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11 Decadence in Contemporary Culture as a Theme in Swedish Literature, c. 1885–1920

Claes Ahlund

Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss the theme of decadence as a cultural process in Swedish literature from approximately 1885 to 1920. The development of this theme cannot be separated from its participants' relationship to decadence as a literary movement, or rather as an imagined international community.¹

In the early days, the two levels were connected. The decadent poet or writer, in Scandinavia as in the rest of Europe, explicitly or implicitly positioned himself or herself in an emerging decadent community. He or she was also a highly sensitive observer, noticing subtle but ominous changes yet unseen by the world outside this community. Aesthetic refinement and sophisticated analysis were threatened by new sets of barbarians *ante portas*: socialist workers, degenerate criminals, women struggling for emancipation, and the 'Yellow Peril'. At the same time, culture was threatened from within, by the imminent ennui of over-civilization. These changes had already entered the decadent's own mind, making him or her sensitive to the corresponding large-scale process. The best Swedish example of this kind of analysis of culture and self is Ola Hansson's (1860–1925) *Sensitiva amorosa* (1887) (See Andersen 1992, 328–368 and Ahlund 1994, 42–61).

Twenty years later, the idea of a connection between inner processes and cultural decadence had become obsolete. Decadence was still much debated, but it was now seen as an unequivocally negative force discerned everywhere in society by a large number of alarmed moralists, both conservative and socialist. To phrase it differently, decadence was no longer aristocratically exclusive. In the polarized political climate of the years before the outbreak of the First World War, it had become a broad current threatening Western culture.

It should be stressed that the process is not one of poets changing positions, but of a younger generation rejecting the ideas of their predecessors. In the 1910s, Ola Hansson was not one of the many outspoken moralists proclaiming the disastrous decadence of the nation and its people. Likewise, after the turn of the century, radical socialists like Ture Nerman (1886–1969) and patriotic moralists such as Cecilia Bååth-Holmberg (1857–1920) agreed on many of the dangers of this phenomenon, particularly to the young. None of them had previously observed any decadent traits in themselves.

An important international exception to this polarized rule was Friedrich Nietzsche, claiming in *Ecce Homo* to have a “twofold provenance”, being “both decadent and beginning,” and asserting that decadence stimulates life powerfully (Nietzsche 2007, 7). Nietzsche considers decadence to be a necessary stage in life as in culture, leading to regeneration, but nevertheless a very dangerous path. In the course of the 1890s, Nietzsche became a fashionable philosopher, but in Sweden as elsewhere, his reputation was not based on his discussion of decadence. August Strindberg’s novel *I havsbandet* (*By the Open Sea*, 1890) is a notable exception, with close similarities to Nietzsche’s idea of decadence.

At the same time, there were other kinds of ambivalence toward decadence in Swedish literature. Stella Kleve, pseudonym for Mathilda Malling (1864–1942), shocked her audience with the novel *Berta Funcke* (1885) and the short story “Pyrrhusegrar” (Pyrrhic Victories, 1886), both of which centered on female and provokingly decadent protagonists. The highly reflexive and introspective Berta Funcke is in several respects superior to the men she encounters, but she is nevertheless forced to enter a highly conventional marriage (Ney 1993a; Ahlund 1994, 25–41). In the case of *Berta Funcke*, decadence can thus be said to be rejected within the context of the novel itself. It was also rejected by the following novels, where Malling drops the notorious pseudonym, redirecting her writing to the safer ground of the historical novel (Ney 1993b, 540–547).

In this article, the gradual transformation of the idea of cultural decadence will be discussed through a comparison of August Strindberg (1849–1912) and his younger colleague Bertil Malmberg (1889–1958). Strindberg’s and Malmberg’s conceptions of decadence will finally be compared to that of a third Swedish writer, Frida Stéenhoff (1865–1945).

Strindbergian Ambivalence

Tobias Dahlkvist has pointed out the previously ignored connection between Nietzsche's ambivalent understanding of decadence in life and culture and Strindberg's novel *I havsbandet*. "[T]he story of Axel Borg, Strindberg's portrait of a quintessentially modern man, becomes a warning that whatever is valuable in modern Western culture is also infinitely fragile." In contrast to earlier interpretations of the novel, Dahlkvist draws the conclusion that "far from being an *Übermensch*, Borg actually represents a far more important Nietzschean figure: he is a *décadent*" (Dahlkvist 2012, 210).

Strindberg's ambivalent relation to decadence in culture in *I havsbandet* can be compared to the dramatic change that he was going through at this time, rapidly moving away from Naturalism toward psychology and mysticism. In a few years' time, the process would culminate in the *Inferno* crisis, transforming the Naturalist into a Modernist but at the same time religious writer. But even after *Inferno*, an ambivalence toward the process of decadence remains. In the late novels *Götiska rummen* (The Gothic Rooms) and *Svarta fanor* (*Black Banners*), decadence is certainly a negative force, but the question is still unresolved as to whether the decadent aspects of contemporary society should be regarded altogether pessimistically as the dismal end of history, or optimistically as the beginning of a process of regeneration.ⁱⁱ

Götiska rummen and *Svarta fanor* were both written in 1904, and they both display a complex view of history. The expectation that earthly existence would improve is repeatedly formulated, especially in *Götiska rummen*. At the same time, we find many examples, most of them in *Svarta fanor*, of the same pessimistic concept of history that is displayed in *Blå böckerna* (The Blue Books, 1907–1912) in which understandings of time are confronted. The pessimistic conception of a cyclical history meets a linear Christian idea of time, starting with the creation and evolving through the fall to the last judgment.

Götiska rummen provides us with a never-ending list of decadence and decay manifest in Swedish society. The institution of marriage is a main issue, but decay is seen also in the church, clergy, public administration, schools, and universities. Here, as in *Svarta fanor*, journalists are portrayed as agents of fraud and falsification. Statistics are used to demonstrate

the decline of agriculture and a chronic trade deficit. As a consequence, emigration is seen as turning Sweden into “a waste land” (Strindberg 2002, 204, 24).ⁱⁱⁱ

Not everything is negative in *Götiska rummen*, however. Strindberg also presents premonitions of new and better times. Stressing his connection to an advanced international community, he describes Sâr Péladan, Nietzsche, and Swedenborg as leaders of “the most advanced spiritual movements of the turn of the century,” lighting “some great flames, igniting, luminous, for the new century, that may become the greatest of all” (Strindberg 2002, 88).^{iv} In *Svarta fanor*, cosmopolitanism also appears in a less flattering guise. In *Götiska rummen*, however, the “white city”, “the white cosmopolis” of the Stockholm exhibition, is portrayed as a hopeful symbol of a new internationalism (Strindberg 2002, 203).

The coming change is often depicted by images related to the cyclical processes of nature. The old century will soon have “withered”, and all those living in this period of transition are well advised to “enter pupation”, preparing themselves to “reappear with wings”. The monarchy will “molder”, providing fertile ground for a new growth (Strindberg 2002, 175, 44).^v This image has obvious connotations with the growing castle in *Ett drömspel (A Dream Play, 1902)*, rising out of “heaps of straw spread out over the stable manure” (Strindberg 1998, 181).^{vi} The image is thus not only linked to the great cycle of nature, but also points to the connection between heaven and earth.

In *Götiska rummen*, there are also interesting images of contemporary society as a “Babylonian confusion”, and as an escalating “mix of classes and opinions” (Strindberg 2002, 55, 56, 64).^{vii} The union of opposites is often regarded as a positive sign. The young and vital American people is said to be a melting pot of all the peoples of the world (Strindberg 2002, 202). From cooking and chemistry, Strindberg moves on to metallurgy with the image of how all political positions are united and dissolved in this period of transition. “This was perhaps a synthesis of the best of all analyses [...]. Maybe [...] the victorious opinion was a combination of them all, since it was an alloy of precious and base metals.” (Strindberg 2002, 56).^{viii} Things previously kept apart are now brought together, amalgamating. The resulting instability, which many contemporaries saw as a deadly threat to culture, appears as a short period of transition in *Götiska rummen*. It is certainly confusing, but at the same time a necessary stage leading to a new world.

The discussion of society of *Götiska rummen* has a moral basis, but the faith in the age to come is of course also colored by the post-*Inferno* idea of conversion. To the characters Max and Ester, the fact that white buildings and clothing are back in fashion is a sign of the transition from the darkness of materialism to the light of a new spirituality (Strindberg 2002, 193). This religious perspective is applied not only to individual sinners, but to society as a whole. When his marriage breaks up, this means that Gustav Borg cannot complete the synthesis of his life; “he was in full crisis, making his entry into Swedenborg’s realm of Devastation” (Strindberg 2002, 126).^{ix} This is a combination of the chemical imagery (“synthesis”) and a phase in Swedenborg’s structure of conversion (“devastation”). The same pattern is applied to society as a whole; the “devastation” that Borg is forced to go through corresponds to the greater “devastation” of society. In both cases, the process ultimately results in a new and more advanced form of existence.

In *Svarta fanor*, the world is darker. The idea of a “triumph of evil” – a recurring theme in Strindberg’s anti-materialistic post-*Inferno* writing – is evoked in the titles of several drafts for the novel: “Decadents”; “Ghosts”; “People in decay” (Nolin 1997, 15).^x The imagery of ‘decadence’ becomes more drastic, but at the same time, more difficult to interpret. Ulf Olsson claims that the novel is a deeply religious text that nevertheless uses the language of modernity, especially that of Darwinism (Olsson 1999, 198). Per Stounbjerg characterizes it as a radically open and inorganic hybrid text, eluding the generic expectations of both its own time and today (Stounbjerg 1997, 63).

Journalism is one of the main examples of the decadence of society in *Svarta fanor* (Strindberg 2010, 30; Strindberg 1995, 32). It is certainly no coincidence that two of the worst crooks in the novel are writers. The first is Zachris, whose only conviction is that he “had to get ahead”, and who is said to hold a prominent position among “decadents and degenerates” (Strindberg 2010, 29).^{xi} The second is Hanna Paj, who is said to be the leader of a “Satanist movement” fighting for women’s emancipation (Strindberg 2010, 65).^{xii} The liberal journalists, radical writers of the 1880s, and advocates of women’s liberation are all seen as examples of perversion and decadence; not only in principle, but also on a personal level. In the case of Zachris, the perversion of his ideas corresponds to the homosexuality of his oldest son, but is also materialized in the scene where guests in a restaurant that he visits claim that he looks like a “copromaniac” (Strindberg 2010, 116).^{xiii} The image combines a scientific pathological classification with a Swedenborgian identification of sin with matter, mud, and

feces. In *Götiska rummen*, internationalism is often viewed as a positive trend. In contrast in *Svarta fanor*, it is in many cases a sinister force. For instance an international organization of homosexuals is described as a perverted materialistic version of the cosmopolitan theosophist society in the “monastery” (Strindberg 2010, 79–80; Strindberg 1995, 86).

There are many examples of instability and dissolution in *Svarta fanor* as well, but in many cases they are not connected to expectations of regeneration. The Dreyfus affair is described as a “Babylonian confusion” (Strindberg 2010, 197),^{xiv} but this obviously signifies chaos without any positive aspects. Falkenström’s experience of cultural and social instability is also very pessimistic. “Nothing offered a firm hold; love and hate, sorrow and joy, passions and interests, everything was rotten, shifting.” (Strindberg 2010, 80.)^{xv} This is an experience of decadent modernity, typical of the *fin de siècle* and early modernism.

Rather surprisingly, Strindberg allows the notorious villain Smartman to phrase a more nuanced meditation on the variability of society:

I saw all the peoples of the world mixing, all religions melting together, old morals and blue laws stricken from the books, ancient sources of strength dry up, new ones taken up; all of the wisdom of antiquity was unearthed. It was a glorious age, the human race expanded, but individuals were lost; I was one of them! (Strindberg 2010, 200)^{xvi}

Smartman’s analysis is more complex than that of Falkenström, and it is placed at the end of the novel, but Strindberg has placed the ‘seekers’ in the monastery on a yet higher level. In their “ark” (Strindberg 2010, 213), they are to become the starting point of a new and explicitly spiritual civilization.

Bertil Malmberg’s Externalization of Decadence

Strindberg’s restless analysis of decadence focuses on culture and society, but also on the individual. As we have seen, it is highly ambivalent; the decay of his age is alternately interpreted pessimistically and optimistically. Bertil Malmberg also embraces incompatible attitudes toward decadence, but he does not entertain them simultaneously.^{xvii}

Scandinavian and continental writers and poets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both experienced decadence as a reaction to the dissolution of continuity and coherence by industrialization and urbanization; to the growing threat against individuality from the accelerating mechanization of society and to materialism gradually dissolving all spiritual values. The experience of decadence often resulted in emptiness and dejection, or in attempts to escape into nostalgia for the past or the timeless refuge of art. A radical alternative was to stage oneself as decadent.

The significance of decadence differs radically between Bertil Malmberg's first collection of poems, *Bränder* (Fires, 1908), and the following one, *Uppgörelse och löfte* (A Showdown and a Promise, 1911). In *Bränder*, Malmberg stages himself as a derivative decadent; in *Uppgörelse och löfte*, he takes the stage not only as a self-proclaimed national poet, but as a moralist and a seer. Nevertheless, there is an important connection between the two collections. In *Bränder*, the poem "Renhet" (Purity) can be read as a foretaste of his political poetry, where the lyric subject is transformed into a herald of national virtues, and where decadence is no longer a refined attribute of the poet or the lyric subject, but a pernicious quality of a considerable proportion of the Swedish people. In "Renhet", decadence is still sensual and exciting, but it is also colored by a sense of guilt. This could be read as conventional play with decadent props, but when Malmberg extends the lyric subject, using a collective "we", this is in fact his first step into the role of spokesman of his nation (Malmberg 1908, 30).

Belshazzar's feast and the other decadent images of *Bränder* may seem to have no connection to the Swedish defense debate of 1911–1914, but the voluptuous sense of guilt expressed in "Renhet" is rhetorically very close to Malmberg's political poetry a few years later. In "Renhet", the abundant murdering, violating, and desecrating had a somewhat abstract quality since it in most cases lacked concrete objects. In the 1914 poem, "Till försvarets fiender" (To the enemies of defense), we encounter a closely related set of criminal verbs. They are now performed by another subject, the liberal Prime Minister Karl Staaf (1860–1915) and his government, and they also have a distinct object: the country of Sweden (Malmberg 1914).

In *Bränder*, Belshazzar as well as other decadent characters confessed to dreadful crimes, but he also voiced a paradoxical longing for "purity", conventionally contrasted with a sense of guilt with sexual connotations. In "Till försvarets fiender", the purity of the country is

threatened by internal enemies; liberal defense politics. In this case, too, a sexual image is used. Sly seducers have weakened and poisoned the people, breaking down its will to defend itself, so the country lies unguarded and open to an unscrupulous attacker.

The image of many men, gathered to announce their message with booming voices, is a reference to the “farmers’ march” (*Bondetåget*) of 1914. The conservative demonstration was a response to the parliamentary reforms of the preceding years. As a political performance, the march was an answer to the claims of the Labor Movement to represent the Swedish people, and an effort to defuse the increasing social tensions. This can be seen in the poem’s nationalist vision of a movement from discord to union.

The rhetoric of depravity can thus be used to bring out the sins of the lyric subject, or, a few years later, to attack liberal and socialist political opponents. The poem “Ryttaren” (The Horseman), in *Uppgörelse och löfte*, illustrates the displacement. After a long absence, a man returns to his home and his family, with “a soiled shield and a tainted sword”. It soon becomes clear that the stains are not the result of heroic battle. The horseman is “humiliated until death”, and his faith is “wasted and consumed”. He has been caressed by “mistresses” in “misty nights of poppy” and neglected his “work” for a short-lived “fire of pleasure” (Malmberg 1911, 34–35).^{xviii}

The contemporary reader was likely to read this as Malmberg’s personal apology for the poetic “fire of pleasure” titled *Bränder*. In the last stanza, the Horseman addresses his country from a position similar to the one used three years later, in “Till försvarets fiender”:

Tell us that the stains on the warrior’s weapons,
for ever are effaced
by the glory of new deeds of valor,
there is no other way!
Teach the Horseman, riding
through the autumnal fields of his childhood,
that a man’s crown is forged imperishably in the end
by the firm power of will and by virtuous bravery! (Malmberg 1911, 36–37)^{xix}

“Ryttaren” formulates a program for the coming political phase in Malmberg’s poetry. The forging of the crown is a harbinger of his bravery and courage to come – not on the battlefield, however, but in the pursuit of a poetic career.

When Malmberg leaves *fin de siècle* aestheticism for patriotic political poetry, stains, and the desecration are not the only phenomena put to new use. Spleen, sacralized by the master Baudelaire, is of course essential to symbolism and the *fin de siècle*. The prose poem “Belzasar”, in Malmberg’s *Bränder*, is a good example (Malmberg 1908, 31–33). In *Uppgörelse och löfte*, “stains” are transferred from the decadent lyrical subject to the political opponents, as is spleen – in the form of criminal passivity and indolence. In Malmberg’s poetry, this tendency becomes even more obvious as liberal defense politics is materialized as ‘torpor’ and ‘sleep’, both of which states supposedly threaten the nation’s future.

In his *Faces of Degeneration*, Daniel Pick notices a general pattern in the development of the concept. First associated with individuals (criminals, idiots), degeneration is soon discussed primarily in a social context. It is then associated with the great cities, the masses, and modernity itself (Pick 1989, 4, 95 et passim). The changes in Malmberg’s attitude to decadence correspond to this pattern. He makes use of the externalization of decadence, relocating it from the individual to society. At the same time, this process is a kind of exorcism. The lyrical subject ritually dissociates himself from his own decadence, and after the apology, he immediately and fiercely attacks the decadence of contemporary society.

As could be expected, Malmberg’s commitment to the political cause did not last very long. It culminated in *En blödande jord* (A Bleeding Earth, 1917), where nationalist propaganda appears alongside poems in which Malmberg tries to dissociate himself from the horrors of war by means of a conventional Christian rhetoric.

A Decadent Past or a Threatening Decadent Modernity?

Frida Stéenhoff developed a radical liberal feminism aiming to fundamentally restructure society and level inequalities caused by social position and by gender. This program was based on a strong faith in the steady progress of civilization and the gradual improvement of humankind. Stéenhoff soon became one of the most radical voices in the Swedish women’s movement.^{xx}

In her pamphlet *Fosterlandskänslan* (The Love of One's Country, 1907), Stéenhoff discusses the same questions as in the pacifist play *Stridbar ungdom* (Youth with Fighting Spirit, 1907): nationalism versus internationalism; love of one's country versus love of humankind.

Stéenhoff relates these questions to the development of civilization. She claims that the love of one's country was once a legitimate feeling, but that this is no longer the case; the progress of civilization has surmounted nationalism, primitive nationalist instincts giving way to internationalism.

This new emotional life affects thinking. An abundance of newborn reflections move through the brain, up-to-date connections between the old national love and the new international one are sought everywhere. (Stéenhoff 1907, 4–5)^{xxi}

The “newborn reflections” and search for “connections” have a strong resemblance to Strindberg's discussion of ongoing intellectual and mental turbulence. Another similarity is the internationalist rejection of narrow-minded nationalism.

Stéenhoff's feminist theories display a wide range of influences, including Spencer, Darwin, Malthus, Nietzsche, and the philosophers of the French Enlightenment. Stéenhoff never joined a political party. Nevertheless, she was by and large a supporter of the social democrat reform program (Carlsson Wetterberg 1992, 525). Long before the outbreak of the First World War, Stéenhoff had identified militarism as one of the main challenges to her evolutionist, feminist program for justice and righteousness. In both *Stridbar ungdom* and her pamphlets from the war years, nationalism, militarism, and patriarchal ideas stand out as the evil forces that have to be fought to the bitter end. Strindberg's opinions on patriarchy were admittedly very different from those of Stéenhoff, but nevertheless, her dark forces have many similarities with Strindberg's decadent bourgeoisie. In both cases, the ‘triumph of evil’ is an imminent threat to the regeneration of civilization. Whereas Strindberg vacillates in his judgment of the future, Stéenhoff is steadfast in her evolutionary confidence.

Conservatives, including Bertil Malmberg, naturally rejected both Stéenhoff's evolutionism and her equation of tradition with evil decadence. To Malmberg, decadence as a cultural process had close ties to pernicious modernity; that is, to the same accelerating technological, social, and mental processes that Stéenhoff regarded as the promise of regeneration. The

political and cultural change that Malmberg was hoping for was not a movement forward, but backward, originating in the nostalgic dream of a revival of a pre-modern Sweden. Compared to these antagonistic perspectives, Strindberg's view of decadence in culture and society stands out as undecided, ambivalent, and at times even openly contradictory. Alternately and simultaneously, he sees decadence as the dismal final phase of culture and a harbinger of spiritual and cultural regeneration. It could be claimed that this fundamental and provokingly paradoxical ambivalence is itself a mark of the decadent.

Notes

ⁱ Imagined communities: see Anderson 1983; decadence as an imagined international community: see Potolsky 2013.

ⁱⁱ For a more thorough discussion of decadence and regeneration in the two novels, see Ahlund 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ "ett öde land". When no other source is given, the translations are my own.

^{iv} "sekelslutets förnämsta andliga rörelser", "några stora gnistor, tändande, lysande, för det nya århundradet, som kanske skall bli det allra största."

^v "förpuppa sig", "komma ut igen med vingar", "multna ner".

^{vi} "halmdösar utbredda täckande utkastat stallströ" (Strindberg 1988, 9).

^{vii} "babylonisk förbistring", "blandning av klasser och åsikter."

^{viii} "Möjligen [...] försiggick nu syntesen av det bästa ur allas analyser [...]. Kanske [...] att den segrande meningen vore ett sammanskott av allas, emedan det var en legering av ädla och oädla metaller."

^{ix} "befann sig i full kris, görande sitt inträde i det rike som Swedenborg kallar Ödeläggelsen."

^x "ondskans triumf", "Dekadenter", "Spöken", "Förfallna människor".

^{xi} "han måste fram", "dekadansens eller Förfallets män" (Strindberg 1995, 31).

^{xii} "satanist-rörelse" (Strindberg 1995, 70).

^{xiii} "koprofag" (Strindberg 1995, 125).

^{xiv} "babylonisk röra" (Strindberg 1995, 214).

^{xv} "Ingenting höll att ta uti; kärlek och hat, sorg och glädje, passioner och intressen, allt var murket, glidande." (Strindberg 1995, 86).

^{xvi} "Jag såg alla jordens folk blandas, alla religioner smälta samman, gamla seder och sedelagar upplösas, uråldriga näringskällor sina, nya tagas upp; all forntids visdom grävdes fram. Det var en stor tid, släktet växte ut, men individer förgingos; en av dem var jag!" (Strindberg 1995, 218).

^{xvii} For a more thorough discussion of the moral and political poetry of Malmberg, see Ahlund 2007, 211–341.

^{xviii} "med fläckad sköld och fläckat svärd", "[t]ill döden förödmjukad", "förslösad och förbrukad", "älskarinnor" and "vallmotöcknig natt", "lusteld".

^{xix} "Säg, att de fläckar kämpens vapen bära, / trots allt, evärdligt plånas ut igen / igenom nya hjältedaters ära – / men endast genom den! / Lär ryttaren, som rider igenom höstlig barndomsbygd, / att mannens krona smids ovanskelig dock omsider / av viljans hårda kraft och tapperhetens dygd!"

^{xx} For a more thorough discussion of Stéenhoff, see Carlsson Wetterberg 2010, and Ahlund 2005.

^{xxi} "Detta nya känsloliv inverkar på tänkesätten. En massa nyfödda reflexioner korsa hjärnorna, man söker hit och dit för att få till stånd en tidsenlig förbindelseled mellan den gamla nationella kärleken och den nya internationella."

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