

*On Decadent Europe and the Intellectual Identity  
of Young Estonia: J. Randvere's Ruth and  
Friedebert Tuglas' Felix Ormusson*

“What is it that binds me to life?” asks Felix Ormusson. “Not my relatives, not my friends – no one! Werther had a mother, brothers, and friends, but is it possible for me to have any of these! It seems that I was even born into the world without parents! The perimeter of life is contracting. Everything is becoming more insubstantial. As my thought rubs against it, the glass wall dividing being from nonexistence keeps getting thinner. One of these days this merciless diamond will break the mirror of illusions. And what will happen then? The more conscious the human being becomes, the weaker he becomes when faced with life’s tragedy, which is evident everywhere: in humans, nature, the starry sky. Every one of life’s details comes to have a meaning, but taken together, existence loses its meaning altogether. What is left is a wordless, imageless despair, endless and pointless. Everything that is visible is for you only a symbol. You stand helpless before reality. You have no faith left in anything.” (Tuglas 1988: 102–103)

This quotation<sup>1</sup> from Young Estonia’s leading theorist and prose stylist Friedebert Tuglas’ (1886–1971) novel *Felix Ormusson* (1914) is laden with references to literary decadence and the European *fin de siècle*. The novel and its protagonist, a would-be writer returned from Europe to spend the summer holidays at a friend’s farm in rural Estonia, enact in diary form the conflicts and antinomies of a confrontation with the modern, experienced and recorded in the vocabulary of European decadence. For the reader even vaguely

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<sup>1</sup> Here and in the following translation of quotations is mine. M. H.

familiar with the “key words” of decadence, Ormusson’s diary entries and monologues will evoke connotations and specific intertexts, as can be seen from the first rhetorical question Ormusson poses above: “What binds me to life?”. The same can be observed for his more philosophical exclamation, “Every one of life’s details comes to have a meaning, but taken together, existence loses its meaning altogether.” Both of these sentences seem to allude directly to Friedrich Nietzsche’s formulation in *Der Fall Wagner* (1888), of one of the basic meanings of literary decadence, lack of coherence, the whole not holding together:

“Womit kennzeichnet sich jede *literarische decadence*? Damit, dass das Leben nicht mehr im Ganzen wohnt. Das Word wird souverän und springt aus dem Satz hinaus, der Satz greift über und verdunkelt den Sinn der Seite, die Seite gewinnt Leben auf Unkosten des Ganzen – das Ganze ist kein Ganze mehr... Das Ganze lebt überhaupt nicht mehr: es ist zusammengesetzt, gerechnet, künstlich, ein Artefakt.” (Nietzsche 1999: 27).

This totalizing approach to decadence is an important aspect of Nietzsche’s later philosophy; the French word *décadence* is mentioned with increasing frequency in his writings after 1883–1884 (Silk 2005: 587–606). Yet for Nietzsche the style of literary decadence is but one of many examples of disintegration in culture. In addition to the use of decadence as an aesthetic term, the roots of which usage lead back to Gautier and Baudelaire, Nietzsche deploys decadence as a host of cultural meanings that range from psychology to physiology. Scholars of Nietzsche’s philosophy emphasize three main lineages in Nietzsche’s treatment of decadence. First, as has already been briefly discussed, decadence refers to disorganization, the disintegration or lack of wholeness (in both a positive and a negative sense), and the decline in physiological and psychological processes (organic decadence), as expressed in limited reaction to irritation, pathological instincts and the weakening of the will to life. A second meaning of decadence for Nietzsche is seemingly contradictory to the first one: decadence is a normal, even necessary life process, a phase of organic life, though the decadent side of

human life needs to find an appropriate expression and outlet. Thirdly, decadence in Nietzsche's view is a comprehensive manifestation in culture, making itself felt across all cultural fields (decadent morality, philosophy, religion, science, politics, art; Tongeren et al 2004: 540–563).

In light of these three meanings, decadence becomes an overarching synonym for modernity, and more specifically for “modern” psychology of perception and experience. At the end of the 19th century, decadence was a common denominator for a range of processes of modernization and modern approaches to art—along with terms such as naturalism, aestheticism, fin de siècle, impressionism, symbolism, and Jugend. As I will argue below, however, though in Felix Ormusson the term decadence is much more seldom explicitly named than its opposite term, Life, decadence becomes and remains a generative concept throughout the novel. I will also argue, using another Young Estonian – J. Randvere's short prose text *Ruth* (1909), that the arrival of decadence on the Estonian cultural scene was strongly – if not always apparently – gendered. Through the deployment of the gendered discourse of decadence Felix Ormusson and Ruth articulate the dilemmas of the sensibility, consciousness, and creativity of the transitional first-generation Estonian intellectuals.

## Decadence and Life

In the European cultural discourse at the turn of the 19th/20th century decadence and life functioned as opposing philosophical concepts and as metaphors. The metaphor of life was often gender-coded as female, though sometimes in a veiled manner. Both Tuglas' and Nietzsche's texts focus on the experience of the disintegration of a whole. “Life”, the opposite term to “decadence”, signifies wholeness, health, and the unmediated perception of reality. The conceptualization of “life” was furthered by “life-philosophers” such as Simmel, Nietzsche and Bergson: at the beginning of the 20th century life came to be the symbol of authenticity, ineffability, dynamism, creativity, and totality, as well as a universal weapon in cultural discourse in the fight against social convention, the superficiality of

so-called “civilization”, alienation from nature, and sober rationalism; at the very least it became a means for expressing mistrust and protest against such conventionality (Sprengel 2004: 72). If “life” was a feminized term, its opposite, decadence, was coded masculine, but paradoxically it also functioned as a means of fighting social and cultural conventions. By the 1880s decadence came to signify the experience of a wholeness falling apart, of heightened analytic consciousness, alienation from nature and the self, creative impotence, and the splitting of the subject.

In Estonian literary decadence of the beginning of the 20th century, and in the subsequent literary modernism, only the term “life” carries a positive connotation. Usually the opposing term to “life”, “decadence”, remains unnamed, or is mentioned only in passing, and is then listed alongside other negatively coded terms, such as decline, disintegration, decomposition. Why is it so that decadence is so seldom overtly mentioned in the texts of Estonian writers? Reasons for the avoidance of this term should be sought in the mental ambience of the 1890s, when in Europe the term decadence had become “anthropologized”<sup>2</sup>, and consequently acquired a pejorative meaning. This shift in usage can be attributed to nationalistically minded, culturally conservative theoreticians such as Max Nordau, Adolf Bartels, Lev Tolstoi. Decadence became a negative signifier for a deviation from norms, for unhealthy and pathological tendencies; thus it became a medium for conveying a critique of modernity.

Decadence entered Estonian literary discourse already fraught with this secondary field of negative meanings, both through members of the Young Estonia movement, who in the first decade of the 20th century sought to make Estonian “provincial” letters more European, and their critics, who saw these foreign “imports” as the carriers of the cultural disease of overcivilization. *Felix Ormusson* can be situated alongside other texts that enact a critique of modernity in the guise of literary decadence.

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<sup>2</sup> That means the equating of decadence with modern perception and the emphasis on components of cognitive psychology. Cf. Kafitz 2004.

## Bourget's Concept of Decadence

The opening quotation from *Felix Ormusson* does not point only in the direction of Nietzsche, but implicitly toward the writings of Paul Bourget, familiar to the Young Estonia group through one of their members, Johannes Aavik, whose inclination toward contemporary French culture was epitomized by the choice of Bourget as a topic for his master's thesis, the manuscript of which has unfortunately vanished without a trace. In *Der Fall Wagner*, Nietzsche paraphrases Bourget, better known than Nietzsche himself as a writer and theoretician of decadence at the end of the 19th century. Indeed, it has been claimed that it was due to Bourget's influence that Nietzsche worked out his concept of decadence in its final form. In both Nietzsche's and Bourget's accounts, decadence is equated with modernity; both authors share a similar discomfort with their respective cultures and with the perception that both were exhibiting undeniable signs of decline.

In Bourget's view, decadent literature is characterized by the absence of stylistic uniformity: "Un style de décadence est celui où l'unité du livre se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la page, où la page se décompose pour laisser la place à l'indépendance de la phrase, et la phrase pour laisser la place à l'indépendance du mot." (Bourget 1883: 25). Indeed, Nietzsche's above-quoted argument from *Der Fall Wagner* reads as an ironic gloss of Bourget's passage found in the opening essay on Baudelaire in Bourget's *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (1883). In both this and the companion volume, *Nouveaux Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, (1885), Bourget uses examples from a range of French writers<sup>3</sup> to illustrate "symptoms of decadence."

Bourget situates himself among the first writers to reinstate a pessimistic view of life, an attitude rooted in certain intellectual predispositions such as melancholy, decadence, dilettantism, a spirit of analysis (*esprit d'analyse*), weakness of will (*maladie de la volonté*), cosmopolitanism (*cosmopolitisme*). As can be seen,

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<sup>3</sup> Renan, Flaubert, Taine, Stendhal, Dumas the younger, Leconte de Lisle, the brothers Goncourt, Turgenyev, and Amiel.

decadence is one term in the list of symptoms, as well as a general heading for the entire symptomatology, indicating Bourget's ambivalent stance with respect to decadence in his essays of 1883–1886. Seen in terms of psychological phenomenon such as sensitivity or “modern” perception, decadence becomes both attractive and repulsive. From the standpoint of a moralist and cultural conservative, Bourget judges these pessimistic attitudes as phenomena of disease.

In this way Bourget's argumentation makes way for a comprehensive critique of civilization, in which decadence signifies the decomposition of the social organism. In this view, society remains operational only to the extent that its component parts function “avec une énergie subordonnée”, in other words if the majority of people stand against their own inclinations toward individualism. If too many members of society cease to fulfill their roles as elements of the whole, their drive to independence will result in the disintegration of family relationships and the general structure of society. In the “age of decadence”, the experience of social wholeness becomes replaced by diversity, with a resultant collapse of social coherence and a condition producing too many individuals who are incapable of collective coexistence (ib. 24–25).

Thus it should not surprise us that upon closer comparison, Bourget pronounces a more severe negative judgment on decadent literature than does Nietzsche. Both Bourget and Nietzsche begin with the notion of the whole, but Nietzsche redefines this concept in *Der Fall Wagner*. For Nietzsche, the whole “is no longer the whole”, that is, the whole is no longer taken as the norm against which “deviations” are to be measured. This shift of emphasis confers upon decadence a positive charge in the sense of “vitality”. Bourget regards decadence in almost the same totalizing manner as Nietzsche, but his account remains ambivalent, and inclined away from the positive, vitalist valence of Nietzsche's reinterpretation. On the one hand decadence connotes for Bourget culture in an extraordinary state of refinement, whereas decadent individuals are “artistes de l'intérieur de leur âme” (Bourget 1983: 27). On the other hand, decadence signifies modern individualism and egoism. As a moralist, Bourget concludes that the increasing prevalence of individual life

over against common goals and efforts will result in the disintegration of the social fabric.

### The Decadent Dilettante in *Ruth* and *Felix Ormusson*

If cultural decadence makes itself palpable in such contradictory tendencies as growth and aging, refinement and decomposition, the prototypical location of such culture is France, a country thought of at the *fin de siècle* as the epitome of modernization. Since a culture that has arrived at a zenith has nowhere left to move, intellectuals regarded the phenomena of progress paradoxically as signs of regression and decline. It is at this juncture, from a “finished” culture on the cusp of decline that the Young Estonia intellectuals adopted and absorbed European decadence in the construction of their own cultural modernity. As Aino Kallas has pointed out, the Estonian reader made his or her first acquaintance with the “modern person as a beautiful soul” through the pseudonymous J. Randvere’s 1909 prose piece entitled *Ruth*, which exhibits all of the norms and symptomatic values of decadent discourse and its implicit critique of modernity (Kallas 1909). A definition of decadent culture in the spirit of Bourget is articulated quite near the beginning of *Ruth*:

Woman seems to me to be capable of bringing to self-realization a more extensive work of art. In terms of her appearance, she is a more developed product of culture, a specimen of humankind as it has grown ever older and more refined. Her flesh is finer and more delicate; her physical force has diminished; her bones have become more refined, her hand and foot have lost volume. Overall she is a most ethereal, dematerialized, spiritual creature. (Randvere 1980: 10).

Though woman is set up as the allegorical equivalent of a highly developed, aged, and refined culture, the narrator of *Ruth*, himself a decadent intellectual, also makes direct use of the decadent ideal of beauty, the model of the *femme fragile*, to characterize Ruth as an ideal woman. Both of these ideal objects—culture and woman, meld together in a complex bundle of paradoxes: while culture is overripe,

overdeveloped, in the decline of age, the *femme fragile* expresses an immature, ethereal, and morbid beauty.

The portrait of Ruth as *femme fragile*, the projection and creature of male decadent imagination, is initially drawn through her external features: the delicacy and refinement of her flesh, the thinning of her bones, her physical weakness and pale demeanour. Ruth's psychic makeup is constructed according to concepts of the modern masculine subject: she is highly intellectual "in that special meaning given to this in France." She is a being "whose brain activity is extremely developed, who has gathered into the storehouses of her memory vast quantities of scientific and literary ideas and facts." (Ib. 28) These are the characteristics that define the male dilettante in literary decadence. It is not surprising to find the first lengthy consideration of the decadent dilettante in Estonian literature in *Felix Ormusson*. Ormusson, too, is highly analytical and highly sensitive, he has also stuffed his head with literary and scientific facts and he can be characterized as someone with an overdeveloped imagination and the perception of the relativity of different points of view. Together, these two characters seem to be textbook illustrations of Bourget's dilettante – a person with a huge appetite for knowledge and understanding, but whose attitude toward ideas, world views, and credos remains one of skeptical distancing. According to Bourget, the dilettante can make no claims without supplementing them with reservations and nuances, because he is highly cognizant of contradictoriness among different viewpoints (Bourget 59–75).

In the positive sense dilettantism is an expression of the intellectual freedom and "genius" of the decadent, a combination of sensuality and intellect that makes for an ultimate degree of refinement and nuance: life becomes art in the form of vast mosaic of fragments. As a moralist, however, Bourget is equally keen to point out the shadow side of this "superiority", this capacity for making art out of life. Dilettantism carries with it a weakness of will, which is a great disadvantage in a world of decisive action – an attribute that the narrator of Ruth is quick to point out. The *esprit d'analyse* appropriate to science may be accompanied by the pretension to objectivity and an ability to master all knowledge, but the modern human wins these at the expense of spontaneity and



decisiveness. He is unable to discard anything, to take a clear position, to make a decision for or against. In *Felix Ormusson*, the protagonist's genius (which the narrator never doubts) is expressed in the character's oscillation between heightened sensitivity and credence given to different modes of perception. Two of Ormusson's declarations sum up his skeptical, distanced attitude toward different perspectives: "There is no ugliness that is not beautified by distance. All art lies in the finding of the appropriate distance;" "world views are nothing but fine apparel for going visiting." (Tuglas 1988: 31).

Ormusson sets himself in opposition to different people (and their world views), while simultaneously seeking connection with them: he falls in love with Helene, then with her sister Marion; he feels pulled toward his friend and host Johannes, and repelled by him; by turns he idealizes and rejects rural society and its representatives. This oscillation between different positions sometimes paralyzes Ormusson's initiative and leads to an inability to make decisions, which in sum is the real reason for his decadence and melancholy.

Ormusson's cosmopolitanism and thirst for the exotic mix with his pose of dilettante, so that he can be equated with Nietzsche, whose warning to the expression of such attitudes toward life, sounding rather like Bourget:

Ich beschreibe, was kommt: die Heraufkunft des Nihilismus. ... die Zeichen davon sind überall, die Augen nur für diese Zeichen fehlen noch. [---] der moderne Mensch glaubt versuchsweise bald an diesen, bald an jeden Werth und läßt ihn dann fallen: der Kreis der überlebten und fallengelassenen Werthe wird immer voller; die Leere und Armut an Werthen kommt immer mehr zum Gefühl... (Nietzsche 1999: 56–57).

Thus in the era of decadence it is no longer possible to cling to the rules of faith and reason as it had been in the age of Enlightenment. The modern human being (that is, the modern man) no longer holds on to a religion (*credo général*), nor to a force of negation (*force de négation*), both of which possibilities were available in the 18th century. Instead, he is receptive to everything, and his skepticism has

no analogy in previous intellectual history (Bourget 1983: 198–199). Spiritually, the modern man has lost his bearings.

### The Rhetoric of Health and Illness in *Ruth* and *Felix Ormusson*

In the oscillation between conflicting norms, *Ruth* as a text most clearly demonstrates the *fin de siècle* as a time of transition, in which new norms and values do not yet prevail, while the old ones have lost their power. The narrator of *Ruth* deploys a number of markers of “health” to neutralize the taint of decadent pathology in the portrait of the ideal woman. *Ruth*’s active agency, her state of health, which carries a smattering of qualities from the romantic profile of the male genius, outweighs the markings of the decadent dilettante. *Ruth*’s will is not totally paralyzed. Though she often suffers from doubts and hesitations, her moments of inner struggle and indecisiveness are temporary. *Ruth* wakes up early in the morning and after her hours of scholarly work, goes to bed early. In her activity *Ruth* belongs to the productive geniuses of the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

The contrast between *Ruth* and *Felix Ormusson* is dramatic: with his mind saturated by scientific and literary facts, *Ormusson* is a child of his era, and he has lost all capacity to act and to create. This is not to say that efforts to surmount decadence in *Felix Ormusson* are any less than in *Ruth*. However, unlike *Ruth*, *Tuglas*’ novel projects the states of health and wholeness outward from his protagonist – into the setting of the agrarian world of the peasant, into nature, into bourgeois lifestyles and mentalities, and into children and women. For these reasons *Ormusson*, unlike *Ruth*, is a thoroughgoing decadent. His dilettantism belongs unilaterally to the phenomena of late civilization, signifying among other things the enjoyment of material and intellectual privileges inherited from his ancestors; he himself makes no contribution to the reproduction of these values. This is the meaning of *Ormusson*’s claim when, aligning himself with *Werther*, he feels himself to have been born

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<sup>4</sup> One of the intertexts informing the construction of *Ruth* as a character is *Weininger*’s model of the male genius.

into the world without parents. This feeling of rootlessness gives rise to the nostalgia for the past.

Dilettantism as an attempt to define the identity of the decadent male artist is in dialogue with the prior accounts of problematics of the genius. In Bourget's words, those considered dilettantes in the "active centuries" were at the same time great geniuses, meaning skilled appliers of their universal knowledge (eg Alkibiades, Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci, Montaigne). Ironically, dilettantism only reveals the plenitude of its possibilities in the "in the late period of the life of the races", when the extreme state of civilization has gradually destroyed the power to create, and compensated for the loss by the power of intellectual comprehension (Bourget 1883: 60–61). On the one hand, then, Bourget imitates the "genius" and richness of possibilities offered by dilettantism (just as the textual author of Felix Ormusson admires his character); on the other hand Bourget emphasizes the characteristic destruction of the powers of creativity that one sees in the genius-dilettante). The result is art that has lost all of its sacredness, the aura of genius that had been attributed to it in the Romantic era.

The decadent dilettante who merely desires to understand stands in opposition to those who know how to choose and act. In Tuglas' novel Ormusson's opposite is his childhood friend, the petit bourgeois doctor Johannes "who knows what he wants and wants what he knows, though he really does not know very much, nor want very much at all." (Tuglas 1988: 108). Ormusson knows too much and wants too much, and this is a mainspring for his decadence, his feeling that the whole has fallen apart. For Ormusson Johannes becomes the stimulus and object for his self-critique, and his longings for admiration and identification.

### The City as Destroyer of the Perception of Wholeness

As we have seen above, the context for the construction of the decadent dilettante is scientific and technical progress with the concomitant expansion of human powers of intellectual comprehension, with the consequences of plurality and relativism of perspective and the paralysis of will. There is, however, another dimension to the

somewhat frenetic multiplicity and fragmentation of the dilettante's experience. Dilettantism can also result from the panoply of sensory impressions experienced in the large metropolis or in the modern salon, which gathers this multiplicity together into one space (Bourget 1883: 67, 70).

No references can be found in the text of *Ruth* concerning the protagonist's putative experiences in the metropolis. In Tuglas' words, Ruth is an excellent example of the "theoretical European": "Since we have no big cities here, we have come to know the cultural moods of the great world too theoretically, indirectly, through education, foreign literature and art. Heretofore we have not been able to participate actively in the creation of Europe's cultural values. Nothing connects us to the history of these treasures. We are but theoretical Europeans." (Tuglas 1996: 52). Ormusson, however, has clearly had the experience of living in Paris, the quintessential modern European metropolis. Thus the specific makeup of Ormusson's psyche (his hypertrophied imagination, his panic attacks and nervousness) can without scruple be associated with the influence of the city.

According to sociologist and life philosopher Georg Simmel,

Die psychologische, auf der der Typus großstädtischer Individualitäten sich erhebt, ist die Steigerung des Nervenlebens, die aus dem raschen und ununterbrochenen Wechsel äußerer und innerer Eindrücke hervorgeht. [---] Indem die Großstadt gerade diese psychologischen Bedingungen schafft – mit jedem Gang über die Straße, mit dem Tempo und den Mannigfaltigkeiten des wirtschaftlichen, beruflichen, gesellschaftlichen Lebens –, stiftet sie schon in den sinnlichen Fundamenten des Seelenlebens, in dem Bewußtseinsquantum ... einen tiefen Gegensatz gegen die Kleinstadt und das Landleben, mit dem langsameren, gewohnteren, gleichmäßiger fließenden Rhythmus ihres sinnlich-geistigen Lebensbildes (Simmel 2002: 125).

Implicitly Simmel sets two temporalities in opposition to each other – the linear, subjective sense of time that belongs to the metropolis, and which gives rise to a sense of "things falling apart", and a cyclic sense of time attributed to the social spaces of small

town and countryside. In sum, these are reduced to the opposition of modern and premodern (agrarian) societies.

The opposition to the mentality of the small town and the countryside mentioned at the end of Simmel's passage can be found on several levels in the first half of the novel *Felix Ormusson*. The protagonist, who represents metropolitan consciousness, thinks that in the country nothing changes; everything repeats itself—the same voices, the same tasks performed at the same times, and from this Ormusson draws the seemingly logical conclusion that the thoughts of the rural person are similarly repetitive. Country people are always the same, always boring and unimaginative. By contrast, Ormusson thinks of himself as equipped with a superb quality of imagination, as well as an ultrasensitive nature. Interestingly, corresponding attributes can be seen both in the narrator and protagonist of Ruth.

Modernity as the signifier for sensitivity, imagination, and lack of repetition, as embodied by the character of Ormusson seems charged here with positive connotations. But over time Ormusson relates to modernity in a more and more negative spirit. The experience of multiplicity that accompanies scientific and technical progress, amplified by the accelerated pace of life in the modern metropolis, threatens to disintegrate the experiential unity necessary for life. "Nerve fever" is exacerbated by the uncontrolled thirst for acquiring sensations and new knowledge – a drive encoded in the positivist world view; instead of allowing the person to move without impediment from thought to action, "nerve fever" sets him back and forces him into the position of passive contemplator. Ormusson exclaims, "My nerves are so strained that every moment I could explode like a rocket." (Tuglas 1988: 70). This constant state of reactivity which Ormusson brings to his summer resort along with his sensitivity and nervousness is extremely fatiguing. The longer Ormusson stays in his summer "rest home", the more attractive country life seems to him:

How simple and enjoyable life is here! That I did not expect. It paralyzes my thoughts, and all I want to do is rest – from people, art, and nervous fever. To eat at specified times and go to bed

early – that is the *petit bourgeois* way. The intellectual aristocrat stays awake at night and sleeps by day, often eating nothing at all. But it isn't such a bad thing to be a *petit bourgeois* sometimes. At least the human organism votes in favour of it. The very thought of the poisonous air of the café and the powdered women in the flickering mirrors brings on my fever. And when the noise of the metro rumbles in my ears, I always get a sudden foreshadowing of hell. (Ib. 12–13).

Upon deeper analysis, one can see Ormusson's monologue articulating a dialectic between the biological decline ("nerve fever") that is the casualty of metropolitan life and the refinement of the spirit. The life of the "intellectual aristocrat" may mean an ultimate degree of spiritual refinement, but the artificial, unnatural environment of the metropolis in which this life is lived augments physiological decline.

### The Impossibility of Direct Experience and the Thirst for Life

Like Bourget and Nietzsche, Tuglas uses the ambivalent presentation of his novel *Felix Ormusson* to settle accounts with the results of high civilization. On the one hand, for the textual author the figure of Ormusson as protagonist is a model of identification; on the other, he is a means of performing a critique of modernity and overcoming decadence. The zenith of cultural development should correspond to maximally productive activity, but this turns into its opposite, the impossibility of action: "The more conscious the human being becomes, the more powerless he is when faced with the tragedy of life." This highest degree of self-consciousness, due to which "Ormusson stands helpless before reality" (ib. 102–103) is an expression of solipsism and egoism, the cult of the self, and its inevitable consequence is the disintegration of the self.

Ormusson's overly cultured head is stuffed with quotations and interpretations of texts: he is "sick with thought." As a decadent, Ormusson constantly aestheticizes his life. Thus one of the context of his crisis of identity and sensibility is the powerlessness to

experience life naively, without the mediation of texts. Thus he becomes a modern (decadent) approach to art, which opposes itself to a mimetic interpretation of reality and instead emphasizes its constructedness. In himself and all of his objects of reflection Ormusson sees objects of aesthetic imagination. For example, he sees the women characters Helene and Marion refracted through works of art from different ages. He walks in nature as in a baudelaireian forest of symbols. Summer landscapes for him have associations with impressionist paintings.

In sum, Ormusson is incapable of experiencing life directly. The novel's textual author also warns readers against this kind of decadence. "Indeed we have always cared little about life... We have considered words in books as something more real and trustworthy than life itself." (ib. 9). This representation of alienation from life, along with the accompanying veiled critique, carried out by means of self-irony, continues to amplify over the course of the events of Ormusson. It becomes increasingly clear that Ormusson's only real contact with the outside world is his contemplation and self-analysis. All the more so, since Ormusson's consciousness is imprisoned inside him, any objective knowledge of the outside world becomes doubtful, just as it becomes increasingly difficult to make sense of the difference between the perception of reality and hallucination. In sum, even his existence is set in doubt. Sleep, dream, and imagination, life and reality all become mixed up. This is what Ormusson means (in the abovementioned passage) by the thinning of the "glass wall" between being and nothingness. Here we see the experience of decadence in the direct sense of the word: an objective incapability to perceive oneself and reality logically and as a whole. The consequence of this state of consciousness is the multiplication of needs, the creation of demanding fantasies with little if any intersection with reality and existence becomes well-nigh intolerable: "All that is left is a huge, inarticulate despair, endless and purposeless. Everything that is visible is but a symbol to you. You stand helpless before reality. You have no faith left in anything." (Ib. 102–103).

This lack of faith, familiar to the reader of Baudelaire as *ennui* is summed up in Bourget's writings by the word melancholy, which he claims is exhibited in Slavic people as nihilism, the Germanic races

as pessimism, and the Romans as a certain type of nervous disease (Bourget 1883: 15). Bourget locates the causes of melancholy in three factors of modern sensibility: religiosity, albeit poisoned by superstition, which never ceases longing for something sacred, transcendent or ideal; second, sensuality, which has been set free from the shackles of traditional morality, but in its rapid pursuit of transgressive pleasure becomes saturated and inclined to boredom; the third factor is scientific thought, which analyzes everything and nullifies direct experience. The combination of these three results in melancholy: “et de ce triple travail est sorti ... le flot de spleen le plus acre et le plus corrosif ...” (Ib. 11).

Even Ruth has the tendency toward a certain melancholy. Her “self-confident stance has been driven to the utter extreme.” However, besides being a deep thinker and scientific researcher, Ruth is also a poet and a dreamer and mere musical improvisations fill her with a “longing for something fuller and more permanent”. The narrator postulates that “as a sensual and intellectual woman Ruth would arrive at the fatal point at which she would long to taste these refined feelings more directly, even to the point of finding delight in certain perversions.” In Ormusson’s identity the three factors of modern sensibility are interwoven more completely, and without moderation: the reader encounters him either in a state of highest exaltation or total resignation.

Ormusson’s melancholy culminates in the sense of the limits of his sensibility, the realization that the Other remains inaccessible. For Ormusson the Other encompasses his own self as object of scrutiny, but also the rural society that surrounds him, with its representatives; beyond these the Other is nature and woman, and in sum, Life itself. As concerns woman as Other, Ormusson states. “That was how I had to see that girl and myself in the mirror! Some kind of impenetrable, cold, gleaming shell separated me from that woman, separated me even from myself.” (Tuglas 1988: 126; 137)

Ormusson experiences and records many such unsuccessful bids to experience the Other. Even the textual author’s opening address to his character, (“In actuality, You are nothing but a name”) grows out of the same context: skepticism about language, consciousness of the split between signifier and signified are also among the connotations



of decadence. The impossibility of arriving at the *Ding an sich* is thus also a problem of language – the lack of overlap between the name and the object. This sharpened consciousness of language which is already visible in naturalism and impressionism leads in literary decadence to a farther-reaching understanding of the limits of expression.

Overconsciousness, constant reflection, and analysis combine to rule out any possibility of experiencing life as a coherent whole. Yet Ormusson feels a constant longing for real life and direct experience. His friend Johannes (and to some extent the women characters) help him soothe this longing: “He (Johannes) connects me to life through Marion. He is my bridge to that world I so seldom find my way to – into reality.” (Ib. 107–108)

Despite these partial attempts at remediating connection, Ormusson believes that complete bliss and unmediated contact with reality is only possible for country people who have not been spoiled by urban culture. One example is the old peasant named Adam whom Ormusson believes does not think at all:

Thinking is the enemy of happiness. And in the final sense, happiness is the mark of fullness. Old Adam never thinks while beating a fencepost into the ground: never thinks about what the fencepost is in itself, or what the Idea of the fencepost is. He is so simple-hearted that he has never asked himself: am I happy? And despite it all it is a sure thing that he is happy. Happy is he who gives no thought to anything! Happy is she who eats, sleeps, and gives birth to children. (Ib. 103)

## Conclusion

The novels and criticism of Friedebert Tuglas is rich in the different philosophical connotations of *fin de siècle* decadence. The 1916 essay “Aja vaim” (Spirit of the Times) is an eloquent analysis of the life *versus* art problematics of decadence. The author identifies himself explicitly with the pole of art, and with the position of the decadent-dilettante, who, while incapable of experiencing life in a

direct and unmediated way, is envious of all those who have been able to maintain this ability.

Thus Tuglas could well apply to himself the words Thomas Mann wrote in 1918: “Spiritually I belong to that community of writers spread throughout Europe, who, having emerged from decadence speak as the chroniclers and analysts of decadence, while carrying in their hearts an equally strong will to dissociate themselves from decadence.” (Mann 1974: 201). Nietzsche, Bourget, and Baudelaire had paved the way to this kind of ambivalent identity. In the Foreword of *Der Fall Wagner*, Nietzsche said: “Ich bin so gut wie Wagner das Kind dieser Zeit, will sagen ein *décadent*: nur dass ich das begriff, nur dass ich mich dagegen wehte. Der Philosoph in mir wehrte sich dagegen.” (Nietzsche 1999: 11). Bourget used almost the same words with respect to Baudelaire, and may as well have applied them to himself as well. “Il était un homme de *décadence*, et il s’est fait un théoricien de *décadence*” (Bourget 1883: 24).

One has only to browse through the Albums of the Young Estonia group to be convinced that skeptical attitudes toward Europe among Estonian intellectuals did not suddenly emerge at the threshold of the First World War, as has sometimes been claimed. While the first and second Albums, fraught with the after-effects of the 1905 revolution, were charged with optimistic, life-affirming attitudes. Album III, which contained J. Randvere’s *Ruth*, already gave clear signals that a mental shift had occurred. On the basis of what I have argued above, there are ample grounds to claim that this change of mentality is connected with the emergence of the discourse of decadence on the Estonian intellectual scene. Though plenty of first-generation Estonian intellectuals continued to find it important to “become Europeans”, the attitudes through which they regarded Europe become more and more ambivalent. Tuglas’ novel *Felix Ormusson*, and J. Randvere’s *Ruth* philosophical prose sketch of the ideal woman Ruth are telling examples of the ambivalent experience of modernity, and the attendant crisis of the disintegration of the subject and of communication. Both are case studies of decadence, as perceived by *fin de siècle* Europe in its cultural representations.

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