



Translating Culture Oscar Wilde's Decadent Expression into Latvian*

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Abstract

The paper is a comparative study of translating decadence-related cultural concepts encountered in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* into Latvian and compares the first translation of the novel by Jānis Ezeriņš (1920) with that produced thirteen years later by Roberts Kroders (1933). As a result of a mutual "competition" between the two Latvian versions, the translation by Ezeriņš, known as the "Latvian Wilde", has become not only a springboard for the Latvian writers searching for a modern style of expression but also a significant contribution to the reception of Aestheticism and wider recognition of decadent style.

Keywords: Aestheticism, Culture, Decadent Style, Reception, Translation

Introduction

"Culture" is multi-dimensional, complex, and ubiquitous. It has traditionally been regarded as an anthropological concept in anthropology and history, philosophy, sociology, and literary studies. Nowadays, other fields and disciplines, including intercultural communication, cross-cultural psychology, and translation studies, employ the notion of culture as a flexible tool and critical aspect for explaining real-life phenomena from an interdisciplinary perspective (Baldwin *et al.* 2005). In situations where culture serves as a means of creating community or is a system of symbols and signs used to communicate within and between societies, as well as when aspects of one culture are being communicated to another, we may speak of "communicating cultures" (Kockel and Máiréad 2004, 4-5).

* Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Latvian have been translated into English.

“Translation”, defined as communication across languages and cultures (House 2016), ensures the transmission of cultural information or “transporting” one culture to another. As a cross-cultural event (Snell-Hornby 1988) and not only intercultural but also cosmopolitan communication (Canagarajah 2013), translation is one of the forms a literary work exists in – a specific layer of literature that is always at the juncture of one’s own and the foreign (Zajac 1987, 157). The underlying aesthetic foundation of translations is the conception of an absolute artistic value of a literary work. Though translation has to be perceived and assessed as an independent work in the context of target-language and target-culture specificity, it simultaneously reflects the source-culture and the author’s ideological position in a new cultural environment. Based on typological similarities, translation may be contrasted with both the original and translations into the same or different languages within a comparative literary theory frame (Toper 1998, 179). The differences identified while comparing a source text with a target text arise from objective reasons (language peculiarities, the cultural-historical context, and specificities) and subjective reasons – the translator’s individual decisions and creativity.

Taking into consideration the fact that people have always been striving to comprehend a culture (or cultures) other than their own, “translating culture” implies “dealing with *textual objects* experienceable and intelligible only within [...] a culture [...]” (Silverstein 2020, 94, emphasis in original). Language exists only in the context of culture (Lotman and Uspensky 1978). Culture, in the narrower sense, may seem untranslatable as most of its manifestations are non-linguistic, thus it is one of the main obstacles in achieving a perfect translation (Yue 2015, 555). In doing so, however, the value of the source culture must be preserved while approaching the translation task as a process of looking for similarities between language and culture and avoiding rewriting the text when translating it. According to Venuti (1995), by employing the foreignising approach, the reader is always aware of the translator’s presence.

Translation is both a linguistic and cultural activity which involves communication across cultures. The literature of smaller nations is often modelled upon some other nation’s literature, thus translated literature “is not only a major channel through which fashionable repertoire is brought home, but also a source of reshuffling and supplying alternatives” (Even-Zohar 1990, 48). Being able to enrich and shape a nation’s literary landscape, translations model their developmental contours; however, the flow and reception of translations are an uneven process: “Whether translated literature becomes central or peripheral, and whether this position is connected with innovatory (‘primary’) or conservatory (‘secondary’) repertoires, depends on the specific constellation of the polysystem under study” (46). The dearth of foreign literary impacts may lead to the stagnation of national literature. In its turn, if one polysystem (a component such as literature) of a larger heterogeneous polysystem (Even-Zohar 1990) is open and desires innovative ideas and artistic expression forms as the result of the “dynamic process of evolution” (e.g., absorbing direct influences and recreating “borrowed elements” into new original phenomena), translated literature may become an integral system within this literary polysystem, i.e., a part of a cultural, literary, and historical system of the target language (Munday 2016).

In the first half of the 20th century, translations significantly influenced the development of Latvian literature and initiated a rapid growth of literary borrowings in Latvian writers’ artistic world (Veisbergs 2021). Multiple comparative analyses of the source texts and texts representing the Latvian national literature reveal thematic similarities, shared depictions of motifs and images, and typical stylistic and linguistic peculiarities. One of the reasons for polemics within West-European writing and borrowings by Latvian writers was a growing interest in decadence as a cultural phenomenon and in decadent writers’ style as a means for the rebirth of art, often stimulated by translations.

1. *Decadence: The Concept and Phenomenon*

Decadence is a rather suggestive and multifaceted concept used for denoting a new trend (not movement) in literature and art associated with the *fin de siècle* fascination with cultural degeneration. Decadence as a literary category overlaps with naturalism, romanticism, Aestheticism, Pre-Raphaelitism, symbolism, impressionism, and modernism and it can be defined as a late-romantic current in art and literature “that raised the aesthetic dictum of ‘art for art’s sake’ to the status of a cult, especially in the final decades of the nineteenth century” (Hanson 1997, 2). Understanding European decadence as a phenomenon of cultural and social transition allows for treating it as pre- or proto-modernism (Weir 2008, xv). The duality of decadence is related to “degeneracy” and “rebirth”, i.e., on the one hand, a decadent is attracted by the real world that provokes both negative and positive emotions, pleasures, and senses, but, on the other hand, s/he is longing for otherworldly experiences (Desmarais and Condé 2017). In the atmosphere of “fatigue” and “boredom”, decadence manifests itself as a cultural attitude, denying the credibility and certainty of scientific theories and declaring the privileged status of feelings and revelation, or the absolute autonomy of art.

Although the active circulation of the concept “decadence” in British culture had begun around 1850 (Ellmann 1988c), the flourishing of decadence lasted for a comparatively short period: from the early 1880s until the middle of the 1890s. It is considered to have reached its culmination in 1890-91 when Oscar Wilde’s (1854-1900) novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was published. It was a time when the principal cultural paradigms were interacting and shifting, and the values of mainstream Victorian culture were challenged by such features of decadent style as the prioritisation of unnaturalness over everything natural, the prevalence of form over content, the focus on individualism and excessive self-analysis, disdain for conservative moralism dominating in society, as well as the emphasis of decorative over-refinement, hedonism, eccentricity, and erotic sensibility.

Aestheticism as an anti-positivist reaction and a perspective on literary and social life had been impacted by French literary decadence and symbolism. By exploring the creative work of French progressive authors during his stay in Paris in 1883, and while meeting with prominent French writers Paul Verlaine, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Edmond de Goncourt, among others, Wilde adjusted his interpretation of Aestheticism,² developed a more profound comprehension of art, dissociating himself from his former influences. In his series of lectures on *The Value of Art in Modern Life* (1884-86), letters, and literary works, he often maintained that modern literature did not exist outside France (Ellmann 1988b 316-41; Holland 2003, 73, 113); he was especially attracted to the work of Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, the early philosophy of Aestheticism by the Parnassian poets, and the artistic world of Joris-Karl Huysmans.

The concept of “decadence” was broached in 1893 in the essay “The Decadent Movement in Literature” by Arthur Symons who emphasised that decadent literature reflected all moods and forms of behaviour of a society (Damrosch, Henderson and Sharpe 1999, 1954). His

² Wilde’s philosophy of aestheticism was related to “not only two very different doctrines, but two different vocabularies – John Ruskin’s ‘morality’ aesthetic and Walter Pater’s ‘flamelike’ aesthetic” (Ellmann 1988a, 46-47). Ruskin had cultivated religious belief and moral values, as well as appealed to human consciousness and disciplined self-possession, whereas Pater advocated mysticism, the imagination, and a sensual drift that was founded on decadent moods (Ellmann 1988a); both divergent perspectives and attitudes provided orienting points in Wilde’s writings (Riquelme 2013).

publication in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* defined impressionism and symbolism as the offshoots of decadence (Symons 1893), which in 1899 were further analysed in Symons's highly influential *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (Sklare 1951) – a testimony to the rapidly declining popularity of decadence after Wilde's scandalous lawsuits in 1895.

Wilde's ties with decadence are rooted in the stylistic expression of his artistic world, in the pessimistic, psychologically dark spirit of his works. The novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is a brilliant manifestation of the writer's aesthetic decadence; his decadent works also include the poem *The Sphinx* (1894) and the tragedy *Salomé* (1893), initially written in French. Wilde's belief in the idea that Aestheticism and decadence complement each other differentiates him from those advocates of Aestheticism who may not be ranked among the representatives of decadence and from those decadents who may not be regarded as worshippers of beauty. Having been deeply influenced by classical art and having acquainted himself with literary works by his Romanticist predecessors and representatives of Aestheticism and decadence, he set the foundation for both a paradigm of beauty and decadent writing, which heralded modernism in Britain, Europe and the rest of the world, including Latvia.

2. *Decadence in Latvia*³

In Latvia, the designation “decadence” was shaped during the first decade of the 20th century, precisely when the newly-formed Latvian literature,⁴ searching for original themes and plots and untraditional literary forms, entered the developmental phase of modernism. For writers seeking creative freedom, it was a turning point as Latvian literature in general and literary criticism in particular became polarized on the art-for-art's sake philosophy that had reached the early Latvian modernists, mainly via the translations in Russia and Germany and direct contacts with Russian poets of the Silver Age (Sproģe and Vāvere 2002). For the Latvian nation born in translation (Veisbergs 2014), translated European literature at the beginning of the 20th century ensured the next stage of development due to the local need for a new and modern-world-oriented perception of art. Between 1904 and 1910, a group of so-called decadents who admired Aestheticism and decadent principles united around the journal *Dzelme* (The Gulf) (1906-07). They were known as the *Dzelmes grupa* (Dzelme Group). Although their declaration *Mūsu mākslas motīvi* (The Motives of Our Art) (1906) has been known as the Latvian Decadence Manifesto, their decadence was mainly in the nickname, as they mainly proclaimed the demand for freedom of art and principles of modernism: “None of the modernistic movements in Latvia had its manifesto. Instead, there were declarations and conceptual speculations” (Tabūns 2003, 181). Thus, although the content of their work lacked deep philosophical substance and theoretical unity and was sometimes contradictory, it still provided a framework for promoting individual freedom in art. Latvian modernists perceived Wilde as a gifted decadent writer and an advocate for the “renaissance” in art. Wilde was a

³ Some aspects analysed in the following sections have been discussed in Kačāne's monograph (2015) and other publications (2008; 2013) in Latvian.

⁴ The middle of the nineteenth century, the first “National Awakening” (1850-80) when the idea of Latvia as a nation emerged, is considered the beginning of Latvian national literature. The turning point is 1856 when a verse collection *Dziesmiņas* (Little Songs) by Juris Alunāns – a Latvian philologist and representative of Jaunlatvieši (the Young Latvians) movement – was published. It mostly consisted of translations and was aimed at showing “the beauty and strength of the Latvian language” (Alunāns 1856, 3). Before that, for centuries, it was the Latvian language and folklore which played a crucial role in preserving the ethnic community of Latvians under the subordination of other powers and cultures (German, Swedish, Polish, Russian).

literary icon, appearing in the literary journals *Pret Sauli* (Toward the Sun) and *Stari* (Rays) alongside Friedrich Nietzsche and other West-European writers whose understanding of art offered a means of escaping reality. The early Latvian modernists (including Haralds Eldgasts, Viktors Eglītis, Fallijs, Jānis Akuraters, Kārlis Skalbe, and Kārlis Jēkabsons) were influenced not only by French writers (Charles Baudelaire, Paul Verlaine, and Arthur Rimbaud), but also by the American Edgar Allan Poe, the Polish Stanisław Przybyszewski, the Italian Gabriele D'Annunzio, a number of Russian writers (Konstantin Balmont, Valery Bryusov, Fyodor Sologub), and Scandinavian, German, and Austrian literatures that accentuated “radicalism” through the synthesis of decadence, symbolism, modernism, and other phenomena. Latvian writers experimented with depictions of a restriction-free individual or decadent superhuman (the concept of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*), portrayed the subject's sense of superiority and mysticism, the dominance of the human's spiritual processes, occasionally focusing on the equal value of the aesthetic and non-aesthetic, the ethical and the unethical, the sublime and the perverse. Significance was laid on the representation of *taedium vitae*, the aestheticisation of Dionysian ecstasy and death.

However, Latvian decadence (sometimes referred to as symbolism and impressionism) must not be perceived as a direct echo of European decadence. Various forms and sub-forms of literary trends that had matured in Europe for decades reached the new Latvian literature in a “compressed” form within one decade (Tabūns 2003; Sproģe and Vāvere 2002). In the Latvian context, early twentieth-century decadence can be interpreted as 1) a literary phenomenon directed against aesthetics of realism and naturalism, that is, as anti-traditionalism, which strived to be independent of the ideology of the epoch; and 2) a testimony of belonging to the West-European adherents to “pure art”, where the idea of the supreme individual, for whom the disengagement from a social determinateness was typical, was brought to the forefront. Although the “new” art was accepted critically and labelled as “sick” and “leprous” (e.g., in Jānis Jansons-Brauns's (1908) critically reflective essay “Fauni vai klauni?” (Fauns or Clowns?)), its ideological supporters – both early modernists at the beginning of the 20th century⁵ and the second generation of modernists in the 1930s – perceived the influences as a renewal or renaissance of art:

Any ‘renaissance’ gets started by some older, former culture [...] the Germans and the Russians learnt from the achievements of French culture. [...] Decadents themselves, of course, knew very well that it was neither the “decline” nor “over-refinement” but the renaissance they fought for [...]. (Eglītis 1949, 64-65)

Wilde entered the Latvian cultural space as an aesthete-decadent and had a decisive and lasting role in the dynamics of Latvian culture and the development of modernist literature. Among the first Latvian translations of Wilde's works are his poems in prose (from 1902) and literary fairy tales (from 1903) which were translated repeatedly in the following years and decades. They were followed by translations and retranslations of plays (among them the tragedy *Salomé*, 1907, translated by Fricis Jansons; 1912, translated by Jānis Ezeriņš), philosophical essays (from 1907), fragments of *De Profundis* (1910; 1933) and aphorisms, as well as short stories (from 1912) and poems (from 1920).⁶ Given that some of the first translations of Wilde's

⁵ For example, one of the leading figures of the Latvian decadence Viktors Eglītis' theoretical works written in the period from 1903 to 1913 were published in a book titled *Ceļš uz latvju renesansi* (1914, Path to Latvian Renaissance).

⁶ For translations of Wilde's works, see “Timeline of the Latvian Reception of Oscar Wilde” (Kačāne 2015, 309-34).

oeuvre (in particular poems in prose and fairytales) were imprecise and incomplete, numerous retranlations were soon published. Latvian authors were attentive to them and strove to achieve fine first translations in Latvian.

A Latvian translation of Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was first offered to readers in the social-political and literary Latvian daily newspaper *Latvijas Sargs* (1919-34, Latvia's Guard) – one of the first Latvian newspapers of independent Latvia – in 1920 by the poet, writer, and translator Jānis Ezeriņš (1891-1924) (Uailds1920).⁷ Ezeriņš's version was also published as a book in 1921 (Uailds 1921).⁸ By that time, after the turbulent years of World War I, the proclamation of the Republic of Latvia (1918), and the Latvian War of Independence (1918-20), the early modernists had already found their own unique forms for their artistic expression. Nevertheless, a re-evaluation of the discourse around “decadence” continued due to this translation, and the period was again declared as “a great decadence era” (Jēkabsons 1921).

Ezeriņš had been fascinated by the phenomenon of decadence as a young man. He started translating Wilde's novel while following the activities of the Latvian “decadents” during his student years at Valka teachers' seminary in Valmiera (1906-10) but had to admit that “his language skills were still quite poor to do this job” (Ērmanis 1955, 130). The work was resumed later, and as revealed by the correspondence from 12 March 1917 with Antons Austrīņš (1884-1934), his friend, writer, and the then head of the literary department of the newspaper *Līdums* (Clearing, founded in 1913), it was planned that the translation would be published in 1918: “Presumably, the big events will not have changed your intentions as an editor, and we will be able to print ‘Dorian’ next summer” (RTMM 80767). However, the plan failed due to the swiftly changing political and cultural situation, though it materialized a couple of years later under different circumstances. The translation by Ezeriņš was immediately perceived as “very good” (Egle 1921), “masterly” (Jēkabsons 1921), and “beautiful” (Liepiņš 1924). Despite being somewhat rushed and drawn from translations in other languages, Ezeriņš's translation of Wilde's novel was mentioned in the *Latviešu literatūras vēsture* (History of Latvian Literature) as one of the translator's most significant contributions (Grīns 1936, 396). For decades it was believed that Ezeriņš's translation was made from intermediary languages; however, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a comment in the republished edition was added specifying that it was based on the original English version (Vailds 2003).

In 1933, another translation of the novel in Latvian, in a print run of 4,000 copies, was published by the gifted theatre critic, theoretician, and translator Roberts Kroders (1892-1956) (Uailds 1933).⁹ In time, this coincided with the activities of the second-generation Latvian modernists who “rebelled” against antipodal literary tendencies which belonged to the national

⁷ In the first half of the 20th century, Wilde's surname had several spelling traditions in Latvian: Uailds, Vilde, Wilde, Vailds (the latter gradually became the accepted tradition).

⁸ The book was published by Ansis Gulbis' (1873-1936) publishing house – one of the first major publishers of independent Latvia that greatly contributed to the development of Latvian literature; the publishing house was originally founded in St. Petersburg at the beginning of the 20th century at the time Gulbis worked there, after the proclamation of Latvia's independence it continued its work in Latvia (Avotiņa 2003).

⁹ The book was published by the publishing house Grāmatu Draugs (Book Friend), founded in 1926 by Helmārs Rudzītis (1903-2001), which followed the strategy to print quickly and cheaply to reach the widest readership. The activity of the publishing house was interrupted in 1944 by the Soviet occupation but it managed to continue its work in exile (Smilkčiņa 1999b, 41-42; Avotiņa 2003). At the end of the 1920s and in the 1930s, Kroders was a regular contributor to the publishing house, e.g., his translations of Romain Rolland's novel *Jean-Christophe* was published by Grāmatu Draugs in 1927-28, of Guido da Verona's novel *Mimi Bluette fiore del mio giardino* in 1927, of Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere* in 1928 and *Trionfo della morte* in 1929, of Stefan Zweig's novellas in 1931, etc.

ideology-based literature of positivism. Ezeriņš and Kroders were contemporaries and creative intellectuals. Both of them were in their own way related to the daily newspaper *Latvijas Sargs*, which was founded and supported by the interim government for expressing the ideas of national independence, unity, freedom, and liberation, and originally functioned in Liepāja, the biggest regional city in the unoccupied western part of the country (Smilktiņa 1999a, 10-11). Kroders was the newspaper's co-founder and member of the editorial board at the time when his twin brother Arturs Kroders was the editor of the newspaper (from early 1919 to March 1920) (Bankavs 1928, 669). Ezeriņš's translation of Wilde's novel was published in 64 newspaper issues between 7 August and 4 December 1920, when its editorial team included Ernests Blanks and Augenbergs-Ezerietis, among others, and the newspaper was already based in the capital Riga.

The creative work of both Ezeriņš and Kroders involved translating: Ezeriņš translated the Old French legend *Aucassin and Nicolette*, Giovanni Boccaccio's short stories, Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le noir*, as well as works by Molière, Charles Baudelaire, Théophile Gautier, William Blake, Alexander Pushkin, and Alexander Blok, whereas Kroders translated the prose works of Knut Hamsun, Henryk Sienkiewicz, August Strindberg, Guy de Maupassant, Arthur Schnitzler, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Erich M. Remarque, plays by George B. Shaw, Johann L. Tieck, Luigi Pirandello, Ferdinand Bruckner, Carlo Goldoni, *One Thousand and One Nights* tales, etc. Both Ezeriņš and Kroders were bright intellectuals who enjoyed a Bohemian way of life. They had known Wilde's novel since their youth thanks to the critics; they had also read it in the original language and they were familiar with translations in other languages, Russian and German in particular.¹⁰

Irrespective of these similarities, notable differences lie in the specificity of the translators' individual creative self-expression. Unlike Kroders, who was mainly known for his outspoken theatre criticism focusing on the problems of form, as well as translations, Ezeriņš was a successful short-prose virtuoso who mostly wrote in the genre of the anecdotal novelette and who had learned from Boccaccio, Maupassant, Wilde, Poe, and others. He was a witty, merry soul of Latvian literature, a "care-free gambler" (Veselis 1925, 83), a dandy and self-proclaimed decadent; at that time, decadence was often regarded as an analogue of dandyism and was not related to boredom, pessimism, or fatigue, but rather to mischief and wit:

Jānis Ezeriņš's further conduct and life, too, showed us that he was not only a simple decadent but also a 'genius'. At that time, it was a matter of honour for any poet to wear their hair long; the hair of poets-decadents had to be even longer, as we see in the picture supplement to *Dzelme* in 1906. Decadents should also dress differently. (Pētersons 1929, 203)

When characterizing Ezeriņš's literary work, the Latvian writer Marta Grimma noted that his writing style was so aesthetic that he could truly be deemed the Latvian Oscar Wilde (RTMM 95040). On the other hand, Kroders was described as "an absolute aesthete" for whom, as for Wilde, criticism was a peculiar form of art; Kroders valued Wilde as one of the most recognized playwrights (Liepiņš 1967, 5).

Ezeriņš's life ended abruptly and prematurely some years after the proclamation of independence of Latvia: he passed away at the age of 33 after a severe illness. Kroders lived longer but his life and creative work were interrupted by Latvia's Soviet occupation (1940)

¹⁰ In Germany, the novel was first translated in 1901 (also in 1902, 1906, 1907, etc.), whereas in Russia it was translated in 1905 (also in 1906, 1907, 1909, 1911, 1912, 1915, 1916, 1928, etc.) (Roznatovskaja 2000, 49-66; Barnaby 2010, xxi-lxxiv). The impact of the phenomenon of "Russian Wilde" on Latvian early modernists (major influence) and impetus coming from Wilde's reception in Germany (minor influence) ensured a "dialogue" between Latvian literature and Wilde.

– in June 1941 he and his family were deported to Siberia. He died at the age of 64 shortly after returning to Soviet Latvia when “the development of Latvian literature was halted by the sovietisation and ideological censorship of culture and art, which, demanding the reflection of social aspects of reality and typization in literature, turned against many manifestations of individualization” (Kačāne 2021, 582). At that time, the fact of his passing, the inhumane conditions he had to endure, as well as his contribution to literature, theatre, and art history and criticism, were mostly discussed in Latvian periodicals published in exile (in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, the USA, etc.) by the intellectuals who had managed to flee the Soviet occupation in the 1940s. Having once been at the peak of Latvian culture, Kroders’s life and work suffered a decade-long neglect in Latvia until their re-evaluation in the 1990s. Similarly, Ezeriņš’s creative writing was not widely promoted in the Soviet era, however, his translation of Wilde’s novel was re-published in 1976 in spite of the official negative attitude of the Soviet power towards both decadence (including modernism, symbolism, avant-gardism, etc.) and writers representing these trends.

If we analyse the two Latvian versions of Wilde’s novel in their historical and cultural contexts, it becomes clear that Ezeriņš’s translation has become an integral part of Wilde’s Latvian identity, testified also by its repeated publications (Vailds 1976; 2003; 2014; 2017). Numerous critics have acknowledged Ezeriņš’s version as a highly valuable, original, partly ancient, decorative, Art Nouveau, creative and theatrical translation, “from which flows an almost palpable beauty” (Riteniece 2019). However, reviews of Kroders’s contribution are also positive emphasising “the magic of the Latvian sentence, plasticity, modulation and sophistication of all kinds of nuances” (Jēkabsons 1935). Each of Kroders’s translations contained “a stamp of personal luxurious style, [...] coming from the two sources – from the richness of the Latvian language and the translated author’s spirit” (K. Rs. 1935, 4). Nevertheless, according to the data in the biographical dictionary *Es viņu pazīstu* (1939, I know him) provided by Kroders himself, during twenty-eight years of his work, he wrote 1,218 editorials, essays, reviews, and reflections on art and national ideology for publication in periodicals. In the period from 1910 to 1939 he translated 120 literary and scientific works, as well as published collected works in theatre history and monographs (Unāms 1975, 270-71), which suggests that he oftentimes published in haste, dictating to a typist, producing a final revision that lacked “literary polish” (Zālītis 2005).

On 3 February 2017, when a new version of Wilde’s novel was adapted for the stage at the Daile Theatre,¹¹ a new translation by the literary adviser of the theatre Evita Mamaja was used. According to the producer Laura Groza-Ķibere, Ezeriņš’s translation was too old-fashioned; there was exaggerated aestheticisation and poetization (see Jundze 2017). For the first time, the title of the novel’s production coincided with the lesser known translation by Kroders – *Doriana Greja portrets* (literal.: The Portrait of Dorian Gray) (see *Doriana Greja ģīmetne* in Ezeriņš’s translation; literal.: The Facial Image¹² of Dorian Gray; bold mine). Nevertheless, the new approach and

¹¹ Although Wilde’s plays have been staged in Latvia since the beginning of the 20th century, the first production of Wilde’s novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* took place in the renewed Latvia in 1994 in the New Riga Theatre produced by Alvis Hermanis (b. 1965). Many theatre critics perceived it as an artificial performance of unnatural body movements consisting of stylized ballet elements (Radzobe 1994), or attractive scenes of kitschy dances (Čakare 2006). Although the producer’s “manipulation” of decadence concepts was seen as lifeless kitsch and the impeachment of decadence in general, the relation to the West-European tradition of decadence was emphasized through the inseparable unity of death and its aestheticisation (Radzobe 2013).

¹² The etymological analysis has revealed that the Latvian derivative *ģīmetne* (borrowed from the Lithuanian *gymis* – the “face” and “facial image”, for example, in a mirror) has been in circulation in Latvia since the 1870s.

translation, according to the theatre critics, seemed flat, simplistic, and inappropriate, leading to mundaneness on the stage and a lack of philosophical depth (Zeltiņa 2017). The efforts of the Daile Theatre to both bring the performance closer to the source text and modernise the play, on the contrary, alienated the adaptation from the original Wildean style appreciated in Latvian culture. Eventually, Ezeriņš's translation endured the test of time and was indirectly acknowledged as still modern, however, the issue of the translation of philosophical and intertextual layers still remained topical (Rodiņa 2017).¹³ Thus, retranslations, being motivated by multiple and complex reasons (interest in an author's work and/or persona, fascination with literary movement the writer represents, commercial decisions, potential ageing of the earlier translation, etc.) are mainly triggered by change and represent a transformation in reception (Cadera and Walsh 2022).

3. *Translating Decadent Style*

Any culture-specific concepts are translatable only with a thorough knowledge of the cultures between which the transfer of meaning takes place, and therefore the success of literary translation largely depends on prior cultural competence (Herzfeld 2020). In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the decadent style manifests itself, among others, in decadence-related culture-specific concepts, often used within English as foreign-language text insertions (mainly in French, sometimes in Latin or other languages). Insertions of an untranslated text – expressions, proverbs, liturgies, citations from other literary texts – into the Anglophone speech of literary characters are for Wilde not only the means for expressing authenticity, cosmopolitanism, or playful aestheticism, but predominantly a strategic manifestation of some definite social and cultural phenomenon and paradigm, which is being implemented through the author's erudition. Intertextual references in French in the novel are conspicuous attributes of a decadent style related to the French decadent school, which emphasises Wilde's affinity with the precursors and contemporaries of the decadent movement across borders and demonstrates his admiration of – and association with – their anti-traditional aesthetic views (Kačāne 2013). Through the analysis of the translation of such phrases, it is possible to compare the translators' approaches to translating decadent style.

Decadence-related foreign-language insertions can be seen within the binary opposition “the old” vs. “the new”, where decadents and aesthetes manifest themselves as agents of the beginning of the “new/modern” era. Challenging traditional values is signalled by Lord Henry Wotton's words in French in the following fragment: “The longer I live, Dorian, the more keenly I feel that whatever was good enough for our fathers is not good enough for us. In art, as in politics, *les grand-pères ont toujours tort*” (Wilde 2007, 45). In his translation, Ezeriņš preserves the French expression *les grand-pères ont toujours tort* and adds a literal translation as an insertion within a text “vectēviem nekad nav taisnība” (literal.: grandparents are never right)¹⁴ (Vailds 2003, 62). Kroders, however, deletes the French language within the Latvian text and offers an equivalent translation “senčiem nekad nav taisnība” (literal.: ancestors are never right) (Uailds 1933, 54).

In the dictionary of the Latvian language, *ģimetne* has been defined as 1) a photograph of a human face (including also the upper part of the body); 2) a representation of a person or a group of people in fine arts (Bāliņa *et al.* 2006, 333). In its meaning as “portrait”, the word was used since the 1880s-90s, however, it managed to occupy a stable place in the Latvian lexicon only in the 20th century (Karulis 2001, 332-33).

¹³ Although retranslations may be triggered by change and may signal a transformation in reception, they may also represent commercial decisions or ageing of the earlier translation.

¹⁴ Here and henceforth, translations of Wilde's Latvian quotes into English are mine.

Similarly, among the foreign-language insertions in the novel, there are historical terms *fin de siècle* and *fin du globe* applied to characterise the end of the nineteenth-century disillusionment with life, apocalyptic atmosphere, pessimism, the liminality of the epoch, escapism, and change of paradigm, associated with French decadence and Aestheticism in England. Here is an example:

[...] Nowadays all the married men live like bachelors, and all the bachelors like married men.
 ‘*Fin de siècle,*’ murmured Lord Henry.
 ‘*Fin du globe,*’ answered his hostess.
 ‘I wish it were *fin du globe,*’ said Dorian with a sigh. ‘Life is a great disappointment.’ (Wilde 2007, 149)

In the translation by Ezeriņš, both terms in French have been purposefully preserved, and they are supplemented with an adequate explanation in Latvian “gadsimta gals” (literal.: the end of the century) and “pasaules gals” (literal.: the end of the world) within the text (Vailds 2003, 207). Consequently, Wilde’s authentic manner of writing, through which the epoch’s “spirit” and cultural hallmarks are shown, has been preserved. In Kroders’s translation, slightly different phrases in Latvian “laikmeta gals” (literal.: the end of the epoch) and “pasaules gals” (literal.: the end of the world) are offered; however, again no text in French was preserved (Uailds 1933, 179).

In general, this tendency, which can be observed in multiple examples, testifies to the translators’ different translation strategies:

‘Four husbands! Upon my word that is *trop de zèle.*’
 ‘*Trop d’audace,* I tell her,’ said Dorian. (Wilde 2007, 148)

Jānis Ezeriņš’s translation:

Četri vīri! Jātzīstas, tā ir centība, liela centība – *trop de zèle.*
Trop d’audace – liela pārdrošība, es viņai teicu, – atbildēja Dorians. (Vailds 2003, 206)

Roberts Kroders’s translation:

‘Četrivīri! Esatzīstos, ka tāirlielacentība’.
 ‘Lielapārdrošība, esteicu tai’, atbildēja Dorians. (Uailds 1933, 178)

‘*Rouge and esprit* used to go together.’ (Wilde 2007, 43)

Jānis Ezeriņš’s translation:

‘*Rouge un esprit* – smiņķis un asprātība – nebija šķirami’. (Vailds 2003, 60)

Roberts Kroders’s translation:

‘Sārtulis un atjautība senāk bija nešķirami’. (Uailds 1933, 51)

Throughout the novel, Ezeriņš consistently preserves Wilde’s French lexis and inserts an explanatory text in Latvian following the foreign-language text. Kroders’s translation strategy, on the other hand, is oriented towards “total translation” on all levels, and therefore intertextual non-English passages from the source text are replaced by the target language text. Even the most extensive quotation in French – the reproduction of the second part of “Sur les lagunes” from Gautier’s poem “Variations sur le carnaval de Venise” from the anthology *Émaux et Camées* (1852) – in Kroders’s version is given only in Latvian. Similarly, Ezeriņš preserves the text in French and provides its translation. In addition, foreign words used in Chapter 11 in the de-

scriptions of Dorian Gray's aesthetic-decadent exotic infatuation with, for example, musical instruments also testify to this fact (*juruparis – juruparis* (Ezeriņš), *džuroparisas* (Krodērs); *clarin – clarin* (Ezeriņš), *klarnete* (Krodērs) etc.). Ezeriņš mostly preserves foreign exoticisms in the original language, while Krodērs Latvianises them to a great extent.

Foreign lexical items used for introducing “colour” and “culture” into the target text are usually regarded as partially “culturally untranslatable”. By being less “absolute” than “linguistic untranslatability” which is determined by differences between two language systems, the issue of “cultural untranslatability” arises when a cultural phenomenon, functionally relevant for the source language text, is absent from the culture of which the target language is a part (Catford 1965, 94, 99). Because of this, and considering the period in which the translations were made, each of the translators has chosen a different approach to translation – for Ezeriņš, the representation of decadence-related concepts in French is significant due to the openness of the Latvian literature to West-European modern literary tendencies and the manifestation of belonging to the West-European adherents to art for art's sake at the beginning of the 20th century, whereas Krodērs strives for simplicity through linguistic purism and an emphasis on Latvianness.

One of the themes highlighted in Wilde's novel pertains to dandyism as a social and cultural phenomenon related to decadence and aesthetic-decadent experiences. At the beginning of the 20th century, dandyism was uncommon in Latvia, but Wilde's novel and persona greatly facilitated it. Wilde's novel contributed to the gradual shaping of a new type of self-image that demonstrated an attitude aimed at shocking society (e.g., in the sensational decadent novel *Zvaigžņotās nakts* (1905, *Starry Nights*) by Haralds Edgasts (1999)). After dandyism became part of the Latvian culture, ironic depictions of dandies appeared in the prose of the young modernist generation of the 1930s protesting against the literature based on national positivist ideology (Kačāne 2020).

In Wilde's novel, Dorian Gray is depicted in the atmosphere of external elegance and refined taste; the character's subconscious desire to create a unique approach to life by combining aesthetic dandyism and decadent aesthetics is revealed:

[...] yet in his inmost heart he desired to be something more than a mere *arbiter elegantiarum*, to be consulted on the wearing of a jewel, or the knotting of a necktie, or the conduct of a cane. He sought to elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles and find in the spiritualizing of the senses its highest realization. (Wilde 2007, 107-08)

In both Latvian translations of Wilde's novel, Latin *arbiter elegantiarum* has been preserved and it is followed by an insertion in Latvian “modes likumdevējs” (literal.: fashion law maker) by Ezeriņš (Vailds 2003, 152) and “modes likumdevējs” (literal.: fashion laws maker) by Krodērs (Uailds, 1933, 132), which in this particular case contradicts the latter's more traditional strategy. For Latvian readers, who in the first two decades of the 20th century are only slightly familiar with the phenomenon of dandyism, Wilde reveals a decadent dandy's hyper-engagement with the senses or aesthetic and decadent sensibility, as well as with perfection of the pose and self-construction. Dorian Gray's daily habits are depicted within the frame of a duality “order – chaos”, i.e., in the atmosphere of aristocratic luxury, relish, frolicsome ease, and relaxation, as well as a preoccupation with the mysterious night: “I thought you dandies never got up till two, and were not visible till five” (Wilde 2007, 30). A fusion between life and art (the main focuses of the novel), as Michael Subialka remarks, is necessitated by a “penchant for self-fashioning”, and decadents' aestheticism “locates that fusion in the dandy's street-wandering performance, which combines the decadent's display with the flâneur's aesthetic investigation of the modern metropolis” (2019, 3).

The novel incorporates the features characterising decadence – including questioning generally accepted values, focusing on the category of the artificial opposing (and prevailing over) that of the natural, searching for relish in *paradis artificiels* unrelated to mundaneness, and demonstrating a picturesque manifestation of darkness, sin, and death.

In the novel, Lord Henry refers to sin as “the only real colour-element left in modern life” (Wilde 2007, 28). While imaginatively engaging with transgressions against divine laws and bringing aestheticism into focus, Wilde attaches positive semantics to negativity and incorporates them into the category of enjoyment, thereby revealing striking features of literary decadence.

In relation to the concept of sin, Ezeriņš uses the lexeme “apgrēcība” (sinfulness) mainly employed in Latvian religious texts, which is derived from the noun “grēks” (sin), by adding a prefix and a suffix and which implies a sinful deed, unreasonable behaviour, and transgression: “Apgrēcība ir vienīgais, kas vēl no krāsainības palicis pāri mūsu dzīvē” (literal.: Sinfulness is the only thing left from colourfulness in our life) (Vailds 2003, 38). Kroders translates this fragment by using the noun “netikums” (vice), revealing the semantic of a moral flaw or weakness due to the repetition of specific actions: “Vienīgais krāsainais elements, kas palicis vēl mūsu dzīvē ir netikums” (literal.: The only colourful element left in our lives is vice) (Uailds 1933, 33). Moreover, while translating, Ezeriņš occasionally aestheticises decadence-related concepts by replacing semantically neutral words with more semantically loaded ones, e.g., in the context of worshipping nocturnal darkness and beautiful sins, the phrase “beautiful things” (“Beautiful sins, like beautiful things are the privilege of the rich” (Wilde 2007, 67)) is replaced by the poetic lexeme “beauty”: “Skaisti grēki, tāpat kā arī viss pārējais daiļums, ir bagātnieku privilēģija” (literal.: Beautiful sins, like the rest of beauty, are the privilege of the rich (Vailds 2003, 94, underlining mine)). Kroders translates “beautiful things” with a noun phrase “viss skaistums” (literal.: all the beauty) (Uailds 1933, 82). Contrary to Ezeriņš who gives preference to a poetic lexeme “daiļums” that expresses abstraction, Kroders chooses the prosaic and more specific expression “skaistums”.

In addition, the comparative analysis of the translations has revealed that, on the whole, Ezeriņš tends towards making the concept of ugliness beautiful and poetic, whereas Kroders underlines the deviation from norms in ugliness. For example, when rendering Wilde’s sentence “Ugliness is one of the seven deadly virtues [...]” (2007, 161) into Latvian, Ezeriņš uses the derived noun consisting of the abstract noun “glītums” (prettiness) preceded by the prefix “ne-” (non-prettiness/non-beauty), thereby emphasising the destruction of boundaries between the beautiful and the ugly emphasised by Wilde in the novel and other decadent writers: “Ne-glītums – viens no septiņiem nāves tikumiem [...]” (literal.: Non-beauty – one of the seven deadly virtues-) (Vailds 2003, 225, underlining mine). Kroders, on the other hand, translates “ugliness” with the noun “kroplība” (deformity) derived from the adjective “kropls” (crippled) and thus focuses on hereditary and undesirable deviations from normality or defects, i.e., he retreats from the aestheticisation of the decadent concepts and the paradigm of beauty: “Kroplība ir viens no septiņiem nāves tikumiem[...]” (literal.: Deformity is one of the seven deadly virtues) (Uailds 1933, 194, underlining mine).

In the depictions of Dorian Gray’s falling in love with Sybil Vane, Wilde supplements the theme of love by focusing not only on destruction and death (so essential for decadent writers) but also on a cold-hearted game with life and death:

There is something to me quite beautiful about her death. I am glad I am living in a century when such wonders happen. They make one believe in the reality of the things we all play with, such as romance, passion, and love. (Wilde 2007, 86)

Es viņas nāvē redzu daudz skaistuma. Man prieks, ka dzīvoju gadsimtā, kurā notiek šādi brīnumi. Tas liek mums ticēt lietu realitātei, ar kurām mēs mēdzam rotaļāties, – kaislei, aizrautībai un mīlai. (Vailds 2003, 122)

Es viņas nāvē redzu daudz ko skaistu. Man prieks, ka dzīvojam laikmetā, kad notiek tādi brīnumi. Tie liek mums ticēt lietu reālībai, ar kurām mēs visi spēlējamies, romantiskas aizrautības, kaislības un mīlestības reālībai. (Uailds 1933, 108, underlining mine)

Ezeriņš's translation conveys an aesthetically playful mood. The adjective "beautiful" is translated by the noun "skaistums" (beauty), emphasizing the paradigm of aestheticism. At the same time, the nomination of two out of three emotions is revealed by the choice of short two-syllable poetic nouns with the endings -a ("mīla" – love), and -e ("kaisle" – passion), avoiding words with suffixes ("mīlestība" – love; "kaislība" – passion) that impart heaviness, i.e., by then newly-coined lexemes which in literary texts were first used by the famous Latvian poet, playwright, and translator Rainis (1865-1929) and which can provoke a specific state of ecstasy and ease (Augstkalne 1968). In Kroders's version, longer prosaic nouns with the suffix -īb- followed by the endings -a ("mīlestība" – love, "kaislība" – passion) are rhymed with the noun "aizrautība" (romance); therefore, to denote "reality", Kroders has selected the synonym "reālība" instead of the more frequently used "realitāte", encountered in Ezeriņš's translation, and has created a new phrase "mīlestības reālība" (love reality) (underlining mine). Thus, by striving for rhythm and inclusion of repetition, which creates a certain stiffness and heaviness of expression, Kroders's translation reduces the effects of aestheticism and decadent playfulness.

Conclusion

Decadence as an aesthetic mode influenced and shaped Latvian literature and provoked ambiguous theorisation in literary criticism. Focusing on the artistic ideal, art for art's sake, and the fusion of life and art, the fascination with decadence in Latvia was associated with an aesthetic-decadent paradigm. As an advocate of the artist's freedom, Wilde became one of the most significant influences on Latvian literature. Both translations of Wilde's novel were published in the inter-war period, in 1920 and 1921 and 1933; however, since the beginning of the 20th century, the novel had been known to Latvian intellectuals, especially those oriented toward modernistic expression who were the most devoted connoisseurs of Wilde. Although the novel had contributed to the emerging literary discourse in Latvian literature via its multiple translations in Russia and Germany and had greatly influenced Latvian early modernists, they were not ready to translate Wilde's decadent expression into Latvian during the most active phase of modernism.

The first translation of the novel was related to early twentieth-century Latvian writers' enthusiasm for West-European modern tendencies and, consequently, its function was to consolidate the reception of aestheticism, decadence, and Wilde as a disseminator of art for art's sake philosophy. The communicative-functional approach of translation employed by Ezeriņš ensured the transference of the contextual meaning of Wilde's novel and thereby also his aesthetic-decadence style of expression.

Kroders's translation addressed the consciousness of young readers and those who, while still being open to literary cosmopolitanism, were giving credit to their "own" culture and language. Consequently, when rendering non-English and decadence-related concepts and phrases into Latvian, he relied on domestication as a translation strategy and laid his emphasis

on the target language. This approach in translating culture-specific references created a certain degree of distortion of the original and failed to fully introduce a foreign culture to its readers.

Ezeriņš's contribution to Latvianizing Wilde's legacy is impressive: he translated fragments from Wilde's *De Profundis* (1910), the stories *Lord Arthur Savile's Crime* (1921, 1922), *The Canterville Ghost* (1920), *The Sphinx without a Secret* (1922), and other works, displaying a deep appreciation of Wilde's work and personality. He approached the novel as a writer-creator and simultaneously as an admirer of beauty. Unlike Kroders, Ezeriņš emphasised the decadent style by underlining the concept of beauty and individuality of decadent characters. The translator's creative approach has contributed significantly to constructing Wilde as the most vivid representative of Aestheticism and, much more than Kroders's, presented a novel as a symbol of decadent expression. The preservation and explanation of non-English and other decadence-related concepts testify to an artistically heartfelt and aesthetically enjoyable approach to both the source- and target-culture and language.

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