

Decadence as Dynamism and Mutability: The Nietzschean-Bergsonian Imprint in the Early Works of A. H. Tammsaare and J. Semper ⁽¹⁾

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1. Introduction: Cultural Background of Estonian Literary Decadence.

In this article, we will focus on selected examples of Estonian literary decadence from the second decade of the 20th century: A. H. Tammsaare's (1878–1940) novella *Kärbes* (The Fly, 1917) and Johannes Semper's (1892–1970) two short stories, *Ristipood sfinks* (Crucified Sphinx, 1918) and *Püha umbrohi* (Sacred Weed, 1918), with more in-depth analysis of the latter ⁽²⁾. The complexity and depth of Semper's short stories has been completely dismissed in Estonian literary history. For Tammsaare's *Kärbes*, the reception offers mere plot summaries, overlooking the rich intertextual network, along with abundant allusions to Nietzsche's philosophy. Written during the First World War, the publication of these texts coincided with the culmination of different decadent practices in Estonian culture. This is verified by a number of works created during the war. In the context of Estonian literature, the most important example is the highly influential decadent novel *Felix Ormusson* (1915) by Friedebert Tuglas (1886–1971) who led several local decadent and/or modernist groupings (cf. Hinrikus: 2020, Hinrikus and Undusk: 2022) ⁽³⁾. Additionally, the material gathered for the 2017 exhibition *Children of the*

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(2) For additional information about Tammsaare, see Hinrikus (2015a) and Peiker (2015). For Semper, see Talviste (2007) and Kirikal (2021).

(3) In recent scholarship, the connections between decadence and modernism have started stimulating discussions. As the emergence of modernism is rooted in decadence, it is a challenging task to draw a differentiating line. Both aesthetic modes have a lot in common in terms of composition, formal features, and content patterns. Cf. Sherry (2015), Lyytikäinen *et. al.* (2020a, pp. 5-6), Lyytikäinen *et. al.* (2020b). There are still some distinctive characteristics of literary decadence such as specific character types, oft-occurring themes, motifs, and metaphors, supported by oxymoronic poetics and repetitive intertextual cues to the same authors – the "decadent imagined communities" in Matthew Potolsky's terms. His notion recycles Benedict Anderson's famous concept "imagined communities" (1983). Cf. Potolsky (2013, p. 6).

Flowers of Evil. Estonian Decadent Art further demonstrates that crucial decadent art was produced precisely during or after the war (Hinrikus *et. al.*: 2017, Kass: 2022). Nevertheless, several innovative ⁽⁴⁾ works were published substantially earlier, as the cultural upheaval was already ignited in 1905 with the establishment of the Young Estonia (1905–1915) movement – which we will discuss below.

We will analyse *Kärbes*, *Püha umbrohi* and *Ristipood sfinks* as part of Tammsaare's and Semper's larger oeuvre. Moreover, we will locate them in the broader context of *fin de siècle* decadence – a term which helps to differentiate subsequent forms of (neo)decadence from its first appearance (cf. Condé: 2022). In literature, the so-called pioneers of *fin de siècle* decadent aesthetics in the first half of the 19th century were Theophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire. Therefore, the succeeding examples of *fin de siècle* decadence in Europe and beyond (Gagnier: 2015, Desmarais and Weir: 2022), which generally (or at least in the European “peripheries”) emerged only in the first decades of the 20th century ⁽⁵⁾, frequently found inspiration from French decadent tradition.

We define decadence in the Foucauldian sense as a network of discursive practices, which at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th century emerges in various genres, including modern aesthetic movements, such as naturalism, aestheticism, symbolism, impressionism, and expressionism, also extending into philosophy and (pseudo)science. Below we will illustrate through Semper's and Tammsaare's prose how decline, disintegration, and a sense of ending, which belong within the key meanings of decadent art, literature, and philosophy, often associate with transitions ⁽⁶⁾, movements and ascents, producing ambivalent expressions of dynamism. Moreover, this constant mutability at least partly explains the vacillating value hierarchy, which articulates positive and negative meanings simultaneously. To designate this phenomenon, we use the term “oxymoronic poetics” ⁽⁷⁾.

In connection with the mentioned perception of transitionality and ambivalence, we are primarily interested in articulations of dynamism and mutability, which *Kärbes*, *Ristipood sfinks* and *Püha umbrohi* reproduce through decadent practices. The mentioned formulations associate firstly with the accelerated rhythms and alternated modern psychology often caused by the abrupt moving from rural milieus to towns and cities. Due to this sudden transition, the tropes related to the agrarian society – like ambivalent symbols which frequently link with forces of nature, plants, and insects – (covertly) enter the examples of literary decadence. Thus, in the Estonian case, the described urban sensibility tends to merge with a nostalgic tenderness towards

(4) The function of decadence is tightly associated with the ways it strives towards experimentation and innovation. See e.g., Constable *et. al.* (1999, p. 2).

(5) The widespread emergence of decadent aesthetics in “the peripheries” is also linked with the reception of its initial trendsetting forms. Even though numerous works of French, English and Italian decadence appeared at the end of the 19th century, similarly to the texts of the main representative of German decadence, Friedrich Nietzsche, the extensive global reception of their work began rather at the beginning of the 20th century. David Weir claims that “[d]ecadence is hard to date” and offers his own timeframe. See Weir (2018, p. 7).

(6) About decadence as transition, see Pynsent (1989, p. 142).

(7) Riikka Rossi argues that the oxymoronic logic of decadence “blends life and death, beauty and decay” (Rossi: 2020, p. 121).

rural affectivity – its alleged slowness, sheer physicality and stresslessness. Secondly, and in accordance with the oscillation between urbanity and rurality, we will open dynamism-related themes through the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose position as an author with respect to decadence is, in Foucauldian terms, “transdiscursive” (cf. Foucault 1979, p. 153, Kafitz 2004, p. 13). Namely, both Tammsaare’s *Kärbes* and Semper’s two short stories either directly or vaguely manifest the Nietzschean understanding of life as an endless becoming, a struggle between contradictory wills to power on the one hand and unpredictable descents and ascents on the other. Thirdly, we would like to highlight Henri Bergson’s influence on examples of literary decadence – a topic that to date has received little attention as Bergson is by and large associated with modernism (cf. Ardoin, Gontarski and Mattison: 2013). Bergson’s famous concept of *élan vital* partly overlaps with the implications of Nietzsche’s “life”. Furthermore, *élan vital* functions as an evocative symbol of constant movement and change, the adoption of which allows the texts to address the tension between the desire for innovation and the fear of repetition. Let us also mention that as Tammsaare’s and Semper’s texts do not contain direct quotations, but rather offer idiosyncratic interpretations of the ideas and concepts of these thinkers, we mostly employ the terms “Nietzschean” and “Bergsonian”.

Decadence as a discourse and, in a narrower sense, as a certain aesthetics, which has important overlappings with modernism, was actualised in Estonia due to the modernisation of various art forms. This in turn was (similarly to the rest of Europe) part of wider processes of modernisation, above all urbanisation, commercialisation, and technologisation. Estonian historians locate the acceleration of these processes in the last quarter of the 19th century. Among the reactions to the referred changes is the emergence of the aesthetics of decadence at the beginning of the 20th century⁽⁸⁾. At that time Estonia was still a colonial borderland of the Russian Empire with the German-speaking elite being *de facto* in power and local literati using German as *lingua franca*. The wake of the first Russian Revolution in 1905 enforced various emancipatory movements. The revolutionary situation stimulated the effort to resist the imperial politics of russification which had grown more aggressive since the end of the 19th century. At the same time, the first generation of Estonian urban intellectuals (whose birthdates fall within the time range of approx. 1870–1890) struggled to reject the impacts of German colonial culture⁽⁹⁾, gathering motivation from other European (including Nordic, but above all

(8) Regenia Gagnier argues: “The factors that instigated the rise of the Decadent Movement in France and England – the decline of economic, social, religious, political, ethnic, and gender traditions under the forces of modernization – seem to have had similar effects elsewhere, resulting in diverse literatures of decadence. The characteristics of Decadent literatures thus appear at different times in different cultures, but typically at those moments of cultural transition, when local traditions meet the forces of modernization” (Gagnier: 2015, p. 25).

(9) The language of schooling of the Estonian intellectuals born in the 1870s, including Tammsaare, was German. Even Tammsaare’s personal notebooks contain mostly quotations in German and just a few sentences in Russian. The generation born around the 1880s and after, i.e., Semper and his peers obtained education in Russian. However, Semper was also fluent in German and French.

Finnish) ⁽¹⁰⁾ and global rapidly modernising cultures. Thus, hand in hand with the mentioned revolution and other emancipatory movements, the first modern art grouping, Young Estonia (1905–1915) was born (cf. Raun: 2009). The grouping's ideas were mainly published in five albums (1905–1915) which contained original work and essays in Estonian, but also translations from various languages, especially from French decadent corpus. One of the most influential articles of the first album scrutinised Baudelaire and decadence ⁽¹¹⁾. Yet the visual art and creative texts of Young Estonia's first two albums (1905, 1907) rather advocated ideas of future-oriented progress and positivism inspired by revolutionary sentiment. Since the third album (1909) however, sceptical and pessimistic attitudes started to prevail. Formally, the Young Estonia movement ended in 1915, but the mature and multi-layered decadent works of the former Young Estonians were mainly published after this official endpoint. Moreover, the decadent poetics and aesthetics is also expressed in the works of some subsequent (modern) literary and art groupings, which could explain why the first half of the 20th century is known in Estonian cultural history as the epoch of Young Estonia.

As pointed out before, the stories in focus here were published during the First World War. Then the successor of Young Estonia, the grouping Siuru (1917–1919), mainly composed of writers, including Johannes Semper, was active. Owing to its members' cultivation of bodily desires, Siuru was disparaged by contemporary criticism because they allegedly ignored war atrocities. Yet this claim hasn't been sufficiently researched. In a similar vein, Tammsaare's *Kärbes* and Semper's two short stories do not explicitly relate to war. Rather they only allude to the war, emphasising instead the ways modern individuals were impacted by the broader changes accompanying modernisation which concerned among others psychology, biology, temporality, sexuality, and aesthetics.

Tammsaare's and Semper's representations of decadence emerge through auto-fictional depictions of university life with the core theme of self-creation which typically finds nourishment through ambivalent, nervous erotic relationships. *Kärbes* is set in a provincial town which reminds the Estonian reader of the university town Tartu. *Püha umbrohi* and *Ristipood sfinks* unfold in Stockholm, Helsinki, Imatra, and St. Petersburg. For Semper, St. Petersburg, where most of the narrative events unravel, was a locus of intellectual, creative, and erotic possibilities which is also the case for several examples of Finnish *fin de siècle* decadence ⁽¹²⁾. Thus, the location and the relevant topics grow out of Semper's own background. The same is true for Tammsaare. In 1907–1911 Tammsaare studied law in the University of

(10) After the 1905 revolution, several Young Estonians, including Johannes Aavik, Villem Grünthal-Ridala, Friedebert Tuglas and Gustav Suits studied or lived in Finland. Thus, Estonian and Finnish traditions of decadence were in close dialogue at the beginning of the 20th century – a topic that has not yet been studied enough. Cf. Lyytikäinen *et. al.*: 2020.

(11) The author Johannes Aavik titled the article as *Charles Baudelaire ja dekadentismus* (1905). In the same album, we also find Aavik's translations of various Baudelaire's poems.

(12) Cf. Parente-Čapková (2020, p. 49). As there were no metropolises in the Nordic region, the habitual setting for local decadent literature was St. Petersburg or Paris. However, imaginative loci or provincial-rural areas were also employed, cf. Lyytikäinen *et. al.* (2020a, p. 4).

Tartu, and the vibrant student life similar to Semper's experience is also recognisable in *Kärbes*. However, in comparison with Semper, who was a genuine cosmopolitan, Tammsaare did not travel much: he only made a long trip to the Caucasus in 1912–1913 in order to restore his poor health. Semper, on the contrary, felt at home in various metropolises: before living in Moscow, Berlin and Paris, he studied Germanic-Romance philology in St. Petersburg in 1910–1914 (since 1914 Petrograd).

To conclude, the referred autofictional setting is among many aspects which invite us to compare Semper's and Tammsaare's work on the surface of decadent aesthetics. Below we will scrutinise the resemblances and dissonances between their texts which are inspired mostly by French and German (Nietzschean decadent) tradition. The certain synergy between these two male authors is further supported by the reception where Tammsaare's influence on his younger colleague Semper is stressed (cf. Siirak: 1968, p. 322). As this observation has not yet resulted in exhaustive research, we would like to initiate new discussions which these authors' oeuvre undoubtedly deserves. Thus, we will locate their texts' (dis)similarities in the context of decadence studies, aiming to offer a historicised close-reading of the chosen works.

2. Fusing Urban and Rural Milieux as an Expression of Decadent Flux.

In A. H. Tammsaare's and J. Semper's stories *Kärbes*, *Püha umbrohi* and *Ristipood sfinks*, besides the explicit philosophical allusions that we explore in the following sections, dynamism and mutability are expressed through a particular agitated sensibility which is mainly ascribed to the modern European urban atmosphere. Some markers of this ambience are specific word-usage and an assortment of modern characters with labile, unpredictable mindsets. For example, one finds multiple representations of discernibly active, often even manic motion, with an abundant use of verbs (jumping, skiing, skating, swinging, climbing) and adjectives (lively, brisk, bursting) that suggest dynamism. Furthermore, the imaginative reaction to European urban experience is richly nuanced by the abruptly changing moods of the characters, who are inclined to oscillate between curiosity and boredom, fascination and contempt, melancholy and ecstasy. These inconsistent emotional structures are in turn associated with the characters' simultaneous yearning for intimacy and distance. The latter dissonance leads to dysfunctional love relationships, labelled "nervous erotic" by the then already renowned Finnish-Estonian writer and critic Aino Kallas (1921).

The volatile rhythms of the urban environment (and the resurging need to escape from them) are reinforced by Tammsaare's and Semper's symbols that interlink both with flourishing, Nietzschean becoming and decomposing, while implying motion, power, and vitality: the fly, the sacred weed, and the waterfall. These metaphors, which we will open in the following sections, suggest that the representations of the European urban pace of living and psychology entwine with images of (local) rural life and/or nature. However, through the key symbols (especially the fly and the weed), the function of discursive decadence emerges as an articulator of unavoidable biological mutability. In other words, the buzzing fly and the growing weed are allegories of organic life, which – intertwined with different meanings of

the Nietzschean-Bergsonian “life” – reinforce the idea of organic sprouting, inevitably followed by disintegration and *vice versa*.

As stated in the introduction, Tammsaare’s *Kärbes* takes place in a provincial town similar to Tartu. In contrast, Semper’s *Püha umbrohi* and *Ristipood sfinks* are located, among other places, in vibrant cities, such as Helsinki, Stockholm and St. Petersburg. Even though it may seem at first glance that Tammsaare’s and Semper’s characters seamlessly identify with urban life, part of their personal crisis stems from the fact that most of them are first-generation city-dwellers, with roots and family in village society.

Regarding Semper, the (implicit) affinity with the rural environment is evident in the stories that precede *Ristipood sfinks* ⁽¹³⁾ in the collection, where characters plunge into intimate relationships in a country setting during a northern summer. The student characters Alla and Ado in *Püha umbrohi* presumably also have a rural background, although the story does not dwell on this. There is only a short passage where the female protagonist compares the neighbourhood milkman’s steps with the sound of cans from the milk cellar (Semper: 1918, p. 16), attesting to her familiarity with the particularities of rural life ⁽¹⁴⁾. In contrast with Semper’s stories, the male characters in Tammsaare’s several texts, including *Kärbes*, explicitly originate from agrarian society. They are first-generation urban students, poor journalists and/or writers, i.e., upstarts-decadents ⁽¹⁵⁾, whose psychic structure is in many ways defined by their rural background. However, they are evidently also informed by the model of a metropolitan decadent, such as is seen e.g., in the oeuvre of Charles Baudelaire, Oscar Wilde, and Knut Hamsun ⁽¹⁶⁾. These authors often build their characters upon the influences of (the constantly growing) metropolis ⁽¹⁷⁾. The background of this choice is the premise that in the busy urban milieu, the impacts of accelerating modernisation and ambivalent reactions to them, emerge in the most powerful manner. Indeed, this specific milieu functions as an amplifier of both inspiration and stress. Thus, in a way Tammsaare’s and Semper’s texts hark back to Georg Simmel’s

(13) In the short story collection where the analysed texts were published, *Ristipood sfinks* is preceded by two short stories *Õed* (Sisters) and *Võrkkiiges* (In the Hammock). All three form a narrative whole as the main characters as well as the topics discussed are the same.

(14) The rural origins are more noticeable in Semper’s later work, such as his short story collection *Ellinor* (1927) and the novel *Armukadedus* (Jealousy, 1934). In the former, the eponymous protagonist, a *mondaine* and a Nietzschean New Woman, has a thorough knowledge of the regimes of country life like the tending animals in the morning and knowledge about farm buildings. In the latter, the male protagonist Enn comes from a conservative-patriarchal rural family.

(15) In the Estonian context, the prototype of the upstart-decadent is the protagonist of Tuglas’ novel *Felix Ormusson* (1915), cf. Hinrikus (2020, pp. 175–191).

(16) The epigraph of the first edition of the first part of Tammsaare’s pentalogy *Tõde ja õigus* (*Truth and Justice*, 1926–1933) was from Baudelaire’s essay *Enchantements et tortures d’un mangeur d’opium* (1860). Tammsaare’s translation of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published in 1929. As for the connections between Hamsun’s *Sult* (1890) and Tammsaare’s texts, see Plath (2013).

(17) The urban scene is not the *sine qua non* of decadent writing in Europe. Strindberg and Hamsun often also depict rural environments. The plot of Huysmans’ paradigmatic decadent novel *A rebours* (1884) unfolds in a suburb near Paris, see Lyytikäinen *et. al.* (2020a, pp. 25–26).

seminal *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), which describes the (over)stimulating impact of the money-driven urban environment in contrast with slower, more habitual, and smoothly flowing rural existence.

However, as suggested above, in Estonian (and Nordic) decadence the urban realm mixes with rural influences creating idiosyncratic, locally tinted images of modern experience. This blending emerges in a straightforward way from Tammsaare's essays where the yearn for stability, slowness and clarity merges with the urban mindset. In 1914, he wrote about the volatile nature of the age: "There is a lack of stability, standing still – everything moves and changes like a burbling brook. If you stop moving forward with it and start observing, you will smile and grow sad" (Tammsaare: 1986a, pp. 297–301). Four years later, Semper adds, in the optimistic words of the painter Tarm from *Ristipood sfinks*: "Everything flees, everything changes, and my goal is to chase it with colours to attain the gist of it" (Semper: 1918, p. 101). Tarm wants to chase the mutable, which is bound to be elusive. The context of "it" evokes the abrupt change of location (moving from a village environment to a town or a big city) experienced by the upstart. This rupture, in which Tammsaare and Semper show a clear interest, entails shifts in the human psyche, affective sensibilities, and sense of time.

In Semper's writings, "it" implies a certain newness which is expressed by the (fe)male urban (life-)artist, whose agrarian roots are hidden. Whereas Tammsaare's narrators' usually melancholic viewpoint verbalises a refusal to move forward in tune with modernisation processes, Semper's (fe)male decadents do not consider any kind of slowing down. This typically entails crafting the city, such as St. Petersburg, Helsinki or Stockholm, as a locus for inspiration and the cultivation of liberating practices, like fulfilling love affairs. For example, in *Ristipood sfinks*, the male narrator and the newly-met female character Evi are shown heading out from the claustrophobic gallery to the streets of St. Petersburg, which are described as vivacious (Semper: 1918, p. 124, 111).

Being slightly more pessimistic than Semper, Tammsaare's pragmatically oriented (provincial) town comes across as a generator of loneliness and wounding lust. The alienating city or town with its sense of dynamism repeatedly appears as the locus of poverty, violence, and social inequality. Therefore, in Tammsaare's works, literary decadence often blends with literary naturalism, as is common in Nordic examples of decadence⁽¹⁸⁾. For example, we find numerous descriptions of shabby backyards and cold dwellings with "stinky hallways"⁽¹⁹⁾. Semper's metropolitan milieux are more directly associated with decadence as luxury: the relatively sumptuous interiors are "cleaned" from the by-products of day-to-day life (dust, broken items, dirt, food leftovers) and engulfed in various aesthetic, sensuous objects such as books, paintings, photos, and souvenirs. In Alla's rental room in

(18) Oft-cited examples of the intermingling of decadence and naturalism are Henrik Ibsen's, Minna Canth's and August Strindberg's oeuvre (Lyytikäinen *et. al.* 2020a : pp. 11–22).

(19) The female protagonist of *Kärbes*, the typist Tiksi, thinks about her past as follows: "And she had had her own childhood, although in the outskirts with unaired rooms, stinky hallways, dusty or muddy streets, dirty friends, drunk men, lecherous women, bugs, and illnesses" (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 133).

Püha umbrohi, there is an abundance of art reproductions and postcards depicting (nude) female bodies (Semper: 1918, p. 15). The male artist Tarm from *Ristipood sfinks* has an atelier, the layout and textiles of which the narrator-writer describes as “tasteful and clean” (Semper: 1918, p. 102). The aestheticised interior functions as an extension of the inner life of Semper’s (relatively wealthy) decadent-aesthetes, who aspire to beauty. This difference accentuates Tammsaare’s noticeable criticism of modern city life which can also owe to the fact that he, unlike Semper, lacked firsthand access to metropolitan experience and his financial possibilities were considerably more meagre than Semper’s resources ⁽²⁰⁾.

In addition, Tammsaare’s narrators’ and/or implicit author’s criticism touches upon the urban upstarts’ hypertrophied thirst for travelling, mocking their need to constantly “be on a kind of a flamboyant journey” or to regularly board “a fuming steamboat or a rumbling speed train” (Tammsaare 1986b, p. 361). He refers to the blasé upstart-decadent’s anaesthetised ability to feel the thrill which results in seeking desperate compensation from travelling. Tammsaare’s irony diverges from Semper’s views who, mostly due to André Gide’s influence ⁽²¹⁾, thinks that being constantly on the verge of setting off is one of the experiential peaks of human life. This craving is crystallised in *Ristipood sfinks*, in Tarm’s self-explication: “I – the perpetual leaver, the seeker, whose happiness lies only in journeys and building castles in the air” (Semper: 1918, p. 91). This comparison indicates that unlike Tammsaare, Semper mostly regards travelling affirmatively.

Charged with multiple impulses gathered from agitated metropolitan lifestyles, Semper (more often than Tammsaare) represents means of transportation, such as the automobile, as a luxurious symbol of modern progress. Indeed, Semper’s Tarm relieves his lack of erotic fulfilment, which hinders his pursuit of life as a totality, through accelerating in a car (Semper: 1918, p. 118–119). In contrast, in Tammsaare’s *Kärbes* there is no mention of cars ⁽²²⁾. However, the narrators and implicit authors of both depict (departing) trains. They use the emotionally loaded motif of stressful departure, which normally entails losing someone. This emphasises the ties between vibrant “life” and suffering. Semper’s most intense intimate scenes typically unfold between a train passenger and someone still standing on the platform. Similarly, in a scene of Tammsaare’s novella *Noored hinged* (Young Souls, 1909) the male student Kulno sends his former lover Aino off on a train to St. Petersburg. In the rumbling noise of the departing train, he tries to verbally hurt Aino (Tammsaare: 1909, p. 220). This refers to an aspect of

(20) According to the principal ideologue of Young Estonia, Friedebert Tuglas, Estonian early 20th century intellectuals were, due to their lack of material “experience of Europe”, unable to creatively represent the modern rhythms of life and urban psychology. Thus, Tuglas deemed himself and his peers “theoretical Europeans”. See Tuglas (1912, p. 97). Cf. Hinrikus (2020: pp. 175–191).

(21) Gide was one of the most inspiring writers for Semper. The protagonist Nathanael from young Semper’s favourite book, Gide’s *Les nourritures terrestres* (1897), provided him with one of his most often used pseudonyms Naata Nael. Semper defended his MA-thesis on Gide in 1929. In 1930, Semper published his translation of Gide’s *Les caves du Vatican* (1914). About Gide’s influence on Finnish literary decadence, see Lyytikäinen (1997).

(22) The first demonstrator car was displayed in Estonia in 1896. In 1910, there were about 20 cars in the capital Tallinn. See Paramonov (2019, p. 67).

the nervous and unpredictable erotic which is bound up with the ruthlessness of urban life and the resultant loss of perspective on life as vitality. Thus, in *fin de siècle* decadent prose, heterosexual (and homosexual) love affairs frequently amount to a strenuous power struggle in which desire is maintained by enforcing distance and inflicting pain.

In conclusion, both Semper's and Tammsaare's cityscapes frequently seem cold and ruthless. If for Semper the modern Western city also appears as an optimistic place which can nourish creativity, Tammsaare's ageing writer Merihein⁽²³⁾ (and his many doubles), reach intimate epiphany not in a stimulating urban environment, but through a solitary revelatory experience in a natural setting, gazing at the sunset whilst sitting on a rock (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 252).

3. Dionysian Decadence in A. H. Tammsaare's *Kärbes* (24).

The title *Kärbes* derives from the common fly who lives in the apartment of the novella's central figure, the ageing writer Andres Merihein. His construction as a character is associated with a sense of belatedness⁽²⁵⁾ and ending, plus alienation from authentic life. Following the actions of the buzzing fly, while sipping wine and philosophising-dreaming in a melancholic mood – these are the means for Merihein to escape everyday life. It turns out that the edge of the writer's wine glass has become this insect's favourite spot. As Merihein comments to his flatmate, a student and pipe collector named Lutvei⁽²⁶⁾, his decadent lifestyle has even turned the fly into a drunkard. This flatmate portrays himself ironically as lazy, poor, pliable, purposeless, and characterless – all in all, as someone who enjoys a comfortable life. Lutvei is one of Merihein's objects of projection. The writer has “a lust for life's juices, which flow through the eyes, feelings, and sounds” (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 191), and he believes that the carefreeness of the young student Lutvei would help to quench this desire. Thus, he invites Lutvei to move into his apartment.

Moreover, to activate his dried-up wells of creativity, Merihein establishes contact not only with Lutvei but also with other “young souls”⁽²⁷⁾. Besides

(23) The name Merihein alludes to the nature, literally to “sea hay”.

(24) The title – Dionysian decadence – comes from Pirjo Lyytikäinen's research, which is the foundation of Nordic Decadence studies. Cf. Lyytikäinen (1997) and Lyytikäinen *et al.* (2020).

(25) This typical decadent sensibility is explicitly addressed in a passage where Merihein laments that he had discovered his own creative yet unpublished ideas in a work of an Italian writer, cf. Tammsaare (1979, p. 181).

(26) The construction of Lutvei refers to the so-called collector figure common in literary decadence (e.g., the works of Baudelaire, Huysmans, Wilde, Flaubert). Their collections include objects from a wide range of realms ranging from artworks, jewels, musical instruments, and perfumes to modern styles and sensations, see Potolsky (2013, pp. 72–73). In the context of Estonian literary decadence, one of the first prominent decadent collectors is the narrator of *Ruth* (1909) by J. Randvere *alias* Johannes Aavik. Cf. Hinrikus (2015b).

(27) *Young Souls* is a title of one of Tammsaare's earlier so-called university novellas (*Noored hinged*, 1909) to which we referred in the previous chapter. The others are respectively *Pikad sammud* (Long steps, 1908) and *Üle piiri* (Over the Border, 1910). The reception situates the later *Kärbes* (1917) together with these, because the situations, topics, and characters repeat themselves.

Lutvei, the main characters in the novella are Kulno, who is the double of the young Meriheim ⁽²⁸⁾, and Miss Tiksi, the erotic object of all three. Her affair with Lutvei unfolds in the first chapters of *Kärbes*. However, at the end of *Kärbes*, Tiksi (who is a certain mixture of a New Woman and a *femme fatale*) becomes Kulno's lover. Hence, parallel to the story of Meriheim, two other narrative trajectories extend: Tiksi and Lutvei's relationship, which is built around the above-mentioned "nervous erotic", and the intensifying sexual tension between Kulno and Tiksi, stimulated by the decline of Tiksi and Lutvei's love. The dynamics of both relationships is further mediated by the mutual erotic interest between Meriheim and Tiksi, which all in all remains in their imaginative worlds.

In the following argument, we will concentrate on the protagonist of *Kärbes*, the writer Meriheim, who, in accordance with many other decadents, senses that an excessive dedication to art i.e., writing, that requires constant reflective relationship with oneself and one's surroundings, alienates him from the life as such. Therefore, Meriheim hopes that contact with youth – culminating in loud and sometimes wild, sexually-charged gatherings in writer's apartment – as well as drinking quality French wines and meditating together with the "natural", at the same time mystical, poetic fly, enable him to reach an intense state of intoxication (Tammsaare: 1979, pp. 176, 179) ⁽²⁹⁾. Meriheim is looking for a condition in which the lust for life oozes through his body. He believes that in addition to getting drunk with the fly, he will also arrive at the same state by partying with the students. Yet each one of these scenes, which mutually comment and reflect on one another, reproduce a slightly different mood.

If boozing with the fly is marked by languid, lonely, and melancholic sentiments, carousing with students becomes ever wilder and more aggressive over time. The catch-phrase that accompanies the acts of drinking – "the old Romans drank to that" (Tammsaare: 1979, pp. 159, 162) ⁽³⁰⁾ well encapsulates this entirely decadent vibe. Furthermore, the narcotic-anarchic atmosphere is intensified by group singing and smoking the peace pipe from Lutvei's collection (accompanied by shouts that the pipe is eternal, pious, sweet, and blessed). These activities extend into an intellectual debate between the students which according to Kulno can explain nothing, for there is no longer any faith in words. Instead, discussion interferes and demolishes, "shoving everyone's faces together even more" (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 158).

(28) A younger version of Kulno (with the same name and same inclinations) already makes itself visible in *Noored hinged*. The reception has pointed to both Kulno and the writer Meriheim as Tammsaare's *alter egos*.

(29) In *Kärbes*, the opposition between and the entanglement of civilization (e.g., the quality wines) and nature (e.g., a fly whose dizziness is associated with drinking wine and sleeping and who leaves small black dots) is important.

(30) This catch-phrase mutates into a refrain swirling in the words or heads of several characters (Tammsaare: 1979, pp. 176, 181, 199). It associates modern life with the decline of the Roman empire, a widely disseminated topos in decadent literature and art. In *Kärbes*, we also come across an ironic paraphrase of a saying, which was widely known: "Estonians of yore drank to that" (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 178). Let us also mention that among the male students there is also a homosexual couple with the nicknames Säts and Tuss, the latter being a diminutive name for female genitalia (Tammsaare: 1979, pp. 156–157). The given examples once again allude to the ambivalence and the transitional character of decadence, which is associated with both overmaturity and underdevelopment.

It is crucial that these drinking scenes and characters' thoughts explicitly foreground numerous Nietzschean notions and ideas, which in other contexts of *Kärbes* are not engaged as directly. For example, the juxtaposition of manifold voices (marxism, darwinism, idealism, materialism) in these intellectual quarrels alludes to Nietzschean perspectivism (Nietzsche 2006a: p. 87), that is, to his idea of the relativity and particularity of all vantage points. In other words all human knowledge is too human (cf. Nietzsche: 1995), i.e. there is only "human truth, human justice, human piety, human cruelty and other such matters, but the human being as such does not exist" (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 196). Moreover, drinking with students, leading to collective ecstasy and the emergence of sensuality, is in turn linked with "herd morality" – an idea which Nietzsche articulates in various texts and toward which *Kärbes* also points. One example of such signification is the Nietzschean ambivalent opposition of an individual (lone) and the herd, which also refers to the homogenising effect of society⁽³¹⁾.

However, the main function of the drinking scenes in *Kärbes* is not merely the reference to "herd" mentality and natural instincts i.e., the (human) biological needs (eating, drinking, snoring, having sex) that humans share with the animal kingdom nor the attendant negative affects (jealousy, resentment, rage), which are oftentimes unleashed on a collective level. Both in the party scenes and Merihein's private contemplations, a certain Dionysian atmosphere is created, in which the intoxicating, drowsy-erotic and ecstatic-manic instincts merge. From the Nietzschean viewpoint, these instincts can, on the one hand, culminate in creation (if they become associated with Apollonian instincts). On the other hand, they can become mere symbols of formlessness, chaos and aggression⁽³²⁾. In *Kärbes*, both meanings of the Dionysian are important. Merihein is an ageing Dionysian poet⁽³³⁾ who wants to confront the students as representatives of a wild and creatively impotent crowd. Nevertheless, for Merihein they also symbolise something positive i.e., Nietzschean bodily vitalism and thus affirmation of life. The Nietzschean becoming-oneself (Nietzsche: 2006b, p. 192) suggests a constant striving towards saying "yes" to life – a metaphor for the incessant slippage of authenticity, bodily instincts, and vigour. This kind of positive acceptance is the ultimate goal of Merihein's individual identity construction in Tammsaare's text.

Indeed, Merihein is revealed as a passionate artist who rebels against traditional (Christian) morality. He suffers from the weakness of his own will and seeks a more authentic subjectivity⁽³⁴⁾. Merihein's deeds and words

(31) See Kellner (1994). Cf. "The lone [individual – *M.H.*] one disappears, the mass remains; the lone one is destroyed, but his work remains" (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 139); "It is the lone ones who create the gods, mortals like themselves" (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 196).

(32) Nietzsche first thematises Dionysian instincts, both in contrast and in conjunction with Apollonian instincts, in the book *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (1872), cf. also Gooding-Williams (2001).

(33) This is claimed by Andresen (1979, p. 194), yet he does not (because of political reasons) mention Nietzsche. Even after the Soviet period, Nietzsche's influence has not been studied in depth in Tammsaare's oeuvre.

(34) This Nietzschean aspiration is important in Finnish examples of (Dionysian) decadence, especially in Joel Lehtonen's and L. Onerva's works, which most likely also inspired Estonian decadent artists, among them Tammsaare. About J. Lehtonen, cf. Lyytikäinen (1997) and Ahmala (2016), about Onerva, Parente-Čapková (2014).

rely on the dream of individual freedom and are inclined to succumb to embodied, internal instincts and drives. Thus, Merihein yearns to resemble the Nietzschean higher being, who strives toward *Übermensch* ⁽³⁵⁾. This is further confirmed by the words of the narrator, according to whom Merihein's greatest regret is that he has not "lived only for his dreams, whatever the cost! Why did he not more stubbornly resist the temptations of the joys of real life?" (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 175). By such resistance, the writer refers to having previously enjoyed cheap praise from his friends and felt joy out of mere envy. As the narrator argues, given another chance and supported by his life experience, Merihein could fling wide open "the gates to the realm of his dreams, releasing all the beasts, both the loving and disgusting ones" (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 175).

Another passage from *Kärbes*, where Merihein philosophises with the drunk fly accentuates more clearly the same Nietzschean threads:

Do you understand this? You keep pushing onward leading only with your head and back: why don't you rub your belly once in a while? Then you would understand what hook the world is suspended by [...] its umbilical cord, along which life keeps crawling. The life-snake is coiled around the navel. To every man his own snake, for some even seven of them, but all of them are twisted around the navel. Ask women, they know. [...] Yes, some men have seven life-snakes around their navels [...] But poets only have one small snake apiece, the best poets a tiny one, great ones a very tiny one, like the cabbage worm... (Tammsaare: 1979, pp. 150–151)

The smallness of the life-snake refers to artists' alienation from life. However, Merihein's inclination to project his desires, yearnings, and problems outside himself (in this case onto the fly) strikes the reader as even more important. Namely, the fly is thoroughly understandable for Merihein because it contains only what Merihein has inserted into it. More generally the writer adds "it is only in the other that we completely understand our own thoughts, our own feelings" (Tammsaare 1979, p. 192). Indeed, this inclination applies to all the important characters in Tammsaare's story. Projections allow them to somehow control incessantly changing subjectivity and life. In several passages, these projections align with dreaming and forgetting in the Nietzschean sense ⁽³⁶⁾. Yet life does not bend to the world of imagination. The characters of *Kärbes* consistently come to the realisation of how their intimate partners and their surroundings turn out to be quite different from what they had previously expected or believed. In the passage quoted above, this wish for a certain stability or understanding is alluded to via Merihein's suggestion that the fly should also rub its stomach at the place where the life-snake crawls. As Nietzsche claims in several texts, there is "more reason in your body than in your best wisdom" (Nietzsche 2006b, p. 23)

(35) In several sections of *Kärbes*, it is claimed that the human being does not exist (Tammsaare: 1979 : pp. 196–197) as if proving that there is no Nietzschean higher man. This rhetoric is amplified in Tammsaare's play *Juudit* (1921), which he more or less completed during the First World War, and which, like *Kärbes* and *Varjundid* (The Shadings, 1917) contains many references to various Nietzsche's texts.

(36) Tammsaare (1979, pp. 150, 236). About forgetting as saying "yes" to life i.e., acting in its favour, see Nietzsche (1998, pp. 88–89, 92).

In *Kärbes*, the decadent male characters' (including Meriheini's) inability to move forward and join with the flow of life stems from their excessive belief in rational wisdom. Thus, Meriheini makes a suggestion to the fly (his *alter ego*) to totally obey its bodily instincts. As we have shown, the body's action is motivated by the life-snake – the symbol of the will to life and to power. The life-snake reveals itself through “the will to power – the unexhausted begetting will of life” (Nietzsche 2006b, p. 88). The problem of Tammsaare's decadent male characters is that their life-snake rather resembles a cabbage-worm, even though, as we will argue below, similarly to Tiksi and the fly they all are in the Nietzschean sense, more or less driven by the will to “have and to want to have more” (Nietzsche: 1968, p. 77) In short, “willing to be stronger, willing to grow” (Nietzsche: 1968, p. 356) – this is what everyone is interested in.

Thus, the link between the woman and the life-snake is crucial. In male characters' projections, Tiksi is associated with similar ideas as the fly, who is not only “natural”, but also something projected as “philosophical, mystical, or divine” (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 176) ⁽³⁷⁾. Therefore, Tiksi appears together with the fly both in masculinised reality and dreams. Namely, Tiksi (unlike the too theoretical male decadents) cannot sufficiently “relate love and thinking” (Tammsaare: 1979, p. 169). Her restive and “unconscious self-righteousness” (Tammsaare: 1979, pp. 173–174) makes all the male characters (including the narrator) dream about her as the embodiment of the life-snake imbued with vitality. However, Tiksi does not completely obey the projections of the male characters. Though more vaguely than the decadent students, she (as version of the New Woman) also senses a lack of contact with life itself, which would include her body as a vital part.

The fly, as an ideal object of projection and as the embodiment of Nietzschean life as fragility *par excellence*, loses its wings and, eventually its life (Tiksi breaks its neck) at another students' gathering. Moreover, when Meriheini realises that his ideal object of projection (e.g., his *alter ego*) is dead, he turns his back to all (Nietzschean) idols, including Tiksi. His story ends in solitude and thereby saying “yes” to life as incessant becoming. The writer remains faithful to his art, rejecting those facets of life where merely Dionysian instincts, that is, anarchy and chaos, flourish. As an artist, Meriheini wants to lace together the Dionysian and the Apollonian instincts. In other words, he tries to make a zither ⁽³⁸⁾ out of his pain. Meriheini sits in the natural environment, where every organism, due to its will to power, grows, becomes, and constantly reproduces, “until sufferings start to ring in one's chest, until the pains become thick and soft like worked clay, which one can knead and shape” (Tammsaare 1979: pp. 252-253). He tries to entangle his Dionysian instincts, which are associated with lust as well as languid, diffuse states, with Apollonian ones, which represent form and structure. In sum, *Kärbes* implicitly points to the ambivalent Nietzschean contrast which, on the one hand, is associated with pre-Socratic power, vitality, and unity, entwining Dionysian and Apollonian facets of the culture of tragedy. On the

(37) In Estonian decadence, the manifestations of sexism and misogyny are often based on Otto Weininger's ideas of sex difference, see Hinrikus (2015a).

(38) In Estonian and also in Finnish the “zither” is *kannel* – a musical instrument in folk tradition.

other hand, *Kärbes* alludes to the lifelessness, fragmentation, and comfort of modern/decadent culture that according to Nietzsche have their roots already in Socratic Greece⁽³⁹⁾. The decadent students function as symbols of inauthentic comfort, pleasure, and decomposition. Meanwhile, Merihein as a convalescent from decadence⁽⁴⁰⁾ attempts to overcome his weaknesses (Dionysian instincts) by means of fusing them with Apollonian drives, through which he hopes to establish a more authentic and vital identity as an artist. The metaphor of decadence *par excellence* – the fly – is rich in contrasting yet intertwining meanings. It refers to the natural aspects of life (including dirt and putrefaction) and in a philosophical sense, it points to the fragmentary nature of life, reproduction, endless becoming, growth, blooming, and dying.

4. Imagining *Élan Vital*: Bergsonian Decadence in J. Semper's *Püha umbrohi*.

The main symbol of incessantly moving and changing life in Semper's *Püha umbrohi* is the protagonist, a student named Alla⁽⁴¹⁾ who emerges as a Nietzschean-Bergsonian decadent New Woman⁽⁴²⁾. The text's focussing on dynamism, including shaping life as an ineluctable thrust forward, composed in turn of descents and ascents, is already implied by the title – *Sacred Weed*. Similar to *Kärbes*, "life" appears here as a stubborn, wild, fecund (re-)germination despite the repetitive, cruel efforts to weed it out. As a metaphor for Alla (Semper: 1918, p. 36), the title refers to proliferation and endurance which are in (implicit) opposition with temperance and apathy. The motif of an unusual, vital weed communicates strikingly in comparison with the representative of cultivated plants, here a rose⁽⁴³⁾. Unambiguously symbolising desire and betrayal, the rose is associated with inevitable, non-negotiable decay, as opposed to the deeply rooted weed's ambivalent oscillation between budding and withering, which is connected with organic, nurturant "life".

(39) See Kellner (1994). *Kärbes* also contains in the Nietzschean vein direct references to the Greeks, Socrates, and Jesus. Cf. Tammsaare (1979, pp. 139–140).

(40) See Nietzsche's claim in *Ecce Homo*: "Granting that I am a decadent (*sic!*), I am the opposite as well" (Nietzsche: 2005, p. 76).

(41) The name Alla is meaningful in this context, signifying "descent" in Estonian. Both *Püha umbrohi* and the above-discussed *Ristipood sfinks* are substantially shorter than *Kärbes*: 29 and 23 pages respectively.

(42) We define the heterogeneous term "New Woman" in a broad sense as various (including decadent) forms of femininity which counterpose women's traditional reproductive and submissive roles and suggest new modes of subjectivity. The term applies both to fictional characters from different aesthetic modes and the experiences of real women. "Decadent New Woman" denotes the constructions of emancipation-seeking women who in various ways associate with decadent aesthetics, for example the recycling and transforming of misogynist decadent types (*femme fragile* or *femme fatale*, a certain revision of these figures being Tammsaare's Tiksi), and other strategies that we discuss throughout this article. See Viola Parente-Čapková (2014, pp. 15-18).

(43) The motif of the rose is crucial in the story. Alla asks both of her lovers, the student Ado and the nameless soldier, to pursue the same red rose. Later, the very same rose in a vase in Alla's room serves as a revelation for Ado: he recognises that Alla has an intimate relationship with another man, the officer.

Thus, in accordance with decadent poetics, the title of the story is oxymoronic. The unexpected adjective “sacred” attached to “weed” creates estrangement, pointing to the uniqueness and attractiveness of the protagonist, and even somewhat to her immunity to deterministic mindsets and mainstream morals. The title also suggests Alla’s playing out of melancholy, stemming from romantic breakups and the resultant (fleeting) loneliness – associated in the story with silence, windlessness and inertia. Through these contrasts, which also emerge as interdependencies between *spleen* and thirst for life, she eventually appears as an independent figure carried by the Nietzschean idea of life-affirmation, making her a rare female character type in Estonian literature of the time.

As mentioned before, in addition to Nietzsche, the primary philosophical undergirding of Semper’s oeuvre, including the idiosyncratic New Woman figure Alla, derives at least partly from the idea of vital impetus (*élan vital*) created by Bergson in *Creative Evolution (L’Évolution créatrice, 1907)* (44). Although Bergsonian life-philosophy is essential to all of Semper’s works, we find the most explicit homage to Bergson in his 1939 novel *Kivi kivi peale* (Rock upon Rock), where a male architect, Semper’s *alter ego* Joel Hurt, expresses his adoration for Bergson’s *magnum opus*. Joel understands life “as an unforeseeable creative thrust into the unforeseeable future, a fluid, shifting, and incessant push forward” (Semper: 1947, p. 57). This is a paraphrase of the notion of *élan vital*, defined as a constant forward-pushing and thoroughly original impetus toward life. (Bergson: 1944, pp. 97–98, 113). Aesthetically merging Bergson’s key-notions and beliefs with decadent strategies allows us to view Semper’s stories as examples of “Bergsonian decadence”. While many decadent and modernist authors tend to (implicitly) masculinise the Nietzschean-Bergsonian capacity to experience life as a creative movement, in Semper’s works, the seekers of this type of intensity are often women. For example, the aforementioned Alla roams the streets of St. Petersburg, visiting the Hermitage and concert halls. She is fascinated by decadent, fluctuating, sado-masochistic erotic and provocative dialogues, not to mention her self-designing as a modern dancer. The narrator binds the female character together with a Bergsonian emphasis on “life” as dynamic creativity, as well as with Hyphen, Nietzschean-Dionysian instincts and body focus which makes it possible for Alla to pursue “life” as a totality instead of exclusively as love and/or the erotic. Thus, it should be recognised that Semper breaks with conventional gender norms more radically than his older colleague (45).

On the narrative plane, *Püha umbrohi* is complex. Like Tammsaare’s *Kärbes*, the story is mostly mediated through the narrator’s perspective,

(44) Nietzsche’s impact is accentuated by Semper’s admiration of André Gide, who was an avid disciple of Nietzsche and his ideas on morality (Sheridan: 1999, pp. 163–164). Semper also alluded to Nietzsche in his essays, and he wrote the afterword for *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*’s Estonian translation in 1932. In addition, Semper was the first to introduce Bergson’s philosophy to the Estonian audience, with the earliest articles appearing in 1915.

(45) While studying in St. Petersburg in 1910–1914, Semper actively engaged with creative New Women (i.e. Alma Ostra, a future Estonian lawyer, politician and writer); one of his greatest epiphanies in art is associated with a female artist, namely, Isadora Duncan’s performance in St. Petersburg. In 1920 he married a future Estonian pianist and music-researcher, Aurora Adamson. Thus, Semper’s personal contacts oftentimes are with emancipation-seeking women.

who repeatedly merges with the central female character. In addition, Alla is characterised by her companion, the male student Ado (this is a reciprocal identification, i.e., Ado describes Alla and vice versa, even though Alla's viewpoint dominates). Furthermore, Alla develops intertextual identifications, as with Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which she reads with great pleasure, displaying her obsession with youth and beauty as Dorian's *alter ego*.

Certain fragments of the text adopt a highly descriptive, rarefied style where intertextual clues, artificial modes of expression, and various musical terms abound. The inner landscapes of the characters are reflected through eroticised descriptions of nature, encompassing affectively intense images of singing birds, bursting soil and wine-pouring sun. Embracing the common features of decadent short stories – like those written by Charlotte Mew, Vernon Lee, Octave Mirbeau, and Edgar Allan Poe – such descriptions are elevated from the status of backcloth to a focal feature ⁽⁴⁶⁾. Both by identifying with Alla and Ado and through keeping a distance from them, the narrator creates an unfixed and moody disposition which confuses the reader. Hence an atmosphere promoting inversion and displacement arises, which is frequently seen in decadent aesthetics (Constable *et. al.*: 1999, pp. 12–13). Similar to Tammsaare's *Kärbes*, this story by Semper also relies on dialogue. The variability in the angle of perception evokes both the Bergsonian idea of the processuality of reality and Nietzschean perspectivism which suggests the mutability of life in terms of the power struggle between various truths standing for different interests.

The story line consists of the meeting of Alla and Ado at a party in Imatra, a scenic place in Finland; their visits to art exhibitions and talks and walks in St. Petersburg; the subsequent intensifying of their relationship due to jealousy and differences in expectations and Alla's plan to commit suicide. As a vivid example of a Nietzschean risk-prone decadent character, she manifests the fusion of life and death in the desire to dive into a dangerous waterfall in a state of ecstasy at a spirited party. Later she climbs St. Isaac's Cathedral intending to throw herself down from the tower – the tip of which is discernibly immersed in a storm. In this context, as has already been suggested above, the wind can be an emblem of living movement and thus an antithesis to melancholy. Eventually, due to her stubbornness and fear of an ugly death, Alla does not follow through on her plan to throw herself down from the tower. For Alla, the heavy pull of death transforms into vital enthusiasm, a certain illness is transformed into an energetic stimulus to life in the Nietzschean vein. Thus, her yearning to re-germinate is paradoxically bound up with the self-destructing tribulations (i.e., risking losing her lovers, often looking for trouble) that she takes on by choice.

As Bergson has also written, the greatest success belongs to those who take the highest risks (Bergson: 1944, p. 146). Alla's triumph over pessimism and death surfaces in the last scene where she gazes out over the urban panorama. This episode relies on Nietzschean upbeat poetics: "It was still so nice to

(46) The intense and detailed descriptions of anthropomorphised nature do not create a trivial milieu but remain just as important as the characters, the events, and the pivotal symbols, see also Boyiopoulos (2022).

feel herself above the others, above the city, above life and death. [...] And suddenly she was overtaken [...] by a gleeful will to descend lightly back to the beautiful, colourful land” (Semper: 1918, p. 36).

Furthermore, Alla’s congeniality with the flux of the metropolitan and natural surroundings is amplified by the remarkably poetic style of representation which withdraws from realist literary modes. As the embodiment of *élan vital*, she is invoked through the synesthetic merging of sounds, touches, smells, tastes, and vivid pictures. In a milieu where the alternation of different shades of colour (orange-yellow, purple, blackish-green tonalities) creates an impression of shivering and vibration, she listens to the nearby waterfall emitting “muffled bassos” and hears “the *pizzicato* of clattering” coming from the next room. Then she touches herself whilst gazing at the process from the mirror, smells the lilies and drinks wine with Ado (Semper: 1918, p. 7–9). Through Alla, who sets up an immense sensuous explosion, the Nietzschean love “for the things of this world”, i.e., the senses, emerges. (Life)-artists are capable of perceiving life as “so palpably near, colourful, resonant, illuminated”: they grasp the world with all the senses simultaneously (Nietzsche 1998: p. 92).

The sensually enriched pursuit of creative movement manifests itself further via Alla’s strong identification with Isadora Duncan and modern dance. Besides beauty, Alla associates dance with her core values of freedom and youth. She is saddened by the prospect of growing old, as at a certain age it is no longer appropriate for a woman to bend her back “like the Greek dancers on the vases” (Semper: 1918, p. 34). This implication functions on the one hand as a critique of the ageism and rigid social norms forced upon women during the first decades of the 20th century. On the other, it is one more way to validate life as essentially dynamic. According to Bergson, it is indeed in the capacity of a dancer to embody grace (*la grâce*), which allows the future to exist in the present moment. The antipodes of graceful gestures are angular movements which do not imply dynamism, because “each of them is self-sufficient and does not announce those which are to follow” (Bergson: 2001, p. 12). Angularity is the living self’s opposite, namely the solidification of movement and the formation of an “outer crust” (Bergson: 2001, p. 167). For the same reason, Zarathustra, Nietzsche’s harbinger of the Over(woman), dances his way forward, proclaiming that one learns to fly only through perfecting one’s mobility. In Nietzsche’s sense, (s)he must, in addition to standing and walking, learn how to run, climb and dance (Nietzsche 2006b, p. 156). This is the only route to the condition of Over(woman). Alla’s attachment to dance thus draws upon Bergsonian “life” as consisting of free, plastic movements which merge with the Nietzschean idea of embodied subjectivity.

An apotheosis of the thirst for life as stimulating and unrestricted being is the depiction of the Imatra waterfall, where students have come to celebrate the arrival of spring. The “floury-foamy” waterfall is the antithesis of alienation and a symbol of ecstatic-Dionysian experience brought about by the cheerful party spirit and the contradictory emotions ignited by it. To rephrase, the rumbling and rainbowing fall is a marker of authentic-powerful life, implying Nietzschean admiration of the instincts, which need not be repressed (Semper: 1918, pp. 11–12). The sensory experience of the waterfall evolves into Nietzschean-Bergsonian perfection by virtue of its continuity:

it neither dries out nor does it manifest its power in episodes. Instead, it is represented as a vigorous force, tying in with Nietzsche's idea of the greatest deeds as a "rolling thunder", opposed to "sudden claps" (Nietzsche: 1998, p. 116). This sense of perpetuity speaks of life's clear tendency to self-maintain (François: 2007, p. 100), which attunes with the sacred weed, Alla – a multi-faceted synonym of life – who re-buds again and again.

Alla's sensual encounters with nature and the city and the deep sense of power accruing from individually overcoming the pursuit of death, exemplify one of the basic beliefs of Nietzsche and Bergson. Namely, life is will itself, in the context of which multiple contradictory forces struggle with one another, leading to a surprising originality that is absolutely unforeseeable in Bergson's terms and that constantly reproduces itself (François: 2007, pp. 100, 103). Like Tammsaare's work, *Püha umbrohi* ends optimistically, with the overcoming of decay and re-establishment of vigour through an exhilarating experience in a distinctive milieu, St Petersburg's St. Isaac's Cathedral where Alla gathers delight from being high above the windy metropolis and its small-looking inhabitants.

5. Conclusion

As attested by numerous contemporary theatre performances, reprints and essays, A. H. Tammsaare is unquestionably among the most canonised authors of Estonian literature, whose work has been harnessed as the representation in a nutshell of Estonian national rural identity. However, his texts' linkages with (Nietzschean) decadence and modernism have largely remained undiscussed. Johannes Semper's intricate decadent works, and their ties with Nietzsche and Bergson, have been overlooked throughout the 20th century. Even after the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, when the interest in aesthetic changes initiated by Young Estonia and subsequent cultural groupings re-emerged, Semper's oeuvre has still received little attention. This kind of amnesia can be partly due of his political reputation, namely his collaboration with the Soviet Union since 1940 (Talviste: 2007).

Even though the authors' overall reception and their texts differ in many aspects, such as stylistic features and ideological undercurrents, their similarities in philosophical foundation outweigh the divergences. For both the underpinnings are often predicated on Nietzschean insights (i.e., centeredness on the body, the instincts, and the senses, plus the idea of intense, authentic experience) which in Semper's case – rare in the context of decadence – fuse with the Bergsonian concept of "vital impetus" as an everlasting forward-moving creative force.

Both writers longed to express the hastening rhythms of modern life, including abrupt moves from rural to urban environments and the nervous, unstable relationships instigated by the modern European city. To reach this kind of version of decadent aesthetics, they use similar textual strategies, including oxymoronic poetics, which also attests to Tammsaare's (implicit) influence on Semper. The represented modern experiences differ substantially from collective mentalities in rural milieux. Tammsaare's and Semper's protagonists – the male decadents (artists and intellectuals) plus the decadent New Women – seek opportunities to disconnect from limiting (self)-

consciousness, abstract mindsets, and social norms to reach the incessantly changing and verbally elusive “genuine life”.

The idiosyncrasy of the analysed texts in the context of Nordic literary decadence and even on a global plane lies in the blending of the striving towards philosophical “life” in Nietzschean and Bergsonian terms as a constant movement and decadent aesthetics. In Semper’s case, this combination also involves the subverting of traditional gender stereotypes: in a sense, he rewrites Tammsaare’s work from a female perspective. Hence, in Semper’s case, the changes that modernisation entails are often expressed through women characters, whereas Tammsaare tends to locate female figures at least partly in pre-modernity. Moreover, on the broader plane, Tammsaare’s and Semper’s works step into a dialogue with the texts of “core decadence” (Lyytikäinen *et. al.*: 2020a, pp. 5–6, 15–16), creating unique and ambivalent textual combinations. Furthermore, the differences between the two authors’ works also emerge through the depiction of the dilemma of art and life.

In Tammsaare’s *Kärbes*, the dedication to art as a possible facet of “full life” is forcefully foregrounded. This is exemplified by the story’s endgame: the writer Merihein finds his creative Apollonian-Dionysian vitality in a natural setting, outside his hometown. He is in a state of exaltation, because backing away from the collective Dionysian instincts in the Nietzschean sense allows him to find his purely individual way as an artist. Like many other decadent works, *Kärbes* is thus obsessed with (unattainable) fertile textual reproduction (Constable *et. al.*: 1999, p. 5). In Semper’s *Püha umbrohi*, on the contrary, life and art are hierarchised conversely and life – in the form of intensive erotic relationships and distinctive subjectivities – is cherished in preference to a hermetic mode of living devoted to art. Although creativity is important for Semper as an implicit author and for his narrators, the practice of art can easily be sacrificed in the name of a fulfilling, emotionally stimulating mode of existence.

At the same time, life associates in both authors’ texts with tensions, risks, and self-overcoming motivated by the will to power. Therefore, the philosophical term “life” appears in Semper’s and Tammsaare’s oeuvre as a constant tracing of movement, eroticism, authenticity, mutability, and creativity, although the hierarchical order of those qualities differs in various parts of the texts.

As surmised throughout the article, the connotations of life fuse with the meanings of decadence, creating an atmosphere of transitionality. To retain the dimension of perpetuity, the antinomies that arise through these quests remain unresolved: the halves of such germane oxymoronic metaphors as the fly and the sacred weed are not synthesised. Thus, in the final scenes of Semper’s and Tammsaare’s stories the optimism experienced by Alla and Merihein through intensive epiphanic moments is not, (according to the inner logic of the stories) eternal, but rather fluctuating, likely to flow into the next crisis, i.e., decadence. This flux – a perpetual transition – acutely shapes those characters as the Nietzschean-Bergsonian vital-creative transmitters of ascents and descents, life and death.

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on decadent aesthetics in the selected examples of Estonian modern literature from the second decade of the 20th century: A. H. Tammsaare’s novella *Kärbes* (The Fly, 1917) and Johannes Semper’s two short stories, *Ristipood sfinks* (Crucified Sphinx, 1918) and *Püha umbrohi* (Sacred Weed, 1918). These texts are analysed in the broad context of *fin de siècle* literary decadence. In this context, the associations of decline, disintegration, and a sense of ending (which belong within the key meanings of decadent art, literature, and philosophy) are scrutinised in relation to transitions, movements, and ascents. Through these ambivalent links, Tammsaare’s and Semper’s works articulate various, often dissonant forms of dynamism and mutability. These in turn are built on (implicit) applications of Nietzschean and Bergsonian ideas of “life” as an endless becoming, a struggle between contradictory wills to power on the one hand and unpredictable descents and ascents on the other.

Estonian literary decadence – A. H. Tammsaare – J. Semper – F. Nietzsche – H. Bergson.

RÉSUMÉ

L'article propose une étude de l'esthétique décadente dans trois exemples de littérature moderne estonienne de la deuxième décennie du XX^{ème} siècle : le roman court *Kärbes* (La Mouche, 1917) d'A. H. Tammsaare et les récits *Ristipood sfinks* (Le Sphinx crucifié, 1918) and *Püha umbrohi* (Algue sacrée, 1918) de Johannes Semper. Nous situons ces œuvres dans le contexte de la décadence littéraire de *fin de siècle* pour analyser les associations du déclin, de la désintégration et de la fin – éléments de sens couramment utilisés dans l'art, la littérature et la philosophie de décadence – avec les transitions et les mouvements décrits dans les textes. À travers ces connexions ambiguës, les œuvres de Tammsaare and Semper créent des formes variées et souvent dissonantes de dynamisme et de mutabilité qui se nourrissent des notions nietzschéennes et bergsoniennes concernant la « vie » comme un processus de devenir infini, une lutte entre volontés de puissance contradictoires d'une part et des trajectoires descendantes et ascendantes imprévisibles d'autre part.

Décadence littéraire estonienne – A. H. Tammsaare – J. Semper – F. Nietzsche – H. Bergson.

SAMENVATTING

Dit artikel richt zich op de decadente esthetiek in de geselecteerde voorbeelden van Estse moderne literatuur uit het tweede decennium van de 20e eeuw: A. H. Tammsaare's novelle *Kärbes* (De vlieg, 1917) en Johannes Semper's twee korte verhalen, *Ristipood sfinks* (Gekruisigde sfinx, 1918) en *Püha umbrohi* (Heilig onkruid, 1918). Deze teksten worden geanalyseerd in de brede context van de literaire decadentie van het fin de siècle. In deze context worden de associaties van verval, desintegratie en een gevoel van beëindiging (die horen bij de sleutelbetekenissen van decadente kunst, literatuur en filosofie) onderzocht in relatie tot overgangen, bewegingen en stijgingen. Door deze ambivalente verbanden articuleren de werken van Tammsaare en Semper verschillende, vaak dissonante vormen van dynamiek en veranderlijkheid. Deze zijn op hun beurt gebaseerd op (impliciete) toepassingen van Nietzscheaanse en Bergsoniaanse ideeën van "het leven" als een eindeloos worden, een strijd tussen tegenstrijdige machtswensen enerzijds en onvoorspelbare dalingen en stijgingen anderzijds.

Estse literaire decadentie – A. H. Tammsaare – J. Semper – F. Nietzsche – H. Bergson.