ground. Many theorists, artists, and writers of the time equated decadence with disease and cultural degeneration, and this burden of prejudice and disdain carried over into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which resulted in the gradual distantiation from the concept.

In his treatise "Degeneration" (*Entartung*, 1892), the Austro-Hungarian doctor and writer M. Nordau (Südfeld) characterised the atmosphere of the *fin de siècle* with such keywords as

weariness, hysteria, egotism, and the paralysis of will, labelling many influential modern authors as degenerates (T. Gautier, C. Baudelaire, G. Flaubert, F. Nietzsche, R. Wagner, É. Zola, L. Tolstoy, H. Ibsen, O. Wilde). The diagnoses of the era were not exactly wrong, but Nordau (and his peers) completely overlooked the innovative and experimental moments characteristic of the oeuvre of the thinkers he mentioned, such as the conscious subversion of existing norms and traditions, and the promotion of unusual behavioural and perceptual practices.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, decadence was subjected to quite a strong pathologisation. Its peak on the eve of the Second World War resulted in the erasure of all the ambivalent layers of meaning carried by the concept. In both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, modernist aesthetics was equated with moral degeneration, and its representatives were persecuted as formalists, cosmopolitans, decadents, or bourgeois nationalists. Since the end of the 1940s, many composers, writers, and artists in the Soviet Union, including Estonia, were persecuted and punished due to this label. Widely exploited propagandist stigmas – decadence, cosmopolitanism, and formalism – designated characteristics that had harmonised the works of the former artists of the occupied Republic of Estonia, indicating connections between them. It was only from the end of the 1960s that complicated manifestations of (new) decadence began to emerge in Estonia, in other countries belonging to the Soviet sphere of influence, as well as beyond.

A more comprehensive and transnational study of decadence has only started to blossom in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. BADS or the British Association of Decadence Studies). Today, decadence has become an interdisciplinary and cross-genre critical concept associated with many and sometimes contradictory meanings. Far from reductive catchphrases, decadence in various arts refers first and foremost to deviations from and breaking of the canons of beauty and morality that prevailed until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Decadence emerges especially powerfully in conditions of socio-historical transitions and upheavals. In Estonia its initial flourishing can be located in the era of rapid urbanisation in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Subsequently the Young Estonia movement was born, and similarly to Finnish, Latvian, and other peripheral small cultures in Northern and Eastern Europe, modern Estonian nation(alism) was to be built on the ruins of old (decadent) Europe. This deeply ambivalent experience resulted in works of art which paradoxically express both over-ripeness, decay, and fragmentation, as well as the contradictory perception of youth and immaturity, seeking unprecedented innovation through artistic experiments. Diffused into various isms (impressionism, symbolism, futurism, expressionism, *art nouveau*), decadence as a bodily and spiritual superabundance or – on the contrary – as a certain deficiency, aesthetically revolts against the values tied to conservative moralist rhetoric.

**We invite all researchers who are interested in decadence, as well as freelance practitioners fascinated by decadence to analyse its changing and controversial meanings in various art forms and during different eras. We warmly welcome discussions that delve into the similarities between decadence and modernism or scrutinise their mutual influences.**

**Presentations on the following topics would be of interest:**

- the dawn of the “canon” of decadence and associated concepts, texts and authors in Estonia (translation, reception and interpretations, various transmission channels and influence patterns);
- philosophical concepts such as decadence, degeneration, pessimism, nihilism (plus the entanglements between the mentioned concepts and ‘life’/élan vital); “translation” of philosophy into literary, artistic and musical languages (A. Schopenhauer, F. Nietzsche, H. Bergson, O. Weininger, S. Freud, O. Spengler and others);
- stylistic techniques (irony, allusion, quotation, imitation, paradox, pastiche, ekphrasis);
- oxymoronic poetics (interweaving of opposites such as sickness and health, youth and old age, death and birth, love and hate, decline and rise, sleep and being awake, nature and art/technology, human and animal, beauty and ugliness);
- characters (*femme fatale*, *femme fragile*, the New Woman and the New Man, prostitutes, bohemians, dilettantes, dandies, *flâneurs/flâneuses*, aesthetes, collectors, upstarts, androgynes);
- perception of extremes and sensory syntheses (synaesthesia, horror, spleen, contempt, jealousy, hysteria, ecstasy, intoxication, apathy, melancholy, depression, psychotropic substances);
- gender and gender troubles (misogyny, androphobia, homophobia, nymphomania, sexism, feminism);
- the body (diseases, norms and deviations related to the body, narcissism, eroticism, erotomania, pornography);
- time and space (earliness, lateness, senses of beginning and ending, the metropolis and the provinces, rural landscapes (including bogs and swamps), transitory and passage *loci*: the hotel, the brothel, the theatre, the cinema, the street; means of transportation such as ship, train, car, plane);
- the “young nation” and the “old breed” (race) and their interconnectedness;
- relations between Estonian and Finnish decadence and the Finnish idea of the “young nation”;
- decadence and primitivism (the relationship between the civilised and the uncivilised);
- blending of naturalism and decadence or modernist and decadent aesthetics;
- decadence and the isms of the turn of the century (impressionism, aestheticism, symbolism, *art déco*, expressionism, futurism) and the quest for synthesis;
- decadence and language renewal.

We also encourage participants to move beyond *fin de siècle* decadence and present ideas which analyse expressions of (new) decadence:

- in Soviet, “Socialist” and Postcommunist contexts;
- contemporary arts and aesthetic theories;

- in pop and alternative cultures (TV, social media, fashion, countercultures).

The keynote speakers are Tiina Abel and Marja Lahelma (art), Kerri Kotta (music), Daniele Monticelli (translation) and Jaan Undusk (literary culture).

Please send preliminary proposals by 15th of December 2022. Abstracts should be submitted by the 15th of February 2023 ([utkk@utkk.ee](mailto:utkk@utkk.ee)). Participants shall have an opportunity to collaborate in at least one special issue of an academic journal.

The conference is organised by The Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, Tallinn University and Estonian Academy of Arts. It is supported by the following projects: PRG1667 “Emergence of a Civilised Nation: Decadence and Transitionality in 1905–1940” (The Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences), PRG1206 “Translation in History. Estonia 1850-2010: Texts, Agents, Institutions and Practices” (Tallinn University) and “Cultural Amnesia and the ‘Golden Age’ of Finnish Art: Unravelling the Narratives of Finnish Art History, c. 1880s–1910“, funded by the Academy of Finland.