

On Decadence, Aestheticism, and Karl Ristikivi

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This article consists of two parts. The first part undertakes to present the author's conceptual vision of decadence at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, claiming it to have been an essentially artistic ennoblement of decline based on a pre-eminently aesthetical configuration of representation. Alongside this assertion, an attempt is made to place the decadence of the turn of the century within a broader cultural-historical framework, with the aim of making 19th century decadence appear as an actor in a more ample story of thought about decline. Accordingly, the 19th century positive investment in the meaning of decadence is juxtaposed in the article with three historically prior approaches that are characterized not by wilful submission to decadence, as featured in the *fin-de-siècle* culture, but, quite the contrary, by their resisting decadence via proposing a way out of the deleterious situation it conveys. All three, actually along with *fin-de-siècle* culture, had drawn from the fall of ancient Rome as a prototype of decadence, but had interpreted it differently and with different proposals for a solution.

First, the idea of decadence could be embraced as part of a cyclical worldview, implying that the decline of a state and its culture is as legitimate a part of every historical process as is fall in the natural world. Accordingly, the Rome that collapsed once should be remedied and its culture transferred—*translatio imperii*—by the new generations and their states, be it the Carolingian or the Holy Roman Empire, or the Kingdom of France. Second, it could be stated (as in the case of Augustine) that the fall of a secular city is of minor importance as compared to the city of God, which actually gathers strength while the secular city loses it. From this point of view, the ability to read history from another perspective, besides a purely natural or human one, could make us notice ascension where we otherwise see only decline. Third, the stance taken by religious rationalism (Ernest Renan), namely, that decadence is too relative a term to be used for the description of humanity's wayfaring, reflects the strong Enlightenment belief in the growth of human reason in time, which makes decadence in the long run an inappropriate and senseless concept for history studies.

The second part of the article develops the hypothesis that some eminent features of the oeuvre of Karl Ristikivi, related especially to his historical novels, can be viewed as evolving from the decadent nature of his writerly character. The claim builds, first, on the pervasive motif in Ristikivi of being on the road, made expressly manifest by the author in his announcement that his home and his roots are actually everywhere he has passed through in his life, not just in childhood nor in the homeland. Ristikivi's trust in the immediacy of the senses and in the momentariness of action displays an affinity with decadent aestheticism, by being enacted, according to this article, in the same frame of coming to grips with reality in a morally deprived world. To accept reality, distorted or decadent, in artificial form is a way of providing it with sense through representative means.

A peculiar characteristic of Ristikivi's historical novels created in exile is that they lack almost any contact with Estonia, be it understood in the sense of plot, characters, or milieu. The argument of the present article is that this substantial lack in the author, who is otherwise highly engaged in Estonian

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exile culture, mirrors the decadent distrust in the material world, which is compensated, again in a decadent way, by the signs of religious hope appearing under the overall decline of matter. Set side by side with the authors of historical fiction in contemporary Estonia, for example with Jaan Kross and Lennart Meri, whose wish to plead historical initiative in their works is undeniable—as is made manifest in their pretension to tell the historical truth about Estonia—, Ristikivi's escapist attitude comes even more into relief. Actually, Ristikivi is not only missing Estonia but overturns in a decadent way some explanatory patterns that Estonian history writing used to lean on. Addressing the Medieval Crusades, a sensitive topic for Estonian history writing, not from the angle of their Northern unfolding, as would concern Estonians, but tackling them instead in idealist terms as events transpiring in the Holy Land, is a mark of relinquishing national history in favour of a decadent perspective. However, let it be stressed, the article asserts the decadence of Ristikivi in no other terms than in the typological sense of culture.

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