

International Conference

“Peripheral” Decadences and Forms of Nationalism

13–15 November 2025

in Tallinn

organised by

the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences

in association with **the Estonian Academy of Arts**

Sharing platform proposed by the team

“Emergence of a Civilised Nation: Decadence and Transitionality in 1905–1940”

(PRG1667; supported by the Estonian Research Council)

&

15th International Conference of the Baltic Literary Scholars



Motif from Friedebert Tuglas' ink drawing “Muinasjutt” (“Fairy Tale”, 1907)

Keynote speakers

Juliet Simpson (Art History, Coventry University, UK)

Jaana Undusk (Literary History, Under and Tuglas Literature Centre, Estonia)

Organizing committee

Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences:

Mirjam Hinrikus, Marin Jänes, Merlin Kirikal, Hegely Klaus, Leo Luks, Viola Parente-Čapková, Aare Pilv, Riikka Rossi, Elle-Mari Talivee

Estonian Academy of Arts:

Tiina Abel, Linda Kaljundi

Homepage: <https://dekadents.utkk.ee/en/conference-peripheral-decadences-and-forms-of-nationalism/>

Programme

Thursday, 13 November — KUMU Art Museum and Writers' House

16:00 Curator's tour of the exhibition "Spiegel im Spiegel" at KUMU (Valge 1, <https://kumu.ekm.ee/en/syndmus/spiegel-im-spiegel-encounters-between-estonian-and-german-art-from-lucas-cranach-to-arvo-part-and-gerhard-richter/>)

17.15 Bus to Writers' House (Harju 1)

17:30 Conference registration at the Writers' House

18:00 Opening of the conference

18:20 Plenary lecture: **Jaan Undusk**, Glimpses of Decadent Discourse from the Estonian Perspective

19:30 Concert: **Kirke Gross** (cello), **Kertu Aer** (double bass), **Sveta Grigorjeva** (text and movement), **Martin Kirsiste** (piano)

20:15–23:00 Reception

Friday, 14 November — Estonian Academy of Arts (Põhja pst 7)

10:00–11:30 Plenary lecture (room A101)

Juliet Simpson, Edgy Encounters: Decadence, Nation and Creation beyond Borders

11:30–12:00 Coffee break

12:00–13:30 Panel discussion (room A101)

Mirjam Hinrikus, **Viola Parente-Čapková**, **Riikka Rossi**, **Lola Annabel Kass**, **Ragne Soosalu**

13:30–14:30 Lunch break

14:30–16:00 Session 1

Room A101

Riikka Rossi, moderator

Signe Leth Gammelgaard, Decadent Economic Peripheries in the Novels of Herman Bang

Ian Gwin, The Finnish Bridge: Homeland and Migration

Kaia Sisask, Translation and the Nation: Conflict or Concord?

Room A302

Hasso Krull, moderator

Eva Eglāja-Kristsone, Trapped Between the Idea of New Woman and Erotic Utopia: Diary of Marija Stalbova-Eglīte

Katarina Leppänen, Patriarchal Civilization as the Cause of Decay and Despair in Elin Wägner's Novel "Den förödda vingården" ("The Devastated Vineyard", 1920)

Eret Talviste, Halted Wandering: Senses of Belonging in Elizabeth Bowen's „To the North“ (1932) and Leida Kibuvits's „An Evening Ride“ (1933)

16:00–16:30 Coffee break

16:30–18:00 Session 2

Room A101

Jaan Undusk, moderator

Kristiāna Ābele, *Burtnieku nams* Revisited: Implications of the First Creative House Project in Latvia Between Decadence, Cultural Patronage, National Emancipation and Social Progress, 1908–1914

Mikko Välimäki, Yearning and Disgust – The Cyclical Conceptions of Nations Among Finnish Artists in Paris

Robert Stilling, The Nordic Trek to Harlem: Race, Decadence, and Richard Bruce Nugent's „Half High“

~18.30 By train to Nõmme district

19:00–22:00 Reception at the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre Museum (Väikese Illimari 12)

Saturday, 15 November — Estonian Academy of Arts

9:00 – 10:30 Session 3

Room A501

Benedikts Kalnačs, moderator

Hent Kalmo, The Problem of Overculture in Estonian Thought at the Beginning of the 20th Century

Leo Luks, Johannes Aavik's Thesis of Degeneration of the Estonian Nation: the Idea and its Implications

Aušra Jurgutienė, The Lithuanian Case of Decadence

Room A302

Aare Pily, moderator

Jon Stone, The Count and the Grim Reaper: Eric Stenbock and a (Trans)National Decadent Poetics

Hasso Krull, Revolution and Decadence in the Poetic Universe of Gustav Suits

Kristjan Haljak, Jaan Oks and the Peripheral Revolution of the Self: Decadent Subjectivity and National Tension

10:30–11:00 Coffee break

11:00–12:30 Session 4

Room A501

Viola Parente-Čapková, moderator

Mirjam Hinrikus, Riikka Rossi, Spiritual Naturalism and the Forms of Nation in A. H. Tammsaare's „Kõrboja peremees“

Merlin Kirikal, Aesthetics of *fin de siècle* Decadence as Nation Building: Johannes Semper's „A Sacred Weed“ (1918)

Kerri Kotta, This Enduring Yearning: Nostalgia in Estonian Music

12:30–13:30 Lunch break

13:30–15:00 Session 5

Room A502

Leo Luks, moderator

Antti Ahmala, Nietzscheanism and the Nation in Finnish Literature of the *fin de siècle*

Solveiga Daugirdaitė, Gender and Race: Liūnė Janušytė's novel „Korektūros klaida“ („The Proofreading Mistake“, Kaunas, 1938)

Viola Parente-Čapková, Mirjam Hinrikus, Search for the Right Interpretation of Life and Literature: The Multifaceted Figure of the Upstart of A. H. Tammsaare's „I Loved a German“ (1935)

15:00–15:30 Coffee break

15:30–17:00 Session 6

Room A502

Tiina Ann Kirss, moderator

Benedikts Kalnačs, Decadent Characters in Realist Fiction: On the Aesthetic Polyphony of *fin de siècle* Latvian Literature

Tutta Palin, Finnish Sculptors Aarre and Wäinö Aaltonen in the Context of Decadence and Nationalism

Aistė Kučinskienė, The Decadent Movement in Lithuanian Literary Canon: Missing Tradition or Unwelcome Trend?

17:00 Closing of the conference

Room A202

Kristjan Haljak, moderator

Aare Pilv, Decay and Fermentation of Nation: „Creative Nationalism“ of Henrik Visnapuu.

Kai Stahl, The Figure of Salomé in Estonian Art

Audinga Peluritytė–Tikuišienė, Women of Lithuanian Poetry

PLENARY LECTURES

Glimpses of Decadent Discourse from the Estonian Perspective

Jaan Undusk

In my view, there are three fundamental principles that help us understand modern Decadent discourse.

Firstly, and stylistically, modern Decadence has grown out of opposition to the classicist mode of art, that is to say, a decline in the classical standards of poetical language use and composition. The first modern decadents were the poets of French romanticism, Victor Hugo and his followers. Charles Baudelaire, the high priest of decadence himself, shared this opinion.

At the same time, the Decadent turn is inconceivable without the forerunning, or parallel development of naturalist principles for depicting reality: here, the human being is a highly determined creature, determined by his parents and heredity, by climate and the social rank, by his cultural surroundings and by the historical moment of his existence. Decadence was a protest against such strict determination. However weak it be, there always remained a human factor in it, or freedom: the deconstructive potential of a creative mind opposed to „scientific fatalism“.

Thus, the main veins of decadence were its non-classicist and non-naturalistic strivings for, correspondingly, rhetorical and anthropocentric freedom. Nevertheless, it remained dependent both on classical forms and the naturalistic view of life. The poems of Baudelaire with their pure rhymes and limpid rhythm structures, full of naturalistic imagery, are only one example among many.

Secondly, and sociologically speaking, decadence marked the rise of a noble class of intellectuals, the intellectual elite, or the power of the so-called aristocracy of the mind (*Geistesaristokratie* in German), the leading force in the future society. The distinctions between the old social classes had become weaker, the values of different human layers were being mixed, and thus it was no longer clear, without ambiguity, as to what belongs to the realm of beauty and what to ugliness, what are

the features of the high or the low standards of expression. The nobility's capital had been its ancient privileges, the capital of the bourgeoisie was its money, the intellectuals' capital was their brainwork, that is, the imaginative power and thought experiments, the creative mind. And this mental potential was – in a wider perspective – greater than the values which the nobleman had inherited or the industrialist could buy. Only the intellectual aristocrats – men of diverse rank, whose own roots were socially mixed – were able to see the complicated mixture of values as a new starting point. They became the lords of this ambivalent world, the decadent culture. Their experiments were often dangerous, or even deadly, but if they succeeded, they could lead to unexpected heights. As in early German romanticism, the quest for „syntheses“, even a „malady of syntheses“, became a characteristic of poetical philosophy.

Thirdly, and philosophically, decadence was a culture of transition. It was Friedrich Nietzsche who not only formulated the binding transitivity of every decadent condition but who also embodied this process of change in his person: decadence – as a disease – is inescapable in understanding modernity, but decadence has to be overcome and one must recover from it. According to Nietzsche, he himself had undergone all the stages of decadence before he left it behind (in „Ecce homo“ he says: besides being a decadent, I am also the opposite) – unlike Richard Wagner, the epitome of declining art, who was, in Nietzsche's view, a natural born decadent, and remained so till the end.

In a more general way, Nietzsche's discourse of decadent transition continued in the widely-read „Cultural History of the Modern Age“ (1927), written by the Viennese essayist Egon Friedell: „Wherever something new is being formed, there is weakness, sickness, and 'decadence.' Wherever new germs are developing, there is an apparent condition of reduced vitality, as in pregnant women, children cutting teeth, or moulting canaries. In spring all nature is in a sort of neurasthenia. [---] All the current definitions of neurasthenia are nothing but ugly circumlocutions for the physiological states of talent.“ In conclusion, Friedell's thoughts flow together into the „decadent“ paradox: there is no such thing as a healthy genius, and genius is never sick; genius is simply „an organized neurosis, an intelligent form of madness“.

To proceed in the same vein, one can also call Decadent culture a manifesto of creative non-adaptiveness. Audiences had hardly ever been faced with such enormous amounts of pathos, which irritated the collective health of society. The urge for spiritual totality (melancholy, Platonism, symbols, alcohol, narcotics, hallucinations and the metaphysics of death), as well as physical totality (sexuality,

illnesses, over- and under-developed bodies and body parts, corpses, animals, plants, ecstatic and distressing smells, riots of colour born in the slanting rays of the setting sun and other landscapes of the senses), was probably intended to compensate for what machine-based progress had threatened the most.

Based on these principles, I shall try to give examples of the uses of decadent discourse in Estonia through the 20th century.

Bio

Jaan Undusk is a member of the Estonian Academy of Sciences and was the director of the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre from 2000 to 2025. Since then he is working there as a senior researcher. His interest in the culture of the *fin de siècle* period dates back to his student years at the University of Tartu at the beginning of the 1980s. He has written on many themes of Estonian, Baltic German and German literature as well as on problems of literary theory and philosophy. He has also translated three works of Friedrich Nietzsche into Estonian.

Edgy Encounters: Decadence, Nationalism and Creation beyond Borders

Juliet Simpson

In this keynote, I will be offering fresh perspectives on temporalities of nationalism and Decadent cultural forms, to rethink their interactions across an imaginary of cultural identity and creation beyond boundaries of nation or culture. As discussion will propose, these 'edgy encounters' redraw the map of anthologized Nordic 'national Romantic' and late nineteenth century *fin-de-siècle* constructs of cultural modernism. Indeed, they open a more porous terrain of Decadent cultural and temporal interests and transfers as sites of renewal (that borrow from 'nationalist' tropes) and creative world making (in a border-crossing imaginary), as liminal, suggestive and 'other'. In particular, my concern in this talk is with a heightened literary and artistic responsiveness to pre-modern medieval art and sites in Europe's North, North East and German lands, entangled both with a search for national origins stories and with Decadence as an 'alterity' of modernity. Focusing on three key themes, first is to shed light on unexplored pathways, temporalities and recoveries of late 19th -century and early 20th-century artist, writer and image encounters with migrating pre-modern objects, sites and practices. Second is to extend these cross-border afterlives to examine their reworking of liminal nationalisms in spaces of Decadent cultural experimentation. Through key writer and artist networks, we will probe the significance of these 'uncanny' pre-modern encounters for expanding 1880s-1900s Nordic-Baltic and German Decadent artistic collaborations and interactions. Finally is to consider why and in what new ways, these artistic interactions re-envision nationalist interests in Nordic contexts and beyond them, as a Decadent space of art and cultural practices, remaking the medieval as a vector for a new transnational creativity beyond borders.

Bio

Juliet Simpson is Full Professor of Art History (Modern and Contemporary), Chair of Cultural Memory and Research Director for the Centre for Arts, Memory and Communities at Coventry University, UK.

PI and Guest Curator, "Gothic Modern: From Darkness to Light, 1875-1925",
Helsinki-Oslo-Vienna, 2024-26

International Research Fellow, Käthe Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-
Apocalyptic Studies, Heidelberg University, 2022-23

Latest Publication: Juliet Simpson and Anna-Maria von Bonsdorff, "Gothic Modern
– Edvard Munch to Käthe Kollwitz", Hirmer-Chicago University Press, 2024

International Editorial Board, "Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide"

International Evaluation Board, Academy of Finland-Research Council of Finland,
2024-.

Scientific Board for the Association of Women in the Arts, Cultures and Society,
AIWAC, Rome, 2023-.

International Editor, "Women in the Arts – New Horizons", Brepols (Turnhout-Los
Angeles), 2025

ABSTRACTS

In alphabetical order of presenters

***Burtnieku nams* Revisited: Implications of the First Creative House Project in Latvia Between Decadence, Cultural Patronage, National Emancipation and Social Progress, 1908–1914**

Kristiāna Ābele, Institute of Art History of the Art Academy of Latvia

A particular chapter in the history of Latvian culture is associated with a building in the industrial Vecmīlgrāvis suburb of Riga's Northern District. Presently it houses a music school, named after Augusts Dombrovskis (1845–1927), a Latvian industrialist, philanthropist and cultural patron who planned and financed its construction with the purpose to create a boarding house for Latvian writers and artists, inviting them to live and work in the surroundings of his sawmill.

Built in 1907 as part of an extensive local development programme and open to residents in 1908–1914, it was named *Burtnieku nams* (also *māja* or *pils*) – i.e. “House (Palace) of the Literati”, implying a lexic reference to ancient Latvian soothsayers (*burtnieks/-i*). While one of the permanent lodgers was an embodied archetype of the old wise man in the national culture – the famous *Dainu tēvs* (“Father of Folksongs”) Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923), the majority of residents consisted of young artists and writers from the circles of the so-called Decadent bohemians, including almost all signatories of the declaration “Motifs of Our Art” (*Dzelme*, No. 5, 1906), a Decadent Manifesto.

Becoming an important creative hub, *Burtnieku nams* witnessed not only fruitful artistic exchange and proliferation but also struggles with depression, difficulties to adapt to Dombrovskis's requirement of temperance and financial problems. An exemplary model of its timeless fruits is the classic “*Baltā grāmata*” (“White Book”) by writer and artist Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877–1962) but *Burtnieku nams* also saw the

despair leading Proto-Expressionist painter Voldemārs Zeltiņš (1879–1909) to commit suicide.

In a perspective rendering of early 20th century Latvian culture the *Burtnieku nams* project with its participants deserves to be discussed as a vanishing point for different aspirations and initiatives, related to cultural patronage, national emancipation, interdisciplinary collaboration, centre-periphery relationships, local development and other aspects.

Bio

Kristiāna Ābele, Ph.D., is a senior researcher and director at the Institute of Art History of the Art Academy of Latvia in Riga, as well as a full member of the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Her works include monographs on artists Pēteris Krastiņš (2006), Johann Walter (Walter-Kurau) (2009; concise version, 2014), Voldemārs Zeltiņš (2021), and Vilhelms Purvītis (in the book “Purvītis”, edited by Laima Slava, 2022), parts about the artistic life of 1840–1890 and 1890–1915 in the “Art History of Latvia” (ed. by Eduards Kļaviņš, vol. IV, 2014; vol. III, book 2, 2019), as well as numerous articles, conference papers, public lectures, essays, and exhibition projects with particular focus on Baltic art in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Nietzscheanism and the Nation in Finnish Literature of the *fin de siècle*

Antti Ahmala, University of Helsinki

My presentation explores the relationship between Nietzscheanism and nationalism in Finnish literature of the turn of the 20th century. The presentation is based primarily on my doctoral dissertation (2016), which examines the themes of authenticity and alienation in the Decadent early works of the classic author Joel Lehtonen (1881–1934). I also draw upon other major research on Finnish Decadence and Nietzscheanism such as Esko Ervasti's old study "Suomalainen kirjallisuus ja Nietzsche" ("Finnish Literature and Nietzsche", 1960). In addition to Lehtonen's works, I discuss Nietzscheanism more broadly, for example in the works of Volter Kilpi, L. Onerva, and Eino Leino.

The protagonists of the "Dionysian Decadence" of Lehtonen's early novels are exceptional individuals both in their strengths and especially in their peculiar weaknesses. They have grandiose fantasies of artistic creation, but are doomed to remain only artists of their own lives. Degeneration, decay, and the lust for pleasure are the leitmotifs of their existence. The main character of Lehtonen's debut work, the narrative poem "Perm" (1904), is of a completely different breed, an *Übermensch*-like character in the vein of some of the characters of Eino Leino's Kalevala-inspired "national neo-Romanticism". The verse form of "Perm" is based on the "Kalevala" metre of the Finnish national epic.

National neo-Romanticism is a concept that has been traditionally used to describe the dominant literary current of the turn of the 20th century, while newer research has usually opted for the intertwined concepts of Symbolism and Decadence, which highlight the Finnish *fin de siècle*'s vivid international connections. Nietzscheanism is a central part of the influx of European influences. I examine how it relates to the thematics of nation and race.

Bio

Antti Ahmala is a postdoctoral researcher of Finnish literature at the University of Helsinki. His research has focused on Finnish Decadent works of the *fin de siècle* and more recently on antimodern thought and feelings in Finnish literature from the early 20th century to contemporary times. Ahmala's doctoral dissertation (2016) studied the themes of authenticity and alienation in the Symbolist-Decadent early works of Joel Lehtonen (1881–1934) in relation to discourses of the *fin de siècle* and particularly Nietzschean thought. Based upon the study, Ahmala's postdoctoral research has explored the continuation and transformation of antimodernism in later literature, focusing on the genre of the essay and particularly Finnish contemporary essayists. In the project "Culture-specific Emotions and Literature", Ahmala has recently examined culture-specific emotions in Finnish literature of the *fin de siècle* and the early 20th century, focusing on literature of the time of the Finnish Civil War.

Gender and Race in Liūnė Janušytė's Novel "Korektūros klaida" ("The Proofreading Mistake", Kaunas, 1938)

Solveiga Daugirdaitė, Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore

Due to special historical circumstances, such as the ban on the Lithuanian press (1864–1904), many of the European artistic trends were delayed or did not take clear forms in Lithuania, so the work chosen for this paper dates from the 1930s.

The novel by the satirist Liūnė Janušytė depicting a Lithuanian women's internship in Paris, was largely forgotten by readers and scholars until its re-publication in 2011. From a contemporary perspective, the novel changes the stereotypical view of pre-war women, as the protagonist vigorously opposes the notion of women as passive beings through her actions and her reasoning, and introduces a new hero into literature – a lover from an exotic country.

As the author, narrator and heroine of this book share the same name, the work was criticised for its lack of artistry as soon as it appeared, although from a contemporary perspective, the novel could be described as an early harbinger of autofiction in Lithuanian literature. The proximity to the known facts of the writer's life gave rise to the condemnation of her immorality by the political figures of the time.

Although the novel does not have a traditional main storyline, one of them is the love story between the heroine, Lucy, and Maurice, who comes from the Antilles. It was this aspect that should have been seen as challenging the ideology of the ruling Nationalist Party, which favoured a model of "pure" national cultures. Not only is Paris presented in the novel as a multicultural cauldron, but through the novel the "negrophilia" that flourished in Paris in the first half of the 20th century, represented by jazz, black dancing and Josephine Baker's dance performances, comes into Lithuanian literature.

Bio

Solveiga Daugirdaitė, senior researcher at the Institute of Lithuanian, Literature and Folklore, Vilnius, is interested in expression of gender in art and autobiographical writing.

Trapped Between the Idea of the New Woman and Erotic Utopia: the Diary of Marija Stalbova-Eglīte

Eva Eglāja-Kristsone, Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia

This paper explores the intimate, introspective writings of the Latvian teacher and translator Marija Eglīte, *née* Stalbova (1879–1926), whose unpublished diaries (1902–1926) reflect the ideological, aesthetic, and emotional entanglements of Decadence and early feminist modernity in the Baltic *fin de siècle*. Married to poet and Decadent figure Viktors Eglītis, Marija's personal writings reveal the contradictions of a woman caught between the rising ideal of the New Woman and the alluring, yet limiting, erotic utopia propagated by Decadent and Symbolist currents.

Reading the diary as a liminal and affect-laden space of identity construction, this paper examines how Decadence shaped Marija's understanding of femininity, sexuality, and intellectual ambition. While deeply inspired by French, Russian, and German literature, and intellectually engaged with contemporary debates, Marija's self-perception remains entangled in traditional gender norms and the overwhelming charisma of her husband. Her diaries oscillate between devotion and self-erasure, aspiration and self-doubt—mirroring the broader tension between national-cultural awakening and imported cosmopolitan aesthetics.

Stalbova's introspective writing is contextualised within Baltic Decadence as both a cultural import and a response to nationalist discourses. By analysing the diary alongside contemporary Decadent aesthetics and the figure of the muse, this paper discusses how female subjectivity was both shaped and confined by the intersections of gendered nationalism and artistic aspiration in a “peripheral” European context.

Drawing on scholarship in Decadence studies and feminist life-writing, this contribution sheds light on how transitional identities were forged in intimate texts at the intersection of personal desire and cultural change.

Bio

Eva Eglāja-Kristsone is a senior researcher at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia. Her research focuses on autobiographical writing, women's history, and Baltic literary modernity.

Decadent Economic Peripheries in the Novels of Herman Bang

Signe Leth Gammelgaard, Lund University

This paper will discuss two novels by the Danish *fin de siècle* writer Herman Bang, namely “Stuk” (“Stucco”, 1887) and “Haabløse Slægter” (“Hopeless generations”, 1880) in relation to economic and financial developments in Denmark during this time. It will examine how the global and European dynamics of capital in the period informs the Danish self-understanding as a nation, and consider how Bang negotiates these shifts in the two novels, and notably how they differ in their stylistics and portrayals.

By outlining shifts in the economic and financial sphere in Denmark during this time, I will address the ways in which Denmark, and perhaps Scandinavia more broadly, navigated its peripheral position, and the thoughts and ideas about the future of the nation, specifically what role commerce and innovation should play. Bang’s portrayals of theater and performance in “Stuk” and the lost illusions of “Haabløse Slægt” gives a different rendering of the period, showing its shadowy side of Decadence and the inability to realize visions. I will end my presentation by relating these points to a larger understanding of Decadence as connected to economic developments, notably in the imperial centers of England and France.

Bio

Signe Leth Gammelgaard, postdoc at Lund University. My research focuses on the intersection between literary and economic history. In my doctoral work I explored the shift from Realism to Decadence in the nineteenth-century novel as related to economic changes, and my current project examines the interwar dystopias in a comparative perspective. My work has appeared in various international and Scandinavian publications, including journals *Utopian Studies*, *b2o review*, and the book “Exploring NORDIC COOL in Literary History”.

The Finnish Bridge

Ian Gwin, University of Washington

In this paper, I outline correspondences between the national literatures and development of statehood in Finland and Estonia. The “Finnish bridge” (*Soome sild*) emerges in Finnish and Estonian folksongs and can be traced further back to early national awakening and the inception of folkloristics from hegemonic institutions (which include Swedish, Russian, and German literatures). In this talk, I begin with examples from the transitional period following 1905 when, as Setto Zetterberg describes (2017) the “Finnish Bridge” becomes actual for Estonian intellectuals as political refugees.

I model this interaction through the studies on folklore and the folk tale, including the method of the Finnish school, including Kaarle Krohn’s “Folklore Methodology”, which defines national literatures over the “Finnish Bridge” in the chapter “Homeland and Migration.” These differences become key for literary Decadence in the region as well: as part of my dissertation, “The Secret of the Waves,” I argue that the Baltics parallel developments in romantic philology—the organic “life” of languages as expressions of the inner life of a people—which Linda Dowling describes as the decay of literature in the British Empire, in “Language and Decadence in the Victorian *Fin de Siècle*” (1986).

Bio

Ian Gwin is a doctoral researcher and translator, whose research and writing focuses on Estonian, Finnish, and Baltic literature. His dissertation, tentatively titled “The Secret of the Waves,” focuses on the representation and reception of the mermaid in fairy tales after H. C. Andersen. A comparative study, it treats the crossing of folklore and literary Decadence around the Baltic Sea in Finnish, Estonian, and Latvian national literatures. He is an American Scandinavian Foundation Fellow in 2025-6, working at the University of Helsinki with Professor Riikka Rossi.
iangwin@uw.edu

Jaan Oks and the Peripheral Revolution of the Self: Decadent Subjectivity and National Tension

Kristjan Haljak, Tallinn University

This paper explores the Estonian writer Jaan Oks (1884–1918) as a marginal yet radically innovative figure of early 20th-century literary Decadence whose experimental prose poetry enacts a profound transgression of conventional subjectivity. Building on Julia Kristeva's concept of the "revolution in poetic language," the presentation situates Oks within a comparative framework alongside the French poet Lautréamont, uncovering striking parallels in how both authors fragment, destabilise, and erotically overload the lyrical self. While Lautréamont's "Les Chants de Maldoror" ("The Songs of Maldoror") has long been understood as a proto-surrealist and anti-humanist attack on moral and poetic norms, Oks's prose poetry—particularly texts such as "Emased" ("The Females") and "Nimetu elajas" ("The Nameless Beast")—has rarely been recognised for its analogous transgressive potency. Oks's work expresses a violently ecstatic, vibrational poetics that blends folkloric and mystical registers with a corporeally saturated eroticism. His textual subject oscillates between genders and spiritual categories, enacting a libidinal dynamic of dissolution which both mirrors and subverts the emerging nationalist discourse of Estonia as a "young" and spiritually unified cultural body.

By tracing how Oks's poetic form undermines stable binaries of gender, self and other, sacred and profane, I argue that his work reveals a deeply ambivalent response to nationalism: one that neither affirms nor rejects the nation, but rather inhabits its symbolic structures in order to fracture and reimagine them. The Oksian subject, marked by circular temporality, jouissance, and linguistic excess, articulates a subterranean, panpsychic alternative to the virile, heroic models of national becoming.

Bio

Kristjan Haljak, writer, essayist, literary critic, translator and literary scholar, Tallinn University, kristjanhaljak@gmail.com.

Spiritual Naturalism in A. H. Tammsaare's "Kõrboja peremees"

Mirjam Hinrikus, the Under and Tuglas Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, & Riikka Rossi, the Under and Tuglas Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, University of Helsinki

A. H. Tammsaare (1878–1940), one of the most canonized authors in Estonian culture, offers in his novel "Kõrboja peremees" ("The Master of Kõrboja", 1922) an illuminating case study of how literary Decadence was transformed in the Estonian context. Set in the Estonian countryside, this lyrical and tragic love story — rich in poetic depictions of decay and hereditary ties to the land — shows how Nordic and Baltic authors combined cosmopolitan Decadent poetics with national themes and motifs rooted in the local environment.

At the center of "Kõrboja peremees" lies a strange love story of Villu and Anna, heirs to two rival farms. Their intense attraction is shaped by an unresolved past — on the one hand through ancestral rivalry and attachment to the land. On the other hand, and even more powerfully, the past intrudes upon the present through Anna and Villu's erotic and at least partly violent relationship, the past events of which have taken place ten years prior, and which they sometimes recall in a conflicting, fragmentary manner. This unresolved past unfolds as a cycle of passion and destruction that culminates in Villu's suicide.

The novel's gendered power struggles and emotional turbulence—love, hatred, guilt, and alienation—align Tammsaare's narrative with a *fin de siècle* sensibility and, more specifically, with the aesthetics of literary Decadence. Although the agrarian setting and peasant characters evoke realism and naturalism, Tammsaare's narrative turns inward, probing the psychological conflicts of his characters and evoking an uncanny fatality that defies rational explanation. Furthermore, while "Kõrboja peremees" contains numerous references to recognizable historical moments, its treatment of time, space, and causality resists realist transparency. Linear time is disrupted by contradictory accounts of the past and by narrative gaps that obscure the present. Central to our analysis is the concept of spiritual naturalism, whose roots lie in the tradition of *fin de siècle* French Decadence.

Bios

Mirjam Hinrikus is currently leading the project “Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence and Transitionality, 1905–1940” at the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences (see [project page](#)). She has published articles in both Estonian and English, and has edited and co-edited several volumes in both languages. Her most recent major work is a special issue on Estonian literary decadence in the journal *Keel ja Kirjandus* (see [2024 issue](#)). At present, she is co-editing a university-level textbook in Estonian, “Sissejuhatus kirjandusteooriasse ja praktikasse” (“Introduction to Literary Theory and Practice”, 2026), together with Raili Marling and Piret Viires. Her article “Linguistic Innovation and Literary Decadence as the Beginning of the Avant-Garde: The Estonian Case” will appear in 2026 in the volume “Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in Central Europe” (Brill; eds. P. James and C. C. Outes). In addition, together with members of the decadence project, she is preparing an English-language special issue on Estonian and Finnish decadence in literature and art, forthcoming in the online journal *Volupté* in 2026.

Beginning in 2024 Riikka Rossi has been a senior researcher at the Under and Tuglas Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, as participating researcher under the aegis of the research project “Emergence of a Civilised Nation: Decadence and Transitionality in 1905–1940” (PRG1667). She is also a professor of Finnish literature at the University of Helsinki. Her research centres on historical period-styles of Finnish literature, and more recently on literature and emotions from an interdisciplinary perspective. She has published extensively on history and theory of literary naturalism, realism, and primitivism, and studied the literature of Decadence in relation to naturalism and early modernism. Her studies on emotions focus on negative and ambivalent emotions in literature, e.g., on the poetics of disgust, melancholia, nostalgia, ecstasy, anxiety, and difficult empathy.

The Lithuanian Case of Decadence

Aušra Jurgutienė, Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore

Although the conference invites us to problematise the relationship between the aesthetics of Decadence and nationalist discourses, I do not find it interesting to write a paper on the absence of *fin de siècle* Decadence, as the trend of global Modernism that was entirely alien to the young Lithuanian national culture, or to analyse its few minor manifestations in Lithuanian literature. I undertook writing this paper because of an unexpected discovery: in Lithuania, the best understanding of peripheral Decadence was expressed in a peripheral text – the diploma work “Jono Aleksandriškio-Aiščio idėjų pasaulis” (“The world of ideas of Jonas Aleksandriškis-Aistis”, 1943) written by a talented Lithuanian university student, active literary critic and poet Bronius Krivickas (1919–1952). Drawing on E. von Sydow's “Die Kultur der Dekadanz” (“The Culture of Decadence”, 1921, Dresden), Krivickas convincingly linked the poetry of the most European Lithuanian modernist, Aistis (1904–1973), with Decadence. The fact that Krivickas was interested in Decadence and chose Aistis's poetry for his study, also shows his own aesthetic connection with it.

Paradoxically, in Lithuania, Decadence has briefly flourished in its own way and on its own time — before and during the Second World War, as a gloomy prophecy of the collapse of the individual, nation and Europe. This was a time when the writer saw his/her historical time as unbearably gloomy, and an individual seemed too weak to overcome it.

However, the texts and fates of Aistis and Krivickas, the greatest Lithuanian “Decadents” experienced their own historical corrections: after the war, the theorist and founder of Lithuanian Decadence remained in Soviet-occupied Lithuania, became a partisan and died for the freedom of his homeland (his texts could be publicly published in 1999, after regaining independence). Meanwhile, Jonas Aistis had fled to the West in 1944 and saved his life, and has programmatically returned to patriotic poetry, for which he was pushed to the literary margins both by the young generation of modernists in exile and the Soviet critics. The peculiarities of Lithuanian Decadence, which unexpectedly flashed in the texts of Krivickas and

Aistis will help us better understand the interconnections between nationalist discourses and Decadence as an aesthetic phenomenon in Lithuanian culture.

Bio

Aušra Jurgutienė is a Senior Researcher at the Department of Modern Literature in Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Vilnius.

The Problem of “Overculture” in Estonian Thought at the Beginning of the 20th Century

Hent Kalmo, University of Tartu

Traditional spatial hierarchies have been contested in recent intellectual history, to the point that it has become questionable whether “centre” and “periphery” are useful concepts at all. I shall argue in this paper that “periphery” can be understood as a form of self-perception and, in this case, it remains an essential category for thinking about the nation. Theories which associate some sort of general worldview with nationalism tend to obscure concrete aspects in the representation of the nation and its close links to other ideas such as culture, progress, decline or rejuvenation. Culture has been a central concern in reflecting on the prospects of the nation, but as the Estonian case exemplifies, the problem of culture itself underwent a marked change at the beginning of the 20th century, explaining why Decadence would suddenly appear as a major theme in Estonian thought. Whereas culture had earlier been perceived as an undisputed value – a remedy for backwardness – it acquired a more ambiguous status once foreign influences (such as modern 'Decadent' literature) started to be seen as a threat. In this intellectual setting, the condition of being a periphery carried both negative and positive connotations. On the one hand, it still designated distance from the highest cultural achievements attributed to metropolitan centres abroad. Yet it now also provided a sense of reassurance, implying that, for territories removed from such centres, it was possible to reject the worst excesses of 'overculture'.

Bio

Hent Kalmo is a visiting lecturer at the Department of Law of the University of Tartu. He has studied at the University of Tartu (BA), at Harvard Law School (LLM) and the University of Paris-Nanterre (PhD). He was a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute in 2014-2015 and Marie Curie Research Fellow at Harvard Law School in 2017-2018.

Decadent Characters in Realist Fiction: On the Aesthetic Polyphony of *fin de siècle* Latvian Literature

Benedikts Kalnačs, Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia,
Riga

Turn-of-the-century Latvian fiction was largely divided between Realist texts, on one hand, and early Modernist aspirations (at times labelled as Decadent literature), on the other. Importantly, both trends responded to social transformations in society. Thus, Realist art was often considered in the context of economic development and also seen as an outcome of the rising national self-consciousness of the Latvian population. At the same time, Decadent contributions discussed the potential symptoms of decline reflecting on a reality where “all that is solid melts into air”. On a closer look, however, the seemingly polarized aesthetic trends shared a lot of qualities. My aim in this paper is to look at the impact of Modernist ideas in *fin de siècle* Latvian literature, with particular emphasis on Decadent characters in Realist fiction that signal the complexity of perception and interpretation of turn-of-the-century society at a point of crisis.

Bio

Benedikts Kalnačs works as a senior researcher at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia. Recent publications include “The Antinomies of Latvian Literary Realism” (Primerjalna Književnost, 2024), “Walking through the Text: The Representation of Mobility in Late 19th-Century Latvian Fiction” (World Literature Studies, 2023), and “Beauty, Truth and Form: Idealism and its Others in Nineteenth-Century Latvian Literary Debates” (CompLit. Journal of European Literature, Arts and Society, 2022).

The Aesthetics of *fin de siècle* Decadence as Nation Building: Johannes Semper's "A Sacred Weed" (1918)

Merlin Kirikal, the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences

In "Püha umbrohi" ("A Sacred Weed", 1918) by the Estonian writer Johannes Semper (1892–1970), the nameless narrator-artist follows a short yet eventful period in the life of a Decadent New Woman Alla, a snappy pedagogy student in the war era St. Petersburg/Petrograd. Intoxicated by a Nietzschean springtime-ecstasy and constantly searching for sensations of intensity, she plunges into situations promising erotic and aesthetic thrill. This complex, multi-perspectival story about a (self-)ironic Estonian woman is typically to the radical art of the time engorged with intertextual and -medial cues. What might at first glance seem exclusively like a story about modern art, changing gender relations and aligned complicated affects, and thus indifferent to the questions of nationalism, becomes at least partly so if read carefully in the immediate larger historical context.

The author Johannes Semper matured during a time when various emancipatory initiatives were taken, such as the 1905 Russian revolution and the powerful coming of the first local Decadent-nationalist art movement Young-Estonia (1905–1915), to which young Semper also contributed since 1910. With his peers, Semper saw it as his generation's task to build a solid basis for a professional Estonian culture. Positioning himself among the agents of change, i.e. composers of new national(ist) aesthetics, Semper manifests self-consciousness about writing on the verge of an old era. This means that among other facets, Semper, as a striving member of a thriving small nation, conceptualised a necessary aesthetic change through the lenses of nation building. For him, the way to reimagine the Estonian "high" culture lay in the cross-fertilisation between local tendencies and Western Decadence, in practicing this merging until "everything is represented, until all dry, heavy, moist, light styles co-exist" which would mark the arrival of the Estonian original style. He claims that only initial national self-denial leads to due synthesis. "A Sacred Weed" can be read as an attempt towards this type of synthesis.

Bio

Merlin Kirikal, PhD, Senior Researcher at the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences. She is a member of the research project “Emergence of a Civilised Nation: Decadence and Transitionality in 1905–1940” (Estonian Research Council, PRG1667). Main topics: the oeuvre of Sophia Vardi (1883–1940), Alma Ostra (1886–1960), Johannes Semper (1892–1970) and Aino Kallas (1878–1956); the genealogy of Estonian modern literary culture; literary Decadence and Modernism; nationalism and women’s movement, the impact of Friedrich Nietzsche and Henri Bergson on Estonian literature during the first half of the 20th century; feminism, gender and queer studies.

This Enduring Yearning: Nostalgia in Estonian Music

Kerri Kotta, Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre

The emergence of Estonian national art music coincided with the final phases of classical tonal music. The genesis of it was propelled by a desire to engage with a tradition that Estonians had not initiated, rendering later reconstruction of that beginning unfeasible. The absence of a "golden age" has profoundly influenced the evolution of Estonian art music, as evidenced by a unique longing for classicism that, somewhat paradoxically, permeates nearly all stylistic transitions. In this presentation, I aim to guide the audience through a brief exploration of the formation of the classical corpus of Estonian music, alongside the so-called second trajectory of its modernisation, primarily represented by the works of composers from the Artur Kapp school. Following a brief examination of reformed national romanticism (socialist realism), I will delve into specific aspects of late Soviet escapism—particularly exoticism and nostalgia—that significantly shaped the trajectory of re-modernised music during the period of independence restoration.

Bio

Kerri Kotta (b. 1969) is a music theory professor and the head of musicology at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre (EAMT). In 1997, he received an MA in composition and a 2004 PhD in musicology from EAMT. From 1994 to 2004, he taught at Tallinn University and, since 2004, at EAMT. Kerri Kotta's research interests include Schenkerian analysis, theories of form, and Estonian music. He is editor-in-chief of the academic Eduard Tubin Complete Works edition and a member of the board of the interdisciplinary yearbook of the Estonian Musicological Society *Res Musica*. He is the chairman of the International Eduard Tubin Society. The detailed CV of Kerri Kotta can be accessed in the Estonian Research Portal at: https://www.etis.ee/Portal/Persons/Display/571e8508-3fbc-46cd-b9d7-db2f26fc7081?tabId=CV_ENG

Revolution and Decadence in the Poetic Universe of Gustav Suits

Hasso Krull, Estonian Academy of Arts

In Estonia, Gustav Suits is the first name to be associated with nationalism and literary innovation at the beginning of the 20th century. Suits is the initiator of the Young Estonia movement and a political revolutionary, who became a suspect already as a schoolboy. In 1917, immediately after the October Coup in St. Petersburg, he proposed the idea of a Finnish-Estonian political union, and as a radical social democrat, he presented a draft of an Estonian Workers' Republic, thereby making the first gesture towards the political independence of Estonia.

At the same time, Suits' poetry became increasingly complex, refined, and ambivalent. His poetic attitude seems to constantly fluctuate between a militant affirmation of life and a dreamy fading away, producing an effect reminiscent of Nietzsche's famous proclamation that one can be „at once a decadent and a beginning“. The social atmosphere and the growing inequality in the young Estonian Republic quickly became repellent for Suits, but he never abandoned his nationalist fundamentals. Thus, Suits can be called a national Decadent *par excellence*.

After his first book of poetry *The Fire of Life* was published in Helsinki in 1905, Eino Leino wrote a review for the daily newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. Although he was quite content with the younger poet's first book, he hoped that Suits' poems on the subject of love will be more refined in the future. In a personal letter Suits has confessed that the day he read Leino's review was „the most terrible day in his life“. This confession is telling, as it brings him even closer to the Baudelairean atmosphere of „borderline narcissism“, that Eugene W. Holland has analyzed as „a historical rather than a psychological category“, ensuing from the disillusionement caused by „the recurrent failures of the democratic ideal promised by modern society to prevail over the continually resurgent authoritarianism“. Democracy is a mirage looming on the horizon, but never fully attained.

Bio

Hasso Krull (b. 1964) is an Estonian poet who has published eighteen books of poetry and nine collections of essays that include literary criticism as well as writings concerning art, cinema and society. During 1990-2017 he was teaching cultural theory at the Estonian Institute of Humanities (special courses on creation myths, oral tradition, continental philosophy and psychoanalysis). From 2019 he has been teaching creative writing in the Estonian Academy of Arts.

The Decadent Movement in the Lithuanian Literary Canon: Missing Tradition or Unwelcome Trend?

Aistė Kučinskienė, Vilnius University

The first steps in the formation of Lithuanian literary canon can be traced to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, alongside the flourishing national movement.

Literature played a crucial role in nation-building, so it is no coincidence that the emerging literary canon was shaped by the criteria of modern nationalism, such as spirit of the nation, “national morality”, best reflected in the works of Late Romantic poets and Realist writers.

At that time, some Lithuanian artists were strongly influenced by *fin de siècle* and Modernist aesthetics, introduced through the Young Poland movement. Yet the contemporary reception of this “new” literature was ambiguous, and writers more impacted by Decadent art faced rejection. We could assume that Decadent literature simply did not align with the ideals of modern Lithuanian nationalism. However, Juozapas Albinas Herbačiauskas (1876–1944), the only Decadent writer mentioned in the histories of Lithuanian literature, despite employing innovative forms of expression, also engaged with topics and motifs of national revival in his work. This however, was not enough for the canonization of his works (neither in his time nor posthumously).

This paper examines why the ideas of Lithuanian nationalism and Decadent art did not coexist. Is it because Decadent literature never became a strong tradition in the Lithuanian literary field? Or was it simply an unwelcome aesthetic trend, given the criteria of modern nationalism? To answer this, I analyze Herbačiauskas’s literary and autobiographical texts, along with their reception throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

Bio

Aistė Kučinskienė is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Philology at Vilnius University (Lithuania). Her main academic interests include the history of Lithuanian literature (especially the first part of the 20th century), the Lithuanian literary canon, and research on autobiographical writing.

Patriarchal Civilization as the Cause of Decay and Despair in Elin Wägner's Novel "Den förödda vingården" ("The Devastated Vineyard", 1920]

Katarina Leppänen, University of Gothenburg

The Swedish feminist Elin Wägner worked all her life as a literary author and journalist. One special interest of hers was sexual psychology and effect the philosophical-scientific discourse, represented by thinkers like Otto Weininger and others that equated a feminization of culture with a decline of civilisation, had on women. Thus, although Wägner herself cannot be identified as a representative of Decadent literature, culture, or aesthetics, her work is in constant dialogue with the Decadence of her time. She was well informed about the ongoing international debates and regularly participated in European conferences predominantly on women's issues and pacifism.

My talk will analyse Wägner's book "Den förödda vingården" from 1920, her stylistically most daring work, as an expression of counter-discourse, yet clearly relates to Decadence. Female sexuality and eroticism are here described in ambivalent terms and questions of sexuality and "race" (nation) are brought into play with ideas of human (humanity's) degradation. The novel is set in Vienna after the First World War and depicts two women journalist who, from different perspectives, approach the total devastation. The book also pitches the two women's characteristics against each other. The title alludes to not only the destruction of the city but also to the devastation of (human) characters.

Bio

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Johannes Aavik's Thesis of the Degeneration of Estonian Nation: the Idea and Its Implications

Leo Luks, the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences

Johannes Aavik (1880–1973) was one of the initiators and leading figures of the Young Estonia movement. Known primarily as a language innovator, Aavik was active in many fields, including as a writer and essayist.

The launch of the Young Estonia movement was the manifesto “Noorte püüded” (“Youth's Aspirations”), which called for the modernisation of Estonian culture based on rural traditionalism: more European culture, let us remain Estonians but let us become Europeans also. Aavik took the concept of Estonians' cultural backwardness to the extreme. In a short essay published in 1914, “Üks meie kulturalise nõrkuse põhjustest: vastupidine selektsion” (“One of the causes of our cultural weakness: reverse selection”), Aavik argues that the Estonian nation (breed) is degenerating. In my presentation, I will analyse the assumptions, context and implications of this claim.

Aavik's essay begins with an estimated description of Estonians' cultural level as extremely low compared to developed Europe. This is followed by a section of causal explanation, which is summarised in an extravagant thesis: Darwin's law of selection manifests itself in the Estonian people in a recursive, downward direction. Aavik's causal explanation is based on the thesis of cultural assimilation. Estonians as the rural peasants were the underclass for centuries. It was the natural choice for the more talented and ambitious people to exchange the Estonian language and culture for German ones.

In a Darwinian approach, we should speak here of the extinction of one species (Estonians) through the dissolution of another. We could also talk about the decline of a culture in the spirit of Decadent theories of History. Yet Aavik does not and cannot do this. First of all, the narrative of decline presupposes a higher state of being, in relation to which one degenerates. The pre-Young-Estonian nationalist

narrative (Carl Robert Jakobson) also idealises an ancient (up to the 13th century) golden age of pride. Such a view does not suit Aavik; judged by the standards of European high culture, the ancient Estonians were also barbaric. That reason led to Aavik's strange thesis of a reversal of fortune, which is full of paradoxes: firstly, the Estonian nation has been inferior since ancient times, and secondly, it has been degenerating for another 700 years, but it has still not died out (at the beginning of the 20th century there were more Estonians than ever before in history). Aavik believes that this inferior entity can be cured by European culture, and devotes his long life to this goal.

Bio

Leo Luks's research interests include Decadence as a state of transitionality in the context of Nietzsche's philosophy. He focuses on Nietzschean interpretations of race and nation, including the intersections between strength, power, affectivity on the one hand and Decadence and nihilism on the other.

During his studies, Leo Luks mostly analysed the problems of nihilism in Nietzsche's philosophy and its further developments in phenomenology and hermeneutics. Based on those studies, Luks published a monograph in 2015 "Nihilism ja kirjandus" ("Nihilism and Literature"). During the last decade, Luks has published extensively on homelessness in Estonian literature, the era of post-truth, ontological affects in phenomenology, Estonian philosophy, etc. Furthermore, he has published collections of essays, poetry, translations and more than 100 pieces of literary criticism.

The Finnish Sculptors Aarre and Wäinö Aaltonen in the Context of Decadence and Nationalism

Tutta Palin, University of Turku

In Finland, Decadence is not firmly established as a category or designation within the field of visual art. In art historical research, it has mainly been noted in the context of specific topoi or singular artworks connected to Symbolism. For example, the topos of the closed eyes, signalling an intense immersion in the unseen, in Helene Schjerbeck's (1862–1946) or Ellen Thesleff's (1869–1954) production, following Odilon Redon and the Aesthetic Movement, has been identified (Wivel 1997; cf. Stewen 1996). Similarly, Art Deco as a style has not been seen as a major influence in Finland. More recently, Decadence is explored as a sensibility, a 'constellation' characteristic of the long nineteenth century, in which interests in 'occulture', decay and death merge (Välimäki 2021).

In my paper I discuss a set of works by two male sculptors of a later generation, Aarre Aaltonen (1889–1980) and Wäinö Aaltonen (1894–1966), at an interface of Decadence, Art Deco, and an emotionalist Expressionist aesthetic. My suggestion is that an amalgam of such phenomena is discernible in the 1910s and 1920s, at times combined with an interest in Nationalism in the form of Kalevala motifs, for instance. This mixture presents an alternative (even if an ambiguous one), to the more heroizing and explicit mode of Nationalism typically associated with Finnish male artists of the long nineteenth century. In Aarre Aaltonen's production, an affective aesthetic that may be seen as Decadent prevails even longer, as in the public bronze commission Ilmatar and the Scaup which depicts the cosmogonic myth from Kalevala, created and accepted in 1939 but unveiled in Helsinki after the war in 1946.

Bio

Tutta Palin, PhD, is Professor of Art History and head of the Degree Programme in Media Studies, Musicology and Art History at the University of Turku, Finland. She specialises in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century art in Finland. Her current

interests involve alternative modernisms and the popularization of modernist art discourses.

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Search for the Right Interpretation of Life and Literature: The Multifaceted Figure of the Upstart of A. H. Tammsaare's "I Loved a German" (1935)

Viola Parente-Čapková, the Under and Tuglas Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, University of Turku, & Mirjam Hinrikus, the Under and Tuglas Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences

A.H. Tammsaare's (1878–1940) novel "I Loved a German" (English translation by Christopher Moseley, 2018) was originally published as "Ma armastasin sakslast" in 1935, at a time when the author was already an established and celebrated figure in Estonian literature. The novel has traditionally been interpreted as a love story between protagonists of two nations with differing symbolic statuses — an Estonian and a Baltic German. This kind of (often decolonial) reading is also suggested by the allegorical title "I Loved a German".

While situating the novel within the tradition of literary decadence and the modernist literature from which it grew, we ask how Tammsaare's treatment of the themes of social mobility and the national/ethnic difference intersects with decadent and *fin de siècle* thought and aesthetics with its complex stance on "truthfulness". We focus on Tammsaare's rendering of the upstart or parvenu character with its complex and distinctly ambivalent connotations. The figure of the protagonist of the novel, a „rural student“ Oscar with his writing ambitions, has to be understood within its own specific historical and cultural context, tied to the Estonian national aspirations. We show how Oscar's search for "truth" and the "correct" interpretation of life and (literary) text is subverted by his strategies of imitation and mimicry, typical of parvenu novels, and further complicated by the use of irony, self-irony and parody, typical of the decadent aesthetic.

Bios

Beginning in 2024, Viola Parente-Čapková has been Senior Researcher at the Under and Tuglas Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences, as participating researcher under the aegis of the research project "Emergence of a Civilised Nation: Decadence and Transitionality in 1905–1940" (PRG1667). She is also Professor of Literary Studies and Creative Writing at the University of Turku. Her research interests are

fin de siècle Finnish literature, namely Decadence in European perspective, *fin de siècle* women's writing in Europe with a focus on Finland, transnational cultural and literary networks and transnational reception of women's writing, theoretical issues in literary history, philology, feminist literary theory, postcolonial theory, intermediality, and digital humanities.

Mirjam Hinrikus is currently leading the project "Emergence of a Civilized Nation: Decadence and Transitionality, 1905–1940" at the Under and Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences (see [project page](#)). She has published articles in both Estonian and English, and has edited and co-edited several volumes in both languages. Her most recent major work is a special issue on Estonian literary decadence in the journal *Keel ja Kirjandus* (see [2024 issue](#)). At present, she is co-editing a university-level textbook in Estonian, "Sissejuhatus kirjandusteooriasse ja praktikasse" ("Introduction to Literary Theory and Practice", 2026), together with Raili Marling and Piret Viires. Her article "Linguistic Innovation and Literary Decadence as the Beginning of the Avant-Garde: The Estonian Case" will appear in 2026 in the volume "Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in Central Europe" (Brill; eds. P. James and C. C. Outes). In addition, together with members of the decadence project, she is preparing an English-language special issue on Estonian and Finnish decadence in literature and art, forthcoming in the online journal *Volupté* in 2026.

Women of Lithuanian Poetry

Audinga Peluritytė-Tikuišienė, Vilnius University, Faculty of Philology, Institute for Literary, Cultural and Translation Studies, Department of Lithuanian Literature

Salomėja Nėris (1904–1945) was the first really strong lyricist in the world of Lithuanian poetry, and although affected by the political complexities of her time, she still excites passions in Lithuanian culture. The lyrics of Salomėja were extremely important in the gloomy Soviet era, when a murdered, exiled, repressed nation had to relearn the art of the word. The motifs of nature and flowers, love, woman, native land in Nėris's work rewrote codes of neo-romanticism created by men with feminine meanings.

Salomėja Nėris reinterpreted those meanings because she reflected and tried to escape from the field of cultural stereotypes. Her intimate voice deeply shook Lithuanian poetry. Unfortunately, the Soviet era was not favourable either to the nuances of lyrics nor to talented authors. Diana Glemžaitė (1925–1949), the fosterling of Nėris's neo-romantic school, died tragically in the resistance battles, therefore the neo-romantic tradition was continued by the delicate post-war poet Janina Degutytė (1928–1990), and modernized by Judita Vaičiūnaitė (1937–2001).

Among the diaspora, Salomėja Nėris was questioned more strongly, thus the younger generation of poets played a stronger role here, notably Biruta Pūkelevičiūtė (1923–2007) and Liūna Sutema (1927–2013). Among them, Pūkelevičiūtė, who studied the art of poetry in interwar Lithuania, would seem more relevant to this neo-romantic idea. However, unlike Nėris, speaking in a sensual and romantic-like language, Pūkelevičiūtė overcomes the cultural identity stereotype perceived by Salomėja Nėris, and opens up to the new universality of the woman's world.

Bio

Audinga Peluritytė-Tikuišienė, born 1966 in Vilnius, Lithuania. PhD., Assoc. Prof at the Department of Lithuanian Literature, Institute for Literature, Culture and Translation Research, Vilnius University. Her interests: classical and contemporary

Lithuanian Poetry, comparative and interdisciplinary research. She has participated in the Lithuanian art press as a critic of literature since 1992. She has published four research studies since 2003 (the latest on the comparative aspect) about Lithuanian classical, contemporary and comparative (with Czech, Polish) literature: "Tradition of Lithuanian Lyrical Poetry of the 20th Century" (2003), "Old Myths, New Tales: About Contemporary Lithuanian Literature" (2006), "The Latest Lithuanian Literature" (2011), "Architectural Boundary: Contemporary Lithuanian Literature and Contexts" (2016). She has co-authored or compiled several science books. She has also organized several international conferences at Vilnius University (2006, 2008, 2015, 2017, 2020).

Decay and Fermentation of Nation: „Creative Nationalism“ of Henrik Visnapuu

Aare Pilv, the Under and Tuglas Centre of the Estonian Academy of Sciences

Henrik Visnapuu (1890-1951) began in the second decade of the 20th century as a poet who had an eclectic mixture of poetics – Romanticist, Symbolist, Decadent, Expressionist and Futurist directions were all present in his poems, although in his manifestos he positioned himself rather as a Futurist. In the 1930s he became an important proponent of nationalism, but this had important Futurist overtones because his nationalism was a sort of creative and artistic project, not a preservation of existing national patterns.

Decay and fermentation are important motives in his texts, these are the preconditions of the rise of a new and young nation. It reminds one of the Nietzschean views on Decadence – that decay is a necessary stage for becoming new and young. In any case decay, rot and fermentation as Decadent phenomena were turned by Visnapuu into rather positive categories. My paper elaborates on how, for Visnapuu, elements of Decadence must be used as means of futurist renewal, and as such he embodies the presence of avant-garde in Decadence and vice versa.

Bio

Aare Pilv focuses on the dynamics of Decadence and Avant-Garde in Estonian poetry during the first decades of the 20th century (especially in the poetry of Johannes Barbarus). He is also interested in the entanglements of leftist thinking of that time with modern nationalism and various aesthetic discourses. Pilv has researched the problems of self-writing, especially in the works of Estonian writers of recent decades like Madis Kõiv (1929–2014) and Tõnu Õnnepalu (s 1962). He has also dealt with the issues of interpreting Soviet Estonian literature. On a theoretical level, he has been interested in the role of artistic/figural language in constructing individual and collective identities. He has published poetry and prose, he has been active as a translator, critic, and playwright. Aare Pilv has the degree of *magister artium* in literary studies (Tartu University, 2002, “Autometatextuality in Literary Culture”).

Translation and the Nation: Conflict or Concord?

Kaia Sisask, Tallinn University

At the end of the 19th century, a critical discourse emerged among Estonian cultural figures concerning the "spirit" and "character" of the Estonian language and the harmful influence exerted by translations from foreign languages. While the need to distance oneself from German models was acknowledged, increasing attention was also paid to the perceived "threat" posed by modern Western European modes of thought to the authenticity of Estonian culture. For instance, the creative ambition to transpose Western European naturalism to the depiction of Estonian realities (*à la* the novelist Eduard Vilde) was seen as fostering an excessively pessimistic image of the Estonian people. A particular target of criticism at the end of the 19th century was French literature, which was accused of moral laxity and considered a direct threat to the vitality of the Estonian nation. However, the debate extended to translation more broadly, giving rise to what can be described as an outright campaign against translated literature.

This campaign was centred around three key points of criticism: 1) morals, under the influence of the "dangerous" ideas found in translated literature—so the morals, and hence the vitality—of the Estonian people were said to be deteriorating; 2) literature of light or trivial content was believed to corrupt public taste; 3) original Estonian literature, it was argued, could not develop if the literary field was dominated by translations.

The publication of translated literature was thus seen not as an idealistic enterprise, but as one driven primarily by economic motives. In addition to well-known conservative figures such as Anton Jürgeinstein, the young Estonian author Jaan Oks also aligned himself with this position. For Oks, the advancement of original literature was of critical importance, as only original *belles-lettres* could simultaneously express the freedom of the human soul and serve as a "revelation of national secrets." Translation—what he called "distortion"—was, in his view, a crime against original *belles-lettres*. (Jaan Oks, "Critical Sentiments". – "Young Estonia III". Tartu: Noor-Eesti Publishers, 1909)

This viewpoint was powerfully challenged by other members of *Noor-Eesti*, who argued that the development of the Estonian people and the vitality of its culture would in fact be furthered through engagement with world literature. As the key cultural publications of the early 20th century – namely the Young Estonia almanacs and journal, as well as the journal *Eesti Kirjandus* published by the Estonian Literary Society – did not compete but instead collaborated closely, a fruitful balance between translations and original literature was ultimately achieved.

Bio

Kaia Sisask, docent, Tallinn University, kaia.sisask@tlu.ee.

The Figure of Salome in Estonian Art

Kai Stahl, University of Turku

Decadence, as a literary and artistic movement, commonly employs tropes of ambivalence. Among these are *femme fatale* figures – objects of male artists' desire, but at the same time sources of their anxiety. In my paper, I focus on one of the *femme fatale* figures, Salome. According to the New Testament, she was a Jewish princess who demanded the head of St John the Baptist on a platter as a reward for her sensual dance at her stepfather King Herod's birthday feast. Her figure and her dance inspired numerous male artists, writers, and composers, especially since the second half of the 19th century in metropolitan art centres of Western Europe. As an emblematic *femme fatale* figure, Salome became a fashionable trope of *fin de siècle* Decadence. It seems that Estonian artists visually interpreted the story of Salome mainly during the 1910s, with only a few male artists creating individual works on this theme.

I scrutinise how Estonian artists such as Anton Starkopf, Eduard Wiiralt, August Mülberg, Ado Vabbe, and Karl Krahe depicted the subject of Salome in parallel with Western European *fin de siècle* artists. Additionally, I examine whether any local or “peripheral” aspects or points of view can be observed in their artworks when they deal with the subject of Salome. I also pay attention to early modern dance and the dancers who performed Salome's veiled dance, which fascinated these artists.

Bio

Kai Stahl, PhD, is a postdoctoral researcher at the Department of Art History at the University of Turku, Finland. She defended her dissertation in 2023 at the same university. Since 2007, she has published widely particularly on the subject of female artists and alternative modernisms in early twentieth-century Estonia. She is the author of a monograph, “Ainulaadne sõsarkond: Õed Kristine, Lydia ja Natalie Mei” (“A Unique Sisterhood: Sisters Kristine, Lydia, and Natalie Mei”), commissioned and published by the Estonian Art Museum in 2020, and she is one of the three curators

of the exhibition, “The Mei Sisters: Avant-Garde and the Everyday Life”, shown at the same museum in 2025.

The Nordic Trek to Harlem: Race, Decadence, and Richard Bruce Nugent's "Half High"

Robert Stilling, Florida State University

"I am now Nordic." So says Aeon Brennan, the white-passing protagonist of Richard Bruce Nugent's fractured Harlem Renaissance novella "Half High". Composed in the 1920s but only just published in 2023, Nugent's novel offers a meditation on race, place, and time in a dizzying blend of *fin de siècle* Decadence and Gertrude Stein-esque modernism, all set in jazz-era New York. Born of parents who are "maybe-Negro and maybe-Nordic," Nugent's Aeon Brennan presents racial categories as ever-shifting and mutable as he transitions through multiple identities: Black, White, Negro, Nordic, homosexual, poet, Jesus, saint, emperor, and ghost who transcends four-dimensional space-time. While the term "Nordic" was not uncommon among Black writers in the 1920s as a term to designate and exoticize whiteness, Nugent stretches the concept through constant juxtaposition with other categories. Along with Aeon's foil, his brother Stuart (based on Nugent himself), a maker of "trivial" but "decadent and perfect" art who remained "Negro" despite his shared "Nordic" ancestry, Nugent presents the figure of the modern mixed-race artist as both subject to the racial pressures of his time and as a Decadent incarnation of a line of saintly apostles of beauty that transcends history, racial genealogy, and place. This paper will thus ask what it means for a Decadent, mixed race, artist protagonist to claim himself to be "Nordic" during the Harlem Renaissance. In keeping with the theme of this conference, this paper will argue for the importance of viewing the Decadence of one periphery from the point of view of another, for seeing the idea of the "Nordic," however distant, distinct, and detached as it may seem in 1920s New York from Northern Europe, as essential to the reformulation of race in Decadent literature of the modernist era in beyond Europe.

Bio

Robert Stilling is Associate Professor of English at Florida State University and the author of "Beginning at the End: Decadence, Modernism, and Postcolonial Poetry" (Harvard University Press, 2018). He has published on Decadent literature and art in

PMLA, *Volupté*, *Cusp*, Feminist Modernist Studies, and Victorian Literature and Culture.

The Count and the Grim Reaper: Eric Stenbock and a (Trans)National Decadent Poetics

Jon Stone, Franklin & Marshall College

A transnational devotee of Aestheticism who published three volumes of poetry and one collection of stories, Count Eric Stenbock represents the intersection of several major and prominent Decadent traits. As part of the paradigm shift that accompanied Decadence's celebration of otherness and perversity, Stenbock's work can be read as a model of the movement.

Stenbock was born in 1860 in England into a Russo-Baltic aristocratic family. He developed a broad literary and cultural familiarity with late nineteenth-century English, German, and Russian literature and sought to insert himself into the intellectual spheres of London, Reval, and St. Petersburg, spending long periods living at the family estate in Kolga. When his final book of poetry, "The Shadow of Death", was published in 1893 he had developed a distinct identity grounded in his queerness, his global and cosmopolitan lifestyle, and his embrace of the occult. As a writer often relegated to footnotes and anecdotes, Stenbock's marginality offers a glimpse into the processes of inclusion and exclusion that were essential to Decadence's formation. He is both central and liminal, written into and written out of the accounts of the era. The complexities of his national and transnational identity, poetics, family history, and cultural contexts make Stenbock a hub for Decadent practices and discourse and served to exemplify core aspects of early modernism at both center and periphery.

Bio

Jon Stone is Professor of Russian at Franklin & Marshall College. He studies early Russian modernism, European Decadence, and the print and material culture of the *fin de siècle*. He is the author of "The Historical Dictionary of Russian Literature" (2013), "The Institutions of Russian Modernism" (2017), and "Decadence and Modernism in European and Russian Literature and Culture" (2019).

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Yearning and Disgust – the Cyclical Conceptions of Nations Among Finnish Artists in Paris

Mikko Välimäki, University of Helsinki

It's clear that many Finnish artists perceived Parisian culture as degenerated and doomed, and compared it to the fresh and youthful Finnish life. These ideas seem to be affected by both the aesthetics of Decadence and their own nationalistic beliefs. Decadence as an aesthetic and as a political metaphor aren't equal, but they are often indistinguishable, as they seem to be both contradictory and interconnected in artists' belief systems.

This presentation examines the ways of juxtaposing the repulsive Paris with the archaic, serene Finland among Finnish artists' letters and works of art in the 1880s and 1890s Paris. I will be presenting two examples: Akseli Gallen-Kallela, who at the same time was deeply submerged in European (Decadent) artistic avantgarde, and heavily nationalistic and interested in agrarian romanticism. He expressed far reaching ideas on the decline of Europe and the dawn of Nordic nations. Pekka Halonen, on the other hand, was entrenched in poetic nature painting and expressed a deep disgust in Parisian urban life, signing his letters "from the gutters of Paris". These views were not only expressed in private letters, but in works of art. I will be presenting and comparing paintings that present these views through cyclical organic metaphors, discussing the principles behind them, and their utilization in artistic/political discourse.

Bio

Mikko Välimäki is a PhD student in the University of Helsinki, working on a dissertation on Decadence in Finnish visual arts and culture. His main interests are the social dimensions of art, mainly nationalism, modernity, and race, focusing on the late 19th and early 20th century. He has also previously worked with questions of esotericism and gender. Mikko Välimäki is a project member of the research project "Emergence of a Civilised Nation: Decadence and Transitionality in 1905–1940".

Halted Wandering: Senses of Belonging in Elizabeth Bowen's "To the North" (1932) and Leida Kibuvits's "An Evening Ride" (1933)

Eret Talviste, University of Tartu

An April breeze opens the Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen's novel "To the North" (1932), while another April wind is at work in the first lines of the Estonian writer Leida Kibuvits's "Rahusõit" ("An Evening Ride", 1933). Written around the same time, but miles apart and likely unaware of one another, both novels wonder rather than wander, although their titles suggest movement, and although modern forms of transport are central to and haunt the storylines. Drawing from Jane Bennett's currents of sympathy unpacked in her "influx and efflux: writing up with Walt Whitman" (2020) and Teresa Brennan's transmission of affect in her book of the same name (2004), I speculate how the wind moves, and how the characters stand still in it, surrounded by speed. I ask what does this dichotomy — being still within movement — say about vernacular-ethnic cultures in the face of emerging modern political nation states in Ireland and Estonia? Ireland and Estonia do not normally belong to the same comparative infrastructures, one being grouped together with the west, and the other with the east. This paper is situated in the "new" (Mao and Walkowitz 2008) and transnational (Berman 2018; Fernald 2017) modernist studies to create a dialogue between Anglo-Irish Bowen and Estonian Kibuvits to wonder how these women writers wrote up places in the 1930s, in the decade of rising fascism, in two newly independent nation states. Following wind, an elemental force and a textual device that cares neither about political borders nor ideologies, I propose that Bowen and Kibuvits wrote up places, and belonging to them, in ecological or affective rather than ideological terms.

Bio

Eret Talviste is a researcher in English Literature at the University of Tartu, Estonia. Following a PhD scholarship in modernist intimacies at Northumbria University, she joined Tartu in 2021 as a part-time researcher. In 2022 she won the Estonian Research Council's funding for a comparative project "Women, Nations, and Affect: The Importance of Leida Kibuvits's Writing in the Context of Transnational

Modernisms.” She has published book reviews, essays, and academic papers in both Estonian and English. Her first monograph “Strange Intimacies – Affect, Embodiment and Materiality in Virginia Woolf and Jean Rhys” is forthcoming in November 2025 with the Edinburgh University Press.

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Les nations n'ont de grands hommes que malgré elles, — comme les familles. Baudelaire