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The Transformation of Ugly into Beautiful in the Literature of Decadence

Abstract

The transformation of ugly into beautiful is a feature of decadent literature. The embellishment of ugliness was important for the decadents to distinguish themselves from the followers of Classicism, who rejected the close representation of ugliness, from the naturalists who inserted ugliness in their works for the sake of a faithful representation of reality, and from such writers and theorists, who allowed the representation of ugliness only on condition that it turns the attention to its opposite, *i.e.* the beauty.

The decadents, by inserting ugly subjects in their works, wanted to prove the power of art, which can embellish ugliness too. By their artistic solutions, the decadents showed that ugly subjects need not be banished from literature, because the form of a work is more interesting than the subject. Huysmans writes on his hero, Duke Des Esseintes: “only the work of his brain [the writer’s] interested him, regardless of the subject” (2009: 244).

The decadent embellishment of ugliness had influence on the later periods of literature too. Even if there are important differences between Decadence and Avant-garde, the concept that art can embellish ugliness was a prior condition of the birth of the historical Avant-garde trends.

Keywords: Decadence, beauty, ugliness, Anti-classicism, Anti-naturalism, the power of art.

Transforming ugly into beautiful is an important feature of decadent literature. This phenomenon is shown well also by the fact that the decadents readily accepted the derogatory nickname of ‘decadent,’ proudly bore it and re-evaluated it as a positive attribute. As Roger Bauer states, decline, and especially its prototype, the decline of the Roman Empire, was not beautiful in its historical reality, but it was the decadents who sugarcoated it by adapting this subject to their literary innovation (2001: 7).

Huysmans’ decadent novel, *A Rebours* (1884), is a good example of the decadent embellishment of ugliness. The beautification of syphilis is very interesting. The main character of the novel, Duke

Des Esseintes, buys such flowers whose blotches look like a syphilis ulcer. He stares at the blotches of the caladium contentedly and states: “And now here it was again, reappearing in all its pristine splendour on the brightly colored leaves of these plants!” (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 102). He thinks that Mother Nature cannot create such flowers – it is the gardener (*i.e.* the master) who “finishes off her sketches, signs them with his stamp, impresses on them his artistic hall-mark” (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 102). Thus syphilis becomes a metaphor of artistic creation. The decadent novelist, with his highly artistic view, can afford to choose ugliness as a subject. This concept is also present when Huysmans inserts “great splashes of blood” in the narration of the book (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 62). This appears as a memory recalled by the duke when he is absorbing the taste and aroma of the Irish whisky. He recalls that he did not choose a “well-to-do businessman” dentist but rather went to a “mechanic who called himself a dentist” (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 60). Huysmans writes:

After staying for a while in the street, wondering what to do, he finally mastered his fears and climbed the dark staircase, taking four steps at a time as far as the third floor. There he came up against a door with an enamel plaque repeating the name he had seen on the placard outside. He rang the bell; then, terrified by the sight of great splashes of blood and spittle on the steps, he suddenly turned tail, resolved to go on suffering from toothache for the rest of his life, when a piercing scream came from behind the partition, filling the well of the staircase and nailing him to the spot with sheer horror. At that very moment a door opened and an old woman asked him to come in. ([1884] 1966: 62)

As is observable in the quotation, the “great splashes of blood” take place in an artistic, dense narration with excellent timing of the frightful impressions. He remembers the tooth extraction as a spectacular scene when he was hysterically squealing and stamping his feet: “At this point the drama really began. Clutching the arms of the chair, Des Esseintes felt the cold touch of metal inside his cheeks, then saw a whole galaxy of stars, and in unspeakable agony started stamping his feet and squealing like a stuck pig” (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 62). So the “great splashes of blood” are an organic part of the narrator’s exaggerations, which render the story strongly literary.

Huysmans aimed to fill such domains with artistic values when most of his contemporaries settled for following the usual patterns: François Livi emphasizes that Huysmans changes the French word order, which results in “nervous” sentences (1991: 122). The contemporaries noticed that *A Rebours* broke with linguistic conventions. Jules Lemaître, in his article published in *Revue Contemporaine* in 1885, condemned the language of the novel on the basis that it was full of superfluous neologisms and grammar errors. However Lemaître admits that these do not do harm to the beauty of Huysmans’ language. He adds that sometimes it is the imperfection that makes young writers original (Lemaître 1885: 559). It is not only in the field of sentence creation where Huysmans breaks with tradition. Apart from the frame story there is no plot in the novel. Nothing happens that could happen in a 19th-century neoclassical, romanticist or naturalist novel. Instead of a story, the author provides a portrait of a duke with odd preferences. There are no minor characters. “It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character” (Wilde [1891] 2011: 184), is what the narrator of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* says about the “yellow book,” *i.e.* Huysmans’ *A Rebours*. As Joëlle Gleize asserts, the only thing that changes during the novel is the duke’s neurosis (1992: 197). The innovations in the field of word order and novel structure, in other words, formal originality were for Huysmans more important than the beauty of the subject because, in his conception as expressed in the metaphor of syphilis, art can embellish ugly subjects.

The embellishing of ugliness became an important literary convention in decadent literature. As is also shown by Verlaine's decadent volume *Jadis et Naguère*, decline and related topics, such as weakness, (mental) sickness, misery, suffering and death, are embellished by original associations and particular moods that are present in poems. The decadent embellishment of ugliness also influenced turn-of-the-century Hungarian literature. The Hungarian literary critic Aladár Schöpflin, when reviewing László Cholnoky's short story volume titled *Bartholomew's Night*, observed the narration's embellishing power over ugliness:

Although these short stories accompany their characters to dirty taverns, to vacant lots, where they sleep drunk, and to other ugly places, there is nothing disgusting or frightening in these writings. The environment is unimportant [...], we concentrate on spiritual functions, on the thoughts produced by the drunken brain, and we can only gloat over their strange, morbid beauty. [...] The man who creates art fills the desert with flowers. (Schöpflin 1918: 697)

The Hungarian writer Dezső Kosztolányi's decadent volume of poems, *The Laments of a Poor Little Child* (1910), was an exceptionally artistic representation of such subjects as sickness, death and prostitution. Also, later, Kosztolányi remained faithful to the idea that the beauty of the poem is independent of its subject, and it was from this aspect that he criticized the poetry of Endre Ady, in which the author frequently settled for inserting his favorite topics in the poems and did not work them artistically (Kosztolányi 1929: 7–21).

Anti-classicism

The transformation of ugly into beautiful as an artistic task became important in the fight against classical esthetics as propagated by French official circles even as late as the mid-19th century. Désiré Nisard, who held several high-ranking government offices in his life, suggested in his book, *Histoire de la littérature française* (1844–1861), that writers should follow Boileau's *Art poétique* (Nisard [1844–1861] 1878–1880: 311). In his book, *Études de mœurs et de critiques sur les poètes latins de la décadence* (1834), Nisard examined late Roman literature from a conservative aspect, as Wolfdietrich Rasch, François Livi and Matei Calinescu similarly assert (Rasch 1986: 23; Livi 1991: 105; Calinescu [1977] 1987: 165). Although Nisard admitted that late Roman literature had certain merits, his overall opinion was negative. He believed that late Roman literature lacked true values. He drew a parallel between late Roman literature and Romanticism, which, in his interpretation, meant a decline in comparison with Classicism: “Le temps de la poésie est fini en France [...] Il n'y a pas d'exemple d'une langue qui ait eu deux beaux âges de poésie. [...] sa belle langue est marquée de tous les symptômes de décadence” (Nisard [1834] 1878: 393). The conservative critic Armand de Pontmartin believed that classical antiquity should serve as a model for writers. He condemned Dumas fils' *Lady of the Camellias* as a “Théâtre de la Décadence” because the play did not follow the rules of classical drama and because its main character was a prostitute (Rasch 1986: 24).

Classical esthetics rejected close representation of ugliness. Although Boileau, in *Art poétique*, mentions art's ability to beautify ugliness, he also states that it should be carried out by following the classical Greek dramas, where ugliness, rudeness and violence were not shown on the stage but subsequently informed about by a character: “il est des objets que l'Art judicieux / Doit offrir à l'oreille

et reculer des yeux” ([1674] 1966: 171). Winckelmann highly appreciated the fact that on the statue of Laocoön and His Sons, Laocoön’s face does not show anger despite his suffering. This statue and Virgil’s *Aeneid* were regarded by Lessing as examples of an appropriate representation of suffering. Lessing accepted the poetic description of pain on the condition that the poet also showed other, elevated moments of the character’s life ([1766] 1990: 35–36). He rejected the representation of suffering in visual arts on the basis that only one single moment can be recorded by these. And as for what was disgusting, Lessing thought that it could be important in the domain of the ridiculous, but disgusting itself must not be the subject of painting or poetry ([1766] 1990: 174–175).

Huysmans, in his decadent novel *A Rebours*, strongly rejects classicism. Des Esseintes does not accept classical ideals such as moral education, or elevated subjects and style. According to Des Esseintes, the classical Latin that is propagated by teachers is boring, contains predictable phrases and lacks nuances. He thinks “that idiom could, at a pinch, enunciate the pompous platitudes and vague commonplaces endlessly repeated by the rhetoricians and poets of the time, but it was so tedious and unoriginal that in the study of linguistics you had to come down to the French style current in the age of Louis XIV to find another idiom so wilfully debilitated, so solemnly tiresome and dull” (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 40). Des Esseintes considers Virgil as “one of the most appalling pedants and one of the most deadly bores that Antiquity ever produced” (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 40). He dislikes Virgil’s “well-washed, beribboned shepherds taking it in turns to empty over each other’s heads jugs of icy-cold sententious verse” (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 40). However, he is an admirer of Petronius, who did not choose an elevated subject, but depicted “the vices of a decrepit civilization, a crumbling Empire”¹ “in a splendidly wrought style” without any moral judgements (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 44). Petronius’ stylistic fineness reminds Des Esseintes of his favorite contemporary French writers who were not esteemed by official circles (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 44). According to the narrator, “the only thing that interested him was the working of the writer’s brain, no matter what subject he was tackling” (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 179–180). If it is not the subject that matters but the artistic creativity, then ugliness should not be banished from literature. By inserting ugliness into literature and creating new values in the field of form, Huysmans gives an artistic response to the classical norm, which prescribed elevated subjects and traditional techniques.

Anti-naturalism

The decadent concept of the beautification of ugliness must be distinguished from the naturalists’ views. The naturalists also inserted ugliness into their literary works by choosing subjects despised by the followers of classicism or by depicting the ugliness of the milieu. But there is a very important difference – for the naturalists, ugliness was a part of faithful representation. Zola writes:

Our analysis will always be cruel, because our analysis goes to the bottom of the human body. High and low we throw ourselves at the beast. Certainly there are veils mere or less numerous, but when we have described them one after another, and when we have lifted up the last one, we see behind it more dirt than flowers. This is why our books are so black, so severe. We do not seek for what is repugnant – we find it; and if we try to hide it we must lie about it or at least leave it incomplete. ([1881] 1893: 271–272)

1 Huysmans’ error. In that age the Roman Empire still did not show any symptom of crumbling.

Unlike the naturalists, the decadents were not interested in faithful representation. Vivian in Oscar Wilde's *The Decay of Lying* expresses his dissatisfaction with the spread of realism in literature, which he considers as boring and without fantasy. He says: "The ancient historians gave us delightful fiction in the form of fact; the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction" (Wilde [1891] 1905: 8). According to him, "All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature and elevating them into ideals" (Wilde [1891] 1905: 54). By representing ugliness, the naturalists aimed to improve society. The decadents, however, were not interested in society but separated art from it. For this reason Duke Des Esseintes appreciates that Mallarmé

in an age of universal suffrage and a time of commercial greed, lived outside the world of letters, sheltered from the raging folly all around him by his lofty scorn; taking pleasure, far from society, in the caprices of the mind and the visions of his brain; refining upon thoughts that were already subtle enough, grafting Byzantine niceties on them, perpetuating them in deductions that were barely hinted at and loosely linked by an imperceptible thread. (Huysmans [1884] 1966: 160)

Although it considers two different concepts, Naturalism and Decadence can be present in the same work. Edmond and Jules de Goncourt's novel, *Germinie Lacerteux*, is an example of this. The authors write in the preface of the book that they also want to deal with the sufferings of lower class people in their novel. However, the concept that art can embellish ugliness is also present in this work. According to David Weir (1996: 57), "the use of precious and careful style in the presentation of ugliness" can be observed in the novel. Weir emphasizes that the description of Germinie's ugliness ends with an unexpected turn:

From this ugly woman emanated a piquant, mysterious charm. Light and shadow, jostling and intercepting each other on her face on which hollows and protuberances abounded, imparted to it that suggestion of libertinism which the painter of love scenes gives to the rough sketch of his mistress. Everything about her,—her mouth, her eyes, her very plainness—was instinct with allurements and solicitation. (de Goncourt & de Goncourt 1865)

The description draws attention to the idea that unusual perception or thinking has power over ugliness. This unusual manner of thinking is related to art. As David Weir reveals, the description of Germinie's ugliness is highly artistic and is similar in tone and in the use of color motifs (yellow and gray) to the description of Montmartre:

The sky was of a leaden hue, with occasional cold, bluish streaks as if ink had been applied with a brush! over Montmartre there was a light streak, of a yellow color, like the Seine water after heavy rains. Above that wintry beam the wings of an invisible windmill turned and turned,—slow-moving wings, unvarying in their movement, which seemed to be turning for eternity. (de Goncourt & de Goncourt 1865)

According to David Weir, the metaphor comparing the sky over Montmartre to an artist's canvas washed with ink serves to underline "the decadent predisposition to replace nature with art, and to use style at a distance from subject matter traditionally handled in the realist mode" (Weir 1996: 56).

The rupture with the romanticist contrast between ugly and beautiful

The decadent idea of embellishing ugliness must also be distinguished from such romanticist concepts that, in art, the role of ugliness is to turn attention to its opposite, *i.e.* beauty. Victor Hugo, who also used

this tool to emphasize beauty, wrote in the preface of *Cromwell*: “La salamandre fait ressortir l’ondine; le gnome embellit le sylphe. [...] Croit-on que Françoise de Rimini et Béatrix seraient aussi ravissantes chez un poète qui ne nous enfermerait pas la tour de la Faim et ne nous forcerait point à partager le repoussant repas d’Ugolin?” ([1827] 1932: 24). The German philosopher Karl Rosenkranz, in his book *Asthetik des Häßlichen*, which was published in 1853, treated ugliness as a dialectical counterpart of beauty and related it with a lack of freedom. He, too, approved of the representation of ugliness only on condition that it turned one’s attention to beauty. His example is caricature, where disproportions necessarily recall the right proportions and which, via its comic character, has a liberating effect (Rosenkranz 1853: 63). The decadents, however, when using ugliness in literature did not aim to turn anyone’s attention to the right proportions, or moral ideas, or to the beauty of the characters of their works, but wanted instead to prove art’s capability to embellish ugliness.

Baudelaire’s volume, *Les Fleurs du mal*, was an important precedent for the decadents to transform ugliness into beauty. Baudelaire’s particularly artistic representation of decline and related themes was already praised by Théophile Gautier, who appreciated the “refined and subtle” structure of the poems, which enables one to see “the morbidly rich tints of decomposition, the tones of mother-of-pearl which freeze stagnant waters [...] the hateful bilious yellows, the leaden gray of pestilential fogs, the poisoned and metallic greens smelling of sulphide and arsenic [...] and all that gamut of intensified colours, correspondent to autumn, to the setting of the sun, to over-ripe fruit, and the last hour of civilisation” (Gautier 2013: 36). It needs to be emphasized, however, that in several poems of the volume, ugliness is still represented as the opposite of beauty; for example, in *L’albatros*, Baudelaire explicitly contrasts poets’ spiritual superiority with their sufferings: “Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées / Ses ailes de géant l’empêchent de marcher” (2014: 78). By way of this contrast, Baudelaire applies a centuries-old literary convention – the concept of the miserable lives of poets (Santarcangeli 1980), which was later also adopted by the decadents, e.g. by Verlaine, in his *Poètes maudits* (1884 and 1888). Although the decadents also sometimes used this centuries-old tradition, they refused to use the traditional contrast between ugly and beautiful; they only wanted to show that art can embellish ugliness. When Huysmans writes about his hero that “only the work of his brain [the writer’s] interested him, regardless of the subject” (2009: 244), and when he represents ugliness in an unusual way, he does not recognize the contrast between elevated and ugly subjects but wants to prove that ugliness can be transformed into beauty through the writer’s skills.

Towards the Avant-garde

The concept that art can embellish ugliness not only resulted in decadent works of high value, but also influenced later literary trends. This concept was a prior condition of the birth of the historical Avant-garde trends even if there were important differences between Decadence and the Avant-garde. The enervated characters of the decadents’ works would have considered Marinetti’s or Mayakovsky’s poetry too shrill. The role that surrealists attributed to chance in art was contrary to the decadents’ sympathy for artificiality. Most avant-garde artists rejected the concept of “l’art pour l’art,” and aimed to change society. Despite the differences, the Avant-garde owes much to Decadence. When avant-garde authors intended their works for a society-improving role, it was not by representing reality that they wanted to reach this aim but by provoking, or even shocking their readers. According to Peter Bürger, the most important objective of avant-garde art was to shock the public ([1974] 2010: 25). To shock

the readers they applied such methods as making connections between distant, unrelated subjects, using rude expressions, or utilizing the acoustic nature of the language. The unusual linking of distant subjects can be regarded as a continuation of the Baudelairean mysterious “correspondences,” even if in avant-garde art these connections often entirely lose their conventional meanings or cannot be interpreted even as inversions of the conventions. The use of rude expressions in literature was preceded by the decadents’ concept that art has power over lowly subjects and expressions, and therefore these need not be banished from literature. In using the acoustic nature of the language the decadents were initiators, since Verlaine, and later the symbolists too, aimed to transform poetry into music through which to fulfill their idea that the beauty of a poem is independent of its topic. Thus the concept that art embellishes ugliness is a milestone in the history of literature.

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