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INTRODUCTION

Decline and fall

This is a book about loss and the stories it generates. In the last years of the nineteenth century English writing was especially rich in such stories. Across disciplines and genres are heard the same anxieties concerning the collapse of culture, the weakening of national might, the possibly fatal decay – physical, moral, spiritual, creative – of the Anglo-Saxon "race" as a whole. A sense of abiding loss is familiar enough in many periods (our own included), but the idioms used to express that sense will always be historically specific. So too will be the ways in which such perceptions are cast into narrative, into stories a culture tells itself in order to account for its troubles and perhaps assuage its anxieties.

Though I do not hesitate to draw in works from other disciplines, my primary texts in this study are widely read fictional narratives of the 1880s and 90s. A nation, or any imagined community, is held together in part by the stories it generates about itself. We are perhaps more familiar with fictions that tell of a people's origins, cast in the form of epic or myth: Aeneas founding Rome, or Brutus Albion. Heroic narratives like these are instrumental in the creation and maintenance of collective identities – and one thinks of their proliferation throughout the nineteenth century – but nations also sustain themselves in literally more prosaic ways. We need not unreservedly assent to Georg Lukács's claim that novels are epics for a fallen age in order to maintain, along with Lukács, that fictional prose narrative is the preeminent aesthetic form through which modern communities in the West make and remake themselves.[1] This being the case, we need to account for the decidedly eschatalogical impulse pervading so much late-Victorian fiction. Heroic narratives of foundation give way to stories of the end time. It may be, as contemporary commentators seldom tired of iterating, that the ends of centuries inevitably breed such dark fantasies. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, fin de siècle always feels like fin du globe. It may also be, as Frank Kermode has shown, that the Victorian fin de siècle reenacts patterns of apocalyptic yearning that reach back many

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centuries.[2] Yet it is undeniably the case that the late Victorians enact their own peculiar patterns, speak their own dialect.

This study focusses on fin-de-siècle representations of three forms of decline: national, biological, aesthetic. As I argue throughout, in late-Victorian thought these terms often entailed one another, so that a discussion of any one of them led to consideration of the other two. Nation, body, art: it seemed to many that their respective declines were mutually implicated. Under these broad headings were arrayed a variety of more specific (though still unwieldy) anxieties, including but not limited to the retrenchment of empire, the spread of urban slums, the growth of "criminal" classes, the proliferation of "deviant" sexualities, the rise of decadent art, and even the demise of the three-decker novel. As John Stokes points out, "lumping things together" is a habit of mind characteristic of the Victorian fin de siècle.[3] Indeed, the conviction that a wide variety of seemingly disparate phenomena were, on some deep level, connected was one of the energizing fictions of the period.

Of the social vocabularies available to fin-de-siècle writers to articulate their sense of decline, this book attends most closely to those generated by the pseudo-science of degeneration theory. Like its better-documented counterpart, "progress," "degeneration" was a term no late-Victorian thinker could do without. As a critical tool, its value coincided with its reach. Recent works by Daniel Pick, William Greenslade, and Sander Gilman have shown how degeneration theory enabled middle-class commentators to forge functional links among manifestly unlike phenomena.[4] (An 1894 study, for instance, gathered under this one critical paradigm discussions of financial institutions, the development of landed property, dinosaurs, crayfish, rudimentary organs in mammals, and the decline of empires.[5]) Even in less extreme usages, degeneration theory permitted writers to move easily through a wide range of topics.

Invariably, the topics addressed were ones that from a middle-class perspective gave most cause for alarm. The class allegiances of degeneration theory are always highly visible: as Greenslade puts it, degenerationism was "an enabling strategy by which the conventional and respectable classes could justify and articulate their hostility to the deviant, the diseased and the subversive."[6] From its modern beginnings in the 1850s in the work of Benedict-Augustin Morel, the study of degeneration was at once a branch of biology and a form of cultural criticism undertaken by a beleaguered bourgoisie. Morel, a clinical psychiatrist specializing in the study of cretinism, wanted to develop criteria by which to identify the degenerate subject, but he placed this endeavor within a wider concern for

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the fate of the nation. Degeneracy afflicted the individual, but its supposed causes (poverty, malnutrition, prostitution, crime, alcoholism, pollution) and effects (sterility, madness, imbecility, suicide, revolution) reached deep into the collective life of the people. At every point the biological model of the degenerate provided ways to theorize social decay.

This protean quality brings its own problems, of course. Like the great totalizing vocabularies associated with the names of Hegel, Darwin, Marx, and Freud, the vocabulary of degeneration so saturated Western consciousness in the fin de siècle that tracking it can be difficult.[7] "Knowledge" about degeneracy quickly achieved the status of popular wisdom, available for use by a wide variety of non-specialists. One need not have studied, or even have read, the works of pathologists or clinicians in order to "know" what degeneracy looked like or what it entailed. This assimilation into the vernacular of a technical discourse was aided by the ease with which degeneration mapped onto older paradigms of decline and fall from the Old Testament onward. Even within scientific communities, moreover, significant conceptual slippages occurred, with little agreement as to proper methods or objects of study. This was especially the case in Great Britain, where the study of degeneration was not organized around commanding figures like Morel in France or Cesare Lombroso in Italy. The relative absence of sharply defined schools of thought in Britain was a further reason that degeneration "theory" there was less a coherent system than a form of common sense.

It is as a form of common sense that I approach the various invocations of degeneration in the period. Nothing like scientific or methodological rigor can be said to structure them. As Antonio Gramsci reminds us, one strength of common sense is that it "cannot be reduced to unity and coherence" and thus can accommodate conceptual contradictions that might otherwise prove disabling.[8] Sometimes degenerative paradigms were brought forward consciously and clearly, as when London newspapers used Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1895) to help "explain" the accusations brought against Oscar Wilde. Other times those paradigms pervade the background, giving texture and lending resonance to critical lamentations over perceived losses of various kinds. My object has not been to bring these and other instances into some kind of ultimate coherence – impossible in any case – but rather to indicate the differing ways in which a small cluster of basic tropes could be articulated and deployed.

Unsystematic and commonsensical as it was, knowledge about degeneration was nevertheless considered to be the purlieu of the trained specialist. The Victorian fin de siècle is the moment of full emergence for a

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figure I call the "professional reader," the man (and it is invariably a man) whose training allows him to extract "useful" meaning from a welter of often confusing signs. A vigorous interest in hermeneutic method – specifically, in the value of close reading – links together practitioners from a variety of disciplines: medicine, psychiatry, criminology, sociology, anthropology, and literary criticism among others. These are fields whose status as professional disciplines was being consolidated during this period, so perhaps it is not surprising that they share a desire for methodological rigor. As the example of Freud and psychoanalysis shows clearly, this interest in close reading grows in part from a faith in interpretation as a form of therapy, a way of mastering troubles by coaxing meaningful pattern out of unruly experience. The classic detective story, as exemplified by Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories, also relies heavily on this faith. As the following chapters will show, the professional man is a recurring figure of authority in late-Victorian fiction. The losses felt at century's end are finally inseparable from the interpretive paradigms used to name them, while those paradigms in turn cannot be understood apart from the professional critics who developed and deployed them.

As I mentioned, the key coordinates of my study are works of popular fiction. I have thus omitted from consideration several writers – Hardy, Gissing, Butler, Conrad come most quickly to mind – who frequently figure in discussions of late-Victorian loss and angst. If in the modern world literature is invested, as Fredric Jameson argues, with "the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions," much more of that kind of cultural work goes on in popular fiction than is generally acknowledged.[9] As I argue, such texts were important disseminators of "knowledge" about degeneracy. A form of popular wisdom, degeneration theory received many of its most compelling articulations in the highly commonsensical modes of popular fiction. Indeed, to a greater extent than on the Continent, public discussion in Britain about social problems was carried on through the medium of mass market texts. That their strivings to achieve satisfying solutions never wholly succeed constitutes their interest and much of their value. *Dracula* for instance addresses, in displaced form, the issue of British imperial decline while also charting a variety of paths by which, in fantasy, that decline may be reversed or transcended. That the "solutions" Stoker's novel offers are finally implausible, self-contradictory, or mutually inconsistent only sharpens our sense of the (perhaps) irresolvable social problems evoked.

In giving extended attention to popular texts, I take issue with at least one tenet of our own popular wisdom, namely that, even at its best, such

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fiction does no more than cheerfully reproduce dominant ideologies. As the citations throughout the following chapters abundantly indicate, the last decade has seen fin-de-siècle popular fiction become the object of extended and fruitful critical inquiry. Yet in most accounts the value of such texts is still said to lie in their "transparency," the way they offer "direct access to a bedrock of ideology or myth."[10] While this claim is doubtless true of many popular texts (as well as of many works of high culture), as a general rule it needs qualifying. Indeed, the narratives I examine are notable for the sophistication with which they give shape and voice to contemporary problems, as well as for the ways in which they attempt to resist dominant ideological structures.

A few final words about the form and scope of this book. Its tripartite structure was suggested by a line in Holbrook Jackson's groundbreaking study of the fin de siècle, *The Eighteen Nineties* (1913). Looking back at the period, Jackson argued that the 1890s split into halves, divided neatly at mid-decade by Oscar Wilde's trial and conviction. The first half, Jackson wrote, was "remarkable for a literary and artistic renaissance, degenerating into decadence; the second for a new sense of patriotism degenerating into jingoism."[11] As a rough indication of the way the period felt to contemporaries, this seems accurate enough. Jackson was a smart and sympathetic critic of the fin de siècle, and in his work we can already sense scare quotes surrounding his use of terms like "degeneracy." Indeed, Jackson everywhere prompts us to question the comfortable symmetry of his formulation, with its familiar rhythms of alternating renaissance and decay.

Just as important, though, he also invites us to consider the *relation* between the halves of his formula, to ask whether "decadence" and "jingoism" are mutually implicated rather than simply opposing terms. For the most part, though, subsequent critics have declined his invitation. As Stokes rightly notes, where Jackson "looked for synchronic interaction" among the period's many facets, later readers have usually "isolated the discrete thread, the significant 'tendency'," and thus explained the whole by the part.[12] The fin de siècle may have enjoyed lumping things together, but twentieth-century criticism has, for good or ill, tended to separate things out.

While the present study cannot pretend to anything like Jackson's scope, it does work to bring seemingly unlike thinkers into productive conversation. Indeed, this book was originally motivated by a desire to bring within the same critical frame such disparate writers as Wilde and Kipling, Nordau and Stevenson, Symonds and Haggard, Doyle and Stoker. In the most general sense, I wanted to see what connections could

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be forged between fin-de-siècle "decadence" and "jingoism." One link was immediately apparent: both terms were used by medical specialists and cultural critics alike to designate forms of degeneracy. Yet it also became clear that, from the perspective of contemporary observers, jingoist imperialism seemed to have been called into existence by decadence, as a counterweight to aesthetic excess. In other words, there is compelling reason to read, say, Kipling alongside Wilde, since the former's ethos of masculinist imperial adventure was in large part a response to the perceived dangers of Wildean aestheticism. At the same time, as works like *The Light that Failed* and Haggard's *She* reveal, masculinist adventure was itself thoroughly "infected" by decadent (and therefore "degenerative") paradigms.

Since this study examines tropes of degeneration, and since late-Victorian degenerationism was obsessed with the decay of organisms both individual and collective, "body" and "nation" finally seemed more appropriate and more flexible terms to use than Jackson's "decadence" and "jingoism." Loosely speaking, Chapters 1, 2, and 3 attend more closely to questions of the body, Chapters 5, 6, and 7 to the nation, with Chapter 4 serving as a pivot between the two sets of three chapters. Yet, as the following pages will amply show, anxieties about the decay of the individual body were inseparable from anxieties about the decay of the collective "body" figured in national or racial terms.

Finally, I should stress that this book does not attempt to determine whether British society was declining "in fact" during this period, nor does it offer criteria by which such a determination could be made.[13] While the works I examine address real and pressing historical problems, my interest is finally in the varying ways in which "history" becomes textually encoded. I approach these texts as forms of "symbolic action" in Kenneth Burke's sense. According to Burke, literary works are "answers to questions posed by the situation in which they arose." Yet they are never "merely answers, they are *strategic* answers, *stylized* answers."[14] Imaginative works are not timeless accounts of universal human concerns, nor as artifacts are they wholly self-consuming or self-reflexive. In however displaced or attenuated a manner, they are human responses to specific human situations, responses necessarily articulated in the materials and idioms of the moment. Yet in their "adopting of…strategies for the encompassing of situations," works of imagination remake those situations. Their relation to history is always asymptotic. "The situations are real," Burke writes, just as "the strategies for handling them have public content," yet the literary work (fiction or nonfiction) is unavoidably "false" in so far as it constitutes

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a "stylized" response.[15] In the end this is no less true of a professedly factual work like J. A. Froude's treatise on empire, *Oceana*, than it is of Bram Stoker's delirious recasting of imperial history as Gothic fantasy in *Dracula*. Each is, in Burke's happy phrase, the "dancing of an attitude."[16]

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PART ONE

Strange cases, common fates

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CHAPTER I

Strange cases, common fates: degeneration and fiction in the Victorian fin de siècle

HOOLIGANS AND FLESHLY POETS

To begin, consider two essays written by the Scottish literary journalist Robert Buchanan. Both invoke degeneration in order to condemn a popular author, though the authors condemned could hardly be less alike. In December 1899 Buchanan attacked Rudyard Kipling in "The Voice of the Hooligan," inaugurating a by now familiar line of Kipling criticism. "The Voice of the Hooligan" linked Kipling's literary ascendancy with the rise of militant jingoism and lamented the barbarizing effects of both on British culture. Kipling's "exaltation to a position of almost unexampled popularity," Buchanan argued, could be accounted for only by the fact that "in his single person [he] adumbrates...all that is most deplorable, all that is most retrograde and savage, in the restless and uninstructed Hooliganism of the time."[1] Late-Victorian fears of the "hooligan" drew heavily on middle-class portrayals of the urban poor as a degenerate race whose physical and psychological health had been irreparably damaged by modern city life.[2] Buchanan extends this category to include those portions of the bourgeoisie whose appetites had likewise been brutalized by contemporary conditions. For Buchanan, the hooligan was the type of the modern degenerate, Kipling its most dangerous spokesman. His fiction pandered to "whatever is basest and most brutal" in modern man, quickening the decline of a once-great English people.[3]

Buchanan, when he is remembered, is sometimes remembered for this essay, though his name is more often linked with a piece published twenty-eight years previous to it. In 1871, under the pseudonym Thomas Maitland, he attacked Dante Gabriel Rossetti in "The Fleshly School of Poetry," thereby earning himself some notoriety among readers of Victorian verse. Where Kipling offended with his violence and vulgarity, Rossetti alarmed with his sensualism and "intellectual hermaphroditism." The vocabulary of degeneration again comes into play, this time in

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connection with what Buchanan thinks of as Rossetti's perverse addiction to the senses and his confounding of gender categories. Fleshly poets are unnatural men, the critic argues. To support this contention, he reads Rossetti's artistic productions as symptoms which betray the pathological deviations of the artist's diseased body. In Rossetti's painting and poetry there is visible

> the same thinness and transparence of design, the same combination of the simple and the grotesque, the same morbid deviation from healthy forms of life, the same sense of weary, wasting, yet exquisite sensuality; nothing virile, nothing tender, nothing completely sane; a superfluity of extreme sensibility, of delight in beautiful forms, hues, and tints, and a deep-seated indifference to…all the thunderous stress of life, and all the straining storm of speculation.[4]

This is diagnosis rather than analysis, and so it is meant to be. In such critical discourse the question, as Barbara Spackman suggests, becomes "not *who* produced a text but *what* – what disease, what atavistic deformity, what hereditary fault."[5] The disease of the fleshly poet finds its counterpart in the disease of the fleshly poem, with body and text each displaying the same telltale "symptoms." Turn where we will in his poetry, Buchanan says, we find only Rossetti and his "sickness." No one of his poems is "quite separable from the displeasing identity of its composer," who cannot help but put "the most secret mysteries" of his being on display in "shameless nakedness."[6] In Kipling too Buchanan finds the same impulse to self-exposure, the same aversion to "anything that demands a moment's thought or a moment's attention," the same uncontrollable desire for sensual gratification, in this case the gratification associated with inflicting punishment, exerting mastery, or indulging brutal instincts.[7]

Despite their differences – and it is difficult to imagine figures more unlike than Rossetti and Kipling – these two writers are in Buchanan's view indicative of larger troubling trends in the culture. While, as forms of "deviance," fleshliness and hooliganism appear to have little in common, they represent for him the two end points at which a debased modernity has arrived. A similar claim is made by Arthur Waugh in his alarmist *Yellow Book* essay of 1894, "Reticence in Literature," where the "two excesses" into which modern English writing has fallen are further coded by gender: "on the one hand, the excess prompted by effeminacy – that is to say, by the want of restraint which starts from enervated sensation; and, on the other, the excess which results from a certain brutal virility, which proceeds from coarse familiarity with indulgence."[8]

This yoking together of seemingly distinct forms of "excess" was common practice among social critics. The title of Hugh E. M. Stutfield's 1895

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