

DECADENCE IN THE WILDERNESS WILL TO TRANSGRESSION OR THE STRANGE BIRD OF FINNISH DECADENCE

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And we want to be decadent, if everyone else flaunts their good health
(Joel Lehtonen, *Mataleena*, 88)¹

As the Decadent movement spread out all over Europe it echoed many ideas and forms that had first developed in France, but it was also “contaminated” by new ideas and transformed by the national environments and traditions. In this process some of its initial features underwent radical change, especially under the influence of Nietzsche and his supposedly “anti-decadent” philosophy. Still, this larger Decadent movement continued to be rooted in French Decadent literature – mainly relating to and relying on major paragons such as Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, the father-figure Joris-Karl Huysmans, and the interpreter of “contemporary psychology” Paul Bourget.²

The ambiguities connected to the movement followed it everywhere. In one sense, literary Decadence was only one manifestation of the varied discourses of decay current in the late nineteenth century, outlining in different ways the presumably inevitable decaying stage of Western civilization.³ These discourses resembled one another in addressing the threats of modern technology, theories concerning the spiritual and physical degeneration of the human race, and the metaphysical pessimism of fashionable philosophers. However, in contrast to the other discourses of decay Literary Decadence proceeded from the world which had been presented by Naturalism, in which all things ended in repugnance, dissolution, illness and death, or living death. Both nature and man were represented as processes of disintegration and decay.⁴

To specify the main impetus of literary Decadence is of course risky, in view of its various manifestations, but its differences from its breeding ground in Naturalism help to define it at least on a very general level. Émile Zola, the leading figure of Naturalism, was also a leading figure in the depiction of decay, taking as his themes all possible forms of decadence in the social, genetic, moral, erotic and spiritual domains. In his works, however, decadence is generally depicted according 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. In prose, the narrator observing from the outside now gave way to focalisation through the principal character and depictions of the protagonist’s narcissistic self-reflection and imagination. The marked turn to nostalgic aestheticism was combined with grotesque masochistic or sadistic fantasies,

¹ The translations of *Mataleena* (hereafter M) are mine.

² I have explored this extensively (Lyytikäinen 1997).

³ See e.g. Pick 1989.

⁴ See. Baguley 1990, especially chapter 9.

pervverting beauty and its classical connection with virtue.⁵ J. K. Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884), the "Bible" of Decadence, demonstrated this transition and served as a compilation of the characteristics of Decadence. In Decadent prose the protagonists (most often 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). A will to transgression and even a will to decay distinguish Decadent characters.

This shift is related to the fact that 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, including the recurrent fantasies about the decline of the Roman Empire. 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.⁶ But there is a provocative aspect to choosing transgression and aestheticising evil and ugliness. *Épater le bourgeois*, the tendency to shake and overturn prevailing values is a central aspect of Decadence – and a strategy which has remained important in modern art.

These characteristic aspects of Decadence also define the manifestations of this movement in Finland. It must be emphasized, however, that we cannot speak of a movement of Decadence in Finnish literature: there are isolated works by individual authors, which, as a rule, received uncomprehending criticism and marginal audiences.⁷ Among these authors there were some whose subsequent works later became classics, but in the older histories of literature their early connections with Decadence are not recognised. One of them was Joel Lehtonen (1881–1934), whose early works are clearly inspired by Decadence and who developed a strange version of it, connected to primitive agrarian life and the wilderness rather than city life, old culture and urban settings. In comparison, other Finnish Decadent works are more conventional, if this expression can be used in this context.⁸ Decadence in an

⁵ See e.g. Rasch 1986.

⁶ See Lyytikäinen 1997.

⁷ In Finland ideas of decadence or cultural pessimism were not welcome in the dominant national circles. Objectively, a country where the national culture had only just began to flourish and which was, economically and socially, experiencing the fastest development in its history should not have been a breeding ground for decadence and cultural pessimism: the idea of a young and healthy nation was put forward to counter the spreading of discourses of decay into Finnish cultural life. Furthermore, growing threats to the whole national project seemed to demand the clinging to the newly formulated nationalist tenets and the return to the literature of national idealism after the naturalist and materialist experiments of the 1880s. At the turn of the century the autonomy of the Grand-Duchy of Finland was undermined by the Russification politics that the Russian government had adopted. But the urge towards a narrowing of the cultural field and a rallying around the national struggle was counteracted by opposing tendencies that were similarly enhanced by the stifling atmosphere of political pressure and censorship. This was also a period when the urge to fully participate in European trends was felt amongst Finnish artists. The new openness to the latest trends and, for the first time, a large-scale direct access to French culture as well as to the up-to-date German philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche created a tension between individualistic aestheticism and the demands set by the political situation in Finland.

⁸ The investigation on Finnish Decadence has been scarce and only some aspects and authors have been taken up in the only older study of Finnish Decadence, *Der Nordische Decadent* by Rafael Koskimies 1968. My own study of Finnish Symbolism and Decadence *Narkissos ja sfinksi* [*Narcisse*

agrarian or even wilderness setting reflects the strange blend produced by the encounter between European currents and Finnish culture. Resistance to the older Finnish literature depicting the countryside and the peasantry in an idealized light, an urban French mould reflecting completely different cultural values and Nietzschean anti-Christianism formed the hybrid fictional worlds of Lehtonen's earliest three novels, published in 1904 and 1905, which described life in remote villages still in a highly pre-modern state.

In my essay, I explore the characteristics of Lehtonen's Decadent writing focusing on the novel *Mataleena* (1905), which bears the subtitle *A song to the native place*. In spite of this subtitle which has lead scholars to focus on the autobiographical background of the work⁹ and the apparently neo-romantic imagery of the novel (partly deriving from the works of Selma Lagerlöf¹⁰) the connections to Decadence are conspicuous as I purport to demonstrate in my discussion of the novel.

To the roots: the poet-protagonist in search of his identity

Mataleena (1905) is, ostensibly, about a trip in search of roots; the protagonist has returned to his home village in search of his biological mother who had abandoned him when he was a baby – an autobiographical fact which the author here uses in symbolical ways. Born in the outlying regions of Finland, Lehtonen (this adopted name signifies also a child born outside of wedlock) experienced in his own life an immense gap between urban culture and the primitive life of the common people in the countryside, which was his birthplace and where his mother and half-brothers still lived after he himself had been adopted by a wealthy widow who provided for his school education and studies at the University of Helsinki. The novel, although strewn with autobiographical details and realistic descriptions, is, at a deeper level, an allegory of becoming a (Decadent) poet: as such, it is a presentation of the roots of the novel itself.

The beginning of this novel, written in lyric prose, depicts the wanderings of the protagonist in his home village where he feels like the “happy prince” of the fairytale – or rather the beggar without a shirt who was declared to be the happiest man in the fairytale repeatedly alluded to in *Mataleena*.¹¹ He evokes his early memories of the sites he visits and meets people who knew him as a child. He is offered “booze”, and the eulogy of distilled spirits parodying the praise of wine common in the literatures of more southern lands is the first sign of the provocative attitudes of the protagonist/narrator and a prelude to the other Decadent motifs to come. This element of “northern poetics” functions also as an inversion of the conventional images that associate poets with wine but is, nevertheless, a harbinger of the Dionysian elements of the novel.

and the Sphinx] 1997 is, to date, the only extensive study on Finnish Decadence and the only one discussing Decadence in Lehtonen. For a short introduction in English see Lyytikäinen 2003.

⁹ E.g. Tarkka 1977, the most prominent monograph on Lehtonen's early works.

¹⁰ *Gösta Berlings saga* in particular: it was translated into Finnish already in 1902, but Lehtonen could have read it in Swedish as well. Lagerlöf was a fashionable fin-the-siècle Swedish author who was to be the first female author to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1914.

¹¹ Lehtonen is not referring to Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince* but to the fairytale where an unhappy prince is looking for the happiest man in his realm to find out the secret of happiness. It turns out that the only perfectly happy subject of the prince is a beggar who does not even own a shirt.

The journey of the protagonist continues to the backwoods where his half-brother and mother live in a small tenant house. This stretch of road emulates a descent into hell in burning sunshine through a dark, threatening forest populated with grotesque forms and imagined devils. Tortured by insects and scared by other insignia of the devil, the protagonist proceeds with ambivalent feelings. The repeated phrase: “terrifying is the wilderness” is amply illustrated by the details of the description. But the protagonist is exalted as well: what is terrifying is also strangely alluring. And the goal of the journey, the centre of the hell, is the mother, Mataleena. She takes the devil’s place or the place of the monster – and she is a monster, albeit an ambivalent one. But the poet is not shocked by the grotesque Cyclops he sees: although the description of the mother dwells on lurid details which could, as such, provoke only disgust and awe in the reader, the attitude of the narrator is full of empathy (thus inciting also the reader to feel sympathy) and seems to imply that everything is as he expected it to be.

The narrator’s long lost mother is found sitting on straw scattered on the floor of the tenant house. She is a one-eyed human wreck, insane and wracked by a strange nervous disorder. A reputed beauty in her youth, she is now an ugly skeleton suffering incessant pains, delirious, terrified by her visions of hellfire, tortured by bedbugs and cockroaches.¹² All in all, the description of the mother resembles, in tone and style, the description of the bulldog woman in *A rebours*. “La femme bouledogue” or the vision “l’image de la Grande Vérole”,¹³ one of the emblems of disease personifying Syphilis in Huysmans, is also a perfect example of the grotesque imagery so common in much Decadent prose, but which in Finland is only used by Lehtonen. Furthermore, Lehtonen vacillates between naturalist description and grotesque fantasy in much the same way that Huysmans does, although the subject matter Lehtonen is describing in this scene is very different, and in fact closer to the spheres of life focused on by the Naturalists. The state of the mother evokes the last images of Gervaise in Zola’s *L’Assommoir* and comparable scenes describing the end in decay of Naturalist characters. This mother of three children born out of wedlock, all of whom she immediately abandoned, is a living dead, spending her last years as a destitute charge of her eldest son, a pauper himself with numerous children in rags.

The title of Lehtonen’s novel already alludes to the importance of the mother figure as it names her instead of the protagonist. The mother’s name Mataleena is a popular Finnish variant of Magdalene, but for her poet-son the mother is both the sinful Mary Magdalene and the holy Madonna of Decadence. She herself repents her

¹² Combining beauty and illness or death this way makes the figure an emblem of Decadence: compare Baudelaire’s poem “Une charogne”. See also Rasch 1986, introduction.

¹³ Putting the common elements in italics demonstrates the affinities: “Cette *figure ambiguë, sans sexe, était verte et elle ouvrait dans ces paupières violettes, des yeux d’un bleu clair et froid, terribles* ; des boutons entouraient sa bouche ; des bras extraordinairement *maigres, des bras de squelette*, nus jusqu’aux coudes, sortaient de manches *en haillons, tremblaient de fièvre*, et les cuisses décharnées *grelottaient* dans des bottes à chaudron, trop larges.” (*A Rebours*, 195) The differences pertain to the opposite evaluation connected to this image. Lehtonen emphasizes the suffering of the victim, Huysmans the terrifying nature of his nightmare. Lehtonen is closer to Naturalism because his image is not a phantasm like Huysmans’.

sins, and when her son tells her story, he underlines that the insanity of his mother is caused by the consciousness of her sins induced in her by the parsons and the village-people. Repentance is what her son does not approve of; the sinful Magdalene is his heroine. Instead of rejecting the grotesque figure and the outcome of her sinful life or showing any bitterness for himself having once been rejected by her,¹⁴ the poet-narrator identifies with his mother, defiantly recognizing in her his own fate, in which – as he sees it – the blessing of a life in absolute freedom is mixed with the curse of early decay and insanity.

The imagination of the son and the poet provides the poor woman with a glorious past of freedom and passion which has meant defying all the rules of her community. She has paid a high price: besides her mental and physical disorders she is an outcast condemned by her village community as a whore, but her son is proud of her transgressive energy, her strong passions and unbending affirmation of life – or her Nietzschean spirit – which she (according to his imaginative story) exhibited when she was young.

The son's feelings are connected to the idea of heredity. The idea of fatal heredity, introduced to nineteenth-century literature by Naturalism, and Emile Zola in particular,¹⁵ is twisted here to serve the purpose of asserting a symbolical heredity of will to transgression, creative energy at the cost of sanity and self-destroying prodigality. The poet is the Prodigal Son, a Faustian superman and an apprentice of the devil in one and he is grateful for his family heritage, consciously adopting it as the guiding principle of his life. He presents himself as the last of his kin, the most beautiful bloom of an accursed family line. In him, finally, the madness of the family has produced an artist. The artist is the "thorny rose of the wilderness", drawing its strength from the mire of decadence to produce the new horrible beauty desired by the modern era. But he knows that madness and death are the price to be paid for a life worth living – the life of an artist. Life as a free artist for this Decadent tends to be regarded as a lifestyle and not a career. He has his models in this; productive work even in the form of art became suspect already for the French Decadents.¹⁶ This life is one of self-indulgence, indifference to morals, and readiness to embrace reckless extravagance. The blossom and last member of the family of fools also shows his willingness to die – any day – or even to commit suicide. His dream is to die drunken "with a puddle of booze on my lips, birchbark shoes on and without shirt" (M, 80). Whereas the horror-figures in Huysmans terrify the weak protagonist (even if the descriptions still betray a fascination at least on the part of the author) the equivalent figures fascinate the Finnish decadent poet-protagonist – who seems to possess the barbarian energy nostalgically longed for by the more urban Decadents.

Mothers and muses

The more fantastic elements in Lehtonen's novel provide the poet with another mother figure, who is free from the naturalistic constraints still imposed on the

¹⁴ Unless we do not interpret the grotesque description itself as a kind of "revenge" by the author himself.

¹⁵ The theme of an inherited curse which leads to the ruin of the protagonist was also maintained in Huysmans' *A Rebours*, though subdued by other themes.

¹⁶ E. g. Baudelaire connected publishing with prostituting oneself (*Journaux intimes: Fusées I*).

description of the characters existing in the fictional world. Like Des Esseintes, Lehtonen's protagonist is also prone to fantasy and dreaming. Right after describing the meeting with his mother he depicts a recurrent vision he has. When he looks at the birch forest in the lingering light of the northern summer nights, he sees "The Wonder of the Forest", a female creature who bears an affinity with a sylvan spirit. This bizarre emblem, which combines elements of vegetal nature with a female figure, symbolises the figures of a muse and a beloved as well as of a mother.

The protagonist sees this imaginary woman repeatedly; in her later apparitions she is identified with the spirit of the wilderness. The ambivalence of this creature comes clearly forth in the description of the first encounter. The narrator starts by describing his vision in terms of contrasting dispositions – thus indicating that he already knows what the creature is. It is a figure driven by fierce and contrary passions; wild erotic desires as well as violent hatred and jealousy. It is ice-cold and burningly hot at the same time. It blesses and blasphemes, cures and poisons, and is "eternally avenging". Then he concretises the creature as a female figure:

[--] it was a woman, the Wonder of the Forest, whose eyes flash with wild green like phosphor and whose nipples in her breasts swollen with lust glow, scarlet like two wild carnations. (M, 12)

He then addresses his friends, the audience of his narration, by saying that they must recognise this image, because they know the woman (the beloved he had had) who was the personification of his wild soul. Here, in fact, we have three things connected with each other: a deliberate confusion between a real woman of the fictional world, the emblem seen in a vision, and the poet's own soul. The poet sees the Wonder of the Forest in his beloved, and both females are images of his own soul.¹⁷

The narrator makes it even more complicated by referring to the Wonder of the Forest as one of his mothers: we begin to see that he is really in search of allegorical mother-figures, who could mother his writing. But there is a remarkable tension between the image of the Wonder of the Forest and the real mother to whom the title of the novel refers. Mataleena, the mother who is a reincarnation of Mary Magdalene, is, clearly, an emblem of decadence, whereas the Wonder of the Forest is a figure of untamed primitive force, a kind of Mother Nature.

To understand the whole, both the decadent real mother and the visionary image of the soul with its various incarnations have to be taken into account. The appropriation of the feminine figures by the poet is the secret of his writing: the figures allegorically represent his ambivalent poetry combining wild but suicidal energy or creativity with Dionysian excess and an obsession with inevitable decadence. The vital forces that a Decadent maniac has are tainted with the death-drive. But, unlike many weak protagonists of Decadent literature, our poet-hero seems to have the force and energy to appropriate the creative forces symbolised by all the female presences in his life. Sterility or impotence does not seem to threaten him; he is rather trapped in a scenario which would delight psychoanalysts.

¹⁷ This is an instance of the Narcissism typical of Decadence (Lyytikäinen 1997). See also Levine 1994, Thornton 1984, and Zweig 1968.

Once again we can compare Lehtonen's novel with Huysmans' bible of the Decadence. In *A Rebours*, primordial female figures primarily emerge from the descriptions of Gustave Moreau's Salomé –paintings represented through des Esseintes' point of view and from the latter's nightmares. Lehtonen's Wonder of the Forest can be related to Huysmans' depictions of Salomé, the quintessential Decadent female, although she plays a different role in Lehtonen's Dionysian poetics. Lehtonen emphasises the energising and positively inciting features of his emblem instead of the neurotic and contaminating nature and the paralysing or poisoning effects that Salomé has.¹⁸ However, another image of Huysmans is clearly even more important for Lehtonen's description of his Wonder of the Forest. The dream creature in one of des Esseintes' nightmares which undergoes strange metamorphoses, "The Flower" ("la Fleur"), combines a female figure with the strange "syphilitic" plants des Esseintes has earlier bought:

[--]la femme changeait ; des couleurs flamboyantes passaient dans ses prunelles ; ses lèvres se teignaient du rouge furieux des Anthuriums ; les boutons de ses seins éclataient, vernis tels que deux gousses de piment rouge. (*A Rebours*, 198)

While for Des Esseintes, the over-ripe weak fruit of an old civilization, the primitive female figures are terrifying and paralysing, although tempting at the same time, Lehtonen's protagonist – himself a male hysteric – mirrors himself in them and identifies with them. His creative force is linked to this heritage personified by the wild female figures, who are in the end not so far apart from each other. The protagonist imagines the youth of his mother as a wild temptress to make her also a variant of the Wonder of the Forest and the old mad Matalena resembling the bulldog woman is what awaits the artist after the burning fire of mania is spent; she is the emblem of the future of the Decadent artist himself.

The transgressive energy of the wilderness, which inspires Lehtonen's poet-figure, combines the emblems of powerful primitivism with all the negative force of the Decadent imagination. Nature itself is here a place of insanity as well as being a primordial life force. The wilderness is beyond good and evil, and it is where whores are Madonnas, the devil is divine, and madness and genius are the equivalent of each other.

Dionysian decadence

The Nietzschean aspect of Lehtonen's Decadent poetics means breaking with one of the defining features of the more traditional forms of Decadent writing: the depiction of weak male protagonists. Deriving from Huysmans' depiction of his unfortunate hero but already present in earlier French literature in the motif of world-weariness

¹⁸ I refer, for example, to the following passage: "elle devenait, en quelque sorte, la déité symbolique de l'indestructible Luxure, la déesse de l'immortelle Hystérie, la Beauté maudite, élue entre toutes par la catalepsie qui lui raidit les chairs et lui durcit les muscles ; la Bête monstrueuse, indifférente, irresponsable, insensible, empoisonnant, de meme que l'Hélène antique, tout ce qui l'approche, tout ce qui la voit, tout ce qu'elle touche." (*A Rebours*, 145)

and exhaustion or in the symptoms of “late-comers” to the scene of Western culture,¹⁹ these figures haunt the world of Decadent writing. Their weakness shows itself in incapability of action, neurotic troubles, impotence and nostalgia for more powerful ages. Even 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 a waning away. The beauty produced by them in art and literature is the overripe fruit of an overly refined neurotic culture worshipping nuance and form. It is the rotten core of the fruit that the Decadents themselves are masochistically digging out.

Dionysian Decadence, on the contrary, seems to present a life in a world of which the weak and tired Decadent, representing the other tendency, can only yearningly dream: a life in the chaos of barbaric power and orgiastic pleasure. Is this then still Decadence? Nietzsche at least sought to make the power springing from the Dionysian serve the affirmation of life as an antithesis to Schopenhauer’s denial of life, and to achieve liberation from decadence caused by weakness.

The strangely agrarian Finnish Decadence in Lehtonen follows a Nietzschean programme. One of Lehtonen’s earlier novels, *Paholaisen viulu* [*The Fiddle of the Devil*], published in 1904, contains long speeches of its protagonist emulating the speeches of Zarathustra. But his inner conflicts, decadent life-style, and early death from tuberculosis suggest rather the dire consequences of his Nietzschean ideas – also hinted at by the title of the novel. Thus even if *The Fiddle of the Devil*, like *Mataleena*, took on a demonic or Dionysian form, in which resignation, weakness or refinement was replaced by defiance, this meant an hysterical will to transgression and the worship of destructive power rather than the affirmation of life in any positive sense. Lehtonen inherited his demon heroes from Romanticism, but they were reassessed in the light of cultural decadence and pessimism, combining Nietzschean defiance and a lucid despair seeing the vanity of it all. Idealistic heroism (already problematised by the darker trends of Romanticism) degenerated, while sensuality and the power of instinct, which included greatness in transgressions and perversion, gained ground.

For the weak Decadent the demonic man was a fantasy figure or a figure from the past, who represented lost, archaic strength and a combination of spontaneous action, strong will and passion. Huysmans’ hero combines extreme weakness and fragility of the nervous system with a ferocious imagination. He has wild sadistic dreams and is capable of producing vigorous mental images, imagining sublimely horrible figures and forceful emblems of disease. In his dream visions, Des Esseintes, or the overripe fruit of the old civilization, keeps falling into barbarism and savagery, which were thought to be *the other* of civilization.

This imagined “authentic” alternative to degenerate modern man bears a resemblance to Lehtonen’s heroes, but his protagonists in fact also undermine the alternative – they are too “modern”, too conscious of their “lateness” to be able to fully appropriate it. They are active and destructive in a desperate way; their energy is equated with spending and destruction (a burning to ashes) but their activity is still

¹⁹ We meet these themes in Alfred de Musset and in the figure of D’Albert in Théophile Gautier’s *Mademoiselle de Maupin*.

restrained to debauchery, idleness and violent fantasies rather than real action. The story of *Mataleena* is, in a sense, a nostalgic story because the poet imagines a passionate love story with real action for his mother, but his own power is in this imagining (even if it still can lead to poetic productivity).

In the epidemic of fin-the-siècle melancholy Lehtonen's protagonists have their place as well. In terms of the two faces of melancholy (which was, of old, associated both with depression and mania) one could speak of mania and manic symptoms here. Contrary to the weak decadents' spleen, which avoids involvement with the world we have a sort of poetic maniac who attacks the whole world in the name of change and destruction but does not really attempt to change the world. Or, referring to the allegorical or emblematic maladies presented in *A Rebours* we could say that in Lehtonen the neurosis has turned into a sort of (male) hysteria.

Thus the Dionysian aspect of Lehtonen's Decadence, as an instinct of (transgressively) breaking down all order and boundaries, is in the service of (self)destruction instead of creating new life. Its supposed affirmation of life passes through the destruction of all things old, without any positive visions of building a new world, and what is in fact affirmed is the principle of continuous movement and thus of continuous destruction. These demonic heroes are not even true barbarians. They are simultaneously fervently "active" and fatigued, and their activities not only lack an objective but are without joy. Everything comes down to the idle actions of a melancholic and the raging of a madman. In Lehtonen's other early novels the protagonists, all in a way would-be-artists, are incapable of producing works of art – instead they pretend that their lives are their art-works. Only the protagonist of *Mataleena* is a real poet, and an alter ego of the author, but even he has a tendency to praise only destructive actions and a life filled with pleasures – or a sort of Dionysian atmosphere of Bacchanalia connected to heavy drinking. But the only Dionysian *symposion* described in the novel is a mere vision, not a reality. It reveals the programme of the Decadence as imagined by Lehtonen.

A programme of transgressions

The rather fragmentary novel describing the protagonist's stay in his birth place, but inserting the long story of his mother's youth in between, ends with the vision which (allegorically) outlines the programme for the Decadents. The fall has come and in the darkness of the night the narrator sees how the wall of his room opens. He discerns a party gathered around a table, surrounded by vines rich with grapes. The guests are drinking "the juice of the grapes" from golden goblets. All are proud, some of them are very pale, but others look strong and healthy and some have devilish eyes. The narrator explains: they are ghosts and madmen, all his family and his similars (the term Lehtonen uses recalls Baudelaire's address to the reader in "Au Lecteur": "mon semblable"), living and dead. Then he also sees Satan with black wings shimmering like jewels and the Wonder of the Forest, naked with lips like bloody wounds and eyes green with electricity, her bosom swelling with lust. Upon seeing the poet all raise their goblets and welcome him to their party. They address him as "the golden flower of the family" who has been endowed with "the

brittle harp²⁰ of a mad family liable to break early.” (M, 82) They also refer to a crown of thorns the poet is wearing, thus alluding to him as a substitute for Christ, but the Christ of pagans.²¹ This is the beginning of the long proclamation of their programme consisting of transgressing all old values. This visionary litany proclaimed by the chorus of ancestors in the symposium hosted by Satan and the Wonder of the Forest, or the *Femme Fatale* with capital letters, attacks all the conventions and institutions of bourgeois society.

The only god recognized by these pagans is the Self and its absolute freedom. The Self makes only Nietzschean demands of them: constant defiance, contempt for mercy, disregard for good and evil. These fools hope for no salvation on earth or in the afterlife; they proudly march towards their own decay and death. They only follow their instincts, have no principles or respect for anything – only for the “criminal spirit of rebels” (M, 85). Their antisocial pathos makes them the associates of all the outcasts of society, but they only care about their boundless egotism, which is equated with the “forces of creation”; a creation that seems to be understood in terms of destruction rather than of building anything new.

The list goes on and on and ends with clear references to Decadent motifs. The fools love all the pleasures of the flesh and wander around (as *flâneurs*) in “red silk-velvet vests” amongst the others who “sweat in their everyday jackets” (M, 88). As artists they are prepared to trample art under their feet if art hinders their free lives; they become dilettantes who turn their lives to art. They proclaim: “And we want to be decadent, if everyone else flaunts their good health.” (M, 88)

Conclusion

The strange rural setting, the apparent energy in transgressions shown by Lehtonen’s protagonist and the Nietzschean tone of its proclamations do not hide from view the family resemblances and references to Decadent writing present in Lehtonen’s novel. It is true that the relationship with the Decadence in *Mataleena*, could, helped by its supposedly autobiographical background and “Romantic” elements, pass unnoticed by the critics and the later biographically oriented scholars who were not only unfamiliar with French Decadence but also unwilling to admit that Finnish literature could have much to do with it. It is impossible, however, to continue to ignore this context when closely reading the text against the background of the central works of French Decadence and in the knowledge of the processes which guided and enhanced the spreading of French influences to the Nordic countries. The long tradition of underestimating the authors’ contacts with European cultural centres and overestimating their autodidact “Finnishness”, a myth cherished by the nationalist literary histories, has long prevented a free comparative study of Finnish literary movements and the exploration of the lively cultural exchanges and dialogue that were typical of the fin-the-siècle literary scene in the country.

²⁰ The instrument is actually ”kannel”, a traditional Finnish instrument, originally with five strings over a horizontal sounding board, and plucked by hand. In most of Finnish poetry it is used as the symbol of poetry in the same way as the harp is used in most western poetry.

²¹ Interesting links between Lehtonen’s pagan and dionysian primitivism and Walter Pater’s aesthetic hellenism associating Dionysus with Christ (Evangelista 2009, 40-41) could possibly be established.

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Biographical note

Pirjo Lyytikäinen is Professor of Finnish Literature at the University of Helsinki and Director of the Finnish Doctoral Programme for Literary Studies. She has published monographs and articles on the nineteenth century Romanticism and early twentieth-century Modernism in Finnish Literature. The monograph *Narkissos ja Sfinksi* [Narcise and the Sphinx] explores Finnish Fin-de-siècle Symbolism and Decadence from a comparative perspective. Her publications in English include an edited volume *Changing Scenes. Encounters between European and Finnish Fin de Siècle* (2003) with the article "The Allure of Decadence" by her.

Summary

The decadence that the Decadents identified in their own civilization was recognized through the model of Roman Empire, although they thought that the Romans were, even in their decadence, much more vigorous than the modern "cerebral" decadents. The figures of the late Empire, which fused the over-ripeness of culture with barbarism, were great even in their decline; the ancient uninhibited transgressions and vices fascinated the decadents although even the imagined debaucheries exhausted the modern decadents. Des Esseintes is, of course, a paradigmatic figure, connecting extreme weakness and fragility of the nervous system with wild sadistic

dreams. He is capable of producing vigorous mental images, imagining sublimely horrible figures and emblems of disease, which fell on a fertile ground in later decadent writings.

At the same time, the idea of the savage and the primitive which had undergone a radical change, when the romantic idea of the noble savage was replaced by the primitive as the lowest order of humanity, became fashionable even among many Decadents. This debauched barbarian or savage (whose representatives or relics the survived “primitive cultures” were) marked the beginnings of human culture and was the suppressed foundation of all developed cultures. The danger of the return of this primitive side of man could threaten even the most civilized individuals or nations if the ties and restraints of culture were loosened (Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* represents this perfectly). For the decadents, who did not see their own civilization in the terms of progress any more, and embraced ideas of entropy, dissolution and return to a state of new barbarism, the idea of the decline of their culture, thus, could become connected with the idea of the primitive “in us”, the primitive lurking in the psyche of every individual and the primitive that was built in the culture itself. As the primitive became, increasingly, identified not only with “primitive peoples” or “primitive races” mostly inhabiting in the colonies or far-out regions, but with groups within the civilized society, like workers, paupers, lower classes, Jews or even women, it was easy to find seeds and forces of the foreseen and, at the same time, feared development.

When these ideas were connected with Nietzscheanism, like in the early novels by the Finnish author Joel Lehtonen, they produced a provocative form of Dionysian Decadence; a manic form of decadence combining primitive energies with provocative questioning of traditional cultural values. It was Nietzsche himself who suggested the idea that the “tropical man” or the primitive seen as the evil to be eradicated by the moralists should be recognized as a potentially positive force (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 197). Lehtonen’s decadent figures (especially in his novel *Mataleena* 1905) find their roots in the primitive life of the Finnish “wilderness” and connect this primitiveness to a provocative decadence, which is *à rebours*, against all recognized cultural values but has power only as a form of deconstruction and destruction.

Key words

Dionysian Decadence, transgression, devil, femme fatale, mania