

Delight or Poison

The Emergence of Hungarian Decadence at the End of the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

For most of the 20th century, Hungarian literary history disregarded decadence as a thematic or stylistic marker and refused to acknowledge that it was a significant cultural driving force of the fin-de-siècle Hungarian literature. I propose to interpret decadence not as a mere stylistic, moral or temporal category, but as a cultural trope, a *modernist way* of perceiving the world and creating art. I hypothesize that the Hungarian reception of French and English decadence at the end of the 19th century produced a uniquely reflexive version of this phenomenon. I aim to understand how decadence integrates into and presents itself in Hungarian literature and to uncover significant works hidden by the cultural forgetfulness of Hungarian literary history.

Keywords: decadence, fin de siècle, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Zsigmond Justh, Dezső Malonyay

1. Introduction

There is a plethora of outstanding works interpreting Western, primarily French and Victorian decadence on different scales and from various perspectives. These studies, handbooks, and monographs propose that decadence should not be viewed merely as a period or style marker, but as a concept describing a complex array of artistic and social responses to modernity. For instance, Jane Desmarais and David Weir see decadence as “a major cultural trope with broad explanatory power” (Desmarais–Weir 2019, 7), while Kate Hext and Alex Murray consider it a form of modernism (Hext–Murray 2019).

Following the establishment of the international prestige of research on decadence, the shift towards a wider global perspective, as observed

in the recent volume edited by Desmarais and Weir, is promising. *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* dedicates separate studies to Turkish, Italian, Japanese, Scandinavian, and Eastern (Russian and Ukrainian) decadence. This turn towards internationally less explored literatures seems to reinforce Weir's earlier argument. His thesis in *Decadence – A Very Short Introduction* posits that decadence manifested differently and to varying degrees in the major literary and cultural centers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – Paris, London, Vienna, and Berlin – due to urbanization projects, cultural-political and social structures, and preexisting patterns (cf. Weir 2018). The authors of *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* explore decadence in geographically or culturally distant literatures based on this assumption. They conclude that the delayed or sporadic reception of decadence produces a “unique” decadence that can still be contextualized within world literature. In this dual-oriented interpretation, local and global decadence mutually illuminate each other's mechanisms. Stefano Evangelista discusses this *exchange* between European and Japanese decadence (Evangelista 2022), Pirjo Lyytikäinen claims that Scandinavian decadent prose *reconfigures* Western decadence (Lyytikäinen 2022), and in the latest issue of *Volupté*, Di Cotofan Wu states: “The Korean decadent movement also added a distinct dimension to the global understanding of decadence.” (Wu 2023, 203)

It is then justified to assume similar outcomes when examining Hungarian decadence. Also peripheral in Western research, it can provide a unique insight into the evolution of global decadence and raise important questions about its multifaceted nature. At the end of the 19th century, the Hungarian cultural milieu simultaneously confronted the already mature, multi-variant Western decadence and experienced those global and local ambivalent attitudes that necessitated this new artistic expression. Reframing Hungarian decadence as a glocal phenomenon also has an emancipatory effect as it showcases the recycling and creative powers of the receiving culture¹ and poses the question of whether certain aspects of Hungarian decadence are, in fact, not borrowed but internally developed.²

1 As Emese Fazakas and Levente T. Szabó argue in their foreword to the 2020 volume of the *Hungarian Studies Yearbook*: “From this specific angle, Eastern and Central Europe are not just at the receiving end of global phenomena, but a place where scholarly, cultural, and artistic knowledge is creatively and enthrallingly created and re-created, resulting in intricate cultural, artistic, and scholarly patterns.” (Fazakas–T. Szabó 2020, 5)

2 In his paper examining the glocality of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, T. Szabó convincingly demonstrates the significance of such a shift. He reveals how the specific status of the journal's home university shaped the founders' unique concept of comparative literature, hitherto overshadowed by the cosmopolitan approach of international scholars, and proposes to “rethink the way the founders and the collaborators negotiated their locality with others”, and how all of them negotiated the transnational and global, but also one other as part of the transnational and global.” (T. Szabó 2020, 71)

The situation is intriguingly complex, especially since the possibility of Hungarian literary decadence has not been properly considered in Hungarian literary history until now. It is not entirely surprising, therefore, that the international academic community has also ignored the question. David Weir, for example, places the culmination of decadence in the first decade of the 20th century within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but his analysis is limited to Vienna and German-language literature (cf. Weir 2018). Despite the growing interest, it remains unclear how decadence is expressed in Hungarian-language literature, as local forms of decadence have remained completely invisible to both Hungarian and international research for various reasons.

2. Modernist Shame: What Happened to Hungarian Literary Decadence?

In the October 1938 issue of the famous Hungarian modernist review *Nyugat*, Antal Szerb confessed that two decades earlier, decadent literature held initiatory significance for him: “Living for beauty then meant opposing everything else, all Christian and bourgeois value systems. Modernity meant exactly this to me: decadence, satanic inclinations, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and dandy superiority. Dorian Gray, if you still remember him, poor soul.” (Szerb 1938, 274) A prominent figure in Hungarian interwar belles-lettres and literary history writing, Szerb identified aestheticism, rebellion, and decadence not only as the starting point of his artistic-professional career but as a fundamental experience of modernity.³ It appears that during World War I, the decadent worldview and artistic attitude, along with notable decadent authors, works, and topoi, were (still) present in Hungarian literary consciousness. However, if we search for answers in the scholarly works of the past century regarding how decadence was present at the turn of the century, in what sense, and to what extent it had modernizing power, we do not receive satisfactory explanations. Hungarian literary history has barely even posed these questions. In the canonical academic handbook *A magyar irodalom története* (The History of Hungarian Literature), published in 1965, the term “decadence” was mostly used

3 Szerb’s accurate perception and representation of literary decadence are consistent with the later analysis of the fin-de-siècle phenomenon. *Five Faces of Modernity*, a staple work of research on decadence, confirms the views of the Hungarian author: “aesthetic modernity should be understood as a crisis concept involved in a threefold dialectical opposition to tradition, to the modernity of bourgeois civilization (with its ideals of rationality, utility, progress), and, finally, to itself, insofar as it perceives itself as a new tradition or form of authority.” (Călinescu 2003, 10)

as a pejorative synonym for decline⁴ or as a thematic-motivic marker.⁵ The authors adopted a perspective that deemed decadence inherently unacceptable, immoral, and condemnable, thus trivializing and erasing it from the Hungarian literary-historical tradition.

How did this happen? And what does cultural forgetfulness reveal about the status of Hungarian decadence? It is surprising but symptomatic that even Szerb reported a sense of shame regarding decadence following his early enthusiasm, and while he wrote about it with lenient appreciation in 1938, in his 1941 article *A dekadensek* (The Decadents), he already wanted to leave it behind as an outdated phenomenon: “How far away all this is today! How out of fashion tiredness, illness, decadence have become! [...] The excessive refinement and »taste« of the fin de siècle today appears as tastelessness. I would feel ill in Des Esseintes’ meticulously arranged orange and blue study; I wouldn’t be able to write a single line” (Szerb 1941a, 368). In *A világirodalom története* (The History of World Literature), Szerb consistently deems the stylistic, thematic, and genre elements that he perceives as having “percolated” from decadence as outdated (cf. Freeman 2019). It is clear that he attempts to salvage important fin-de-siècle oeuvres (Wilde, Nietzsche, Rilke, Thomas Mann) from the – according to his view – obsolete tradition of decadence (cf. Szerb 1941b). His literary history writing is characterized by the same restrictive, concealing, and appropriating strategies that Nick Freeman and Kristen MacLeod discuss in relation to the *Times Literary Supplement*,⁶ T. S. Eliot,⁷ and Ezra Pound.⁸ Their conclusions are also applicable to Szerb and his contemporaries’ understanding of decadence. Freeman and MacLeod argue that the self-definitional acts of modernism obscured and erased earlier decadent traditions. Therefore,

4 “[Zoltán] Ambrus, in the types of his realistic short stories, embodies the disintegration, the struggle, and the inner decadence of the Hungarian middle class.” (Diószegi 1965, 867)

5 “In the era of *Blood and Gold* [*Vér és arany*], [Endre] Ady’s poetry presents numerous decadent themes.” (Varga 1965, 107)

6 “In the years leading up to the First World War, the TLS constructed a version of literary history that confined decadence largely to the 1890s. It ignored significant work by figures from that decade who were still active [...], and when it spotted new outbreaks of the disease, it acted swiftly to snuff them out.” (Freeman 2019, 75)

7 “During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the radical and experimental stylistic elements of decadent writing were appropriated in ways that divorced them from their (im)moral context, making them first challengingly modernist and then respectable. Cultural power brokers such as Eliot slowly convinced a learned minority that literature of this kind represented a redoubtable bulwark against other forms of decadence, the growing populism and concomitant erosion of standards intellectuals had feared ever since the educational reforms of the 1870s.” (Freeman 2019, 84)

8 “Decadence, however, was alive and well in the 1920s, much to the chagrin of writers like Pound and Lewis, for whom it represented a threat [...], it threatened the cultural authority of modernists who competed with these new decadents for the attention of publishers, magazine editors, booksellers, and readers.” (MacLeod 2019, 229–230)

it is a fruitful question not only how the rejection and forgetfulness of decadence occurred but also what its dynamics and internal canon were, as all evidence suggests that decadence, in terms of its impact history, is an ineliminable phenomenon and a significant cultural driving force at the turn of the century.

If we look behind Antal Szerb's retrospective shame and distancing and examine the works he and other Hungarian literary historians concealed due to their decadent label, the internal structure of Hungarian literary modernity and modernisms also comes into new light. First and foremost, it is worth asking how the foundational text of decadence, the 1884 *À rebours* (*Against the Grain*), and its author Joris-Karl Huysmans were embedded in late 19th and early 20th century Hungarian literature. A reception history analysis can reveal numerous early sources from the late 19th-century Hungarian reception of decadence, providing relevant starting points for further research on Hungarian decadence.

3. The Early Hungarian Reception of Joris-Karl Huysmans and His *À rebours*

Hungarian literary scholarship knows little to nothing about the impact of Huysmans' cult novel.⁹ Most authors date the Hungarian reception of *À rebours* from the publication of its translation in 1921,¹⁰ which, however, had little resonance in the contemporary press – except for advertisements, only one review appeared in *Nyugat* (cf. Laczkó 1922). The work, translated into Hungarian rather late, arrived in an environment that, according to Antal Szerb's previously cited confession, sought to distance itself from decadence. Based on this, one might indeed conclude that decadence entered Hungarian literature as a phenomenon that had already lost its relevance. If it had any impact, it must have been brief and did not produce significant works. However, it is thought-provoking that Gyula Pekár,¹¹ as early as 1915, adopted a similar stance to Szerb: "The storm has not yet sufficiently cleared the musty air of our unventilated society through the open window of the war, nor has it sufficiently dispersed the decadent, stuffy atmosphere of pre-war moods. The wind

9 Although Ferenc Kiss analyses lengthily the influences of *À rebours* in Dezső Kosztolányi, the Hungarian translator's first novel *Nero, a véres költő* (Nero, the Bloody Poet) (cf. Kiss 1979, 117-125), the critical edition of *Nero* and more recent monographs of Kosztolányi only mention this essential connection in passing.

10 Even a work that acknowledges the importance and influence of *À rebours* supposes that the Hungarian reception of the "bizarre Bible of decadence" only began – and almost immediately ended – with the publishing of the Hungarian translation (Takács 2003). After the 1921 edition (Huysmans 1921), the book (*A különc* 'the excentric') was only reprinted once in 2002.

11 Gyula Pekár (1866–1937) was a prolific but little-known Hungarian writer, later a politician. According to Antal Szerb, Pekár started out with "fragile decadent subtleties" before becoming a "pillar of the conservative worldview" (Szerb 1935, 432).

has certainly swept through the main corridors of our lives beneficially, but in some corners, the air is still as cynically suffocating, sensuously, even perversely oppressive as before. [...] Huysmans' decadent »life artist«, the famous Des Esseintes comes to one's mind, whose greatest pleasure is to »train« a respectable bourgeois child into a thief. I ask, is it right to watch this social poisoning with folded hands?" (Pekár 1915, 4). The article's protest supports the hypothesis that decadence was a significant cultural and social phenomenon in late 19th-century Hungary; it was well-known, understood, and acknowledged – while often vehemently denied and condemned, especially during and after World War I. It also reveals that Pekár identified poisonous, corrupt, harmfully individualistic, and indifferent decadence with *À rebours* well before its Hungarian translation. This indicates that the translation is not an absolute measure of a work's familiarity and embeddedness, and it encourages searching for the Hungarian reception of Huysmans' novel in earlier and less straightforward but equally significant mediating gestures.

Between the 1884 publication of *À rebours* and its 1921 Hungarian translation, Huysmans' name appeared with increasing frequency in the Hungarian press. Initially, literary journals such as *Magyar Salon*, *Ország-Világ*, and *Fővárosi Lapok* published reports, reviews, and interpretations about Huysmans and his novel. These early texts often misspelled Huysmans' and Des Esseintes' names and the novel's title: Huysmanns (Lázár 1895), Huysmann (Kozári 1897), Huysémann (Kondor 1899), des Essemntes (Justh 1894), des Enceintes (Justh 1888b), À retours (Justh 1886). This suggests that the Huysmans experience had an air of novelty, being significant but not self-evident, perhaps even second-hand. However, it is telling that when Huysmans' supposed (1898) and actual (1900) conversion to Catholicism broke through the press threshold, his name was rarely misspelled in journals. The consistently correct spelling of Huysmans' name and novel titles, along with the interest of non-literary journals, indicate recognition.

Although different authors held varying views on the authenticity of Huysmans' conversion, its disputability provided an opportunity to regularly report on him, publish news and gossip, and gradually incorporate him and his works into the broader (literary) public consciousness. One of the first reports neutrally quoted a *Le Figaro* interview with Huysmans (n. n. 1900a, 16), but the *Magyar Nemzet* correspondent shared a skeptical comment along with a *Le Figaro*-published Huysmans letter: "Huysmans is a rather interesting figure who, at the beginning of his career, was the wildest naturalist, then joined Sâr Péladan's camp and became a Satanist, and finally became a mystic and returned to the faith of his cradle. It is not impossible that after some time, he will start all over again" (n. n. 1900b, 6). On the other end, religious authors celebrated Huysmans' conversion as the failure of materialism and positivism: "In modern life, the failure of science, the failure of politics was followed by the failure of art and the

failure of life... suicide. / This is felt by the great sufferers of our age, the tormented artistic souls. / Hence the miracle of conversions, the converts" (Kozári 1900, 344).

Thus, the synchronous reception of Huysmans and *À rebours* was present in Hungarian literature and culture, albeit previously invisible and unexplored. The digital turn in periodical research has made press products searchable, and in this forgotten source material, Huysmans and his novels are conspicuously present: as controversial as in other European literatures. In many Hungarian fin-de-siècle journals, Huysmans is an author legitimized by even opposing viewpoints. Different readings shape the image of the decadent/convert Huysmans from various angles and purposes. Despite objections, they present him as an important author to the wider public: "True, even with such aberrations [as *À rebours*], Huysmans possesses such merits that place him among the most excellent storytellers and make him a phenomenon that cannot be overlooked with a smile" (n. n. 1898, 7).

Contrary to prior beliefs of Hungarian literary history, Huysmans and his novel are unavoidable references in the Hungarian fin de siècle, even if sometimes concealed behind reservation, irony, or judgment. By the time the Hungarian translation of *À rebours* appeared in 1921, readers no longer perceived the novel's subversive modernizing power. By then, the once dominant poetic and worldview tradition was more a significant memory treated with nostalgic rejection by the innovative intent. Therefore, it is essential to revise the perspective that dates the impact of *À rebours* from the publication of its translation. Given the delayed adoption of a closed, outdated tradition, such an approach cannot assume the existence of Hungarian decadence, while a dense, still scarcely researched Hungarian Huysmans reception can elucidate much about the complex inner logic of early Hungarian decadence.

4. Parisianism and Parisian Pessimism: Zsigmond Justh's Reading of *À rebours*

The first (documented) Hungarian reader of *À rebours* seems to be Zsigmond Justh (1863–1894), who wrote about the pathbreaking French novel with the deliberate intention of literary mediation and artistic provocation. The young writer and publicist, who admired France, was an extremely active cultural agent consciously shaping his extensive network of foreign and domestic contacts. He spent several seasons in Paris, where he met leading figures of the artistic elite: he was a close friend of Sarah Bernhardt and Rupert Bunny, often visited Mark Antokolsky's studio, and in 1888, he frequently visited Huysmans, who gifted him a signed copy of *À rebours* (cf. Justh 1977). Justh had certainly read the novel by then, as he provided an accurate description of *À rebours*' protagonist, Duke des Esseintes, in an 1886 article, seeing

him as a literary representation of a type in Parisian high society.¹² During Justh's 1888 Paris visit¹³ this conviction evolved into the claim that Huysmans and his character represented the only noteworthy fin-de-siècle artist type.

In his diary, Justh introduces the first personal meeting by evaluating the Huysmans works he knew: "His most interesting books are »*À Rebours*« (the analysis of the character of Montesquieu-Fézensac) and his collection of critiques »*L'art moderne*«." (Justh 1977, 68) However, he relies not only on the author's artistic interests and habits in his imagination but also directs the portrayal of the individual through his reading experiences. Justh superimposes Huysmans and Des Esseintes, constructing the figure of the refined, crowd-despising artist who does not compromise for popularity from the novel: "Otherwise, the sophistication of his taste somewhat reminds me of *Des Esseintes* (the hero of *À Rebours*). [...] During the walk, he was very interesting, quite Des Esseintes-Huysmans, just as I had imagined from his books." (Justh, 1977, 69, 301)

This interchangeability, the interpretation of author and character in relation to each other, is also a characteristic element of later Huysmans depictions in the Hungarian press reports. Partly, perhaps, as a result of this correspondence, Huysmans gradually ceased to be considered a naturalist writer in Justh's view. By the end of the second meeting, he already decided to write about Huysmans because "it will do good in our country... faire connaître l'art pour l'art" (Justh 1977, 159). Justh, with excellent intuition, identified the shift in Huysmans' art and articulated the lack of l'art pour l'art ideology in the Hungarian literary context as early as 1888. Justh's *À rebours* references, in this light, can be seen as part of a conscious effort to introduce a new artistic direction. They are indicative of how the early Hungarian interpretation of decadence was partly possible through the less scandalous, pejorative notion of l'art pour l'art, which "tamed" decadent texts for many contemporary creators and cultural actors.

Justh's *Párizsi napló* (Parisian Diary), written in 1888, became accessible to the public only from 1939, so it did not directly influence the early Huysmans and *À rebours* reception. However, Justh's articles

12 "»Qui est pour être admire« (a decadent of the Faubourg). An overly refined race. Little blood, all nerves. Bound by mysticism, hereditary pride and blood [...]. He despises and hates the masses [...]. He does not believe in God, but he is religious in his way. There is something of the Trappist and of Sardanapalus in him. [...] He loves old Christian mystical literature [...]. He often spends hours poring over the Odilon Redon drawings that adorn his walls. It is one of his rare pleasures. On his writing desk lay the most extraordinary works of Baudelaire, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Mallarmé, and Verlaine [...]. This figure is immortalized in Huysmans' novel »à Retours« [sic]." (Justh 1886, 570)

13 Justh summarizes his experiences and impressions of the time in his diary – published posthumously under the title *Párizsi napló* (Parisian Diary). From these notes, it is easy to reconstruct how his artistic tastes and preferences were shaped by carefully selected new acquaintances.

contain traces of the artistic and aesthetic commitments that formed while writing the diary. In the Parisian Justh columns published between 1886 and 1888, Des Esseintes' character and the manner of his creation serve as recurring arguments, examples, and even goals.¹⁴ These are not so much about the duke's tastes but about his artistic sensibility and ways of perception – *the deliberately realized unique aesthetic experiences*.

Justh perceives this ambivalent experience as specifically Parisian, where pleasure and disgust, delight and nausea, joy and fatigue, boredom and artificiality simultaneously prevail.¹⁵ In his view, art-loving aristocrats capable of and willing to experience these “enjoy doubly” (Justh 1888a, 371), “on a second level” (Justh 1888b, 1922). Justh also highlights that this artist type is rare even in Paris, “like an *overrefined ornamental plant* that not only requires *greenhouse* air, special soil, and unique care but also an entirely unique, special, distinguished place and atmosphere” (Justh 1888a, 372, emphasis mine, T. D.). Justh perceives the exceptional artistic environment – described with a Huysmans metaphor¹⁶ – as a lack in the Hungarian literary context. He considers the articles thematizing the new artistic sophistication, and the discourse about Huysmans and *À rebours* as suitable to fill this void.

Justh recognizes, presents, and analyzes distinctly decadent characteristics in his journalism. He emphasizes the epoch-making power of artists meeting Huysmans' standards¹⁷ and uses unique terms in the Hungarian press to describe the significant fin-de-siècle phenomenon: *Parisianism* (Justh 1888c), *Parisian pessimism* (Justh 1888a). Several reasons can be assumed behind this terminology. Firstly, at that time, the words “decadent” and “decadence” were neologisms in the Hungarian language. Secondly, it is likely that Justh intended to separate the new artistic direction from the notion of decline and its associated prejudices: he perceived and appreciated decadence while freeing it from one of its significant and contested characteristics in the Hungarian context. Although he believed that artistic sophistication could only organically emerge in the specific social-cultural context of the “declining Paris”, Justh's early (1886–1888) interpretation of *À*

14 “The famous Montesquiou-Fézensac, painted by Huysmans in his ‘à Rebours des Enceintes’ [sic], shows how far one can go in artistic refinement.” (Justh 1888b, 1921-1922)

15 “At this moment, the Parisian is tired of all the pleasure this sultry, fragrant winter garden can give him. He is tired of the constant delight; all the oysters and champagne have spoiled his stomach. He is disgusted with the endless pleasure, and despite everything, he could not do without it.” (Justh 1888a, 372)

16 Cf. “Then, there are flowers of noble lineage like the orchid, so delicate and charming, at once cold and palpitating, exotic flowers exiled in the heated glass palaces of Paris, princesses of the vegetable kingdom living in solitude, having absolutely nothing in common with the street plants and other bourgeois flora” (Huysmans 1922, 134).

17 “These are the most interesting figures of decadent Paris in the era of *Huysmans*, the *Baudelaire* imitators, *Sarah Bernhardt*, *Rollinat*, *Moreau de Tours* and *Haraucourt*” (Justh 1888a, 372).

rebours suggests that he considered decadent poetics and worldview productively adoptable.¹⁸

However, by the end of 1888, a change is noticeable in Justh's attitude towards decadent art. It is not entirely clear what causes the gradual shift. Perhaps the publication of his articles analyzing Parisian social and cultural life in a volume brought new insights (Justh 1889), or maybe his increasingly severe tuberculosis prompted him to reconsider his value system. The texts in *Páris elemei* (Elements of Paris), placed side by side, may have emphasized concerns previously expressed: the fear of social and artistic sterility, of emptiness.¹⁹ Art detached from society, aestheticism, and decadence lose their relevance in the context of referentially understood decline. However, it is crucial that while Huysmans' name and novel title completely disappear from Justh's journalistic and literary writings, his arguments against decadence often use Huysmansian metaphors, allegories, and poetic solutions: "the orchid, which produces the rarest and most beautiful flower, usually destroys the plant from which it draws its delicate color, enchanting shape, and entire charm" (Justh 1888c, 650). Thus, the critique of decadence and its concealment are carried out using the tools of decadence itself, leaving a telling mark on many of Justh's journalistic and literary texts.

In conclusion, the first significant milestone in the Hungarian Huysmans and *À rebours* reception consists of Justh's texts discussed above. Although he committed himself to *Parisianism* for only a very short – albeit intense – period in his career, he played an essential role in the early history of Hungarian decadence. With his extensive network of artists – abroad and in Hungary –, assiduously curated interests, and conscious taste, Justh mediated his perception of the French author and his novel from a particularly suitable position, and with great impact. Unjustly and spectacularly quickly forgotten in Hungarian literary history, Huysmans and his influential character Des Esseintes were still heroes of early Hungarian decadence in Justh's writings. The value judgments, representations of Huysmans' character and work, and their utilization in Justh's writings prefigure the key points of later Hungarian reception.

18 In his 1887 collection of short stories, entitled *Káprázatok* (Illusions), contemporary critics recognized French models, but judged them incompatible with the Hungarian environment. Cf. "To draw the fall of the gentry, who lives for pleasure alone and boasts only of its ancestors: a grateful and modern subject. But then let us also look at our hero from a local point of view and not model him on a worn-out Parisian type." (Péterfy 1887, 156)

19 "And it is a disastrous symptom for the future of a nation when men and women alike reach beyond mediocrity in refinement, sensitivity, and spirit and are thus incapable of harmonious self-work and of all that goes with it: marriage, social and national aspirations. When a part of a nation has reached this stage, it begins to break up into individuals, fragments and parties. It is *the beginning of destruction* [*pusztulás kezdete*]." (Justh 1888b, 1922)

5. A Monumental Hungarian Decadent Novel from 1895: Dezső Malonyay's *Az utolsó* (The Last)

In the early 1890s, a French-cultured circle formed around Justh, whose members were all well-acquainted with Huysmans' name and novel. Gyula Pekár, upon meeting Justh in 1891, published a detailed review of *À rebours* in a widely-read political daily, the *Pesti Napló* (Pekár 1891). He was mainly interested in the sensational, scandalous aspects of Huysmans' work – Des Esseintes' *à rebours* nature and lifestyle – and made these visible to a broad audience. Later, news and gossip about Huysmans' private life created the icon of the decadent (life) artist in a similar fashion. Considering an article written two years earlier by another close friend of Justh, this attention is surprising. Péter Vay (1868–1948)²⁰ refers to the eighth chapter of *À rebours* to summarize the evolution of modern taste at the end of the century. Vay's starting point is the orchid-tulip dichotomy evoked by Huysmans' novel, to which he adds the modern-outdated value pair. In his argument, the orchid symbolizes and indicates the adequately cultivated sensitivity and understanding of decadent art. He believed that the delay and close-mindedness in taste and outlook characteristic of the Hungarian literary milieu misunderstood and failed to recognize the significance of Huysmans and decadence (cf. Vay 1899).

The embedding of *À rebours* and decadence in Hungarian literature was indeed neither homogeneous nor unproblematic. Critiques continuously questioned the artistic value of the French decadent novel from the perspective of bourgeois modernity, the cult of progress, a perceived canonical aesthetics, or morality. *À rebours* depicted “ugliness” (Apáthy 1887, 273), “filthy things” (Erdélyi 1895, 903), and Huysmans “delved into the psychology of perversion and recounted the horrific orgies of Satanism in his novels” (n. n. 1897). In his review of *Entartung*, Béla Kondor detailed the dangers Max Nordau associated with “degenerate” works and their indirect impact on society, citing *À rebours* as a prime example of a harmful novel “describing the life of an inhuman being who was physically sick and weak, morally vile, and intellectually idiotic, [...] with anarchistic tendencies” (Kondor 1899, 4). Kondor, fearing for social order, condemned the Pre-Raphaelite, Symbolist, Parnassian, and decadent creators as “literary artistic bandits, procurers, and murderers” (Kondor 1899, 5).

In the context of strong stigmas of immorality, perversion, and madness, it may not be surprising that Hungarian decadence did not develop around such spectacular nodes and oeuvres as in the West. These fears and social stereotypes about the destructive power of decadence seemed to be validated by several fin-de-siècle life paths:

20 In a letter to Zsigmond Justh, Gyula Pekár refers to their mutual friend as a “Des Esseintes-like” man (Pekár's letter to Justh, Budapest, Dec. 5, 1891). Vay later studied theology and travelled the world as a missionary before being consecrated as a bishop.

Zsigmond Justh died early of tuberculosis; his youthful friend, Géza Batthyány, committed suicide;²¹ Péter Vay chose a religious path with a Huysmansian turn. This does not mean, however, that important, valuable, and reflective Hungarian decadent works were not created at the turn of the century – even if they do not form a continuous narrative and remain invisible even to literary historians and experts. An excellent example of this is the 1895 “*Az utolsó*”²² (The Last) by Dezső Malonyay,²³ an unjustly forgotten three-volume novel, likely one of the greatest literary works of Hungarian decadence. In the history of Hungarian decadence, it is crucial that in 1895, just a decade after Huysmans’ typifying novel, a work appeared reflecting on the worldview and poetic characteristics of decadence and raising the question of how decadent art could survive itself.

In *Az utolsó*, Dezső Malonyay experiments with the self-expression and self-representation possibilities of decadent literature. He evokes, interprets, and fictionalizes the theoretical background of decadence, consciously shaping his self-narrator according to decadent models. Malonyay also questions the boundaries, functioning, and possible stakes of decadence. The family history and personal fate of his protagonist, the last descendant of the Kerbastik d’Azincourt family, provide a panoramic literary historical summary of how decadent worldview and art emerged and were conceived at the fin de siècle. The novel simultaneously encapsulates typical life situations and solutions of decadent literature and heroes interpreting these from an “external”, reflexive perspective that critiques the decadent worldview.

Malonyay problematizes fears expressed against decadence – sterility and, consequently, the question of continuity – within the narrative framework of a fictional autobiography. The protagonist recounts his failed artistic attempts spanning roughly from April 1842 to May 1843, ending the story with the aftermaths of a near-death experience. The withdrawn young count’s father dies during a black mass in their Parisian palace. The doctor diagnosing the heart attack advises the shocked heir to engage in a creative act – writing,

21 In his diary, Justh depicts Géza Batthyány in the same terms he had described Duke des Esseintes a few years earlier: “*A refined, almost overrefined race. Little blood, many nerves.* One of the most artistic personalities in Pest, without being an artist. Because to be one, one needs energy, and my good Géza lacks it completely.” (Justh 1977, 327–328, emphasis mine, T. D.)

22 The novel was first published in *Pesti Napló* between 9 February and 27 June 1895. Although the title page of the three-volume book sets 1896 as the year of publication, the Bulletin of the Hungarian Booksellers’ Association, *Corvina*, of 30 September 1895, already lists the novel among the recent publications (cf. n. n. 1895, 109).

23 Dezső Malonyay (1866–1916) was also a member of Zsigmond Justh’s circle of friends and, just like him, shared an admiration of the Parisian fin-de-siècle culture. Although he was an active writer, Malonyay is now mainly known in Hungarian ethnography and art history as he published collections of folklore, biographies of painters and analyses of fine art, which are still influential today. While working on his novel, *Az utolsó*, he was on a scholarship in France.

painting, love – to avoid his father’s fate. When the valet, knowing the secret, sets the palace on fire out of revenge and late rebellion, the last Kerbastik heir flees to his Breton estate, intending to follow the doctor’s advice. However, his artistic and romantic attempts fail. The stake of these pursuits is to overcome the helplessness, decadence and madness perceived as paternal inheritance. The story’s climax seemingly resolves the ontological crisis by eliminating art. The young count is severely injured as he breaks the glass of the idealized pastel portrait of a woman. Before losing consciousness, he throws his father’s picture found behind the female portrait into the fire. After recovering from the amputation of his charred left arm, the last Kerbastik d’Azincourt scatters the colorful dust from the pastel painting into the sea. This ending is consistently interpreted by the sparse literature on the novel as expressing “the unfeasibility of aestheticism” (Németh 2022, 88), forgetting that the text’s final act is not the double iconoclasm and symbolic burial but the reflective autobiographical act recording all this. While the story indeed concludes with the suspension of romantic and artistic desires and the experience of disillusionment, the poetic and narratological solutions of *Az utolsó* confirm the success and creative power of the decadent novel. Malonyay writes from a standpoint aware of the Des Esseintes model’s failure, constantly questioning what could work if it does not and how decadent art should change. Ultimately, choosing first-person narration, he seems to argue that this failure does not matter. Despite the backdrop of a diverting history and the overwhelming expectation of social responsibilities, it is still possible to write a decadent masterpiece. Disregarding these constraints may be the only way of doing it.

The paradox of the artistic failures told within the autobiographical framework is that all attempts that failed in the past (e.g., the count did not compile the Breton legends collection, did not paint the numerous pictures he envisioned, and stopped writing a diary after a week) are realized in the retrospective narration. The memoir records the orally transmitted beliefs, the unpainted pictures are brought to life through ekphrasis, and the autobiography takes the place of the incomplete diary. This second, successful creative act not only produces a decadent novel – the one the reader holds – but also reflects on its writing challenges and obstacles and establishes a type of artist novel that the Hungarian literature on the history of the genre does not even assume existed at the time.²⁴ Malonyay not only writes a decadent artist novel but reflexively confronts his protagonist with issues criticized in contemporary reviews of decadent art: his hero repeatedly faces the notions of his existence being useless, amoral, and unsustainable.

Malonyay certainly knew *À rebours* well; his character reflects numerous traits and modes of creation reminiscent of Des Esseintes. Both are the last descendants of historically significant aristocratic families. Like

²⁴ The recent literature on the history of the Hungarian artist novel does not mention *Az utolsó* at all. Cf. Harkai Vass 2001; Gergye 2004; Kardeván Lapis 2012.

the French author, Malonyay introduces the decline of the Kerbastic d'Azincourt family through portraits and programmatically evokes typically decadent conditions in his protagonist: boredom, disgust, weak will, fatigue, weariness, androgyny, mysticism, refinement, sensitivity, escapism, elitism. Just as Duke des Esseintes,²⁵ Malonyay's young count also seeks disembodied, "purely poetic" experiences expressible through abstract forms of colors, sounds, and shadows.²⁶ However the protagonist of *Az utolsó* struggles with his attributes and continuously searches for moods, forms of expression, and themes transformable into art within this framework. Regardless of the narrative level, the count repeatedly confronts the inadequacy of words to express his emotions, thoughts, and artistic ideas: "Sometimes I feel so much that I cannot find adequate words to express it. All the words I find are cold and empty" (Malonyay 1896b, 145). His attempts are often met with misunderstanding and distrust from his environment. For example, he abandons his symbolic play project because his audience's referential reading discourages him: "But this is just poetry, abbot! Don't you understand?" In the continuation, the abbot dismisses artistic work as a pastime for gentlemen (Malonyay 1896b, 152-153).

The question of the purpose and usefulness of art is a deeply concerning ethical dilemma for Malonyay, expressed not only in his letters to friends²⁷ but also at many points in his novel: "No matter how much I was moved by the almost animal sadness of this poor woman and how much my heart went out to her, my first thought was not to alleviate her bitterness. I watched her with a certain curiosity and [...] observed her demeanor like a painter his model [...] And instead of completely surrendering myself to this mood preceding artistic creation, I foolishly preempted it with self-criticism and, as if to justify myself before my conscience, I eagerly asked the priest to take care of that woman" (Malonyay 1896b, 86). Malonyay is continuously preoccupied with whether art that focuses on itself is justifiable and how it can be

25 "imperative need to escape from the horrible reality of existence, to leap beyond the confines of thought, to grope towards the mists of elusive, unattainable art." (Huysmans 1922, 163)

26 "Moods are breathlike, they could be conveyed like such! [A hangulatot csaknem lehetszerűleg közölhetné az ember!]" (Malonyay 1896b, 148)

27 "My Dear friend, I can imagine how much this story shocked you. It is terrible. But see, in the depths of my soul, the heartless, insolent artist awakens, and I think what a splendid theme!" (Malonyay's letter to Justh, Paris, Dec. 21. [1893])

justified:²⁸ for instance, can the story of a life spent in inactivity and failure be interpreted as art.²⁹

In the protagonist's consciousness, sights involuntarily take the form of landscapes,³⁰ still lifes,³¹ or genre scenes,³² and their subsequent linguistic representation gives the impression of descriptions of real paintings: the text lists the details of the framed picture, similar to the gaze traversing a painting. As the narration does not name any artists or titles, we might conclude that most of these ekphrases are fictional. However, there is at least one occurrence of depicting an actual painting. During his first sea voyage, Malonyay's protagonist leans over the edge of the sailboat and hopes to find something "extraordinary" underwater: "For instance, a man!... Yes, if a man was lying under one of those dark green bushes!?... / Or a woman!... / Sapho, the woman in love! / Perhaps she lies like this under a bush in a sea-forest. / What a beautiful picture one could paint!" (Malonyay 1896b, 54) As it happens, such a painting exists, and just around the time Malonyay started to work on his novel, he mentioned it in a review of an art exhibition he attended in Paris: "The favorite subjects of Ary Renan are visions and mirages and in his painting in [the Musée du] Luxembourg he painted Sapho lying at the bottom of the sea" (Malonyay 1894, 7). Malonyay anonymously borrowed the imagery of Ary Renan's 1893 *Sapho* to convey the artistic and sexual desires of his protagonist.³³ The idea of the dead poetess gives

28 The novel's clock metaphor also raises the problem of the autonomous nature of art "at the end of all things" ["minden dolgok végén"]. It expresses the protagonist's stagnant sense of time: "I am a clock that works but does not tell the time because its hands have fallen off." (Malonyay 1896c, 62) The count sees himself as an atemporal entity which, precisely because it does not move, cannot progress and, therefore, cannot be useful.

29 "reading through what I have written so far, I was almost shocked to realize that my anemic imagination, albeit with bitter effort, finally wants to assert itself: I am nearly creating! / If only I could do it!... Perhaps I would be doubly compensated. It is worth enduring, and I would endure life once more for a little truly artistic achievement." (Malonyay 1896b, 45)

30 "The harsh outline of the hills behind the town, the scattered houses and the rocks of the small bays harmoniously blended into the perspective of a painting" (Malonyay 1896b, 53).

31 "From one of the windows, a yellowish-red light filtered out onto the road – the sadly awake light of a small oil lamp. / The lamp stood on a table covered with waxed linen, two glasses beside it, one contained milk or some creamy medicine. A spoon lay over the glass [...] what a beautiful, what a simple, honest picture it was!" (Malonyay 1896a, 33-34)

32 "How many times have I wanted to paint this painting: – the little grey old woman knitting in bed, carefully pressing the striped duvet over her partner's head so he wouldn't wake up, – the stove yawning in the gloom, – my grumpy coachman with the smoldering tin lamp in his hand, its yellow-red flame filling the dark kitchen with long shadows full of drying underwear..." (Malonyay 1896b, 18)

33 It is, of course, possible that the ekphrasis had multiple sources as the description also resembles the Pre-Raphaelite interpretations of Ophelia, and the well-informed Malonyay might have known John Everett Millais' 1851–1852 and John William Waterhouse's 1894 depictions of the theme.

way to the idealizing fantasy of the count, as he imagines an erotically charged vision of his female companion beneath the water's surface: "Or if Mathurine were lying there!... / Her shapely form would be clad in drenched clothing, her red hair floating spread around her head, covering her face and bosom, the tendrils coiling around her, small iridescent shells settling on her shoulders, and I would descend into her embrace like that jellyfish..." (Malonyay 1896b, 54). Although the delivery of this ekphrasis is much less detailed and dynamic than the ones of Huysmans in Chapter V of *À rebours* (Chapter VI in the English translations), it has a mirrored function. Art historian Laura Moure Cecchini argues that Gustave Moreau's *Salomé Dancing before Herod* "became a stylistic prototype of decadence in visual arts" because of Huysmans' novel (Cecchini 2019, 141-142). Malonyay likely incorporated a painting with many stylistic and thematic similarities to that of Moreau because he perceived it to be a decadent art piece. Even if it is improbable that readers of *Az utolsó* would have discovered this connection, tracing back Malonyay's text to Renan's painting further confirms the Hungarian author's ambivalent regard for decadent art. In the introduction of his review of the 1894 Salon du Champ-de-Mars, Malonyay relates his feelings of admiration and envy but also of fear, sadness and disgust, as he considers overrefinement an illness, an addiction – a conviction he carries on to his novel (cf. Malonyay 1894).

Malonyay resolves the central issue of decline versus creation in *Az utolsó* in the "sad poetry of the sea, the wind weeps among the mast ropes, and the waves carry the tale to the shore" (Malonyay 1896b, 116). In the novel, the Breton legends and ghost stories processing loss and aestheticizing death presuppose tangible experiences of demise, such as the disappearance of fishermen on the open sea. Similarly, the narrator's cyclical view of existence imagines the birth of a new, serene land opposite to the poetry of the old, decaying, dying earth.³⁴ The associative meanings condensed in the sea motif express that decline is not necessarily equivalent to death or, if so, creation is equally a necessary concomitant. Within the novel's world, creation (the narration of the self) legitimizes not only the protagonist's existence but also the legitimacy of the decadent art he represents.

6. Conclusions: Delight and Poison

Accusations and fears against decadence have been an integral part of its Hungarian emergence and literary historical judgment since the beginning of its reception. Stereotypes soon formed and spread, and

34 "These rocks were the ribs of the late earth. The Ocean eats them too, slowly, one by one, and one day, the seagulls will seek their usual resting place in vain. / Thus the earth dies here, and elsewhere, another is born in its place; the Ocean creates it from its tiny snails. How serene must the poetry of that new earth be if that of this dying old one be so sad!" (Malonyay 1896b, 130)

were later reinforced by World War I and totalitarian state structures. They suggested that decadence reduced to stylistic and thematic traits depicts the decline and fall of a useless social class, it is inherently aimless and unsustainable, even immoral and poisonous. It is unsurprising that Hungarian literary history published during state socialism avoided substantive research on decadence, but from both local and global perspectives, addressing this neglect is increasingly urgent.

Reading backward in the possible history of Hungarian decadence, the characteristic modernist denial first becomes apparent in the works of Antal Szerb, from which the significance of Hungarian decadence can already be inferred. His prominent, almost impatient critique between the two world wars strengthens the assumption that decadence was a significant impact phenomenon in the Hungarian fin de siècle and simultaneously indicates where it is appropriate to search for the beginnings of Hungarian decadence.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the Huysmans readings and representations by Zsigmond Justh and the artistic circle around him convincingly indicate that *À rebours* was already present with worldview and poetic force in late 19th-century Hungarian literature. These sources confirm that despite the aforementioned stereotypes, there is indeed an early Hungarian decadence, significantly connected to the synchronous reception of Huysmans and his novel, decades before the work's Hungarian translation appeared. However, even the most dedicated and determined interpretations are not free from doubt and uncertainty: they soften and "tame" the decadent text.

In a tone resembling his later 1915 critique of decadence ("social poisoning"), Gyula Pekár wrote in an 1893 letter to Justh that he did not recommend *À rebours* to Dezső Malonyay because, while it was a "delight" for himself and Justh, it would be "poison for Malonyay's delicate and slightly morbid sensitivity" (Pekár's letter to Justh, Paris, 23 November, 1893). It seems that a defining feature of early Hungarian decadence is this precarious act of balance; its authors both build on decadence, and also continuously question the legitimacy, artistic and social value, and sustainability of their art.

This is the position from which the forgotten Hungarian decadent masterpiece of Malonyay artistically renegotiates this uncertainty and dilemma in a highly reflective manner. The careful composition of *Az utolsó* is no coincidence: the story of the protagonist, representing the decadent artist, concludes with a failure experience and symbolic burial, narrated by a reflective, dual narrative voice. The monumental novel of Hungarian decadence not only adopts the characteristic solutions of French decadence but also reflects on its limits and incorporates related doubts, becoming more reflexive and skeptical than the latter, encapsulating both decadence and its critique.

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