

## *J. Randvere's "Ruth" (1909) as an Example of Literary Decadence and the Quintessence of Young Estonia's (1905–1915) Modern Ideology*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This article is based on the interpretation of a segment of the reception of J. Randvere's provocative, short essay-novella "Ruth" (1909), which was written by Johannes Aavik, a well-known Young Estonian and one of the principal modernizers of the Estonian language. This segment of reception regards "Ruth" as the quintessence of Young Estonia's ideology, but does not offer a full explanation of how this ideology in "Ruth" is associated, on the one hand, with Young Estonians' ambitions in modernizing Estonian literature and, on the other, with the broader *fin de siècle* European culture. I shall ask through which discourses does this ideology, which is innovative in the context of Estonian culture at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, express itself in "Ruth"? What imaginations, representations and associations appear in "Ruth" in relation to the Young Estonian program, which interweaves tradition and/or Estonian national-mindedness on the one hand, and Europeanness and/or modern ideas on the other. Or who are these Europeans and Estonians with whom Young Estonians wish to identify? Although Young Estonian ideology in "Ruth" has mostly been associated with connotations of decadence like "a culture of individuality", "artificiality" and "aestheticism", I will argue that in "Ruth" counter-discourses also come to the forefront. In other words, "Ruth" becomes the quintessence of the Young Estonia ideology, because it serves as a metaphoric counterpart to the Young Estonians' program: "let us be Estonians, but let us become Europeans". Through the reproduction of decadent discourse, which is in this text in the dominant position, "Ruth" oscillates between the ambivalent valorizations of signs of health (norms) and disease or decadence (deviation from the norms), accompanied, on the one hand, and among other things by opposition to the national discourse and, on the other hand, to the signs of decadence, that is the neutralization of the symptoms of decadence.

**Keywords:** literary decadence, *fin de siècle*, modernization of Estonian culture, Young Estonian movement, J. Randvere's "Ruth" (1909)

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the avant-garde in Estonia was virtually synonymous with the Young Estonia movement. Their period of activity

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spanned the decade between 1905 and 1915. During this period members of the group (main names are Gustav Suits 1883–1956, Friedebert Tuglas 1886–1971, Johannes Aavik 1880–1973, Bernhard Linde 1886–1959, Villem-Grünthal Ridala 1885–1956) published different types of texts, produced works of visual art, conducted scholarly research, organized exhibitions, and founded the Young Estonia publishing house. Their primary aim was the radical modernization of Estonian literature and culture (cf. Kallas 1918; Raun 2009). Since the activities of the Young Estonians took place in the atmosphere of political repression that characterized the aftermath of the revolutionary events of 1905 in many places in Russia, including the Baltic province of Estonia, many of their active members were forced into political exile. This meant that they often directed their activities from abroad. From time to time, particularly in the summer season making brief stops in Paris and in several other European cities, including Finland.

Johannes Aavik – one of the principal modernizers of the Estonian language – studied at Helsinki University from 1906–1910. His steadfast struggle to make the Estonian language more beautiful and richer in vocabulary appears in many theoretical writings and calls to action. As a Francophile, Aavik admired the majesty and style of the French language, and emphasized its suitability for the discussion of psychological issues (cf. Chalvin 2010). Similarly to other Young Estonians, Aavik envisioned the new “Estonian style” to be the replacement of the style of the village or the rural educated person with a style befitting one educated person writing to another (cf. Aavik 1915: 222). Among other things Aavik was also a translator, literary critic, and writer. The latter designation he earned mainly thanks to one short, very controversial piece, entitled “Ruth”, which was published under the pseudonym J. Randvere in the third Young Estonia Album in 1909. This was actually the second version of “Ruth”. The first one was written by Aavik in French either in 1907 or 1908 in Helsinki. After that the manuscript was sent to the leading ideologue of Young Estonia, Gustav Suits, who then requested that Aavik submit an Estonian-language version for the next Young Estonia album (Vihma 1980: 66–67).

“Ruth” is a very provocative text, which seeks to goad the provincial, gradually modernizing Estonian society and culture. The fact that it was published in the third Young Estonia album amplifies the text’s provocative effect, because this album was intentionally put together so that the individualistic mentality it expressed would affect to the bourgeois disposition. Thus one should not be surprised that immediately after its publication “Ruth” drew a great deal of critical attention. A handful of liberals were positively inclined toward “Ruth”. But the conservative, national-minded readership that saw the shortcomings and dangers of the text was much larger. Many reviewers recognized in “Ruth”

the influence of fashionable thinkers and writers of the time, such as Weininger, Nietzsche, and Huysmans etc., and claimed that "Ruth" expresses social isolation, the lack of national feeling, self-centredness, and individualism. Even the emphasis on the constructedness of the protagonist was a thorn in the flesh for several reviewers (cf. Haava 1910; Kallas 1921; Vihma 1980: 74). Also left-wing intellectuals can give this text no peace accusing "Ruth" of the dominance of sexual drives and paradoxically also of bourgeois tendencies (AG. 1911: 107).

If we place these reproaches in the context of the reception of the Young Estonia movement as a whole, we can observe astonishing similarities. While those critics who are in solidarity with the workers' movement and social-democratic views accuse the Young Estonians of individualism and lack of revolutionary feelings (cf. Minor 1910; AG. 1911), then older-generation national-minded critics who take peasant culture as their standard, fault them for insufficient nationalism. In its most extreme form, these attitudes are summed up by Anton Jürenstein, in whose view the Young Estonians were degenerates, who brought the French cultural disease to Estonia, a dangerous elite culture, which they imitate "in ape-like fashion", and thereby "our men, who come from farms, are destroyed intellectually, just like distilled spirits (destroyed) the Indians physically"<sup>2</sup> (cf. Jürenstein 1909: 488).

These concurrences in reception between "Ruth" and Young-Estonia as a whole are no mere coincidence. Many of those involved in the discussion about "Ruth" have emphasized that this text draws together the contradictory ideological views of the Young Estonians, and manifests their aspirations to be the modernizers of Estonian literature and culture. For example, in the collection *Nuori Viro. Muotokuva ja suuntaviivoja* ('Young Estonia. Portraits and Trajectories', 1918), which was first published in Finnish, Aino Kallas states: "What is characteristically Young Estonian about "Ruth" is ... Ruth's longing for irreality, her worship of beauty and her non-sociality, her artificiality and theorizing. However, what is most deeply Young Estonian, is "Ruth's" hidden ideal of uselessness, a culture of individuality taken to an extreme, having no value other than its own existence." (Cf. Kallas 1921: 144–145.) In 1935, the literary scholar Paul Ambur [Hamburg] repeats the same view, adding that "Ruth is the kind of person who the Young Estonians imagine themselves to be, the kind of person they want to be" (cf. Hamburg 1935: 43); in 1980, at the celebration of the hundredth anniversary of Aavik's birth, these same positions are summarized once more (cf. Langemets 1980: 712). This article is based on the segment of the reception of "Ruth" which regards this text as the quintessence of Young Estonia's ideology. How does "Ruth" make

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<sup>2</sup> This quotation and all quotations that follow are translated by Tiina Kirss.

visible the Young Estonians' understandings of what they imagined themselves to be? Through which discourses do ideas that are innovative in the context of Estonian culture at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century express themselves in "Ruth"?

### The ambivalent programme of the Young Estonians and "Ruth"

In the opening article to the first "Young Estonia" album (1905), entitled "The Strivings of Youth", Gustav Suits declares: "Earlier in history it was said: *Noblesse oblige* – nobility obligates! We say: *Jeunesse oblige* – youth obligates! And we are standing at a crossroads. There are many directions and strivings in our land, but let the task and endeavor of youth be the following: when the times are narrow and constraining, they must be expanded and adjusted to the needs at hand! That which allows people and nations to make their circumstances more suitable to their needs, that which carries and raises people, is education. And our call is: "More culture. This is the first condition of all emancipatory ideals and efforts. More European culture! Let us remain Estonians, but let us also become Europeans." (Suits 1905: 17)

This excerpt from the Young Estonians' manifesto, charged with the rhetoric of struggle is the slogan most often discussed and repeated, and through which the identity of the Young Estonians is constructed to this day. The program of the Young Estonians is based on a hierarchical binary opposition between old and new, demanding the birth of the "new" and unusual to take place through the denial of the "old": the dominant language and culture of the Estonian cultural space at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Therefore these dominants had to be shaken. However, the aim of the Young Estonians was not reproducing the hierarchical opposition own/stranger (that is with respect to either Estonia or Europe), but rather to break free of this opposition, that is, to saturate Estonian language and culture with shards of as many different cultures and languages as possible, to open Estonia to influences from outside (Monticelli 2008: 279–280). In this way one can explain two seemingly contradictory wishes of the Young Estonians: the desire to preserve what exists and the desire for deeper change. What kind of imaginations, representations and associations appear in relation with this intertwined Estonian national-mindedness and Europeanness? What geographical-cultural Europe does "Ruth" envision? And who are these Europeans and Estonians with whom Young Estonians wish to identify?

Let us first briefly introduce the structure and content of "Ruth". The genre of this 56-page text is hard to define. It has been referred to as an essay-novella

(cf. Vihma 1980: 69), because the text contains the statement: "This is like a piece of a diary – but more accurately, a transcribed monologue ... without composition or plan, proceeding without a purpose, going where one's feet take one, tasting of all the colors and smells, observing all kinds of phenomena with curiosity, taking a pause at every question..." (Randvere 1980: 5–6.) According to the narrator of "Ruth", a structure accommodating diary entries permits "conversation with oneself", offering, despite the difficulties of accommodating form and content almost "unbounded freedom in choice of topic" (ibid. 5–6). Thus even the form of "Ruth" is radical in a Young Estonian fashion, signifying among other things, a turning against the (realist) novel, which at the time was in the ruling position in terms of literary genres (and, as a rule, as a polyphonic form).

In the case at hand, "boundless freedom in terms of content" is expressed as a focus not on a narrative and events, but rather on the mediation of what is happening in the consciousness of the character. That is, in "Ruth" nothing actually happens. The text focuses almost entirely on an extremely detailed construction of an ideal woman, from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet. Whereas this activity of construction is explicitly thematized: "this unreal, constructed person" (ibid. 23), says the narrator about his ideal woman. Thus here one encounters an example of standing in opposition to ordinary reality, which hides the need to change reality, or to supplement it artificially by cosmetic means, to aestheticize it – dispositions, which are characteristic of many examples of literary decadence (cf. eg. Lyytikäinen 1997, Potolsky 2004, Kafitz 2004), including "Ruth". Driven by such an intention, the narrator contemplates several different topics: for example, the appearance of his ideal woman, her psychological make-up and intellectual characteristics, her place of residence and environment, her horizon, what she eats and drinks, what books she reads, what music she listens to, her sexual preferences, etc. On the basis of these thoughts one can make several generalizations, with respect to tendencies characteristic of *fin de siècle* Europe (cf. Hinrikus 2006a).

From the perspective of narrative analysis, one should also note that there are two points of view at work in "Ruth". The text speaks primarily from the third person point of view, but this becomes involuntarily mixed with the first person perspective. Indeed, when describing his ideal woman, the narrator repeats the words that Gustave Flaubert uses with respect to the protagonist of his novel, *Madame Bovary* (1857): "This (is) myself, if I were a woman" (Randvere 1980: 9). As a result, in some passages "Ruth's" protagonist becomes an imaginary relational and sexual partner for the male narrator. However, it is generally difficult to differentiate between the two voices, which in turn points to the importance of the idea of androgyny (Undusk 2006), which was

widely disseminated at the turn of the 19th/20th century in Europe (cf. eg. Parente-Čapková 2014: 41). Concluding this it should be said that although there are many innovative moments in “Ruth’s” content, rhetoric, style, and fresh vocabulary, I shall basically concentrate on some aspects of content.

### The Modern Artist and the Decadent-Dilettante in “Ruth”

What arouses the reader’s attention with respect to the narrator of “Ruth”, who mostly remains hidden in the shadow of the projection of his ideal self, is the fact that he compares making entries in his diary with a “blithe, purposeless” flow, which allows him to taste “all the colors and smells” and enjoy “all sorts of phenomena”, as well as to ponder over “all sorts of questions” (Randvere 1980: 5–6). In the context of Estonian literature at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this is perhaps one of the earliest gestures toward the familiar figure of the modern artist from Baudelaire’s texts<sup>3</sup>, most of all from his essay “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), the figure that Walter Benjamin dubbed the *flâneur*.

However, in “Ruth” there are no more explicit references to the metropolitan experience of modernity.<sup>4</sup> Yet implicitly, that is through allusions, to the paleness, somewhat nervous sexuality, and hypertrophied faculty of reflection, the intermittent perception of relativity of viewpoints and overly rich fantasy life, one can deduce a certain degree of influence of different aspects of this experience. In other words, the traits that make themselves apparent in Ruth do not so much connect directly with the “real” *flâneur* walking through the metropolis, but rather evoke the texts of Baudelaire and many others in whose texts this figure makes frequent appearances as the modern dandy and/or aesthete and/or (male)artist. Moreover, it seems that “Ruth’s” protagonist has been constructed in resonance with Paul Bourget’s concept of decadence, and the figure of decadent-dilettante, which follows the intellectual lineage of Theophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire (cf. Kafitz 2004).

The influence of this decadent artist figure is first signaled by “Ruth’s” epigraph, the author of which is the French poet Sully Prudhomme: “I can imagine it! So I can make/An angel under my mortal brow/And who should

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<sup>3</sup> Aavik was in Estonia probably the first who introduced Baudelaire to the broader audience, cf. Talviste 2006.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the surroundings of Ruth’s home remind the reader in several ways of the atmosphere of a small Estonian university town (Tartu) from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Ots 2006).

judge the difference/between the imaginary and the real."<sup>5</sup> (Randvere 1980: 5.) This motto refers unambiguously to the tendency of "Ruth's" narrator to fantasize, his need to create artificial aestheticized worlds around him, one manifestation of which is Ruth, the ideal woman. Thus the narrator becomes a kind of re-embodiment of Pygmalion (Kirss 2006) – again a well-known figure in examples of literary decadence (cf. Lyytikäinen 1997; Parente-Čapková 2014). But in what way do these characteristics exhibit themselves in the woman of the diarist's dreams?

The narrator makes the following statements about Ruth: she is "intellectual to a very high degree, in that specific meaning given to the term in France ... whose capacity for thinking [...] is extremely advanced. [...] She has [...] a broad erudition, which presumes a fine memory. She loves linguistic research, which few women love seriously and scientifically" [...] and "she shows a particular interest in philosophical questions", as well as natural sciences and mathematics (Randvere 1980: 14–15). In addition Ruth is extremely self-conscious. "Her self-conscious manner is pushed to the ultimate degree, because her brain has been built in the finest, but also the most solid manner, and her nervous system is very dense." (Ibid. 16.)

The network of allusions by means of which the narrator defines Ruth's intelligence connects with recognizable accounts of decadence which were widely disseminated at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most important figures to confer definition on decadence was the above-mentioned Bourget, about whom Aavik wrote his (now lost) Master's thesis in French, and who was much better known than Nietzsche at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a theoretician of decadence (cf. eg. Kafitz 2004: 66–88). In his two-part collection of theoretical articles entitled *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* I, II (1883, 1886), Bourget claims to be among the first to have noticed the re-emergence of a sort of pessimistic attitude toward life. This basic attitude manifests itself, according to Bourget, in a variety of intellectual inclinations, that is, as the expressions of decadence: melancholy, dilettantism, an analytical disposition, weakness of will, cosmopolitanism, a thirst for emotions and the exotic. He illustrates this list of characteristics through the "psychological heritage" of the French writers (Charles Baudelaire, Ernest Renan, Gustave Flaubert, Hippolyte Taine etc.) who had had the strongest influence on his own generation.

In the above passage quoted from "Ruth" connections are activated with Bourget's symptoms of decadence through the reference to Ruth's characteristic

<sup>5</sup> *J'imagine! ainsi je puis faire / Un ange sous mon front mortel! / Et qui peut dire en quoi diffère/ L'être imaginé du réel.*

and specifically French intellect, which relates to her self-conscious stance, which she has in turn carried to its extremes. In addition, the protagonist of "Ruth" manifests to some extent the three main factors of modern (decadent) sensibility. First, Ruth has the tendency to fall into melancholy from time to time, since "besides being a deep thinker and scientific researcher, (Ruth is) also a poet, a dreamer" (Randvere 1980: 36), whom particularly musical improvisations fill with "a longing for something more permanent and more whole" (ibid. 47). She also does not lack some of the traits of decadent eroticism: "as a sensual and intellectual woman, Ruth would reach the fatal limit where she would desire to taste certain refined feelings, and could even find pleasure in certain perversions" (ibid. 59). Bourget discusses the interconnections among the three factors of modern sensibility primarily through the texts of Baudelaire and under his texts influence (cf. Kafitz 2004).

Most thoroughly is Ruth bound to Bourget's notion of dilettantism as a symptom of decadence about which he writes in his essay "Ernest Renan": "For this reason her superiority expresses itself primarily in the fact that she notices the endless small nuances of a thought, or the different sides of a phenomenon; she knows how to look at things from every angle, discern all those possibilities, relationships, and combinations, which no one else has remembered to notice before." (Randvere 1980: 17) "Ruth is ... a general intellect ... Her ideal is most similar to Renan's dilettantism, which feels an interest in everything ..." (Ibid. 58.) According to Bourget, dilettantism only manifests in the "very intelligent and lustful" – in the extremely sensitive individuals with a greatly enhanced capacity for perception and reflection; those who are able to "make a mosaic out of their spirit" (Bourget 1883: 59, 70). This is "much less a doctrine than an inclination of the spirit, which makes us lean in turn toward the different forms of life, and directs us to loan ourselves to its forms, while surrendering oneself to none" (ibid. 59). In addition, we learn that "of all its poesy" dilettantism makes itself felt "only in the later stages of the life of races, when extreme civilization has destroyed creative capacities little by little, replacing them with intellectual comprehension" (ibid. 60). Thereby, as one of the forms of expression of decadence, dilettantism is inscribed in the experience of diversity that characterizes the life of the modern metropolis (in a broader sense, that of modern society), which forces one to parcel oneself out to the different forms of life; with this ability for comprehension one also acquires the capacity to equalize all perspectives. (Ruth knows how to "look at things from all angles").

There is yet one more important thing to keep in mind while examining Bourget's attitudes toward dilettantism as one of the forms of expression of decadence through "Ruth". Bourget's account of decadence is usually quite ambivalent. This so-called "poesy of dilettantism" may make Ruth into a



symbol of the height of civilization, but similarly to Bourget, the narrator of "Ruth" warns that a capacity for understand everything (that is any viewpoint) can also render her passive and uncreative (cf. eg. Randvere 1980: 18). However, these ambivalent attitudes towards decadence are in no cases specifically Bourgetian. Although Bourget is in a Foucauldian sense in a certain transdiscursive position, serving as an expander of the discursive structure of decadence (Kafitz 2004: 13), he still speaks under the influence of this discourse, the function of which at the turn of the 19/20<sup>th</sup> century is to express and ambivalently evaluate the various changes related to modernization (Potolsky 2004: V–VII). Thus the ambivalence in "Ruth", which is associated with the oscillation between signs of health and sickness – an issue on which I will focus in the next section – engages with a whole range of *fin de siècle* (often quite misogynist) thinkers besides Bourget who spoke through the discourse of decadence.

### The woman's body as the symbol of an aging Europe and the sign of misogyny

In the intellectual tradition of Gautier and Baudelaire, the figures of the modern artist and/or the *flâneur*, and their extensions in the constructions of the decadent-dilettante by Bourget and others are clearly masculinized. In other words, the traits attributed to these figures, such as an over-developed capacity for reflection, and the resultant narcissism; the perception of the relativity of viewpoints in turn leading to the paralysis of the will; a splitting of the subject, and neurotic tendencies, all express different aspects of the masculine experience of modernity. "For this reason, she has the intellectual strength and sharpness proper to a real man." (Randvere 1980: 16) says the narrator about Ruth, drawing upon models of (ideal) masculinity permeating the culture of that time.

However, it is obvious that in the construction of Ruth, models of femininity are also used. At the beginning of "Ruth" the textual narrator deems it important to explain why he builds his ideal based on a woman's, not a man's body: "It seems to me that a Woman could realize a bigger work of art in herself. Concerning her outlook, she is a product of humankind, which represents the more developed, more aged and more refined culture. Because her body is finer and more tender, her physical power has diminished, her bones are refined, her hand and foot have lost their voluminous skirts. Altogether it is one more ethereal, more dematerialized and more spiritual being." (Ibid. 10.) What first strikes us in this quotation is the decadent definition of culture, which already

echoes traits familiar from Bourget's essays: progress, refinement, aging, regression. In the course of its development, decadent culture has reached the peak of refinement, from where there is no place to go: the only option is decline. But perhaps even more telling here is the connection between decadent culture and femininity. Decadent culture has been feminized, as the passive, will-less, sexualized, and neurotic decadents are themselves partially feminized, because such characteristics have been feminized throughout the history of western thought. However, culture in general has been a thoroughly masculinized concept, like the mind and the spirit. Therefore, the denaturalization of the "naturalized" binary: masculinized culture *vs* feminized nature raises expectations at the beginning of "Ruth's" narrative. Could this be a sign of a more decisive turn, the reference to women's emancipation, or the making visible of women in the public sphere, tendencies that were gaining in strength at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Perhaps the demolition of the traditional binaries is an indication of the narrator's intention to construct Ruth as a so-called "new woman"?

Such a claim would be premature, but of course the protagonist of "Ruth" has many contact points with representations of the "new woman", that were widespread at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fact that the traditional gender binary stays in place in the construction of Ruth: masculinized intellect *vs.* feminized body, was noticed already by Aino Kallas, who stated this as follows: Ruth has "a man's intellect and virtues of male-character" and "the bodily charm and emotional life of a woman, and these are added together: man plus woman." (Kallas 1921: 147.) In addition to the "pleasantness of a woman's character" (Randvere 1980: 14), the feminized traits of the construction of "Ruth's" protagonist mainly revert to representation of the *fin de siècle* eroticized and feminized body. With a conspicuous richness of nuance, the first person narrator describes almost every part of Ruth's body: skin, eyes, mouth, limbs, even her breath. It is apparent that in this characterization of Ruth's external appearance, a crucial role is played by sensuous details – large eyes; long, thick eyelashes; sensual mouth; sensitive nostrils; a tempting, curvaceous body; blond, thick, loose hair. Scholars who have discussed these signs of the feminized body, which make up almost a fourth of the text of "Ruth", have pointed to connections with representations of women and femininity – figures of both the *femme fragile*, *femme fatale* and *femme enfant* in *fin de siècle* art and in literary decadence (Kivimaa 2006; Ots 2006: 36; Hinrikus 2008).

In sum, the purpose of these details is to direct the discussion toward the topic of Ruth's sexual desirability. We should notice here that at some point a clear shift of point of view occurs in the discussions of sexual morality, marriage, and Ruth's sexual behavior. While most of the text of "Ruth" describes the

ideal woman as the projection of the third-person narrator's ideal self – what the decadent, *flâneur*-like narrator would like to be if he were a woman – all of a sudden the narrator begins to talk in the first person, and Ruth shifts from being the object of the narrator's projections to being, unambiguously, the object of his sexual desire. "To embrace this young and fresh body ... and to think that behind that brow that one is kissing ... is hidden such a fine, educated spirit ... all this would seem unheard of, unimaginable ... but for precisely these reasons it has an irritating attraction ..." (Randvere 1980: 59)

### Wavering between an aging Europeanism and Young Estonianism

Yet another feature makes "Ruth" interesting as a text. The structure of the text foregrounds the rhetoric of health and sickness – clearly one of the most characteristic aspects of literary decadence (cf. Spackman 1989). This rhetoric is situated as a whole within the construction of the protagonist of "Ruth". Ruth is represented in such a way that many of her physical, sexual, psychological and moral characteristics continually set her symptoms of "sickness" or decadence under suspicion. Let us examine the following passages as examples: "In her manner of being, (Ruth) is not eccentric, affected, vain, haughty, or moody" (Randvere 1980: 51); "her principle and ambition is to be rather than to appear" (ibid. 51); she has good digestion (ibid. 31); "she (does not have) inclinations toward irony and teasing" (ibid. 52); "Ruth' love is always a particular mix of purity and erotic, romantic dreaming and perversity" (ibid. 60); Ruth is "a young maiden, serious and youthful, simple and aristocratic" (ibid. 33); "a blond type, something Finnish in the racial sense of the word" (ibid. 25) – all of these are understandable both in terms of neutralizing the signs of European (French) "illness" as well as overcoming the tendency toward decline; in other words, these are examples in which traditional (including those associated with "Estonianness") norms of behavior, attitude, speech and valorization are reinforced and reaffirmed.

Indeed, irony, games with different roles and the accompanying lying, eccentricity, states of affect and moodiness – these characteristics (which are absent from Ruth according to the narrator's point of view) are typical of the decadent-dilettante, for example Des Esseintes, the protagonist of *À rebours* (1884), the novel that was considered the bible of decadence. The decadent, as the representative of decadent culture is characterized also by a bodily state of illness; Ruth deviates from this model as well, since she is blooming with health. The narrator goes on to mention that Ruth is not old and tired in spirit like the male decadents, who have sick, young bodies; unlike them, Ruth is

young, serious, and simple, racially similar to the Finnish. The mention of the Finnish race at this point of the text directs the reader's attention to the relative importance of national discourse in this text. This example could be considered as an attempt to identify with the awakening of the Finnish people (Kivimaa 2006: 222–223).

However, it should be kept in mind that in Finland as well as in Estonia, nationalist ideas and signs of the formation of national consciousness became mixed with the signs of decadent moods (Lyytikäinen 2003). On the more general level, it seems that the goal of the statements referred to above is to oppose certain aspects of social upheaval, which arose at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century in Europe, which was modernizing at an accelerated pace. In light of what has been argued above, the figure of Ruth becomes, on the one hand refined, and as such a symbol of decadent Europe, but on the other hand a representation of the young, nascent Estonian nation.

Furthermore, since Ruth is a complex symbol of the aspirations of the Young Estonians (cf. Kallas 1918, Hamburg 1935), in certain passages Ruth becomes a sign of modern (or decadent) account of art, a sign both of its affirmation and its rejection.<sup>6</sup> In the following quotations traditional and modern aesthetic norms are either juxtaposed or Ruth's modern traits are emphasized as positive. "Official and academic beauty" exerts "a little stiff and cold influence" (Randvere 1980: 22–23) is a claim that clearly expresses Ruth's representation's opposition to the academic ideal of beauty, as well as to the associated mimetic relationship with reality, as is represented in the classical account of art. The narrator goes on to say: "there is something homely, familiar, simple, and natural, but also something cultured and refined" (ibid. 25); "Ruth's complexion is privileged by two fine characteristics: race and endurance, without which there can be no serious beauty. Her facial color is not red, as with peasants, nor is it naive-tender ... [...] The color of Ruth's face is a healthy pallour ..." (ibid. 27–28).

From the abovementioned excerpts one can conclude that Ruth is simultaneously being identified and set in opposition to the understandings of modern art. The last two of the above-quoted statements specifically call to mind a quote from Baudelaire's text *Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe* (*New Notes on Edgar Poe*): "...It seems to me that I am presented with two women: one, a

<sup>6</sup> Dieter Kafitz claims that in Gautier-Baudelaire intellectual tradition the term decadence is positive and related with the account of art, but at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it means much more and becomes both negativised and anthropologized; in other words it becomes equalized with components of modern perception and cognitive psychology (cf. Kafitz 2004: 50, 142, 145, 371).

rustic matron, repulsive in her health and virtue, without allure and with no glance, in short, owing nothing except to her simple nature; the other, one of those beauties who dominates and oppresses the memory, uniting a profound and original charm with all the eloquence of dress and manner, mistress of her walk, conscious and queen of herself." (Baudelaire 1980: 589)

Dieter Kafitz points out that Théophile Gautier refers to this passage in his famous "Notice" which serves as an introduction to Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* explicating the contexts both of Baudelaire's poetry and the hierarchical binary opposition between nature and art that dominates in this poetry. As can be seen from Gautier's exposition, there are several places in Baudelaire's text where classical and modern understandings of art revert to the figures of two girls (Gautier 1861: LIII-LIV, XXV, cf. eg. Kafitz 2004). The protagonist of "Ruth" also seems often to be situated simultaneously in the framework of two female types. On the one hand Ruth is something simple, healthy, and virtuous referring to classical accounts of art; on the other hand, she is characterized by ultimate cultivatedness and luxuriousness starting to symbolize modern or decadent account of art.

Summarizing, however, it is apparent that the first half of Ruth is what remains dominant. "Ruth" and its protagonist suggest that wholeness, activity, and health are attributes that outweigh the diverse signs of decadence. If we interpret the examples of overcoming decadence that can be found in "Ruth" in terms of reproducing national discourse, we could argue that emergent national consciousness outweighs the moods of decadence. Among other things, it is useful to observe that Ruth's health is connected with proper nutrition and good digestion, which Nietzsche, whose own health was weak, considers important for the overcoming of decadence in the texts he wrote in the second half of the 1880s (cf. Nietzsche 1888/1996: 32–33, 37, 147) and in which the term decadence appears hand in hand with connotations inspired by Baudelaire's and Bourget's definitions of decadence (cf. Kafitz 2004).

In addition, Ruth's physical and physiological health is augmented by her moral and psychological characteristics, for example by her will, which is not totally inhibited (cf. Randvere 1980: 45). In this view, the representation of Ruth seems to harmonize with the ideal of masculinity, which roots one should look since the romantic period. In other words, Ruth associates with the figure of the male genius, who is in some of his aspects androgynous (cf. Battersby 1989). From these accounts of the genius, many theorists of modernity (decadence) from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century (Nietzsche, Nordau, Weininger, Lombroso etc.) inaugurate their discussions. In addition to Weininger's definitions of the male genius (cf. Hinrikus 2006b), one can

sense in the construction of Ruth some elements of Nietzsche's idea of the over-man.

### Summary

In 1912, Young Estonian Friedebert Tuglas wrote in his essay "Literary Style" (1912): "... the city, a new tempo of life, a new psychology, which truly determines a writer's personal inclinations and new literary movements, will not bypass (i.e. Estonia) without exerting its influence. [...] The new, more conscious life energy demands a new, more conscious literary form. This will find for itself a new technique and method, a new linguistic and stylistic choice." (Tuglas 1996: 53) "Ruth" would seem to be a prime example that fits within Tuglas' framework of demands. Clearly it is one of the earliest texts of Estonian literature that so richly and powerfully exhibits the signs of this renewal. Without a doubt, "Ruth" is an impressive exemplum not only of a new literary form but of new technique, language and style.

Moreover, the three key words in the above passage – the city, a new tempo of life, and a new psychology, the appearance of which Tuglas awaits in different media of literature and culture, have either direct or indirect connections with the text of "Ruth", more specifically with the narrator of text and his ideal woman, Ruth. The connotational network among these key words is inseparably bound with a new (modern) and in many respects also decadent constructions of gender. Toward the cultural expression of these new constructions, Young Estonians adapted discursive models, forms of representation, oppositions, and subject positions that were offered to them by the discourses of modernity circulating in the European cultures that surrounded them. Since the discourse of decadence dominated *fin de siècle* European culture, the modes of representing modern intellectual are bound up in many ways with the forms of representation characteristic of European decadent discourse in its multiple combinations of rise and decline.

Reception of "Ruth" has related the quintessence of Young Estonia's ideology in this text mainly with "Ruth's" "cult of individuality", "artificiality" and "aestheticism". I will argue that on a broader level of generalization, "Ruth" becomes a metaphoric counterpart to the Young Estonians' program, "let us be Estonians, but let us become Europeans". The reproduction of decadent discourse in "Ruth" takes the form of an oscillation between the ambivalent valorizations of signs of health and disease (decadence), accompanied, on the one hand, by opposition to the national discourse and traditional

understandings of art and, on the other hand, to the signs of decadence, that is the neutralization of the symptoms of decadence.

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