Narcissuses, Medusas, Ophelias... Water Imagery And Femininity In The Texts By Two Decadent Women Writers

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In the *fin-de-siècle* art and literature, women and water are tightly connected, as it is clear from many icons of womanhood associated with water popular with the Symbolist and Decadent artists and writers. Water has been traditionally connected with life, birth and re-birth, creation and creativity, but also with death and oblivion. The water surface often serves as a kind of a mirror. As Bram Dijkstra points out, in many works of art the "natural mirror" of water appears as the source of woman's being "from which, like Venus, she had come and to which, like Ophelia, she was destined to return" (Dijkstra 1986, 132). Venus/Aphrodite, "born of the sea foam," the "goddess of love and beauty, poetry and art, laughter and lovemaking," can be seen as an empowering symbol of the "New Woman," as the feminist interpretations of Kate Chopin's *Awakening* have shown (e.g. Gilbert 1984).[1] The "decorous," mad Ophelia, "committing herself to a watery grave" (cf. Dijkstra 1986, 42-48), suited more the Decadent mode.[2] As a kind of a counterpart to the passive Ophelia in the *fin-de-siècle* art and literature we can see Medusa, who, with her "paralyzing eyes and bestial proclivities was the very personification of all that was evil in the gynander" (Dijkstra 1986, 309), the masculine woman-monster about which Decadents fantasised and which they dreaded.

The motif of the mirror and reflection unites Medusa with Ophelia: Ophelia can be considered a mirror, a reflection of man for whom and through whom she exists.

[1] I use the term "New Woman" to point to any attempt by the *fin-de-siècle* thinkers, artists and writers to create a concept of female subjectivity different from previous ones, a discursive construction based predominantly on the concerns of middle class women.

[2] By Decadent mode, I point to the aesthetic of the Decadent movement which originated in the late 19th century France and spread quickly over Europe. Its main characteristics are refusal of mimesis, conceiving of reality "aesthetically", not "realistically", autonomy and privacy of art in relation to "life" and "reality", the worship of the unnatural and artificial, extreme subjectivism and egocentricity, eccentricity, the taste for bizarre, fantastic and mystic, exoticism, eroticism and perversion, detailed analysis of elaborated and refined sensations (cf. e.g. Cuddon 1977, Pierrot 1981).

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Medusa, on the other hand, can represent woman's unwillingness to become man's reflection, though the mirror turns out to be fateful for her. The most emblematic figure of Decadent art, connected with the mirror motif (a water-mirror motif), is, nevertheless, Narcissus, a figure explored as a prototype of endless self-analysis and aestheticised androgyny.

My concern is the way in which women writers whose work can be characterised as Decadent and/or Symbolist[3] used these figures as well as the imagery of women/femininity and water in conjunction with the above-mentioned figures. When analysing this aspect of their work, I am looking at the ways in which these writers created and co-created the Decadent imagery, what strategies they adopted in their representations of woman and the construction of female subjectivity, how they dealt with tropes and with the metaphorisation and abstractisation of women, so heavily present in Decadent art. As it has been pointed out by feminist literary critics and aestheticians, many women writers and thinkers twisted the figures of Narcissus (or its female version, Narcissa) and Medusa into empowering symbols, or used them to explore questions of gender. I focus on two turn-of-the-19th-and-20th-century Decadent women writers,[4] the French Rachilde (Marguerite Eyméry-Vallette, 1860-1953) and the Finnish L. Onerva (Hilja Onerva Lehtinen, 1882-1972), whose texts can serve as examples of different strategies in turn-of-the-century (Decadent) women's writing.

Both Narcissus and Medusa associate the Freudian elaboration of the pertinent myths, though, as far as the turn-of-the-century thought and art is concerned, the direct influence of the Freudian discourse and of psychoanalysis is not always necessarily relevant. As mentioned above, Medusa often stands for the dreaded gynander, while Narcissus is a typical embodiment of a feminine figure, who is, nevertheless, a man. As Rita Felski put it, "femininity was to become a governing metaphor in the *fin-de-siècle*

[3] While in French literature, where many Modernist artistic trends originated, there is a clear division between Symbolism and Decadence, in some other literatures, Decadence and Symbolism are difficult to differentiate and appear as two sides of one coin – this concerns especially cultures where the *mélange* of the turn-of-the-century artistic currents was referred to by an umbrella name of Neo-Romanticism, as was the case in the Nordic countries, particularly Finland (cf. Lyytikäinen 1997, 13).

[4] By "woman writer" I mean a writer who belongs through her socio-cultural attributes to the category/construction/position called "woman" in a certain historical situation and context. By Decadent writer I mean a writer whose texts are, at least during a certain period, dominated by Decadent poetics.

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crisis of literary representation, linked to an aesthetic definition of modernity" (1995, 91). The feminisation of the *fin-de-siècle* aesthetic discourse has been often associated with the crisis of dominant ideals of masculinity in the 19th century; however, the femininity that the aesthetes worshipped was detached completely from "real women." Femininity was usually accredited value only as a "free-floating signifier - as part of a performance" (Felski 1994, 1099) of the artist-androgyne, who was never figured as a woman, but as an effeminate male. The discourse became gendered with the emphasis on the artificiality of the valued feminine, predicating the power of feminine artifice upon a radical disavowal of and dissociation from the "natural" body of the woman, which was perceived as abhorring and vulgar, as anything "natural" in Decadence. Though claiming to have broken with the earlier aesthetic tradition, Decadents, echoing in many ways the contemporary "scientific discourse", repeated the stereotype of the Kantian "bearded woman" when figuring intelligent, creative women as masculinised monsters. Though seemingly subverting the fixed gender roles, Decadents kept the "hard boundaries" in their approaching the "Other" (cf. Gagnier 1994) and avoided any deeper questioning of the gender system and its hierarchies, let alone to align themselves with the feminist movement; generally speaking, Decadents perceived feminists as gynanders *par excellence*. The hypertrophy of the abstract feminine was, consequently, a complex challenge for the woman writers, "real women" themselves, confronted with the "Woman" as sign, style, figure or metaphor of man's femininity, a stylistic pose of the Decadent dandy within the framework of his protest against the bourgeois ideal of masculinity.

Constructivist Essentialism and Parodic Masquerade

If we look at the texts of Decadent women writers from the point of view of constructing female subjectivity, we can detect two main strategies. The first strategy consists of re-appropriation of various icons and metaphors of womanhood, including those that are associated with evil and doom in the Decadent discourse**.** The Decadent women writers who adopted this strategy twisted the Decadent generalizations about women into empowering images or even political gestures. Female body is aestheticised from an

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explicitly female point of view and metaphors of motherhood are (re)appropriated by women. We can call this strategy "constructivist essentialism," using the term Ebba Witt-Brattström coined for analogical strategies adopted by some Modernist women writers (Witt-Brattström 2003). The Decadent idea of woman as "vulgar", "natural" and "primitive" is changed into an empowering project: if women *are* their bodies, they can take the right to the bodily environment (cf. Butler 1986/1998, 37) and fill it with new meanings.

The strategy allows appropriation of various mythic female monsters which function in the Decadent aesthetics as prototypes of "stained," "Medusean" beauty, perceived as transgressive, and change them into empowering images (cf. e.g. Suleiman 1986, 20). Woman as the other is seen as the "first sex," the norm, which should not be defined in relation to man. In this context, narcissism, which, in case of woman, is often depicted as an expression of trivial vanity in Decadence (cf. e.g. Dijkstra 1986), can work as a symbol of woman's creativity and self-sufficiency. With the help of such projects, it was possible to re-map woman's body, to re-formulate the sexual difference from the explicitly woman's point of view. Thus women got an opportunity to ask questions about "female nature" and sexuality that could hardly be possible to ask otherwise, as well as to appropriate Decadent ideas about beauty and twist them into empowering images. As a certain continuation of this strategy (to appropriate and re-appropriate, embody, the idea of woman as the aesthetic sex) can be seen e.g. in some later feminist conceptions of narcissism as "self-love," which was often aimed against the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality. Female subjectivity and creativity is connected with female beauty and pleasure.

As a counterpoint to the "constructivist essentialism" are strategies that question all essences from the point of view of both sex/gender and sexuality. Some Decadent women writers internalised the Decadents' contempt for real women and everything "real" by means of using the strategies of masking and masquerade typical of Decadent artists. In the name of these strategies all ideas about essential sexual difference were refused. These textual and other performances can be analysed by means of Judith Butler's theory of performativity (Butler 1990): the polarities of sex and gender, body and

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mind, masculine and feminine are erased (concepts of the androgyne as a "feminine mind in man's body" and of the gynander as a "masculine mind in female body" lose their meaning).

The constructivist essentialism and the Decadent masquerade can be also seen as two sides of the same coin: "true" femaleness and femininity can be viewed as masks in the same way as the "gynandry" or Decadent versions of androgyny. Some strategies can be also seen as a kind of Lucy Irigaray's *mimicry/mimesis (mimétism)*. According to this strategy, woman appropriates the feminine style and position dedicated to her in discourse. By copying this position it is possible to reveal mechanism by which discourse misuses woman (cf. Irigaray 1977/1985, 220) and starts producing new images.

Rachilde's and Onerva's use of water imagery within the framework of Decadent aesthetics I am going to discuss represent two ways of negotiating between the above strategies. At the first sight, Rachilde's work seem to represent the Decadent version of gender masquerade without much to say about concrete, "real" women. L. Onerva's works, for their part, seem to offer an explicitly female version of Decadent poetics. Close reading of their texts offers, nevertheless, a more complex picture.

Rachilde: Narcissus and Medusa – Revenge of the Cannibalised Feminine

Rachilde, called by her contemporaries Mademoiselle Baudelaire, was one of the most visible

Decadent figures in Paris. Dressing as a man, she draw attention both by her unconventional looks and behaviour and her exacerbatedly Decadent novels with themes as sado-masochism, homosexuality and necrofilia. Later on, she was almost forgotten and has been re-discovered by the feminist literary criticism only in the last decades. However, the feminist critics' response to her work was, for a long time, rather uneasy since she distanced herself programmatically from "women's literature" and, pursuant to the Decadent elitism, refused any solidarity with women as a group. A re-evaluation of her work and its deeper analyses happened only in the last decade when feminist literary criticism focuses on questions as performativity, cross-dressing and female authorship (see especially Felski 1995, Holmes 2001, Hawthorne 2002).

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In many Rachilde's texts, we can find manifestations of distance from "real," "biological" womanhood: the heroine Raoule from the novel *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) dresses as a man and acts as a creator-Pygmalion, choosing as the object of creation, as a lover-Galateia, a man from a lower social class. She manipulates him even after his death, turning him into a wax figure which she visits dressed sometimes as a woman, sometimes as a man . The way Rachilde thematises perversion leads to interpretations according to which Rachilde tries to appropriate perversion for women. She is polemic with the contemporary conviction that women lack the transgressive erotic fantasy which is necessary for "real" perversion and are to be associated only with hysteria, which Rachilde tries to "masculinise" (cf. Felski 1995). In other texts, we find not only distance, but direct disgust with the female corporeality. Mary from the novel *La marquise de Sade* (1887) is not an androgynous figure like Raoule, but, ironically enough, she is a highly "feminine" woman. Seducing men in order to destroy them, Mary wants to take revenge because she was born a woman. She hates all manifestations of her womanhood. Femininity as a metaphor for seduction is made use of in a ironic way since the scope of seduction is a sadistic manipulation, traditionally defined as masculine. Mary accepts a mask of womanhood as a strategy. Just like Raoule, she refuses any clearly defined gender identity: she does not want to be a woman, but she hates the "real" men as well. Neither is lesbian identity an option. From the point of view of recent feminist and gender theories about performativity and transgender, we can read Rachilde's stories as an example of gender masquerade. There is no integral personality under the mask which could after its removal show any unequivocal gender identity: both gender and sexuality appear as mutable, performative acts (cf. e.g. Butler 1990, Garber 1992).

The disgust with physical, biological womanhood which we find in many Rachilde's texts could (given also Rachilde's open distancing from women's movement and her denial of any matrilineage) lead to an interesting, but a rather one-sided interpretation of gender and figurations of femininity in her work. I will question such interpretation using Rachilde's texts from the 1890s, namely the novel *La Tour d´amour* (1899), analysing the water imagery in this novel and concentrating on the use of the figures of Narcissus and Medusa. The name of the novel points to the lighthouse which

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can be seen, at the first sight, as a symbol of a self-confident rationality, safety and civilisation, while the sea associates otherness, the unknown, chaos, elemental forces and danger. The task of the guardians of the lighthouse, the old eccentric Barnabas Mathuerin and the young Jean Maleux, the narrator of the story, is a defense of civilization against disorder and barbarity, of the law against chaos. These oppositions that Jean understands as unswerving do, however, begin to intermingle. Jean finds out that Mathuerin is no prototype of a lion-hearted manhood, capable and willing to tame the powerful water element. Mathuerin wears a cap on which there is attached long female hair and at night he sings with a voice of sirens.

Mathuerin "cures" Jean from his interest in women who are alive and brings him into a strange narcissist state: he persuades Jean that "living women" are only a nuisance and that "our skin is the best thing." Jean ceases to wear shirts in order to be "closer to his own skin" and starts to dream about the drowned beauties from shipwrecks. What contributes to this development is also his experience with "living women." He is obviously afraid of women of the same age and social status and chooses totally uneven relationships (e.g. a Moor prostitute or a fifteen-year old country girl), destined to fail. Dead women who do not talk back and, as Mathuerin says, "cannot cuckold us", women whose passivity allows space for fantasy and whose physicality does not represent a menace, take gradually over in Jean's dreams. He realizes that he never loved any "living" woman, that he loved only the idea of Love, desiring the aestheticised idea of desire, which a real woman could only damage. Like Narcissus does not hear the voice of Echo, Jean excludes the knowing, the seeing and the pleasure of the female (cf. Segal 1988, 6).

Gradually, Jean discovers that the hair on Mathuerin's cap belonged to dead women from shipwrecks, and understands that Mathuerin is a necrophiliac. When doing repairs on the lighthouse from outside, Jean discovers Mathuerin's most horrible secret, hidden at the window of the room whose door is always locked: it is a head of a young woman, kept in a glass jar. Due to a plant, growing from the jar and falling around in cascades like big, rich hair, the head resembles Medusa's head. It takes some time before Jean realizes that he is not looking at a reflection of his own face in the glass surface of the window, but at a face behind his reflection, behind two glass surfaces – that of the

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window and that of the glass jar: he realizes that the ghostly watery vision is situated beyond the glass, *inside* the lighthouse. Just like Narcissus in some versions of the story, Jean has difficulties to differentiate his reflection from the image of the other. Rachilde plays a rich game with hierarchically conceived dualist metaphors, based on the oppositions inside - outside, human being – *his* mirror reflection, self – other, etc. (cf. Johnson 1987/1990, Haste 1993, 43-44; my italics).

We can read the scene like an ironic version of the Narcissus' story and its various variants; in some of them, in order to erase the homoerotic motifs of the story, Narcissus mistakes his reflection for a woman or a water nymph. In the turn-of-the-century art, this illusory woman stands often for an ideal, the "better half" of the man, which he desperately pursues (cf. Lyytikäinen 1997, 20). In Rachilde's text, this ideal woman is turned into a terrifying gorgon who, though already dead and seemingly disempowered, petrifies the man with her look. The Freudian meaning of narcissism as an unconscious search for oneself in the other is ironically twisted and Jean's position can be interpreted as a critique of the male subject who projects his own ego on the world, which then becomes a mirror enabling him to see his own reflection wherever he looks; a critique of the isolated, homosocial/hom(m)osexual environment, where "the satisfaction of the instincts is partly or completely positioned as independent from other people" (Freud 1921/1940, 69), as a kind of regressive narcissism. In other words, this position is deaf to the embodied others, maintaining that "our skin is the best."

In Freud's rendering of the story, the water mirror, a pool into which Narcissus looks, surrounded by long grass and hidden away from sun, is interpreted as mother's genitals, as mother's body (Freud 1919/1985). Thus the narcissist can bee seen as seeking his own image within the frame of the mother's body (Segal 1988, 8-9). Given Freud's interpretation of the head of Medusa as vagina (Freud 1940/1955), we find in the above mentioned scene from *La Tour d'amour* a complex mirroring, in which the narcissist seems to be looking at himself, but the mirror refuses to reassure him of his identity and he is is actually haunted by the face of the woman, the mother (cf. Segal 1988, 13).[5]

[5] When discussing this scene, Melanie C. Hawthorne draws parallells with Rachilde's own life: "The reflection also speaks specifically to Rachilde's sense of failure. She thought she had become 'un homme de lettres', but the mirror shows instead a woman." (Hawthorne 2001, 195).

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The novel with its highly ironic title can be interpreted as a pessimist vision of the crisis of the male subject and the logocentric civilization at the *fin-de-siècle*: the phallic lighthouse does not offer the heroes a safe refuge, it ceases to be what it had pretended to be all the time: a steadfast asylum of Law and rationality. The tower erected proudly to the heavens and appropriating a divine authority becomes a warning finger pointing to the void. As Mathuerin points out several times, the God is dead. The Law of the Father, nevertheless, remains. As an empty shell it is even crueler than before and mercilessly punishes those who betrayed its laws. This symbolic function of the lighthouse is predicted already in Jean's hallucinatory visions at the beginning of the novel when he, drunk, falls into the sea and almost drowns:

> I am leaning my head backwards in order to see the heaven, but there is no heaven any more, there is a monster, a lighthouse which is growing, getting bigger and it looks as if erected on my belly. It seems to me I have to bear it and it is crushing me, the horrible lighthouse, completely naked (...) It is opening its mouth... nothing more than mouth (...) It is blind, but devours me nonetheless... (Rachilde 1899, 10).[6]

The metaphoric opposition lighthouse/law – sea/chaos is thus questioned already in this overture. While the sea, described as a monstrous, "wild old woman," is trying to pull Jean into the depths of irrationality, oblivion and doom, he seems to hear the siren singing "the song of destruction *inside* the tower." Also the deconstruction of the opposition sea – heaven is indicated already at the beginning: "... water is becoming clouds, an inverted sky..." It is repeatedly confirmed: "The lighthouse soared, huge, pointed as a menace towards the sky, it loomed up, giant, towards the bloody mouth, towards the black crack in the heavenly light since it was attracted there by the supreme duty to be as great as god" (Rachilde 1899, 55).

In a way typical for the Decadent transgression, Rachilde questions the images of the polarity of heights and depths inspired by neo-platonism and mysticism by means of manipulation of metaphors. The heights associate light, the higher (divine) principle; the way to the heights leads, at the same time, towards the "real" self of the creative subject, while the depths mean the darkness of the prison of the matter. In the Christian

[6] The translations of Rachilde's texts are mine.

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symbolism, this polarity is explicitly expressed by the opposition of the Christian heaven and hell, which offers the seeker two alternatives: to follow the God's Word and Law, or to fall into sin and perdition.[7] Rachilde ironises and turns upside down the automatised space metaphors, typical not only of the Symbolist poetics, but also deeply rooted in the Western art and Western culture in general; metaphors, in which the good, the positive, consciousness, health, life, authority, morality and rationality are situated always up, while evil, negativity, unconscious, disease, death, absence of authority, amorality, emotionality and all the rest associating otherness are situated down (cf. Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

The hero of *La Tour d'amour* tries to defy the pernicious influence of his stay in the lighthouse during his last trip to the land which culminates in a murder of an unknown prostitute. Jean has a triumphant feeling, that he "killed the sea," often paralleled with a loose woman, a sexually aroused, horrible, all devouring female monster; in the French original, the homonym of 'la mer' (sea) and 'la mère' (mother) point also to the triumph over the maternal and the victory of the paternal (cf. Hawthorne 2001, 195; Holmes 2001, 160).[8] After his return to the lighthouse, Jean finds Mathuerin in a deep regression – apart from the fact that Mathuerin had long before forgotten how to write and read, he is now also forgetting to speak and seems to have fallen into a "prelinguistic" state, in the Lacanian-Kristevan terminology a pre-Symbolic, Semiotic state (cf. Kristeva 1974/1984). He regains the ability to speak only before he dies, when he asks Jean to return his "lover in the jar" to the Ocean. After Mathuerin's death, Jean remains alone in the lighthouse and starts to observe in himself symptoms similar with those of Mathuerin's: he starts to

[7] For elaboration of this motif, see e.g. Lyytikäinen 1997. In Rachilde's texts, such deconstruction of the polarities happens quite often. As an example, we can quote the short story *Les Vendages du Sodome* (1894). The story depicts a symbolic refusal and, eventually, also a brutally graphic destruction of woman by patriarchal masculinity and her replacement with abstract effeminacy and ho(m)mosexual bond between men. The heroes of the story, lead by an old patriarch, depart from a tower, whose whiteness contrasts with the bright colours of the vineyard; it also contrasts with the "violet sky", towards which it is pointed and which seems to fuse with the vineyard of the same colour (cf. Rachilde 1894/1993).

[8] At this point, both Melanie C. Hawthorne and Diana Holmes point to the temptation to see Jean as a fictional version of Rachilde herself: "Like the motherless Jean, [Rachilde] felt betrayed and threatened by women, and despite an acute awareness of the absurdities and dangers of the 'masculine fortress' of decadence, she opted for its protective walls. In this novel, projecting her struggle to disassociate from the feminine onto a male figure, for whom the acquisition of masculine status is truly possible, Rachilde nonetheless manages to suggest the fragility of gender." (Holmes 2001, 161, cf. also Hawthorne 2001, 195).

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forget to write and to speak, he is afraid he might also forget the alphabet and feels he must hurry to write down his story: "... And I am mad since I do not hope for anything, I do not expect anything ... not even the drown beauty during tide!" (Rachilde 1899, 70).

Water, sea and ocean (as well as nature in general) has been often used as a metaphor of femininity, as a symbol pointing to elemental, unrestrained womanhood, an emblematic "other," mysterious, horrible and irrational, against which the male subject constructs itself as the guardian of rationality, the Lord and Master of the universe (cf. e.g. Lloyd 1984). The masculine world suppresses the female element, dominates it and keeps it in distance. In Modernity, the typical concept of nature was instrumental: nature is a means, which can be used in human projects, it should be controlled, tamed and socialised according to the needs of man (Giddens 1991, Lloyd 1984, see also Melkas 2006). The Decadents, sceptical and hostile towards these concepts, ironised them within their despisal of any idea of progress and the dread of technical civilization (e.g. Pynsent 1989). They would deconstruct the model of rational masculinity and would rather "cannibalize" the dangerous and fascinating feminine[9], construct its surrogates by imprisoning it in their fantasy: aestheticising it, they would use it for their needs and thus render it "harmless."

If we understand the drowned women and the woman-Medusa in a metonymical way,[10] we find a connection between the drowned women, the severed female head and the sea – a connection that allows us to conceive the "drowned beauties" and the head-Medusa as a part of the water element, which, at the same time, associates metaphorically the unbound feminine. This more concrete interpretation emphasises a fragmentation of the physical femaleness and its mutilation; if we recall that some figurations of the Medusa in the *fin-de-siècle* art have been characterised as "nightmare visualisation[s] of woman as predatory sexual being" (cf. Dijkstra 1986, 310), the severed woman's head in

[9] The concept of "cannibalisation of the feminine" has been used e.g. by Diane Hoeveler in her study on the Romantic androgyny. Hoeveler points out that the majority of ideals of womanhood that appears in the texts of the prominent Romantic poets can be understood only within the framework of the poets' "literary absorption" and "cannibalisation" of the feminine, which appears as a supplement of the male psyche, as projection or a symbolic extension of the male ego (Hoeveler 1990, xvi, 2). In Decadence, such "cannibalization" often implies the complex game of gender masquerade as obvious from stylistic poses of the dandy, the artist-androgyne in the figure of the effeminate man, as mentioned above.

[10] For the radical re-evaluation and re-conceptualisation of the trope of metonymy and its use for the feminist thought see e.g. Irigaray 1977/1985, Irigaray 1984/1993.

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the jar, reminding the hero of the Medusa's head, can be seen as an attempt to tame and punish the frightening feminine other. The aestheticised association of woman/femininity with water, seduction and death (cf. Kalnická 2003)[11] is ironically twisted in Rachilde's novel: women are forced into the position of a seductress by their tragic death, after which they are cruelly mutilated and "cannibalised" by the narcissist men. As suggested above and as Rita Felski has noted in conjunction with *La marquise de Sade*, the idealization of seduction as feminine (cf. Baudrillard 1979/1990) "explicitly denies its imbrication in gender power relations," while the texts of Rachilde, by contrast, "suggest a very different vision of seduction that is immediately linked to, rather than severed from, hierarchical dynamics of power and the articulation of sadistic desire" (Felski 1995, 190).

The more the womanhood as otherness in *La Tour d'amour* gets suppressed, refused and mutilated, the more aggressively it takes control over the world of the phallic Law – it penetrates this world from inside, just like the sea penetrates the lighthouse, like the song of the sirens penetrated Mathuerin's body, like the cut off head of the "ultimate siren," the dead woman-Medusa intermingles and overlaps with Jean's reflection in the window glass, reminding him of the "initial matricide"[12] – as if the victim came back to haunt the slayer. The stories of Narcissus and Medusa intermingle and overlap. This powerful wave, this "backlash" in the form of a counter-attack of the repressed otherness, does not, however, stop where it "should," i.e. in the male hero's fantasy, but it disturbs the very foundation of the male subject which gradually loses control over the degree of the absorption of the feminine. The aestheticised fragmentation, "disintegration" of language typical of Decadent aesthetics (e.g. Bourget 1883, Reed 1985), is replaced with the disintegration of language as the emblem of the Symbolic order. The phallic Law does not offer men any support – it crushes them with its demands, but it does not grant the former security and safety. As if the "female" element would like to take revenge on

[11] The connection of these elements in philosophy and art has been analysed from the gender viewpoint by Zdeňka Kalnická (see Kalnická 2003).
[12] Luce Irigaray speaks about a buried act of matricide, on which all of Western culture rests (Irigaray 1981, 81), the destructive imagery of our society on which our society is constructed (cf. Whitford 1991, 33-34).

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men,[13] who refuse to concede voice to the "living women" and listen to them (in the novel, the question is e.g. about Jean's lovers, whose version of the story remains untold), isolating and abstracting the female principle from these real, living women, whom they treat as meaningless and interchangeable. In this way, *La Tour d'amour* connects with Rachilde's texts that deal with female sadistic fantasy, the motivating force of which is revenge: "a violent response to the previous condition of [female] powerlessness and impotent rage" (Felski 1995, 191). Such interpretation points to the impossibility to separate the symbolic, discursive dimension from the empirical, material historical one – an issue topical in the contemporary feminist debates, especially those inspired by the thought of the philosophers of "radical sexual difference" as Luce Irigaray, who refuses to dissociate questions of the feminine from the presence of the real-life women (cf. Braidotti 1989, 99).

L.Onerva: Narcissa, Medusa and Ophelia – Thousand Lillies and Death in the Bog

The above reading of Rachilde's way of treating water imagery and the figures of Narcissus and Medusa in her works from the turn of the 19th and the 20th century questions thoroughly the line of interpretation according to which Rachilde would be relevant for the contemporary feminist criticism merely as a precursor of ideas of performativity and gender masquerade. This questioning, however, does not change the fact that Rachilde refused to be associated with the explicit search for female identity. As an example of a Decadent author who dedicated the majority of her work from the beginning of the 20th century to the theme of the "New Woman," we can discuss the Finnish poet, prose-writer and literary critic L. Onerva. Onerva's relationship with the women's movement was not unproblematic either; the nationalist, conservative and

[13] It is interesting to follow how this theme develops in the works by women writers from the 1920s and 1930s. Kukku Melkas offers a most interesting analysis of an apocalyptic novel *The Revenge of the Holy River* (Pyhän Joen kosto) by the Finnish writer Aino Kallas (1878-1956), in which an engineer Adam Dörffer, representing masculine power, rationality and technocracy, tries to bound the "wild" river by a dam in the interest of "civilization" and progress. He falls in love with the "female water element" he originally wants to dominate and, eventually, fuses with it in his violent death, not lacking sadomasochist overtones. Adam's death is a kind of a rebirth, a birth of a "new man", whose fusion with the feminine does not any more point to the strategy of cannibalisation, but what gets emphasised is man's passivity and receptiveness. In his death and rebirth, Adam accepts the "wild" knowledge, represented by the river, which is proved higher than the "masculine" rational knowledge. Melkas sees the novel also as an example of the ecofeminist trend, an early ecological work (see Melkas 2006).

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moralist spirit of the mainstream women's movement in Finland caused Onerva to identify more with her male artist colleagues (Symbolists and Decadents) than with the women's movement. However, the position and fate of "real women" was much more important for Onerva than for Rachilde, just as the issue of the position of woman writer, which was a role that she, unlike Rachilde, did not refuse. Onerva did not wear men's clothes: on the contrary, she acted in public as an explicitly feminine woman with a strong inclination towards narcissism. She was perceived as a transgressive persona, given the above-mentioned moralist spirit of the Finnish women's movement.

Already in Onerva's early poems we can find a spectrum of various strategies as far as the treatment of the turn-of-the-century icons of womanhood is concerned: there is both pleasure from identification with some female figures considered transgressive in the given context, narcissist pleasure from the role of erotic object, but also frustration resulting from such role, from the position of the female Narcissus. At the same time, however, man's objectifying look wakes up muse's self-consciousness and the consciousness of her body, which points to the impossibility to separate objectification from subjectification.

At the turn of the century, the male Narcissus's look in the water mirror becomes a pretext of identity contemplation, while in case of woman this look associates vanity and superficiality (e.g. Dijkstra 1986, 143-144). The paradox of the female Narcissus, well known from psychoanalysis, is present in the following Onerva's poem: "Mists float along the sea / heavily and slowly. / I am looking for a drowned lily / on the open sea. // Mists float along the sea / heavily and slowly. / Down, down, lunatic / there you get a hundred lilies! (Onerva 1908).[14] We can interpret the poem from a gender-neutral point of view which could be backed by the nonexistence of the grammatical gender in Finnish. The questioning of polarities between heights and depths, connected here with the Narcissus myth, fuses with the feelings of the Decadent artist: in the world that surrounds him, he feels to be a child of a "mirage of the sky," like a narcissus growing on the verge of the abyss – the sky above is the same illusory as his reflection on the water surface, which only covers dangerous depths. The Narcissus myth fills the archetype of the artist's

[14] The translations of Onerva's texts are mine.

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journey with a new meaning: it has to lead first down, into the depths, in order to be able to head for the heights. The descent into the watery depths, surrender to mysterious and unknown forces, powers of night and the unconscious, functions often as a pre-requisite of finding ideal creative powers (cf. Lyytikäinen 1997, 64). Narcissus dives into the water, into his own reflection in an illusory conviction that he is going to find there his real self, the truth, knowledge and artistic inspiration, symbolized by the enigmatic "lily" in the poem.

As mentioned earlier, Narcissus, associated in Symbolist and Decadent art with homosexuality and effeminacy, was, just like the dandy and the prototype of the Decadent artist in general, represented as a feminine man, never as a masculine woman. Narcissus's female counterpart in the Ovid's myth is the nymph Echo. However, as various feminist scholars have pointed out, this gender polarity cannot be symmetrically reversed (e.g. Segal 1988). In the work of some Decadent women writers, Narcissus and Echo fuse into a figure of Narcissa (cf. Dijkstra 1986, 143-144), by means of which the author tries to reveal the mystery named "woman" and investigate the issue that began to be called the unconscious. Thus we can interpret the "lost," "absent" lily as a metaphor of the mystery of femininity, as the desired key to the proper self. During the search for this key one has to descend into the depths – the depths doubly unknown, because if the male unconscious is a riddle, the female unconscious is something not only mysterious, but also terrifying, not only for the man, but for the woman herself as well. In the depths of the "female" sea element, there are hundreds of these keys-lilies; the price necessary to pay for their discovery is, however, the voluntary relinquishment of the Symbolic Order, the fall into chaos and the "Semiotic", in other words, madness (cf. Kristeva 1974/1984). Different interpretations of metaphors of heights and depths create an interesting tension between meanings that are traditionally ascribed to these polarities, and possible new meanings. If we prefer the metonymic vision, there is, again, a possibility to see the woman-flower as a part of the water element, in which materializes the unrestrainedness of this element, that offers woman boundless freedom, though at the highest price (cf. Kainulainen 2001).

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For a woman, looking for the "drowned flower" in the water depths (other meanings of the Finnish word "hukkunut", translated above as "drowned", are "lost, absent, missing"), it is possible to identify with this absent, illusory flower. Thus the flower can be interpreted as a metaphor of woman's absence, void and negativity. In the turn-of-the-century art, women were often identified with flowers and perceived as interchangeable, just like flowers (cf. Dijkstra 1986, 60 and Homans 1986, 281). The figure of the mad woman in her interchangeability with flowers can be thus associated with Ophelia, whose self-sacrificial madness was connected to her devotion to her man; Ophelia "surrounded herself with flowers to show her equivalence to them," and at the end "committed herself to a watery grave, thereby fulfilling the nineteenth century male's fondest fantasies of feminine dependency" (Dijkstra 1986, 42). We can, however, connect the figure of Ophelia with that of Narcissus, fuse them into a kind of a "New Woman" who departs from the dependency on man, but, after she sunk into the depths of her unconscious and madness, her sacrificial mission is erased and she finds a promise of female creativity, of a new female identity. Ophelia's "feminine passivity," emphasised by the Decadents as lethal languidity, can be seen in an empowering way, if we try to interpret her not through the concept of "negative narcissism," associated with melancholy,[15] but with the help of the concepts developed by Lou Andréas-Salomé in her revision of Freud's theories of narcissism. Salomé defined passivity as openness and receptivity to the life that lives through but is neither encompassed by nor accessible to the conscious subject. Salomé advocated "an unconscious with a positive dimension which offered the possibility of "regression" to a primal undifferentiation without pathology, to "woman," whom she defined as "a regressive without a neurosis," remaining "interested in the moments when the narcissistic undifferentiation was recovered in artistic creativity" (Martin 1991, 203-206).

The most radical problematisation of the figure of female Narcissus in conjunction with the constructions of female subjectivity is to be found in Onerva's top prosaic achievement, the novel *Mirdja* (1908). The novel can be characterised by the oxymoron a Decadent *Bildungsroman* or a *Künstlerroman* with a female protagonist. It is a typical

[15] Such interpretation would follow Julia Kristeva's concept of identification of woman with death, based on the "negative narcissism" (Kristeva 1987/1989).

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Decadent novel focused not on the plot, but on the heroine's inner life, dream visions and contemplations. The heroine Mirdja is an exceptional human being in many respects, famous (or, better to say, infamous) for her unconventional behaviour. As many other heroines of the "New Woman novels,"[16] Mirdja refuses all traditional female roles and patterns of behaviour and looks for what to replace them with. Like the lyrical subjects of Onerva's early poems, also Mirdja oscillates between various icons of womanhood (from the pleasure caused by the role of a passive erotic object to the use of archetypal roles of cruel and demonic women, felt as transgressive) and desire to become a creative subject, equal to the male one. She is not burdened by the conventional morals; she was not raised in a traditional family, but was educated by her uncle, who considers himself a Decadent dilettante, just as Mirdja's other educator, a bohemian Rolf Tanne. Mirdja styles herself into a role of a Decadent dandy, but her body[17] appears to be an obstacle. She is a beautiful, highly "feminine" woman and thanks to her looks, she is constantly offered the roles available to women in the sphere of art: that of the muse, bayadere, at best that of the reproductive artist (actress and singer), in short, a figure that can stand for the "eternal" feminine, an object of inspiration for a creative (male) artist.

Mirjda's educators consider the fact that she was raised without the mother a great advantage: she was spared the "harmful influence" of the bourgeois moralist women and can become a "superhuman," universal creature, free of the traditional gender stereotypes. However, the Nietzschean Overman, as well as the fantasies of the "New" – androgynous– human being, fail when they have to be incarnated in the female body. Thus Mirdja is constantly confronted with her "femaleness" and forced to give it a meaning . This stimulates her to search for female role models and a mother figure. However, the feeling of uniqueness and the narcissist feelings that her educators encouraged in her, impedes her from getting close with other women.

As a Decadent, Mirjda resorts to identification with dream visions, artistic fantasies, or, directly, with art works – a theme well known from both work and life of the famous Decadent and Symbolist writers as Oscar Wilde and Valeri Bryusov. In

[16] See e.g. Ardis 1990, Showalter 1990/1995, Ledger 1997, Richardson & Willis 2001/2002, Witt-Brattström 2004.
[17] On the issue of body and mind in *Mirdja* see Lappalainen 1991.

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Mirdja's case, the fateful work of art is not her portrait, but Crivelli's painting of a female saint that Mirdja calls a madonna, with which she falls in love and in which she narcissistly mirrors herself. The encounter with the painting in a Paris gallery is also an important chapter in the heroine's search for the new divinity. Mirdja was raised in the conviction that God is dead and her search for the alternative of the traditional patriarchal God gradually fuses with her search for the mother figure and the ideal of womanhood with which she can identify. The picture of the catholic saint/madonna seems to represent such an ideal, absent in the Protestant tradition that had surrounded Mirdja so far. At her first encounter with the painting, Mirdja declares: "... now I have found for myself a chapel and a holy picture which I will love" (Onerva 1908/1982, 146).

Mirdja visits the painting every day and feels she has finally found what she was looking for: a maternal and female idol as well as the strength to try to appropriate the look that had so far objectified her, and, at the same time, to combine the pleasure resulting from the admiration of a woman with the narcissist pleasure resulting from admiring herself: "My God, how beautiful can woman be! Sometimes I desire to be a man, just to be able to derive pleasure from woman, yes, and why not, also from myself. Isn't it better to be the one who experiences the pleasure than the one who causes it?" (Onerva 1908/1982, 146).

The maternal attributes of the saint-madonna are, however, soon suppressed (there is no mentioning of the child in conjunction with the painting). Mirdja's inner monologue, in which it is impossible to differentiate if she is talking about the woman in the painting or about herself, suggests how her "Decadent" education and narcissism impedes her from loving real women: "But my Madonna, whom I love, is neither a real Madonna nor a real woman. (...) Since she is cold and immobile as stone (...) and dwells in an old golden frame. (...) Oh, pale Narcissa, you have turned into stone on your silk stalk!" (Onerva 1908/1982, 146-147). The "love" for the ornamentally aestheticised icons of womanhood is also an omen: sterility, "untouchability" and "stoneness" turn the madonna from a possible symbol of maternal love into a pagan idol and a terrifying symbol of castration: "Everyone has her own Medusa and she was mine. I turned into stone on the

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spot. And since then I do not do anything else but look at her and worship that cold and immobile idol. Since she is cold and immobile as a stone." (Onerva 1908/1982, 146).

The characteristics of the saint-madonna as Medusa does not, however, first appear as completely negative – even if Mirdja admits her incapability of any "real" feelings, it seems that there would be a possibility to draw creative power from the figure in the painting: she feels an immense desire to get the saint-madonna for herself and starts to "steal" the painting piece by piece by copying it for herself. [18] At first sight, Mirdja just copies a representation of woman created by a man – however, she herself emphasises that she does not copy it faithfully, but "falsifies" it: "So I began to steal her, to falsify her, carrying her home piece by piece. Every morning I looked at her and every afternoon I tried to return her jeweled splendour on the canvas. I am not a painter and my work was like dream writing. But I got something of her for myself..." (Onerva 1908/1982, 147). "Falsifying" a madonna without the child, i.e. without the son, "dream writing," can mean an endeavour to express the female creative powers outside the frame of reproductive art, allowed to women. At the same time, it suggests a potential vision of the madonna as a mother of a daughter, questioning the traditional mother-son dyad (Rojola 1992). In the sense of the Irigarayan *mimétism* (cf. Irigaray 1977/1985), the "falsifying" of the painting of a woman by an aspiring woman artist can be seen as a metonymic strategy aimed at stabilizing a bond between women. A possibility to experience pleasure from female beauty in the position of the subject-spectator while remaining a woman, a possibility to appropriate a man-made icon of womanhood, to make strategic use of the power of archetypal monsters, to draw force from them and use them directly or indirectly for the search of the newly defined female identity is, however, thwarted by an interference of an unknown man: "The one and single time in my life I admired a woman and even then – a man stepped between us." (Onerva 1908/1982, 147). An unknown man who begins to observe Mirdja in the gallery, closes her with his first line into a bewitched narcissist circle: "You must be an incredibly vain person, being able to sit and admire your own picture..." (Onerva 1908/1982, 147). The following day the man decides to restore the "order" of things and, with a brush in his hand, asks Mirdja: "Dear young lady, whoever

[18] On the possibility to "steal", appropriate Medusa as a symbol of female joy and creative powers cf. e.g. Cixous 1974/1980, and Clark 1991.

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you are, please allow me to paint you." (Onerva 1908/1982, 148). Mirdja escapes: her biggest fear is the fact that she feels a strong attraction for the man and that she suspects she could be easily lured into the role of a passive model of a muse-inspirer, a role that gives her narcissist pleasure, but prevents the escape from the existing stereotypes.

As a result of the man's intervention, the madonna-Medusa turns into a horrifying other, in a way that is typical for Onerva's ambivalent and ironic approach. The mighty mythical creature Medusa becomes finally a monster whose look turns into stone the woman who identifies with her. The complex play of Mirdja's narcissist mirroring results in her becoming sterile both as a creative artist and as a woman. She remains a childless dilettante: she is unable to live up to her Decadent educators' contradictory dreams about the "female Overman" and muse-inspirer in one person, she does not become a creative artist, she fails to establish relationships with other women and she does not fulfill the traditional female roles either, especially that of motherhood, which she finally understands as the only possible way out from her failures.

The process of mapping of a woman's portrait through "stealing" it points to a slow and painful project, during which the woman artist has to work through various images of womanhood as well as the notions of self-portrait, self-representation, authorship and creativity; a project connected with the basic problems of the feminist aesthetics and theories of representation. If we understand gender and its representation as both product and process, Mirjda's affirmation "But I did get something of her for myself" acquires an important meaning. When read through the Irigarayan strategy of *mimétism*, the fusion of the stories of Medusa and Narcissus as well as Mirdja's "falsifying" and "stealing" of the painting points, on the one hand, to subsumption of ideas developed according to the masculine logic, but, on the other hand, also to playful repetition, with the help of which it is possible to make visible what had to remain invisible.

The same ambivalence occurs at the ending of the novel. Mirdja gets married and after many peripeties, her difficult relationship with her husband Runar develops into a total symbiosis, which manifests itself as a return to childhood, to a kind of a Kristevan "Semiotic paradise." However, they both have to pay the highest price for such return: regression, oblivion, madness and the loss of identity. After Runar's death, the late Mirdja

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feels lost and calls herself a "sterile prostitute," obsessed with the fact of being childless. The novel ends with the scene in which Mirdja sinks into a bog, where she is looking for her non-existent child. The old mad Mirjda can also be seen as a grotesque version of the Decadent Ophelia – her "union" with the bog is described with synaesthetic images, where the scent of bog herbs intermingles with cries of birds and with the image of Mirdja being wrapped in a white shroud of the bog mist (Onerva 1908/1982, 297).

The bog, an intermediate and ambivalent piece of land between water and solid ground, can be seen as both Symbolist soulscape and the Decadent version of the Mother Earth, the Great Mother, given the Decadent indulgence in intermediate states and the state of ambivalence. The return to the womb of the Mother Earth (whom Onerva often invokes in her work) often fuses with the return to childhood and to mother's womb in general. Mirdja's union with it can be also read as a grotesque variant of melting into the pantheist "sea of life," an image widely explored in the turn-of-the-century Finnish literature (cf. Sarajas 1961). Mirdja's search for the nonexistent child can be also interpreted as her last attempt to find her self in femininity as a creative principle and to return to the mother she never knew (Parente-Čapková 1998).

If we come back to the figure of Narcissus-Narcissa and the metaphors of heights and depths, the image in which Mirdja sinks into the bog, a frequent symbol of the unconscious in Nordic Decadent writing (cf. e.g. Koskimies 1968, 89), can be read as a bitter parody of the above mentioned figurations of the Decadent Narcissus in his search of the "true self."

The association of the bog with the maternal womb, femininity and death unites, again, the stories of Medusa and Narcissus. It recalls both the concepts of negative and positive narcissism: Mirdja, "prone to regressive narcissism" as every woman (cf. Martin 1991, 214), is a prototype of the female version of the melancholic Narcissus (cf. Lyytikäinen 1997, 73-104), but her "passive" union with the moist part of the Mother Earth, her plunge into the bog, can be interpreted in the vein of Lou Andréas Salomé's concepts of passivity as "openness and receptivity to the life that lives through but is neither encompassed by nor accessible by the conscious subject – as a yielding to that

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which exceeds and, from a certain point of view, may seem to threaten the ego and its demands for control and coherence" (Martin 1991, 203).

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Analyses of the gender aspects of the ways in which Decadent women writers used and fused the figures of Narcissus and Medusa against the background of water imagery, and in which they used other figures associated with water as Ophelia, help us to problematise any straightforward readings of their works. The particular strategies used by Rachilde and Onerva when creating and re-creating Decadent poetics can be read as a deep concern with the repressed feminine other. Both male and female Narcissus are confronted with the repressed feminine, cast off into the sphere of the Kristevan Semiotic. For the male Narcissus in Rachilde's work, the feminine represented by the decapitated "Medusa" in the metonymic connection with the "feminine" water represents a threat both to the traditional masculinity and to the Decadent effeminate masculinity. The *fin-de-siècle* crisis of the masculine subject creates the conditions for the emergence of the repressed and feared feminine. This process, which could break down the narcissism of the (male) subject and open him to the Other, is, however, a very complex one.[19] In Onerva's texts, the repressed feminine associated with water imagery and represented by the figure of madonna/Medusa appears as threatening for the becoming female subject, but it still gives a promise of empowerment, creativity and new female identity. In Rachilde's texts, the Decadent narcissist homosociality, effeminacy and masquerade is subverted by the "female" element; in Onerva's work, the constructivist-narcissist moment is subverted by the Decadent passivity and melancholy, but restored again as a promise. The manifestations of the "negative" narcissism are compensated by the possibility of the "positive" one.

Rachilde's and Onerva's strategies can serve as an example of approaches adopted by women writers at the turn of the 19th and the 20th century in search for the new meanings of old myths. On the one hand, the Decadent crisis of the traditional concept of mimesis, the exacerbated aestheticism, the cult of the artificial feminine and a very cautiously defined transgression makes the search for the positively defined female

[19] This process can be paralleled with some phenomena in the contemporary philosophy as analysed by Luce Irigaray and Rosi Braidotti (cf. e.g. Whitford 1991, 31-34).

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identity very difficult; on the other hand, in its emphasis on the importance to let speak the other in the form of the repressed feminine, the work of these authors foretells the complex and multilayered way in which the 20th-century women writers use the water imagery and the mythical and literary figures connected with it.

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