

## Preface

Literary Decadence was one of the varied discourses of decay of the late 19th century, outlining in different ways the presumably inevitable decaying stage of Western civilization. These discourses addressed in like manner the threats of modern technology, theories on the spiritual and physical degeneration of the human race, and the metaphysical pessimism of fashionable philosophers. In literary Decadence depictions of decay were combined with its romanticisation and its transfer from the everyday world to the exotic or mythical realms of fantasy. In this sense, Decadence is also Symbolism, or rather its negative reverse face, where the ecstasy of beauty is contorted into sickness, grotesque visions or representations of perversion and transgression. The model for Decadent poetry was set by Charles Baudelaire's "La charogne" which provokes by making things ugly and repugnant aesthetic: "and the sky viewed the handsome carcass on the ground / like a bud unfolding". On the other hand, Decadent characters are aroused and excited more by images of sado-masochistic violence than by visions opening on to the ethereal or the visions of the Symbolists.

Literary Decadence proceeded from the world which had been presented by Naturalism, in which both nature and man were represented as processes of disintegration and decay. Emile Zola, the leading figure of Naturalism, was also a leader in depicting decay, taking as his themes all possible forms of decadence in the social, genetic, moral, erotic, spiritual domains. But in his works decadence is generally bound to the conventions of a realistic mode of representation. The discourse most characteristic of Decadence differs from naturalistic depictions of decay by its shift into fantasy and internalisation. J. K. Huysmans' novel *A rebours* (1884) demonstrated this transition and served as a compilation of the characteristics of Decadence. In Decadent prose the protagonists (mainly civilized male intellectuals) reflect on their own state of decadence, choosing transgression, pleasure and decay, while in Naturalism environmental and genetic determination made tragic victims out of the principal characters (usually common people or women).

There is a provocative aspect to aestheticising the evil and the ugly. *Épater le bourgeois*, the tendency to shake and overturn prevailing values is an aspect of Decadence and a strategy which has remained important in modern art. On the other hand, the provocative nature of Decadence is often associated with resignation: it is resigned to inevitable decay rather than seeking to change the world. Weakness, fatigue and illness, of which the decadent era and its people suffer in the visions of Decadence, can only lead to destruction. Dreaming of transgressions sometimes is enough for the protagonists of Decadent narratives. But the authors managed, at least to some extent, provoke audiences although many of them were marginal figures in the literary field of their time.

The twenty-one articles on Decadence in this issue of *Nordlit* are based on papers that were presented at the conference *The Decadence or an Aesthetic of Transgression*, which took place 9-12 June 2010 at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Tromsø. Thirty scholars from eleven different countries participated in the conference.

The aim of the conference was to examine and interpret the provocative aspects and the varieties of transgression in Decadent literature. This meant, at the same time, questioning the nature of these transgressions. It seemed legitimate to ask to what extent Decadent literature can be considered at captive of its age, in that it recycled and affirmed prevalent prejudices, for example in regard to women, homosexuality and race.

Three keynote speakers were invited: Professor Per Buvik (University of Bergen) opened the conference with “Zola et la sexualité décadente”; Professor Melanie Hawthorne (Texas A&M University) presented a paper entitled “Gisèle d’Estoc: Portraits of a Decadent Woman”, and Professor Guy Ducrey (University of Strasbourg) presented a paper entitled “Ne me touchez pas! Transgressions décadentes d’une parole biblique”.

Professor Jean de Palacio (Sorbonne University) was unable to attend the conference but he has done us the honour of providing us with a paper for this volume.

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