Morbid Love: American Decadence in the 1890s

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation engages with a neglected group of writers, artists, and intellectuals in the United States who identified with Decadence, a European literary and artistic movement. Decadence was a label, embraced by some, that refers to a state of art and literature that suggests the end of an Empire: luxurious, imitative, corrupt, sensuous, and ultimately worthless. Self-professed Decadents elevated artificiality, morbidity, sensuality, and pessimism. They also lived lives, both imaginary and real, of separation from the world, attempting to fully embody otherness as they watched the world change around them and anticipated the fall of civilization. I question how these supposedly foreign ideas worked in America, in a transatlantic conversation that reveals yet another aspect of the transition to modernity in America. I suggest "morbid love" as key to understanding the cultural work of Decadence, using it to mean both a love of illness and disease that the Decadents evidenced, as well as a love that in itself was doomed to death. In this dissertation I argue the following. First, I build on work establishing the existence of American Decadence by emphasizing the cultural engagement of Decadence despite its self-professed insularity and rarity. Second, I argue that Decadence in America exemplifies a particular moment in the intellectual histories of degeneration theory and sexuality that has been largely ignored. While most studies of degeneration theory emphasize the power of the theorists and the low social status of theorized, Decadents brought degeneration to the upper classes, the learned, those with cultural capital. They acted as both theorists and theorized. In terms of sexuality, Decadence created a space that fit into neither the standard acts paradigm, nor the following identity paradigm, suggesting that sexuality was a matter of artistic and aesthetic choice and taste. Third, I argue that these deviations from standard narratives show that American Decadents performed a political queerness that functioned as a cultural critique and created a space that complicates our understanding of the period. Each chapter of this dissertation explores an aspect of the Decadent cultural criticism, emphasizing the deliberate queerness, or morbidity as they would phrase it, of their stance. It is now standard in studies of structures to examine the construction of the "normative" condition (whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, etc.) rather than the deviant. I argue, however, that this approach automatically associates those with power as normative and those without as deviant. I hope in this work to complicate that narrative.

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Introduction

A young woman welcomes a man, a good, though naïve, minister into her private rooms. As his eyes adjusts to the light, he sees a room, lit by strange lanterns reflected through colored glass:

> The walls of the room were in part of flat upright wooden columns, terminating high above in simple capitals, and they were all painted in pale amber and straw and primrose hues, irregularly wavering here and there toward suggestions of white. Between these pilasters were broader panels of stamped leather, in gently varying shades of peacock blue. These contrasted colors vaguely interwove and mingled in what he could see of the shadowed ceiling far above. They were repeated in the draperies and huge cushions and pillows of the low, wide divan which ran about three sides of the room. Even the floor, where it revealed itself among the scattered rugs, was laid in a mosaic pattern of matched woods, which, like the rugs, gave back these same shifting blues and uncertain yellows.[1]

Nude statues fill the alcoves, silk draperies covered walls and openings, Oriental, Egyptian, and Greek decorations adorned the floor and walls, and tall candles accentuated an altar, upon which rested a massive carved casket. The smoke of the woman's cigarette fills the room; the minister does not smoke. He relaxes on cushions as she plays piano for him. The strains of Chopin, the light, the smoke, the sight of the statues, the woman's skin, entrance the minister, who experiences a near hallucinatory level of pleasure, which quickly turns to a feeling which he interprets as illness. Soon after he experiences a total nervous breakdown. Shortly after this, his life in tatters: his marriage a disaster, his health damaged, his faith lost, his job gone; he sets off west to be a real-estate agent.

[1] Harold Frederic *The Damnation of Theron Ware* New York: Stone and Kimball, 1896, 258.

This, a scene from Harold Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware,* is the threat of Decadence in America. A supposedly European disease, for a brief moment, in the 1890s, Decadence entered the cultural conversation in America. Though almost immediately forgotten, Decadence's brief moment in the sun, or in the darkness of a curtained room, is essential to understanding the complex currents of the end of the nineteenth century.

Decadence, a word now meaning something akin to indulgence, had a much more complex and culturally relevant meaning at the end of the nineteenth century. As an idea "Gaining branches in most domains—race theory, linguistics, politics, medicine, and literature—Decadence was one of the more enduring ideas of the nineteenth century but in so many shapes that it is only with caution that we can consider it one idea at all."[2] Decadence was the state of a nation at the end of its life, complete with a total collapse of morality, derivative and overwrought art, exhausted culture, and neurotic melancholy, and sensuous citizens whose only thoughts were for their own eccentric, immoral, and unhealthy pleasures. However, the group of people who identified themselves as decadent, or aligned themselves with European Decadent culture found a positive understanding of life at the end of an empire, thinking it something to be embraced and enjoyed, or at least acknowledged rather than opposed. These artists simultaneously considered themselves the cultural elite and also the culturally marginalized. Their work flourished in the literal and figurative margins. They produced not canonical works, but ephemera in the form of newspapers and little magazines. Their artistic production was made for each other—stories, drawings and

[2]McGuinness, Patrick. *Symbolism, Decadence and the Fin de Siècle: French and European Perspectives*. University of Exeter Press, 2000, 8.

books produced by and for friends—and for any of those who might stumble across it and possess the aesthetic taste to recognize real art. While many Decadents had large audiences mass culture and popularity were anathema to their ideal. Because of this, American Decadence has proved difficult to excavate, much less to define.

As embraced by some and disparaged by many, Decadence referred to the state of civilization, specifically art and literature, at the end of Empire: luxurious, imitative, corrupt, sensuous, and ultimately disposable. Self-professed Decadents elevated artificiality, morbidity, sensuality, and pessimism. They also lived lives, both imaginary and real, separate from the world, attempting to fully embody otherness, as they watched the world change around them and anticipated the fall of civilization. In this inquiry, I examine how these supposedly foreign ideas worked in a transatlantic conversation that reveals yet another aspect of modernity in America. I explore the people who espoused these ideas, how their ideas circulated, and what cultural work the discourse of Decadence did in America. The interaction between those who critiqued the culture of decadence, particularly Max Nordau, and those who felt an affinity for it exists at the intersection of concerns about class and gender.

This book not only establishes Decadences as an important, even central discourse at the end of the nineteenth century, but also gives insight into a world of upper middle class men and women who deliberately othered themselves, aligning themselves with women, racial minorities, the Oriental, the demi-monde, the sick, and the outcast, while attempting, successfully in most cases, to hold onto their privilege in the process. The idea of Decadence, as well as the communities it spawned, had a strange and contradictory career in America. While its connotation of decay and disease

was antithetical to the dominant American idea of itself as a nation, it managed to both inspire fear and attract followers.

My goals are as follows. First, to build on work establishing the existence of American Decadence, by emphasizing the cultural engagement of Decadence. Second, I argue that Decadence in America exemplifies a particular moment in the intellectual histories of degeneration theory and sexuality that has been largely ignored. While most studies of degeneration theory emphasize the power of the theorists and the low social status of the theorized, Decadents brought degeneration to the upper classes, the learned, those with cultural capital. They acted as both theorists and theorized.

Third, I argue that American Decadents performed a political queerness that functioned as a cultural critique and created a space that complicates our understanding of the period. In terms of sexuality, Decadence created a space that does not quite fit into the standard narrative of the history of sexuality. The late nineteenth century serves as the turning point between the idea of sexuality as a matter of personal acts, and the modern understanding of sexuality as an identity. In this space Decadents created a discourse suggesting that sexuality was a matter of artistic and aesthetic choice and taste.

Each chapter of this dissertation explores an aspect of the Decadent cultural criticism, and emphasizes the deliberate queerness, or morbidity as they would phrase it, of their stance. It is now standard in studies of structures to examine the construction of the “normative” condition (whiteness, heterosexuality, masculinity, etc.) rather than the deviant. I argue, however, that this approach automatically associates those with

power as normative and those without as deviant. I hope in this work to complicate that narrative.

In the first chapter, I establish the presence of Decadence in America and describe its connection to rhetorics of deviance and degeneration, focusing especially on the work of Max Nordau as illustrative of the fears of a particular moment in the history of degeneration that has been ignored. In the next two chapters, I investigate the morbid love that Americans associated with Decadence. I take this phrase at first to mean the love of morbidity, and examine the Decadent and anti-Decadent discourses of disease, decay, and illness as an articulated opposition to a culture of health and prosperity. In the second chapter I establish morbidity as the means by which American understood Decadence. That is, they understood Decadence through the rhetoric of disease and death. In the third chapter I question how gender inversion functioned as morbid. In the fourth I examine at pessimism as particular signs of morbidity. The fifth chapter shifts the connotation of the term to consider morbid love as perversion and examine the ways in which Decadents leaned on deviant sexuality to establish their alterity while maintaining their cultural standing. Finally, in the sixth chapter I establish that despite their claims of detachment and negation, Decadence was an active political and social discourse; the idea of morbidity, and the positive love expressed for it, was no accident, but a deliberate and for some a possible, political, and cultural alternative.

Methodologically, I use a variety of sources, theory, and technique. In this interdisciplinarity, I take my cue not just from my training, but also from the Decadents themselves. In the Decadent moment fiction and science intertwined. Art and sexuality met. History loomed large to the individual. Because I am interested in the cultural work

of Decadence, and its public circulation, so I use works that were published and existed in the public sphere. I especially draw from newspapers, magazines, and other serial publications to understand the discourses of Decadence. I follow the Decadents again in reading the works of doctors, psychologists, alienists, and social scientists not as authorities but as participants in a conversation that concerned civilization, aesthetics, science and modernity.

By modernity I refer to the set of circumstances including industrialization, the importance of technology, progress, the primacy of science, commodity capitalism, mass culture, individualism, rationalization, professionalism, secularization, urbanization, the destabilizing impacts of war and migration, and the overall sense of a break from the past into a new world of progress. Whether or not this "actually" happened in the 1890s is immaterial. It matters only that this break was felt so keenly and clearly as to have been an obsession then and now.

I argue that in this modern moment, the Decadents put forth a queer cultural criticism. Although queer encompasses the deviant sexuality of the Decadents it is better here understood as a broader term. When I refer to queer I mean anything that opposed the (hetero)normativity of the culture. The Decadent opposition to progress, lack of interest in the future, and general opposition to the generative order of the nineteenth century marks them as queer as much as their transgressive sexuality and gender performance. Thus queer also serves as a way to create an alternate world. In this definition I follow queer theorists including Michael Warner, José Munoz, Lee Edelman, Lisa Dugan and Sarah Ahmed.

Gender, class, and race are the holy trinity of cultural history. While, ideally we would be able to see every angle at once in an infinitely dimensionalized analysis, in reality choices must be made. Here, I privilege the interplay of gender and sexuality. Class is also a constant concern, especially in my understanding of the way that Decadents saw themselves as aristocrats in a democratic purgatory. Race hovers in the background. Decadents rarely addressed race in terms of the familiar American racial politics of white and black. Rather, they positioned themselves in the middle of a struggle of civilizations. If America was the imperial civilization, it required an Other. For the Decadent that Other was usually portrayed as Oriental, placing them at odds with most contemporary taxonomies in which the black-white binary was privileged. They also skirt other American imperialistic categorizations by ignoring most of the populations that were subject to American imperialist interventions and claims of American racial superiority.

Ultimately, love, as suggested by the title is the subject and object of this work. Love and desire are not mere oddities which deserve to be removed to the side of history, or to be solely the province of subfields: they are at the center of history itself. The many loves of the Decadents, their strange desires, their yearning for a different world, their attachments to the pleasures of the world they lived in, their aesthetic joys and sexual deviance are very heart of the matter, the very core of history.

Background and Literature Review

As a literary and artistic movement, Decadence usually refers to a mostly European group of artists at the fin de siècle, many of whom self-identified as Decadent, who were keenly aware of the impending decay of civilization, and therefore connected

themselves to the writers during the decline of the Roman Empire. France and England hold the title as the "homes" of Decadence in most research; however, as David Weir notes, that there were groups of people who called themselves decadents in America is "a fact of cultural history (a little known fact, but a fact nonetheless)".[3] Thus while France and England were certainly the leaders of Decadent culture, and emulated by Decadents in other countries, it was not entirely a French or British phenomenon, or even entirely a European one.

The idea of Decadence as a social and historical phenomenon was a late nineteenth century obsession. In philosophy, Frederick Nietzsche led the way, preoccupied by Decadence at the end of his career. In America, historians and sociologists pondered the implications of social decadence. The corruption and decline of the next generation is a perennial concern. To certain observers the last decades of the nineteenth century held changes more frightening and real than mere generational drift. As has been well documented by scholars, the nature of the self was in transition at this moment. The waning of religious and community ties left people weightless. As religious understandings of the self lapsed, so did the autonomous self-determined ideal of classical liberalism. It was worn away by the revelation of irascible forces of nature, especially evolution. It was in this moment that the state and nation turned to natural and social science to control what were now populations. The modern techniques of power and knowledge used to govern these populations were what theorists following Michel Foucault call biopiolitics. [4]I am not interested directly in these techniques. What

[3] Weir, David. *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890-1926*. State University of New York Press, 2009. xv.
[4] Michel Foucault *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979* Palgrave, 2008.

is essential to the following discussion is the idea that the degeneracies of individuals, their lives, health and natures was deeply connected to the health of the nation. I will go so far as to suggest that this idea, along with the governmental, social and cultural repercussions of it, are an essential facet of modernity and America.

In order to continue, I must attempt a definition of artistic and literary Decadence, though I do so with the caveat that any definition is insufficient and the most inclusive are so vague as to be useless. With that said, Decadence held as its motto 'art for art's sake'. It set itself the agenda of deliberately flaunting conventional morality and societal mores, which put it in the ironic position of obsessing over genteel society and morality. In short, literary Decadence looks not just to the beautiful, but seeks the beauty and artifice that society specifically designates as degenerate or perverse and relies on style over substance. In an essay on the artistic philosophy of decadence, Jane Duran explains R. G. Collingwood's definition was "Decadence sets in in the limiting case where something is done for the sake of an effect and the effect intended appeals somehow to a baser, lower, or more ignoble portion of ourselves."[5] Furthermore, Decadents " received that label at least partly because their work depicted some of the category violations mentioned above, and also because it was clear that part of the intent of the work was to arouse an emotion which we would ordinarily deem to be an unworthy one"[6] Characters of fictional works accomplish this because "they violate sexual norms of gender boundaries, interpersonal behaviour, the constraint on doing harm to others, and so forth."[7] This oppositional stance and interest in the perverse

[5] Duran, Jane. "On Decadence." *Philosophy* 65, no. 254 (October 1, 1990): 455–464, 457.
[6] Duran, 458
[7] Duran 458-459

leads to close connections between decadence and numerous sexual subcultures. Homosexuality, fetishes, and all manner of strange sexualities appear in decadent texts. Though Decadence was driven by men, it had a decidedly feminine connotation. It emphasizes, the bodily, the monstrous, the uncontrollable sexuality, the value of artifice over nature, and nature's eventual destruction: all tropes that read as feminine. Instead of disassociating these things, Decadents often reinforced these gendered associations. It was in their artistic interests that the lines be clear, so that when they crossed them, the violation would be clear. Indeed, Decadence distinguishes itself from the general feminization of culture by role reversal and exaggeration. Such a feminine ethos put forth by the male Decadent cadre put the Decadents again opposed to the cultural current, especially in America. Decadents managed to set themselves against both the genteel matriarchy and the cult of vigorous, imperial masculinity that opposed it. I will expand on this idea in the third chapter of this work.

The idea of Decadence in America is paradoxical at best. Decadence certainly had more of a hold on the European civilization. Comparatively, American culture was still comparatively green, and thus not likely to fall prey to the inevitable social ill of the old country. Nevertheless, it was difficult for even the most sanguine of Americans to ignore the troubling signs. Predictions of the end times filled the world at the end of the nineteenth century. While some looked forward eagerly towards the new century, others prepared for the worst, assuming the best was behind them.

The rhetoric of civilization helps to explain the Decadent racial position. Instead of positioning themselves in the midst of racial decline, they saw Western civilization in a state of decline. As the opposition, they positioned the East. Rather than engage

imperially with the east they "wished instead not to overcome but to become, to experience the Orient in themselves. The experience, in turn, need not occur in any actual Orient, but in some political, spiritual or aesthetic East." [8] Decadents saw the East as a gateway to the past in the modern world that did not fall into the savagery and atavism that Degeneration theory claimed.

Decadence shares with bohemianism the valuation of experience and sensation. David Weir argues that Decadence is an aesthetic category, while bohemianism is a lifestyle. [9] This distinction, of course, perhaps causes more confusion than it clears, since many decadents lived a bohemian lifestyle. Mere outcast status is not a clear criterion especially in America, since American Decadents were associated with the Harvard manner, and the intellectual community surrounding Harvard and particularly Charles Eliot Norton and a central part of my argument is that Decadence was more mainstream than its disciples pretended. It should also be mentioned that Decadence might also be defined as a kind of antimodernism. Certainly, the Decadents overlap with Lears' antimodernists. They had a fascination with the oriental, the medieval, the aristocratic. They also share religious tendencies. Ellis Hanson notes that no other cultural movement could count as many converts to Catholicism as the Decadent movement, because the Decadents' tendency to "displace sexuality onto textuality"

[8] David Weir *American Orient: Imagining the East from the Colonial Era Through the Twentieth Century* Amherst: U Mass Press, 2011, 13.
[9] David Weir. *Decadence and the Making of Modernism*. Univ of Massachusetts Press, 1995.
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made Catholicism's aesthetics and symbols very attractive.[10] The overlap is a credit to Lears' perception, but Decadence is its own cultural phenomenon.

Like the antimodernism that Lears describes, the distinctions between Decadence, and the culture it opposes eventually blur.[11] As Matei Calinescu notes, any generalization about Decadence will eventually reach the paradox that "progress is decadence and conversely decadence is progress."[12] This paradox will appear throughout our discussion of Decadence. For the purpose of this work the question of who is, or is not a Decadent is secondary. By taking accusations and professions of Decadence seriously, and examining the cultural work of the idea itself, I avoid the pitfall of ruling certain writers in or out by means of style or content.

Little magazines provide one of the easiest ways to construct a who's who of American Decadence. Little magazines are so named in contrast to the larger commercial magazines. They were typically literary with a small circulation and aimed at an elite audience. The work of Melinda Knight and Kristen Macleod suggests that American little magazines of the 1890s have been undervalued in most historical accounts, since most historians date the little magazines and their role in American culture, from 1912 on. There were more than one hundred and fifty little magazines

[10] Hanson, Ellis. *Decadence and Catholicism*. Harvard University Press, 1998, 23. Hanson's work only covers European Decadence, but Thomas Frederick Haddox argues that it holds true for America. Haddox argues that Kate Chopin, and later Carson McCullers and Anne Rice, ought to be added to the Decadent tradition.

[11] No Place of Grace deals with some of the characters who may also be claimed by the decadents. Lears notes the specter of decadence was fodder for critics of American values, but argued "few Wildean poseurs appeared in the United States"(49), a contention that is easily countered by the documentation of Wilde's wild popularity in the U.S.

[12] Călinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Duke University Press, 1987. 155

started between 1894 and 1898.[13] The most famous and successful was *The Chap Book*, though it published a wider variety of material than other little magazines, was more commercial minded, and shied away from the depths of human experience that Decadence celebrated.[14] Others include, *M'lle New York*, *The Lark*, *The Mahogany Tree, Knight Errant, The Fly Leaf*, *Lotus*, *Moods*, *The Fad, Lucifer's Lantern, The Kiote, The Kansas Knocker, Bibelot,* and *Bradley: His Book*.[15] Of course, all of these magazines did not clearly identify themselves as Decadent; however, they shared an opposition to William Dean Howells and other champions of the genteel, moral, and decorous in literature as well as the up and coming cheap, popular magazines, and therefore provided a home to the Decadents in America as they did in England. Macleod notes that *M'lle New York* deliberately constructed an American genealogy for Decadence, tracing its roots to Whitman and Poe, and continued to nurture a more American version of Decadence by giving voice to New York's immigrant population. Knight notes that the little magazines and their dissemination of decadence was the emergence of a modernism that was both elite and radical.

To make a list of American Decadents is surely a fool's errand, but what follows is an attempt to name the main players. Edgar Saltus is probably the safest to identify as a Decadent. He deliberately associated himself with Decadence, befriending Wilde and Verlaine. He was a historian of Roman decadence, and his work exhibits both

[13] MacLeod, Kirsten. "'Art for America's Sake': Decadence and the Making of American Literary Culture in the Little Magazines of the 1890s." *Prospects* 30 (2005): 309–338, 309.
[14] See, Wendy Clauson Schlereth *The Chap-Book: A Journal of American Intellectual Life in the 1890s* Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1980.
[15] See also Doyle, James. *The Fin de Siècle Spirit: Walter Blackburn Harte and the American-Canadian Literary Milieu of the 1890s*. Toronto; East Haven, Conn.: ECW Press 1995 for discussion of the magazines he edited: *The Lotus* and *The Fly Leaf*

Decadent themes and heavily stylized writing.[16] The work on Edgar Saltus is surprisingly lacking, especially for someone as prolific and critically lauded as he was in his lifetime. He wrote fifteen novels and over thirty short stories. When he does appear in scholarly literature it is usually with the epithet of forgotten or obsolete followed by a call for more critical scholarship on him. He casts enough of a shadow that he pops up in many different scholarly works dealing with the turn of the century, but is often dismissed in terms like George Cotkin's who argues "Edgar Saltus' Schopenhaureian fin de siècle aestheticism and pessimism only served to illustrate further this dissipated state of mind."[17] Aside from a biography by Marie Saltus published in 1925, the only book dedicated to Saltus is the short critical study by Claire Sprague in 1968[18].

Ralph Adams Cram, while a major figure, is not first known as a Decadent perhaps by his own wishes.[19] His novel *The Decadent*, published in 1893, was

[16] Edgar Everston Saltus (1855-1921) Born to a well-off New York family that also produced his half-brother Francis Saltus (Edgar's mother was his father's second wife), Edgar studied both in the U.S. and abroad. He obtained a law degree from Columbia, but never practiced. Instead he turned to literature publishing translations of French works, and a biography of Honore de Balzac . He then turned to philosophy penning *The Philosophy of Disenchantment* and *The Anatomy of Negation*. He then found his métier, or at least his money, in novels. He wrote nearly twenty novels that exhibited his sparkling prose and epigrammatic style. The subjects were almost invariable of the upper class cosmopolitan variety. Saltus depicted subjects just at the edge of censorship; his novels included scenes of adultery, murder, prostitution, homosexuality, and incest. Designed to shock and titillate, his works were melodramatic in their plots. The best include *Mr. Incoul's Misadventure, Enthralled* and *The Truth about Tristrem Varick. Madame Sapphira* is a rather obvious depiction of the dissolution of Saltus's first marriage to Helen Read. He was married again in 1894 to Elsie Smith who bore a child. They separated in 1901, but Smith died before a divorce was official. Saltus married for the final time in 1911 to Marie Giles. Because she survived him and published his biography Marie Giles Saltus remains a great influence on his legacy. Besides his novels he is also famous for his historical work including *Imperial Purple, Imperial Orgy*, and *Historia Amoris*. He supported himself week to week, especially after his 1890s hey-day, by working as a newspaper and magazine columnist and story writer. In both his life and his work, Saltus was the ultimate Decadent. Of all the writers I name here, it was Saltus who had the most influence on his contemporaries and was a driving force in popularizing Decadent ideas. He was already fading into obscurity upon his death, and soon thereafter was practically unknown, despite many famous defenders.

[17] Cotkin, George. *William James, Public Philosopher*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994, 95.

[18] Sprague, Claire. *Edgar Saltus*. Twayne Publishers, 1968.

[19] Ralph Adams Cram 1863-1942: Worked and lived in Boston. Known for his architecture, especially churches done in a Gothic Revival style. He has a feast day in the Episcopal liturgical calendar to honor him for these contributions and for his famous conversion experience. He was also an essayist and novelist. His interest in the medieval and the orient led him to Decadent circles. He was a member of The Visionists (a Boston group of Decadents, Symbolists, Aesthetes and the like-minded). He helped to publish *The Knight Errant* Despite his

influenced by Wilde and Pater, as well as Cram's own life and circle of friends; however, he did not publish the book under his own name, and it remains obscure. Still, there is more scholarly work on Cram than most of the other American Decadents, since he is the subject of several books. Douglass Shand-Tucci, Cram's most recent biographer, mentions his intersection with Decadence, but settles on Bohemian as the best descriptor of Cram's early life and work.

Vance Thompson helped found M'lle New York with James Huneker.[20] He is probably best known for his literary criticism, some of which may have been plagiarized. However, he also wrote fiction. Thompson is an interesting case because he eventually published *Eat and Be Thin* as well as *Drink and Be Sober*, self-help books that could not be farther from the decadent aesthetic. Again, the scholarly work on Thompson is very thin, mostly focusing on his career as a journalist.

Gelett Burgess is an odd addition here, known best for his bromides, the invention of the blurb, and short poetry about cows. He published *The Lark* in San Francisco and maintains a fairly high profile because of his contributions to humor and his connection to Frank Norris.[21]

James Huneker acts as a transitional figure between the original Decadent movement and the Decadent revival.[22] His novel *Painted Veils* was published in 1920,

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marriage to Elizabeth Read and three children there are some questions about his sexuality, especially concerning his friendship with his fellow architect Bertram Goodhue.

[20] Vance Thompson 1863-1925: Born in Pennsylvania he studies abroad and settled in New York. Though he is best known for his collaboration with Huneker on *M'lle New York* he was a novelist, poet and drama critic in his own right. He attempted to introduce Decadent and Symbolist writers with his *French Portraits*

[21] See also Nathan, Marvin R. "San Francisco's Fin de Siècle Bohemian Renaissance." *California History* 61, no. 3 (October 1, 1982): 196–209.

[22] James Huneker (1857-1921) was born in Philadelphia into a fairly wealthy family. He studied abroad in Paris, returning to teach piano. Finding this utterly unbearable he turned to criticism. Beginning with music, he soon expanded to all sorts of artistic expression. He published in a variety of New York based papers and magazines. Like Edgar Saltus, Huneker was married three times, divorcing his first two wives. His mistresses (as well as Edgar

when Huneker was in his 60s, yet Huneker is best known for his career as a cultural critic. He founded *M'lle New York* with Vance Thompson. His work helped introduce Decadent writing to America. Even H.L. Mencken, who had no love for other Decadents, was an enthusiastic supporter of Huneker, grouping him with Conrad and Dreiser in terms of talent.[23] A 1963 critical biography by Arnold Schwab exists and is the only book length work on Huneker. He did not collapse into total obscurity, however, and still makes cameos in works on the 1890s, New York, music history, journalism history, and Mencken biographies.

The 1920s resurgence of Decadence included James Branch Cabell, George Jean Nathan, Ben Hecht, Carl Van Vechten, Djuana Barnes, and Maxwell Bodenheim, all of whom are perhaps more recognizable than their forbearers. Their legacies merge into America Modernism, science fiction, and the Harlem Renaissance.

Most of the work on American decadence has been scattered in other works. Alfred Kazin's *On Native Grounds* touches upon the little magazines of the '90s. Kazin praises Huneker, as being able to keep his senses amidst the "bizarre nonsense of the period" and notes that Edgar Saltus was "the only genuine exotic."[24] Larzer Ziff includes a chapter on the Decadents and their little magazines in his work *The American 1890s,* though he too treats the Decadents as deserving their obscurity. The definitive work on Decadence in the United States is David Weir's *Decadent Culture in the United States:*

Saltus) appear in his novel *Painted Veils.* His books of art and literature criticism include *Mezzotints in Modern Music, Melomaniacs, Chopin, Ivory Apes and Peacocks,* and *Unicorns.* His more culturally critical books include *Iconoclasts*, *New Cosmopolis*, and *Egoists.* In addition to the vaguely autobiographical *Painted Veils*, Huneker also wrote an autobiography *Steeplejack*. Though Huneker's star faeded quickly, and he died in povery, he at least merited some critical attention and has a biography and a book of his letters published.

[23] Schwab, Arnold T. *James Gibbons Huneker, Critic of the Seven Arts*. Stanford University Press, 1963

[24] Kazin, Alfred. *On Native Grounds: An Interpretation Of Modern American Prose Literature*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1942, 66.

Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890-1926.[25] Weir gives four definitions for decadence. First, it describes the conditions of national or imperial decline, more specifically applying to the fall of Rome and the late nineteenth century. The second meaning, based on an organic metaphor of degeneracy, suggests that the people of such a time are weak, unhealthy, and infertile as a result of overcivilization. The third refers to the unhealthy and degenerate conditions that exist in such a country, in which the art produced is imitative, unoriginal, and overwrought. The fourth definition, held by some decadents themselves, suggests that the disintegration of a civilization gives art more energy and originality as a result of its liminality. Weir emphasizes the transitional connotations of decadence. Decadence not only depends on the sense of the collapse of civilization, and the change inherent in such a collapse, but also depends on transgressing moral and social codes. Weir first examines the reasons why decadence and America seem to be incompatible. He cites America's youth as a country, its lack of an aristocracy, and its renowned social mobility and moral inflexibility. Part of Decadence is the sense that an empire has reached its historical pinnacle and is about to collapse, but America did not have the history to back this decline. Weir argues, however, what mattered was the sense of decline and overcivilization. Weir examines decadents in New York, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco. Each community of decadence had its own feel, with New York based around Edgar Saltus, Boston having the richest traditions, Chicago being the most commercial, and San Francisco caught between Bohemianism and Hearst. Broadly, Weir argues, American Decadence was

[25] Weir, David. *Decadent Culture in the United States: Art and Literature Against the American Grain, 1890-1926*. State University of New York Press, 2009.

not merely imitative, though imitation was a mark of the decadent style itself, but drew upon European decadence out of necessity because America had no tradition that could support the idea of a declining civilization. Weir also argues that American Decadence was connected to popular and consumer culture in ways that European decadence was not. In a land in which Decadence could not be inherited, it could at least be bought. To his chapters on the cities, Weir adds a chapter on the Decadent revival and an afterward examining the films of Kenneth Anger in the context of the dissipation and commodification of Decadence.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, these definitions Weir is sometimes vague about the complex social and cultural background, focusing instead on the cultures and mood of the cities he discusses. Weir is also lacking in specificity when it comes to determining who was or was not a decadent. To Weir's excellent introduction to Decadent culture, this work examines the specific cultural work that these communities did in America.

Though decadence is most often considered a European phenomenon, it might best be described as transatlantic[26]. People and ideas moved across oceans. While many scholars assume America to be the receptor of ideas generated by Europe, ideas moved from America to Europe as well. This was true from the very beginning. Edgar Allen Poe is often named as an inspiration to European decadents. In his "New Notes on Poe" Charles Baudelaire names Poe as an exemplar of Decadent literature.[27]

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[26] Matthew Potolosky *The Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* Philadelphia: Upenn, 2012. Potolosky makes the point that Decadence is an international phenomenon, but Poe is the only American mentioned in his work.

[27] See this essay in Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Unknown Poe: An Anthology of Fugitive Writings*. City Lights Books, 1980, 93-110.

Huysmans' protagonist Des Esseintes names Poe as the author with whom he had the closest affinity of spirit.[28] Oscar Wilde, the most visible representative of decadent life and art, was astonishingly popular in America, and he enraged or enraptured American audience when he toured the nation in 1882. Work on American decadence has been done under the guise of analyzing Wilde's following in America, though this work defines Wilde as an aesthetic.[29] A less well known example, Henry Harland, though American, relocated to England in 1889. He became the first editor of the *Yellow Book, IMAGE* the literary home of the decadents in England.[30] Day and Copeland and Stone and Kimball in turn published decadent work on this side of the Atlantic, though only F. Holland Day was himself involved in the Decadent movement. In George Schoolfield's *A Baedeker of Decadence*, the United States is represented by James Gibbons Huneker[31] Schoolfeld describes American Decadence as imitative and decidedly faded. The imitative and referential tropes might be a way for American decadents to indicate intellectual genealogy and form community. Indeed, perhaps the only way to definitively mark an American as a Decadent was its reference to European decadent literature, yet, this culture was not necessarily imitative. As Melinda Knight argues, little magazines did not depend on European models. *The Chap Book,* published in Chicago

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[28] From his novel *A Rebours* (1884) published in English as *Against the Grain*

[29] See, for example Roy Morris Jr. *Declaring His Genius: Oscar Wilde in North America*. Harvard University Press and Mary Warner Blanchard *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age*. Yale University Press, 1998. Morris' work tells the story of Wilde's visit to America and is mostly concerned with his experience and reception, bumping into American decadents along the way, but only in passing. Blanchard's work focuses more on the American context and the results of Wilde's influence, but concerns itself more with shifts in aesthetics and personal and domestic style rather than cultural production.

[30] Even the colors get confusing. Yellow is most often used to refer English Decadence, and the Americans who followed it, but also referred to yellow journalism. "Purple Cow Period" is sometimes used to indicate decadence or aestheticism, and is a reference to Gelett Burgess. Mauve was coined retroactively by Thomas Beer.

[31] Schoolfield, George C. *A Baedeker of Decadence: Charting a Literary Fashion, 1884-1927*. Yale University Press, 2003. It might be significant that the book begins with France and England, and the United States appears between the cultural powerhouses of Australia and Iceland.

between 1894 and 1898 by Stone and Kimball postdated the arrival of *The Yellow Book*, which first appeared in America in April of 1894, by a mere month. It was certainly already in production by the time Copeland and Day began published *The Yellow Book*.[32] Americans did not even have to turn towards Europe for descriptions of the ills of high civilization inasmuch as Nordau was himself influenced by George Beard's work on neurasthenia.[33] If not reaching the level of irony, this idea's migration east is at least strange, simply because the European culture of decadence assumed a long history of civilization, empire, and debauched aristocracy, none of which existed in America. Nevertheless, fin de siècle anxiety suggested to many that American civilization had reached its height, and the next step might be towards degeneration. Decadence as a stage of cultural decline was certainly important to American intellectuals. Edward Alsworth Ross, for instance, suggested that America might be susceptible to the Decadence that overtook Greece and Roma, recommending a vigorous middle class and the control of newspapers. For him, "Decadence carries the idea of the raveling of a web, the crumbling of a wall that was once strong, the falling to pieces of a structure that has rotted at the joints."[34] This particular concern, focusing more on the social, appears more in the twentieth century, after the ravages of the First World War, and after decadence as an artistic movement had waned.

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[32] Knight, Melinda. "Little Magazines and the Emergence of Modernism in the 'Fin de Siècle'." *American Periodicals* 6 (January 1, 1996): 29–45. 31 The *Chap-Book* is the most studied little magazine. In addition to the work of Knight and Macleod, see Schlereth, Wendy Clauson. *The Chap-book: a Journal of American Intellectual Life in the 1890s*. UMI Research Press, 1982.

[33] Armstrong, Tim. *Modernism: A Cultural History*. Polity, 2005. 92

[34] Ross, Edward Alsworth. "Social Decadence." *American Journal of Sociology* 23, no. 5 (March 1, 1918): 620–632. 620.

I will take the existence of Decadence communities as a given throughout the rest of this study. David Weir has proven the mere fact of their existence, my focus henceforth will be on the cultural relevance of this fact.

As an introduction to the world of the American Decadent, we should briefly look at the book that, while it certainly did not cause the Decadent movement, functioned as shibboleth and model for American and European Decadents alike. Huysmans *A Rebours* translated into English as Against Nature or Against the Grain. Des Esseintes, the hero, finds no community though he searches in religious, scholarly, and literary communities, as well as the realms of the debauched, the rich, and the artistic. There is no plot to speak of except Des Esseintes' slow mental and physical deterioration, most of the book is spent in description of the protagonist's home and his attempts to decorate it. He sends a turtle to have its shell decorated with inlay gold and jewels so that it may be a moving decoration. The turtle's death from the weight of its shell does not disturb him. He creates a hothouse garden filled with plants that look as artificial, waxy, metallic and man-made as possible in order to make nature itself seem unnatural. His favorites are of course the carnivorous plants. His favorite obsession is scent and he has made a machine in which he can create complex perfumes with the touch of buttons that create a narrative symphony of odor. A whole chapter is devoted to his library, specializing in Latin texts from the Roman Decadence, though his books bore him now. In vain he searches for a book to sooth his nervous and enervated mind. He determines that "to attract, a work must have that character of strangeness demanded by Edgar Allen Poe; but he ventured even further on this path and called for Byzantine

flora of brain and complicated deliquescences of language."[35] This was the call to action taken up by writers around the world. In the end his mind remains unsmoothed and he submits to doctors' orders to return to Paris and live in society with the normal and the mediocre. He is sure that if this saves him physically, he will not be able to bear such an existence, and so cries to God to have mercy on him.

With Des Esseintes at our backs we now look at how Decadence (this European transport) like one of Des Esseintes strange hot house plants, thrived on American soil and how American Decadents searched for pleasures and words to soothe their fevered minds.

[35] Joris-Karl Huysmans *Against the Grain* Tr John Howard Illustrated Editions Co, 1931, 268

Chapter 1

The Decadents and the Doctor: Max Nordau and Theories of Degeneration

In this chapter, I will describe the theories of degeneration available at the time, with special attention to the work of Max Nordau. While other theories of degeneration fed into the Decadent phenomena in both Europe and America, I focus on Nordau because of his specific attention to literature and art, and his disappearance from the intellectual conversation. The interaction between those who critiqued the culture of decadence, particularly Max Nordau, and those who felt an affinity for it, exists at the intersection of concerns about class, race, and gender.

When Austrian writer and doctor Max Nordau published his scathing critique of modern art and life called, *Entartung* in 1892, he directed it to a European audience; he could never have predicted the reaction that came not from the Europeans he criticized, but from Americans, whom he barely mentions.[36] Published in America in 1895, as *Degeneration*, the book went through six editions in a few years and created a storm of controversy, making Nordau a household name.[37] Nordau was already familiar to some Americans. His works *The Conventional lies of our Civilization* 1883 and

[36] Max Nordau 1849-1923. He was born Simon Sudfeld in Pest. He changed his name when he moved to Berlin. He spent most of his time in Paris. He obtained a medical degree from the University of Budapest. Though his family was Jewish, he felt more inclined toward German culture. He married a Protestant woman. Later in his life; however, he was a leader of the Zionist movement and essential to its development. He was a devotee of Cesare Lombroso. His cultural criticism includes *Conventional Lies, Paradoxes*, and *Degeneration.* He also wrote plays and novels.

[37] *Degeneration*'s English translation was published by D. Appleton and Co. Appleton also published Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley and John Stewart Mill in the United States along with the magazine *Popular Science*. They also published Lombroso's *The Female Criminal* in 1895.

Paradoxes 1886 had both been published in America, both of which attracted only minor attention. *Degeneration* was different.

Decadence was certainly connected to the discourses of degeneration and devolution. However, Decadence reveals a very particular intellectual genealogy. While Decadents dealt with sexual immorality, social disorganization, racial decline, and personal disease, their discourse was strangely devoid of Darwinian, Spencerian, and Utopian rhetoric. Indeed, the simplest way to distinguish them from Naturalism (aside from style), is their avoidance of prominent social theories. While London, Norris, and their brethren focused on many of the same topics as the Decadents, their literature was written in the spirit of warning, of the revelation of a system. Naturalism's dreary determinism and spare style was anathema to the Decadents. However, this chapter is not dedicated to style.

The scholarship on degeneration in America is vast. Degeneration, in its broadest sense the falling away from an ancestral type or to decline or become of a lower type. This was a concern as soon as European colonizers landed. Tales of people gone savage by too much contact with the natives circulated. The intellectual and popular obsession with civilization and its deterioration only continued as the Puritans sought to create their garden in the wilderness only to watch their community deteriorate and fall away from God; and England was entertained by stories of the Jamestown colony's inability to remain civilized or "English" in the face of starvation and disease. In the absence of a totalizing theory of degeneration, intellectual and popular discourse incorporated a variety of racial, religious, evolutionary, and geologic thought. At the beginning of the nineteenth century the theories of Buffon, Lamarck, and Cuvier

collided with the particular needs of Americans. Buffon argued that, while organisms were created into molds, they changed or degenerated, as they migrated to different environments. Cuvier emphasized the catastrophic nature of the impetus to change. By the late 19th Century Benedict Morel's definition of degeneration deviating from the normal type. His 1857 work *Traité des Dégénérescences*, was never translated into English, but it was still influential. Works like Samuel Royce's *Deterioration and Race Education* helped popularize Morel's work.[38] The *New American Cylcopedia* cites Morel's as the definitive definition in the entries for both "Degeneration" and "Degeneracy". The same entries discredit Nordau's definition, claiming that his attempt to connect genius and degeneration had failed. [39] Nordau and his mentor Cesare Lombroso both relied on a definition of degeneration that was not mere deviation but also had marks of atavism.[40] While Nordau's theory of degeneration does not rely entirely on atavistic theories of the modern reversion to ancestral type, he saw degeneration not just as deviation, but as definite decline.

The last century of the nineteenth century was a critical moment for these ideas. Robert Bannister devotes an entire chapter of his study of Darwinian ideas in the Anglo American context to the 1890s.[41] America had a vast territory to explore and catalog,

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[38] Samuel Royce *Deterioration and Race Education* Boston: Lee and Shepherd 1878.
[39] "Degeneration" and "Degeneracy" *The New American Cyclopedia* v 5
[40] The definitive work on atavism is Dana Seitler's *Atavistic Tendencies*
[41] The definite work is Degler, Carl N. *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought*. First Edition. Oxford University Press, USA, 1992.
For a literary angle see Gianquitto, Tina. *America's Darwin: Darwinian Theory and U.S. Literary Culture*. University of Georgia Press, 2014.
For the transatlantic story see Bannister, Robert. *Social Darwinism: Science and Myth in Anglo-American Social Thought*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.Gould, Stephen Jay. *The Mismeasure of Man*. W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.
See also Hofstadter, Richard. *Social Darwinism in American Thought*. Reprint edition. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

native populations to move and exploit, and the institution of slavery to enforce. Americans thus began not only consuming racial and evolutionary theory, but producing it. When the dust cleared after the civil war the intellectual and cultural situation had shifted. Americans were late to take to Darwinian rhetoric, but once the idea took root it spread deeply, not just filling the places occupied by the religious rhetoric, racial phylogeny, and naturalistic theories but merging with them. Neo-Lamarckianism, orthogenesis, and theistic evolution competed on equal terms with Darwin's theory. With a now free black population, a newly visible urban poor, rising immigration, and imperial contact, the exigencies of teleologically ordering the world led to the rise of social Spencerianism. As August Weissman's theories interacted with those of Lamarck and Spencer, interpreters sprang up to further muddy the ground. By the end of the 1890s nothing was clear. Yet, because the laissez-faire solution was to many unacceptable, reform Darwinists began to turn to Eugenics. In post-Darwinian America, a teleological view of evolution captured the American Imagination. Though some Americans, most notably the pragmatist philosophers, embraced the uncertainty and contingency that Darwin's theories suggested, teleological theories, like Spencerianism proved easier to digest. [42] While these impulses merged with and fueled the progressive urge for reform, social hygiene, and progress, the ultimate result was a further separation of people into populations deemed worthwhile or completely unsalvageable.

Nordau's work arrived in the midst of a complicated morass of theories of evolution, devolution, atavism, and regression. It is strange how separate Nordau and the reaction to his work was from the mainstream of hereditarian and evolutionary

[42] The list of people who got Darwin "right" is of course longer.

thought. Nordau's work fit more into criminal anthropology which had achieved a niche popularity in the United States.[43] Francis Galton's ideas had by then arrived in America, but the practice of eugenics was two decades away from going mainstream. Most Americans would have been familiar with the criminological developments occurring both in Europe and at home. Cesare Lombroso's most famous work *The Criminal Man* was not translated into English until 1911, right in time for the Eugenics boom, but his book *The Man of Genius* was printed in English in 1891. This is appropriate because what draws the Decadents together with Nordau and he with Lombroso and Galton is not their obsession with criminality but their obsession with genius. Lombroso's work deeply influenced Nordau along with criminologists and eugenicists. Lombroso was best known for his relation of physical defects to mental and moral defects. His system gave adherents the ability to infer criminal behavior from a criminal physiognomy. The shape of head and ears, the symmetry of the face, and the relative length of limbs were especially important in identifying the criminal. More specifically, Lombroso argued that specific criminal tendencies from thievery to murder to prostitution could be discerned by careful examination. See fig 1 Lombroso's studies did not have the backing of statistical science (even fabricated statistics) nor did he engage with the newly popular sociological mindset. However, his contention that moral insanity could be read on the face, an old idea, was phrased in modern enough terms that it rang true in the 1890s.

[43] See Mark H. Haller *Eugenics: Hereditarian Attitudes in American Though* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press 1963, for a discussion of the influence of Moriz Benedikt and Cesare Lombroso on eugenic thought. See also Becker, Peter, and Richard F. Wetzell. *Criminals and Their Scientists: The History of Criminology in International Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, 2006 for a more detailed explanation of the transatlantic movements of criminal anthropology

Robert Dugdale's 1877 study *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity* is well-known in the history of eugenics for being both foundational and misinterpreted. Dugdale suggested that environmental factors, which might be heritable, are the root cause of the Jukes' criminality, but his work was later used as justification for eugenic methods.[44] Galton's statistics and Dugdale's sociology were certainly influential, but they were very distant from the culturally based degeneration theory that Decadence engages with. Lombroso's *The Man of Genius* was translated into English by Havelock Ellis, who also published a work of criminology *The Criminal* in 1890 (later published in America) that was based on Lombroso's work. While criminology would eventually become its own branch of science, one that supported eugenics, it was in the 1890s still a nascent field.

Nordau references Spencer occasionally, but usually only in terms of degenerates who use him to puff up their scientific credentials. He never seriously takes into consideration Spencer's theories but hints that Spencer is a bit too individualistic and mystical minded for his taste. Besides some vaguely admiring comments about fellow men of science, Nordau's only substantial mention of Darwin is in a footnote in which he agrees that some natural deviation from the norm that is advantageous might be passed down, and thus help the species evolve, but that the far more common process is one in which the strong willed members of the species find themselves up against a problem and in their desire to overcome it adapt themselves. Evolution is thus an act of the will. Lamarck's giraffe's neck elongates because the animal realizes that in order to be better fed, its neck should be longer, and this

[44] See Deglar

concentration on the neck increases blood flow and nervous impulses which over time and generations lengthens the neck. Willpower here, Nordau makes sure to mention, should not be confused with Schopenhaur's mystical notion.[45]

Psychiatry was also at a turning point at the end of the 19th Century. Looking back, we can chart the curve from the aliensts' study of the pathological, and their home in asylums, to "modern" psychiatry's focus on the normal and therapeutic, but at the moment alienism was struggling to attain authority. Armchair theorists like Nordau could still feel that they had something to add. Morel is Nordau's chief instructor in psychiatry and Nordau works with Morel's understanding of insanity as a hereditary pathology. Morel also argues that environmental factors, a parent's alcoholism for example, can begin a hereditary slide into degeneracy. Nordau also references Charcot and Janet with great respect for their work on insanity. Even though Nordau's language seems to indicate that he is in conversation with Spencerians and other veins of hereditarian thought, it was here, in the midst of the protean fields of criminal anthropology, sexology, and psychiatry that Nordau fit.

The scholarly focus on Darwinian, Spencerian, and Eugenic theories of degeneration; those that were most directly connected to scientific and social thought, obscures other facets of degeneration theory equally present at the end of the century. It is to the one of the defenders of this theory that I now turn.

By examining Nordau's work first on its own terms and then in the context of its American reception we gain entry to the discourse of Degeneration and Decadence that

[45] Degeneration 262

is often obscured by the more prominent post-Darwinian, Spencerian, and eugenic discourses. To understand why Nordau's work caused such an uproar in the United States, it bears examining his contention in some detail. The work is over 500 pages long, but even so is not a difficult read, as is evidenced by its quick popularity. Nordau divides his work into five books. The first is entitled "Fin de Siècle" and describes the current situation. This pairs with the fifth book "The Twentieth Century" in which Nordau gives us a glimpse of the future in light of current tendencies. The three books in between, "Mysticism", "Ego-mania", "and "Realism" investigate the ills of each particular ill, and delve into the artists and thinkers who exemplify and promulgate them. The luminaries he accuses of degeneracy run the gamut from easy targets like Nietzsche and Verlaine, to more respectable figures such as Zola and Tolstoy.[46] His only mention of an American author is a brief aside about Walt Whitman. He begins with a kind of disclaimer that the rest of his book seems to belie. He argues: "Only the brain of a child or of a savage could form the clumsy idea that the century is a kind of living being, born like a beast or a man, passing through all the stages of existence, gradually ageing and declining after blooming childhood, joyous youth, and vigorous maturity, to die with the expiration of the hundredth year after being afflicted in its last decade with all the infirmities of mournful senility"[47] Yet, there is clearly something special about the end of the century, and a clear decay of some kind. So while the century is an artificial construction "it is a habit of the human mind to project externally its own subjective states.[48]" Nordau then describes several situations that embody the fin-de-siècle

[46] Nietzche was relatively unknown at this point, and Nordau's wrath helped to influence perception of him.
[47] Nordau, Max Simon. *Degeneration*. New York: D. Appleton, 1895, 1.
[48] Ibid, 2

attitude: a king who abdicates in return for cash, a couple who marries in a gas factory and honeymoon on a balloon, a young lady who marries an older wealthy man while also intending to keep her young lover. The common denominator according to Nordau, is "contempt for traditional views of custom and morality."[49] This especially applies to traditional gender roles. Next, Nordau makes a distinction that proves problematic. "The great majority of the middle and lower classes is naturally not *fin-de-siècle.* It is true that the spirit of the time is stirring the nations down to their very depths and awaking even in the most inchoate and rudimentary human being a wondrous feeling of stir and upheaval. But the more or less slight touch of moral sea-sickness does not excite in him the cravings of travailing women nor express itself in new aesthetic needs."[50] Now, to say that the underclasses were more virile than the upper classes, or more joyful, or stronger, or even more vital, was one thing; this rhetoric was incredibly widespread.[51] However, to say that the lower classes were more moral and less corruptible brought Nordau into contention with the civilized and well-off, who were anxious to defend themselves. In Nordau's estimation there is something about the lower classes, that makes them culturally or genetically immune to the influence of the end of the century.

Nordau further elaborates that "It is only a very small minority who honestly find pleasure in the new tendencies, and announce them with genuine conviction as that which alone is sound, a sure guide to the future, a pledge of pleasure and of moral

[49] Ibid, 5
[50] Nordau 7
[51] See Gail Bederman. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. University Of Chicago Press, 1996.

benefit."[52] However these few hold enormous power and influence. They cover much of society as "a little oil extends over a large area of the surface of the sea."[53] These few people impart not only artistic taste but also a certain temperament. "The disposition of the times is curiously confused, a compound of feverish restlessness and blunted discouragement, of fearful presage and hang-dog renunciation."[54] Women, while not the majority of producers of this art, were its victims. Like the young and feeble-minded, women were especially susceptible to the charms of fin de siècle writing and literature due to their "common place natures". [55] Moreover, women were often the target audience for the novels and works of arts produced by the Decadents.[56] Reaching for the example of a woman to make his point, he posits a hysterical woman, who chafes against societal constraints, and longs to set her lower natures free. She meets a novelist and a dramatist who argue that as a young woman she has the right to set these desires free, according to her pleasure, and even after marriage she may pursue her erotic impulses and break her vows. Indeed, the young woman would be considered dull, unprogressive and slavish if she held fast to social mores. Breaking the rules makes her a more interesting person. This trope is easily recognizable as the stirrings of feminist sexual and social revolution that Nordau and medical consensus agreed was a sign of hysteria. Nordau's contribution is to tie this tendency directly to the artistic temperament and to its authority and influence through books and culture.

[52] Nordau 7
[53] Nordau 7
[54] Nordau 2
[55] Nordau, Max "Society's Protection Against the Degenerates" *Forum* 19:5 Jul 1985, 535.
[56] Edgar Saltus in particular assumes that the reader of his novels was a woman, and frequently directs asides to her.

At the beginning of his chapter on symptoms, Nordau's first example is a description of women of the fin de siècle, riding a train, a classic sign of modernity. The women wear their hair in a variety of styles drawn from classical antiquity through the present. Dark complected women dye their hair light, and light complected women dye their hair black, purely to "snap [their] fingers at nature."[57] In dress, women combine medieval hats with Spanish inspired jackets that jangle with bells. He notes that dresses reminiscent of Catherine de Medici, Mary Queen of Scotts, and an angel of the annunciation sit next to each other. The majority wear clothes with "bewildering oblique lines, incomprehensible swellings, puffings, expansions and contractions, folds with irrational beginning and aimless ending, in which all the outline of the human figure are lost, and which causes women's bodies to resemble now a beast of the Apocalypse, now an armchair, now a triptych, or some other ornament."[58] He then goes on to explain that the children are equally unnatural in their dress, profaned in absurd disguises that only the imagination of a spinster could have come up with. Finally, the men, who are the least offensive and outrageous, possibly through "fear of the Philistine's laugh."[59] Still "They do not express their real idiosyncrasies but try to present something that they are not."[60]

The degenerate is so numb and jaded in body that "Mere sensuality passes as common place and only finds admission when disguised as something unnatural and degenerate. Elegant titillation only begins where normal sexual relations leave off.

[57] Nordau 8
[58] Nordau 8
[59] Nordau 9
[60] Nordau 9

Priapus has become a symbol of virtue. Vice looks to Sodom and Lesbos, to Bluebeard's castle and the servant's hall of the 'divine' Marquis de Sade's *Justine* for its embodiments"[61] Sexual behavior has nothing to do with reproduction, and is no longer a natural act for the degenerate. Rather, it excites in proportion to its deviations from nature. A final symptom is that these people are no longer content to merely listen to music or read literature, or see a painting, but must combine sensations in spectacles designed to stimulate their senses.

Degenerates are all morally insane, which consists of egoism and impulsiveness. They are also prone to emotionalism; which Nordau admits is present in hysterics as well as generally healthy people going through a temporary illness or weakness. Finally degenerates possess a mental weakness and despondency that presents in the form of pessimism, hatred of all men, and self-hatred. This results in an incapacity for action, which the fin de siècle degenerate convinces himself is not only freely willed by himself, but is philosophically justified, hence the popularity of Schopenhauer and Buddhism. Degenerates are also full of doubts and perpetually seeking answers where there are none, for instance chasing after the philosopher's stone and the secret to perpetual motion. Finally, all revolutionists and anarchists are degenerates because degenerates are incapable of adaptation, and are thus prone to schemes to make everyone happy. Finally, mysticism is to be found among all degenerates.

Feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz suggests that the relationship between body and mind is a Mobius strip. Instead of a binary, in which woman is associated with

[61] Nordau 13

body and man with mind, she suggests that the connection is more complex and dependent. Mind and body are neither two separate things, nor one, and one turns into the other without passing through a clear threshold.[62] Inside and outside has no clear threshold, but outside can become inside and vice versa. If Nordau had paused to fully articulate his understanding of mind and body, he might have come to a model similar to Grosz'.

After thus describing the typical fin de siècle person, Nordau proceeds to diagnose them with degeneracy and hysteria, of which neurasthenia is a minor stage. Her follows Morel in defining degeneracy as a "morbid deviation from and original type."[63] The physical signs of such degeneracy Nordau terms stigmata (an unfortunate term, he admits), and lists the physical defects that Morel and Lombroso also fixate on, including asymmetries, ear shape, hare lips, etc.

Nordau asserts that if an examination of the creators of fin de siècle art were undertaken, and their lineages studied, physical signs of degeneracy would surely be found. However, such an investigation cannot take place because of "human consideration."[64] The class considerations here are obvious. His mentor, Lombroso, was able to invasively investigate his subjects because they were poor, criminals, or otherwise marked as subject to scientific and state surveillance. It was, and still is, of course, impossible to subject those with cultural and social power to such treatment without their active participation. The fact that Nordau even contemplates doing it is

[62] Grosz, Elizabeth A. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Indiana University Press, 1994.
[63] Nordau 16
[64] Nordau 17

part of what is so radical about his work, and what many took strong objection to. Even the suggestion that an authority might speculatively investigate the bodies of the elite, and find them wanting, is a violation.

Since Nordau cannot personally examine his subjects, another solution presents itself by virtue of the fact that mental stigmata are just as clear as the physical signs. Mental stigmata can be read through artistic works and biographical details. Mind and body are strangely connected. Physical defects denote some kind of mental defect. However, this does not fully explain Nordau's understanding of fashion. For surely all those that he describes were not born craving unnatural fashion. Indeed, Nordau notes in many cases the fin de siècle spirit is "a mere imitation of a foreign fashion gaining vogue, and not an organic evolution."[65] So the fin de siècle attitude can be both the consequence and sign of physical and mental degeneracy, but it can also be a fashion, or affectation, not organic to the nation. Degeneracy is caused when "by any kind of noxious influences an organism becomes debilitated."[66] Nordau argues that the real risk of decadent art and culture is that its influence may gradually corrupt the minds, and then the bodies of originally normal people "for in addition to those whose organic constitution irrevocably condemns them to such a fate, the present degenerate tendencies are pursued by many who are only victims to fashion and certain cunning impostures, and these misguided ones we may hope to lead back to right paths. If, on the other hand, they were to be passively abandoned to the

[65] Nordau 2
[66] Nordau 16

influences of graphomaniacal fools and their imbecile or unscrupulous bodyguard of critics, the inevitable result of such a neglect of duty would be a much more rapid and violent

outspread of the mental contagion,"[67] So, what starts out as fashion, as imposture, as merely surface, can slowly become real degeneracy.

Nordau now moves into the controversial part of his book, which later necessitated Cesare Lombroso himself to publish a piece repudiating his connection with Nordau and publicly reprimanding Nordau for misrepresenting his theories. Unlike Lombroso, who with Galton thought that though some types of artistic genius was certainly related to degeneration, it was a special type that was necessarily different from the degeneration of the deviants and delinquents. In contrast, Nordau argues that genius is no defense against degeneracy, in fact it is a possible sign of it. Not all geniuses are lunatics, and certainly all lunatics are not geniuses. However, the degenerate's genius is developed as part of an asymmetry of the brain, meaning that some other faculty is atrophied. A true genius, when the exceptional or different is removed from him, remains a sane, intelligent, and moral person. A degenerate, when the special capacity is removed, is left only a madman or criminal.

Nordau's prognostications for the twentieth century are amusing and not completely fanciful. The streets of the twentieth century will dotted with suicide clubs. Entire professions will revolve around sedating and subduing those whose frayed nerves causes them to become hysterical in public. Attention spans will have shortened such that school is only 2 hours long, and public amusements can be no longer than

[67] Nordau 552

half an hour. The old religions have fallen by the wayside, replaced by flashier cults, along with all sorts of spiritualism and sorcery. All sorts of sexual psychopathy will be normalized, with masochistic men dressed in fashion recalling women's clothes walking in broad daylight, looking for the approval of women dressed in masculine attire complete with boots, riding crops, and cigars.

This is not inevitable, because both individuals and nations process the capacity to mitigate the noxious effects of the environment. If society takes heed now, and curtails the influence of the decadents and their cultural productions, it is almost certain that civilization can be saved. Mass media have a particular responsibility. Some kind of policy to encourage healthy art and literature, and discourage degenerate art and literature would be needed, though Nordau falls short of encouraging outright censorship.

The close of Nordau's work bears quoting at length.

> We in particular who have made it our life's task to combat antiquated superstition, to spread enlightenment, to demolish historical ruin and remove their rubbish, to defend the freedom of the individual against state oppression and the mechanical routine of the Philistine; we must set ourselves in opposition to the miserable mongers who seize upon our dearest watchwords to trap the innocent. The 'freedom' and 'modernity' the 'progress' and 'truth' of these fellows are not ours.[68]

Nordau in America

The reaction to Nordau's work in America is revealing in several ways. First, his work, written for popular consumption, made degeneration rhetoric more available than the more recondite and subtle theories of Darwin's interpreters such as Benjamin Kidd

[68] Nordau 560

or Henry Drummond. Second, these responses reveal the deeply seated fear of Decadence in America. A critical contention of the American nationalistic self-image, exaggerated in American exceptionalism, nativism, colonialism, and jingoism, was that America was healthier than dying Europe, and that the only problem amongst the middle and upper classes was "overcivilization." The reaction to Nordau's work reveals the real concern over the psychic health of Americans. Finally, before Freud, Nordau's culturally based theories of infection and contamination, along with his focus on the culturally educated classes reveal a moment in which social control impulses might have been turned towards the cultural producers and not the consumers, and when that control meant not eugenic breeding, but the surveillance of the mind.

The reaction to Nordau was swift and almost universally negative. His work spawned innumerable reviews, citations, newspaper articles, short fiction, and even whole books in reply. Nordau bashing made strange bedfellows. William James, George Bernard Shaw, Cesare Lombroso, and James Huneker all wrote vituperative criticisms of *Degeneration*. Artists, ministers, doctors, psychologists, and literature critics all reacted negatively to Nordau's association of immorality with high culture. American critics' hatred of Nordau is strange, especially considering their equal hatred of decadence. Nordau mentions America only briefly, and considered Decadence a European disease. Why, then, did Americans think Nordau was somehow addressing them? Possibly because American intellectuals did not quite fully believe in their own immunity and also objected to the boundaries that Nordau was crossing.

The startling range of commentators is a testament to the diffusion of Nordau's ideas. For instance, Nordau's comments on the degenerate nature of women's fashion

leads to Nordau's unlikely mention in the fashion section of the *St. Louis Republic*. Margaret Hannis, a journalist, takes issue with Nordau's, from her view, unwarranted and unsupported attacks on women's dress. She argues that fashion has always drawn from history, indeed there is nothing new in the fashion world. In the past, perhaps, dress served the function of dividing nations and classes. Now, however, fashion is just fashion. It changes, but is not indicative of anything. Contrary to Nordau's belief, women have grown more intelligent, but fashion remains. Thus, trying to decipher its connotations for either progress or degeneration is foolish. [69] Women in the current era have the luxury of being able to pull from many different styles, so that they are no longer slaves to fashion, but rather in charge of fashioning themselves, of choosing the styles that suit them best, regardless of what is au courant in Paris. Thus where Nordau sees degenerate taste, Hannis sees individuality.

Positive remarks came in the vein of praising Nordau's learning, William James notes that he is indeed very well read in various literatures and the current psychological work. Nicholas Murray Butler then a professor of Philosophy and Education at Columbia wrote the preface to the American publication of *Regeneration: A Reply to Max Nordau* by Alfred E. Hake in 1896. He calls Nordau "The most daring toreador in recent years" [70] Butler is typical in asserting that the value of Nordau's book is not in itself, but in the way it raises interest in important issues. Thus, "In a certain subtle way it has set us to examining the reasons that lead most of us to deny the

[69] Hannis, Margaret "Personality in Dress: A Woman's Raimant Bespeaks her Charactersitcs" *The St Louis Republic* April 9, 1895, pg 22.
[70] Nicholas Murray Butler "Preface" in Hake, A. Egmont (Alfred Egmont), and Nicholas Murray Butler. *Regeneration. A Reply to Max Nordau*. New York, G. P. Putnam's sons ; 1896. Iii.

essential viciousness and abnormality of some of the most salient and striking characteristics of contemporary culture"[71] So Nordau helps Americans to realize that he is, in fact, completely wrong about modern culture.

The venom directed at Nordau is surprising, considering that his theories, to our modern eyes, were no worse than the other hereditarian or eugenic work being published. Many of the criticisms included a statement of support of Cesare Lombroso, to whom *Degeneration* was dedicated. Lombroso's theory posited that physical marks of degeneracy correlated with criminality, because they indicated atavism, or a state of savagery. Lombroso himself found it necessary to publish a repudiation of Nordau, widely circulated in America, in order to safeguard his own reputation. Lombroso notes that "Degeneration, for one who follows my theories instead of destroying fortifies the diagnosis which proves them to be geniuses and enlarges its range, for only the mediocre have not maddish forms for the very reason that they lack fecund originality, which is the basis of genius." [72] Lombroso takes the edge off of the diagnosis of degeneration, dulling it to mean something like abnormality, or even difference. He also carefully avoids connecting geniuses to other degenerates, criminals, and low-lifes. Lombroso is careful to praise Nordau, but tactfully states that perhaps he got ahead of himself with some of his theories. He especially defends most of the authors and artists Nordau attacks. This repudiation, as well as Nordau's response to it, was pounced upon gleefully by the American press. One article smirks "Pitiful as is Nordau's predicament, he can console himself by reflecting upon the predicament of the critics

[71] Butler, v.

[72] Cesare Lombroso "Nordau's Degeneration its values and its errors" *Century Illustrated Magazine (1881-1906);* Oct 1895; I, 6. 936;

and reviewers (and their name is legion) who have accepted his philosophy and endorsed his verdict upon the degenerates. How these poor devils feel can better be imagined than described. If there is any sense of shame in them, I fear there will be an appalling increase in the suicide rate."[73]

Scholar Linda L. Maik notes that Nordau's detractors in America took issue with his style and attacked his nationality and ethnicity. They also disagreed with his aesthetic judgments, and with his use of science to critique art and morality. [74] Maik argues that within Nordau's attempt to rationalize the irrational there was contained "a sociology modern enough to inspire fear."[75] However, it is also clear that Nordau's understanding of the strange connection between body, mind, and culture, as well as his violation of class privilege was responsible for the reaction. Nordau's critics are rejecting the connection between mind and body that he is attempting to make.

For instance, Mayo Hazeltine, in his review of Nordau, argues that Nordau has the effects of modernity completely reversed in terms of class. In his view, the inventions of modernity that Nordau thinks caused degeneration, the rail, the steamship, the telegraph and telephone, the agglomeration of capital, and the intensification of intellect, are the province of the industrial and commercial classes. Thus, at least physically, the upper classes are immune from modernity. So, if anything, it is the upper classes who are the healthiest and best screeners of art and literature.

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[73] "Lombroso Repudiates Nordau" *Liberty* Oct 19, 1895, 2.
[74] Linda L. Maik "Nordau's Degeneration: The American Controversy" *Journal of the History of Ideas* , Vol. 50, No. 4 (Oct. - Dec., 1989) , pp. 607-623
[75] Maik 608

William James, calling the book "A pathological book on a pathological issue" also comments on the sweeping implications of Nordau's theory, quipping that if Nordau had turned his diagnostic method on himself, Nordau would find himself a "graphomaniac, a misanthrope, and a misoneast, a coprolalic, an erotomaniac,"[76]

Aside from these obvious flaws, his understanding of the egomania of degenerates is based around Lombroso's research on criminals who demonstrated "obtuse sensibility of their skin and other perceptive organs."[77] It is this research that Nordau is using to critique works of art by cultural elites, a logical leap that James finds irresponsible. As with any divisive cultural figure, quickly the name Nordau signaled insanity or irrationality. In a letter to the editor, Leopold Jaches replies to an article written by the Times' music critic, W. J. Henderson. Jache askes "But what is to become of health in art if the inspiration of the composer is to be sought in the wild philosophy of a Nietzsche or a Nordau."[78]

William Dean Howells used his column in Harper's Weekly to review *Degeneration*. Although he reviews it he is careful to state that "the book is not worth reading in itself or for itself" but since others are reading it, or pretending to read it, he might as well comment. "He is offensive in manner, and writes a vulgar noisy style; he stamps about, shouts, and calls names…If you begin to talk of him you fall into his vice of abusiveness, as I am doing now."[79] Howells believes that the reason it is so popular is that Americans automatically grant authority to European writers. He wishes that he

[76] William James "Review of Degeneration" *Psychological Review*, Vol 2(3), May 1895, 289-290. 289.
[77] Ibid 289
[78] Jaches, Leopold "The Critic Criticized" *The New York Times* Feb. 28 1901 pg 8.
[79] Howells, William Dean "Degeneration" *Harper's Weekly* April 13, 1895. 342

could tell his "Dear, simple-souled, brother American" that there is nothing in Nordau's book "that you need worry yourself over for a moment." [80] "This method may be scientific, but it is not moral, and I doubt very much if it is scientific." After arguing that Nordau is so over the top that he must be completely insincere, interested only in the fame that such a ridiculous book brings, Howells concludes "What Dr. Nordau really does is to offer himself as an example of that cunning, dishonest unscrupulous degenerate well-known to alienists who devotes his powers, abnormally active in disease, to the arts of illusion and deceit."[81] Whether Nordau's work is scientific is irrelevant to Howells. His morality transcends both science and art, enabling him to judge both. This war of moralists is strange. Nordau and Howells would seem to be on the same side; both are arguing that art should be curated for the public so that they are only exposed to healthy, class-appropriate art. However, Nordau's implication that some of the artists that Howells likes are degenerate, and that this degeneration might spread to America, is too much for Howells to take. In a discourse full of outrageous and hyperbolic responses, Howells's review attracted attention for being especially and unnecessarily indignant. Others agreed with Nordau. The editors of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* object to Nordau's claim that newspapers have a special place in defending the country from degeneracy. Again, this seems strange, because Nordau accords newspapers quite a bit of power in determining taste and as cultural gatekeepers. Nevertheless, like Howells, The *Sentinel* takes exception to the very idea that degenerate ideas might have any foothold in America whatsoever. Newspapers do not

[80] Ibid 342

[81] Howells, William Dean "Degeneration" *Harper's Weekly* April 13, 1895. 342

need to defend the American people against degenerate art, because the average American newspaper reader has no connection to such art. Most Americans read good, clean, American literature, and have never even heard of Nietzsche or Verlaine.[82] American commentators were not oblivious to the strange workings of fame. The idea that *Degeneration* is so widely read precisely because so many people find it not worth reading is well discussed. An article in the *Omaha World Herald* argues that "Mr. William Dean Howells' frantic disgust at Max Nordau's 'Degenerates' cannot but arouse the public to some show of interest." The article goes on to quote in full a piece from *The Critic* on the subject of Howells' Nordau review. Entitled "Degeneration vs. Realism: A Fable" it describes a Sioux chief who constructs a very ugly idol, which he loves even though it is ugly because he himself made it. A wandering medicine man, with a mania for destroying lumber, throws it into the fire. The Sioux chief announces to the gathered crowd "My dear American Indians, this is not a fire: it is nothing but an amusing phantasm conjured up by the absurd medicine man. The Idol I have made is not and cannot be consumed. Thus he consoled himself while convincing no one who was acquainted with the properties of fire." [83] Howells will remain through this work as something of a villain for the Decadents, representing the forces against which they arrayed themselves. His confidence in the optimistic, progressive, and moral American spirit led him to object to Nordau and led the Decadents to object to him.

Writing in 1950, Lewis Mumford reflected back on the past half century. Concerning the end of the nineteenth century, before the First World War, he argues

[82] "Degeneracy and Newspapers" *The Milwaukee Sentinel* Sunday June 30, 1895, 12.
[83] Constance Goddard Dubois "Degeneration vs. Realism: A Fable" *The Critic* April 17, 1895

that the books written reflected the optimism of the age. With all the new technology, with the progress of civilization so evident, how could utopia not be right around the corner? The success of *Looking Backwards* is proof of the faith in progress of the end of the century. What then, is to explain the success of Nordau's book? "But the reaction against it was not due simply to Nordau's loose thinking: it was due to the general belief that degeneration was impossible in the literature or art produced by a Century of Progress." [84]Further, "he had, perhaps by accident, a curiously sound intuition of the future." [85] Mumford agrees with his 19th century predecessors that Nordau's thinking is poor, but, shockingly, he was right. Edward Bellamy may have inspired admiration as well as detraction, but Nordau's universally disclaimed book was ultimately more correct.

Charles Loomis Dana found himself as one of the few to defend Nordau. Dana was a physician who eventually became a professor of nervous diseases at Cornell Medical College. He published on neuroses, and retained his pre-Freudian ideas even after Freud's visit to the United States. He also published translations and commentaries on Horace. In a speech to the Nineteenth Century Club of New York, Dana is careful to mention that Nordau's ideas are not new. A newspaper article written about this lecture comments on the existence of the "Paranoia Club, Limited" of New York. This club existed many years previous to "encourage and study those erratic tendencies in society with an aesthetic, moral, picturesque or scientific interest. In particular, this club shall pursue the study of Decadence, Occultism, Anarchism,

[84] Lewis Mumford "Mirror of a Violent Half-Century" New York Times Jan 15, 1951, 1.
[85] Lewis Mumford "Mirror of a Violent Half-Century" New York Times Jan 15, 1951, 1.

Amateur Economics, Religion, and all paranoical manifestations, in poetry, art, science and practical life. Lying in its higher form will be encouraged"[86] Whether or not this club really existed, Dana argued that the idea of degeneration was well proven. He addresses himself, not to the criticism of other doctors, but to the criticism of William Dean Howells. Howells cannot merely disregard Nordau on the basis of Nordau's "hysteria". These literary men, according to Dana, are merely trying to defend themselves because they feel attacked, but are doing so out of panic rather than real thought. Nor is it sufficient to claim Nordau himself, when his diagnostic tools are turned back towards him, is a degenerate. Because degeneration is a real condition "the question of who has it must be determined on the evidence and not by objuration."[87] Dana goes on to agree with the majority of Nordau's argument. He concedes that Nordau lets his scientific method slip, especially when he takes on individuals like Wagner. There is no real way to examine Wagner closely enough to make a definitive diagnosis. Dana does agree, however, that the majority of decadent art is unhealthy. Art for art's sake is not a justification, and we should not let ourselves be bullied by those who throw charges of "philistinism" at those who question art. Finally, Dana admits that he does not know whether or not we are degenerating. He takes another jab at Howells, wondering how it is that Howells seems to have all the answers, and can so readily declare America to be completely healthy and untouched by degeneration. Statistics are unreliable and hard to come by, but Dana, surveying the

[86] This first appears in the "Talk of the Day" *Boston Journal* April 19, 1895, p 10, but it is not connected to the nineteenth century club. It then appears in"Degeneration" *The Sioux City Journal* April 20 1895 p 6. The "paranoia club" only appears in this summary of the Nineteenth Century Club meeting. No such organization is mentioned in the original article, which appears to be "A Question of Degeneracy: An Interesting Question Before the Nineteenth Century Club" *New York Tribune* April 17, 1895 p. 5.

[87] Dana, Charles L "Are We Degenerating" Forum Jun 1895 vol 19:4, 458.

available evidence, posits that degeneracy may be increasing, but only slightly. They may be increasing, not because of our vices, but rather our virtues. Our civilization is so altruistic and vital that some who have degenerative illnesses are able to make it to adulthood and raise children. Nevertheless, degeneracy will probably not increase out of the bounds of our ability to control it.

Not all medical experts agreed with Dana. An essay in *Medical News* asks if in Nordau "we have a real prophet calling to us in the wilderness, or have we only a fakir" then answers both in the affirmative[88]. The essay goes on to argue that although Nordau is clearly interesting he lacks the discipline to be either a scientist or a critic. Nordau's insistence that he be a Renaissance man at the turn of the 20th Century suddenly seemed a little ridiculous. The idea that he could write psychology, art criticism, novels, and plays undermined his authority in all worlds.[89] Furthermore, for psychiatry "the time is yet far distant when this science will be able to dictate terms even to jurisprudence and sociology."[90]

The most interesting responses come from those who saw themselves as the target of Nordau's vitriol. George Bernard Shaw's piece on Nordau, entitled "A Degenerate's View of Nordau" was widely circulated in America.[91] His defense; however, was based on the fact that Nordau simply does not understand art or modern art criticism. He declares both himself and the art that he produces and enjoys to be

[88] "Max Nordau and Degeneration" *Medical News* Aug 19, 1895 67:7, 177.
[89] Nordau's plays were published in America, but were never very popular. They received poor reviews, and the little popularity they did have seemed to be based on the pleasure of seeing Nordau fail.
[90] Max Nordau and Degeneration" *Medical News* Aug 19, 1895 67:7, 177
[91] Shaw was one of those critiqued by Nordau

health and wholesome. Others took a different approach, defending art's right to be neither healthy nor unhealthy. These included those who considered themselves decadent.

A review in *The Chap-Book* sets forth the Decadent reaction with tongue thoroughly in cheek. The reviewer, who styles himself only as "A Degenerate," warns the reader against Nordau's book because it leads one into the "most deplorable, most odious, most blighting habit—that of searching for degenerates"[92]. Indeed, the reviewer was drawn to the inexorable conclusion that he himself was a degenerate. Since degenerate can be discerned by the shape of their ears, the author begins to obsessively study the shape of ears on others as well, thus ruining his social life. He then confesses a whole range of symptoms including graphomania (obsessive writing), iophobia (fear of poisons), and belenophobia (fear of needles especially on the floor). He notes that "Our mental traits we oftimes conceal from public view, our moral traits we always conceal, but many of our physical characteristics, alas, cannot be wholly hidden." [93] This is Nordau's crime. He intimates that the privacy of the mind, especially the upper-class mind, can be read on the body, and the body can be read by the products of the mind.

James Huneker was possibly the most prominent American Decadent. As such, he took a prominent position on Nordau. Huneker's "Nosphilia a Nordau Heroine" exemplifies the complex relationship between the labeler and the labeled. Unlike many

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[92] A Degenerate "Degeneration" *The Chap - Book; Semi - Monthly. A Miscellany & Review of Belles Lettres (1894-1898);* Jul 1, 1895; 3, 4. 147.
[93] A Degenerate "Degeneration" *The Chap - Book; Semi - Monthly. A Miscellany & Review of Belles Lettres (1894-1898);* Jul 1, 1895; 3, 4. 147.

populations labeled by medical science to be deviant, Huneker and his community held considerable cultural power. Huneker makes it clear in his writing that he considers Nordau a complete moron. His review of Nordau's book is particularly scathing, putting him, oddly, on the same side as William Dean Howells. For him Nordau is like "something that cries at night in the desert," something to be quickly left behind.[94] What exactly does he object to? Decadents in America saw themselves as the outcasts, but also as the most important members of their generation. They were, of course, much more mainstream than they pretended. This combination of power and assumed powerlessness, put the decadents in a position to lean into the rhetoric that defined them. Rather than resisting the aspersions cast upon them by Nordau and others, they identified with them. Huneker uses his review to align himself and his favorites—Schopenhauer, Swinbourne, Baudelaire, Maternlick, and Verlaine—with Dante, Michael Angelo and any other luminary who Nordau or Lombroso eviscerates. If you take their theories seriously, Huneker argues, then all artists are criminally insane. Huneker pushes hard against the specter of censorship and the idea that psychologists or alienists had the slightest right to the realm of art criticism. He asks why a man who so clearly hates art persists in writing about it.

Huneker then goes on the attack, setting out the Decadent agenda. He calls Nordau "the spokesman of this Philistine class and the banner-bearer of all that is morbid and vulgar and commonplace in the criticism of art, life, and literature"[95] Huneker proclaims "art-for-art", which Nordau argues was only true of the first cave painters, and

[94] James Hunker "The Case of Dr. Nordau" *The Forum* Nov. 1915, 571
[95] Huneker "The Case of Dr. Nordau" 584

the atavistic child who produces similar works. Finally, Huneker notes that "Art is art because it is not nature...Art is not and can never be democratic…Its essence is personality"[96] Huneker's response to Nordau is a good starting place for positioning Decadents in terms of their self-definition. They oppose moralism, censorship and fearmongering, but also optimism, Philistinism and Pollyannaism. Art is opposed to nature, democracy, and any sort of collectivism. Individual personality is the essence of art.

Unlike many of those who were the brunt of eugenic or racist screeds, the Decadents were in the strange position of having enough cultural power to embrace the discourse. While avoiding much of the debate over evolution and inheritance, decadents became enamored, and amused, by Max Nordau's prediction of destruction. While Nordau's rhetoric holds much in common with other evolutionary and eugenic theories of decline, he differs from them by establishing a reciprocal connection between culture and the individual psyche. Where others focused on the lower classes, using them to occasionally impugn those in power, Nordau focuses on the *avant-garde* and high society. Over the vast span of his work, he contradicts himself many times, and is often vague and certainly hyperbolic. The connection he draws between body and mind, individual and culture, were certainly novel.

It is understandable that Max Nordau's grand synthesis would have been appealing, if not convincing. I need not describe here the material and social causes

[96] Ibid 582

leading to the often-bewildering intellectual climate of the late 19th century[97]. It is important to note, however, that Nordau's work appeared in America as one of the last popular works of the type of alienist, categorizing, speculative psychology that reigned before the revolution brought by the separate influences of Freud and William James. Nordau preceded Freud in connecting art to psychiatry. Nordau's psychiatry, of course, was radically different than Freud's. Also, Nordau focused on the artist, while Freudian and Jungian criticism of art and literature would focus on the work itself.

Nordau's work is essential to understanding Decadence and its place in American culture. As much as it was defined positively as a connection to the canon of Decadent works, American Decadence was defined negatively, playing into fears and perceptions. Thus, Nordau's work both defined American Decadence retroactively and shaped it; illuminating both for supporters and detractors, the cultural power and possibilities of Decadences. For those to whom Nordau's twentieth century seemed a nightmare, it was a warning, but for the Decadents who dreamed of such a future, Nordau's work was a model and promise. While other theorists of degeneration warned of an atavistic return to a savage past, especially amongst the lower classes, Decadents saw the promise of a past that offered aesthetic freedom in the future.

[97] See, for instance Lears *No Place of Grace* and Daniel Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics,* and Stephen Jay Gould *The Mismeasure of Man*

Chapter 2
Morbidity and the Signs of American Decadence

"Decadence! What a world of sinister significance and suggestion is contained in those three syllables".[98] So writes William Aspenwall Bradley, Gertrude Stein's literary agent, in an article in *The Bookman* entitled "What is Decadence?" Despite their insistence to Nordau that such a thing could never happen in their country, Decadence did exist in America, although how to identify them was problematic. In this chapter, I will explore first what Americans meant by Decadence, and then how American Decadents understood themselves through discussions that took place mainly in periodicals and newspapers. I will discuss the way that morbidity functioned for American Decadents as a cultural tool. It enabled them to be culturally legible, and gave them a means by which to resist cultural norms.

For Americans, Decadence was a catchword with a large array of unsavory meanings, yet they all converged on the idea of disease and unnaturalness. Most Americans saw Decadents as diseased, or unhealthily obsessed with disease; the most common adjective applied to Decadents in America was morbid, a word that came to act as a synonym for Decadence itself. What terrified Americans most was not the presence of the illness, but the Decadents' love of it, their whole-hearted turn away from health and towards illness. In this atmosphere, how did American Decadents make themselves

[98] William Aspenwall Bradley *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life* Jun 1913 37:4. 431

legible? How did others understand them as a coherent group? Decadents themselves emphatically, and somewhat disingenuously, rejected this definition, casting themselves instead as the defenders of art, the elite who could see the coming storm.

Decadent Audiences

It is important to establish the reach and influence of Decadent cultural producers and their audiences. Are they, as those who have studied American Decadence, members of closed groups, or were they, as Nordau suggests, like a film of oil spreading across water? It is tempting, as David Weir did, to describe Decadents as rather hermetic groups, isolating themselves from the outside world. Certainly, this this is a perspective that *Decadents in America* encouraged. Groups of friends, like the Visionists, out of whose influence Cram's *The Decadent* was written, and which spawned *The Knight Errant* and *The Mahogany Tree* gave the impression of cliquishness and cultural snobbery. Edgar Saltus described himself as completely anti-social, dealing with people only as necessary. The Decadent dream after all was a life of seclusion, of removal from society, of the individual over community, of the elite over the popular. The Decadents themselves might have us believe that they and their small circle of friends were the only enlightened, and no one else could possibly be as sophisticated. They also deliberately figure Decadence as an elite and urban phenomenon. Yet Decadence is based in some kind of community, some kind of connection with the outside world, even if it is only a negative one. The problem of the lonely decadent is one exacerbated by historians who figure American

Decadence as either non-existent, or as the singular fancy of Edgar Saltus. Lest we begin to think that American Decadence was so insular and esoteric as to be socially and culturally insignificant, let us take a moment to discuss the audience and distribution of Decadent literature.

The virulent individualism that so marks American Decadence, makes it difficult to identify who or what is Decadent, simply because of the definitional disinclination to identify with a group. This in itself makes assessing the actual cultural impact and audience for Decadence problematic. The other problem with assessing the relationship of Decadence with its public is its preference for the highly ephemeral little magazine. As Susan Harris Smith and Melanie Dawson argue, periodical production, circulation, and reading were the central constituents of American culture in the 1890s. While they may seem the solipsistic folly of a few, by the end of the nineteenth century the magazine was a center, if not the center, of popular culture.[99] The sheer width of distribution of little magazines suggests that Decadence was more of a force than might be assumed by the number of people who openly admitted to being its disciples. Circulation numbers are difficult to come by: *M'lle New York* had less than 1,000 in circulation while the *Lotus* had nearly 10,000, *The Chap-Book* had between

[99] The literature connecting peridocials to various aspects of American culture is vast. See for example:
Brooker, Peter, and Andrew Thacker. *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: Volume II: North America 1894-1960.* Oxford University Press, 2012.
Knight, Melinda. "Little Magazines and the Emergence of Modernism in the 'Fin de Siècle.'" American Periodicals 6 (January 1, 1996): 29–45.
Richard Malin. *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*. Verso, 1996.
Ellen Gruber Garvey *The Adman in the Parlor : Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, 1880s to 1910s*. Oxford University Press, 1996.

2,250 and 4,000.[100] The point is not mere numbers, but the cultural reach of the ideas, which had surprising width of distribution.

While the Decadent little magazines were sometimes very homosocial spaces, depending on who was writing them, and for what audience, novels were a decidedly feminine space.[101] In her biography of her late husband, Marie Saltus notes that her husband's fans were almost entirely composed of women who sometimes rabidly admired her husband's work. [102] She writes that "Admiring letters from women were his daily diet. As a rule, he ignored them. At one time I started to make a scrap-book of them for him, calling it The Dollymops Daily. When a week or so would go by without bringing in a fresh batch of them, Mr. Saltus was told that his stock was going down and that he should have a care to his moustache."[103] Women readers were, of course, the site of much anxiety. Nordau and others agreed that women were especially vulnerable to

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[100] American Newspaper Directory G. P. Rowell &Co 1897

[101] For an understanding of how literature was seen as dangerous up to the mid 19th C. see Davidson, Cathy N. *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*. Oxford University Press, 2004. Davidson argues that the novel was a site of argument about the nation, the nature of democracy, and the role of women in the new nation. Therefore, the novel had the potential to educate, but also to contaminate or seduce. See also Linda Docherty "Women as Readers: Visual Interpretations" *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 107 Part 2 1997335-388.
Sullivan, Larry, Lydia Cushman Schurman, editors. *Pioneers, Passionate Ladies, and Private Eyes: Dime Novels, Series Books, and Paperbacks*. New York: Haworth Press, 1996.
Flynn, Elizabeth A., and Patrocinio P. Schweickart, eds. *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts and Contexts.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
Kaestle, Carl, et al. *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991.
Machor, James L. *Readers in History: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Contexts of Response*. JHU Press, 1993.
Tompkins, Jane. *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860.* New Ed edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
Kelley, Mary. *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century* America. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

[102] Marie Saltus *Edgar Saltus The Man* Chicago: Pascal Covici 1925.

[103] Marie Saltus *Edgar Saltus The Man* Chicago: Pascal Covici 1925. 95

writers like Saltus. Saltus himself played this to his advantage. In Decadence's male membership and female audience, we begin to see the strange gender lines of the movement.

The paradox of the cultural centricity and purported marginality of Decadence is well established in *The Lotus* a small magazine edited by Walter Blackburne Harte, an English-Canadian-American who edited and wrote for a number of magazines. [104] He comments "I have touched somewhat on the proneness of people with literary taste, desired if not possessed, to regulate their likes and dislikes by code. In one summer, it may be, they are realists and romanticists and veritists each according as the 'fad' is. And just now it is 'quite the thing' to be decadent. By this I mean not the Decadence of the immortal French master to whose school this name was first applied, but rather the quality, if there be quality, which marks the out-put of a group of writers and illustrators who apparently have discovered the fountain of perpetual youth. A lack of form, and the absence of ideas, a dab of black and abundant curves,--in admiring these one is entirely comme-il-faut. Why, not a few days since a delightful flutterer fluttered into the proof room of *The Lotus* and, beholding on a piece of white paper the black print alone of a two-colored drawing, exclaimed rapturously 'Another of those striking effects in black and white! Oh, I just dote on Aubrey

[104] On Harte see Doyle, James. *The Fin de Siècle Spirit: Walter Blackburn Harte and the American-Canadian Literary Milieu of the 1890s*. Toronto; East Haven, Conn.: ECW Press, 1995. Harte was born in England in 1899, migrating first to Canada and then to the United States. He was involved in publishing *The Lotus* and *The Fly Leaf.* Harte also published a book of short stories *The Ghost's Ordinary*. Despite being well-known and talented, he died in poverty.
The *Lotus* was a little magazine published between 1895 and 1897. It published fiction and some art criticism and commentary, as well as illustrations in the Beardsley style.

Beardsley.'"[105] The picture he refers to here is obviously influenced by the new art (see fig 1), but he refuses to acknowledge that the work of *The Lotus* is anything but individual. Decadence is a "fad", and like every such fad it is prone to being misunderstood an appropriated by posers and the habitually fashionable. In this case, Decadence is reduced to an appreciation for Aubrey Beardsley, a lack of substance, and an obsession with youth culture.[106] Yet Blackburne makes clear that "real" Decadence is still to be admired. This rejection of community or commonality is one of the reasons that Decadence so often appears to be so highly individualistic as to be evanescent. However, it is important to remember that *The Lotus* was a small magazine published in Kansas City, Missouri, hardly the cosmopolitan center of European influenced culture that was the Decadent Ideal. Yet its editor feels the need to scoff at the fad of Decadence among the young, or not so young, of those who consider themselves trendy and au courant. Thus Decadence had enough cultural reach to be the fad of the day in the prairie as well as the city.

The Kiote is a similarly surprising location of Decadence. It was published in the even more unlikely location of Lincoln, Nebraska. Though it is rather late to the Decadent party, published for one volume in 1898, it bears all the hallmarks of a Decadent little magazine, including an admiration for French literature, and essays on Schopenhauer (whom most claim Saltus entirely failed in popularizing), its purpose being "in the name of leisure, in the cause of artistic

[105] "Comment" *The Lotus* Nov 15, 1895. vol 1 no 2, 56

[106] Gellet Burgess smirks elsewhere that he was absolutely shocked to learn to that the average age of "les jeunes" was over fifty.

living."[107] The inaugural issue describes a meeting of all the animals, most from the East, including the Boston Bull and the Princeton Tiger. The Kiote also appears, though the other animals feel that it is out of place, that nothing good could come from a desert land. The Kiote proudly states that his voice is more beautiful than theirs and his art shall be heard. Again, this sort of conversation about the perceived insularity of Decadence only serves to prove the actual cultural impact that it had.

H. L. Mencken recalled the impact that reading *M'lle New York* made on him reading it as a youth in Baltimore.[108] Mencken's adoration of James Huneker assures him a powerful place in American culture, if not in memory. George Henry Payne, a contributor to *M'lle New York* recalls touring America and finding clippings from the magazine among the scrapbooks of local newspaper men.[109] Furthermore, the connection of Decadence with publishing, transatlantic book trade, and print culture through Copeland & Day in Boston and Kimball and Stone in Chicago suggests deep networks of information. At the end of his life Saltus made his living writing for *Collier's*, *Cosmopolitan,* and any other popular publication that would pay him for a few lines of prose. James Huneker was also a newspaper man who worked at *The Sun* for his entire career. Bliss Carman[110]

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[107] *The Kiote* vol 1, no 1, 19

[108] Schwab 101

[109] Schwab 101

[110] William Bliss Carman 1861-1929. Carman was born in Canada and studied at Oxford and Harvard. He became famous as a poet and essayist. He helped publish the *Chap-Book*. His published volumes include *Low Tide on Pre, Behind the Arras: A book of the Unseen, A Seamark:A Threnody for Robert Louis Stevenson; Ballads of Lost Haven: A book of the Sea; and By the Aurealn Wall and Other Elegies.* He is most famous however for his collaboration with Richard Hovey on *Songs from Vagabondia* and *Last Songs from Vagabondia* published by Copeland and Day. The success of this volume, and his association with the Boston Visionists, firmly cemented him as one of the more visible American Decadents. After the 1890s,

had a column in the *Boston Evening Transcript* for several years in which he discussed issues of art; helping to introduce symbolist, aesthetic, and Decadent authors. Despite their protests, their cultural position resembled Nordau's metaphor of an oil slick over water. Here again, the Decadents try the trick of positioning themselves as the scrappy outsiders, the artistic fringe, when they had a hold at the center of American culture.

Thus, it is not a question of who is, or is not, a Decadent in the United States, as the Decadents themselves would have it, but rather a question of how their ideas were connected to and engaged with issues of the day, how much they figured in public discourse, and how much they shaped future conversations.

The Forms of Decadence in America

So, if Decadence did indeed have a both a community of writers and a public that extended beyond their own salons, what was the content? Much has been written about the state of American society at the end of the nineteenth century. This was the beginning, in Richard Hofstadter's words, of the age of reform. The social and political upheavals of the last decades of the century are almost innumerable. Yet Decadent fiction and criticism, at least by its own admission, concerned itself only with style, with the personal whim, and had nothing to do with the goings on of the outside world. I suggest that taking the Decadents at their word ignores their engagement with society and culture.

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like his other Decadent brethren, Carman had less literary success, and was often supported by Mary Perry King, his patron. In 1928 however, he was named poet laureate of Canada.

The very name Decadence suggests a painful awareness of the moment in history. The 1890s were not coincidentally the height of Decadence. I need not describe the entirety of American capitalism here. The 1870s and 1880s were periods of rapid growth, followed by the Panic of 1893. Wealth rapidly collected in the very few at the top, while the poor, if they could get work, were relegated to wage slavery. It was only at this moment, with oligarchy as a real threat, or possibility, and the end of the world, or at very least *a* world, nigh, that Decadents could even exist in America.

The 1890s were decade of violent strikes, economic panics, Jim Crow laws and lynchings, The New Woman and suffrage, of populists, of war, of American expansion, of massive immigration, shifting demographics, and radical politics. Yet, those who associated themselves with European Decadence buried their heads in the sand. Neither they nor the characters they wrote about seemed to care in the slightest about current events, or even seemed to live in the same world. This very indifference suggested an alternative to the other means of dealing with the last decade of the century. The attempts of others to process the radical change has been well documented. The search for order, the progressive attempt to create a better world, the populist resistance to industrialization, the struggles for racial equality, the modernist hope for a more rational and scientific future, the anti-modern refusal to acknowledge change, the jingoism of American expansion, the Victorian confidence in progress, the socialist and anarchist hope for a revolution, all have been used to frame and

understand the 1890s.[111] The discourses coalescing around the unwanted label of American Decadence fits none of these frames. As historians, Decadence offers us another framework in which to consider the decade. They offer a counterbalance to the discourse of American virility and manhood, and add a third term to the political narrative of progressives and populists.

The definition and positioning of Decadence was equally difficult for its contemporaries. As we shall see, Americans generally defaulted to a vague understanding of Decadence in relation to morbidity. However, aficionados of Decadence attempted more technical definitions, and failed. Bliss Carman explores this problem in a series of his columns for the *Boston Evening Transcript*. Carman's column was entitled "The Modern Athenian" and ran weekly from 1896 to 1898. It uses literal Socratic dialogue, placing Socrates, recently returned to Boston from Altruria, in conversation with an unnamed interlocutor who seems to be a native Bostonian. Socrates is more worldly than the speaker,

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[111] The history of the late nineteenth century is a well-trod field, even if the particularities of the 1890s have not been fully explored. On the creation of the professional middle class, corporate elite and search for order see Wiebe, Robert H. *The Search for Order, 1877-1920*. Hill and Wang, 1966 and Trachtenberg, Alan. *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*. Macmillan, 2007.
On the excesses of capitalism and the responses see H. W. *The Reckless Decade: America in the 1890s*. University of Chicago Press, 2002. Lears, T. J. Jackson. No
On progressive politics see Rodgers, Daniel T. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000. Hofstadter, Richard. The Age of Reform. New York: Vintage, 1960.
McGerr, Michael. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870-1920*. 1st edition. Oxford Univ. Press: Oxford University Press, 2005.
On American jingoism and empire see Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. University Of Chicago Press, 1996.
On radical social movements see: Buhle, Mari Jo. *Women and American Socialism, 1870-1920*. New edition edition. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1983. Timothy. *The Haymarket Conspiracy: Transatlantic Anarchist Networks*. University of Illinois Press, 2012. Brands,
On populism see: Postel, Charles. The Populist Vision. 1 edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
On the antimodern response see Jackson Lears *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. University of Chicago Press, 1981.

but also more rigid. In 1896, Carman spent several columns on the problem of Decadence. Upon hearing Socrates mention the word in connection with Democracy, the speaker follows up. Socrates asks the speaker to define Decadence, and he replies, as most Americans might, by asserting that its essence is depravity, essential evil. Socrates asks if Decadent art and literature can have any lasting impact. The speaker replies that of course it cannot; Decadence is also defined as lifeless, transient, and forgettable. Socrates points out the essential contradiction here. Either Decadence is evil or ephemeral, it cannot be both. Socrates then asks, since Decadence and Degeneration are so often conflated, what degeneration means. The speaker replies that it is a lack of vitality. Socrates explains, using the example of Beardsley, that this is also impossible, since the fear of Decadent art, the imaginations it inspires (for good or ill), and the other art that results from it, proves its vitality. "Well then, Socrates" I said rather abashed "what in the name of sense is Decadent?" "Anything that is commonplace is Decadent" he replied "Whatever is commonplace, and imitative, and uninspired and without individuality is Decadent. All popular commercial art which is merely pretty and is supplied to fill a demand is Decadent." [112] Socrates goes on to explain that anything that was truly ephemeral, anything that lacked vitality and was prone to the shifts in fashion is the art that should truly be called Decadent. This includes most magazine poetry and fiction. The speaker objects that this practically inverts his entire understanding of the categories of art. Socrates smugly replies that this is

[112] Aug 9, 1896 "Modern Athenian" Boston Evening Transcript

exactly his point. A week later, Carman returns to Decadence. The speaker turns to his friend “B”, a famous architect who identifies as a Decadent.[113] “B” has recently read *Degeneration,* and it has convinced him that he is a degenerate. This resulted in him changing his hat style, lest he be detected. “B” confirms that some Decadent art is unhealthy and immoral, but that it is more about temper, feeling, and manner, rather than intention or result. He also contends that Decadence is not a “cult” as the speaker suggests, but a movement and a moment. He suggests that Whitman, Tennyson, and Emmerson are all equally Decadent. The speaker tries to stump him by saying that by this measure the Bible itself would be Decadent. B agrees that the Song of Solomon and Revelation are indeed Decadent, and supremely beautiful. Frustrated, the speaker gives up, but notes that if B’s work in architecture is an example of Decadence, then he himself is a devotee. The next week, the speaker, still searching after a definition, interviews Richard Hovey. The speaker lays out the problem. Socrates has explained that true decadence in art is bad, but “B” asserts that everything good in art is decadent. The speaker realizes that they are both using definitions of the word that are different from, indeed opposite from, modern casual usage, and he asks Hovey to help him clear up this definitional morass. Hovey suggests a strictly literary and historical definition. Decadent should refer to either the imitative literature of past ages, or to the school of French writers who first claimed the term.

[113] Bertram Goodhue

This is the definitional conflict that surrounded Decadence in America. Decadents themselves, like “B” played into ideas of the connections between Decadence and Degeneration, but still defend Decadent art as beautiful and worthwhile, even if it is unhealthy. Others defended Decadence the movement from charges of Decadence the stylistic insult. Still others considered Decadence the movement as an inversion of its perception, meaning that it is truly modern and healthy, the only bit of sanity in an insane world.

It is this definitional vagueness that made Decadence useful as a framework to work through cultural fears. For most Americans, the central problem of Decadence quickly became health and illness. Morbidity helped to clarify the meaning and threat of Decadence.

The period of 1890-1920 saw a renewed interest in health, especially public health. In a decade of chaos both reformers and the government considered health on a national scale. [114] By the end of the nineteenth century the “regulars” of American medicine were well on their way to establishing their authority and social dominance. Though scientific developments, like the rise of germ theory, certainly aided doctor’s authority, it was allopathic medicine’s social and cultural maneuvers that resulted in its power. The expectation that doctors and public health officials would take responsibility for epidemics, and their relative successes in doing so, also helped to consolidate not only the power of physicians, but changed the expectations for government in assuring the health

[114] Engs, Ruth Clifford. *Clean Living Movements: American Cycles of Health Reform*. Greenwood Publishing Group, 2001.

of its citizens.[115] Urbanization, transportation, educational changes, "professionalization" efforts, lobbying, and the rise of science as a rhetoric of authority in general helped doctors establish their authority.[116] Cities, and the immigrants and workers they contained in close quarters, saw new health crises and necessitated new technologies of control. The status of women was also a major social aspect of this change, with women being forced out of medicine as it gradually became more scientific[117]. This does not mean that in the 1890s alternative rhetorics did not exist, or that medicine was in any way devoted to modern scientific developments or the scientific method. Certainly "alternative", homeopathic, and irregular medicine was still practiced. Indeed, both the allopathic and homeopathic physicians experimented with water and electricity treatments. Both considered diet, mental state, and lifestyle in their assessments.

Neurasthenia fed into these concerns. It was a disease born of modern conditions, that needed new techniques of treatment. Sufferers turned to both doctors like S. Weir Mitchell who prescribed his famous rest cure, and to lifestyle gurus. Because neurasthenia was a problem with the lack of energy as its root cause treatments involving electricity were especially popular. As many scholars have shown, the obsession with health was deeply connected to Americas global position. The health and virility of men was essential to new imperialistic visions.

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[115] Rosenberg, Charles E. *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866*. 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

[116] Starr, Paul. *The Social Transformation of American Medicine: The Rise of a Sovereign Profession and the Making of a Vast Industry*. Reprint edition. New York: Basic Books, 1984.

[117] Morantz-Sanchez, Regina. *Sympathy and Science: Women Physicians in American Medicine*. 1st ed. The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
Kirschmann, Anne Taylor. *A Vital Force: Women in American Homeopathy*. Rutgers University Press, 2004.

The health of women, especially white women, was necessary to safeguard the future of the race. Immigrants, whose living conditions bred disease, provided the specter of what white America might become if health were not a priority. [118]

Here, neurasthenia figures as a discursive space within which Americans came to understand Decadence. Neurasthenia was a physical reaction to modernity. Exposed to the increase in pace of modern time, the delicate system that was the highly civilized and specialized American became deranged. In an electrical and sexual economy, those with neurasthenia spent more than they could afford. This overspending, whether physical, sexual, or mental led to an exhaustion of the nerves and developed symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and all manner of vague bodily symptoms associated with hysteria. Because this spending was often sexual, neurasthenia threatened the reproduction of the white civilized race. Julian Carter argues that white men and women were burdened with the curse of modern civilization in the form of neurasthenia, and thus unfit to reproduce a strong race, but because neurasthenics were also vulnerable to the disease because of their good breeding and civilization they held a kind of promise.[119] The cure was not to reorder the world (an impossibility at this point), but better to equip the person to deal with the world. This sometimes meant carefully doling out the amount of stimulation one could

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[118] See Carter, Julian B. *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880–1940*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2007.
Wexler, Laura. Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism. 1st New edition edition. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000.
Hoganson, Kristin L. *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*. Yale University Press, 2000.
[119] Carter *The Heart of Whiteness,* 43

tolerate, or attempting to strengthen one's constitution by activity. In any case the cure to neurasthenia involved prudent management, careful consumption, and managed continence. Decadents broke all of these rules and, what is worse, exalted a lifestyle of spending, pleasure, unlimited sensuality, and endless intellectual stimulation to a wide reading audience. They were neurasthenics who welcomed the disease.

Having established that medicine, health, and illness was –and still is—a setting for all kinds of social and cultural debates and not only shaped, but was shaped by the social and cultural surroundings, I now turn to the ways in which Decadence can help us understand this particular moment better in their resistance to the "healthy" norm. At the century's end, Americans felt a need to consolidate a national identity, especially because of their new international status. Health, purity, and vitality were an essential part of this national image. The health of Americans had been a contested point, since Jefferson's correspondence with Buffon. The purity of the Anglo-Saxon race, a concern explored in the last chapter, necessitated a focus on health. While the Eugenic movement after the 1890s would focus on those who were marginalized and without power, Decadence put the focus on those with access to cultural power. Neurasthenia functions as a link between modernity, bodies, class, race, and gender. George Beard popularized the diagnosis. For him, it meant an overstimulation of the nerves in either brain, digestive system, or reproductive system. While the base cause of neurasthenia was simple, modernity and civilization, its organic causes and its symptoms were more difficult to pin down.

Thus, neurasthenia provided link in the minds of Americans between mind, body, and culture, that helped Decadence to be understood in a particular way in America. By asserting a connection to illness that was not negative, Decadence queered both the question of illness and of modernity.

American commentators rarely used the word "Decadent" itself, unless they were referring to foreign literature. Instead, they referred to such literature as morbid, and spoke about it in terms of disease. In a review of James Huneker's short stories for instance Edward Clark Marsh writes "For justification of their displeasure—and perhaps of the delight of certain readers with different tastes—there is conveniently at hand the single word 'morbid'[120] Americans knew Decadence, then, by its ill health, and its love for that illness. The health or sickness of literature was as of much concern or more, as its artistic "quality" for reviewers at the end of the nineteenth century.[121]

While this was a literary problem, it did not necessarily have a literary solution. European Decadence was known for its anti-positivist connotations and American Decadents pushed back, as we have seen, against attempts to pathologize their writing as degenerate. The American response to Decadence is uniform in its attempt to respond to Decadence not as an aesthetic mood or literary movement, but as a disease that ought to be under the purview of physicians or psychiatrists. Charles Dudley Warner, then the editor of *Harper's*,

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[120] Edward Clark Marsh *The Bookman* Dec 1905 22$, 360.

[121] This was not a new fear, but was certainly inflected by Darwinian and Spencerian understandings of proper and improper development. The rhetoric of science replaced the rhetoric of religion, and instead of lambasting immoral literature, the conversation turned to "unhealthy" literature and its possible effects especially on the young.

weighed in, asking "scientists alienists and psychological investigators to make a careful study of the Yellow literary atmosphere."[122] In Dudley's analysis the current trend of literature resembled a peach disease, which did not manifest obviously until the entire orchard had to be rooted up and replanted. Modern science had identified the cause, and now farmers could spot the diseased trees before they affected everything. Just as a peach grower weeds out the yellows in his orchard when he sees the signs, if the public had some insight into what exactly yellow literature is, they might be able to stop it before it spreads. Just as a storm of dust might initially convince people that the atmosphere has permanently changed and that the judgments days are at hand can be explained easily by scientists as a passing event, so too should scientists show that the current yellow literature "is only a local infection of dust and impurity spread by our modern facilities of communication."[123] The literary jaundice is purely local, and London can expect a fresh breeze to blow the yellow dust from the atmosphere. This is not a naturally American or even global phenomenon, rather it is a local problem that everyone thinks is global and permanent. Whatever it is, though, it is certainly a disease, and one that its victims welcome. Warner, co-author of *The Gilded Age* thought that, like any epidemic, this one was mostly chance and coincidence. Decadence circulates normally in literature. He writes "There have always been diseased people seeking notoriety by reason of their maladies"[124] The current literary environment was not some warning of the end

[122] Charles Dudley Warner "Editor's Study" *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* Fed 1895, 90:537, 482. Yellow was a common euphemism for Decadence because of the *Yellow Book*
[123] Warner, 482
[124] Warner, 482

times, but an outbreak of a known illness. Warner quotes Thoreau, writing of similar literary sensibilities, "I say all these things without the least hesitation because I have the jaundice myself; but I also know what it is to be well."[125] What afflicts the Decadents is not new, but unlike Thoreau, they refuse wellness, and embrace the jaundice. Warner's analogy is interesting in that he is assured that yellow literature is in fact obviously deleterious, it occurs "naturally" and randomly to some extent, and its early signs might be difficult to detect, but once it catches on and becomes a movement, it can easily infect everything. Yet in individual cases symptoms remain difficult to identify without the intervention of a scientist or alienist who could properly classify it. Still, unlike neurasthenia, Decadence refused medical attention. Its producers would not submit themselves to the care of physicians, and its productions themselves were beyond the reach of alienists and physicians.

Despite the difficulty in spotting nascent individual cases of the Decadent disease, its symptoms as a whole were obvious if somewhat vague. Dr. Frank Crane, a minister famous for his *Four Minute Essays*, helpfully gives us a quick definition of Decadence in 1914. "There is a pleasure in pain, in fever, in drunkenness. There is a pleasure of a certain kind in working at a sore tooth, in picking at a wound. Some people find gratification in making everyone around them miserable. Some people enjoy pinching babies, picking at the dog's tail, beating horses, browbeating their wives, nagging their husbands, scolding their children. Some love to visit the morgue, to attend a hanging or a lynching.

[125] Warner, 482

Some seem never so in their element as when they have dyspepsia, or strange pains, or weak nerves. Some indulge in profanity and obscenity and appear to like it."[126] In short, Decadence bears the same relationship to healthy literature "that a disease bears generally to health." [127]Here, Decadents are pictured as deliberate inversion of everything good and normal. The problem is not with society, this is not an inevitable artistic outpouring of a certain age, this is an individual problem. The Decadents associate themselves with death, not because they have to, but for fun. Pain, wounds, fevers, hangings, dyspepsia and nerves, these were the words that Americans associated with Decadence, not Chopin or Art or Beauty. Out of all the ways that Americans could understand Decadence, this was the one they chose, why?

Morbidity helped capture both the vagueness and the specificity of what Americans objected to in Decadence. The Saturday Review provides a definition: "We mean a brooding desolated spirit, which sees everything draped in black, which finds life in a muddle, and an unenjoyable muddle, which takes no delight in the great natural things—sun, stars, and sea, and the beauty of women and the freshness of woods and innocent laughter."[128] Most Americans would also have recognized morbid as a medical term indicating disease, this was its first usage, the sense of gloom of depressive thoughts came later.[129] Morbid was a reference to the writing itself, to its diseased nature, to the minds and bodies of the people who produced it, and to the effects it caused. Despite calls for

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[126] Dr. Frank Crae "Decadence" *The Montgomery Advertiser* Jan 26, 1914 85:26, 4.
[127] Ibid
[128] *Saturday Review,* 1894 p. 191
[129]"Morbid" OED Online, Oxford University Press.

scientific investigation, and the use of vaguely medical terms, morbidity remained a resolutely non-scientific concept. Morbidity was the literary and cultural sister of neurasthenia. While neurasthenia, and its European (and longer lived) relative hysteria were physical illness with cultural causes, Decadence was both the cause and the result of illness. And unlike hysteria and neurasthenia, Decadents did not turn to doctors to cure themselves. Rather, they either blamed society for the illness, casting themselves as the only healthy ones, or embraced the diagnosis of illness as a sign of enlightenment.

In an article on Decadent novels imported into America through the Keynote series, the author suggests that they are nothing but studies in morbid psychology.[130] The mistake made by Decadent authors is that only immorality is natural. Like the person who enjoys a good execution, they deliberately invert values. Yet this inversion is always framed in terms of health. The same writer argues that these books can "induce paresis. They are unnatural and cause and nervous strain too great for health." [131] Morbidity is not merely a description of tone or mood, but the actual potential for a work to cause illness, or a work that reflects the actual illness of its author. The logic of neurasthenia dictates that the activities of the mind can enervate the nerves. Thus an essential component of the rest cure was the removal of all intellectual stimulation including reading.

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[130] The series included nineteen book and short story collections by H. B. Marriott Watson, Grant Allan, George Egerton, Arthur Machen, Henry Harland, Ella D'Arcy, Florence Farr, Francis Adams, M.P. Shiel, Evelyn Sharp, Gertrude Dix, Stanley Makower, Fiona Macleod and Carlton Dawe. They were published by both the Roberts Bros in Boston and John Lane in London. Aubrey Beardsley designed the title page for each. For more on the specific books and their authors see Harris, Wendell V. "John Lane's Keynotes Series and the Fiction of the 1890's." PMLA 83, no. 5 (October 1, 1968): 1407–13.

[131] "Decadent Novels" *Outlook* Oct 5, 1895 52:14, 551.

Disease leads to death. Writing about the absorption of the Chapbook by *The Dial,* an article in the New York Times argues that the demise of *the Chap Book* signaled the end of the fad of decadent literature. While the Chapbook itself had sometimes produced work of artistic merit, the little magazines that followed it were the product of "unhealthy imaginations."[132] Instead, the work produced was "morbid, hysterical, false to art, and false to life. They deceived a few persons for a time, had their brief summer hour, and passed on to complete oblivion."[133] The logic here is strange, but it seems that part of the way that Americans identified morbidity was by longevity. That which was diseased would surely die out, while that which was healthy was what survived.

So, Decadent works are morbid in a number of ways. First, they depict, explore, and in some cases celebrate unhealthy or abnormal psychology. Secondly, their words are so toxic that they can cause actual illness when read. Finally, this is deliberate, a slap in the face to normality. Americans recognized this morbidity, not simply by depictions of illness or death, but by obsessive, sensual depictions of sexuality, writing that seemed to come from a deranged mind, a deliberate but sophisticated anti-sociality, and an artificial pessimism. Finally, and most essentially, Americans recognized Decadents by their deliberate affection for the things that Americans had designated as unhealthy and un-American.

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[132] "A Sign of the Times" New York Times Jul 23, 1898. BR1

[133] Ibid.

The American case is revealing because of the ways in which American decadents and their critics and interlocutors constructed sickness and health. For the Decadents to invert something, they first had to understand what it was that they were inverting. What exactly critics found objectionable and diseased about their work, and the way that American Decadents used and responded to this criticism is essential.

The morbidity of Decadent novels, while it caused scandal and brought criticism and some, did not reach the level of pornography, at least to the level of prosecution. The exception to this was *Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice* by James Branch Cabell[134]. Published in 1919 by Robert McBride in New York the book was the subject of a high-profile obscenity trial. In 1920 John S. Sumner, head of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, fresh off of a failed case against a store clerk for selling a copy of Theophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, brought charges against the printer and publisher. Barrett H. Clark, a drama critic, organized an Emergency Committee to protest the charges. This committee published "Jurgen and the Censor" in defense of the novel. Cabell himself comes off as rather blasé, writing that "With the outcome of the Jurgen case I have really now no especial concern. To the reception accorded my books during the last fifteen years this suppression of the Comedy of Justice seems, indeed, the logical and exhilarating climax. At all events, the book exists in a sufficient number of copies to be beyond destruction by anything save its own

[134] James Branch Cabell, 1879-1958. A Virginian who graduated from W&M, Cabell was involved in the transition of Decadence to fantasy and science fiction. He does not figure more prominently here because of his late dates; his popularity peaked in the '20s. In addition to *Jurgen* he is known for the works included in *The Biography of the Life of Manuel*.

inherent inadequacies. If *Jurgen* contains the right constituents it will live, and if it lacks the stuff of longevity it will in due course die; either way, the outcome is, now, to be decided neither by me nor by vice commissioners, nor even by a grand jury."[135] In 1922 after two years of stalling, Judge Charles C. Nott directed a not guilty verdict in part because of a previous ruling that stated that the whole of the work must be obscene, and because McBride's lawyers successfully defended each passage that was accused of obscenity. The judge felt the work had unusual literary merit, a judgment that has not held up.

The incredibly subjective means by which Americans identified Decadence, and the Decadents elaborate construction of poses and counter-poses made identifying Decadence difficult. *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, by Harold Frederic, with which this work began, depicts what American Decadents might look like and describes the worst possible outcome of American Decadence.[136] It is an example of the fracture lines between how Decadents saw themselves and how Americans saw them. The eponymous protagonist begins as a minister who by the end of the novel has lost his faith. It is often read, as the title suggests, as a fall from grace. However, it is important to remember that Frederic had been living in England for years when he wrote it and was associated with Aestheticism and Decadence more than the "local color" writing

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[135] James Branch Cabell "Jurgen and the Censor" Privately Printed New York: 1920, 7. Other contributors to the book included Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, and Amelie Rives.

[136] For other analyses of Theron Ware, see Bennett, Bridget. *The Damnation of Harold Frederic: His Lives and Works.* Syracuse University Press, 1997; Foote, Stephanie. *Regional Fictions: Culture and Identity in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2001; and Myers, Robert M. "Antimodern Protest in 'The Damnation of Theron Ware.'" *American Literary Realism*, 1870-1910 26, no. 3 (April 1, 1994): 52–64.

that the book at first seems to suggest. It is a complex tale in which clear cut meanings are evasive: there are no heroes, and the moral is ambiguous. It is interesting that this book was published as *Illumination* in England suggesting a more complex interpretation. It does however, provide an excellent example of what Americans feared from Decadence. Frederic manages to satirize not only small town philistinism, and the American Common man ideal but also the American Decadent. There are no winners here; fin de siècle thought in America is troubling if nothing else.

The novel opens with Rev. Ware, a Methodist minister, at the meeting that will decide his next position. He is an all-American type, as far as ministers go, handsome, bright, and well-mannered. It is well-known that he is the best preacher at the meeting; indeed, everyone is still abuzz about the last sermon he preached. Given his popularity, he expects one of the plum spots for his third church. Instead, to the shock of many, his next appointment is to Octavius, a small church in a rural district. His wife is disappointed. She was from a nearby town, daughter of a well-to-do farmer, educated in the city, charming, musical, and sensible. The first year of their marriage was spent happily discovering how to keep house, at the end of which they found themselves in debt. After their move, at a moment when Ware is vulnerable in his career and in his marriage, he meets Celia Madden after following the throng attending the death of a Catholic man. Celia, the daughter of the wealthiest man in the town, introduces him to her friends, the Catholic Priest Father Forbes and the no longer practicing Doctor Ledsmar.

Ware is exposed to all the varieties of Decadent morbidity. Fr Forbes introduces him to the seductive and sensuous pleasures of Catholicism, including the pleasingly authoritarian structure of the church, in which the priest is an object of veneration, not a vulnerable Methodist cleric. Ware is also charmed by the priest's abilities in biblical criticism, though he is slightly unnerved by the priest's complete faithlessness. Celia Madden, in addition to her traditional feminine attractions, introduces him to the basic ideals of Decadent art and literature, the primacy of style and beauty of morality and meaning. She exalts the "Greek" view of life. Doctor Ledsmar introduces Ware to evolutionary theory, atheism, pessimism and doubt.

These exposures are experienced by Ware as an illness. They are all clearly aspects of Decadence, and they all lead him to slowly disintegrate, introducing him to doubt, despair, and the pleasures of the world. While his experiences could be classified as pleasure; he interprets the headiness, feverish desire, and loss of faith as symptoms of an illness. This leads him to eventually faint in church, an episode that sends him to bed for days. It is in Celia's rooms, in the episode that opens this work that Decadence functions as both illness and cure.

The Damnation of Theron Ware functions both as a warning and confirmation of Americans' fears about Decadence, and also as a Decadent novel in itself. Theron's path may be a fall from grace, or a path to enlightenment, in which we all get to participate in Ware's realization that there is no purity anywhere. Theron Ware is a problematic hero. He is neither strong

enough to maintain his health nor to become entirely Decadent and embrace the illness. He cannot become one of Celia's little salon; he simply is not smart or interesting enough. His only value to them is the spectacle of his corruption. Once corrupted, he chooses a middle road, ignoring what he has learned about human nature, but also unable to continue as a minister. Ware retreats into mere survival and deliberate ignorance of what he has learned, heading west to be a politician or a realtor. Lest Frederic be accused of siding with the Decadents, Ware's Decadent friends are posers even by Decadent standards. Celia claims to be "Greek" but she continues to make carefully calculated decisions that more or less preserve her position in the town and her respectability. She and Fr. Forbes have their trysts on trips out of town. Forbes maintains his position as priest. None of the trio produce any art. Instead of leaving their small town to meet others with their sensibilities, they prefer to live in sheltered superiority.

Perhaps the most anxiety producing part of Frederic's novel is that for Ware the disease is also the cure. In the midst of his corruption, Ware finds that the sensual stimulations of Decadent accoutrements—Chopin, silk cushions, feminine forms, and reflected candlelight—the only things that can soothe his mind. Yet, in soothing him they also further deepen his disease.

James Huneker put these concerns into fiction. Published in October 1895 in *M'lle New York*, "Nosphilia: A Nordau Heroine" describes a newly married couple. In it, disease is embodied as a woman, playing on the feminine sound of the word. Nosophilia is both the victim of the disease, and the cause of her husband's death. Huneker describes the eponymous woman in terms

reflecting the physiognomy of Cesare Lombroso, Nordau's mentor. Her face, at first glance, speaks of nothing abnormal; she has fine lines on her brow, small eyes, ears that suggest she detests music. Indeed, there was nothing remarkable about her face but its "accentual versatility."[137] Her husband does notice, however, two harsh lines on either side of her nose, a nose reminiscent of a "predaceous bird"[138]. After her (unconsummated) marriage, her husband finds her reading J. K. Huysmans' book *A Rebours*, a Decadent classic and the obvious vector of the contagion. Her behavior becomes increasingly strange. She becomes obsessed with smells, inhaling the scent of her husband instead of kissing him, spending her days breathing perfumes, rolling herself on carpets scented with tuberose. She can recognize people by their smell, and becomes feline in her movements. Her husband was "naturally healthy-minded" and "abhorred the abnormal," and therefore panicked that her behavior might drive him to drink or other dissolution.[139] So pure is he, that he resists even reading Nordau's *Degeneration* when a friend suggests it because of the disorders it describes, but eventually he skims it until he finds a mention of Baudelaire's love of perfumes. He then realizes that his wife is a degenerate, specifically, a nosophile. In a fit of jealousy, having smelled another woman's scent on her husband (he had been at the funeral of a friend's mistress and had acquired the scent leaning over the dead body) she goes insane and attacks him. In the

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[137] James Huneker "Nosphilia: A Nordau Heroine" in Foster, Edward Halsey. *Decadents, Symbolists, & Aethetes in America: Fin-de-siècle American Poetry : an Anthology*. Jersey City, N.J.: Talisman House, 2000. 30

[138] Huneker "Nosophilia" 30.

[139] Huneker "Nosphilia" 31.

morning they are both found dead. Nosophilia, while a ridiculous parody of Nordau's threat, is also the real heroine of the story. Her husband is hopelessly dull, Nosophilia at least has a passion, a discerning taste, even if it does lead to her death. This is obviously a parody of Nordau's over-exaggerated and hyperbolic tone. However, it is also a piece of Decadent fiction that carries the marks of the fiction that Huneker admired and wrote himself. A nosophile, in this story, is one who is obsessed by smell. In Nordau's use it is one who loved disease, a catch-all term for the strange desires of the degenerates. Nordau, like many other doctors with grand social schemes, loved to write in a gratuitously jargonized fashion. Neologisms take wing in his work. He pulls Nosophilia and Nosophobia from Victor Magnan, though he claims to himself prefer to get at the root cause of these varied disorder, which all fall under the title of degeneration. The definition of the word seems to be a contest between the two men. The OED sides with Nordau, defining nosophile as "a person who is abnormally attracted by sickness or disease" and citing the English translation of *Degeneration* as well as a quote from Huneker's story "The Eighth Deadly Sin" published in *The Smart Set* in 1905. However, this story also revolves around smell and the perverse love of odors.[140] There are two possibilities for this contention. Either Huneker deliberately misunderstands Nordau, conflating Nordau's deprecation of the Decadents' love of smell, which followed from *A Rebours* and some passages of Verlaine's, with the word nosophilia, making a pun of the word while emphasizing the ridiculousness of medicalizing such tendencies. Or, Huneker mistakes the

[140] "noso-, comb. form". OED Online. March 2014. Oxford University Press.

root of Nordau's neologism, and understands him to be referring to the pathological love of scent. Contemporary writers seem to agree with Huneker. In the *Pictorial Review,* an article cautions women against the overindulgence in perfumes, noting that Nordau has deemed these people nosophiles, and indeed doctors in New York are beginning to see cases of women utterly destroying their senses of smell by obsessively inhaling oriental perfumes[141]. While Nordau names men in his association of smell with degeneration, perfumes are obviously more tempting to women, and thus more of a danger to them. The connection of the sense of smell and sexuality suggests, according to Nordau, "an atavism going back not only to the primeval period of man, but to an epoch anterior to man."[142] Huneker's story bears this out in its dénouement, revealing Nosophilia's atavistic return to an animal nature.

[141] "The Apple of Paris" *Pictorial Review* 4:2 (Nov 1902): 31
[142] Nordau 503

This is obviously a parody of Nordau's over-exaggerated and hyperbolic tone. However, it is also a piece of decadent fiction that carries the marks of the fiction that Huneker admired. Nordau's implication is that because this sort of thing exists in Huneker's mind, and pleases him, his body must also be compromised. To Huneker, this is too ridiculous even to be repudiated. In his review of a later Nordau work, Huneker attacks Nordau for promulgating pseudo-science, but what is worse, writing bad plays that are made worse by his attempt to make them moral and uplifting. Art requires no justification, and he need not defend himself, only the existence of his art.

Morbid did not always mean only unnatural sexuality, though this was the main sign of morbid thought, but it always evinced "morbid' symptoms, symptoms that show a confusion of senses, some kind of disease of the brain, a lack of connection to reality. James Huneker describes a Decadent in his story "The Dream of a Decadent." This piece has a slightly tongue-in-cheek air to it, describing what a Decadent experience might be like, according to those who pathologized it. He again apparently follows Nordau's fears. It is a description of astral projection, or lucid dreaming, in which the dreamer, bored, decides to have experiences with his dream body (using the Rigveda). He transports himself to Paris where he enters the Theatre D'Art, and stays for the show with the more corporeal audience. The art is a combination of sights, mostly colors and lights, with scent (starting with the beguiling combination of Florida Water with bacon and eggs) and the sounds of an orchestra. Then the dreamer notices that the rest of the audience has their lips pressed to a tube. He follows suit, and drinks

his fill of gumbo as the show continues. He asks another theater goes "Can you tell me the name of the piece, play, morceau, symphony, stueck, odour, sonata, picture, drama, 'cooking', comedy, or whatever you may call it, that they are about to perform?"[143] He is in astral form, though, so of course communication with others is difficult. From snippets of dialog and scenery he realizes that he is witnessing the final scenes of *Alice in Wonderland.* He leaves, vaguely wondering what kinds of food were served during some of the earlier parts, and returns to Gotham, singing with some children in the street before going to bed exhausted. The piece is short, only two pages, but vividly conveys the intense, synesthesia-filled, vaguely mystical, experience that so confounded American commentators. There is no point to this art work, no moral. It reflects nothing "natural" or real, yet it is beguiling.

Huneker's fantasies are exaggerations, but even the Decadents agreed that their literature and the way they lived their lives was connected. Edgar Saltus describes the life of a Decadent author in many of his books. Throughout his novels he uses the character Alphabet Jones as his stand in. Jones offers advice and witty bon-mots, showing up at parties, or as a confidante to the main character, but is always vaguely disaffected, shrugging his shoulders at others' misfortune, offering cynical comments, then suggesting a drink. In his novel *Ghost Girl* Saltus describes a writer's life with details that according to his wife, reflected his own habits. From these, we can describe Saltus' version of the Decadent author. Though obsessed with people and their motivations, emotions,

[143] Huneker "The Dream of a Decadent" *M'lle New York* 1:3, 1895.

thoughts, and needs, the Decadent author is essentially misanthropic, perhaps because he knows too much. Chandos Poole, the protagonist of *Ghost Girl,* lives in an attempt to avoid others. In his apartment in Harlem where he does his writing, "There was no telephone. I had had the accursed thing removed. Moreover, it was idle to ring, in addition to being hazardous. Touch the button and you get a shock. I had had a battery put in for that purpose. To lead a profitable life of crime requires silence, solitude and a natural gift for villainy." [144] Poole resents the most human of things: company. He styles himself as a villain, though he does nothing villainous except write moderately successful "popular" fiction. His temperament is directly related to his work. He laments that "Except to the amateur, the getting at anything of the kind is a form of labour hard as a bricklayer's much more engrossing and far less useful. It held me with invisible threads that were firmer than rope. They bound and gagged me, rendering me, as the opiate of creative dreams do render one, unfit for human companionship."[145] In a very flattering and sentimental biography Saltus' third and final wife Marie, herself an author, described her husband as an eccentric suffering what might be easily diagnosed now, and then, as a mental illness. "When working on a novel Mr. Saltus was living in another world. He knew where his things were, but no other, unless possessed of second sight, could have hazarded a guess. Under cigar butts, half burned cigarettes, piles of manuscripts, note-books and pencils, which were scattered all over the floor, anything might

[144] Edgar Saltus *Ghost Girl* New York: Boni and Liveright 1922, 10.
[145] Saltus *Ghost Girl* 32

be hidden, and often was. Until he had finished a novel or other prolonged work, any attempt at clearing up would have been fatal, not only to himself but to the sanity of the one who did the cleaning. With the knowledge that most literary men were 'litterers' the room was divested of anything which could be injured before it was turned over to him."[146] Saltus further explains "In the early days when I was first married to Helen Read, I was writing on a novel. She had no idea how interruptions affected me—nor did I realize myself how acute anything of the kind could become. I was in the middle of an intricate plot. Helen, who out of the kindness of her heart was bringing me a present, opened the door of my study and came in more quietly than you did. Before she could open her mouth to say a word, I began to scream and pull at my hair. Rushing to an open window I tore the manuscript, on which I had been working so long, into fragments and threw them into the street. Whether she thought I had gone suddenly insane and intended to kill her, she did not stop to say. When I looked around she had fled." [147]

The morbid psychology that Decadence threatened made them barely able to exist with or around other people. Decadent literature examined and perhaps created minds to abnormal that they cannot be understood by, or even be near, normal people. Morbid here means deleterious to society as an example of extreme individualism. Vance Thompson explores this idea in his book *The Ego Book: A Book of Selfish Ideals*, which in an inflated and petulant

[146] Marie Saltus *Edgar Saltus The Man* Chicago: Pascal Covici 1925, 166.
[147] *Edgar Saltus the Man* 49

defense of selfishness. Thompson addresses family, friends, lovers, enemies, and society and describes how to keep oneself free from their suffocating attempts to chain or trap the individual ego. As we shall soon discuss, for Thompson, the ego is decidedly male. The greatest threat to the male ego is, of course, the mother. She "storms the stronghold of his being as the Cossacks storm a town."[148] The individual's job in the face of the mother's cajolery and coercive love is to protect himself from her influence as well as from the influence of the rest of his family. In adulthood this includes resisting the seductive charms of lovers to relinquish one's free will. Thompson is quite aware that his interpretation of childhood as a struggle to resist a mother's love is "a sacrilege uncommitted in the ages" and will be read by his fellow Americans as sick.[149]

If Decadence in America was seen as a disease, how did American Decadents see themselves? They resisted accusations of morbidity, maintaining an allegiance to the disaffected "art for art's sake", but at the same time they seemed to bait others into these accusations, and described themselves as sick as well. As Havelock Ellis commented in approbation, this movement calls to those who "weary of too much living, or never strong enough to live at all, to hide their faces from the sun of nature and grope into cool, delicious darkness, soothing the fever of life"[150] Ellis argues that this retreat into the unnatural, into the morbid, is necessary, understandable, and not at all dangerous. His chapter

[148] Thompson, Vance. *The Ego Book: A Book of Selfish Ideals*. E.P. Dutton, 1914, 32.

[149] Thompson *Ego-Book*, 31

[150] Havelock Ellis *Affirmations* Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1915. 211

in praise of Huysmans explores the ways in which Decadent literature provides a valuable look into the psyche. He argues “that the energy which in more primitive times marked the operations of the community as a whole has now simply been transferred to the individuals themselves, and this aggrandizement of the individual really produces an even greater amount of energy. The individual has gained more than the community has lost.”[151] As Decadents watched the world collapsing and communities along with them, they saw themselves as making the only rational decision. They portrayed themselves as withdrawing towards art.

Ellis goes on to say that “An age of social decadence is not only the age of sinners and degenerates, but of saints and martyrs, and decadent Rome produced an Antoninus as well as a Heliogabalus. No doubt social " corruption " and literary " corruption " tend to go together; an age of individualism is usually an age of artistic decadence, and we may note that the chief literary artists of America—Poe, Hawthorne; Whitman—are for the most part in the technical sense decadents.”[152] These times, while they might be distasteful, have their value. Why not appreciate and enjoy them for their value? This was one of the few definitions that James Huneker approved of. Huneker still rejected the term Decadence because it is a relative term, and only exists so long as people have some definition of Classic, which of course is also always changing. Decadents

[151] Ellis *Affirmations* 177
[152] Ellis Affirmation 177

rejected talk of illness, instead inverting the idea entirely. To them, their critics were missing the point. It was the "normal" American who was morbid.

Oscar Wilde describes this phenomenon "Perhaps, however, I have wronged the public in limiting them to such words as 'immoral,' 'unintelligible,' 'exotic,' and 'unhealthy.' There is one other word that they use. That word is 'morbid.' They do not use it often. The meaning of the word is so simple that they are afraid of using it. Still, they use it sometimes, and, now and then, one comes across it in popular newspapers. It is, of course, a ridiculous word to apply to a work of art. For what is morbidity but a mood of emotion or a mode of thought that one cannot express? The public are all morbid, because the public can never find expression for anything. The artist is never morbid. He expresses everything."[153] Morbid is the right word, Wilde argues, but it is applied to the wrong people. In its inversion of everything, Decadence also inverts the idea of morbidity itself.

After going through the many meanings of the word, William Aspenwall Bradley, the literary agent for Gertrude Stein, suggests that when Americans says Decadence, they mean the exact opposite. They use the word to signify something so original that it scares them, and reserve the word genius for imitation. One aspect of Decadents in America was that they rarely named themselves as Decadent, instead, they made oblique references to their innate specialness. Many of the Decadent little magazines, for instance, simply state their purpose as purveyors of the best art and taste. Yet this assertion is

[153] Oscar Wilde *The Soul of Man* London: Arthur L Humphrey's 1900, 52.

disingenuous, because Decadents deliberately, as we have seen, inverted values, and aligned themselves with illness. Their mission was not a purely aesthetic one.

The first issue of *The Knight Errant*, a little magazine edited by Bertram Goodhue and Ralph Adams Cram, sets out its mission: "One by one in this last night, the beautiful things have disappeared, until at last, in a world grown old and ugly men, forced to find some excuse for the peculiarity of their environment have discredited, even beauty itself, finding it childish, unworthy, and—unscientific: not only beauty in Art, but beauty in thought and motive, beauty in life and death, until the word has become but a memory and a reproach."[154] There is nothing here to suggest the ill health that others saw. Rather the authors describe a search for beauty in an ugly, dying world. If anything is ailing, it is the world.

In private, James Huneker was slightly more straightforward. In a letter to Benjamin de Casseres, who had just sent him a manuscript of an admiring piece about Huneker himself, Huneker first admonishes him for his gratuitous praise, and for his overly sunny writing style. Then he mocks his aversion to decadence, writing, "I wrote a story in 1900 "The New Sin" which is morbid, decadent, devil-worshipping, hysterical, and if I publish it send me a letter full of

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[154] "The Quest: Being an Apology for the Existence of the Review Called the Knight Errant" *The Knight Errant* 1:1 April 1892, *The Knight Errant* was edited by Ralph Adams Cram and Betram Goodhue. It included pieces by F. Holland Day, Bliss Carman, and Walter Crane. For more on the Boston Decadents, see *Currents of the Nineties in Boston and London: Fred Holland Day, Louise Imogen Guiney and their Circle* New York: Garland 1987. See also. *Improper Bostonians: Lesbian and Gay History from the Puritans to Playland*. Beacon Press, 1999. Also, see "Boston Decadent Communities" Ch 3 of David Weir *Decadent Culture in the United States.*

hellish prudence and I'll laugh. You must work out your own cure. Be good, or virtuous, and you will be bilious."[155] Huneker admitted that his stories are deliberately morbid, he is not defending his work as outside of society, but rather suggests that his solution to life in this age is an alignment with illness. He later writes, perhaps ironically, "My clogged system is forever cured of the decadent crowd. I'm done. Me for sunshine and health foods."[156] In public Huneker raged against those who sought to pathologize decadence and argued that Decadence was a word that had no meaning other than in relation to Classic art. In private, however, he too used a rhetoric of illness to describe what Decadence was and what it meant.

While Decadents like Huneker and Saltus argued for l'art pour l'art in public, this was not how they appeared to others or how they wanted to appear. In order to identify themselves, in order to be culturally legible and thus culturally relevant, they drew on American understandings of health to indicate that their work was unhealthy, and that they were on the side of ill health. The very suggestion that an author might be on the side of a deranged mind, or of an unscrupulous character, was enough to signal Decadence for Americans. They did not need the raptures of Huysmans. Americans identified Decadents by their morbidity, the potential of their literature to cause disease, and possibly death. Decadence, by its very nature, is contrarian and oppositional. What could be

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[155] James Huneker *The Intimate Letters of James Huneker* ed. Josephine Huneker.New York: Charles Scribner's Sons 1922. to Ben Casseres Aug 1 1912 p134

[156] James Huneker *The Intimate Letters of James Huneker* ed. Josephine Huneker New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922. to Edward C. Marsh April 5, 1909, 94

more oppositional than a Decadent in America? That America did not seem like the sort of place that end-of-the-empire art might thrive is precisely the point.

That Decadents opposed standards of normative health being applied to their works, and objected to the criticism of doctors and psychologists, did not stop them from describing themselves as ill and taking pleasure in being called ill. While they attempted to invert the ideas of health and illness, casting themselves as reasonable in the face of an insane world, they reaffirmed the difference between sickness and health, and its importance to American culture.

Chapter 3

The Eternal Feminine and the New Woman: The Decadent use of Gender

"Morbidity" constituted the dominant discursive domain within which Decadence resides. I now turn to the specific ways that this morbidity was expressed. Because morbidity is as broad a term as Decadence, the specific ways in which Decadence violated norms of health are essential to understanding the ways that willful degeneracy and decadence was threatening. In this chapter I examine what may have been for the 19th century the most troubling aspect of Decadence: the transgression of gender roles.

That Decadents were associated with sickness is hardly a revelation, it was, after all, a style and movement based in part on identifying with the sick and the other. Barbara Spackman argues that European Decadents used a rhetoric of sickness as an "alibi for alterity"[157] To some extent, this analysis can be applied to American Decadents as well. The morbidity that they evince certainly has a feminine quality. It is precisely their appropriation of the feminine that renders them morbid.

[157] Spackman, Barbara. Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio. Cornell University Press, 1989.ix

I do not mean here to fall into an argument about what traits "are" more or less feminine; indeed, my argument eschews any appeal to essentialism. Nor do I mean to recapitulate Ann Douglas's argument about culture as a whole. Rather, I understand the feminine and the masculine to have the valences that they did for my cast of characters in this particular historical moment. Even this is complex enough as meanings continually shifted and created multiple valences. Still the discourse of American Decadence requires the establishment and violation of gender norms. In the process of marking themselves as deviant, special and unique, Decadents supported the very culture they tried to undermine. The paradoxical nature of their protest helps to account for their almost immediate descent into obscurity.

My purpose here, however, is to discuss the discourse of and around Decadence, and that discourse was deeply connected to race and gender; Decadence depends upon maintaining gender and racial difference and hierarchies because the cultural value they depended upon for their cultural power was in direct proportion to the extent that they violated these hierarchies. In the sense I use it here, I mean "discourse" to indicate the systems of thought, both words and practices, that organize how society defines truth and deploys power.[158] Decadence could not include many women because its discourse was based upon usurping the other's epistemological and existential caché. American Decadence is a study in cultural cooptation.

[158] I paraphrase this definition from Foucault. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, First Edition (Vintage, 1990).

The apparent absence of Decadent women in America is both a matter of definition and of viewpoint as it is of historical fact. Decadents themselves sought to exclude women, for reasons I will discuss, and the alterity of their self-image was based on their subversion of masculinity. We are much more likely to understand, as Showalter does, the works of the Fin de Siècle women as Utopian and searching for liberation in the end of an old world and the creation of a new. Yet, similar themes by the men are inflected in a completely different way.

Gender at the Fin de Siècle

Throughout this work I have argued that Decadence is at the center of the 1890s public sphere of discourse. First I will examine several currents of gender unrest that shaped the Decadent place in the culture of the 1890s. Then, I will set American Decadence amongst these currents, arguing that they occupied an important and rarely examined space

As with sickness and perversity, there is some circular logic to the association of Decadence with both gender and racial boundary crossing. Because Decadence was in some circles merely a buzzword to denote the distressing, chaotic, or atavistic tendencies of the privileged, Decadence was in some instances synonymous with these gender and racial transgressions. This was especially true in terms of the Decadent relationship with the New Woman. As Elaine Showalter puts it “To most late Victorians the decadent was new and

the New Woman was Decadent."[159] Thus, while most self-professed Decadents were men, the New Woman was lumped in together with their, as their counterparts. They were, as Elaine Showalter puts it "twin monsters of a degenerate age"[160] It is no accident that Showalter's book about women associated with Decadence highlights almost solely British women writers (with the exception of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Kate Chopin, both of whose connections to Decadence are fleeting). The New Woman in America, while certainly associated with sexual liberation, was troubling more for her independence, rejection of marriage, education, career and desire for political and social equality.[161] Max Beerbohm quipped that the New Woman sprang fully armed from Ibsen's brain.[162] The New Woman, and the problems associated with her arrival provide the background for American Decadence's use of gender.

To understand the complicated and sometimes overlapping relationship between the New Woman and the Decadent, we must examine the way that women figured in the literary and cultural imagination of the 1890s. Thomas Beer begins his idiosyncratic work *The Mauve Decade: American Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century* with a chapter titled "The Titaness". Beer's Titaness is a

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[159] Showalter, Elaine. *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle*. Rutgers University Press, 1993. x

[160] Showalter, Elaine. *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle*. Rutgers University Press, 1993. x

[161] On the New Woman see: Ledger, Sally. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*. Manchester University Press, 1997. Patterson, Martha H. *Beyond the Gibson Girl: Reimagining the American New Woman, 1895-1915*. University of Illinois Press, 2005. Patteson, Martha H., *The American New Woman Revisited: A Reader, 1894-1930*. Rutgers University Press, 2008. Jean Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875-1930*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003. See also, the essay by Sarah Grand that popularized the term: Grand, Sarah. "The New Aspect of the Woman Question."*The North American Review*158, no. 448 (1894): 270–76

cultural figure, the emblem of an over-feminized culture that censored and sentimentalized. She was “a terror to editors, the hope of missionary societies and the prey of lecturers…. She existed rather as a symptom of America’s increasing cheapness than as an attitude of womankind”[163]”The collapse of American thought excused her forays.” From the remains of the Bostonian tradition of individualism and courage “welled a perfume of decay, cants, and meaningless phrases: “the nobility of democracy,’ ‘social purity’ and the like.”[164] Beer envisioned the last decade of the nineteenth century as the struggle of an older more masculine tradition against this emasculating Freudian nightmare of a cultural force. The oppressive maternal overtones of the Titaness are impossible to miss. These same women who restrict cultural and literary individualism and expression, were also the advocates of materialism and consumerism, but they also valued beauty, European literature and art, and fetishized the Orient, values that sound strangely familiar to us. The Titaness did not invent “cheap cruelty and low social pressures, but they erected this baseness into virtue by some defensive sense of rectitude, and a generation of sons was reared in the shadow of the Titaness, aware of her power, protected by nothing from her shrill admonitions.”[165]

Beer’s selection of the 1890s as an important and ill understood decade, combined with the way that he positions gender conflict as the foundation of the ethos of the Mauve decade. The term “mauve” is, of course, in the words of

[163] Beer 35
[164] Beer 36
[165] Beer 60

James Abott McNeil is “pink trying to be purple,” a useful shorthand for the American Decadent movement in general. It is also no coincidence that Beer wrote in the 1920s, which other scholars have identified as the moment when Decadence hit American shores, the last gasp of a dead European movement that expressed itself in the bloated novels of James Huneker and the later work of Edgar Saltus.

Thus Beer’s views are a good reflection of the gender politics of Decadence. His Titaness is a combination of New and Old woman who troubled the literary, political and social ambitions of the Decadents. As Elaine Showalter argues in her *Sexual Anarchy* the social and cultural anarchy of the end of the nineteenth century, especially the shifts in the economic structures of the world, caused anxiety in the middle classes that manifested in anxiety over gender and sexuality, and the need to control and categorize shifting boundaries. This, according to Showalter, resulted in fears about the new woman and the gay man. The new woman was economically and socially independent, and tended towards progressive social causes. The gay man embodied concerns about the effeminate, urban, and over-civilized nature of modern masculinity. These anxieties about the shifting roles of men and women dominated the middle-class imagination.

Femininity and masculinity were at war for culture and society in the minds of many. These movements have been well analyzed by others.[166] Even if the

[166] On gender in the 1890s on the international stage see Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* and

people of the 1890s, and certainly from Thomas Beer's vantage point this held true, were obsessed with dividing the world into the masculine and the feminine, attempting such an approach by labeling Decadence as feminine and thus threatening is unproductive. Certainly, one of the most distinctive features of American Decadence is its reliance on feminine signifiers (sensuousness, artificiality, superficiality). One of the great complaints of American Decadents was that culture was over feminized and American Decadence was also strangely hostile to women, and their hold on culture.

Gender and morbidity connected in several ways. The most obvious way that Decadents flouted middle class morality was in their exaggerated femininity. Gender inversion, Nordau agrees, is one of the signs of degeneration. The feminization, or perceived feminization of culture in the nineteenth century is well documented. Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture* outlines the ways in which the second half of the nineteenth century saw mass culture become sentimental and moral, and cultural values moved from the male Calvinist to the more feminine liberal religion. She argues that over the course of the nineteenth century mass culture emerged along with industrialization, urbanization, developed separate spheres. The woman's sphere moved to the

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Bederman, Gail. Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917, University of Chicago Press, 1995.
On hysteria, race, and gender, see Briggs, Laura. "The Race of Hysteria: 'Overcivilization' and the 'Savage' Woman in Late Nineteenth-Century Obstetrics and Gynecology," American Quarterly 52 (June 2000).
On the idea of separate spheres see: Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. 1975. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-century America".*Signs* 1 (1). University of Chicago Press: 1–29.
On the New Woman see: Sland, Bugitte. *Becoming Modern: Young Women and the Reconstruction of Womanhood in the 1920s,* Princeton University Press, 2000.

domestic, and emotion, sentimentalism, was another commodity to be mass produced. Douglas finds women authors complicit in this process of sentimentalization, which she seems to view as an intellectual failure. While this thesis has been seriously challenged as a unifying historical theory for the 19th century, Douglas's observations help to explain the perception of those who lived in this moment.[167] Douglas describes the domestic novelist in terms that could just as easily be used to describe decadent writers. In her words the "domestic novelist was concerned with the isolation created by fantasy rather than the solitude imposed by moral commitment." The difference is that "the domestic novelist was plying her trade to convey an illusion of community through the shared consumer pleasures available in a mass society"[168] I agree with some of Douglas's critics. Sentimentalism does not necessarily represent lack of intellectual rigor, or some sort of weakening of culture. A better explanation, even as Beer hints, is that women authors deliberately sought to feminize the masculine public sphere, an aggression that could not go unanswered. We must understand Decadent discourse as a form of masculine resistance against this Titaness, a way to reclaim this realm that women now threatened to occupy.

For women, aestheticism, the more palatable and popular version of Decadence, was, as one scholar argues, a means to independence and expression.[169] Women working outside the home, and women asserting

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[167] See Philip Gould "Revisiting the "Feminization" of American Culture. Introduction." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies,* Volume 11, Number 3, Fall 1999, pp. i-xii

[168] Douglas, 158

[169] See Mary Warner Blanchard, *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age* (Yale University Press, 1998).

economic independence was, at the same time, one of the destabilizing forces that led to aestheticism popularity. Aestheticism in America arose in connection with the English artistic reform movement led by John Ruskin and William Morris. It was a reaction to the increased mechanization and industrialization of society and, as the Decadents might put it, the increased Philistinism of the middle class and ugliness of the now more populated cities. Aestheticism peaked in the 1870s and 1880s, though its influence is still felt today. The art for art's sake slogan allowed women the opportunity to theorize and value their artistic accomplishments. Beauty itself could be a justification. Especially in America, the aesthetic movement was concerned with interiors, specifically the domestic interior. This put women if not on the same plane with, at least in collaboration with successful male artists. Women aesthetic artists like Candace Wheeler, Celia Thaxter, Mary Louise Mclaughlin, and Mariana Van Rennselaer "recognized in aestheticism an escape from Calvinist orthodoxy, an evasion of tyrannical fathers and ineffective husbands, and an opportunity to advance in the social and business worlds of the Gilded Age."[170] The loose flowing robes that became popular as symbols of aestheticism not only gave women the smooth lines that characterized aesthetic art, but also allowed for freer movement. Tea dresses, wrappers, and Mother Hubbard dresses, once associated with sickness, maternity and old age, were popular. See, for example, the painting by J. M. Whistler, "Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink: Portrait of Mrs. Frances Leyland". Whistler was American but took up residence in London and Paris. His influence

[170] Blanchard xiii

had faded by the 1890s, but his version of aestheticism was appealing in the United States. Again we find that these artistic trends, usually considered an importation from Europe, are better viewed as a transatlantic conversation.

Finally, let us turn to the question of civilization and empire as it affects gender. The connections between gender, race, and empire frame most of the discourse of Decadence. In the sociology of the era, decadence is couched as "racial" decadence, which is of course inseparable from the gender roles of men and women whose job it was to protect the evolutionary progress of civilization. For example, Sarah Simons, in an article in the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, argues that there are three types of decadence, individual, racial, and social.[171] Where there is racial Decadence there is necessarily social, though the inverse is not necessarily true. She elaborates that social and racial decadence are not to be confused with primitivism, though they have similar features as the helpless child has similarities to the feeble old man. Decadence is also associated with movement; it is not mere stagnation.

The social and racial forces of degeneration and Decadence have a foundation in the evolutionary forces of reproduction, which are of course dependent on gender roles. Gail Bederman argues that manliness, the Victorian attributes of restraint, turned to masculinity, the more atavistic ideals of strength, in part because of fears of race suicide. This view is of course dependent on the prevailing acceptance of Spencerian social forces, which naturalist writers popularized and explained, and understanding of America as hyper-evolved. The

[171] Simons, Sarah E.. 1901. "Social Decadence". *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 18. Sage Publications, Inc.: 63–86.

evidence for this over-civilization was apparent in the fragmenting of society, the increased specialization of roles, and the presence of weakness and degeneration in the highest classes.

Gail Bederman is *Manliness and Civilization* examines the need to emphasize America's strength in the face of encounters with "less evolved" societies, and the threat of neurasthenic overcivilization. Masculinity in this case took the form of aggressiveness, strength and virility, replacing the earlier values of self-restraint and willpower, Decadents, finding themselves in a moment of flux in male gender roles, inverted both. Since the gender discourse of the 19th century automatically posited the genders as opposites, this meant that women's frailty and passionlessness was prized.

Richard Harding Davis, famous as the author of *Soldiers of Fortune,* illustrates the complexities of this moment in history, and interests us here as the polar opposite of the Decadent worldview. In *Soldiers of Fortune* Clay, an engineer by trade, is working in a small South American country. He and his fellows manage to stave off a coup. He courts the affection of a young woman, the daughter of his industrialist employer, who is dissatisfied by the over-civilization of her suitors. He ends up; however, with her sister who is strong enough to stage a rescue of her own. The book reads as a justification for the intervention of the more civilized and technologically advanced U.S. in the affairs of the less developed continent. It also portrays the New Man, who Davis himself served as a model for, as combining intelligence with practicality and strength. The pale effeminate man of the Victorian drawing room was not fit to compete in

this new Imperial world. Rather, the tanned, athletic, assertive Clay is the hero of the story, using both strength and intelligence to win both the battle and the girl.

In this context, we can see that American Decadence sought a middle way, avoiding the enveloping cultural weight of the Titaness, while also rejecting the aggressive masculinity that was suggested as a cure for neurasthenia. The neurasthenic, as the epitome of white civilization, is an important figure for us to consider. To summarize the complicated intersections of evolutionary theory and gender, is beyond the scope of this volume, but I will explore the most salient points.

George Beard's work is likewise telling when viewed in the context of Decadence. The neurasthenic, viewed by Beard as an overworked product of hypercivilization, the Decadents viewed as evidences of rampant philistinism. Neurasthenia and Decadence were both diseases of the age, and Decadence, the love of this state, is neurasthenia justified and made art. While Beard's original diagnosis could be applied equally to men and women, neurasthenia was soon culturally understood as feminine like its sister diagnosis hysteria.

The position of women was an important marker for the state of civilization. According to the Herbert Spencer infused Darwinism that prevailed in most quarters, men and women, as civilization progressed, would become more specialized, more separate. Thus, any movement towards gender blurring was a sign of atavism. On the other hand, from a historical point of view, a highly feminized and sexualized womanhood was a sign of a declining civilization. Still, social decadence is deeply associated with women's status. The Fall of the

Roman Empire, at least Edward Gibbons' recounts it, was, either as cause or symptom, party to the same sort of gender inversions that plagued America at the end of the nineteenth century. Such a sudden shift in roles, the feminization of the man and the unsexing of the woman, was certainly denotative of destruction.

Women in American Decadence

The feminization, or perceived feminization of culture in the nineteenth century is well documented as is the rise of the New Woman. Decadence is deeply connected with both gender inversion and sexual deviance. However, Decadence is not merely a synonym for homosexuality (though this has been argued), and the sometimes virulent heteronormativity of some American Decadents suggests that there was something else going on. Moreover, Decadents opposed the feminization of American culture just as much as the most jingoistic Americans. Instead of the active vital life proscribed by some as a cure for neurasthenia, Decadents prescribed intense aesthetic experience. They embraced neurasthenia not as a disease, but as an extreme sensitivity. Our purpose here is to connect these phenomena to Decadence.

The scholarship on European and British Decadence has deep connections to scholarship on the New Woman, and by extension feminism. American Decadence, however, makes those connections more difficult. American Decadence depended upon gender hierarchies. As with their general politics, Decadents reached for the new, the outrageous, the modern, while at the same time embracing the old and aristocratic. On the one hand, American

Decadents were cosmopolitan and deeply opposed to Victorian gentility, bourgeois values, and the status quo. On the other hand, they were deeply committed to old-world aristocratic values, deeply insular and dependent on the established social order. The only way that American Decadence nods to the feminist principles is in their whole-hearted approval of sexual liberation, though they enjoyed the results more than they approved of the theoretical groundings. Equality was never a foundation of Decadent thought, while sexual freedom was a centerpiece. There are of course, women in the movement; however, they were largely on the margins, not participating in the communities formed by Decadence. Richard Le Gallienne insists that, like all other popular views of decadence, the late nineteenth century fears over the role of men and women miss the point. Speaking of The New Woman he claims, "But I have found her to be very much the old Eve on better acquaintance. The New Woman business is only one of those thousand devices by which the eternal feminine pursues the eternal masculine."[172] Here Decadence leads to an understanding of gender as essentially constant with only the forms changing. Of women's liberation, Le Gallienne insists "When she has become economically independent of man the relations between men and women will lose their main tragic factor."[173] This is the gender struggle when seen from a Decadent point of view: not a matter of society, politics, or fairness, only art.

In valuing style over substance, Decadent works aligned themselves with the feminine. The florid, self-involved, overly-adorned prose was itself a marker

[172] " A Chat with Richard le Gallienne" *Current Literature* vol 21:5 May, 1897, 505
[173] "A Chat with Richard le Gallienne" *Current Literature* vol 21:5 May, 1897, 505

of the Decadent's gender project. This style was deeply associated with women, and Decadents sought to "imitate and amplify presumptions about women's writing and their access to style by embracing a 'gorgeous' style of writing and enhancing the prosiness and mass of their writing" [174] This overwrought style disturbed reviewers who preferred the more immediate or unmediated domestic style as more appropriate for women.

The access that American women had to the aesthetic movement, in part because of the already extant cultural connection between women and superficial artistic pursuits, was also necessarily problematic for American Decadents. Again, they sought to reclaim the aesthetic movement for themselves, away from the bourgeois home that had embraced its principles. Instead of focusing on the freedom of movement that aesthetic dress provided, for example, they latched on to the air of freeness, with its connotations of free love or even prostitution. Instead of the producers and consumers of the aesthetic movement, women for Decadents were aesthetic objects themselves, perhaps the best embodiment of artificiality, sensuousness, and beauty covering a fallen and disgusting nature. Thus while Decadence and aestheticism are often considered part of the same movement, they are distinguishable by their gender politics.

The others, the unreal women who populated the Decadent world, were forced into limited positions. Huneker's "Three Disagreeable Girls" is a typically Decadent rant against women (and women writers) in modern literature. In an

[174] Beam, Dorri. *Style, Gender, and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. 6

inversion of the usual game of naming the literary character one would most like to spend time with, Huneker lists the three women from literature he would least like to meet. He engages in his usual quippy remarks, though it should be noted that he is weakest in his criticism of literature. One reviewer noted that while he shared the obsessions of Havelock Ellis his style was gay instead of serious, and his cosmopolitanism verged on absurd.[175] Still, he tackled questions similar to Ellis's in regard to the New Woman, beginning with Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, He recognizes that feminism per se is not to blame for these women and that it is Ibsen himself who popularized them. He quickly diagnoses Hedda as decadent "inasmuch as her nerves rule her actions."[176] To his credit, he argues that what makes these women (Hedda Gabler, Mildred Lawson, and Undine Spragg) disagreeable is not the mere characteristics of the New Woman, but the fact that they are old wine in new bottles. Rather than representing a new type of literature, they are representative merely of a restlessness on the part of authors, an attempt to write new kinds of women that is ultimately unsuccessful. There is nothing new under the sun, and the gender unrest that plagued the nation was not progress, but part of a cycle. Thus Huneker both dismisses and claims the New Woman. She is not really part of a political or social movement, rather she is an unfortunate byproduct of the same literary milieu that produced Decadence.

Why does the Decadent project need women? This is not merely an American phenomenon, the "classic" Decadent narrative involves few women as

[175] Springfield Republican October 14, 1915, 6.
[176] Huneker *Ivory Apes and Peacocks* 314.

actors in the story, but revolves around the feminine. As Barbara Spackman, in her book about European Decadence, explains this process "Indeed, woman is expelled in order to abstract her qualities and reassign them to the evirated convalescent himself. Convalescence is figured as a sort of secular conversion: the old woman is expelled in order that the new woman may be put on, that the converted convalescent may assume a feminine guise . . . This occupation of the woman's body is both the decadent's profession and the means by which he appropriates alterity"[177]

The Decadent not only occupies the woman's body but speaks through it. In other words, "that attempt at a new interpretation comes into being through a feminization of the male 'protagonist,' who thus discovers a ventriloquistic mode of speech in which the body spoken through is necessarily a 'woman's' body."[178] This helps us to understand the preponderance of fantasy women and feminine signifiers in a world without women.

That some decadents might want a feminized world without women seems at first to be an obvious statement. Given the homoerotic overtones, and the hero-worship of Oscar Wilde, it is certainly no surprise that homosociality and gender inversion was a key feature of Decadent culture in the United States. The aesthetic outfits, tactile fabrics, and luxurious living certainly overlapped with the emerging subculture of inverts soon to become homosexuals. However,

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[177] Spackman, Barbara. *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio*. Cornell University Press, 1989, 9.
[178] Spackman, Barbara. *Decadent Genealogies: The Rhetoric of Sickness from Baudelaire to D'Annunzio*. Cornell University Press, 1989. 10

Decadence was its own subculture, and such symbology was inherently multivalent and dependent on audience.

The specific ways in which Decadents used gendered symbols are revealing.

For example, take the ubiquitous Turkish cigarette. Even by the end of the nineteenth century, cigarettes were still something of a novelty. Not unheard of or difficult to obtain, they still provided that special cultural signification that Decadents were searching for. It was the image of the Oriental woman or the Orientalized western woman that accompanied these cigarettes (see image 2 and 3). Mass advertisements for these cigarettes took off after the First World War and became even more suggestive (see image 4). These women were often pictured alone, either lounging or in an exotic setting. These images had several valences. To women they offered freedom and sensual pleasure, the joys of rebellion. To the Decadent men they offered the same cultural caché with less risk. It is interesting that the cigarette is represented as “feminine” in this period, as it was still unorthodox for a woman to smoke. Finally, they suggest the mysteries of the Orient. While the Imperial expansion into Africa and South America implied tales of war and bravery, the Orient was much more symbolically aligned with Decadent ideals. A connection to American imperialism made sense because of the Decadent historical world-view, and the Orient carried with it connotations of femininity, exoticism, Empire, passivity, and ancient knowledge that appealed to Decadent sensibilities. It was, of course, a result of capitalism and global trade that such products were available for mass

consumption, but Decadents attempted to extract these signifiers from their capitalistic and global connotations, preferring instead the role of enlightened collector and worldly aficionado with enough wealth to procure rare and little seen goods.

Kate Chopin describes the allure of the cigarette in her short story "The Egyptian Cigarette".[179] The protagonist's friend, coincidentally an architect, returns from the Orient with a present for her: a cigarette case containing cigarettes finer than any she had seen. She asks to use his private smoking room, which is styled in typical Decadent fashion. She retreats from the banal chatter of the other women, who she notes might be bothered by a woman smoking. As she smokes the cigarette, she is transported by a vision. She finds herself collapsed in the sand in the desert after her lover has completely cast her off. Slowly, in the burning sand, she grieves and dies.

> The maple leaves looked as if a silvery shimmer enveloped them. The grey-green smoke no longer filled the room. I could hardly lift the lids of my eyes. The weight of centuries seemed to suffocate my soul that struggled to escape, to free itself and breathe.
>
> I had tasted the depths of human despair.
>
> The little clock upon the stand pointed to a quarter past five. The cigarettes still reposed in the yellow box. Only the stub of the one I had smoked remained. I had laid it in the ash tray.
>
> As I looked at the cigarettes in their pale wrappers, I wondered what other visions they might hold for me; what might I not find in their mystic fumes? Perhaps a vision of celestial peace; a dream of hopes fulfilled; a taste of rapture, such as had not entered into my mind to conceive.[180]

Chopin here articulates the meaning and experience open to women through a cigarette.

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[179] Written in 1897 and published in Vogue April 19, 1900

[180] Kate Chopin "The Egyptian Cigarette" *Vogue* April 19, 1900

These images return us to the paradox of Decadence. Cigarettes, like other signifiers of female independence held a different connotation for Decadent men. For women, adopting the aesthetic style was more than a matter of taste. Rather the pants and less cumbersome skirts allowed them more freedom, especially because it enabled them to ride bicycles, which had only recently been made technologically possible. The discourse of Decadence; however, insisted that art was without social or political meaning.

By associating themselves with these types of goods, Decadents were buying not only the exoticism and gender nonconformity, but also the whole array of cultural fears and cathexes that came with the idea of the New Woman. Thus, in a sense, American Decadents could not be entirely on the side of the New Woman, or rather, could not and would not support the kind of social and cultural change she represented. It was necessary for their project to have a highly gendered world so that their rebelliousness and crossing of boundaries could be read as deviant. In a less rigid world dreamt of by the New Women themselves such behavior as the Decadents engaged in would no longer be stigmatized, and thus would no longer provide the aura that maintained their self-image. This then is the folly of attempting to qualify American Decadents as either progressive or reactionary.

It was not just any kind of femininity that would do. As I have already discussed, male Decadents saw the bourgeois feminization of culture which, ironically, they attributed to another man, William Dean Howells, to be a threat. So, it was the figure of the new woman that they appropriated, though this should

not be mistaken to mean that they welcomed the new woman into their ranks, or supported the causes of women's suffrage. At best they supported not women's political liberation but women's moral liberation. That is, Saltus, Huneker and their compatriots often railed against women's sexual oppression, though this was obviously connected to their desires for their own access to women. The new woman functioned as a symbol for Decadence. This is evident in *M'lle New York*, *The Lotus*, and *The Fly Leaf.*

The Lotus based its image on a young Orientalized woman. *M'lle New York* is of course the most obvious because it has as its title figure who if not quite "the New Women" was definitively not the old woman of the parlor. *M'lle New York* was a little magazine published from 1895 to 1898. Its first volume was eleven issues, there were no issues in 1897, and the second volume in 1898 was only four issues. It was published fortnightly and sold for ten cents. The cover and some other illustrations were printed in color. At eleven by eight it was much larger than many of its contemporary little magazines (the *Chap-Book* for instance was four and a half inches by seven and a half), the margins were wide and covered in marginalia. Thomas Flemming and Thomas Powers were the illustrators, and Vance Thompson and James Huneker provided almost all of the content. It was, according to Huneker "More Parisian than Paris." Despite the pages strewn with nude women, the obsession with Mary Magdelene, Salome, and prostitutes, and the many stories figuring women as main characters, Vane Thompson manages to convey his brand of misogyny. He is specifically opposed to the worship of women, suggesting that it is the worship of the Virgin and the

mother that has been deleterious to the race. Woman is "a wonderful animal…shaped to fulfill a certain necessary function"[181] Huneker states in "Gynolatry" that women "are the true rules of the destinies of our race."[182] In many stories that follow, Huneker repeatedly puts sensuous, available women in the company of men who inevitably react with cowardice and impotence.[183] The worship of the woman as mother and virgin, Huneker suggests, has led to weak men, unable to consummate their love. Both the old woman of the parlor and the New Woman of the world was too domineering for the Decadent taste. They imagined a woman who was all Venus and no Virgin.

Walter Blackburne Harte makes an interesting argument in the magazine *The Lotus*. *The Lotus* was published from Kansas City, a strange place for the cosmopolitan art and oriental theme of the magazine. Harte addresses the "foreignness" of the image of the lotus by countering that the flower is, in fact, native to America, and sacred there in one form or another. He then immediately shifts to an expert, a Japanese man, who explains that the lotus root may be eaten. He then elaborates on why the flower is sacred, by showing the ways it is like a young woman. "Although the roots are clad with nasty soil, yet in early summer she sets about to smile, then she laughs, exposing her golden teeth and exhaling her fragrant breath to entice lovers of nature"[184] He explains that there are many young women who are rooted in swampy and dirty environments, and

[181] "Leader" *M'lle New York* I Oct 1895
[182] "Gynolatry" *M'lle New York* Nov 1895
[183] See "Improvisation" "Ineluctable"(April, 1896) Nuptials Royal"(Nov 1898)
[184] "Comment" *The Lotus* 1:1

who may indulge in vices or lack the education or refinement of their peers. In spite of this, or perhaps because of it, they bloom all the more beautifully.

Here again we see the Decadent appropriation of the New Woman, though again the focus is not so much on political liberation as on her opposition to traditional sexual and moral values. Thus the lotus, both flower and magazine, draws on the image of the young, profligate, uncontrolled woman. The pages of *The Lotus* like those of *The Fly Leaf* and *M'lle New York* are studded with illustrations of women. These drawings are done in the familiar Beardsley style and printed in black and red. The women are of the accustomed type, dark haired and willowy, draped in flowing aesthetic gowns, and dangling cigarettes from their fingers or jauntily waving parasols.

In *The Fly Leaf*'s first issue, there is a piece entitled "The Yellow Girl". Curiously, while the other pieces in the first issue, are about American themes, Harte paints "The Yellow Girl" as a British phenomenon. Harte makes the argument that The Yellow Girl is not a real woman or even emblematic of a real social phenomenon. She is a fantasy, something to liven the gray skies of London. She is the modern Circe, a reference to the Bacchantic women of previous ages. Harte then addresses the moralists who react in alarm to the figure. Returning again to paradox Harte argues that, without fantasies like The Yellow Girl, male ???society would go immediately insane. While the moralists rant about the impact of the Yellow Girl on society, he misses the fact that youth and sorrow must have their dreams and that it is precisely these fantasies that allow domesticity to function. Here we have another facet of the Decadent

appropriation of the New Woman; she is indispensable to bourgeois culture, merely another side of the coin that allows modern industry and domesticity to function.

Gender and Morbidity

Having discussed how Decadence dealt with gender, we return to morbidity. While morbidity's presence was easily ascertainable, the healthy reader could spot it in an instant, its meaning fluctuates. Certainly the easiest accusation to make was morbidity in the context of unnatural eroticism. In practice, this was a surprisingly narrow field that excluded much of cheap literature and that focused instead on literature that was obviously directed to the middle or upper class, and had some pretentions to quality.[185] Arthur Honblow, in a review of *American Authors* writes that "The school of erotic fiction is represented in this country by two clever but morbid authors Edgar Saltus and Amelie Rives. Mr. Saltus has written a number of salacious novels, unhealthy in both tone and temperament."[186] Setting Saltus and Huneker aside for the moment, let us take Amelie Rives as an example.[187] In style her novels would

[185] The literature on the rapidly expanding variety of popular, cheap, or sensational literature available in the 19th Century is vast. See, for example, Streeby, Shelley. *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. Denning, Michael. *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture in America*. 2nd, revised edition. London; New York: Verso, 1998. Sullivan, Larry E., and Lydia C. Schurman. *Pioneers, Passionate Ladies, and Private Eyes: Dime Novels, Series Books, and Paperbacks*. 1 edition. New York: Routledge, 1997.

[186] Arthur Hornblow "Some Representative American Authors" *Peterson Magazine* April 1895 5:4 387.

[187] Amelie Rives, 1863-1945, also known as Amelie Rives Chanler and later Amelie Rives Troubetzkoy was an author originally from Virginia. Her scandalous works mirrored an equally scandalous life, married to the unstable Astor heir Chanler only to be divorced then remarried to the artistocrat PierreTroubetzkoy. Her life included affairs, parties, drugs, nude pictures, and a taste for the European and Oriental. She was often connected to Saltus as a sort of female version, but there is no evidence that they were otherwise acquainted. She was a prolific author, writing over 20 novels that were very popular. For a biography see Lucey, Donna M. *Archie and Amelie: Love and Madness in the Gilded Age*. 1st edition. New York: Broadway Books, 2007.

surely be called Decadent, yet debate raged not to whether her works belonged to that school, but as to whether they were healthy. A reviewer in *Life* noted that her novel *The Quick or the Dead* was "an entirely morbid novel. It is hard to imagine how a vigorous Southern woman, fond of outdoor exercise and a lover of nature could write such an unhealthy book"[188] An article in *Current Literature* elaborates on the problem caused by Amelie Rives, along with Laura Daintrey and Lily Curry, that their novels and "the success of *The Quick or the Dead* has stirred up the morbid brains of women who have been theorizing on forbidden things for years."[189] The *Quick or the Dead* tells the story of a young widow who makes the acquaintance of her husband's cousin. She quickly falls in love but then immediately feels guilty and sends the cousin away. After a brief scare during which she thought him dead, she sends for him in relief, and spends a short period of joyful time with him. Then she happens into the church where she was married, is overcome with grief and remorse, and sends the cousin away for good, putting her wedding ring back on. The book, while not actually referring to or depicting any kind of sex, is almost entirely devoted to describing the feelings of desire and guilt. Nothing explicit actually happens, but critics objected to the near obsessive nature of the main character's contemplation of her own desire, and to the depiction of the very idea that a woman might desire. A letter defending her argues that there was nothing really scandalous about the book. Instead the critics and reading public, under a deluge of bad French novels and

[188] "Nothing Here for Tears" *Life* April 5 1888 11:275, 194.
[189] No title, *Current Literature* 1:6 Dec 1888 467

worse American imitations, decided to make an example of something. [190] Writing, "they didn't exactly know why, and they don't know yet, but it was the fashion to denounce the book," Robert Graves argues that it was nothing specific about the book, but merely its reputation that was shocking. [191] Rives earns a brief reprieve when a reviewer in *The Critic* wrote that her short stories showed "a pathos that was not morbid."[192] Even a flattering portrait of her, appended to the appearance of *The Quick or the Dead* in *Lippicott's Magazine* notes that "she was morbidly sensitive" and other children "somewhat dreaded her". [193] The difference between normal pathos and morbid pathos was perilously thin, based on attitude more than content. Ella Wheeler Wilcox and Laura Daintrey engaged in a highly publicized feud in the medium of syndicated public letters after Wilcox, in defending the work of Amelie Rives as healthy, used Daintrey as a counter example, because she "has descended to even lower and coarser depths than Mr. Saltus" in her novel *Eros*.[194] *Eros* is the story of a young woman, Marie, artistic in temperament, who loses her father and mother in short succession. She is in love with Mr. Shapira, who initially returns her feelings. He is seduced by Mamie Remington, the Chopin playing niece of a senator, who herself is

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[190] For more on censorship, sexuality, and print culture see Horowitz, Helen Lefkowitz. *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America.* New York: Vintage, 2003. Boyer, Paul S. *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America from the Gilded Age to the Computer Age*. Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2002. Semonche, John E. *Censoring Sex: A Historical Journey Through American Media.* Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

[191] Robert Graves "As to Amelie Rives" *Los Angeles Herald* Sept 3, 1891, 9

[192] *The Critic* May 12 1888, 229.

[193] J. D. Hurrell "Some Days with Amelie Rives" *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine* April 1888, 531

[194] "Another Literary Row" *Daily Alta California* May 5, 1889. 9. Laura Daintrey is a bit of a mysterious figure. She published several novels including *Eros* and *Fedor* and her travels are noted in the papers, but after 1895 she disappears from the record.

involved with a man whom she loves as her equal in erotic power, but who refuses to marry her. Shapira marries Mamie. Things come to a head when he realizes that she is still in love with her former lover, and married him only for security and revenge. Mamie returns to Dominus, who it turns out is married. She recovers from this with admirable speed, and becomes a rising star in the demi-monde. Marie and Shapiro, in the meantime, get back together, which breaks the heart of another man who had fallen in love with Marie, who dies with only the stars to notice. This is a plot-heavy novel, in form more like Saltus' than Rives. Wilcox's accusations of morbidity centered on the idea that Mamie's passions were described in more detail and with more approval than was absolutely necessary to tell the story. Daintrey argued back that Mamie was in fact not the heroine, but a deeply flawed person, and that her book was on the side of the dulcet Marie, and that perhaps it was Wheeler's reading that was problematic. Wilcox retorted that since a depraved and animal like woman was the most pronounced character, she was most assuredly the heroine, and her lusts were depicted with such clarity that the author must be secretly sympathetic to her. Wilcox ends by noting that she would not have mentioned Daintrey's work if their names had not come up together as members of the same literary school, and Wilcox felt the need to set matters straight and to distance herself. Who in this argument is the Decadent? Who is more morbid, the author who writes morbid characters, or the reader who finds themselves drawn in by the darkest and most sensual character?

Despite Daintrey's suggestion that the reader might be at fault, the threat of morbidity was that it might spread, somehow corrupting either innocent or latently predisposed readers. Taking to the press to defend herself, Amelie Rives wrote a piece entitled "Innocence versus Ignorance" in which she argues that she is in fact doing a service, because young girls are better prepared if they know the facts of life and are able to choose innocence, rather than being kept ignorant. "But how shall health be preserved and physical morality obtained by those kept in ignorance of the laws by which health and physical morality are governed?"[195] This spawned numerous responses arguing that in fact, young women needed to be protected. The supply and demand question is interesting, as authors generally agreed that they were simply meeting demand. The readers themselves were vulgar and morbid, but if only "they would swiftly revolutionize the present ephemeral craving for what one writer called 'highly seasoned literature.'"[196]

American Decadence, then, generally skirted the line of actual pornography or obscenity, being just suggestive enough to be alarming. Morbid eroticism was obsessive, sensual, and transgressive, but not explicit. This depiction of sexuality was still dangerous, though. As with all other social concerns, everyone was talking about the youth. What might happen to the young who read these novels? An article in the *Ladies Home Journal* suggests that the work of Edgar Saltus "leaves nothing for the most diseased imagination

[195] Amelie Rives "Innocence Versus Ignorance" *Th e North American Review* September 1, 1892 p 155.
[196] "Writers of Morbid Books" *Maine Farmer* August 30, 1894 62:43, 2.

to call for." [197] It was as much about the style as about the content. She objects to his language; words like "sesquipedalian," "graphophone," and "vertiginous" having no place in healthy literature. Saltus's work was dangerous, according to Felicia Holt, because of his pretentions to psychological depth and accuracy. She quotes some of his writings on women, and protests that what he presents as psychology is actually perversion and illness. A sexuality full of sights and smells that are so obviously artificial and contrived has no place in the mind of young American women. That is hardly the point though; Saltus' real infraction is his implication that his version of "reality" a reality devoid of health and nature was the real psychology of the American woman. This is the same criticism leveled at Amelie Rives, in response to both her novel and her piece "Innocence and Ignorance" The author of "A Reply to Amelie Rives," Bertha Monroe Rickoff, argues that Rives is right, that young girls need information, but only natural information.[198] The information that Rives is in favor of disseminating is not natural, her books introduce women to a world of the senses, not of spiritual love. Rives wants young women to know that sex exists outside of marriage, so that they may better defend themselves.

The Decadent treatment of gender underpins their entire project and places them squarely in the middle of the late nineteenth century social crisis. As the New Woman appeared the Decadent was both her counterpart and her opposition. In contrast to European, especially English, Decadents, Americans

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[197] Felicia Holt "What shall the Young person read" *the Ladies Home Journal* Jul 1889 vol 6 no 8 p. 10.
[198] Bertha Monroe Rickoff "A Reply to Amelie Rives" *The North American Review* vol 156 1893, 377-379

refused women real admission to their ranks, rather, they appropriated femininity to serve their desire to be offensive to bourgeois culture and to articulate their aesthetic positions. They fought against both the effeminizing forces of culture and the masculinizing New Woman. Opposing both modernizing forces and the atavistic primitivism that promised to cure over-civilization, they found a third way. Their use of gender marked them as troublesome and contributed to their reputation as “morbid”. Instead of embracing the “healthy” aspects of the New Woman, as Richard Harding Davis did, they specifically focused on the “unhealthy’ and threatening sexual and social liberation. They flaunted their feminine affectations, cigarettes and luxurious, sensual pleasures, while excluding women from these spaces, thus distinguishing them from the Victorian parlor.

Figure 1: J. M. Whistler “A Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink” 1873

Figure 2: An 1899 ad for Job cigarettes


MURAD
THE TURKISH CIGARETTE
S. Anargyros
Makers of the Highest Grade Turkish and Egyptian Cigarettes in the World
MURAD
THE TURKISH CIGARETTE
S. ANARGYROS
20¢

Figure 3: Murad ad 1917

Chapter 4

Wilful Sadness: Gender, Decadence and the Pleasures of Pessimism

This chapter will connect the two most unsavory qualities of decadence: their affectation of femininity and their pessimism. An aggressive politics of pessimism, and male centered femininity has made Decadent politics difficult to categorize. Their politics of removal and isolation expressed by engagement, artistic freedom expressed by moral antagonism, their conservative love of the past expressed in love of what we now recognize as "modern," their anti-materialism expressed in lives of sensual and material indulgence, all these paradoxes become suddenly intelligible in terms of affect and gender. The work of Ralph Adams Cram and Edgar Saltus, and the little magazine *M'lle New York*, demonstrate the ways in which Decadent pessimism and gender protest were inseparable, and show the pleasures of both.

Lauren Berlant uses the term "cruel optimism" to describe the ways in which culture and society hold out hopes that are unrealizable; hopes that in chasing we inevitably destroy our chances at achieving. As she puts it, "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" [199]. Specifically, "The fantasies that are fraying include particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy."[200] Not coincidentally, these were the fantasies that were being formed at the moment of the 1890s. This new way of looking at an

[199] Lauren Berlant *Cruel Optimism* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 1
[200] Berlant 3

old problem, the problem of false consciousness, or self-destructive behavior, helps us to understand the emotional and affective stakes of the politics of feelings. Decadents are so difficult to place as either reactionary or revolutionary because they advocated resistance via the politics of affect in the face of rapidly changing social and cultural conditions. This paper draws from the work of Berlant, Sara Ahmed, Ann Cvetokovich, and others working on the feminist cultural studies of emotion and affect. In response to a world condition which they described in a similar fashion to Berlant's assessment, they resisted the trap of optimism. They sought pleasure in the strange, the sick, and the morbid. Though they claimed political and cultural disengagement, in practice this meant a deliberate effort to disturb and shock the bourgeois world through their opposition to the national goals of health, well-being and productivity. Decadents imagined worlds of seclusion filled with highly feminized, highly aestheticized pleasures of touch, smell, taste, and sight. By eschewing happiness as a bourgeois capitalist fantasy, they suggested overall pessimism combined with solipsistic pleasure as a rebellion. However, this pleasure was only available to the elite and inevitably dependent on the very norms they sought to resist, rendering their protest paradoxical at best.

American Decadents countered the cruel optimism of their era with what Louise Imogen Guiney called "Wilful Sadness" Guiney was the woman most involved in Decadent circles, specifically in Boston. Women were rare, for reasons discussed later, but she was always even more of an outsider because she was a Decadent neither in artistic tastes nor politics, urging religious and

social commitment and respect for more conservative literature.[201] Yet, by force of personality she was also in some sense the center of the Boston circle.

"Wilful Sadness in Literature" was an argument against the kind of deliberate moroseness that Decadents purveyed. "Now, wilful sadness, as Plato thinks, as the School-men heartily thought after him, is nothing less than an actual crime. Sadness which is impersonal, reluctantly uttered, and adjusted, in the utterance, to the eternal laws, is not so. It is well to conceal the merely painful, as did the Greek audiences and the masters of their drama. That critic would be crazy, or excessively sybaritic, who would bar out the tragic from the stage, the studio, the orchestra, or the library shelf. Melancholy, indeed, is inseparable from the highest art" (Guiney, 1892). She defends certain, legitimate, kinds of sadness in literature, making a case for the necessity of melancholy, but not the personal, easily uttered, and specific sadness that the Decadents specialized in.

In projecting this wilful sadness, American Decadents adopted feminine attitudes, inverted their gender performance, and even spoke through women in their works. This ventriloquism allowed them to access the alterity necessary to articulate such a position of pessimism and played upon ideas of women as passive, and easily mentally disturbed.

[201] Guiney (1861-1920)is best known for her poetry. While her own tastes were conservative, her personality and warmth, in particular her friendship with F. Holland Day, led to her become close with the Decadent circle. She was also economically out of sync, unable to support herself with a job in the arts, she held a day job as postmistress in order to stay afloat, which her friends supported by buying all their stationery from her.

In the Decadent view, civilization was collapsing. This was only natural and nothing to be alarmed about, it was merely the inevitable wheel of history turning. Just as the Roman Empire fell, so would American civilization. In this worldview, the mandated "positivity" of looking forward to a new century was foolish. The world was collapsing around them, and Decadents were set upon acknowledging that truth, and delighting in their sadness, in the most culturally upsetting way possible.

Americans recognized the morbidity, not simply by depictions of illness or death, but by obsessive, sensual depictions of sexuality, writing that seemed to come from a deranged mind, a deliberate but sophisticated anti-sociality, and an artificial pessimism. Pessimism, especially in the Decadent historical moment was deeply gendered. Ahmed suggests, using *I and I*, that there is a deep connection between unhappiness and female imagination.[202] Decadents sprung upon this connection, linking imagination, and unhappiness as necessary parts of the artist's life.

How might this pessimism be a problem? The fear evinced by Americans when they attacked Decadence, especially for the young and impressionable, and most especially for women who might read these pernicious writings, was that this pessimism might spread. Why would an illness be so attractive? The wilful sadness of the Decadents offered pleasures that were not the respectable happiness of the middle class, but something stranger, something seductive, and something dangerous.

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[202] Sarah Ahmed, Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 35(3), pp. 571-592.

Many attempted to deny that Decadence, or rather the pessimism that was its marker, could exist in America, making it difficult to name when it did appear, simply because of the natural optimism of the American people. As Edward Ross put it in an 1891 essay in *Arena "*The rank corn and cotton optimism of the west quickly feels the deep sadness that lurks behind the French balls, Prussian parades, and Italian festivals." "Naturalism in fiction, 'decadence', in poetry, realism in art, tragedy in music, skepticism in religion, cynicism in politics and pessimism in philosophy all spring from the same root"[203] In a series on what the American public was reading in *The Outlook*, George Platt Brett, a New York publisher, wrote that Americans are a particularly optimistic people. He is sanguine about the future of the national literature because of the total lack in America of Decadent and pessimistic literature, which has neither writers nor readers in America, thus proving her superiority over Europe, which has been wholly infected by this literary fad. [204]

Gertrude Atherton, a writer, in a reply to Brett, cast doubt on the idea of inherent American optimism. "I am inclined to think the cause lies not in a healthy and disdainful optimism, nor yet in our ineradicable purity of mind, but yet in a certain provincial lack of interest in 'the world' in 'life'. We should be reminded that the so-called Decadent literature of Europe which survives ephemeralism—the fate of most of it—has a certain historical significance, inasmuch as it reflects the tendency of a nation, and the spiritual development or

[203] Edward Ross "Turning Towards Nirvana" *Arena* 4 (1891) 739.
[204] Atherton, Gertrude (Feb, 11 1904) "Pessimism in American Literature" *Public Opinion*, 36 p. 177.

disintegration of a people…I will venture to assert that all that is notable in this class of literature is overlooked by no cultivated American who is interested in life as it is. He may read it as he reads of the latest developments in bacteriology or in wireless telegraphy, but he reads it"[205] Atherton suggests that Decadence has a wide reading public in the United States. Even if they do not appreciate Decadence as a literary style, or ascribe to its philosophical implications, they have been exposed to it. Those who have not are not pure; they are merely parochial. Atherton agrees with the Decadents that their pessimism is more realistic than the required American optimism. Their pessimism offered a more realistic, cosmopolitan, view of life. They experienced the joys of knowing more than the average American. That this knowledge might leave them weak, deranged and neurasthenic was a small price to pay.

William James perhaps understood the Decadent position better than many. He too had felt the way of modernity, the contradiction between reason and faith, the new revelations of science. He too had felt the call of neurasthenia; his sister is one of the most often cited sources for interpretations of neurasthenia that center patient's voices and frame the disease as a strategy of resistance. James, Guiney, and the American Decadents are all in agreement that in this particular moment, despair, pessimism and passivity are somehow in the air. They all also agree that the individual's response to this is in some ways a choice. In "Is Life Worth Living" James frames pessimism specifically as a disease from which one must recover. The recovery, in typical Jamesian fashion,

[205] Atherton 177

is a matter of choice, of reliance on the religious capacity to inspire faith, a belief that would create the fact.

Yet followers of Decadence had the facts and thus no need for such a belief. To understand the Decadent affect, we must discuss the Decadent view of history. This is often ignored, because Decadence, as a literary movement, is about style over substance. However, its name is not a mere coincidence. The decadence, for writers sympathetic to the idea, was both a moment in time at the end of the nineteenth century, a prediction for the future, and an understanding of history.

Edgar Saltus has perhaps the most nuanced and explicit understanding of history. Saltus was of course by no means a great historian, or even a good one, but his obsession with history was deeply connected to his association with Decadence. His histories, *Imperial Purple*, *Historia Amoreis*, and *Imperial Orgy*, are not so much histories as glittering accounts of sin and insanity set in a historical moment. In his novels, Saltus seems particularly unconcerned with the particular moment in history. He does occasionally draw parallels between imperial Rome and fin de siècle New York. The leading figures of the day were not politicians, but the wealthy, Carnegie, Rockefeller, Gould, and Astor, who most resembled the heroes of Saltus's history with their rises to power and their excesses. The panic and depressions that so affected many are for Saltus merely seasoning. He comments, "The *corridas* of the Street [Wall street] don't differ much from those of Spain. In each case the spectacle is the same. It is the climax that varies. There the ring is swept by a supe, here it is struck by a

crisis. The orbit of that crisis the astrologists of political economy figure at about ten years."[206] The chaos of business was nothing more than the kind of destructive entertainment that other countries created in a different guise. In the coming years American expansion would surely lead to wars that "will refurbish geography, tear out whole pages and set them up anew."[207] Thus one might think that Saltus ascribed to the cyclical view of history, in which history repeats itself over and over in predictable patterns. Certainly, Decadence implies the inexorable rise and fall of empires. Yet for Saltus, only change was constant, and in the face of change, we are entirely helpless. In his analysis of war, he demonstrates an almost Hegelian understanding of history. The beginning of history was when two brothers stood face to face, their ideas conflicting, and one killed the other. The brothers were replaced by tribes, clans, races, nations, empires, but always the clash of ideas, then war, then a temporary peace.[208] America's emergence as an empire and its inevitable wars and subsequent fall would be "logical, evolutionary, and, though revolutionary, too, will, when accomplished, be accepted, as the inevitable always is.[209] Disengagement, then, is not a refusal to acknowledge the existence of a world beyond themselves, but rather a considered strategy in the face of history. What the reading public does not understand is that moral elevation, personal change, attention to politics, social uplift, are all foolish in the face of such a force. We can enjoy only the

[206] Saltus "The Gospel of Gold" in *The Uplands of Dreams* 89.
[207] Saltus "the Bear in the China Shop" San Francisco Call 94:56 July 26, 1903, 6.
[208] Saltus, "the Bear in the China Shop," 6
[209] Saltus, "The Bear in the China Shop," 6

details, only the surface. His novels them are not ostrich like refusals to acknowledge the historical moment, but assertions of the individual's inability to change or affect history, so the retreat into personal relationships, luxury, and the glittering social scene.

With the inevitability of history established, the grand schemes of the late nineteenth century seem especially laughable in the eyes of those such as Saltus. Marx and Spencer, acknowledged the forces of history, but those who believed and applied them sought to control or channel the natural forces at work. Decadents simply acknowledged their inexorability. We are, at best, interesting anecdotes, a moment in a story, with absolutely no ability to alter the course of history. A complete rejection of the world is the only sensible answer. Unlike Henry Adams, similarly pessimistic, who used ideas of phase theory in his understanding of history, Saltus saw nothing new in history. There is no radical change, no new vision, no new theory, no new force that will alter the world.

To elaborate on the pleasures of Decadent pessimism, I turn to Ralph Adams Cram. Cram depicts the ideal life of a Decadent in his short novel *The Decadent: Being The Gospel of Inaction*. As the title suggests, Cram's work is a defense of withdrawal from the world. It follows a socialist, active in reform, who visits a friend of his at the friend's retreat in the country. As he travels, Cram describes all the horrors of 1890s industrial society, the dirt, the poverty, the ugliness. At the home of Aurelian, everything is different. The material world is carefully described. Many, including Cram's biographer, read this description as coded homosexuality; this view is reinforced by the fact that Cram thought the

book an indiscretion. The scene is drawn so vividly, that it is worth quoting at length.

> The room was vast and dim, seemingly without bounds, save on that side where the violet flames of a drift-wood fire flickered quiveringly, making a centre, a concentration of dull light; for the rest, a mysterious wilderness of rugs and divans, Indian chairs and hammocks, where silent figures lay darkly, each a primal cause of one of the many thin streams of smoke that curled heavily upward;—smoke from strange and curious pipes from Lahore and Gualior; small sensitive pipes from Japan; here and there the short thick stems of opium-pipes, and by the motionless Mexican hammock a splendid and wonderful hookah with writhing stem. As the thin flames of the dying fire flashed into some sudden brightness, they revealed details unseen in the general gloom,—a vast and precious missal gorgeous with scarlet and gold and purple illumination, open, on a carved oak lectern, spoil of some Spanish monastery; the golden gloom of a Giovanni Bellini reft from its home in Venice, and as yet unransomed; the glint of twisted and gilded glass in an ebony cabinet; great folios and quartos in ancient bindings of vellum and ivory and old calf-skin, heavily tooled with gold, and with silver and jewelled medallions and clasps, stacked in heaps in careless indifference; the flash and sparkle of a cabinet of gems, the red splendour of old lacquer; the green mystery of wrought jade. And everywhere a heavy atmosphere that lay on the chest like a strange yet desirable dream; the warm, sick odour of tobacco and opium, striving with the perfume of sandal-wood, and of roses that drooped and fluttered in pieces in the hot air.[210]

Cram's world is a highly material one, filled with objects. The room is filled with things from all around the world, yet there is no implication of capitalistic acquisitiveness. The oriental air of this scene signifies a feminine eastern passivity. Every article is a delight for the senses. Many are exotic, and all are indicative of a life of leisure and pleasure. Aurelian has shut himself up in this place, because as he says "I am aweary of this servile and perishing world, rheumy and gibbering. Here I have my books of the Elect, my fading pictures, my

[210] Cram *The Decadent: A Gospel of Inaction* Copeland and Day, 1893. 11-12

treasures of dead civilisation. This is my monastery, like those of the old Faith that, during the night that came down on the world after the ruin of Rome, treasured as in an ark the seeds of the new life. Here I can gather my Children of Light and bar my doors against the Philistines without."[211] Although Aurelian predicts nothing but destruction, his world is full of pleasure.

Adams Cram articulates the Decadent desire as an essentially passive, feminized one, the need to turn away from the world, to take everything lying down, to dream as Rome burns. The hero of the book explains, "Yes, it is the end of years; the era of action is over, night follows, blotting from sight the shame of a wasted world; but through the mute, unutterable night rises and brightens the splendour of the new day, the new life. Action has striven and failed, and wreck and ruin are the ending thereof; but across the desert of failure and despair bursts the flame of the Dawn; the far-forgotten spirit of the world rises toward dominion again,—the spirit of visions and dreams, the mighty Mother of worlds and men, the Soul of the Eternal East."[212]

These inversions of what an American man should be were inextricable from gender, and gender at this moment was inextricable from sexuality. Thus American Decadents, to the extent they have been studied, have often been part of the story of early gay and lesbian communities. Yet a focus on sexuality misses the point. Their wilful sadness was at least as problematic for their detractors as their sexuality, or rather, it was part of the same problem. The

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[211] Cram 24

[212] Cram, Ralph Adams *The Decadent: Being the Gospel of Inaction* Boston: Copeland and Day, 1893 39

morbidity that they evince certainly has a feminine quality. Gail Bederman argues that manliness; the Victorian attributes of restraint, turned to masculinity, the more atavistic ideals of strength, in part because of fears of race suicide. This view is of course dependent on the prevailing acceptance of Spencerian social dynamics, which naturalist writers popularized and explained, and understanding of America as hyper-evolved. The evidence for this over-civilization was apparent in the fragmenting of society, the increased specialization of roles, and the presence of weakness and degeneration in the highest classes.[213]

To understand the full extent of the Decadent protest, we must consider the hegemonic cultural emphasis on health and positivity. The neurasthenic was the shadow that the decade cast. This was the moment of Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Carnegie, and John Harvey Kellogg. Health and positivity provided a protective shield against the turmoil of modernity. In literature the moral dictums of William Dean Howells reigned supreme. Their gender inversion, the choice of passivity over action, of pleasure over positivity, was in direct rejection of these forces. Of course, their access to passivity, to ultimate leisure, to beauty, was determined by their privilege and status in exactly the world that they hated.

> A fin de siècle spirit of deep pessimism afflicted many American intellectuals and artists. They faced the present with disgust and felt only despair in the face of the future. Faith in progressive evolution, confidence in the liberating power of technology and even belief in God struck these individuals as nothing more than cruel illusions. For these thinkers a properly modern perspective

[213] See, Bederman, G. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* University Of Chicago Press, 1996.

> demanded a cold and clinical glare at the world and immense amounts of either resignation or courage to persevere.[214]

Masculinity in this moment was moving towards aggressiveness, strength and virility, replacing the earlier values of self-restraint and willpower, Decadents, finding themselves in a moment of flux in male gender roles, inverted both, rejecting aggressiveness and self-restraint. Since the gender discourse of the 19th century automatically posited the genders as opposites, this meant that women's frailty and passivity were prized.

We find an even more explicit connection between the feminine and the pessimist in the writings of Edgar Saltus. The pessimist *ne plus ultra* in America, Saltus and his short-lived brother Francis were at the center of the New York Decadent circle. While he is now almost completely forgotten, at this particular moment in history Saltus was one of the great literary lights. His style dazzled, and his wit charmed. Though he had many supporters in the next generation of literati like H L Mencken, Carl Van Vechten, and Ben Hecht, and his influence is felt in subtle ways today, his overblown style, restricted subject matter, and rapid decline in quality, led to quick obsolescence.

Saltus earned his keep as a novelist, writing high society novels about the world of the rich and famous that were read mostly by women. Yet, in an embodiment of the Decadent paradox, he combined this superficial and feminine reputation with a serious mission: to popularize pessimism in America. Saltus wrote two books, *The Philosophy of Disenchantment* and *The Anatomy of*

[214] Cotkin 155

Negation, advocating and attempting to popularize the philosophy of pessimism. In *The Philosophy of Disenchantment,* Saltus reviews the history of pessimism, charting its course from ancient philosophy through the present day, then surveying it in current literature. He goes on to interpret Arthur Schopenhauer and Eduard von Hartmann. He does not address the entirety of their philosophies, but focuses ironically on a very "American" slant, the practical advice for life that their philosophies offer. Saltus concludes that both Schopenhauer and Hartmann have important contributions to make; however, the philosophy of pessimism is still very young, and there are some problems. According to Saltus, pessimism falls short when it comes time to offer solutions. As partial solution to the pessimist's problem of living in a world that can only disappoint, Schopenhauer suggests absolute chastity (a suggestion that Saltus, famous for his affairs and multiple marriages certainly could not abide). Hartmann vaguely advocates a complete denial of the will to live. Though he questions the potential of these routes, Saltus suggests that the reader still adopt pessimism, since it offers the only way of dealing with the world.

Saltus also blurs together the very European traditions of philosophy with some Buddhist and other "Eastern" religious and philosophical traditions. He very clearly explains the reasons for his position, situating it as a natural response to a certain period in society, not, as others declared of Decadence, a passing disorder. He writes, "The moral atmosphere of the present century is charged with three distinct disturbances—the waning of religious belief, the insatiable demand for intense sensation, and the increasing number of those who

live unaccompanied, and walk abroad in solitude. The immense nausea that is spreading through all lands and literature is at work on the simple faith, the contented lives, and joyous good fellowship of earlier days, and in its results it brings with it the signs and portents of a forthcoming though undetermined upheaval"[215] He concludes that "…Broadly speaking…life may be said to be always valuable to the obtuse, often valueless to the sensitive, while to him who commiserates with all mankind, and sympathizes with everything that is, life never appears otherwise than as an immense and terrible affliction."[216] However, he rejects suicide as a solution, embracing instead something between Zen and Stoicism. "The best we can do, the best that can ever be done, is to recognize the implacability of the laws that rule the universe, and contemplate as calmly as we can the nothingness from which we are come and into which we shall all disappear." [217] Of course this philosophical view clashed with his actual life and with his books. While this sort of utter detachment might make the most sense, it was certainly not easy.

At the end of the 1890s, Edgar Saltus worked for a number of newspapers and weekly magazines, giving him plenty of room to comment on the imperial ambitions of the United States. As with other political issues, Saltus emphasized a nonchalant passivity. While he literally turned non-engagement into an art, his understanding of the American empire had an extra edge of inevitability. Saltus'

[215] Saltus, Edgar *The Philosophy of Disenchantment*. Boston, New York : Houghton, Mifflin and company, 1885 231
[216] Saltus, Edgar *The Philosophy of Disenchantment*. Boston, New York : Houghton, Mifflin and company, 1885, 233
[217] Saltus, Edgar *The Anatomy of Negation*. New York, Brentano's. New York, AMS Press, 1886, 218.

obsession with Rome and Russia; however questionable or superficial his actual historical work, meant that he saw America on the inevitable path of Empire. "We may not want them, and at present certainly do not, but we cannot interfere with the law of gravitation."[218] Thus, a passive sort of acquisitiveness would take the place, in the Decadent fantasy, of an aggressive imperialism. Instead of going out to capture other lands, the beautiful material goods of other lands would filter in, as though by gravity. This pessimistic passivity that nevertheless expected luxury was typical of the rest of Saltus' work and cemented his connection to femininity.

Most commentators see his career after 1900 in steep decline. He still wrote novels, but they become increasingly pulpy. He earned his keep as a journalist, writing for Collier's, Harper's, and Cosmopolitan, among others, and selling his work to various newspapers. His work at *Harper's Bazaar* that interests us here. For several years he wrote a column entitled "The Reflections of Floriline Schopenhauer: as Dictated to Edgar Saltus". This column ran monthly for several years from 1913-1915. Floriline Schopenhauer is introduced as the daughter of the late Arthur Schopenhauer, who actually produced no children. Given Saltus' name recognition it was probably clear to all that Floriline was a complete invention. The column functioned as a way for Saltus to continue to discuss Schopenhauer, as he did in his earlier work in *Philosophy of Disenchantment* and *Anatomy of Negation,* but in a feminized form. It is not

[218] Saltus, Edgar (July 26, 1903) "The Bear in the China Shop" *The San Francisco Caller* 94:56, p 6.

surprising that the (very few) critics who address Saltus see this period of his work as weak: the decadence of a Decadent. Notwithstanding the possible drop off in literary quality and ingenuity, it is this phase of Saltus' Decadence that helps us to understand how Decadence functioned in America. Instead of an insular, elite, highly masculine culture, this form of Decadence was popular and feminine. This is unsurprising, because Decadence in many ways co-opted femininity in order to signify its cultural position. In the first of these columns Saltus, as Fraulein Schopenhauer, writes "To do nothing, which is always a very difficult occupation was once the characteristic, not only of beauty, but of the *Grande Dame.*"[219] Saltus/Floriline goes on to elaborate that this kind of beauty is fading from the world. That these philosophical reflections appear in *Harper's Bazaar* of all places is telling. As Saltus' third wife often notes in her biography of him, his fans were almost entirely women. To find not only Decadence, but the pessimistic, arcane, and very un-American philosophy of Schopenhauer in the pages of a popular women's fashion magazine is at first puzzling, until we adjust our view of the Decadent project. Opposite this first column, for instance, appears a portrait of a woman draped in a fashionable gauzy gown. Though this is not an illustration, but merely one of the magazine's many pictures, the woman's aesthetic, almost Grecian style, functions as illustrative of a broader cultural Decadence. As Saltus hints at in the above quote the Decadent project of appreciating beauty with no other useful occupation is exactly the project being

[219] Saltus, Edgar "The Reflections of Floriline Schopenhauer" *Harpers Bazaar* Nov, 1913, vol 48:5

sold, at least in part, by the women's fashion magazine. There are of course columns and stories that appear in the same issues that extol "traditional" bourgeois values of the wife and mother. It should also be noted that the "Reflections of Floriline Schopenhauer" are not a detailed exposition of Schopenhauer's philosophy, but rather Saltus' rambling musings on society refracted through the double prisms of Schopenhauerian rhetoric and a female persona. Nevertheless, his *Harper's Bazaar* column in both its content and its context creates a world of sensual refinement, in which fashions, fabrics, physical sensation, and beauty reign supreme in the person of a pessimist philosopher's daughter.

The Decadents were a threat to the healthy minded American because of their invitation into a world of strange pleasures. This "morbid" life and art was predicated on a pessimistic view of the future which contrasted sharply with the progressive and optimistic American ideal. The expression of this pessimism necessarily included gender inversion and association with femininity. Their willful sadness was an act of resistance against the cruel optimism of their age. Yet, as Cram's decadents in their retreat demonstrate, such a life was only available to those who could afford it. Only the wealthiest could afford such a lifestyle, and only men could make such a life a cultural protest. For women such a life would not signal the gender protest that it did for men, rather it would be interpreted more easily as the effect of over civilization on a woman's nerves.

Ultimately the seductive pleasures of pessimistic Decadence were only available to the elite, and inevitably dependent on the very norms that the

Decadents sought to resist. Pessimism was only a protest in a world that insisted upon optimism. Gender transgression was only effective in a world that insisted upon rigid gender roles. The failure of Decadence was in a sense the movement of the world towards them, and not away from them. After the First World War, when pessimism became à la mode, and gender roles shifted, Decadence no longer made sense, or rather presented no threat, no thrill. So, it disappeared and its defenders were forgotten. Nevertheless, their protest of affect in a relentlessly positive world deserves to be remembered.

Chapter 5

Decadent Perversity and the Challenge to Modernity

The apparent rise in sexual deviance at the end of the nineteenth century was a cause for concern for those who thought it heralded either the end of civilization or was merely an odd side effect of the transition to modernity. Reading Krafft-Ebing and American alienists and neurologists alongside

American Decadents allows us better insight into both.[220] In light of Decadence, the work of the sexologists appears more ambiguous and open to possibilities of interpretation than are available when considered under a strict Foucauldian movement of acts to identity and increasing surveillance. Conversely, when the project of Decadence is viewed in terms of the categorizing and controlling impulses of the sexologists, the radical nature of that project, though it was highly individualistic and short-lived, becomes clearer. Decadence in America belied the newfound faith in progress and national superiority by creating a queer space that existed outside of linear time, history, and national boundaries. That sexual deviance always increased at the end of an empire was an axiom, to resist, reverse, or attempt to manage the rise in perversity was for American Decadents a folly. Instead, they used immorality to shock, and to critique the rational, progressive, aggressive ethos of modernity, suggesting instead a world of passivity and inevitability where beauty reigned. Here, I shift from love of morbidity to a love that is in itself diseased; perversity in other words.

Everyone working in the history of sexuality must at least address the work of Michel Foucault. My work here makes use of many of the insights—that innumerable other scholars have also used—that Foucault developed in his *History of Sexuality*. The eruption of strange sexualities and perversions, as wells as schemes to categorize and understand them at the end of the century

[220] I identify American Decadents as those who associated themselves or were associated, socially or ideologically, by contemporaries with the European artistic movement. They did evinced the Decadent "purple" overwrought literary and artistic style, proclaim 'art for art's sake' as their motto eschewing social and political engagement, elevate art, artifice and imitation over "nature", and concern themselves with the idea that civilization was, in some respect, ending, while associating themselves with youth and new and modern art.

suggests, in part, that the medicalization of sexuality was a more complex process than Foucault suggests, and that medical and moral authorities were not the only driving forces in that process. In fact, the Decadents do propose an alternate history of sexuality with love, eros, as a consistent drive, with its manifestations altering according to culture and history. While the sexologists searched for causes and responsibility as they categorized the Decadents proposed categories based on beauty and taste. I use queer to signify the idea that sexuality is socially and historically contingent and constructed. I argue that Decadents constructed queer spaces for themselves, while simultaneously participating in the process that othered and pathologized such spaces.

To argue that Decadents associated themselves with perversion vergers on tautology. Strange, aberrant, and shocking sexuality is part of the definition of Decadence, so to say that American Decadence wrote about such sexuality is an obvious statement. Decadence pits itself directly against middle class values, playing into the worst nightmares of the middle class. Yet it is not enough to say that masculinity was in crisis, and male effeminacy was threatening.
Daniel Rodgers has described the way that information traveled across the Atlantic, with reform strategies and progressive ideas moving with both people and print.[221] For the Decadents, the transatlantic nature of their enterprise was a given, their stated mission was to bring European art to America and to copy the lifestyle of the European aristocracy. Their engagement with sexual norms, and how to break them, was an international conversation.

[221] Rodgers, Daniel T. *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2000.

Decadents turned away from experience, embracing artificiality. They found the height of this artificiality in sex, gender, and sexuality. At a moment when sexual boundary crossing was moving from a moral vice, through disease, and eventually to identity, Decadents presented a completely contingent and culturally constructed sexuality totally disconnected from nature. Gayatri Spivak describes Decadent writing as "a way of writing where the references seem to be not to a world of nature but always to a world already made into artifice"[222] American Decadents constructed such worlds of artifice, both in actuality and in their works. These worlds often centered around the clubs and groups that drew Decadents together, but also existed in the worlds of the little magazines in which Decadent writers imagined the possibilities of a completely artificial world. Sexuality, as the most naturalized part of human existence, and yet to the discerning Decadent eye, the most artificial, was the obvious material for this construction.

Sexology

American Decadents took up the challenge that prefaces Richard Kraft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, to explore the dark side of love.[223] Krafft-Ebing begins his work with the complaint that philosophers have not taken up the subject of love or sex as seriously as they should. Those that have, Schopenhauer and von Hartmann (not coincidentally Saltus's favorites), have

[222] Gayatri Spivak "Decadent Style" *Language and Style* (1974) 7, 227-234, 229.

[223] I use Krafft-Ebing here because his was the first, and therefore the best known, European work to be published in America. Psychopathia Sexualis was published in English in 1892. For discussion of the reception of European sexologists in America, see Hatheway, Jay. *The Gilded Age Construction of American Homophobia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

made a mess of it. Krafft-Ebing reads them both as advocating sterilization because love goes against reason and can only cause pain. Love has always been a subject for poets, but, according to Krafft-Ebing "They cannot see the deep shadow behind the light and sunny warmth of that from which they draw their inspiration."[224] It is thus the place of the scientist, specifically the physician, to study the reverse side of life, human weakness and misery, in which aesthetics seem out of place. Doctors and Decadents are bound together again. Disease, the morbid, in the realm of sexuality is the prevue of the new field of sexology and of Decadents.

This obsession with the other, the subaltern, the hidden was not, of course, unique. The 1890s were, after all, the decade of *How the Other Half Lives,* of reform and exposé, of gilding the unseemly, of pink trying to be purple. In this climate degeneracy, and in particular sexual degeneracy, was an obsession for doctors and reformers, and an urgent question that bore upon the fitness of citizens, the nation, and America's place in the world[225]. Observers on both sides of the Atlantic were convinced that in this time of modernization, approaching the new century, degeneracy, and specifically sexual degeneracy was rampant. Krafft-Ebing quickly emerged as *the* authority, but in reality he was just a participant in an urgent discussion that American sexologists and American Decadents also engaged in. Charles Hamilton Hughes, editor of the *Alienist and*

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[224] Richard von Krafft-Ebing *Psychopathia Sexualis* Trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock from the 7th ed. Philadelphia: F. A. Davis, 1892, iii.

[225] On the connection between gender and empire at the end of the century see Bederman, Gail. *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States*, 1880-1917. University Of Chicago Press, 1996. Stoler, Ann Laura, ed. *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2006.

Neurologist a journal that regularly discussed European developments, summarizes the current conditions well, and impressively in a single sentence, writing: "Within the past few years the neurologist and the alienist have become familiar with so many strange morbid perversions and reversions of the erotic sentiments and sexual passion, that they must be considered and classified in their relation to society, to morals, and to law, and Science must severally category these perversions of proper and natural human passion, as they may be found to be purely psychological moral perversities or to belong among the neuroses or the neuro-psychoses, and determine in them respectively, the resistless or resistible involvement of the will, separating the psychoses of sexual aberration from the simple neuroses of perverse sexual sensation and impulsion without overwhelming impairment of volition, and these from simple moral vice uninfluenced or unextenuated by neural disease.[226] If the stated American medical and psychological agenda was to examine and categorize, the Decadent agenda was to delve as far as possible into the darkness, implicitly resisting both the categorizations of the sexologists and the idea that the perversions of the modern era were unique.

The Decadents worked to keep sexuality as an aesthetic and poetic concern, rather than a scientific one. Edgar Saltus, in particular, was obsessed with the dark side of love.[227] According to his biographer, Claire Sprague, Saltus

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[226] Charles H Hughes "Erotopathia—Morbid Eroticism" *Alienist and Neurologist* 14:4 Oct 1893 531.

[227] Edgar Saltus (1855-1921) was a novelist, critic, and journalist who was one of the most prominent American Decadents. Never well-respected, he was, for a moment, well-known, yet his reputation disappeared almost immediately after his death, remembered only by his most fervent admirers who included H.L Mencken and Carl Van Vechten.

was deeply interested in European and American sexology. In yet another rant on Nordau's quackery, Saltus notes in passing that Krafft-Ebing, in contrast is "a scientist of real value."[228] Krafft-Ebing's real value may have lain in the fact that he often let his subjects speak for themselves. As his fame grew, and his work went through more editions, he increasingly received case histories not from other doctors but from "sufferers" themselves, lending his work a narrative focus. Huneker and Thompson were also certainly engaged with European sexology. The Decadent little magazines, with their European influences, and aesthetic pretentions engaged with this dark side. The Decadent interest in morbid sexuality was also evident in their lifestyles and their imagined worlds. They created communities, both real and imagined, that depended on sensual, fetishistic, and homoerotic imagery and signs.

It is a commonplace to say that the emergence of sexual identity as a concept, took place at the end of the nineteenth century, and this emergence was at the time a sign and symbol of modernity, as it is for historians now. While perversions were as old as humanity, medical and morally motivated commenters on sex noticed something different, and connected it to the changing times. The perplexingly atavistic nature of sexual perversion was such that at the moment of tumultuous progress, man's evolutionary past suddenly reappears. The categorization of sexuality, dividing out what was not normal into discrete, identifiable parts, was paramount to understanding and controlling modernity. Moreover, individuals themselves were now categorizable. Much of

[228] Saltus "Our Note-book" *Colliers* vol 18 october 29, 1896.

what has been written about medicine and sexuality during this period has been a commentary on the restrictive standards of advice literature, the reaction of medicine to women's sexuality at the rise of the new woman, and the invention of homo and hetero-sexuality.[229] Yet, in their novels, the little magazines, and their imagined and real communities, American Decadents displayed an almost Freudian polymorphous perversity of imagined sexuality.

In order to proceed further, we must first briefly discuss what perversion meant, and what kinds of perversity the Decadents espoused. In studies of perversity, homosexuality was of course of the most interest for modern scholars, but at first it was lumped into a large category of perversion that included almost all non-procreative sex. This distinction stemmed from the earlier paradigm that combined religion and social hygiene

Beginning in the 1860s European doctors started their bid for authority on sexuality,[230] and saw the birth of what is recognizable as modern sexology, meaning that perversions were no longer moral weaknesses, the result or cause of organic diseases, or a bizarre result of the misuse of "normal" sexuality.

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[229] There is an extensive literature on this subject. Almost all recent work on sexology focuses on the invention of hetero- and homo-sexuality See, Terry, Jennifer. *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*. 1st ed. University Of Chicago Press, 1999.. Katz, Jonathan. *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. University of Chicago Press, 2007, Chauncey, Jr., George , "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: The Changing Medical Conceptualization of Female `Deviance'," in *Passion and Power: Sexuality in History*, ed. Kathy Peiss and Christina Simmons with Robert A. Padgug, (Philadelphia : Temple University Press, 1989),87-117. Somerville, Siobhan. "Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body." Journal of the History of Sexuality 5:2 (1994): 243-66. and of course Foucault, Michel,*The History of Sexuality. Volume One: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.

[230] For the history of sexology, see Bland, Lucy, and Laura Doan. *Sexology in Culture: Labelling Bodies and Desires.* University of Chicago Press, 1998. Robinson, Paul A. *The Modernization of Sex: Havelock Ellis, Alfred Kinsey, William Masters, and Virginia Johnson*. Harper & Row, 1976. Bullough, Vern L. *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research.* New York: BasicBooks, 1994. Porter, Roy. *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: The History of Attitudes to Sexuality* Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Rather, perversity was inherent in a particular kind of person. Although many of the most famous theorists of sex were European, Americans participated in the pathologizing. Just as the gender problem was a trans-Atlantic one, the solution, categorizing and labeling, was also a trans-Atlantic one. Krafft-Ebing himself uses American case studies. American neurologists, alienists and psychiatrists cited many others including Henry Maudsley, Franz Scholz, Henri Legrand Du Saulle, Antigonno Raggi, and Arigo Tamassia.[231] These names of course, faded into the background, because they provided only case studies without much theoretical innovation, generally referring only to other authorities. While American psychiatrists never achieved the profile of European ones, their work helps to understand the strange connections between the Decadents and sexology. Furthermore, while most work on the Americans in conversation with Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis during the second half of the nineteenth century traces the development of theories of homosexuality, the authors themselves show a much wider range of interests. Homosexuality is not the focus in their early work. Masturbation, the obsession of physicians, moralists, educators, and everyone involved in social hygiene, remained a priority for many physicians. A. J. Bloch, for example, in an article on sexual perversions in the female, categorizes various cases of female masturbation under Krafft-Ebing's schema of paradoxia, hyperesthesia, and paresthesia. [232] Kiernan Sptizka and Kiernan especially were concerned with responsibility in insanity, publishing on Charles

[231] See for instance Hatheway, Jay. *The Gilded Age Construction of American Homophobia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
[232] A. J. Bloch "Sexual Perversions in the Female" *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* 22:1 July 1894, 1.

Guiteau and Leon Czolgosz, an interest which led them to sexually motivated crimes. Edward C. Spitzka, a New York based neurologist, was perhaps the first to introduce the work of Krafft-Ebing to American audiences.[233] At first, working in the early 1880s, Sptizka first used the work of German neurologists to comment on cases of cross-dressing which he blurs with sexual inversion, again, it was gender transgression that drew the attention of doctors at first, not necessarily homosexual acts.[234] James G. Kiernan, remembered for the first use of the word "heterosexual" took up the work of the early sexologists, concerning himself with the health of Americans in this time of change and aligning himself with the social hygiene movement.[235] He was widely published on a variety of topics. He read Krafft-Ebing to mean that perversions were biological in origin, results of physical degeneration, and that perhaps this had to do with some sort of evolutionary regression, to a period with less sexual differentiation. In his article "Psychological Aspects of the Sexual Appetite," read before the Chicago Academy of Medicine March 13, 1891. G Frank Lydston, a Chicago based doctor whose specialties included genito-urinary surgery and criminal anthropology.[236] He wrote over a hundred medical articles. In addition

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[233] For a brief biography see Kelly, Howard Atwood. *A Cyclopedia of American Medical Biography: Comprising the Lives of Eminent Deceased Physicians and Surgeons from 1610 to 1910*. W.B. Saunders Company, 1920.

[234] Hatheway, Jay. *The Gilded Age Construction of American Homophobia*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 112.

[235] Kiernan was trained in New York and moved to Chicago, and was a prominent neurologist and psychologist, specializing as a medical expert in insanity trials. For his role in sexual perversion based insanity see Duggan, Lisa. *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity*. Duke University Press, 2000.

[236] Lydston graduated from Bellevue Hospital Medical school in New York. He was the resident surgeon at Blackwell Island Penitentiary. He was a professor of both genito-urinary surgery and venereal disease as well as of criminal anthropology.

he wrote novels including *Over the Hookah* (1896) *A Doctor's Wander Days* (1900) and *Poker Jim, Gentleman* (1907), and travel guides. Lydston, in a widely used taxonomy, divided sexual perversion into acquired and congenital types; there were, further, three different types of perversion, an affinity for one's own sex, abnormal methods of gratification, and bestiality. Lydston is mentioned most in histories of homosexuality; however, his early work does not single out homosexuality as the most interesting, dangerous, or significant sexual perversion. For instance, his widely reprinted lecture "Sexual Perversion, Satyriasis and Nymphomania" given in 1889 to the Chicago College of Physicians and Surgeons describes a variety of sexual perversions, including a predilection for stealing shoes, for stabbing strange women on the street, for women with amputated limbs, as well as the disorders of excessive sexual desire mentioned in the title.

Out of this cacophony Krafft-Ebing emerged as the undisputed authority on all things sexological. *Psychopathia Sexualis*, first published in 1886, had its first English edition in 1892 published by F. A. Davis. It went through over thirty-five English and American editions between 1892 and 1899, although the English translations did not reflect the many updates that Krafft-Ebing made to his work.[237] As Heike Bauer suggests, the book's incredible popularity suggests that it was bought by people beyond its intended audience of doctors and lawyers. [238] The book was written not, as Nordau's work, in defense of a carefully organized

[237] Oosterhuis, Harry. "Sexual Modernity in the Works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll." Medical History 56, no. 2 (April 2012): 133–55. doi:10.1017/mdh.2011.30.
[238] Bauer Heike. "Richard von Krafft-Ebing's 'Psychopathia Sexualis' as Sexual Sourcebook for Radclyffe Hall's 'The Well of Loneliness.'" *Critical Survey* 15, no. 3 (January 1, 2003): 23–38.

polemic argument, “Instead, contemporary readers could find subjective experience, dialogue, multivocality, divergent meanings, and contradictory sets of value in *Psychopathia Sexualis*”[239] Publishers, at least from a cynical point of view, seemed to capitalize on this, including disclaimers like “The sale of this book is rigidly restricted to the members of the medical and legal professions.” [240] Krafft-Ebing explains that his book is to be used only by professionals for forensic purposes and that “in order that unqualified persons will not become readers, the author saw himself compelled to choose a title understood only by the learned, and also, where possible, to express himself in terminis technicis. It seemed necessary also to give certain particularly revolting portions in Latin rather than German”[241] The Latin, of course, was not translated in the English version. Despite, or rather, because of, these restrictions, *Psychopathia Sexualis* was widely read. The pretention and secrecy mirrors the elite world, closed to all but a chosen few, that Saltus and his contemporaries imagined and lived in.

All American commentators agreed that sexual crime and deviance while not necessarily new or unheard of, were on the rise, and that their appearance at this moment in history meant something, though none could agree on what. Certainly, though, the sexologists knew that such a profusion of strange sexuality was a sign of at least some kind of degeneration, if not the decadence of a civilization.

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[239] Oosterhuis, *Harry. Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Indentity.*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 195

[240] From the editors preface from the 1899 Redman Co edition.

[241] Psychopathia Sexualis v

Krafft-Ebing "elaborated a shift from a psychiatric perspective in which deviant sexuality was explained as a derived, episodic and more or less singular symptom of a more fundamental mental disorder, to a consideration of perversion as an integral part of a more general, autonomous and continuous sexual instinct."[242] The mission of sexologists was paradoxical; on the one hand, they were obsessed with classifying and categorizing while at the same time they situated perverse sexualities on a spectrum of normal and abnormal. In this way, Krafft-Ebing's work was in itself a destabilizing force, and indeed a queer work. Krafft-Ebing's work was unique in that, especially in later editions as his fame grew, the case histories he recounted were not from the doctor's point of view, but rather subjective accounts. Because he was so intent on the subjective experience of the sufferer, and placed more importance on fantasy and desire rather than on the mere act, his work allows the perverse themselves some power of narration. As his most recent biographer puts it "By offering scripts on which individuals could model their life history, Krafft-Ebing's …case histories also linked individual introspection and social identification. Using the respectable forum of medical science, perverts began to voice experiences and desires which, until then, had been unknown or denied existence in public discourses. The sexological writings of Krafft-Ebing and Moll reflected and, simultaneously, also promoted the emergence of a new experience of sexuality that was intrinsically bound up with the appearance of new kinds of individuals and their grouping into rudimentary sub-cultural communities, of which several of their

[242] Oosterhuis, Harry. "Sexual Modernity in the Works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll." Medical History 56, no. 2 (April 2012): 133–55. 134

clients, especially homosexuals, testified."[243] Moreover, Krafft-Ebing's use of, and references to fiction, including Baudelaire and Zola, further blur the lines between fantasy and reality in his work.

In the endeavor to connect the end of the old world with sexuality, science and literature intertwined. The Decadents referenced science, and the scientists referenced literature. Krafft-Ebing provides us with a rather literary introduction to just what love is, and its storied history. James Kiernan cites the work of Henry Finck, a music critic colleague of James Huneker, who also wrote a book on love.

In *Historia Amoris* Saltus works through all of human history arguing that love was the driving force. He recounts the history of love from primitive man, through Babylon's Ishtar, the Greek's Aphrodite and Sappho, and the Song of Solomon to the courtships of the eighteenth century. He spends the most time, unsurprisingly, detailing the excesses of Rome. He revels in the murder, incest and insanity in the days when "sin was a prayer".[244] For Saltus love is a demiurge, a goddess who exists throughout history in various forms. There was never a time in which love existed as the moralists wish it did. At every moment of Christianity love and sex exist in their most uninhibited forms as the Song of Solomon, Mary Magdelene, and Heloise and Abelard prove. Pleasure, not reproduction, always, was, and remains the ultimate law. While Saltus situates love and desire as natural, they are natural in terms of natural, inexorable law,

[243] Oosterhuis, Harry. "Sexual Modernity in the Works of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Albert Moll." Medical History 56, no. 2 (April 2012): 133–155
[244] Saltus *Historia Amoris* 105

and not natural in any evolutionary or biological sense. The greatest heights of love were not the most genteel, but the most insane. Of the Caesars Saltus writes "Death was their servant. They ordered. Death obeyed. In the obedience was apotheosis. In the apotheosis was the delirium that madmen know. At their feet, Rome, mad as they, built them temples, raised them shrines, created for them hierophants and flamens, all the phantasmagoria of the megalomaniac Alexander, and, with it, a worship which they accepted as their due perhaps, but in which their reason fled…Thereafter, the palace of the Cæsars became a vast court in which the wives and daughters of the nobility assisted at perversions which a Ministry of Pleasure devised, and where Rome abandoned whatever she had held holy, the innocence of girlhood, patrician pride, everything, shame included."[245] It was at this moment of the greatest derangement, bathed in blood and terror, that love could achieve its most abjectly beautiful form. For Saltus, the 1890s peak in Eros-related crime and insanity was nothing new, but was connected to the particular moment in time, as expressions of love are all historically different. Love remains the driving force, no matter its form.

Before Freud, Saltus is arguing here for a sex-drive of sorts, a libido that takes various shapes according to history, moment and person. He is also arguing for the availability of all these forms for the modern era, to those who wished to possess themselves of them. In the Decadent world-view nothing dies; all is cyclical. Thus, as modernity pressured a new understanding of sexuality, Decadents saw it merely as old wine in new bottles.

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[245] Saltus, *Historia Amoris* 109

Sexologists, and Krafft-Ebing in particular, were, strangely enough, acting on a similar agenda as the Decadents. They were part of the complex movement that connected sexuality more and more with individualism. They "recognized the emergence of a plethora of new tendencies that seemed to reverse the cultural movement from less complex to more complex. More and more, they discovered variations that they could only stigmatize as degenerations"[246] They too saw the inevitable decline of civilization.

Homosexuality and Oscar Wilde

We must begin with homosexuality, the quintessential perversions, and the one that obsessed sexologists. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that Decadence makes more sense as a concept in the nineteenth century if we read it as a code word for homosexuality.[247] However, the actual practice of homosexuality was not integral to the Decadent lifestyle. Indeed, many took pains to distance themselves from "real" homosexuality. Instead the Decadents took pleasure in hinting at homosexuality, celebrating the lifestyle rather than the act. As Camille Paglia puts it, "Decadence takes Western sexual personae to their ultimate point of hardness and artificiality. It is drenched in sex, but sex as thought rather than of action."[248] Sexuality was not entirely about sex. Rather the Decadents found sexuality in nearly everything, sexualizing what to others had no relation to sexuality, and presenting themselves as sexual beings. In this they anticipated Freud. They are arguing for a culturally contingent sexuality that

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[246] Birken, Lawrence. *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance, 1871-1914*. Cornell University Press, 1988, 69.
[247] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick *Between Men* New York: Columbia University Press, 1985, 90.
[248] Camille Paglia *Sexual Personae* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, 389.

exists in fantasy more than in reality, in dark imaginings rather than in case studies. Rather than falling into a discreet category of sexual disorder, the Decadents suggested a polymorphous perversity that defied biological explanations.

Neither American nor European sexologists saw homosexuality as a discreet phenomenon. It was, rather, one symptom of a complicated disease that troubled western civilization. Homosexuality and heterosexuality, in the course of the 20th century, won out as the marker of sexual identity. During the 1890s many other possibilities of sexual taxonomy existed. According to Jennifer Terry, "the originators of scientific discourse on sexual perversion suspected that the emergence of a distinct type of person—variously known as the invert, pervert, or homosexual—was a sign that modern life had deeply disrupted the natural order of things. Thus ensued debates over whether this creature was fundamentally dangerous, merely pathetic, or a brilliantly evolved hallmark of advanced civilization…These self-appointed promoters of public health cast homosexuality as an anomalous, pathological condition and suggested that it was a perplexing byproduct of modernity."[249] Yet, at the same time, homosexuality was a vague idea at best. French psychiatrists saw fetishism as the base perversion, with same sex love existing because of a fetish for that sex. American commentators like Kiernan often conflated cross dressing same sex desire, gender inversion, and, any kind of non-gender conforming behavior into homosexuality. Karl Ulrichs was the first, in 1864, to develop a theory on homosexuality. Having

[249] Terry 27

been himself punished for homosexual acts, Ulrichs suggested that male and female bodies were determined by one germ, while male and female psyches were determined by another. When occasionally these germs ended up in the wrong body, an Urning (Ulrich's name for a homosexual) resulted. He of course was not a doctor, though he did argue for the scientific study of homosexuality. Karl Westphal, the first doctor to identify homosexuality, used Ulrichs' observations, though he, and those following him, classified homosexuality as a disease. Magnus Hirschfeld would later follow this strain of sexological thought. In this view perversions, especially homosexuality, were a congenital anomaly that was generally benign, meaning that the sufferers should be treated, at worst, with pity. Richard Krafft von Ebing, Jean Martin Charcot, and Valentin Magnum agreed that sexual inversions were inborn, but thought that they were essentially harmful; signs of degeneration. At the end of the century there was no agreement as to what caused same sex attraction, what the signs were, or who might be most affected.

Krafft-Ebing noted only the very basics of fetishism. He recognizes three categories of fetish; first, parts of women that take on the meaning of the whole such as hands, feet, and hair; next, articles of clothing or references to parts of women, hair brushes, gloves, underthings, and finally materials that for some reason that he never specifies seem too often be sexualized, fur, silk, and velvet materials.

The literal poster boy for aestheticism and Decadence, and the most visible and notorious link between these artistic poses and homosexuality, was

Oscar Wilde. Wilde toured America thirteen years before his conviction for gross indecency. Mary Warner Blanchard's comment on the end of Wilde's influence in America is typical. She writes: "The aesthetic movement was a brief but important interlude of cultural expansion and experimentation. By 1895, however, it was to be cut off by Wilde's own fall from grace…and by the resurgence of a cultural of virility and war in the nation at large."[250] Yet is was precisely this moment, when Wilde's immorality had been confirmed in a court of law, and America was moving towards empire that Decadence reached its height.

In 1882, Wilde was not a major literary force, rather, his tour of America was an exercise in celebrity. Wilde was famous for being famous. He was a quippy aesthete who traveled across the country giving interviews, attending parties, and lecturing on aestheticism, which he defined variously, as the science of seeing beauty everywhere. Wilde did not just tour major cities on the coasts, but gave interviews to Midwestern papers as well; his renown and popularity was no niche phenomena.[251] Every paper began with careful descriptions of Wilde's attire that are remarkably similar. For example, he wore a 'long bottle-green overcoat trimmed with fur, a sky-blue necktie, yellow kid gloves, patent leather boots, and a sealskin cap several sizes too small for him."[252] They concentrate especially on the materials, making sure to mention his patent leather shoes,

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[250] Blanchard, Mary Warner. *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age*. Yale University Press, 1998. xii

[251] Wilde's American interviews are helpfully collected in Wilde, Oscar, and Matthew Hofer. *Oscar Wilde in America: The Interviews*. University of Illinois Press, 2013.

[252] "Our New York Letter" *Philadephia Inquirer* Jan 4, 1882, 7.

velvet jackets, capes and collars trimmed with fur, silk dressing gowns and stockings, and kid gloves. The highly feminized and fetishistic nature of his outfit is certainly not accidental. All of his clothes were either too long, like his coats, or too short, like his scandalous knee breeches, and in vivid colors. His olive green fur lined ulster was especially emblematic. He was usually interviewed reclining on a couch or lounging in a chair. He is usually said to have sunflowers or lilies around him. He smokes Turkish cigarettes elegantly. His smooth face is oval, with vaguely pleasant features, full, red lips, and his hair falls either to his chin, or flows over his shoulders. One reporter from the Boston Globe set out to rectify these descriptions as exaggerations, noting that his hair was merely chin length, not flowing down his back, and his knew breeches were of a perfectly reasonable length.

While they focused on his apparently feminized appearance, almost every interview makes careful mention of his manliness. He was well-built, handsome, with a firm handshake, and gentlemanly manners. In fact, his clothes were a mere costume, for "deprived of them, he would be voted on sight by the average American 'a strapping big clever fellow'"[253]

Krafft-Ebing, commenting on the vogue for such affectations, writes "Under all circumstances a dandified man is ridiculous," although this is because coquetry is a feminine vice, which is should be only barely tolerated among women, not because dandyism necessarily indicated a perversion.[254] Indeed, for Krafft-Ebing

[253] Oscar Wilde's views *San Francisco Morning Call* March 271662, 4.
[254] *Psychopathia Sexualis* 16

the association between dandified clothes and the desire for the same sex was anything but clear. For some of his male case studies who reported desire for other men it was a passing phase, for others it held no appeal, and for still others it was part of a slippery slope towards "acquired" inversion. Still, there was something distinctly unnerving about Wilde's style. The *Harper's Weekly* cover for January 28, 1882 (See figure 1), depicts Wilde as a monkey, dressed in his trademark outfit, with a book and a lily and sunflower. The monkey makes Wilde seem ridiculous and laughable, but also hints at the degeneration that his dandyism indicated.

Oscar Wilde's arrest provides a dividing line between hints of scandal and a clear link between aesthetic literature and homosexuality.[255] Wilde's publisher, John Lane, had his offices vandalized after the April 1895 arrest. John Lane "after defending Beardsley in print as a modern-day Hogarth, acquiesced and fired the art editor, thus putting an end to the *Yellow Book*'s decadent period."[256] Yet, this was not the end in America. While Wilde's arrest might have confirmed their suspicions of links between decadent literature and homosexuality, it did not stop *The Chap-book*, *M'lle New York,* or Copeland and Day from republishing and engaging with Aesthetic and Decadent works for several years afterwards.

Edgar Saltus brushes off Wilde's arrest as the inevitable end of his story, writing: "One may wonder though whether it were their doing, or even Wilde's,

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[255] See, Blanchard, Mary Warner. *Oscar Wilde's America: Counterculture in the Gilded Age*. Yale University Press, 1998. Jr, Roy Morris. *Declaring His Genius: Oscar Wilde in North America.* Harvard University Press, 2013.

[256] Kotynek, Roy, and John Cohassey. A*merican Cultural Rebels: Avant-Garde and Bohemian Artists, Writers and Musicians from the 1850s Through the 1960s.* Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2008. 44

that put him there. One may wonder whether it were not the high fates who so gratified him in order that, from his purgatory, he might rise to a life more evolved."[257] After recording his other impressions of Wilde: that he was not a great poet, but a great man nonetheless, Saltus argues that Wilde's immorality was precisely the secret of his art. He writes, "Renan said that morality is the supreme illusion. The diagnosis may or may not be exact. Yet it is on illusions that we all subsist. We live on lies by day and dreams at night. From the standpoint of the higher mathematics, morality may be an illusion. But it is very sustaining. Formerly it was also inspirational. In post-pagan days it created a new conception of beauty. Apart from that, it has nothing whatever to do with the arts, except the art of never displeasing, which, in itself, is the whole secret of mediocrity. Oscar Wilde lacked that art, and I can think of no better epitaph for him."[258]

It is not accident, therefore, that Wilde the Decadent and Aesthete stood at the very moment when a performance of femininity and close relationships with men tipped over into an outlawed identity. Decadence itself marked these displays and acts as meaningful, and not simply incidental. However, it is a mistake to read Decadence as a defense of congenital homosexuality as Magnus Hirschfeld undertook to do. Decadence existed in America in the moment in which Oscar Wilde could be considered masculine, in which his gender performance could be considered exactly that, a performance, rather than an

[257] Saltus *Oscar Wilde: An Idler's Impression* Chicago: Brothers of the Book, 1917, 13.
[258] Saltus *Oscar Wilde: An Idler's Impression* Chicago: Brothers of the Book, 1917, 25-26.

incarnation of a type. For their brief moment, Decadents defended this distinction. They lost the battle of course, but their eager engagement in the discourse of sexology should not be ignored.

Sadism and Masochism

Despite their connection to Wilde, and the gender inversions suggested by their affectations of dress, at the end of the nineteenth century Decadence was more closely associated with other perversions. American Decadents, especially those in New York, deliberately positioned themselves against a homosexual culture. The aesthetic lifestyle and signifiers that are today read as early signs of homosexual community, were just as easily interpreted as challenges to the standard gender order more along the lines of sadism and masochism, of unnatural aggression or passivity, rather than any sexual inversion. Indeed, Sadism and Masochism, with their implications of gender inversion, and out of control violence were more threatening to nineteenth century minds, and were the base perversions that all other perversions linked to. While his commentary of homosexuality is the most often discussed, Krafft-Ebing first spends an equal amount of time discussing sadism and masochism, which for him are the marks of a decadent, not just a degenerate, society.[259]

Krafft-Ebing admits that the line between what is perverse and fetishistic and what is natural sexuality is rather fine. "Within physiological limits, the

[259] For the invention of masochism see Stewart, Suzanne R. *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècl*e. Cornell University Press, 1998. Byrne, Romana. *Aesthetic Sexuality: A Literary History of Sadomasochism*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2013. Moore, Alison. "Rethinking Gendered Perversion and Degeneration in Visions of Sadism and Masochism, 1886-1930." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 138–57. Stewart-Steinberg, Suzanne. *Sublime Surrender: Male Masochism at the Fin-de-Siècle*. Cornell Studies in the History of Psychiatry. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998.

pronounced preference for a certain portion of the body of persons of the opposite sex, particularly for a certain form of

this part, may attain great psycho-sexual importance. Indeed, the especial power of attraction possessed by certain forms and peculiarities for many men — in fact, the majority — may be

regarded as the real principle of individualization in love."[260] Thus all sexuality is, in some aspect, the beginning of a perversion, a notion that American Decadents understood well.

Krafft-Ebing does make a more difficult distinction between perversion and perversity. Perversion is a disease, while perversity is a vice. A perverse act, in itself, does not indicate either disease or vice. Paraesthesia, or what might now be called paraphilia, (which often occurred in combination with hyperesthesia) needs to be diagnosed by investigating the whole personality of the individual and the impulse leading to the perverse act.[261] The difference, of course, is will-power. Perversity never transforms into perversion. Acts done because of moral weakness were, therefore, still punishable by law, but acts done because of a congenital or hereditary flaw in either the mind or the body should not be punished. This distinction between perversion and perversity, between will and nature, was essential to understanding guilt and innocence.

Sadism was a word already in use before Krafft-Ebing named it as a specific perversion. It was used in relation to the work of the European

[260] Krafft-Ebing *Psychopathia Sexualis* 152
[261] Krafft-Ebing *Psychopathia Sexualis* 57

Decadents, and was in that sense very class specific. Krafft-Ebing's "ideal" sadists were upper class men, able to control themselves, but who harbored sadistic fantasies. In practice of course, psychiatrists diagnosed lower class men more than upper class men. [262] Sadism is the active, object oriented nature of love, which it shares with anger, and the aggressive, conquering role of the man. Masochism is "is controlled by the idea of being completely and unconditionally subject to the will of a person of the opposite sex…This idea is colored by lustful feeling, the individual affected lives in fancies"[263] He notes that "The latest 'Decadent' literature of France and Germany is also largely concerned with the themes of sadism and masochism."[264] For Krafft-Ebing sadism and masochism, as their names derived from authors suggested, were diseases of fantasy and literature. While he enumerates cases of acted out Sadism and Masochism, the essential element is the fantasy.

Definitions of sadism and masochism made them practically signs of the age. For men, Sadism was the over-inclination towards the otherwise normative masculine behavior of aggression. For women, it was an inversion of the normal instinct. Conversely, for men, masochism was the positioning of the self in the feminine role, whereas for women, masochism was an exaggeration of the normal instinct. As Alison Moore argues, "The very concepts of sadism and masochism were thus invoked within a rubric of tension, with normative behavior balancing between the dangers of inverted, systemically perverse gender

[262] Oosterhuis 205
[263] Pyschopathia Sexualis 90
[264] Pyschopathis Sexualis 123

patterns, and the dangers of excess even in the direction of normative gender roles"[265] The policing of gender in the 1890s made the gender inversions of the decadents scream with significance. In this context, the foppish dress of Oscar Wilde was not merely a signifier of possible homosexuality, but an identification with women and their passivity.

Furthermore, in the context of the Rooseveltian crusade for virility, male masochism was a threat to the country itself. Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg points out that masochism is, and was, so fascinating because of its possibilities for social and cultural critique that ultimately demonstrate the perverse nature of the construction of subjectivity. In an era of expansion, war, and progress, it functioned as a challenge to the very idea of modernity, and certainly questioned the ideal of active, aggressive masculinity that was inextricable from capitalism and expansion. Krafft-Ebing makes an even more terrifying connection. He argues that masochism, one of the most interesting psychological problems, originates as a perversion of sexual bondage. Sexual bondage is extremely common. Husbands with much younger, more controlling, or immoral wives are often found in such bondage as are those who run after seductresses. Women are placed in sexual bondage in an almost innumerable number of ways due to the custom and law that mandates theirs as the subordinate position in love and marriage, making them especially vulnerable. This bondage is not in itself perverse, but "when the idea of being tyrannized over is long closely associated

[265] Moore, Alison. "Rethinking Gendered Perversion and Degeneration in Visions of Sadism and Masochism, 1886-1930." Journal of the History of Sexuality 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 138–57. 140 Perhaps some very brief account of its history here.

with the lustful thought of the beloved person, the lustful emotion is finally connected to the tyranny itself, and the transformation to perversion is complete."[266] In other words, after enough abuse in a close enough relationship, masochism could be acquired.

More than the suspected degeneracy of homosexuality sadism and masochism signaled an empire in decline. As Edgar Saltus notes of the sadism of the Marquis de Sade and Gilles de Rais, "It was the logical climax to which decadence had groped and to it already the austere guillotine was attending" [267] The grotesqueries of sadism and masochism were at the heart of the decadent project in America.

Saltus argues that history is "illuminated with crimes that have been applauded and absolved because of their inherent beauty"[268] According to his biographer Claire Sprague , "He had connected crime and beauty; in strife and love he had seen, like some of the early Greek philosophers, the dialectic that defines life, that creates act and change" [269] Of his project she notes, "What more exquisite occupation than to examine and to adjust the relationship between the shudders of pain and of pleasure of Ares and Eros? That adjustment could focus on Rome, Russia, and contemporary wars as easily upon historical lovers, don juanisme, and local examples of ideal and aberrational love"[270] The connections Saltus draws here between love and crime mirror the

[266] Psychopathia Sexualis 145
[267] Saltus *Historia Amoris* 249
[268] Saltus "Saltusian Crusts" *Once a Week* vol 11 May 13, 1893, 6.
[269] Sprague 119
[270] Sprague 120

sexologists focus on sexually motivated crime. While Krafft-Ebing and his American colleagues attempted to parse the responsible from the non-responsible, Saltus shifted the discussion. No one was "responsible" since love was an irresistible force. The only question, then, was what crimes were beautiful enough to be excused. Furthermore, the connection between love, insanity and crime was not new, but rather a cyclical reappearance of an old trope. The same connection could be seen in the Roman Empire, as Saltus detailed in *Imperial Purple* and the more fictional *Mary Magdalene*, it could be just as easily seen in the history of Russia. Still, both Saltus, the Decadent, and Krafft-Ebbing, the doctor, placed sexuality as the moving force behind human social behavior, and both privileged non-normative expressions of sexuality as the worthiest of study and interest.

There is no better illustration of the strangeness, and the underlying sadism and masochism that defined the Decadent movement than *M'lle New York.* He comments "There was no office except under our hats, and the publisher mailed the copies. Frankly, I wonder how we escaped Anthony Comstock. Perhaps our 'precious' prose saved us. But the illustrations! Simply gorgeous…The wicked attacks of Editor Thompson on society and government and women, all these made *M'lle New York* unique. "[271] The very premise of the magazine was highly sexualized. In the closing piece in the first edition the editors describe New York as the eponymous mademoiselle. She gives a goodnight kiss that "is perfumed with wines and spices, birds and truffles, and

[271] Huneker *Steeplejack* 189

over-sea fruit, with the light incense of Bakchar tobacco, the fervor of champagne, and the exultant sweetness of chartreuse; withal something personal, feminine, perverse, wherein the cantharides of desire flicker faintly"[272] In the morning "She is haggard at daybreak, M'lle New York. The rouge and powder are smeared on her frowsy face; the disheveled hair seems scant and coarse; the throat you thought was so white is pallid yellow; the lips are swollen with sleep and wine. She gapes and yawns, stirring with amorous unrest. Even a woman finds one man who loves her--one whom her fist kiss does not disgust; why not M'lle New York?"[273] M'lle New York is equally revolting in the morning light. Still, "You have indulged in the innocent depravity of her morning kiss. Now ring the bell and bid your man bring you a tooth-brush and a glass of water."[274] The language here is florid and highly stylized. It is feminine, and about a woman. Yet, it is clear that it is written by a man, and the vitriol is barely concealed. The woman, New York, is perverse by her very nature. In "reality" she is all artifice, but at night, she is irresistible. The entire magazine is a fantasy of masochism, like those described by Krafft-Ebing, helpless men held in thrall to an immoral and disgusting woman.

The sheer queerness of *M'lle New York* cannot be overstated. Stories about poetry ranging from the absurd to the disturbing occupy the same page with serious critical pieces on European art, literature and music. Demons, nude women, and animals cavort in the margins (see fig 2). Most of the stories thrived

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[272] "M'lle New York" *M'lle New York* 1:1 Aug 1895, 14
[273] Ibid
[274] Ibid

on the strange combination of sex and murder that so fascinated the sexologists. In “The Spider” a man kills his wife, convinced that she is somehow abetting a torturous spider. In “Venus Victrix” after Christians are sent to the slaughter to the cheers of Roman crowds, they required a more elegant torture. A young Christian woman, after refusing to willingly submit to Venus at the urging of a pagan priest, is bound naked to a young Christian man. They fight the urges of the flesh until, to the delight of the crowd, Venus is victorious and Christ defeated. The musicians weep. In the same issue an essay on Satanism provides a means to describe all manner of tortures. “True Love” describes a woman in love with a pig. Philip Hale’s “The Baffled Enthusiast” depicts a visit to the home of Jack the Ripper, now retired.[275] Hyslip, the ripper’s real name, chides Krafft-Ebing for including him in the same category as de Sade, for he was an individual, an artist who should be judged on his own merits. [276] The goal was, of course, to shock, but also to make clear that beauty trumped morality. Paradoxically, this involved directly addressing morality in order to attempt to make it irrelevant, but this is the central contradiction of Decadence. Yet again this paradox put Decadence on the side of those who denounced them. They aimed to be exactly as strange and objectionable as they were portrayed and, importantly, chose sexuality as the path to this goal.

[275] Philip Hale (1854-1934) was a Yale graduate, musician and music critic. A Bostonian he met Huneker though their work in as music critics. Though Hale was not known for his fiction Huneker admired his style. Hale often contributed to *M’le New York*

[276] M’lle New York vol 1 no 6.

James Huneker's *Painted Veils* (not to be confused with *The Painted Veil)* was published in 1920, shortly after which its deeply indebted author died.[277] Huneker, a long time music critic, was barely making ends meet as a critic and writing for newspapers and magazines. Near the end of his life, he took up a friend's advice to write a novel. He had already written an autobiography *Steeplejack*, so called because Huneker styled himself the steeplejack of the arts. He first wanted to call the novel *Istar*, but it was then changed to *Painted Veils*. He had difficulty finding a publisher, a situation he blamed on the specter of Puritanism. *Painted Veils* contained an orgy at a religious revival meeting, a rape (later revealed to be consensual) of a white woman by a black man, a party with nude dancers, prostitution, a virginal bourgeois woman expressing sexual desire, extramarital affairs, extramarital pregnancies, the debauching of a theological student, and a lesbian relationship. In other words, Huneker included everything he could possibly think of that was shocking. Huneker claimed that he himself had experienced the religious orgy having run into a religious revival led by people actually named Brother Rainbow and Roarin' Nell. Another scene in the book, a bacchanalian party, was based on the famous Pie Girl Dinner of 1895 (see figure 3). This was a party given by Henry W. Poor to John Elliott Cowdin, a polo player at the home of James L. Breese, a photographer. Those invited included Augustus Saint-Gaudens (sculptor), Stanford White and Charles F. McKim (architects), Charles Dana Gibson (illustrator), George Barnes (author),

[277] On Huneker, see his biography Arnold T. Schwab *James Gibbons Huneker: Critic of the Seven Arts* Stanford: Stanford University Press 1963. See also his autobiography *Steeplejack* New York: Scribner's, 1920.

Nikola Tesla (inventor), and John Ames Mitchell (editor). Huneker claims he was invited, though his name did not appear on the official guest list. The dinner got its name from the huge pie from which emerged a girl, a sixteen-year-old named Susie Johnson, dressed in black gauze with a blackbird perched on her head. Accounts of the scene vary from the benign to the scandalous, with Huneker's fictionalized account, which features several other nude women servers, and imply that the girl of honor was passed around the men, the most explicit. [278] Huneker's biographer suggests that both these claims are questionable, and might more probably have been put together from news coverage of the Pie Girl Dinner, and rumors and other stories of holy-roller orgies that Huneker might have picked up in his travels, combined with similar scenes from Huysmans. [279] In reviews, Huneker's work is often criticized as a mere imitation of *A Rebours*. Huneker's work is less a novel than a catalog of perversions with a veil of plot. He himself admitted that it was a symptom of the Decadence that afflicted him.

In his book *The Decadent,* Ralph Adams Cram articulates the decadent desire as an essentially passive one, the need to turn away from the world, to take everything lying down, to dream as Rome burns. The hero of the book explains, "Yes, it is the end of years; the era of action is over, night follows, blotting from sight the shame of a wasted world; but through the mute,

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[278] Schwab, Arnold T. James Gibbons Huneker, Critic of the Seven Arts. Stanford University Press, 1963.262

[279] For more on the pie girl dinner and other escapades of the upper classes and Stanford White's circle in particular see Burns, Sarah. *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age America*. Yale University Press, 1999.Mooney, Michael Macdonald. *Evelyn Nesbit and Stanford White: Love and Death in the Gilded Age*. Morrow, 1976 and Paul, Deborah. *Tragic Beauty: The Lost 1914 Memoirs of Evelyn Nesbit*. Lulu.com, 2006.

unutterable night rises and brightens the splendour of the new day, the new life. Action has striven and failed, and wreck and ruin are the ending thereof; but across the desert of failure and despair bursts the flame of the Dawn; the far-forgotten spirit of the world rises toward dominion again,—the spirit of visions and dreams, the mighty Mother of worlds and men, the Soul of the Eternal East."[280]

The kind of community described by Cram did not only exist in fiction, but in reality. In Boston, the Visionists, led by F. Holland Day and Ralph Adams Cram and including Louise Imogen Guiney, Bliss Carmen, Bertram Goodhue, Richard Hovey and occasionally Bernard Berenson, and George Santayana, embodied the Decadent ideal. Members of this club helped to publish *The Knight Errant*. For Stephen Maxfield Parish the Visionists were "Smugly cliquish, enamored of the exotic and the bizarre, in behavior and in art. They tried to be bohemian of course, but they were frequently self-conscious and played their role with mixed success." [281] They had a meeting house in Pinckney Street in Boston. This place had, according to Cram, paintings of Isis on the walls, along with all manner of Oriental and esoteric designs. Its occupants played dress up with a variety of theater clothes, with Herbert Copeland as high priest.[282] While many of their contemporaries like Parish saw the Visionists as pretentious and fake, this was precisely the point. They were not attempting to reflect any "reality" of ancient Egypt or some other ancient or Oriental culture. Rather, their

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[280] Cram *The Decadent,* 39.

[281] Kotynek, Roy, and John Cohassey. American Cultural Rebels: Avant-Garde and Bohemian Artists, Writers and Musicians from the 1850s Through the 1960s. Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2008. 42

[282] Shand-Tucci, Douglass. *The Crimson Letter: Harvard, Homosexuality, and the Shaping of American Culture*. Macmillan, 2004. 83

performances were meant to reflect the higher world created by their art. The dandy was the visual representation of Oscar Wilde's aestheticism in America. Ralph Adams Cram wore a peacock blue suit and purple tie along with pince-nez and a scarlet lined evening cloak.[283] Ralph Adams Cram's *The Decadent* is the reality behind the play-acting at bohemianism that characterized the Visionists.

Most, including his biographer, have read Cram's work as coded and repressed homosexuality. David Weir argues that in Cram's work "suggests a fear of sexual contact with women and the anxiety over the homoerotic feelings that fear implies. The literary heritage of Poe and the gothic novel makes possible the coded language Cram employs: supernatural horror is the medium for psychosexual anxiety. Cram's conversion to the High Church may have made it easier for him to relinquish his rationalism and release his imagination to invent supernatural happenings. But given that the agent of this conversion was a young man for whom Cram felt a deep affection, the Catholic conversion comes at the cost of sexual unease."[284] Shand-Tucci reads *The Decadent* as an admission of homosexuality, and reads in it various coded references and silences that to him, indicate the presence of a homosexual community in Boston. However, the dandyism and fetishistic nature of Decadent communities are not necessarily signs of burgeoning homosexual consciousness, but rather an assertion of countercultural attitudes. Gender inversion, the suggestion of

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[283] On Cram see his voluminous two part biography Shand-Tucci, Douglass *Boston Bohemia 1881-1900: Ralph Adams Cram.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995 and Shand-Tucci, Douglass, *Ralph Adams Cram: An Architect's Four Quests : Medieval, Modernist, American, Ecumenical*. Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2005.

[284] Weir *Against the Grain* 71

perversity, of fetishism, of male passivity were the easiest ways to shock. Still, homosexuality was a concern. Charles Wentworth wrote to Cram about Cram and Bertram Goodhue "You are two innocents and besides you are both queer and queer things are looked at askance since Oscar's expose. Poor Oscar, what horrid privations he will have to endure."[285] Cram and Goodhue were of course innocent, since such art could never be guilty. Nevertheless, they were most certainly and visibly queer.

F. Holland Day, the money behind the Visionists and one of the better-studied members of the group. Day appears in many histories of homosexuality, yet his photography and other work is stranger and darker.[286] According to David Weir, "Day had reason to fear persecution, as well, for his own curious behavior and ambiguous sexuality in the moral atmosphere of Boston after Wilde's conviction and incarceration"[287] Take Day's use of classical, Christian, and Oriental imagery. Day is famous for his crucifixion scenes in which he played Christ. Certainly religious symbolism could easily be co-opted for the expression of counter-cultural themes and deviant sexualities. Cram and his circle in particular were closely associated with the Episcopal Church, whose

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[285] Quoted in Shand-Tucci 147

[286] There is an extensive literature on Day (1864-1933) and his pictorial photography and most address his sexuality: Day never married. He was half of publishing firm Copeland and Day. He was one of the more socially active of the Boston Decadents, taking an interest in mentoring, teaching, and philanthropy. He was independently wealthy, and was the patron of other artists. He was the center of the Boston circle of Decadence, possibly because of his patronage and ability to help publish others.
See, James Crump *F. Holland Day: Suffering the Ideal*. Twin Palms, 1995. Fanning, Patricia J. *Through an Uncommon Lens: The Life and Photography of F. Holland Day*. Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2008. Ellenzweig, Allen. The Homoerotic Photograph: Male Images from Durieu/Delacroix to Mapplethorpe. Columbia University Press, 1992. Fairbrother, Trevor *J. Making a Presence: F. Holland Day in Artistic Photography*. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, 2012.

[287] Weir 80

high church accoutrements and rituals provided an outlet for their aesthetic sensibilities. Day's Saint Sebastian, however, is the most Decadent of his images (see figure 4). The Victorian craze for Sebastian was complex, but it was clear that Sebastian was popular partially for the eroticism of his depictions. Richard A. Kaye argues that Sebastian "became a key emblem for a *fin de siècle* epoch of willfully embraced perversities." [288] He was not only a homoerotic symbol, but an embodiment of illness and masochism. In Day's photograph, Sebastian is bound and pierced with an arrow.

In Chicago, the Bohemian Club and the Cypher Club shocked, though the strong presence of women meant that Chicago's decadence was quite dissimilar to that of New York, Boston, and San Francisco. Henry Blake Fuller is the only Chicago author whose early work could have been considered Decadent, and he soon turned towards realism and the warm embrace of William Dean Howells[289]. The homoerotic content of his novels, especially *Bertram Cope's Year* (1917), certainly contribute to his connection to Decadence as did the contrasts between American and European society in *The Chevalier of Pensieri-Vani* (1890) and *La Chatelaine de la Trinité* (1892).[290] *Under The Skylights* describes a fictionalized world of artists in Chicago, but it is decidedly more bohemian than Decadent, suggesting that upward mobility is the enemy of art. The *Chap-Book* was, of

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[288] Kaye, Richard A. "'Determined Raptures': St. Sebastian and the Victorian Discourse of Decadence." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 1 (January 1, 1999): 269–303.298

[289] On Fuller see Pilkington, John. *Henry Blake Fuller.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970 and Scambray, Kenneth. *A Varied Harvest: The Life and Works of Henry Blake Fuller*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987.

[290] For Henry Blake Fuller and homosexuality see Croix, St Sukie de la. Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago before Stonewall. University of Wisconsin Pres, 2012.

course, based in Chicago, though it began in Boston. However, the Decadence of the Chap-book was almost accidental, since it was in a very real sense an advertisement for Stone and Kimball's publishing house.[291] They printed some Decadent work, but also realist authors, local color, even romanticism. As a sort of digest it lacked the editorial focus of *M'lle New York.* Kimball and Stone were happy to publish any author or critic who seemed in any way new or avant-garde. The community around the Chap-book was, as the *Cypher* put it "a place that is nowhere, somewhere, everywhere", certainly more diffuse than the other Decadent communities. [292] Thus, the Chap-book was certainly less sexually explicit, and did not aim to shock. However, because they did rely on Will Bradley, the American Aubrey Beardsley, for some of their art, along with other avant-garde illustrators, the magazine had the sensual and Oriental feel that Bradley was known for. This in itself was enough to suggest some kind of perversion. The Oriental style lent itself to feminized interpretations

On the other side of the country Les Jeunes were a well-known Decadent group led by Gelett Burgess and including Bruce Porter, Porter Garnett, Willis Polk, Ernest Peixotto, Florence Lundborg, and Yone Noguchi.[293] They came together for a brief two-year period. Even though their heyday was brief, and most came from, then scattered back to various international metropolitan centers, their writing is sometimes defined as quintessentially Californian.

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[291] See Achilles, Rolf. "The Chap-Book and Posters of Stone & Kimball at The Newberry Library." The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts 14 (October 1, 1989): 64–77

[292] *The Cypher* quoted in Parry, Albert. Garrets and Pretenders: Bohemian Life in America from Poe to Kerouac. Courier Corporation, 2013. 181

[293] Nathan, Marvin R. "San Francisco's Fin de Siècle Bohemian Renaissance." *California History* 61, no. 3 (October 1, 1982): 196–209.

However, as Marvin Nathan points out "Rather than creators of a Californian idiom, they were talented, often imaginative purveyors of recent European cultural ideas and styles to San Fransisco and the rest of the nation."[294] Like their other little magazine publishing counterparts, they functioned as popularizers for European art, but Burgess himself rejected most of the ideals of Decadence. In *The Lark,* Burgess *et alia* set out to "demolish Decadence and its 'precious' pretentions" opting for a more youthful and less cynical view.[295] Burgess's "The Purple Cow" style of absurdity and childlike Goop drawings were certainly different in style from the refined Decadence found elsewhere. Yet, Burgess and Les Jeunes are usually included in discussions of American Decadence. David Weir considers Burgess part of American Decadence, spending a part of his San Francisco chapter on him, even though he admits that "Burgess and his friends were more bohemian than decadent is shown not only by the deliberate distance they placed between themselves and the Boston and Chicago groups but also by their removal from the middle class."[296] Perhaps Les Jeunes protested too much against their connections to Decadence. Their later association with Decadence was founded upon their similar engagement with sexuality and gender. Burgess was a dandy of the Oscar Wilde variety.

It was Frank Norris' relationship with Les Jeunes that brought their relationship to Decadence into high relief. Bruce Porter reports that Norris was jealous of Burgess's early literary triumph from the instant success of "The Purple

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[294] Nathan, Marvin R. "San Francisco's Fin de Siècle Bohemian Renaissance." *California History* 61, no. 3 (October 1, 1982): 196–209. 206.
[295] *The Lark* no 1 San Francisco, May 1, 1895, p 3.
[296] Weir 137

Cow.[297] Norris understands his dislike of Burgess, not as a personal dislike, but as part of an international literary and cultural struggle. He sided with Kipling, Henley, and Stevenson against the effeminacy of the British Decadents. In Burgess, and Les Jeunes, he found the American equivalent of the effeminate, over-literary, art-obsessed writer that he despised. Norris complains: "Les Jeunes can do better than *The Lark.* Give us stories now, give us men, strong, brutal men, with red-hot blood in 'em, blood and bones and viscera in 'em, and women, too, who move and have their being, people who love and hate, something better now than Vivettes and Perillas and Goops."[298] Instead of Burgess's silly women characters (Vivette and Perilla), Norris wants an American Kipling to oppose virility to an effeminate art and artist. Despite Weir's argument that the group was more Bohemian in their class allegiances, their affection for avant-garde art, and their separation from social causes attaches them to Decadence, whether they desired it or not. The inclusion of Yone Noguchi in Les Jeunes cements the circle's connection to a Decadent sensibility, and helps to elucidate what was to gain from an association with the orient. [299] Noguchi had affairs with, among others, Charles Warren Stoddard, who, like Holland Day, found the allure of a young Asian man irresistible. Yone Noguchi's novel *The*

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[297] Joseph R. McElrath and Douglass K Burgess eds *Norris, Frank. The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris, 1896-1898*. American Philosophical Society, 1996. xi

[298] Frank Norris "An Opening for Novelists" qutd in Joseph R. McElrath and Douglass K Burgess eds *Norris, Frank. The Apprenticeship Writings of Frank Norris, 1896-1898*. American Philosophical Society, 1996. xiii

[299] Yone Noguchi (1875-1947) was educated in Japan and lived in the U.S. before returning to Japan. He had complex romantic relationships with both men and women. With Leonie Gilmour he was the father of Isamu Noguchi the sculptor. He is best remembered for his poetry. Though Noguchi is impossible to categorize For more see Sueyoshi, Amy Haruko. *Queer Compulsions Race, Nation, and Sexuality in the Affairs of Yone Noguchi.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2012.

American Diary of a Japanese Girl is the story of a young Japanese woman's travels through the United States. [300] He set it against what he saw as the misrepresentations of the body of work including *Madame Butterfly, The Mikado,* and *The Geisha* that produced and reinforced the idea of the Orient, and Japan in particular, as a space that was particularly perverse and feminized. The products of the Orient, the fabrics, the materials, and the style were fetish objects, so too were the people themselves, as Noguchi found during his affairs with both women and men in America. He eventually returned to Japan, renouncing same-sex as well as interracial affection. Miss Morning Glory, the heroine of his novel, at once criticized America, but also adopted a childish, doll-like air, and surrounded herself with silk kimonos and cherry blossoms. Amy Sueyoshi claims, "Through Morning Glory Noguchi set out to portray a sense of femininity different from that of everyday America, one that embodied 'novelty, poetry, and beauty.' But in doing so he projected images not so different from existing characterizations."[301] Noguchi's use of a female avatar is on one level an expression of same sex desire. At the same time, it functions as a broader way of viewing the Decadent obsession with the Orient in general. By adopting Asian art and objects, they associated themselves with several levels of the Other. They put themselves in the position of another race, another gender, another stage of civilization, allowing them to retain their privilege, while at the same time

[300] See Sueyoshi, Amy "Intimate Inequalities: Interracial Affection and Same-Sex Love in the 'Heterosexual' Life of Yone Noguchi, 1897–1909." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 29, no. 4 (July 1, 2010): 22–44.
[301] Sueyoshi, Amy "Miss Morning Glory: Orientalism and Misogyny in the Queer Writings of Yone Noguchi" *Ameriasia Journal* 37:2 2011, 13.

critiquing Western and Modern values by proclaiming a preference for the feminine, perverse, passive, Oriental Other.

None of this is extractable from the transatlantic and colonial context. The Roman Empire was never far from the minds of the 1890s intelligentsia and the increase in perversions was one of the signs of the connection between America's current state and Roman Decadence. America was refashioning itself as an imperial power. In this climate, the Decadent's use of oriental imagery signaled something very different from what such imagery signified earlier in the century. Masculinity and femininity were both metaphors and urgent everyday social markers. As Anne McClintock argues, the idea, connected to Edward Said, that Orientalism was a sexualized metaphor in which male western power conquers a feminized orient, risks eliding gender and sexuality as real components of empire and colonialism.[302] However, the Decadents were dealing with the imagined East, preferring to ignore the real gender politics of imperialism. Edward Said argues that nineteenth century writers were entranced by "the separateness of the Orient, it's eccentricity, its backwardness, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability."[303]

It is precisely this sense of femininity and penetrability that the Decadents played upon.

That perversions were connected to the end of an empire was a fact proven by history. Charles Hamilton Hughes, among others, understood

[302] McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*.. Routledge, 1995.
[303] Edward Said *Orientalism* New York: Random House, 1978, 206.

America to be in an analogous position to Ancient Rome. Even though he names the problem as an entirely modern one, his immediate example is the debauchery of Rome: “Morals and civilization have advanced beyond those of Rome. There are now no amphitheaters and no temples dedicated to Isis, no gardens of Priapus.”[304] Religion and law have changed, and Cattalus no longer sings the praises of perversion, though there are some modern novels that come close. We cannot hope to understand Tiberius or Nero, but Heliogabalus is more understandable, since his acts were out of love. Hughes argues that this history is important because the current situation clearly has either individually hereditary or atavistic origins, so both personal and societal ancestry are important.

The story of how Day met one of his favorite photographic subjects Kahil Gibran, shows the strange and intricate connections between art, sexuality, and empire that Decadence dwelled within. Charles McKinn and Stanford White commissioned Frederick MacMonnies to produce the statue, *Bacchante and Infant Faun*, and erected it in the courtyard of the Boston Public Library. The ensuing uproar over the scandalous nature of the statue resulted in its removal. Meanwhile, Khalil Gibran, having emigrated from Syria, came into contact with Denison House, a settlement house in Boston. Noticing his drawing of the Bacchante statue, an art teacher volunteering at the house brought it to the attention of Jessie Fremont Beale of the Children’s Aid Society who ran the house. Beale in turn reached out to Day, asking him to take over the child’s

[304] Charles H Hughes “Erotopathia—Morbid Eroticism” *Alienist and Neurologist* 14:4 Oct 1893 536.

artistic education. Day photographed Gibran in a number of Oriental costumes. (See fig 3)

Copeland and Day were of course the publishers of much of Britain's Decadent literature in the United States.[305] Day was well connected to Wilde and Beardsley in Europe, and traveled in the Middle East. He decorated his home to look oriental, saving up for a real Persian lamp. He describes his favorite room: "The carpet is in the form of a rug and a border. The latter of deep reddish brown nearly like the velvet paper which comes down to the mapboards also (painted) the same tint. The rug is…fringed very deep on both ends and knotted (the border is three feet wide.) At the top of the velvet paper is a narrow picture molding…then this olive paper goes to the picture molding (next to the ceiling) which with the other woodwork is painted an olive to match the deeper shade in the paper. The ceiling is light olive. The windows held Japanese style transparencies, cathedral glass, and bright India Yellow cord curtains."[306] In another context this might be seen as supporting imperialism. A collection of relics from other lands, the sort of collection Teddy Roosevelt approved of, might demonstrate the Imperial zeal to conquer and appropriate. Asian imagery might also designate a life of luxury and feminine indulgence, a threat to the health and

[305] For a history of the firm see Joe W. Kraus *Messrs. Copeland and Day: 69 Cornhill, Boston 1893-1899.* Philadelphia: McManus, 1979 . Copeland and Day began their firm in 1893. Their first publication was Cram's *The Decadent.* Their mark bears a Latin motto that translates to "A lily among the thorns" . They modelled their firm on William Morris' Kelmscott press, though their politics were less deliberately socialist. They were known for their craftsmanship, quality, and style. Through an agreement with John Lane and The Bodely Head, they published *The Yellow Book* as well as Wilde's work. The firm closed in 1899, having drifted away from Decadent and Aesthetic works.

[306] Day quoted in Fanning, Patricia J. *Through an Uncommon Lens: The Life and Photography of F. Holland Day*. Univ of Massachusetts Press, 2008, 4.

drive of the West.[307] Yet Cram and Day and the more Orientalist minded of the Decadents used these signifiers for another purpose entirely. As Weir argues, "If nothing else can be said for the Boston decadents of the 1890s, at least they provided an alternative to the imperialistic spirit of the period."[308] Yet what was this alternative?

The Decadents looked forward with smugly jaded eyes towards the new century. Instead of hiding in the past, or attempting to work within the process of modernization, they looked forward to the collapse of civilization as inevitable. While others asked how they might change the world or themselves, Decadents asked what pleasures the falling of civilization might afford them. The cacophony of strange, perverse, and queer sexuality described and lived by American Decadents was certainly fodder for sexologists and moralists. The dark underside of modernity signified something more than degeneration or a lapse in morals. While they rarely articulated any sort of political or social stance, and clung to the idea that art was the only law, Decadents' use of the transgressive masculinity of masochism, the terrifying prospect of sadism, the gender inversions and social destabilizations of homosexuality, and the anti-imperialist implications of oriental fetishism set them against the hegemonic, imperialist, masculine culture of the 1890s.

At the same time, the deliberate use of these signifiers to assert their alterity made them similar to the sexologists. They too attempted to define and

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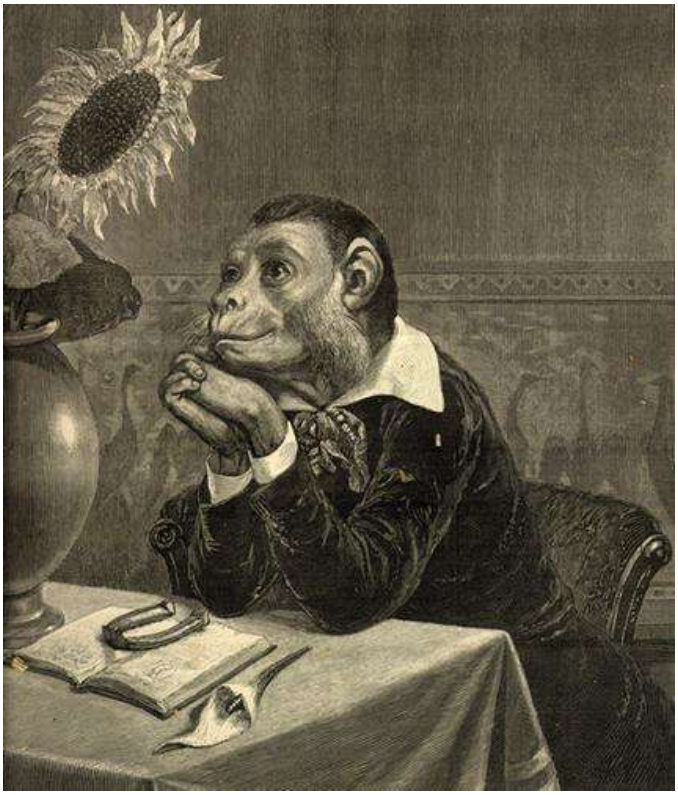
[307] Meyer, Karl E., and Shareen Blair Brysac. The China Collectors: America's Century-Long Hunt for Asian Art Treasures. Macmillan, 2015.
[308] Weir *Against the Grin* 85

elucidate, for different purposes, but the result was the same. Just as some read the sexologists for titillation surely some read the Decadents for information.

As Saltus and his peers participated in the movement of sexuality to the center of identity, they also clearly represented their own participation in this world as chosen, as artistic, as sinful perhaps, but never as organically diseased or something that comprised their biologic core. Their privilege allowed them to accept and reject whatever level of participation in perversion they chose. None argued for the “naturalness” of sexuality. Indeed, they argued for the exact opposite, again and again demonstrating the artificiality and artfulness of sexuality.

To return to Foucault, the Decadents noted, as he did, the late Victorian obsession with sex, and demonstrated their understanding of sexuality as artificial. Despite this rather prescient observation, Decadents wanted nothing more than a return to the world of the past, and were unwitting aides in the creation of a system that twisted sexuality and identity inextricably together.



(figure 1) *Harper's Weekly* Jan 28, 1882.

Figure 2 The posters of *M'lle New York* from volume 1 no. 5.

Figure 3: Image of the Pie Girl Dinner printed in *The New York World* 1895.

Figure 4: Khalil Gibran in Oriental garb by F. Holland Day 1898

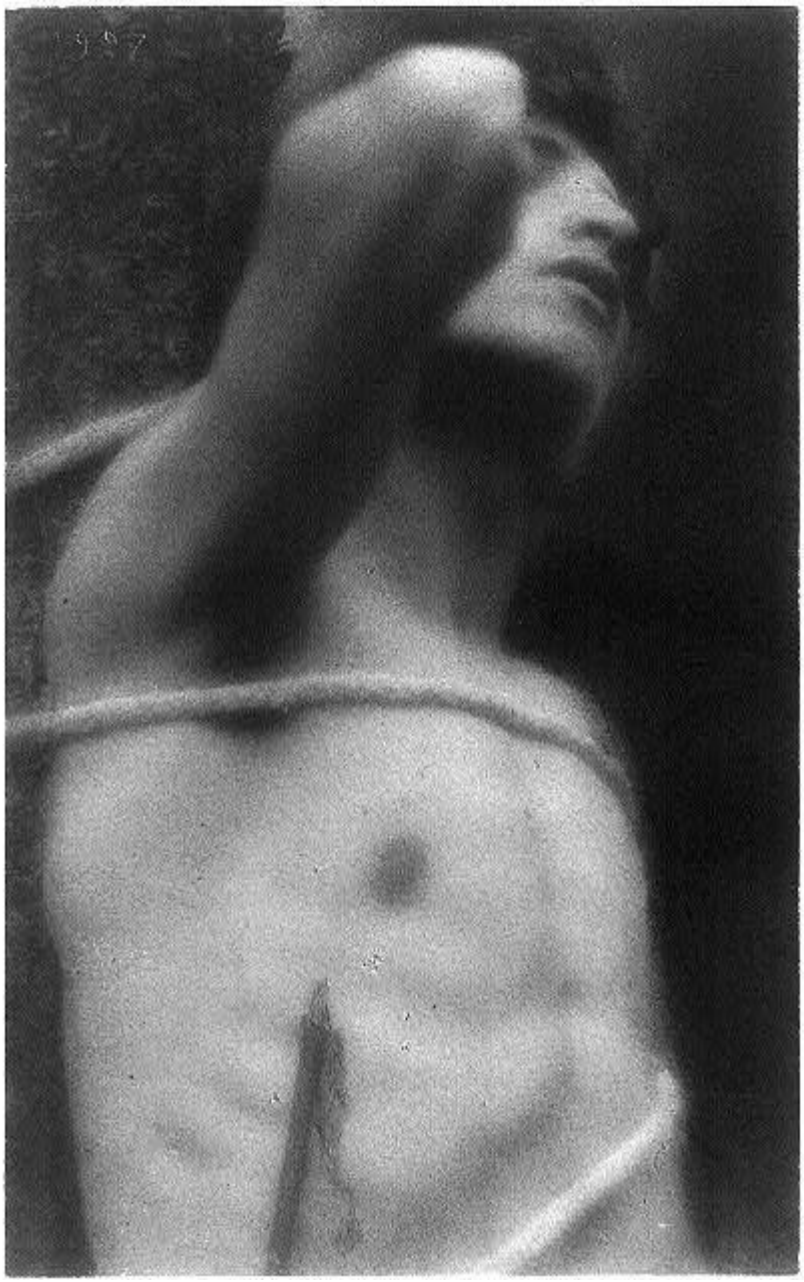


Figure 5 Saint Sebastian tied to tree with rope, with arrow in side, elbow raised by F. Holland Day 1907 Library of Congress

Chapter 6
Decadent Utopias: The Public and the Individual

In previous chapters, I have discussed the ways that American Decadents aligned themselves with degeneration, illness, and sexual perversity in order to demonstrate their cultural independence and individualism. It is this emphasis on the personal, on the right and obligation of the individual to chase the most anti-social and outlandish whims, that defines decadence. By their own assertion, and by the rabid criticisms of others, Decadence was a refusal to engage with the common-place world, an individualism that verged on egomaniacal delusion. In this chapter, I will discuss the ways in which the Decadent dedication to personal and idiosyncratic utopias was in reality deeply engaged with American culture and society, though they were loath to admit such a humiliation.[309] In response to the chaos of the end of the nineteenth century, they suggest a highly contradictory, highly paradoxical worldview that was so different from any other response that it was barely legible, and was dismissed as the reactionary solipsistic rantings of a handful of bitter aesthetes. I examine here the decidedly queer utopias presented by Decadent authors. In a moment in which the only options seemed to be to embrace and attempt to control change with the

[309] A brief note on word choice: when I use "Decadents' in this chapter, I am not so much referring to the opinions of a group of people who identify or can be identified as sympathizing with the cultural movement of Decadence. Rather, I intend to indicate the ideal person that Decadence as a movement imagines. This person can never truly exist. So, in some ways, I will be discussing the doubly abstracted notion of the imagined world of an imagined person.

progressive and pragmatist impulse or to resist it in the populist impulse, Decadent Utopias offer another path.

One of the signs of European Decadence, was its refusal to live in the "real" world. European Decadents, having the resources of the aristocracy, created fantasy worlds of their own in which they followed the strange pleasures of their hearts. J. K. Huysmans' hero Des Esseintes, who was the model for the Decadent self, spends his time entirely removed from the world, pursuing his bizarre and idiosyncratic interests. While they may have argued that these worlds were, by definition, removed from society and politics, this very removal was a political statement. Despite their protestations of non-engagement, they could not actually disappear from the world. Instead, in their insistence on the kind of world they would like to live in, they created profoundly engaged political and social commentary. Furthermore, Decadence, as a movement, idea, and threat, was deeply involved in the discourse surrounding the meaning of the end of the century.

The slogan of Decadence, art for art's sake, the valuation of surface over substance, and the strenuously apolitical sensibilities of prominent American Decadents might seem to indicate that Decadence was a cultural movement with no real content, as transitory as a gesture. Indeed, it is this assessment that has kept American Decadence a footnote. In his survey of the literary 1890s Larzer Ziff suggests that Decadence was the search for "salvation by dedication to the personal peculiarity" and further comments that it was this superficial and highly

personal nature that contributed to its brief cultural impact.[310] That the home of American Decadence was the ephemeral and high-art oriented little magazine, the fantasy novel, and art criticism only cements the idea that decadence was a purely aesthetic stance, with no political, social, or cultural content. However, we have already seen the ways in which the very idea of Decadence tapped into American fears of degeneration, and the ways that Decadent works engaged with ideas of disease, illness and death.

The politics of American Decadents are almost indescribable according to current schema. At first glance they seem easily classified as reactionary or conservative, because of the common theme of resistance to socialism or any kind of social justice thought. Furthermore, they present a kind of classless, genderless, raceless individualism that presages twentieth century neo-conservatism. How? At the same time, they profess a strange lack of control over history or events that resists notions of manifest destiny or evolutionary development, a hatred of capitalism, a dislike of materialism, and a preference for a highly rigid classed society. A distrust of systems, of linear logic, and a comfort with insoluble paradox, allowed them to present a social system that, for them at least, avoided the inevitable failures of the socialist, democratic, or capitalist utopias that seemed the only options for the relief of the current social chaos.

One of the marks of Decadence is the commitment, in their fiction at least, to renouncing the world. All fiction is of course fantasy in some way, and all

[310] Ziff *The American 1890s: Life and Times of a Lost Generation* New York: Viking 1966, 133.

fiction is the personal world created by the author. However, the Decadents were deeply committed to creating worlds, both in literature and in life that indulged individual fantasy above all else.

William L. Svitavsky draws a line between science fiction and decadence in that science fiction, thought it might involve glittering prose and declining civilizations, inevitably looks outward from the self, toward interactions with others, or at least new conditions, while Decadence, though it might posit other worlds, looks inwards. [311] While early science fiction, and utopian fiction sometimes suggested powerful and radical alternatives to the social order, Decadent fiction turned in on itself, wishing for only the dissolution of the outside world, not its reclamation. While this is a useful distinction for separating literary genres, it does not quite capture the meaning of this stance in the context of late-nineteenth-century America.

How then could this worldview, one based on individuality, be at all radical, or even interesting? This was the age of Horatio Alger's novels, of *The Gospel of Wealth,* of Theodore Roosevelt's pose of rugged self-reliance. Individuality and self-creation were hardly strange to the Victorian bourgeois consciousness that young writers who identified with European literature so opposed. This can be partially explained by the fact that of course Decadence was not as radical as it wanted to be. However, there was a kernel of strangeness and resistance at the bottom of the cult of individuality. This can be found in the way that Decadents conceptualized "the public" and "the individual"

[311] Svitavsky, William L. "From Decadence to Racial Antagonism: M.P. Shiel at the Turn of the Century." *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 1 (March 1, 2004): 1–24.

as organisms so opposed that they cannot exist in the same world. *M'lle New York* makes her opinion on "the public" and her editors' disdain for them very clear in the very first piece of the first issue. According to Thompson and Huneker, "*M'lle New York* is not concerned with the public. Her only ambition is to disintegrate some small portion of the public into its original component parts—the aristocracies of birth, wit, learning, and art and the joyously vulgar mob." [312] Rather than being disengaged with the public sphere of current events, politics, and society, the real agenda of Decadence is to reconfigure the public sphere entirely. Tragically, modern America is no longer controlled by the mob of old, but with the public. This "is not merely a juggle of words. This change goes to the root of things."[313] Long ago art and the mob were united "Once the poet and the mob wrought together. Oh, this divine mob of the early centuries! It had a fine force of instinct; it was ignorant and it avowed it; and by this very avowal it attained a high state of intellectual receptivity and appreciation."[314] The mob, unlike the public, knew it was ignorant, and let individuals control the world of art and beauty. Indeed, the idea of the mob is dependent on the existence of individual geniuses, "The mob and Peter the Hennit made the crusades; the mob and Luther the Reformation; the mob and Shakespeare made the drama; as the mob and Villon made the French language."[315] Unlike the glorious mob "The public-The public is made up of individuals who have opinions-they even

[312] M'lle New York "Foreword" 1:1 1895.
[313] *M'lle New York* "Forward" 1:1 1895
[314] *M'lle New York* "Forward" 1:1 1895
[315] *M'lle New York* "Forward" 1:1 1895

pronounce opinions; they read the newspapers; they have a sullen and irreconcilable hate for the extraordinary; they believe in philanthropy (the most selfish of vices, and in education (the monstrous fetich of this thoughtless century); there are millions of them; they walk beneath the eternal stars and fondle each other; they are given in marriage and taken in adultery; they beget children ; they read the newspapers; they have opinions; they are the public. The public-" [316] This diatribe against the public suggests the kind of civic engagement that the Decadent sensibility finds abhorrent. The public are unbearably small minded, and tend towards mediocrity. They are all educated, they all read the papers; they live their lives as if they themselves are important; they contribute to causes of social uplift. The ideal social order would be one without a public but with a mob. The mob revels in its lack of education; it backs intellectual heroes. Thompson goes on to mock the tastes of the public. At least the mob knew it was not qualified to critique high art, and settled for liking what it liked without shame, the public on the other hand, tries to establish rules and limitations for literature, usually under the mask of decency and propriety. Furthermore, the public establishes a hierarchy in which the readers of Howells look down on the readers of Richard Harding Davis who in turn look down on the readers of Laura Jean Libby who in turn look down on the readers of *The Police Gazette*. Huneker and Thompson of course look down on all of them. A hierarchy of readership or public engagement is laughable, all these authors are useless moralists and panderers. For them, only an aristocracy of taste, wit, and birth will

[316] *M'lle New York* "Forward" 1:1 1895

do. Democracy itself is a false idol, and any society that attempts to retain it is doomed.

The Nietzschean overtones of this are no coincidence. While Schopenhauer was Edgar Saltus' philosopher of choice, Nietzsche had much more American influence, and it started, not surprisingly, with the European focused hero-worship of those who considered themselves to be on the artistic and moral cutting edge, in a word, the Decadents. Nietzsche was a natural fit. Thought neither French nor English, and neither a novelist nor an artist, he gave some kind of substantive philosophic backing to the notoriously surface level REVISE Decadent thought, and his own obsession with the sunset of civilization made perfect sense, especially to Huneker's circle. From Nietzsche, American Decadence could gain support for their dislike of bourgeois values, the apotheosis of the individual, and the suggestion of an aristocracy of the intellectually and artistically worthy.

Huneker sometimes fancied himself an American popularizer of Nietzsche, going so far as meeting Nietzsche's sister in Europe. Vance Thompson, as well, found Nietzsche to be sympathetic. Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, whose work on Nietzsche's impact in America is incomparable, cites James Huneker and Vance Thompson as early adopters of the Nietzsche vogue. For Huneker Nietzsche was "a titanic naysayer who decried the entire fund of nineteenth century morality—from Christian sentimentalism to secular humanism, scientific socialism, and democratic-idealism—as confessions of a Western civilization in precipitous decline. Unlike other iconoclasts, however,

Nietzsche's rejections and unafraid love of earth' [sic?] shorn of all inherited psychic props."[317] Thompson on the other hand "employed Nietzsche as a fellow patrician pessimist whose philosophy confirmed that America would remain a 'bankrupt' democracy as long as it mistook equality for necessity, feared individuality as a threat to order, and denatured its thinkers in order to keep the masses ignorant and content."[318] This helps to explain the chaotic and inconsistent nature of Decadent thought. American Decadents like Huneker and Thompson know what they do not like about America, its democracy, its mediocrity, its reliance on popular ideas, and they have a vision of a perfect world, sealed off from the outside, but they propose no system for getting from *a* to *b*, simply because such a proposal would be hopeless. Thus the social criticism of *M'lle New York* is snide and supercilious. Thompson and Huneker take on everything they think that the bourgeois hold sacred, especially the ideas of equality and democracy. In the pages of *M'lle New York* as fat cats cavort with maidens in the margins, equality is a joke that only the very foolish believe.

James Huneker provides a more personal view of his disdain for the "real" world and public that inhabited it. While Vance Thompson wrote most of the editorial pieces in *M'lle New York,* James Huneker shared his highly political disdain of the American political system. While he prided himself on his impracticality, his devotion to high art, and his principled objection to anything that smelled of social change, this very stance led to an articulation of a

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[317] Ratner Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, *American Nietzsche: A History of an Icon and His Ideas* (University Of Chicago Press, 2011), 41.

[318] Ratner-Rosenhagen 44

worldview. For Huneker, socialism was the highest folly, the kind of engagement with the world that Decadence was deliberately opposed to. In a typical remark he sneers "Socialism, that daydream of a retired green grocer who sports a cultivated taste for dominoes and penny philanthropy."[319] Although he came from a fairly well-off and decided bourgeois family—his father was a house painter, and his mother's father a printer—Huneker was not entirely unsympathetic to the poor. He spent much of his life in boarding houses, and was perpetually in debt perhaps due to the necessity of supporting (or not) wives, ex-wives (of which he eventually had two), steady mistresses and innumerable flings. This, in addition to his taste for food and drink, his love of travelling in Europe, and the slim wages he made as a music critic, left him often struggling. Yet he did not identify as Bohemian, nor support any of their radical social causes, or particularly enjoy life amongst the mob. His home on the East side was "for years as close as he got to Paris—and it was probably as close as he ever got to bohemia."[320] As his biographer puts it, Huneker "sympathized with the poor and oppressed, but had no illusions about their taste."[321] Indeed, Schwab argues that it was precisely Huneker's "antipathy to socialism and his apolitical attitude" which later, for socially and politically engaged critics, "probably indicated a shallow intellect" and contributed to his short half-life in American cultural memory.[322] The same could be said for the half-life of American Decadence in cultural memory. While many

[319] Huneker, James *Egoists* 230
[320] Schwab 4
[321] Schwab 107
[322] Schwab 295

far more influential figures such as James Branch Cabell, Carl Van Vechten, and H. L. Mencken argued for the importance of Decadence to themselves personally and to culture, the affected Decadent apathy and non-engagement made it a hard sell.

Huneker's observations on Coney Island, a public place if ever there was one, give us an example of the way that "the public" was anathema to Decadence and why social change was a wild goose chase. Huneker hates Coney Island so much he suggests its immediate demolition. He questions "why, after the hot, narrow, noisy, dirty streets of the city do these same people crowd into the narrower, hotter, noisier, dirtier, wooden alleys of Coney?"[323] He repeatedly puts "people" and "public" in scare quotes, at one point spelling it "peepul" to mock the social reformers. He reports that Jacob Riis even despaired of being able to teach the poor to be clean. For Huneker, the people show absolutely no taste, they are dirty; they smell; they seem to enjoy spending their money on entertainments that are not entertaining and on food that is positively revolting. He wishes the social workers who spend their time interfering in city life would instead take it upon themselves to beautify Coney Island, "but the public likes to be fooled, swindled,—alas!" [324] He further comments that although there is laughter and screaming, there is no joy. The miserable children sit in the dirt and bake in the sun. Of those who seek to improve the lot of the poor, and those who take advantage of them in the name of social uplift he writes:

[323] Huneker *New Cosmopolis* 156
[324] Huneker *New Cosmopolis* 158

“Privileges usurped from the public are granted to a lot of greedy money-muckers who bamboozle the people. The poor, more than the rich, rob the poor.”[325]

After meeting a family of Russian immigrants who were all near death, Huneker indulges, and he clearly understands it as an indulgence, in some pity: “There was a bitter taste in my mouth. If a poor devil of a tramp or a working man had met me then I should not have been able to look either one in the eye. Oh, how cheap is charity! The silver I spent did not relieve the Levins. They had scarcely bade me good-bye, so oppressed were they by their sorrow, their shame. They must have hated me. The man was not ignorant. His English betrayed a reader. He had conversed well about Gorky and Tolstoy, had read Karl Marx, and knew the names of all his saints of anarchy. A socialist? I do not know. I only know that your bookish theories go to smash when you hear a man's voice thrill with anguish.”[326] Here Huneker admits some social connection and rejects the theories that explain poverty. He even begins to doubt his own mantras, as this man was clearly well schooled, and perhaps even possessing of the individual taste that might elevate him into the league of worthy individuals.

Huneker continues in a vein even closer to the radicalism he so detested: “Don't ask me the remedy. I am neither a professional prophet nor a socialist. Don't throw socialism at my head. Ready-made prophylactics smell suspiciously. The ‘dismal science’ scares me. Before the fatal words ‘unearned increment’ I retreat. And the socialist's conception of the state approaches singularly close to

[325] Huneker *New Cosmopolis* 153
[326] Huneker *New Cosmopolis* 175

the old conception of monarchy…That adventure has cured me of all foolish optimistic boasting. I have told the story plainly." [327] Even as Huneker's sympathy is played upon, he still knows that the all-encompassing theories of the socialists and social reformers are bound to failure.

But as dawn approached, Huneker found his senses returning, his brief bout of pity faded away as he hears the answer to his question of what the answer to the problem of the Levis SIC? is: "Better dead!" The mobs thickened. Policemen fought them into line. The hot sun arose, in company with the penetrating odors of bad coffee and greasy crullers. Another day's labor was arrived. Soon would appear the first detachment of women and children sick from the night in the city. Soon would be heard the howling of the fakers: 'Go to Hell, go to Hell-gate!' I felt that I had been very near it, that I had seen a new Coney Island. I went home, after this, the most miserable night of my life--miserable because my nerves were out of gear. I was once more the normal, selfish man, thinking of his bed, of his breakfast. I had, of course, quite forgotten the Levins."[328]

Huneker's moment of weakness immediately returns to the Decadent (and in Huneker's case Nietzschean) position of non-interference. Nevertheless, this non-interference was merely a pose, as the American Decadents did in fact put forward a vision of society just as coherent and forceful as any other social

[327] Huneker *New Cosmopolis* 175
[328] Huneker *New Cosmopolis* 175

system of the time. Instead of turning away from social and cultural theorists, Huneker, Saltus Cram and others are deeply engaged with social thought.

If there is no social system that would appease Decadence, what kind of world were they looking for? The utopias that Decadence suggested were fantastic to be sure, but they hint at a powerful cultural contention that is the legacy of Decadence. If to follow Decadence one must follow the strange desires of one's own heart and sense of beauty, then it is a shocking coincidence that the individual Decadents dreamt of remarkably similar utopias. A better explanation is of course that this emphasis on "the personal" and "the individual" was not mere solipsistic individualism that would lead to anarchy but an important reconception of the individual as the central component of a highly organized society.

Sadakichi Hartmann, a poet of German and Japanese descent who traveled in Decadent and Symbolist circles, describes Saltus after his death, writing that his salon was cluttered with books, "objets d'art, Chinese hangings, Japanese screens, East India statuary. And there Edgar Saltus would sit on a sort of baldachined throne much higher than the divans of his guests, [and?] dispense cigarettes ten inches long."[329] There is some suggestion that this description was the product of Hartmann's own imagination, given that Marie Saltus suggests a more cluttered writer's den as Saltus' sanctuary, and the material effects of his estate were valued at less than $100 after his death.[330]

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[329] Sadakichi Harmann "The Edgar Saltus I Knew" *The Bookman* Sept 1923, 17

[330] See Sprague n 126

This is the kind of sanctuary, a room focused on the individual genius, filled with exotic artifacts, and adoring listeners, that an American Decadent wanted, but could not, in the end, afford.

Ralph Adams Cram's *The Decadent* best exemplifies this complex interaction of the individual and the world and provides the clearest picture of the Decadent utopia. *The Decadent* is a short book privately printed for Cram by his friends. The book itself is a work of art, as was the hallmark of Copeland and Day's books. Cram was later embarrassed about the book, calling it an indiscretion. Still, in it he lays out the clearest statement of a Decadent view of history and society. The book tells the story of Malcolm McCann, a socialist, who goes to visit his old friend and student Aurelian Blake. As he travels to Blake's house he notes the sad and dirty conditions of the towns, the misery of the people, and the signs of "progress" all around him. Taken by private coach, he watches "the nineteenth century, seething with impotent tumult,—festering towns of shoe factories and cotton-mills, lying tradesmen and legalised piracy; pork-packing, stock-brokers, quarrelling and snarling sectaries, and railroads; politicians, mammonism, realism, and newspapers."[331] McCann is the sort of person who searches for meaning in the light of this obvious disaster. He is an avowed socialist, who sees a transitional moment in the chaos around him, and while he is disgusted by the dirt and poverty, feels himself somehow responsible for the poor. At Aurelian's, a country retreat that is the most beautiful serene place the McCann has ever seen, he meets Strafford Wentworth, who engages

[331] Cram *The Decadent* 40

him in an argument about the futility of socialism. McCann is outraged by Wentworth's proposition that the world would be better under a monarchy rather than a socialist state, exclaiming:

"Then you are a reactionist, an aristocrat; no socialist!", Wentworth replies," I am a monarchist and a vehement socialist."

"That is a paradox."

"So are most final truths, since a paradox is only a concise statement of the colour on each side of the shield; you remember the fable?"

"Then you mean to say that socialism and monarchism do not negative each other?"

"No more than the silver of one side of the shield negatives the gold of the other.""[332]

Wentworth goes on to make the point that any system which relies on universal suffrage, the right of the people to elect their leaders, or somehow be leaders of themselves is bound to end in disaster. It is a monarchy, but a monarchy of the public, which would be even more distasteful than rule by a king. For him, democracy inevitably leads to a dreary, unpleasant tyranny of emancipated slaves. He cites the recent global revolutions, arguing that they fail because they hope to put power in the hands of "the people" whoever they may be. The only hope for socialism, for a true government of the people, is monarchy. A good ruler would govern the people and save them from their own corruption. Socialism and monarchy are inseparable from each other. As this

[332] Cram *The Decadent* 21

argument continues, Aurelian steps in: “You will reach nothing by such argument, my children. You are both visionaries,—you, Malcolm, who dream of ideal, impossible republics surrounded by the tottering ruins of your fantastic fabrics, builded on the shifting sand of popular fancies; you, Strafford Wentworth, dear dupe of futile hopes, vainly watching for the King to come to his own again. Dreamers both of you! I alone am the practical man; I wait for that which the gods may give. In the mean time I stand with the 'divine Plato,' aside, under the wall, while the storm of dust goes by. Forsake your forlorn hope, Malcolm; stand to one side with me, and wait. And in the meantime"—he lifted a strange Japanese viol—"in the meantime, sing, and forget the imminent night. Malcolm, there is beauty still left, and a little art; it will last us through the twilight.""[333]

Aurelian, the supreme Decadent, argues that any kind of theorizing is pointless. Again, we confront the strange paradox of Decadence as an ideology of ideals of impracticality, of fantasy, and the Decadent conception of themselves as ruthless pragmatists, as the only ones who actually understand the movement of history. Here, Aurelian knows that any attempt to create change is hopeless. Indeed, any kind of theorizing about the solutions or the future is hopeless. The hellscape outside the gates of his retreat will exist whether he wants it to or not. History will move as it will. He is not insensible to the suffering that McCann sees, as he explains: “"No, it is reason. I know myself: I am of no use to you; I thought I might be once, and I tried. Everything sickens me,—every detail of the life that is now, the stock exchange and newspapers, alleged art and trade, and

[333] Cram *The Decadent* 22

the whole false principle that is under it all. I can't fight them, the contest sickens me."[334] Aurelian is not ignorant of the world, or uneducated in the latest political and economic theories.

He continues to explain to McCann:

> It is all wrong, the principle of your reform; you are wrong yourself. I can't have hope, and if I can't have hope I can't fight. How can I fight for a reform that, if it were carried, would only take the power out of the hands of a sordid gang of capitalists and throw it into the hands of a sordid gang of emancipated slaves? Life would be as hideous under their *régime* as now. You would change the ownership of cities, but you would not destroy them. You would change the control of machinery, but you would not destroy it. You would, in a word, glorify the machine, magnify the details, ignore the soul of it all,—and the result? Stagnation. I have read your Utopias,—they are hopelessly Philistine; their remedies are stimulants that leave the disease untouched. Malcolm, you will fail, for you do not see far enough. 'Ill would change be at whiles, were it not for the change beyond the change.' They are the words of your own prophet; you will, if you succeed, bring in the change, and it will be ill indeed. I wait for 'the change beyond the change.'[335]

[334] Cram *The Decadent* 32
[335] Cram *The Decadent* 33

The only hope for the world is the devastating, crashing change that only history or the gods can bring about.

So Aurelian sequesters with the enlightened in the secluded world that he has created. It is filled with smoke and slumbering men reclining on divans and cushions. Jade and ivory objects crowd the rooms. A young Japanese woman floats through like a dream, serving wine and opium. Exoticized black men work as chauffeurs and servants. Oriental art hangs on the wall. For Cram's Decadents, the only way through is through. While they wait they create around themselves the kind of world that they hope against hope might reign after the collapse is complete.

Here then, is the connection of Decadents with Modernity. Neither welcoming or mitigating, they, and they alone, they believed, recognized that change was inevitable, that history was uncontrollable, and that the individual was the only stable factor. This view profoundly influenced their engagement, or lack of engagement with the world. This was a way of dealing with modernity that was not entirely anti-modern, nor entirely conservative, but something entirely different.

The Mahogany Tree makes a similar point about the kind of person the Decadent was, and what kind of world he wanted. *The Mahogany Tree* was an early little magazine, devoted to literature, best remembered for being the first to publish Willa Cather. It featured many of the same people as *The Knight Errant* and was founded in 1892 by a group who got to know each other as Harvard undergraduates and who orbited around George Santayana. This group

eventually included editor Herbert Copeland, Louise Imogen Guiney, and Ralph Adams Cram. Halfway through its run, Mildred Aldrichh, a journalist best known for her books on the Great War, took over as editor and its focus was lost. *The Mahogany Tree* was not truly Decadent. In the inaugural issue, the Editor, a composite personality used to describe the purpose of the magazine, considers his taste romantic, and even admits an admiration for Rudyard Kipling, revealing an anglophilia common to its contributors. A regular feature, "Round the Mahogany Tree" put characters called The Editor, The Poet, The Essayist, The Philistine, and The Quiet One, in conversation. In a later issue, they tackle the issue of Decadence, admitting that a Decadent is "blissfully uncertain" as a concept. Still, by 1892, Decadence and Decadents were enough in the air to be confusing. Compared to a Bohemian the Decadent is "A more ethereal sort of a person and one who absolutely must live in luxury and idleness to be perfect, but his morals are similar to those of a Bohemian."[336] Here the Decadent ideal is to live a free life of art without the constraints of middle class morality, but with all the luxuries that money can buy, and without the troublesome activities of the Bohemian. Still, the luxury that the Decadent insists on is decidedly material. "He lies on a window seat in a nest of cushions and smokes pink cigarettes and drinks absinthe". If he found the ideal woman, who of course does not actually exist, he would move to an island with her "somewhere in the tropics, furnish it with the implements of the Decadence, cushions, cigarettes, incense, wine, Turkey carpets, jade bowls, ivory couches, Burne-Jones's pictures, French

[336] "Round the Mahogany Tree" *The Mahogany Tree* May 28, 1892, 1:22 345.

novels, Oscar Wilde's complete works-and live there the ideal life,- the new Adam and Eve, whose children would not go wrong at the first touch, because they would have no consciences and couldn't do wrong."[337] While at first this seems like an escapist fantasy, it also suggests the urge to create a new kind of society. After the fall, if there are still those who appreciate art, they may be able to help create a new world. This display of material obsession is contradicted almost immediately when the Editor continues to explain that though this ideal person does not exist there are real Decadents who are "warring against the paynims of realism and the dragons of materialism'"[338] Decadence suggests a world in which material pleasures would not have to be attached to capitalism, or even explicit materialism. In which the exotic and foreign would not have to go hand in hand with imperial ambitions or the squabbling of nations states over trade agreements. Here the editor quotes the first issue of *The Knight Errant*, which was more explicitly Decadent. So, no one *is* in fact a decadent; it is the ideal of the Decadent that does the cultural work. In this case, that work is to set up another vision of society's future. For the pragmatists and social workers that Huneker mocks, this is the dream of a functioning, organic society, for the Puritans on whom some Decadents blame their cultural marginalization; it is a society organized under a Calvinist God, for the socialists it is a utopia ruled by the proletariat and the state. For the Decadent, all these visions are not only

[337] "Round the Mahogany Tree" *The Mahogany Tree* May 28, 1892, 1:22 345.
[338] Round the Mahogany Tree" *The Mahogany Tree* May 28, 1892, 1:22 345

unrealistic, but also unpleasant, the only thing to hope for, is a future of individual pleasure, abjuring all dreams of social integration.

How can Decadence reject materialism, even go to war against it as *The Knight Errant* suggests, while at the same time base their utopias on such conspicuously material signs? The Decadent creates at once a world that is socially isolated, but at the same time deeply connected to other cultures, to Europe, to the East, to the world. The Orient is here the mediating factor that allows the Decadents to assert this blatant paradox. Chinese, Japanese, Indian objects serve something more than the function of suggesting difference, luxury, and sophistication. Of course, they reference an imperial system, without which the very word Decadence loses its meaning. For the world to be ending, America must be an imperial power, and these objects of the east serve to solidify the Decadent view of history. They also hint toward the effeminacy and sensuousness that Decadents played for shock value. But the East was also a pre-industrial world, a world that Decadents imagined could provide a model for a society that retained structure and individuality (at least for some) while rejecting capitalism and puritanical morality. These objects of the Orient, the porcelain, and the opium and the cigarettes, the fans, screens, lamps, hangings, and carpets, even the lovely Japanese woman who floats through *The Decadent* crass material objects into the smoky idealized objects of the mind. These are objects that are not quite of this world, not mundane; thus they can co-exist with a strident defense of idealism, of the life of the imagination.

In this context, *The Knight Errant* seems less like an antimodern search for experience, than critique of the current social system set within a complicated understanding of the individual's place within history. [339] In the first issue, we are first introduced to the idea of the Knight Errant, a figure belonging to another century, who wars against realism and materialism. Again, we are treated to a series of paradoxes: Individuals without individualism, a fight without hope but that will be successful nonetheless, beauty, art and luxury without materialism.

In a very self-aware essay, the writers note that they expect to be understood as either reactionary, escapist, or as some daydream reminiscent of Don Quixote's. They insist that this is not the case, that their struggle is based on a careful understanding of history and a thoughtful consideration of all other options and worldviews, which are found wanting. The enemy is not a man, in this case, but the age itself, and the Knight has no hope of winning. However, he has no choice but to search for beauty, to learn the principles of true art, even in an age that arrays itself against this quest.

In a later essay in the first issue, Ralph Adams Cram makes it clear that the decadence is a major concern. For anyone with the ability to notice it is obvious that the end is near. Cram suggests that individualism needs to be replaced by idealism. He cites the new spirit of the sixteenth century, the Reformation and Renaissance, as setting up a process that led to America's current condition in which realism, naturalism, impressionism, eclecticism,

[339] The *Knight Errant* was a little magazine published in Boston for one volume in 1892 and 1893. In visual style it eschewed the modernism of *M'lle New York* and instead portrayed a gothic feel. It was edited by Ralph Adams Cram and Bliss Carman and its contributors included Bertram Goodhue, Charles Eliot Norton, Louise Imogen Guiney, and F. Holland Day.

agnosticism, rationalism, the competitive spirit and mamonism were the inevitable result. Our faith in evolution, in the idea that this is "progress" is short-sighted, and in fact backwards because all the signs that we point to as "progress" are in fact signs of the Decadence. He smiles that Mr. Spencer and Mr. Huxley's natural forces of evolution will soon be outdone by the powerful and inevitable collapse. He puts all of these problems under the strange banner of individualism. The triumph of individualism, the idea that each person is a contributor and equal voice in a public, is democracy and capitalism, which in their preposterous failings have led to a rigid inequality. He argues "The conditions of life itself which once were accepted as means to a clearly visible end, beauty of living and environment, have come to be only such as aid in the struggle for life that has grown now so fierce, in the acquisition of wealth in legal tender and securities, rarely used but hoarded instead, and in the furthering of purely material and enervating bodily comfort."[340] He further comments, in a vein that bears striking resemblance to Weber's as yet unwritten *Protestant Ethic,* that what was once a religion, a world of magic has been degraded through Protestantism and then American Puritanism, into a worship of rationality, to agnosticism and materialism. The world of the imagination, "at last, expressed in the mathematical forms of a totally different manifestation of the human mind…stands discredited and dead, a mere phantasm of its former self"[341]

[340] Cram, Ralph Adams. "Concerning the Restoration of Idealism, and the Raising to Honour Once More of the Imagination." The Knight Errant 1, no. 1 (April 1, 1892): 10–15. 12

[341] Cram, Ralph Adams. "Concerning the Restoration of Idealism, and the Raising to Honour Once More of the Imagination." The Knight Errant 1, no. 1 (April 1, 1892): 10–15. 13

John Ruskin, Richard Wagner, Walter Pater, Dante Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones and William Morris have at least seen to the root of this Decadence and act as prophets of the new life. This mix of contradictory social theories from conservative to revolutionary is not accidental. The point is that art is the only thing that binds together the true prophets, not their theorizing. Those who have retained the ideals of true art will be able, after the *sturm und drang* of the fall has passed, "to build on the wide ruins of a mistaken civilization" and create, or recreate a civilization worth of art and beauty.[342] This would be a world of individuals, but not of individualism. As Bertram Goodhue later clarifies "So we have for consideration a number of isolated individuals and small schools who, though they work independently, are striving toward the same end."[343] In Cram's world there is no assumption of equality, no republic of equals, no bourgeois sphere.

Their utopia of the individual, an ideal never to be reached, was, in their view at least, a realistic understanding of current circumstance. Instead of attempting to change or alter the horrors they saw around them, as did the foolish bohemians and socialists, they urge retreat. In the face of a failing democracy and industrial system, they urged the return of aristocracy, a more pragmatic and artistically beneficial system. Their justification for all this was of course the preservation and continuation of the production of art and beauty. It is the paradoxical nature of this vision, its rejection of individualism the lived side by

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[342] Cram, Ralph Adams. "Concerning the Restoration of Idealism, and the Raising to Honour Once More of the Imagination." The Knight Errant 1, no. 1 (April 1, 1892): 10–15, 13.
[343] Goodhue, Bertram Grosvenor. "The Final Flowering of Age-End Art." The Knight Errant 1, no. 4 (January 1, 1893): 106–12. 108

side with a defense of the rights of the superior individual, its suggestion that socialism and monarchy were one and the same, its rejection of mamonism and materialism for a world of luxurious material comfort, that contributed to the loss of their vision amid the chaos of the *fin de siècle*.

Fig. 1 *The Lotus* Vol 1, no 2 pg 45

Conclusion

The 1890s are a well-worked field in history. Obviously I have only gestured at some of the things that make this decade so alluring, for scholars and for those who lived it. I have argued that studying Decadence allows us a new vantage point from which to view this period.

I came to this topic after searching for something through which I could explore my interest in normality and deviance, how perceived normality might be subversive, and how certain kinds of marking and unmarking of the self with deviant or minority status functioned to maintain cultural power. The Decadents were themselves obsessed with this question. Their sense of historical importance, of moment, of past and present makes them a cooperative subject for the historian.

Their cultural criticism, which I have tried to highlight here is certainly of no immediate use to our world. They are not easy to love, admire or even understand. Their reactionary snobbishness and oppositional defiance does not lead the reader to a desire to emulate them. Their politics regarding “the masses” are incorrigibly selfish and short-sighted. Yet with some effort of empathy, the duty of every historian, the insights of the Decadents become less recondite. What makes them difficult to understand is precisely their most important contribution: paradox. They created third spaces from what seemed to be purely dichotomous options. Here I have highlighted how they situated themselves around gender, sexuality, and history. They emphasized gender performance, and refused a binary, in a culture that linked mind, body, and soul inextricably. They created an aristocracy in a country without one. They turned the

health/illness binary on its head. They lived in the past in a moment of the future. This creation of space, of possibility, is what they have to offer.

In an attempt to reverse the appearance of Decadence as a passive retreat from the world, I have framed this work in the context of love, a positive attribute. Certainly this is closer to how Decadents saw themselves, as devoted exponents of beauty and art. It is the "morbid" part of this love that troubled Decadents, their readers, and their detractors. While American Decadents tended to see accusations of morbidity as short-sighted philistinism, they went out of their way to deliberately cast themselves as unhealthy. While they rejected Nordau's ultimate diagnosis, his symptoms provided them a pattern to fit, a type that put the most fear into the hearts of the conventional Americans they so despised.

In the context of Degeneration rhetoric, Decadents eschewed all Darwinian and evolutionary thought. They cleaved to an older worldview in which only change was constant and nothing ever really changed. Thus, they expressed their degeneration, not in organic terms, but rather as a state of being perceived as different in a world that was going through changes. In effect they placed the degeneration at the feet of the Others, the philistines, the public. They themselves were the keepers of the cultural seed that would survive the coming collapse. For this trouble they gained the stigma of morbidity, which they gladly shouldered, quite willing to make themselves as different as possible from those who greeted modernity with less knowing eyes.

This morbidity was expressed and understood almost exclusively in gendered terms. From the glittering high-society worlds of Edgar Saltus' novels to the sensual escapism of Cram's *Decadent*, American Decadents appropriated symbols of femininity to suit their purposes.

In addition to their cultural appropriation of femininity, they express an attachment to the perverse, to the "dark" side of love. They express this attachment not necessarily through physical acts, though certainly some of them participated in homosexual relationships as well as other brands of perversion. They also reject the idea of perversion as an intrinsic identity—the "liberal" attitude. Their assertion of perversion as a personal and artistic choice, a combination of taste, sensitivity and preference best expressed in art, sheds new light on a moment in the history of sexuality.

Elizabeth Freeman argues that "being normatively 'modern' is a matter not only of occupying an imagined place at the new end of a sequence but also of living a coordinated, carefully syncopated tempo between a quick time that seems to be enforced and a slow time that seems to be a matter of choice."[344] In her view, queer history resides in "cherish[ing] not only history's flotsam and jetsum but also the excess generated by capital, its castoff, and the episodes it wishes us to forget."[345]

American Decadence is such a moment, forgotten by history, though still relevant. It was forgotten because its adherents offered no solutions, no hope, no

[344] Freeman, Elizabeth. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham NC: Duke University Press Books, 2010, xii.
[345] Freeman xvi

sense of continuity. Rather they understood themselves, as few do, as participants in a particular moment in history, a moment that would shortly pass. Nevertheless, their resistance to the demands of modernity, their appropriation of marginalized culture in order to maintain their privileged alterity, and their essential queerness remain vital and entrancing, just as they predicted.

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