Changing Scenes

Encounters between European and Finnish Fin de Siècle

Edited by
Pirjo Lyytikäinen

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Foreword

The late 19th and early 20th century was a period of dynamic modernisation and internationalisation in Finnish literature and art. Society became more outward-looking, though the existence, as a nation, of the Grand Duchy still politically tied to Russia was threatened by tsarist attempts at Russification. Writers and artists travelled to Paris and Berlin and immersed themselves in European culture, their aim being to play a closer role in international cultural debate. Whereas the available resources had previously been channelled into laying the foundations of a national culture, artists and writers were now keen to capture the spirit of the times by adopting the new contemporary trends. They were eager to avoid the dangers of backwardness and isolation at a time when culture was driven by a greater inner impetus than ever before, despite the growing external threat.

The past century had seen sweeping changes. Until the 19th century, there was no Finnish culture to speak of in the demanding sense of the word: before that, the culture in Finland was for the most part that of Sweden, apart from the folk culture existing in oral form. The development of a specifically Finnish national culture got under way in earnest in the course of the 19th century, but not until the end of the century did culture in Finnish really find its feet. The stimulus for this was provided by Finland's annexation to Russia. When Finland became an Autonomous Grand Duchy of the Russian Empire in 1809, it was forced to rethink its status. Swedish dominated the former province of Sweden almost entirely at that time, even though the ordinary people spoke mostly only Finnish. Under the new regime, people were, however, receptive to the nationalist ideals borrowed primarily from Germany. The Finns had no wish to become Russians, there was no reverting to Swedish dominance, and the only way to become a nation was by integrating the educated circles and the common folk. The creation of a national culture in Finnish became the goal of Finland's educated Swedish speakers. Although the collection and publication of the priceless treasures of folk poetry in Finnish provided the stimulus for and faith in the national project, the work was slow and the country poor, worn down by repeated famines and watched over by the sometimes stern eye of Russia. Not until the closing decades of the 19th century did the situation take a decisive turn for the better.

In training an educated class that now spoke Finnish, the school system gradually created a wider readership for literature in this language. Meanwhile, linguistic antagonism was driving Finnish and Swedish speakers into opposing camps, and literature in Finnish and Swedish began to grow apart. At around the turn of the century, Swedish speakers found themselves on the national periphery, and for them, cosmopolitanism and contacts abroad took the place of nationalist zeal. A rift emerged between Finnish culture in Swedish and nationalist culture in Finnish. K. A. Tavaststjerna, a prominent Finnish writer in Swedish, joined the ranks of the realists and described relations between the nation at large and the educated classes as problematic. He was nevertheless overshadowed in Finnish-speaking circles by the leading writers in Finnish.

Literature in Finnish became more international during the period of realism and naturalism in the 1880s, in line with contemporary trends in France and the Nordic countries. Even so, the political lobby on behalf of Finnish left such a strong mark on cultural life that the literature coloured by Naturalistic strivings was in many cases read in the spirit of nationalism. The earlier description of the people that was part of the pro-Finnish ethos in a way maintained its position and was enriched by portrayals of the urban working class, but the tone and the emphasis shifted. Descriptions of the middle-class, often petty-bourgeois milieu now began to enter literature in Finnish, too. Writers set about analysing relations within the family and between the individual and society, and pointing out social evils. Of the realists, Minna Canth to a great extent turned her attention to the workers and small-town bourgeoisie: the position of women and social injustice are themes running through her work. By contrast, Juhani Aho sought to live up to the role of national writer bestowed upon him by placing his characters in a rural Finnish setting, in the heart of the Finnish countryside, even when his themes had nothing to do with the national project. The conflict between modern and pre-modern is already raging in the works of Aho: it threatens the rustic idyll and the rural way of life as the epitome of the Finnish ethos and allows aspects of French Naturalism to creep into his accounts.

By the dawn of the new century, literature in Finnish had become both national and more pan-European than ever. Writers, like other artists, had lively foreign contacts, and literature was closely influenced or produced in dialogue with international trends. On the other hand, the transition from realism to new, symbolistic modes of expression and ways of thinking stressing the internal or intellectual rather than the external and social paved the way in novel fashion for history and myth, and hence for the use of the national past or mythology.

The national themes were further fuelled by the political situation. The position of autonomous Finland as a Russian dominion came under greater pressure when the striving to strengthen the Finnish national identity began to be regarded by the Russians as a threat rather than as a means of severing Finland from Swedish influence, and when the nationalist movements in Russia set about Russifying all the nations in the Empire. In reaction to this, the nationalist movement in Finland and the search for national symbols grew stronger. The roots of the Finnish nation were now sought in Karelia, the eastern periphery idealised by the Finns and home of the poetry that went to make up the national epic, the Kalevala. For here, it was assumed, the true Finnish ethos was still alive. This initially nostalgic Karelianism nevertheless soon gave way to art uniting the national and the universal in which the emphasis on 'Finnish' could be combined with contemporary international trends. The Symbolism born in France, seeking a more profound reality by allegorical means rather than giving realistic, everyday descriptions was well suited for this purpose.

In Finland the Symbolists embraced Finnish mythology as a source of universal symbols; thus the national was combined with the universal heritage. The stories and characters in the Kalevala were used, especially in the poetry and poetic dramas of Eino Leino, to depict both current political moods and modern ideals. The most remarkable synthesis of contemporary ideals and Symbolism was his play *Sota valosta* (1900) in which Väinämöinen, cast as a popular leader and poet, and other heroes from the Kalevala try to rescue ancient Finnish society, which is in danger of destruction, but are at the same time clearly Nietzschean, *fin de siècle* individualists; the entire play is set in the Kalevalaic era yet is at the same time an allegory of modern times. Yet in his great masterpiece *Helkavirsiä* (1903) Leino developed the art poem based on the Kalevalaic metre and created heroes of his own who had national roots yet rose to mythical greatness.

Not all the Symbolistic literature in Finland drew on national myths, however. The young Volter Kilpi based his early works representing symbolistic lyrical prose on themes taken from the Bible, Antiquity, and tales of medieval chivalry, but he evoked an echo in only a few young writers and Finnish writers in Swedish oriented towards international imagery. The Symbolistic search for beauty, likewise the cosmopolitan Decadence that accompanied it, were alien to the broader reading public, and the only literature to enjoy prestige was that of a nationalist nature or commenting on the current historical situation. The relationship with the ordinary people was, however, also a problem for the Symbolists raised to the status of interpreters of the nation, such as Leino.

In being transformed into the alter egos of Symbolistic artists and into Nietzschean supermen, the Kalevalaic heroes parted company with the Finnish people, even though they were ostensibly still Finnish heroes. Artists began distancing themselves from the ordinary man, the simple peasant, who was now regarded as part of a threatening mass. They thus focused by veiled means on threats associated in the most highly-industrial parts of Europe with the birth of the workers' movement and the urban proletariat, thought to have a degenerating effect on mankind, but also with mass production and the ascendancy of bourgeois values in cultural life. The ingenious heroes, who in literature were usually artists, sought to stand out above the masses condemned as lower mortals and lacking in the higher, idealistic aspirations and respect for individuality.

Ideas such as this had already won a foothold in Finland before the political and social developments really provided any substance for fearing any concrete threat from the masses. It was thus easier, when the opportunity arose, to interpret events by viewing the people as wild barbarians, or as a monstrous threat to civilisation as a whole. In Finland the workers' movement first demonstrated the power of the masses in a way that conflicted with the goals of the educated classes in the general strike of 1905. In this new social and ideological atmosphere, Finnish literature finally rejected, once and for all, the idea based on nationalist aspirations and the Runebergian ethos of an alliance between the people and the educated class and of common goals on the issue of the national awakening. In place of the idealised peasant, the lower classes of society began to be viewed as an irrational threat to civilisation. Instead of innocent, the masses were regarded as corrupt.

This decline had previously been attributed to the changes brought by modernisation. Cast in the role of scapegoat in the descriptions of country life was the wood-processing industry with its timber sales and loggers, its mills and merchants placing modern luxury goods within reach of the masses and tempting them to dispense with thrift. Little by little, however, as new European ideals reached Finland, another, profounder reason was put forth: the masses were primitive; it was no longer believed that they had ever been good. Instead, they were depicted as wild, as beasts, as dangerous barbarians. Meanwhile, the intelligentsia and decadent Western culture were seen as powerless. Various European doctrines analysing and explaining degeneration spread to literature and influenced the human image. The wild primitivism of the masses, the inferiority of the entire Finnish race or the degeneration of members of the intelligentsia could all be motivated by resorting to popular contemporary theories. The accounts of degeneration were made all the more forceful by the onslaught in literature of a new naturalism with even fewer illusions after the period of Symbolism and accompanying Decadence.

The six articles in *Changing scenes* represent the ongoing reassessment of *fin de siècle* literature in Finnish research. The period was seen in earlier research as something of a national renaissance or golden age and interpreted in the light of its national symbols and meanings. Only recently has more attention been paid to its international dimensions and its role in the modernisation of Finnish culture. In particular the spotlight has been trained on the reflection in Finnish literature of manifestations of the degeneration thinking so common in Europe at that time. Research has also picked out works and writers such as L. Onerva that featured less in earlier studies.

The article by Pirjo Lyytikäinen outlines manifestations of *fin de siècle* Decadence in Finnish literature. Previous research has paid almost no attention to these, because decadence did not fit the image of Finland's emerging national literature. The article also serves as an introduction to the modernist themes of *fin de siècle* literature and is based on her monograph *Narkissos ja sfinksi* (1997) addressing Finnish Symbolism and Decadence. The Naturalism that preceded and paved the way for Decadence, and that is not so provocative in Finnish literature as in, say, French, is discussed by Riikka Rossi. Her article demonstrates that many works previously classified as Realist can be read within a Naturalist frame of reference, thus yielding completely new readings of them. Viola Parente-Čapková draws a portrait of L. Onerva, the leading (woman) writer influenced by the Decadent trend of the *fin de siècle*. Adopting a feminist perspective, the article examines the theme of love in the early works of Onerva, above all her best-known novel, *Mirdja*. *Fin de siècle* love discourse is analysed above all with reference to male-female relations and their social aspects. Päivi Molarius investigates the degeneration debate of the early 20th century and its manifestations in Finnish literature. The ideas rooted in the 19th century on the degeneration of the human race persisted and metamorphosed in the 20th century, drawing stimuli from new scientific or pseudo-scientific models. Degeneration themes in literature in Finnish are illustrated by numerous examples, but with special reference to the works of the female writer Maila Talvio.

Finnish literature in Swedish is the subject of two articles. Jyrki Nummi evaluates the relationship of the debut novel *Barndomsvänner* (Childhood Friends) by K. A. Tavaststjerna to the Modernism in Finnish prose. The novel has previously been examined in the Finnish prose tradition in Swedish as the first modern novel in the framework of Realism and Naturalism. Nummi also points out the lyrical features of the novel that tie it to the romantic tradition of lyric poetry in Swedish. Vesa Haapala discusses the poem “Vierge moderne” in the debut collection by the Modernist lyricist Edith Södergran. He contributes to international debate by putting forth a new interpretation of this acclaimed and contested poem. He is, for example, interested in the way even this early poem already condenses the metaphorical strategies of identity formation so fundamental in her late works and their links with the aesthetics of Nietzsche.

Also in the anthology is an article by Leena Kaunonen and another by Auli Viikari examining the poetry of the distinguished Finnish modernist Paavo Haavikko (b. 1931). The article represents the latest research into the Finnish modernism of the 1950s.

Translated by Susan Sinisalo

PIRJO LYYTIKÄINEN

The Allure of Decadence

French reflections in a Finnish looking glass

Eighteenth-century France could still regard its own (Europe's leading) culture as young and as having recently emerged from barbarity,[1] but by the following century concepts and ideas of cultural decadence gained the upper hand, at least in literary representations. Particularly towards the end of the century, writers and artists began to regard themselves as representatives of a late stage of culture, and the concept of "things come late" even spread to countries such as Finland, where national culture was still under construction. Literary Decadence,[2] ambivalently merging descriptions of decay, wallowing in its imagery, presenting shocked reactions to decay and idealising it while developing a "decadent" style which questioned the essence and nature of the work itself, exerted its influence on young cultures, where national objectives combined with an openness to influences from the centres of European culture.

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. Literary Decadence, on the other hand, proceeded from the world which had been presented by Naturalism, in which all things ended in repugnance, dissolution, illness and death, or dying alive.[3] Both nature and man were represented as processes of disintegration and decay. In Decadence, that which was beautiful and continued to thrive found its place in the shadow of death.[4]

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, and spiritual domains. In his works, however, 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. In prose, the narrator observing from the outside now gave way to representations of the principal character's narcissistic self-reflection and imagination. J. K. Huysmans' novel *A rebours* (1884), which became the Bible of Decadence, demonstrated this transition and served as a compilation of the characteristics of Decadence. This was also associated with a difference in the depiction of characters. In Decadent prose the protagonists (civilised 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).

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 realises the "aesthetic of the carcass" 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.

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 – 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. 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.

In the Nordic countries the idea of an overly refined, neurotic culture of decay and a decadent style reflecting it was represented not only in the cult works of Decadence but also in *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883) by the fashionable writer Paul Bourget. In this work the degeneration of Western civilization is seen as the disintegration of the social organism caused by modern individualism. Modern people observe and enjoy the nuances of their own souls; they are no longer involved in nation building. They are neurotic and weak, while also incapable of creating any new kind of beauty.[5] Since decay is inevitable in any case, it is to be made into a virtue. The refinement of an overripe civilisation and the visions of beauty engendered by it may be the products of illness, but they are also the apex of modern civilisation.

In Finland, Decadence did not appear in any markedly programmatic form or in distinct schools, but its themes and style were present in literature at the beginning of the 20th century. Naturalism had already presented "decadent" characters: seducers, aesthetes, tramps and dilettantes. These types lived on in prose ascribed to Neo-romanticism or Symbolism.[6] In a country of two official languages such as Finland, Decadence was also bilingual. In literature written in Swedish in Finland Decadence tended towards cosmopolitan themes and presented itself in terms of ennui and melancholy rather than as a flood of mythical images of degeneration, while Decadence expressed in Finnish, especially in its early stages, cloaked itself in Symbolist allegory and sometimes appeared as Dionysian passion or diabolic fantasies, manic rather than depressive. But here, too, it was possible for the extremes to meet.

The present article focusses on Decadence in literature written in the Finnish language and on its four different variations. One of the most important works in this vein is *Antinous* (1903) by Volter Kilpi, in which the themes of illness and fatigue together with an aestheticism alien to life are staged in the decline of Ancient Rome. The other extreme is represented by the Dionysian decadence of Joel Lehtonen's early works, where the Finnish wilderness symbolises barbarian forces of destruction. Instead of resignation and withdrawal, this work proclaims abandoning oneself to life, wild pleasures and a reckless spending of vital forces – all done at the risk of melancholy, madness and disease. Moreover, an interesting feature of Decadence in Finnish is the fact that decadent eroticism, one of the main themes of French Decadence, is primarily represented by a woman author, *Mirdja* (1908). Here, the femme fatale figure originally corresponding to male fears and dreams is seen from a woman's point of view, with a radical transition of perspective. Other important themes of Decadence are equally prominent, but owing to the female perspective, are also partly problematised in *Mirdja*. Finnish Decadence is also associated with breaking down the idealised image of the common people as a symbol of the nation which was created by nationalist ideology in the 19th century to serve its own needs. In view of the approved image of Finnishness, the representation of the common people in a decadent and degenerate light, which had partly been made topical by contemporary political events and social unrest, marked a major collapse of illusions (among intellectuals).

Mortifying Aestheticism

Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysman's *A rebours* personifies the prototype of the Decadent aesthete. The main characteristics of this prototype are the tendency to create an aesthetically perfect environment solely for personal use, a quest for aesthetic pleasure instead of creative artistic work, and the separation of the aesthetic from the ethical.[7] *Antinous*, the most important depiction of Decadent aestheticism in Finnish literature, meets all these requirements, but represents a world totally different to Huysmans. Its author, the young Volter Kilpi (1874–1939), had already given offence with his debut novel *Bathseba* (1900), in which the Bible story of King David and Bathsheba was rewritten as a modern love story.[8] Despite the disapproval of conservative critics, he received a positive response among young writers.

Antinous remained completely misunderstood by Finnish-speaking critics (Finnish-Swedish critics were better able to place it in its European context). One reason for this was that it corresponded to Decadent ideals in structure and style in its fragmentary nature, its emphasis on detail at the expense of plot, and its representation of an internal rather than external world. It was also a "learned" work, i.e. based on cultural intertexts rather than on observation of the experiential world (realistic mimesis).[9] The unenthusiastic attitude of cultural circles in Finland towards Decadent experiments in style and aestheticism silenced Kilpi, who did not publish any other literary works until the 1930s, when he produced unique and unprecedented Modernist novels, which subsequently assured him an undisputed position in Finnish literature.

Kilpi's *Antinous* presents the eponymous character as an observer reacting to all things around him solely as an aesthete. The external framework is all that remains of the character's historical model. In Decadent literature, Antinous, a favourite of Hadrian, an emperor of the declining Roman Empire, makes fleeting appearances as a paradigmatic aesthetic and homoerotic ideal, while Kilpi mainly creates "a beautiful soul" out of him. Kilpi's book records Antinous' aesthetic experiences and his desire to merge into a vision of the world as a passive "world eye" (the *Weltauge* inspired by the aesthetic of Arthur Schopenhauer).[10] Landscapes as well as living beings within his horizons are turned into works of art to be admired, as contemplation is Antinous' only contact with the outside world. In the aesthetic vision, the outside world becomes part of the viewer's solipsistic self-reflection. The prominent Narcissus theme in the work demonstrates the nature of the aesthetic attitude as eschewing human interaction.[11] The Decadent aesthetic is the self-sufficient pleasure of an individual focussing on himself, which erodes the basis of communal life and morals alike.

Kilpi himself discussed this problem also in his writings on art,[12] noting the detriment of art and the aesthetic experience understood in Schopenhauer's terms to communal life, while still valuing art and internal experience above communal interaction. In *Antinous*, an aesthetic disorder results in the death of the protagonist, but the novel is above all a depiction of his enraptured aesthetic experiences. They are associated with restlessness about the transience of aesthetic merging and a premonition of the dark undercurrents of the self which threaten the peace of contemplation, but not with any concern for social interaction. For Antinous, other people exist only as objects of aesthetic experience. Voluntary death is his solution to his fear of life beyond the aesthetic sphere. According to Schopenhauer, death is the only certain cure for the suffering of life.

The only scene in Kilpi's novel where Antinous is faced with the challenge posed by another person is his encounter with a strange woman reclining on a tiger skin. Her open sexuality and gaze – a gaze that questions Antinous' monopoly on viewing – require both action and interaction. Antinous, however, for whom the woman is the incomprehensible Other, the Sphinx, whose mystery man cannot solve, chooses to flee.

The implicit homoeroticism linked to the figure of Antinous presents itself in Kilpi's novel only as the fear of life and the alienation from reality of an aesthetic narcissist. Real contacts are tempting yet impossible: for this Antinous, even Hadrian would have been abhorrent.

The woman on the tiger skin finds a parallel in the great sphinx which Antinous later meets. The most tangible connection between Kilpi's Antinous and the character's historical model is the fact that the novel occurs in the same places as the historical events themselves. From Bithynia, the town where he was born, Antinous moved to Athens, from there to Rome and finally to Egypt. For Kilpi, Egypt is the land of infinity and death and the scene of a "recognition" often repeated in the works of Decadence: (some) truth about life or himself is revealed to the protagonist. The scene is usually a variant of seeing oneself as described in the myth of Narcissus. In some works the mirror image is literal, while in others the reflection is represented by a double, a woman figure or a work of art. Kilpi's Antinous looks upon his life in the stone sphinx which seals his fate. The sphinx symbolises the harshness and sweetness of life which are inevitably intertwined. The aesthetic will ultimately only cloak suffering. Only death will remain an open possibility for the aesthete who cannot bear the suffering of life.

In keeping with Decadent narrational style, the pathology of Antinous recounted in Kilpi's work remains ambivalent. A focus on the internal world of the principal character largely obviates an external perspective or the narrator's voice that would place the subject of depiction in a certain valuing frame of reference. As is the case in Decadent literature in general, Kilpi's *Antinous* also provokes the reader, although it does not bring on to the scene the elements violence, sexual perversion or sacrilege typical of Decadence. For example, the homosexuality of the protagonist's historical model, often a provocative element in Decadence, remains solely on an implicit level. On the other hand, the novel contains a number of hints aimed at the knowledgeable reader. Allusions to Decadent themes are frequent: the enjoyment of violence and mass hysteria caused by it in the Colosseum of Rome, a brief description of a Roman orgy, and the presence of a seductive woman figure who is branded a predator. European Decadence is the context within which Kilpi writes, but he leaves it without further explication.

The Femme Fatale

Decadence deconstructed the pure, female ideal of Romanticism and Symbolism, in which woman was made into an Ideal, a mirror image of the man's ideal self and/or a symbol of a world of transcendental ideas. Decadence found its idols in femmes fatales, beautiful and mortifying at the same time, at once seducing and killing. Huysmans created one of the main prototypes of this character by analysing Gustave Moreau's Salomé paintings.[13] It was in these works that the principal character saw his dreams come true. As a seductive body, Salomé is able to break

Six articles in *Changing scenes* represent the ongoing reassessment of fin de siècle literature in Finnish research. The period was seen in earlier research as something of a national renaissance or golden age and interpreted in the light of its national symbols and meanings. Only recently has more attention been paid to its international dimensions and its role in the modernisation of Finnish culture. In particular the spotlight has been trained on the reflection in Finnish literature of manifestations of the degeneration thinking so common in Europe at that time. Research has also picked out works and writers that featured less in earlier studies.

One modernist Finnish poet, Neustadt Prize-winning Paavo Haavikko, is also examined in an article representing the latest Finnish research in this field.

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