Preface

The nineteenth-century theorization of mental illness passed first through the sick body of the degenerate: sick bodies produced sick thought. As a scientific model, pre-Freudian theories of degeneration enjoyed a brief, though influential, reign. As a set of rhetorical strategies with which to describe not only sick bodies and their thoughts but also social classes, political positions, genders, and even literary texts, those theories continued to hold sway well into the twentieth century. Thus, though the texts that bear the names of Cesare Lombroso, Friedrich Nietzsche, Benedetto Croce, Max Nordau, Antonio Gramsci, G. A. Borgese, Georg Lukács, Charles Baudelaire, J. K. Huysmans, Sigmund Freud, and Gabriele D'Annunzio clearly occupy different ideological camps and even different centuries, they are nonetheless familial in their adoption of what might be called the rhétorique obsédante of the nineteenth century: the rhetoric of sickness and health, decay and degeneration, pathology and normalcy. This book attempts to chart the changing ideological inflections of that rhetoric as the hands that wield it change, as it moves from discipline to discipline, from genre to genre. A selection of D'Annunzio's prose works constitutes the point of departure and the final destination of a genealogical itinerary that takes into consideration the scientific intertext to literary and critical texts, as well as the French subtext to Italian “decadence.”

Decadent writers place themselves on the side of pathology and valorize physiological ills and alteration as the origin of psychic
alterity. The decadent rhetoric of sickness embraces and exalts the counternatural as an opening onto the unconscious, an alibi for alterity. Literary critics, instead, first launch their antidecadent attack from an island of normalcy, an island located in the pre-Freudian criminological intertext to the language of criticism. The first chapter examines the roots of antidecadent and anti-D'Annunzian criticism in the medicolegal studies of Cesare Lombroso and their first "literary" application in Max Nordau. D'Annunzio's texts have been lacerated by two schools that are presumably at ideological odds with each other: Crocean idealism and the current of Marxist criticism which favors "realistic" narrative. These schools concur in surprising ways. For Lukács, decadent writers represent an "overturning of values"; for Croce, theirs is "the great industry of emptiness," and Giovanni Pascoli, Antonio Fogazzaro, and D'Annunzio are three "neurotics." Lukács sees a "vital struggle between health and decay" in art and finds decadent art battling on the wrong side. Gramsci declares that "D'Annunzio was the Italian people's last bout of sickness." Reading the literary text as a symptom of a diseased body, these critics condemn the text as morally and politically reprehensible, but their condemnation cannot hastily be attributed to a shared political stance, and even less to shared aesthetic theories. The chapter links these condemnations to the politics and rhetoric of Cesare Lombroso's criminological studies and Max Nordau's Degeneration. When these texts are read together, a different perspective appears. The critics' antipathy to D'Annunzio fixes upon erotic discourse (rather than, say, political discourse or even D'Annunzio's problematic relationship to fascism) as a locus of pathology; what these critics object to is a lack of "virility." This preoccupation appears in Lombroso's texts as well, where degeneration is, finally, degenderation. And it can be said to stand at the very roots of decadentism itself, for when Anatole Baju founded the journal Le Décadent, its call to arms was "Man becomes more refined, more feminine, more divine." The attacks on the decadents thus represent less an analysis of the literary text than an imposition of an opposing ideology onto the text.

Eviration and feminization are in fact constitutive elements of the decadent rhetoric of sickness. In Chapter 2 I examine Baudelaire's essay Le peintre de la vie moderne, novels of J. K. Huysmans
and D'Annunzio—*A rebours* and *Il piacere*—and Nietzsche's preface to the second edition of *The Gay Science*. Convalescence as the scene of artistic and philosophic creation is an ideologeme of decadent texts, a narrative that lies between texts. The painter Constantin Guys in *Le peintre de la vie moderne* stands as legitimating father of the aesthete Des Esseintes in *A rebours*, the failed poet Andrea Sperelli in *Il piacere*, and the narrator of the 1886 preface to *The Gay Science*. All are convalescent and participate in what I call a Baudelairean rhetoric of sickness. This Baudelairean convalescent is the site of an intersection between psychology and physiology; lingering sickness, fevers, and congestion are the ground of a new consciousness, a new interpretation of the body's relation to thought. In all four of these texts, that attempt at a new interpretation comes into being through a feminization of the male "protagonist," who thus discovers a ventriloquist mode of speech in which the body spoken through is necessarily a "woman's" body.

To arrive at this ventriloquist movement, the convalescent narrative follows certain steps. The convalescent is socially and topographically dislocated and occupies a liminal position even when, as in the case of Constantin Guys, he is described as "the man of the crowd." Eviration and a death of desire occur upon passage into the state of convalescence. This eviration is clearly marked in Des Esseintes's case—a dinner mourning the death of his virility given on the eve of his withdrawal into solitude—and is alluded to in descriptions of the convalescent as child in Baudelaire and D'Annunzio. Woman is expelled from the scene of convalescence. This expulsion is not, however, the expulsion of her attributes. 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. The resultant physiological ambiguity of the convalescent opens the way to figures of androgyne and hermaphroditism: in Baudelaire's case, to a discussion of the androgyne of genius; in D'Annunzio's and Nietzsche's, to the description of poetic and philosophic production as giving birth. This occupation of the woman's body is both the decadent's profession and the means by which he appropriates alterity.

Chapter 3 analyzes scenes of convalescence in D'Annunzio's *Terra*
vergine, Le novelle della Pescara, and L’Innocente, but these are “Lombrosian” convalescences, which are the scene not of conversion to artistic creation and ventriloquism, but rather of hysterical conversion. Not coincidentally, the diseased character is female and of the lower class, in contrast to the upper-class male convalescent of Chapter 2. While the Baudelairean rhetoric converts symptoms into signs that the subject himself is able to read, the Lombrosian rhetoric reduces psychic activity to the tyranny of the symptom. Chapter 3 creates a dialogue between Le novelle delle Pescara and the Studies on Hysteria of Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer by analyzing the narrative structure of Freud’s clinical studies in relation to that of D’Annunzio’s fiction. In the early Freud, hypnosis serves to induce the traits of convalescence by inducing forgetfulness; it is here that Freud begins to read and translate what he calls the “pictographic script” of the hysteric’s body. The tales of “La vergine Orsola” and “La vergine Anna” follow a similar itinerary. The woman’s body is spoken through once again, but it is not she who speaks; she is not a ventriloquist but a hysteric who assumes postures recorded by Freud’s predecessor Jean-Martin Charcot.

A different approach is reserved for the male Lombrosian convalescent. In L’Innocente, another aspect of Baudelaire’s influence is filtered through the Lombrosian rhetoric, for both the texts that bear his signature and Baudelaire himself as text enter the semiosis of decadence. When his fatal illness is mythified (by Lombroso as well as by writers such as Maurice Barrès) as the most horrifying of all writer’s fates, Baudelaire becomes a sign. This aspect of Baudelairean “influenza” is filtered through the Lombrosian rhetoric, and ideological sympathy threatens to become physiological similarity. In fact, Lombroso’s followers recognized L’Innocente as a faithful representation of a criminal alienato. But though the narrator’s self-diagnosis is drawn from Lombroso, his discourse is structured by mechanisms that Freud will claim are proper to oneiric discourse and the work of censorship: negation, condensation, and displacement. When so read, L’Innocente turns out to constitute, both thematically and rhetorically, a prereading of the Freudian account of Oedipus. What Freud will see as the son’s desire to kill the father appears here as the father’s desire to kill the son projected onto the son, for the narrator commits parricide and infanticide in one condensed stroke.
Chapter 4 analyzes the rhetoric of sickness as applied to the upper-class female body. Neither Baudelairean nor Lombrosian, it might be labeled specifically D’Annunzian, for it constitutes the erotic discourse of the Romanzi della Rosa trilogy and the basis for erotic discourse in D’Annunzio’s later works. Here disease seems to constitute a prohibition that must be transgressed in order that the discourse be erotic. It is, in fact, a commonplace of D’Annunzian criticism that these diseases represent a prohibition, but naturalistic explanations are inadequate, for none of these diseases is, medically speaking, communicable. Convalescents appear once again, though the maladies from which they “recover” are figured as sacred and demonic: epilepsy, gynecological ills, “the hysterical demon.” Another critical commonplace is the notion that sickness renders the woman a ready-made victim of the male protagonist’s sadistic desires; such an interpretation is, in fact, clearly stated in the texts themselves. I argue, instead, that these “female troubles” represent a different sort of contagion: the contagion of castration. The novels of the trilogy narrativize the logic of fetishism: repeated scenes in which the nature of woman’s physiology is “unveiled” are followed by disbelief and disavowal. The topos of the enchantress-turned-hag so prevalent in Il piacere is but the thematic introduction to the textual fetishism of L’Innocente, where fallo (in Italian, at once the emblem of the virile member or the organ itself; an error or equivocation; a defect, failing, or imperfection; a sin or offense) suspends the decision between present and absent phallus and stands for the fetishist’s simultaneous denial and affirmation of castration, at the same time as it names itself as equivocation. In La Gioconda, a narrative of mutilation once again sets in motion the logic of fetishism. This Medusan moment is the consequence of the decadents’ occupation of the woman’s body, and necessarily haunts these texts in which eviration represents a desired state.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations in this book are mine. The choice of what to include in the original and what to include only in translation was a difficult one. In the best of all possible worlds, all texts would be cited in the original and followed by a translation. This not being the case, I have adopted the following criteria: (1) French and Italian texts dealt with as primary sources (a category that includes the writings of Cesare Lombroso and those
of the D'Annunzian critics cited in Chapter 1) are given both in the original and in translation; (2) French and Italian texts cited as secondary sources are given only in translation; (3) since the German texts I cite all exist in standard translations, they are given in translation with key words and phrases interpolated when necessary. In developing my translations of D'Annunzio's work, I consulted the following: Tales of My Native Town, trans. Rafael Mantel­limi (New York: Doubleday, 1920); The Child of Pleasure, trans. Georgina Harding, verses translated by Arthur Symons (Boston: L. C. Page, 1898); The Intruder, trans. Arthur Hornblow (New York: George G. Richmond, 1898); The Triumph of Death, trans. Arthur Hornblow (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1923); Gio­conda, trans. Arthur Symons (New York: R. H. Russell, 1902).

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