

wound is cured, and Dorian is definitively differentiated from his portrait, not only does he die but the book itself ends. This, for decadence, is the consequence of dividing the aesthetic from the real.

But, of course, the dead Dorian does not properly belong to the real world. Reality in literature is a fictional construct. As is decadence itself, Gilman argues. His complaint is that decadence's unreality is not generally recognized because the term is defined in complementary opposition to social norms that are considered natural, good, and right, most importantly to the idea of progress. Decadence gains its false reality, Gilman declares, from its negative position on a continuum whose positive pole is the equally false reality of cultural advance. "If the ideas of progress and decadence," he writes censoriously, "are really two sides of an illusion, then their persistence is an illustration of the power of language and thought to keep the non-existent in imaginary existence" (160). Good for language and thought, I am tempted to retort. In his anger over the failure of decadence to signify anything concrete, Gilman is insensitive to the way it signifies precisely by means of this apparent failure. He attributes to the notion of decadence a mimetic and epistemological claim that, in my opinion, it does not make and then castigates the concept for not performing its supposed mission.

Indeed, Gilman's impasse itself signals the necessity to return to those authors and artists whose work constitutes the topos of the decadent; to understand how one can articulate the varieties of the provocation of "the decadent" without reducing its cause to any specific agent. Let us turn, then, to an analysis of the works of Nietzsche, Zola, Hardy, Flaubert, Wilde, Moreau, Beardley, Lombroso, and Freud to discover the many ways in which these works put into play medical diagnostics, sexuality, oedipal trauma, the disintegration of the subject and the limits of the human to suggest many unsuspected avatars of the death drive.

Nietzsche's *Decadence* *Philosophy*

About no other subject was Nietzsche as sure of his unique expertise as about decadence. "Nothing has preoccupied me more profoundly than the problem of *decadence*," he asserted in the late work *The Case of Wagner* (CW, 155).¹ "I am in questions of *decadence* the highest instance that now exists on earth,"² he boasted to a correspondent a few months later. Made in 1888, the last year before his collapse into insanity, these claims have sometimes been thought to reflect Nietzsche's intellectual decay, as if his preoccupation with decadence as a subject reflected his decaying mental condition. Nietzsche's thoughts on this subject he claimed to know better than anyone are so riddled with contradictions, critics maintain, that they fail to coalesce into any useful insight. Contradictions are, of course, characteristic of Nietzsche's reflections on any of his key concepts, and readers of his books are used to the multiple twists and turns that characterize his dynamic thought. But in the case of decadence, so bewildering are his many conceptual revisions that, despite his claim that the problem is central to his philosophy, critics have by and large not placed it at the center of their interpretations.³

In this chapter I will defend Nietzsche's claim to special authority in questions of decadence. I will defend it, however, not by elucidat-

ing Nietzsche's definition of the idea but by showing that he reacted with unique vigor to its stimulating force as an intellectual *agent provocateur*. It is, thus, unlikely that readers of this chapter will come away with a clear sense of what Nietzsche meant by decadence. He had no such clear idea himself. My purpose is to help readers appreciate how the concept's semantic mobility found in the transformative velocity of Nietzsche's thought a wonderfully responsive vehicle of expression. The profundity of Nietzsche's meditation on decadence is dynamic and conflictual. It does not arrive; it keeps moving. At the end of this chapter, I will outline nine key moments in Nietzsche's reflection, each of which suggests a significantly different view of what decadence is, none of which can be cited as Nietzsche's conclusive definition of the concept.

Puzzling at the outset is the fact that Nietzsche always uses the French term *décadence* rather than the German *Dekadenz*, a usage that Walter Kaufmann's translations do not respect. One might suppose that Nietzsche intends through this usage to suggest his closeness to a sophisticated sensibility cultivated by certain artists and writers in France in the recent seventies and eighties. Nietzsche's intimacy with *décadence* would then imply a connection between his philosophy, which he calls a "filigree art" full of "nuances" (EH, 223; in French in the original), and avant-garde French aestheticism. But this is only the first of many, mostly misleading, interpretive trails: Nietzsche has very little to say concerning French decadence, about which he is not particularly well informed, and he uses the French term, with its suggestion of cultural difference, even when he is referring to his own physiological ills—his susceptibility to horrible migraines, gastric ailments, and eye troubles are all symptoms, he tells us, of his *décadence*.

Banal and reductive as such references to physical ailments may appear to be, Nietzsche nevertheless designated "the body and physiology" (WR, 271) as the "starting point" for his entire philosophy. So we are justified in beginning an analysis of his ideas on decadence from a physiological perspective. Such a beginning, however, is multiple and complex. Indeed, Nietzsche attributed his fundamental philosophical project, to revalue values, to the reversal of perspectives

that the body's varying states of health and sickness had taught him. "Looking from the perspective of the sick," he observes, "toward *healthier* concepts and values and, conversely, looking again from the fullness and self-assurance of a *rich* life down into the secret work of the instinct of decadence—in this I have had the longest training, my truest experience; if anything, I became master in *this*. Now I know how, have the know-how, to *reverse perspectives*: the first reason why a 'revaluation of values' is perhaps possible for me alone" (EH, 223).

I want to begin now by viewing decadence from the point of view that Nietzsche here associates with "a rich life." In this perspective, the body appears as an organized organic whole and decadence as an ongoing process of the elimination of waste: "Waste, decay, elimination need not be condemned," he notes, "they are necessary consequences of life, of the growth of life. The phenomenon of *décadence* is as necessary as any increase and advance of life: one is in no position to abolish it" (WR, 25). As applied to history, what this means is that societies do not go through periods of prosperity and health followed by periods of decline but that "*décadence* belongs to all epochs of mankind: refuse and decaying matter are found everywhere: it is one of life's processes to exclude the forms of decline and decay" (WR, 184-85). From this perspective, decadence has a necessary and beneficial place in the economy of life. It is not a problem in itself—it becomes problematic only if it threatens to exceed its limits and infect the organism as a whole: "*Décadence* itself," Nietzsche observes, "is nothing to be *fought*: it is absolutely necessary and belongs to every age and to every people. What should be fought vigorously is the contagion of the healthy parts of the organism" (WR, 25-26).

According to this unusual notion of decadence as a sort of natural excretory function, it is clear that no one in his right mind would want to be free of decadence. Decadence is a biological process that assures the organism's health, whether this organism be an individual or a society. Indeed, if your decadent functions should cease you would fall ill. The important thing is for the organism to be healthy as a whole so that it can effectively constrain its naturally diseased parts. When Nietzsche calls himself "*healthy in Grund*," he is read-

ing his own physiology in just these terms. Because he believes that "there is no pathological trait in [him]" (EH, 257), he is able to treat his sickness as "an energetic *stimulus* for life, for living more" (EH, 224). Given that he embodies health (including its decadent functions), any other perspective on life is, by implication, contaminated. "As *summa summarum* [sum total]," he writes, "I was healthy; as an angle, as a specialty, I was a *decadent*" (EH, 224).

While Nietzsche insists, somewhat defensively, on his own fundamental health, he upbraids the rest of us for having allowed decadent poison to spread through our bodies, thereby infecting the entire social order: "The body perishes when an organ is altered," writes Nietzsche, "There is no solidarity in a society in which there are sterile, unproductive, and destructive elements" (WP, 32-33). It is as if the entire society were made up of specialized angles, of splinters and fragments. Paul Bourget uses just such imagery of decomposition to describe a society in decadence, and a corresponding style of decadence, in a passage of his 1881 essay on Baudelaire that Nietzsche borrows, without acknowledgment, for his analysis of Wagner. A society, says Bourget, should be thought of as an organism made up of a federation of lesser organisms, which are in turn a federation of cells, that is, of individual citizens. For the total organism to function properly, the lesser organisms have to subordinate their energies to the good of the whole, just as the cells have to subordinate theirs to the benefit of the lesser organisms. If this hierarchical order fails, anarchy and decadence ensue as individual life thrives at the expense of the whole. "The same law," writes Bourget, "governs the development and decadence of that other organism, language. The style of decadence is one where the unity of the book decomposes to give way to the independence of the page, where the page decomposes to give way to the independence of the sentence, and where the sentence decomposes to give way to the independence of the word."⁴ While judging such fragmentation as catastrophic from a political and moral perspective, Bourget is able to recognize its innovative potential in psychological terms: decadence, he suggests, may stimulate new creativity of a morbid, melancholy, refined, sensual kind.

In contrast to Bourget, for whom the metaphor of organic decomposition offers an insight into the psychological sources of an aesthetics of the future, Nietzsche uses the same image to justify condemning decadent art and the modernity it expresses. In the context of an analysis of the way Wagner typifies decadence, Nietzsche writes: "What is the sign of every *literary decadence*? That life no longer dwells in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page gains life at the expense of the whole—the whole is no longer a whole." But this is the simile of every style of *decadence*: every time, the anarchy of atoms, disintegration of the will, "freedom of the individual," to use moral terms—expanded into a political theory, "equal rights for all." Life, *equal* vitality, the vibration and exuberance of life pushed back into the smallest forms; the rest *poor* in life. Everywhere paralysis, arduousness, torpidity or hostility, and chaos: both more and more obvious the higher one ascends in forms of organization. The whole no longer lives at all: it is composite, cultured, artificial, and artifact (CW, 170). Here we seem to be in a traditionally moral world of good and evil: life that dwells in the whole is good; the decadent impulse that fragments, atomizes, and disorganizes the whole is bad. The whole is formed by a natural, organic process; what disrupts it is artificial, calculated, and hostile. No longer does Nietzsche make an effort to include as inherent to life "the forms of decline and decay" (WP, 184). His model, like Bourget's, derives from contemporary biology, especially from Claude Bernard, and from then-current theories of heredity and degeneration.⁵ When he says that paralysis is everywhere, he intends his diagnosis to refer to all of contemporary society. "The sensibility of the majority of men is pathological and unnatural," he observes, going on to generalize that "mankind is corrupt morally and physiologically" (WP, 32).

At this point Nietzsche, the teacher of life's affirmation, seems to be as negatively critical of life as are the moralists whom he berates for condemning life from a position they mendaciously claim to be outside it. Such unnatural morality is, he maintains, "the very in-

stinct of *decadence*, which makes an imperative of itself. It says: '*Perishi!*' It is a condemnation pronounced by the condemned" (TL, 491). The projection of moral goals—which causes a division of the world into an unchanging universe of truth and an apparent one, this one, that is changing, false, and hence "ought not to exist" (WP, 317)—is, he declares, "a dreadful tool of *decadence*" (WP, 316). Moralists urge men to disdain their bodies and neglect their self-interest, all in order to save their souls (see EH, 292, and TL, 535–36). Nietzsche urges his readers to reject this condemnation of life and to mark a division not between life and an afterlife but between two kinds of life, one impoverished and sickly (i.e., decadent), the other ascending and rich.

This distinction, however, becomes confused because of the difficulty one may have in distinguishing between Nietzsche's condemnation of decadence as fragmentation and his affirmation of vital processes such as "change, becoming, multiplicity, opposition, contradiction, war" (WP, 315). The notion of an organic whole, in terms of which Nietzsche considers the majority of mankind to be pathological, serves the same function structurally as the notion of becoming, which the majority of mankind is too weak to affirm. Wholeness (health) is to fragmentation (decadence) as becoming (health) is to morality (decadence). The logical contradiction in this parallel is evident, but Nietzsche is not perturbed by it. Most important to him, it seems, is that decadence remain as the critical term of condemnation in those structures of paired oppositions that are crucial to his thought—despite his distaste for their metaphysical artifice.

Thus Nietzsche approves of the healthy man's "instinctive aversion against *decadents*" (CW, 192). We have come a long way from his tolerant declarations that decadence "is nothing to be fought" and that "one is in no position to abolish it." He now applies these judgments only to himself and to the few others who are constitutionally healthy and hence capable of what he calls "self-overcoming" (CW, 155). In *The Case of Wagner*, the self that he claims to have overcome is the one who was "a child of this time; that is, a *decadent*" (CW, 155) and who identified with Wagner as the embodiment of this typically modern sensibility. In Nietzsche's analysis, Wagner's decadent genius

is characterized by pathological manifestations such as hysteria, nervous excitability, histrionics, mendacity, visual restlessness, sensationism, aesthetic fragmentation, effeminacy, and more. Nietzsche deploys the well-known psycho-medical rhetoric of degeneration with gusto, acknowledging his indebtedness to it while asserting that he is now the stronger for having both experienced and resisted its temptations.⁶

Nietzsche's resistance to decadent modernity was motivated, he tells us, by a desire to attain "the eye of Zarathustra, an eye that beholds the whole face of man [die ganze Tatsache Mensch] at a tremendous distance—below. For such a goal," he comments, "what sacrifice wouldn't be fitting? what 'self-overcoming'? what 'self-denial'?" (CW, 155). It is not clear just why Nietzsche puts these terms in quotation marks, but it may be because he is aware of their function in just the kind of moral teaching he rejects. Nietzsche's vocabulary of sacrifice and self-denial has a distinctly Christian ring to it: it is as if decadent mankind were "fallen" and the philosopher's self-overcoming gave him access to a transcendent perspective far above the fallen world. Indeed, in the first paragraph of *The Case of Wagner* he writes with ironic self-consciousness, "If I were a moralist, who knows what I would call it [his resistance to the decadence exemplified by Wagner]? Perhaps self-overcoming.—But," he adds, "the philosopher has no love for moralists. Neither does he love pretty words" (CW, 155).

Why then, we may ask, does the philosopher ventriloquize the moralist just at the moment when he is claiming no longer to be one? Perhaps the moralist has not been overcome after all and is masquerading as the philosopher. Such a thought should not be ungenerous to Nietzsche, since he acknowledges being fully implicated in the play of forces he analyzes and the history he narrates. "Most of the conscious thinking of a philosopher," he remarks, generalizing from his own case, "is secretly guided and forced into certain channels by his instincts" (BGE, 11). Perhaps Nietzsche's self-overcoming is driven in part by his "instinct of *decadence*" that divides the world into true and false parts. He distances himself so far from humanity

that he identifies with life as a whole and condemns the majority of mankind in its name. "Life itself recognizes no solidarity," says Nietzsche, "no 'equal rights' between healthy and degenerate parts of an organism: one must excise the latter or the whole will perish—symptomatic for *decadents*, equal rights for the ill-constituted—that would be the profoundest immorality, that would be antinature itself as morality?" (WP, 389). Nietzsche as a spokesman for "life" arrogates the authority to distinguish between what is natural and what unnatural and to condemn decadent body parts and decadent individuals alike to be forcefully removed from the infected organism. "The weak and the failures shall perish: first principle of *our* love of man. And they shall even be given every possible assistance" (TI, 570).

Remarks such as the ones just quoted about excision are disturbing, for they could easily be taken as encouraging a racist eugenics, not to say the possibility of genocide. One reason that Nietzsche's thinking goes awry here is that he has excluded from his picture of the healthy, natural, whole organism those "instincts of *decadence*" that elsewhere he claims to be necessary and inevitable in all men. He now considers degenerate mankind the enemy of his will to power. Thus he declares: "Thesis: the *instincts of decadence*, which, through the moralists, want to become master over the instinctive morality of strong races and ages are 1) the instincts of the weak and underprivileged; 2) the instincts of the exceptions, the solitaires, the abandoned, of the *aborius* in what is lofty and what is petty; 3) the instincts of those habituated to suffering, who need a noble interpretation of their condition and therefore must know as little as possible about physiology" (WP, 228–29). Here his strategy is quite blatant and profoundly disquieting in its implications: physiology, he suggests, serves the elite class of artist-philosophers, of which he sees himself as the foremost exemplar, to diagnose decadents as such. However, his implicit claim to have mastered the knowledge necessary for such unequivocal diagnoses is subject to his own insight that knowledge is no more than "error concerning oneself, will to power, will to deception" (WP, 330).

Nietzsche's error about himself concerns, of course, the fact that

Nietzsche's *Decadence Philosophy*

his own instincts are those of an exception and a solitary habituated to suffering, of a decadent, that is. His assertion that his instincts are fundamentally healthy is evidently "a noble interpretation of [his] condition," born, I would wager, of weakness and self-doubt. Ultimately, that weakness overtakes him entirely and expresses itself in megalomania. (He signs a letter to August Strindberg of December 1888 "Nietzsche Caesar.")⁷ Despite his admonition to himself "not to confuse the *decadence* instincts with *humanity*,"⁸ this is exactly what he does. He is repeating just what he attacks in the moralists, depreciating the actual world in favor of one that ought to be. That desirable world may not be transcendent or even truthful in his view, but Nietzsche nevertheless grants it an essential ground, health. Thus, despite his wish to the contrary, he is no different from past philosophers, of whom he writes: "It is a self-deception on the part of philosophers and moralists if they believe that they are extricating themselves from *decadence* when they merely wage war against it. Extrinsication lies beyond their strength: what they choose as a means, as salvation, is itself but another expression of *decadence*; they change its expression, but they do not get rid of decadence itself" (TI, 478).

Now I realize that by thus quoting Nietzsche against himself I may appear to be setting myself up as his superior, as if my insight were greater than his, which I know full well it isn't. But I do want to register my critique of a certain trend in Nietzsche's thinking and to connect that trend with his attempt to overcome decadence. My point is that his effort to extricate himself from decadence leads him to betray what is strongest about his philosophy, its adherence to perspectivism, becoming a reevaluation of values. As I propose to show in the second half of this chapter, another strand of Nietzsche's thinking could have provided him with a way of valuing decadence positively. But he was apparently unwilling to move in this direction.

The body and physiology—this "starting point" for Nietzsche's philosophy is evidently not a point but rather a complex field of intersecting forces. My first critical narrative took off from a rather stable location in this field, stable by virtue of its clear distinction between

health and decadence. My second narrative will begin in a much more fluid and shifting place. It is the paragraph that Nietzsche writes as a direct response to the question he puts to himself, "The body and physiology the starting point: why?"

We gain the correct idea of the nature of our subject-unity, namely as regents at the head of a communality (not as "souls" or "life forces"), also of the dependence of these regents upon the ruled and of an order of rank and division of labor as the conditions that make possible the whole and its parts. In the same way, how living unites continually arise and die and how the "subject" is not eternal; in the same way, that the struggle expresses itself in obeying and commanding; and that a fluctuating assessment of the limits of power [fließendes Machtgrenzenbestimmen] is part of life. The relative ignorance in which the regent is kept concerning individual activities and even disturbances within the communality is among the conditions under which rule can be exercised. In short, we also gain a valuation of *not-knowing* of seeing things on a broad scale, of simplification and falsification, of perspectivity. The most important thing, however, is: that we understand that the ruler and his subjects are of the same kind, all feeling, willing, thinking—and that, wherever we see or divine movements in a body, we learn to conclude that there is a subjective, invisible life appertaining to it. Movement is symbolism for the eye; it indicates that something has been felt, willed, thought. (WP, 277)

Most striking about this passage is, of course, the fact that it answers a question about the body with a meditation about the subject (both, it should be noted, unmarked by gender). The body teaches us to see the subject right, Nietzsche declares, a claim similar in many respects to Freud's statement that "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego" (SE 19, 26). At the outset of the passage Nietzsche seems to be elaborating, once again, a model of the body as an organic unity with a hierarchical organization of the parts in relation to the whole. The notion of a communality (*Gemeinschaften*) suggests the familiar organicist analogy between the body's constitution and that of a society. But it soon becomes clear that his identification of the body with the subject itself actually dissolves any hierarchical structure the

subject may initially have appeared to have. Nietzsche's language is impressionistic and referentially obscure. It is impossible to determine just what organ or psychic function might be represented by the ruler's position. But his point concerns, precisely, the instability, flux, even invisibility of bodily processes. Ruler and ruled are not fundamentally different and are involved in an ongoing struggle that requires that the limits of power be constantly reassessed. Hence there can be no fixed exercise of authority, no firm ground on which to establish mastery and control. Physiology offers anything but a positivist source of knowledge. It teaches ignorance, nonknowing, *Unwissenheit*. A condition of the regent's rule is acceptance of his perspective as one among many provisional and shifting points of view, each uncertain and transitory. "All our so-called consciousness is a more or less fantastic commentary on an unknown, perhaps unknowable, but felt text," Nietzsche observes in *Daybreak*.⁹

No body fantasized in this manner could possibly be declared healthy or ill *im Grunde*. Its *decadence* instincts could not be excised, permanently subordinated, or phobically projected onto the weak and deprived. The ground that previously served Nietzsche to judge decadence as such has now become invisible. This body is inscribed by its decadence—not as some nearly controlled biological function of waste removal but as an inherent illness that cannot be cured and that is, as Jeffrey Wallen puts it, "inextricably linked to subjectivity itself."¹⁰ "All of us have," Nietzsche writes in *The Case of Wagner*, "unconsciously, involuntarily [wider Wissen, wider Willen] in our bodies values, words, formulas, moralities of *opposite* descent—we are, physiologically considered, *false*" (CW, 192).¹¹

Nietzsche—I want to be clear on this point—does not use the term *decadence* to describe this unconscious falsity. Yet many of his negative descriptions of decadence would require only a slight change of perspective for them to be positively transvalued. Thus his critical view of the decadent fragmented body could be transformed into a positive view of the body as a complex field of competing interpretations and valuations.¹¹ In the preface of 1886 to *The Gay Science* Nietzsche describes himself as a lifelong convalescent who profits from

his fickle health by the way it pluralizes and transfigures his thought: "A philosopher who has traversed many kinds of health, and keeps traversing them, has passed through an equal number of philosophies; he simply *cannot* keep from transposing his states every time into the most spiritual form and distance: this art of transfiguration is philosophy" (GS, 35). Indeed, Nietzsche associates the philosopher's "inability *not* to react" (TI, 519) with the most typical of decadent behaviors, hysteria.¹² Mining his illness as a resource for adventurous, original speculation, the (decadent/hysterical) philosopher artist transposes the body's nonknowing into written "symbolism for the eye." Such, at least, is one way of reading Nietzsche's ambition as a thinker.

His practice fulfills this ambition in many respects. It is often hard to know how to define the "subject-unity" of his later books since the reigning idea is only temporarily more authoritative than any number of other thoughts expressing different, even contradictory perspectives. The books are composed as a kind of communal life of numbered sections, each with its own "subjective, invisible life." Although the numbering suggests a logical sequence, the logic of the continuity is often difficult to discover. The sections are usually made up of paragraphs, but sometimes only of brief epigrams or poems. Sections are collected into larger units, labeled "parts" or "essays," and the last book, *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, is composed entirely of selections from his previous writings. *Eccce Homo* contains chapters whose titles are those of Nietzsche's previously published books, of which he gives critiques here. And, of course, there is the famous *Will to Power*, a book Nietzsche never wrote as such, which was constructed in various quite different versions after his death, and that does not exist at all in the latest authoritative edition of his collected works. Thus the body of Nietzsche's texts appears to be decomposed in much the way he found characteristic of decadent style. Indeed, *The Case of Wagner*, the book into which Nietzsche inserted as his own Bourget's analysis of decadence, is itself a fragmented artifact, made up of a preface, twelve numbered sections of various lengths, a postscript, a second

postscript, and an epilogue. Thus Nietzsche's critique of Wagner could be read as decadent for the same reasons that Nietzsche finds Wagner to be decadent: separate units are animated at the expense of the overall effect, idiosyncrasy takes the place of coherent argument, histrionic exaggeration undermines serious conviction. Surely here "the whole no longer lives at all: it is composite, artificial and artificial." From this perspective, Nordau is right to find Nietzsche exemplary of the *fin de siècle* degenerate, whose incoherent, hysterical self is incapable of producing logical argumentation. Many of Nietzsche's books are indeed, as Nordau says, "a succession of disconnected salaries, prose and doggerel mixed, without beginning or ending."¹³

At this point, we might expect Nietzsche to perform one of those reevaluations of values that he claimed as his philosophic specialty and to embrace decadence as the most suitable aesthetic expression of a biological body in perpetual convalescence and of a textual body in perpetual transfiguration. We might well think that he had done just this when we read certain passages at the end of the preface to *The Gay Science* that echo statements on aesthetics by the foremost proponents of the decadent sensibility in the *fin de siècle*. Dismissing the histrionic passions of Romantic literature and music, Nietzsche describes the kind of art suitable for convalescents as "a mocking, light, fleeting, divinely untroubled, divinely artificial art that, like a pure flame, licks into the unclouded skies. Above all, an art for artists, for artists only!" (GS, 37). The notion of artifice, which Nietzsche valued negatively in regard to decadent style "in which the whole no longer lives," here has positive associations with creative play performed at a salutary distance from nature. His prescription for art is strikingly close to the one Oscar Wilde offers in "The Decay of Lying": "Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment."¹⁴ Furthermore, at the end of the preface Nietzsche gives his highest possible praise to a recipe for life that he associates with the healthiest of civi-

lizations, that of ancient Greece, but that sounds perfectly Wildean to our ears: "What is required," he writes, "is to stop courageously at the surface, the fold, the skin, to adore appearance, to believe in forms, tones, words, in the whole Olympus of appearance" (GS, 38).¹⁵ Granted, Nietzsche's "whole Olympus of appearance" is an expression of exuberant life; artistic production for him gives existence an aesthetic dimension, whereas Wilde wishes Art to constitute a barrier against life. Thus Nietzsche distrusts the "art for art's sake" principle because it "debases [and] impoverishes the real" (WP, 168), whereas Wilde often seems to embrace it for precisely that reason ("Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place," he declares¹⁶). But both agree about the fundamental precept that, to use Nietzsche's phrase, "art is *worth more* than truth" (WP, 453), or, to use Wilde's formulation, "Lying . . . is the proper aim of Art."¹⁷

Wilde published "The Decay of Lying" in January 1889, just when Nietzsche was succumbing to his mental illness. But the ideas Wilde formulated in this text as brilliant paradoxes were widely disseminated throughout Europe in the mid-1880s. Nietzsche could have associated his thinking with this cultural movement had he wished to do so. As I noted earlier, his use of the French word throughout his writings of 1887 through 1888 could be thought to refer to the group of writers and artists in France who, from at least 1885 on, defiantly applied this term to their work. But the national identities Nietzsche associates with *decadence* are as slippery as every other perspective from which he views this concept. When he declares his gratitude to his own *decadence*, he does not associate it with anything French but with Wagner, "one of my sicknesses" (CW, 155) and "the great benefactor of my life" (EH, 250). His greatest praise for a contemporary French cultural production is for Bizet's *Carmen* (1875), which he views—with some irony, one suspects—as a wonderfully healthy work, whose music, unlike Wagner's, "is pleasant, it does not *sweat*" (CW, 157).¹⁸ So the most *decadent* musician is German and the least *decadent* is French! The question of *decadence's* nationality is further complicated by Nietzsche's refusal to view Wagner as German at all

Nietzsche's *Decadence* Philosophy

(CW, 182n.). Despite Wagner's Teutonic zeal, Nietzsche claims that the composer's morbid value for the early refinement of his philosophical sensibility was as an "antitoxin against everything German" (EH, 249), a poison taken against the effects of a worse poison. This antitoxin has a French flavor: Baudelaire, Nietzsche claims, has "a kind of Wagnerian sensibility,"¹⁹ as does Victor Hugo (CW, 173, 179, 182). These French connections suggest that Nietzsche's models for *decadence* (Delacroix is another—EH, 248) belong to the period of high Romanticism and its immediate aftermath, rather than to contemporary Parisian culture ("Wagner sums up romanticism, German as well as French," he observes—WP, 67). The French contemporaries he calls "charming" and "delicate psychologists" (EH, 243)—figures such as Paul Bourget, Pierre Loti, Gyp, Melhac, Anatole France, Jules Lemaitre, and, singled out for special praise, Guy de Maupassant—are simply popular authors of the day, not figures who had a significant impact on him (with the possible exception of Bourget).²⁰ Thus *decadence* "belongs" in no particular place; it is neither foreign nor domestic.

But of one thing Nietzsche remains sure: *decadence* is a disease that must be resisted for the sake of health and ascending vitality. In this regard nothing has changed from the point we reached at the end of part 1 of this chapter. Nietzsche cannot imagine an "aesthetics of *decadence*" (CW, 190) that would do anything other than reflect declining and resentful life. He is unable to transpose the notion of *decadence* into "the most spiritual form and distance." It remains intractably physiological, impervious to hysterical conversion. Why?

One possible answer, formulated in just the epigrammatic style Nietzsche would have liked (which, of course, oversimplifies the issue): *decadence* for Nietzsche is a woman.²¹ His hysteria is generated to a significant degree by his revulsion for the female body. Hence he associates his creativity with the achievement of a safe distance from its decadent origins.

This process is revealed in the following way: Here is Nietzsche's description of how "we artists" experience love:

When we love a woman [ein Weib, a derogatory term], we easily conceive a hatred for nature on account of all the repulsive natural functions to which every woman is subject. We prefer not to think of all this; but when our soul touches on these matters for once, it shrugs [as it were] impatiently and looks contemptuously at nature: we feel insulted; nature seems to encroach on our possessions, and with the profane hands at that. Then we refuse to pay any heed to physiology and decree secretly: "I want to hear nothing about the fact that a human being is something more than *soul and form*." "The human being under the skin" is for all lovers a horror and unthinkable [ein Greuel und Ungedanke], a blasphemy against God and love. (GS, 122)

Here is the psychological key to why Nietzsche praises life that "stops courageously at the surface." He has simply reversed motives: the superficiality he calls courageous is actually motivated by fear of "the human being [der Mensch] under the skin." Notice how, in the course of the above paragraph, *das Weib* becomes *der Mensch*. As he talks about woman's "repulsive natural functions" (such as menstruation, I presume), they become representative in his fantasy of all human physiology. This association obviously makes very problematic the starting point he claims for his philosophy, "the body and physiology." For if it is true, as Nietzsche argues, that "[one's] genius is in [one's] nostrils" (EH, 326), then he must feel considerable *resentiment* at the re-sniffing his philosophy requires (the pun is Eve Sedgwick's)²² and be quite anxious to move away from this smelly immediacy.

Now, I realize that Nietzsche's reference in this passage is specifically to men in love. But there are plenty of other passages in his works where he makes similar observations about men's view of women without qualifying it as caused by love. Love simply exacerbates a man's sensitivity to what he has always seen, that is, as he writes in *Beyond Good and Evil*, that woman's "nature . . . is more 'natural' than man's" (BGE, 169). Particularly terrifying is that this nature *moves*, it "seems to encroach on our possessions." It is like an infection, an illness, a physiological decadence. No wonder that he

believes that "Woman has always conspired with the types of *decadence*" (WR, 460) and that he copied approvingly into his notebook for 1888 Baudelaire's remark: "La femme est naturelle, c'est à dire abominable."²³ As Theodor Adorno has pointed out, insofar as aversion from women is fundamental to Christian dogma, Nietzsche is subjecting his thought to an ideological system he claims to abhor: "The fact that Nietzsche's scrutiny stopped short of them [feminine nature], that he took over a second-hand and unverified image of feminine nature from the Christian civilization that he otherwise so thoroughly mistrusted, finally brought his thought under the sway, after all, of bourgeois society. He fell for the fraud of saying 'the Feminine' ['Weib'] when talking of women. Hence the perfidious advice not to forget the whip: femininity ['Weib'] itself is already the effect of the whip."²⁴

Physiology as female nature is an *Ungedanke*. This term covers everything about man that is not "soul and form." It is something quite different from the *Unwissenheit* Nietzsche valued when he derived his picture of the subject's (dis)organization from an ungendered physiology and praised not-knowing as a valuable artistic talent (GS, 37).

Unwissenheit can be productively thought of as an epistemological tool. *Ungedanke* is a horror beyond thought. Woman becomes thinkable only after she has been denatured. Then she can be transfigured into a trope of male creativity. For this to happen, what is necessary above all is distance: "The magic and the most powerful effect of women," Nietzsche writes, "is, in philosophical language, action at a distance, *actio in distans*; but this requires first of all and above all—distance" (GS, 124).²⁵ Once physical distance from woman's decadence has been achieved, then she can be appreciated as a welcome poetic effect in the distance. So removed is she then from her "repulsive natural functions" that the philosopher can imagine taking them over for himself, becoming *mütterlich* with "the pregnancies and deliveries of his spirit" (GS, 326).²⁶ Indeed, the question of woman is crucial to the production of "an art for artists," that is, an art produced by men for the benefit of similarly inclined men. Such artists

do not desire to uncover truth, Nietzsche says: their wisdom is shown by their appreciation of the "veils, . . . riddles and iridescent uncertainties" (GS, 38) that obscure the naked truth of nature. "Perhaps truth is a woman," he speculates, "who has reasons (*Gründe*) for not letting us see her *Gründe*. Perhaps her name is—to speak Greek—*Baubo*" (GS, 38). Kaufmann translates the second *Gründe* like the first as "reasons," but Nietzsche no doubt intended to exploit the double meaning of *Gründe* that this translation obscures. What truth veils is woman's fleshly ground, her biological rationale, her physiological essence, just what the figure of Baubo reveals: the female genitals. The woman who "has her reasons" for veiling this sight is to be mistrusted, for she may well be trying to flatter men by collaborating with their need to lie about her. Nietzsche brings out this point in *Beyond Good and Evil*, where his version of women's relation to truth is more classically misogynist: "What is truth to woman?" he asks. "From the beginning, nothing has been more alien, repugnant, and hostile to woman than truth—her great art is the lie, her highest concern is mere appearance and beauty. Let us men confess it: we honor and love precisely *this* art and *this* instinct in women" (BGE, 163). The task of the philosopher-artist, who knows the connection between woman's art of deception and her repulsive nature, is to steal this art and make it his own. Thus he becomes feminine to the extent that he obscures female nature and uses artifice *in distans* to enhance "the surface, the fold, the skin."

Such behavior is unmistakably fetishistic in Freudian terms. In a later chapter, I will show that these terms are both fundamental tools for the diagnosis of decadence and also crucial manifestations of it. For the moment I want simply to note that the Nietzschean philosopher-artist acts like the Freudian fetishist, veiling the supposed "fact" of castration so as to maintain a childish fantasy of universal phallic sexuality. And I want to associate Nietzsche's apparent homosexual fantasy with certain homosexual signifiers detectable in his work.²⁷ Here *The Case of Wagner* is particularly revealing, for Nietzsche's analysis of this man, Wagner, whom he says he loved (EH, 317), whom he identifies as his own illness (CW, 155), and whom he calls

"a seducer on a large scale" (CW, 183), suggests that Wagner was a feminized man. He was, says Nietzsche, "in his old age by all means *femmini generis*" (CW, 191). Thus, to love Wagner was to love the other in the same, to love woman in the transvestized form of a hysterical man. Moreover, Nietzsche argues that Wagner's work itself promotes the collapse of sexual difference. By focusing on the goal of redemption, his operas lure their audience away from the actuality of "the deadly hatred of the sexes" (CW, 159)—well dramatized, Nietzsche argues, by Bizet—toward a single ideal, the Eternal Feminine. Thus Nietzsche declares: "The female Wagnerian—the most charming ambiguity that exists today; she *embodies* the cause of Wagner [die Sache Wagners]—in her sign his cause triumphs" (CW, 185).

This is Wagner's form of *actio in distans*: his *Sache*—his thing—is a function of the sign. And the sign embodied, reified and sexualized, is characterized by fluid and mobile ambiguity. Wagner "is distinguished by every ambiguity, every double sense" (CW, 183). The charm of this ambiguity is that it avoids the *Grusel und Ungedanke* of the castrated body by treating castration theatrically, as an agent of semiotic transformation. Nietzsche condemns this charm as decadent deception and calls Wagner's sexuality "incredibly pathological" (WP, 55). But he also recognizes his immense attraction to this fetishizing pathology, beyond which may lie a homosexual fantasy. It is hard, indeed, in reading Nietzsche's characterization of Wagner, not to agree with Eve Sedgwick that he is, with a degree of consciousness impossible to determine, "tapp[ing] into and refresh[ing] the energies of emergent tropes for homosexuality without ever taking a reified homosexuality itself as a subject."²⁸ Wagner is presented as physiologically false, as "the greatest example of self-violation in the history of art" (CW, 180). This negation of physiological determinism enables Wagner—the actor, the liar, the magician, the hysteric—to overcome sex as a fixed identity and become a kind of gender-mutant, a man *femmini generis*. Nietzsche claims to despise such a loss of those clear-cut "natural" differences that stimulate the cruel, egotistic war between the sexes. But underlying this condemnation is a positive valuation: the subversion of sexual difference offers the gain of "soul and

form," an *actio in distans* whereby "the surface, the fold, the skin" becomes an attractive locus for male artists to celebrate "the veils, . . . riddles and iridescent uncertainties" (GS, 38) that obscure repulsive female nature.

Thus we reach the conclusion of my second account of Nietzsche's meditation on decadence. It is not so much a conclusion as a temporary resting place, one provisional perspective subject to replacement. "There is *only* a perspective, seeing, *only* a perspective 'knowing,'" Nietzsche writes in *The Genealogy of Morals*, "and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our 'concept' of this thing, our 'objectivity' be" (GM, 119). According to this reasoning, the many perspectives I have analyzed from which Nietzsche observed decadence should enable me now to offer an "objective" description of it. Let me briefly rehearse some of the "different eyes" through which Nietzschean *decadence* has appeared in this chapter:

1. Decadence is a natural excretory function of healthy individuals and societies.
2. Decadence is pathological, a sign of weak instincts. It disorganizes and fragments individuals and societies.
3. Decadence is the expression of morality's condemnation of life. "Truth" is decadent.
4. Modernity, exemplified by Wagner, is decadent, as is the majority of mankind.
5. Nietzsche is decadent in (certain of) his own terms because he wages war against decadence rather than extricating himself from it.
6. Decadence is indistinguishable from subjectivity. The body is decadent in the same sense that the subject is unknowable.
7. The experience of decadence is indispensable to the philosopher, whose sensibility is refined by illness.
8. Decadence is a woman, repulsive and unthinkable, except at a distance.

Nietzsche's *Decadence Philosophy*

9. Nietzsche is decadent from today's perspective because he deploys an aesthetic of superficiality and artifice and because he deploys fetishistic strategies and emergent homosexual tropes.

Can one agree that these perspectives together construct something like an objective picture of decadence? I think not. Reading through this list, one feels bewildered, confused, even exasperated. It is tempting to conclude that Nietzsche, far from being an expert in questions of decadence, couldn't get anything straight on these matters and merely rationalized his intellectual disorder by appealing to a theory of multiple perspectives.

But I have maintained otherwise. I have claimed that he is justified in boasting of his decadent expertise. So, you may well ask, in what do I think his special insight consists? Not in any one of the perspectives I have just enumerated, that much is clear. What Nietzsche teaches me is that decadence is a stimulant that causes a restless movement between perspectives, the goal being the attainment of a position outside decadence that would enable one to judge it as such. Decadence characteristically posits some mode of knowledge, some standard of ethics, some conception of health that would put an end to the slippage among perspectives and permit a clear perception of itself to emerge. We have seen that Nietzsche appeals repeatedly to such normative ideas and that these appeals often seem to betray the most radical and innovative aspects of his philosophy, such as the valorization of becoming, multiplicity, nonknowing. We have also seen that these appeals never succeed conclusively in stabilizing his understanding of decadence.

The perspectives among which that understanding slips are not arbitrary, however. Nietzsche's meditations brilliantly evoke the primary contextual relations put into play by the decadent idea. To name a few: the analogy between biological organisms and societies, the connection between moral standards and instinctual drives, the relation of subjectivity to the body, the link between illness and wisdom, the association of gender to philosophy and aesthetics. Nie-

zsche shows how all these topics are interconnected, and his name for the force that blinds them is decadence. So variable is the referent of this name, however, that it will be of problematic use to us in the rest of this book. I will not be able in subsequent chapters to refer to "Nietzsche's idea of decadence," for that idea is constantly in motion, always elsewhere than in the present of his writing. Moreover, this quality will also be true to a significant degree of my own work. As I suggested in my introduction, I do not propose to offer a totalizing definition of decadence in this book, for I do not believe that any such definition is possible. My chapters are discontinuous, somewhat in the manner of the nine Nietzschean perspectives I summarized above. This discontinuity, I argue, is both what gives decadence its peculiar dynamism and what generates its peculiarly frustrating epistemological irresolution.

Before I move ahead, however, I want to examine briefly how Nietzsche's views were received during the *fin de siècle* period, especially by those writers associated with a sensibility labeled "decadent" at the time. It would be interesting to know which of the nine perspectives I outlined above—and there are more, of course—seemed the most relevant to them. Unfortunately, this question cannot be precisely answered, since Nietzsche's works became available in this period in a rather haphazard manner, and how Nietzsche was read had a lot to do with what was accessible to be read, in translation especially. In France, there was next to no discussion of Nietzsche until late 1892, when excerpts from *Zarathustra* appeared in French in *La revue blanche* and a translation by Daniel Halévy and Robert Dreyfus of *The Case of Wagner* was published.²⁹ Despite the anti-Wagnerism of the latter book, early interest in Nietzsche came largely from the pro-Wagner camp (represented, for instance, by Todor de Wyzewa, who, influenced by Lombroso, considered Nietzsche's critique of Wagner to be a self-destructive gesture typical of genius³⁰) and, in the 1890–1895 period, from anarchist sympathizers. Not surprisingly, the Nietzsche these people admired was not the advocate of decadence as a necessary experience for creative thought but rather the social ther-

Nietzsche's Decadence Philosophy

apist, enemy of both egalitarian democracy and socialist idealism. Between 1895 and 1898, articles about Nietzsche appeared in periodicals such as *Mercur de France*, *La revue des deux mondes*, and *La revue blanche*, often focusing on questions raised by the publication in 1895 of the now largely discredited biography by Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. Despite this book's defense of Nietzsche's health, critics used Nietzsche's own emphasis on physiological decadence to stigmatize him as a degenerate madman and thereby to contain, if not dismiss, the disturbing impact of his thought. This tendency lessened after 1898, when *Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil* appeared in translation and the intelligent—if overly timid and systematizing—analysis by Henri Lichtenberger, *La philosophie de Nietzsche*, was published. Subsequently, new translations of Nietzsche's works by Henri Albert appeared on a yearly basis and academic studies proliferated.³¹

Lichtenberger's book exemplifies the approach current in France in the late 1890s to the theme of decadence in Nietzsche. On the one hand, he feels the need to defend Nietzsche's philosophy from the accusation that it is the product of a sick, deranged mind; on the other hand, he presents the work as a denunciation of decadence that can serve to revitalize French society. Putting aside the rhetoric of degeneracy as inapplicable to Nietzsche's writings, Lichtenberger interprets Nietzsche as a vigorously affirmative, liberating thinker who shows the way out of Schopenhauerian pessimism, Christian suffering, and moral fatigue. This was also the importance of Nietzsche for the Gide of *Les nouvelles terres* (1897) and *L'immoraliste* (1902), but Gide found that Lichtenberger had diluted the philosopher's passionate intensity. Nietzsche, Gide wrote in 1898, had "made himself mad" by pushing reason to its extreme limits and exuberantly glorifying life as tragedy.³² Associating Nietzsche with Dostoyevsky, Gide prepares the way for the existentialist appropriation of Nietzsche. Well before that occurred, however, Nietzsche's thought was appropriated to serve French nationalism: since he frequently contrasted German barbarity to French sophistication, his work could be used to attack his own

country. As the French became more and more alarmed about German militarism, however, Nietzsche was increasingly perceived as an alien after all, and an apologist for Prussian power politics. By the time of the First World War, French intellectuals had ceased to claim him as one of their own. Nietzsche offered the English little reason to make a similar claim, since he called them "the people of consumption cant" (TI, 521) and despised both their philosophy and their music. Yet the English, after a slow start, developed a more subtle understanding of Nietzsche's relation to decadence than did the French. The reasons for the initial hesitancy are more material than intellectual. Although *The Case of Wagner* (published with *Nietzsche contra Wagner, Twilight of the Idols*, and *The Antichrist*) and *Zarathustra* both appeared in English in 1896, the editions were so expensive, poorly distributed, and badly translated that they were little read. Moreover, Nordau's *Degeneration*, published just a year earlier, prejudiced the public against Nietzsche. Various problems interfered with plans for additional translations, and it was not until 1907 that Oscar Levy began to publish a complete works, of which the final volume appeared in 1913.

If, however, Nietzsche's books were mostly inaccessible in the 1890s, English readers did have the benefit of an excellent short introduction to his thought by the extraordinary Havelock Ellis—criminologist, sexologist, literary and cultural critic—published in three installments in the summer of 1896 in the short-lived avant-garde magazine *The Savoy* and subsequently collected in his volume *Affinities* (1898). Like Lichtenberger, Ellis starts out by defending Nietzsche's psychological health. "It is evident," he writes, "that [Nietzsche] is no frail hectic flame of a degenerating race. There seems to be no trace of insanity or nervous disorder at any point in the family history, as far back as it is possible to go."³³ Having asserted Nietzsche's basic physiological health (on the evidence furnished by Nietzsche's sister's idealizing biography), Ellis goes on to present Nietzsche as "one of the greatest spiritual forces which have appeared since Goethe" (2), praising him as a freethinking individualist dedicated to the joys of self-mastery and the supple dance of the intellect.

What Ellis appreciates about Nietzsche are the qualities of aesthetic decadence that his philosophy displays rather than the overcoming of social decadence that his work advocates. Indeed, he is uneasy with the late Nietzsche's condemnation of the age's moral decline and endorsement of a master morality to be exercised by self-chosen supermen. What this late work lacks for Ellis are the decadent aesthetic qualities he admires in the books of the middle period, such as heterogeneity and the subordination of wholes to their parts (like Nietzsche before him, Ellis had read Bourget). He even responds positively to Nietzsche's claim that these qualities derive from illness, to which, says Ellis, Nietzsche owed "a poignant sensibility, a penetrating impulse to reach the core of things."³⁴

Ellis's primarily aesthetic appreciation helped save Nietzsche from the political uses to which his thought was put in France and made his philosophy appealing to many writers associated with the late decadent and symbolist movements in Ireland and England. Ellis's close friend Arthur Symonds, editor of *The Savoy*, read Nietzsche in the original and, belying Nietzsche's disparagement of the typical Englishman's lack of musical taste, admired the German's thoughts on music, dance, and rhythm. He also noted, surprisingly, similarities between Nietzsche and Pater and, less surprisingly, between Nietzsche and Blake (the latter interested Yeats as well).³⁵ George Moore, Vernon Lee, Edward Garnett, James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw, and D. H. Lawrence all came under Nietzsche's influence in the 1900s.³⁶ In 1903 Yeats read and annotated Thomas Common's proselytizing book of excerpts from Nietzsche's works, *Nietzsche as Critic, Philosopher, Poet, and Prophet* (1901), and from then on Yeats's thought is suffused with Nietzschean themes and ideas (such as the superman, master/slave morality, and the mask). Thus it would appear that Nietzsche was wrong about France being the natural milieu for his *decadence* philosophy to bloom (at least in the *fin de siècle*. The extraordinary resurgence of interest in Nietzsche in France in the 1960s and 1970s is a cultural phenomenon in itself). By reading Nietzsche as a therapist for the nation's malaise, the French failed to see what he valued about illness and were forced to disclaim him when

DECADENT SUBJECTS

they perceived that illness in the shape of the Prussian will to power. By reading Nietzsche as an aesthetic decadent, the English were able to assimilate Nietzsche into an established mode of artistic creation, which the stimulation of his ideas helped to keep alive long after its French counterpart had given way to new intellectual trends.

Flaubert's Salammbô:
History in Decadence

Commenting in 1888, at the end of his productive life, on his youthful essay "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life" (1874), Nietzsche declared proudly: "In this essay the 'historical sense' of which this century is proud was recognized for the first time as a disease, as a typical symptom of decay."¹ This is a characteristically grand claim, justifiable perhaps if one were to substitute for "recognized for the first time" a phrase such as "analyzed extensively for the first time." Well before Nietzsche, Flaubert had recognized that an excess of historical awareness was a burdensome characteristic of nineteenth-century consciousness. Traveling in Egypt in 1850, he wrote back to his friend Louis Boulhert: "Wretched that we are, we have, I think, a good deal of taste because we are profoundly historical, accept everything, and adopt the point of view of whatever we are judging [nous plaçons au point de vue de la chose pour la juger]." "But," he asks rhetorically, "do we have as much innateness [innéité] as we have comprehensivity? Is a fierce originality even compatible with so much breadth?" (GL, 645).² "Excess of history has attacked life's plastic powers,"³ observes Nietzsche, as if confirming language's worst fears.

When Nietzsche wrote "On the Uses and Disadvantages of His-