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## Introduction

### Translating Decadence

*Bénédicte Coste, Jane Desmarais*

Université de Bourgogne; Goldsmiths University, London  
([<benedicte.coste@u-bourgogne.fr>](mailto:benedicte.coste@u-bourgogne.fr); [<j.desmarais@gold.ac.uk>](mailto:j.desmarais@gold.ac.uk))

Translation and decadence share a fascinating intersection in the realm of literature and cultural discourse. As the art of conveying meaning from one language to another, translation serves as a bridge between cultures, facilitating the circulation of ideas and literature across borders. On the other hand, decadence, simply defined as an aesthetic and philosophical tradition that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is usually described by its exploration of themes of excess, decline, and moral decay. This unlikely pairing finds common ground in their exploration of the nuances of language, and the transformative power of words in conveying the subtleties of human experience. The following articles explore how translation and decadence intertwine, shedding light on the impact both have had on the evolution of literature. Our assumptions are that decadence in all its complex nuances may help us rethink translation, itself no longer conceivable as linguistic equivalence. Another assumption widely shared by scholars over the last decade is that decadence must be approached as a transnational phenomenon (see Potolsky 2012). Recent publications acknowledge the centrality of Anglo-French relations but explore its literary expression in Latin America, North America, Russia, and Central Europe (Murray 2020), or in Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Northern Europe, Eastern Europe, Turkey, and Japan (see Desmarais and Weir 2022; Creasy and Evangelista 2023). Our own selection enlarges that wide cultural geography with an essay on Davíð Stefánsson, an Icelandic poet, and arguably, one of the first proponents of Nordic literary decadence. All the following articles envisage translation as a seminal aspect of decadence with a special emphasis on translation's flexible forms, and on what might be described as a specific aesthetic of translation likely to revise and broaden over-reductive contemporary meanings of translation.

In her study of *Sensations détraquées* by the Swede August Strindberg, Corinne François-Denève discusses one of the only three literary texts written directly in French by the playwright

then living in France and going through a personal crisis as evidenced by his life story. When the text appeared in the “Supplément littéraire” of the *Figaro* on 17 November 1894, and on 26 January and 19 February 1895, readers were not confronted with Strindberg’s version but that of Georges Loiseau, who does not translate from French to French but

rectifies Strindberg’s ‘interlanguage’ [...] [and] seems to want to invent a ‘deranged’ French, or the discourse of a ‘deranged person’ [...] [he] removes the clumsiness that denotes the author’s xenity but precisely makes up his style, and adds here and there other ‘strangenesses’ [...], which gives it another ‘turn’, seemingly ‘decadent’, modern or unhinged. (Our translation)

Loiseau rewrites an ambiguous text, perhaps pastiching prose writings of the time, into a text intended to express Strindberg’s foreignness. Replacing Strindberg’s expression of his inner troubles, he adopts a lexicon that contemporaries could recognize as decadent and eventually transforms intimate writing into sensational prose. Linguistically, Loiseau adapts Strindberg’s text, culturally, he translates it into a decadent narrative, facilitating but also framing Strindberg’s reception and recognition in France.

Loiseau also betrays Strindberg’s text, and his act of betrayal raises the question of the translator’s ethical standpoint which was not a widely debated issue at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was a period when more recognized translators appropriated the work of lesser-known peers. Oscar Wilde’s *Salome*, also written in French and slightly corrected by Pierre Louÿs, was translated into English by Lord Alfred Douglas, assisted and corrected by Wilde who was dissatisfied with his companion’s English. The names of Louÿs and Wilde do not appear on either version. However, Loiseau, C. François-Denève notes, considered associating his name with that of Strindberg whose original text would be translated into Swedish in 2016 under the title *Crazy Sensations (Förrvirrade Sinnesintryck)*.

Ilze Kačāne studies the translation of the decadent aspects of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* into Latvian through two examples: the first by the author and translator Jānis Ezeriņš (1920) in the daily newspaper *Latvia’s Guard (Latvijas Sargs)*, one of the first press organs of independent Latvia, and the second by the translator and drama critic Roberts Kroders (1933). Considered to be decisive for Latvian literature, the former became a model of modern, even modernist, writing, while the latter displays a translation strategy that obliterates the abundant intertextuality of the Wildean text. Kačāne offers a detailed comparative analysis showing the extent to which the two translators, both fascinated by Aestheticism and decadence, respectively chose opposite strategies, Ezeriņš foreignizing Wilde’s text and creating new vistas for Latvian literature, Kroders domesticating the very same text and insisting on Latvian appropriation of decadence.

Elisa Bizzotto uses another notion pertaining to translation studies to qualify and justify her recent translation of G.B. Shaw’s *Widowers’ Houses* into Italian (2022). Admittedly, Shaw is not an author whom critics naturally associate with decadence and whose writings are far removed from introspection and self-centeredness in the face of a society perceived as characteristics of decadent productions. His friendship with Oscar Wilde did not bring him close to the Wildean plays of the 1890s, except for his discreet parodies. However, Bizzotto demonstrates that the notion of the cultureme enables a retranslation of Shaw for contemporary readership while preserving the historical anchoring of his dramaturgy. Defining the cultureme as

the smallest unit carrying cultural (and culture-specific) information, a concept [...] related to extralinguistic, social and cultural contexts, denoting a social phenomenon that is specific to a certain culture which, however, emerges as such only by comparison to another culture which lacks that phenomenon, (Coman and Selejan 2019, 303)

she justifies the value of transnational decadent cultures for translation. She identifies several decadent cultureemes (“the cultureme of the slums – one of the most recognizable symbols of *fin-de-siècle* London”, “Cockney London”, “Francophilia” and “the New Woman”) and the contextual analysis she provides enables her to propose not only a modern and accurate translation, but also a reflection on the cultural dimension of any translation: “Applying cultureemes to decadent literature helps to throw new light at oblique angles on both source and target texts, thus pointing at diverse ways to face translation issues”.

Karólína Rós Ólafsdóttir provides an original translation of some poems by Davíð Stefánsson (1895-1964), together with an introduction to the first Icelandic poet likely to be described as decadent. Providing a careful presentation of the historical and cultural context in which the collection *Black Feathers* (*Svartar Fjaðrir*) appeared in 1919, she defines it as marked by neo-romantic, symbolist, gothic, and folkloric elements. The poems display a hybridity characteristic of Nordic decadence; they also express the budding poet’s encounter with this same Nordic decadence (see Lyytikäinen *et al.* 2019). Here, the translation is as much a reception of *fin-de-siècle* poetry by an Icelander (whose island was colonized by Denmark at the time) as it is a translation from Icelandic into English accompanied by substantial explanations.

The last two articles testify to the richness of the term translation when applied to decadent productions, recalling their intermedial and inter-art dimension.

Jane Desmarais presents some rarely commented-upon translations of Cyril Scott (1879-1970) of certain Baudelairean poems from *Les Fleurs du mal*. A provincial poet and musician living between Liverpool and Germany at the turn of the century, Scott met Stefan George, himself the translator of Baudelaire’s poetry into German, who would have a decisive influence on his artistic activities. From *Les Fleurs du mal*, Scott chose poems belonging to “Spleen et idéal” which he translated in an archaizing and sometimes erroneous manner, but one that was widely practised in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. J. Desmarais compares his practice to that of F.P. Sturm and J.C. Squire who already display a more modern manner of translating through their adoption of “more prosaic” words that “affor[d] the reader no comfort”. Scott is, of course, best known as a composer, and Desmarais turns to his setting of Ernest Dowson’s poems into song and music as a form of translation. The latter is arguably one of the best-known English decadent poets whom George discovered through German and Dutch translations by the Dutch poet Albert Verwey. George translated some of Dowson’s poems in turn and suggested to Scott the idea of translating them into music. As Desmarais notes, Dowson’s “delicate decadent lyricism had enormous appeal to musicians, singers, and composers in the early twentieth century” (see Desmarais 2019). In his adaptations, Scott privileges “an interstitial state of being” characteristic of Dowson’s poetry along with his reliance on and mastery of silence which he brings out more convincingly than in his translations of translated Baudelaire. His musical adaptations and songs create what Desmarais describes as “music that works a passage between quasi-medieval, romantic/decadent and modernist tendencies, often requiring significant accomplishment on the part of his performers to convey the distinctive moods”. Technically, Scott adapts Dowson’s poetry but arguably, he translates the poet’s words into notes. His translation of poetry into art transfigures the latter’s essential qualities.

Scott’s archaizing translation of Baudelaire’s poetry conforms to the reader’s expectations at a time when it enjoyed considerable renown in Britain, stirring some competition among poets and translators with modern poetry being instantly translated into a plurality of languages. For all its defects and outmodedness, it underscores the extent to which contemporary critics need to adopt a multilinguistic approach to better approach literary exchanges within the *fin-de-siècle* cosmopolitan context and the place of translation in these exchanges.

This cosmopolitan context, itself the subject of recent scholarly work (see Robbins and Lemos Horta 2021), is not confined to Europe and the United States: Japan has also benefitted from a translation of literary decadence through an emblematic work: *The Golden Death* (*Konjiki no shi* 金色の死, 1914) by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō. I. Amano recalls that the novel has often been approached as the result of its author's fascination with Edgar Allan Poe's short stories: "The Domain of Arnheim" (1847) and "Landor's Cottage" (1849). However, this vision is reductive, and Amano suggests reading *The Golden Death* as a literary translation of decadent tropes, objects, and themes underpinned by a desire to westernize Japanese literature by borrowing an aesthetic then perceived as modern. Okamura, the hero of *The Golden Death*, sets out to build an earthly paradise in which he becomes an object destined to perish as soon as he loses what made him human. If the end of the narrative is tragicomic, the fact remains that this "chaotic bricolage of European and Asian artifacts and literary masterpieces" refers to "the author's inability to formulate a clearly defined aesthetic belief through borrowing Western counterparts". Here, the appropriation of decadent elements only displays the impasse of borrowing strategies intended to revive Japanese literature perceived as declining. But at the same time, *The Golden Death* shows how this appropriation verging on translation destabilizes current understandings of translation as linguistic equivalence. Tanizaki Jun'ichirō's novel is also a fine example of translating and adapting Western decadence to its other.

Decadence and translation thus appear to be correlated, intrinsically linked, and constantly redefining each other against transnational backgrounds. The fluidity of decadent productions echoes the fluidity and the scope of translation practices at the turn of the century. Far from conceiving translation as a textual equivalent, the decadent aesthetics of translation explored here cuts across the arts, mediums, and accepted normative languages. Preconceived ideas about translation are turned on their head. The new translations of decadent or *fin-de-siècle* texts by Bizzotto and Ólafsdóttir in this issue stand out as good examples of a flexible and creative translation practice that takes into account both traditional and contemporary approaches.

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