As a critical gesture, the diagnosis of "sickness" reduces the work of the intellect to the twitches of a body jolted by nerve spasms, poisoned by disease. The literary text, rather than a work of sign production, becomes a set of symptoms not (not, rather than un-) consciously produced. In its concern for cure, such a critical discourse traces the symptoms back to the subjects who display them and finds those subjects off-center, contaminated by physiology, irrational, and even criminal. Yet the question asked is not who produced a text but what—who produced a text but what disease, what atavistic deformity, what hereditary fault. Something speaks through the subject, but in the pre-Freudian texts that are the most ambitious proponents of this discourse, it is not language, not yet the unconscious. Behind the disturbed syntax, the disturbing contents of decadent texts, there hides a diseased, degenerate body. Post-Freudian symptomatic readings rely on an analysis of psychic mechanisms to interpret texts; nineteenth-century medicolegal anthropological studies (as their authors call them) ground their interpretive code on a description of somatic reactions, not the unconscious. These pre-Freudian texts are as blissfully unaware of that dark continent as they are of disciplinary boundaries. When the ideologeme of sickness recurs in the post-Freudian literary-critical condemnation of decadentism, a persistent "ignorance" of the unconscious becomes instead a repudiation of it.

Pre-Freudian, post-Freudian—perhaps the very distinction should be put into question. Freud himself begins to eavesdrop on
the unconscious when hysteria speaks: "It was on this place that her father used to rest his leg every morning, while she renewed the bandage round it, for it was badly swollen. This must have happened a good hundred times, yet she had not noticed the connection till now. In this way she gave me the explanation that I needed of the emergence of what was an atypical hysterogenic zone. Further, her painful legs began to 'join in the conversation' (mitsprechen) during our analyses." Fräulein Elizabeth von R., whose talking legs launched a career, could not be hypnotized, but Freud, by resting his hand upon her head, could hear the body talk. Psychoanalysis rests on the somatic compliance unique to hysteria, is founded on the hysterical woman's symptom. Freud was not alone in listening to the body talk (Max Nordau thought he heard it loud and clear) or in privileging the woman's symptom as a matrix for his theory (Cesare Lombroso measured both skull and hymen). But whereas for psychoanalytic discourse it is the psychic event that requests compliance of the body, for the "average" psychiatric text of the late nineteenth century it is physiological disease and alteration that cause psychic events. A reversal of the causal chain, a turning of the topos of cause and effect, allowed Freud to endure, to create his field, while the opposing view continued to hold sway, not in psychiatry or medicine but in the literary criticism that castigates decadent writers.2

A genealogy of that literary criticism must, if only as a beginning, rescue at least one such "loser" from the dust clouds of mediocrity. Of course, neither Cesare Lombroso (who considered himself a criminological psychiatrist) nor his follower Max Nordau (both physician and critic) has gone unacknowledged as a critic of decadence, but recognition has assumed the form of dismissive exclamations, hyperboles devoted to their "stupidity." 3


3. Typical is the description of nineteenth-century medical texts, including
evaluation of "stupidity," however, is a coordinate of the ideologue it claims to supersede. Sickness, as I have said, destroys the intellect; the same critics who dismiss Lombroso and Nordau as "stupid" are quick to tell us that D'Annunzio had no "ideas." By refusing to take average sign production (and, in this case, the critics' own genealogy) seriously, such criticism retains this "stupidity" and transforms it into a symptom (now post-Freudian) of which it is unaware. Anti-D'Annunzian criticism, almost a genre in itself, obsessively repeats the same practices that excite its scorn for Nordau: it denies and deeply mistrusts the figurality of language; it willfully ignores the distinction between author and protagonist, author and text; it castrates the literary text in order to accuse it of impotence.

Such a refusal to read the "average" signs that surround and contextualize the signs privileged by the literary tradition may be countered by another sort of refusal. The critic, writes Paolo Valesio, "should refuse ideological hierarchies, and he should look at every literary text as part of a contexture of 'average' texts whose study is necessary in order to understand the text at issue as a socially conditioned object of sign production." An average text, from this point of view, is one that marks no epistemological break as recognized by cultural criticism, one that has not been institutionalized as required reading in the history of a national literature or culture. An average text is one that has lost the round of literary fisticuffs from which the "great writers" of its age emerge.

allusions to Lombroso and Nordau, in A. E. Carter, The Idea of Decadence in French Literature, 1830–1900 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958). In his chapter "Nerve Storms and Bad Heredity," Carter discusses French texts diagnostic of dégénérescence, which Lombroso knew and quoted extensively: "It must be admitted that these treatises make heavy reading nowadays. They occupy a worthy place in the history of psychiatry, but their absurdity as literary criticism is self-evident, and did not escape contemporary censure. None of the doctors, whatever their eminence in pathology, had much flair in the field of aesthetics. Irony, blague, and all the delicate shades of meaning and intention slipped through their heavy fingers like minnows. Nordau was particularly obtuse, and Moreau's incomprehension almost passes belief" (68). See also Robert Mitchell, "The Deliquescence of Decadence: Flouette’s Eclectic Target," Nineteenth-Century French Studies 9 (Spring-Summer 1981): 247–56.

In approaching the average text, we find before us ideological screens that have rendered it "ridiculous," "unreadable," labeled it (and now I speak of D'Annunzio rather than Lombroso) kitsch. In fact, both Lombroso and D'Annunzio have been "averaged" if we understand "averaging" as the imposition of such extraordinarily opaque screens. In a sense, I "average" them once again, for the real subject of this book is less the novelistic production of Gabriele D'Annunzio than the changing ideological inflections of the decadent rhetoric of sickness. But here a leveling of texts, a refusal to remain within an individual text, is ventured in the hope of delineating the possibilities and limitations of a particular discursive formation, of reading the unreadable.

Uncovering the "average" intertext to literary criticism is, to some extent, a Foucauldian task; indeed, Foucault himself is no stranger to this land. With his surveyor's eye he has, in The Birth of the Clinic, mapped the territory discovered by the discipline of pathological anatomy. In the late eighteenth century, according to Foucault, disease was newly defined as a deviation internal to life, rather than a punitive will that attacks life from without. The interdependence of the opposition between "sickness" and "health," between "pathological" and "normal," is thus made visible:

Furthermore, the prestige of the sciences of life in the nineteenth century, their role as a model, especially in the human sciences, is linked originally not with the comprehensive, transferable character of biological concepts, but, rather, with the fact that these concepts were arranged in a space whose profound structure responded to the healthy/morbid opposition. When one spoke of the life of groups and societies, of the life of the race, or even of the 'psychological life,' one did not think first of the internal structure of the organized being but of the medical bipolarity of the normal and the pathological.

5. The latter conception, though no longer accepted as scientific, remains available as literature, as a metaphor of social disintegration or divine wrath. From Boccaccio to Manzoni to Camus, it loses none of its potency. It is predominantly this aspect that Susan Sontag examines in Illness as Metaphor (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977) and Gian Paolo Biasin highlights in Literary Diseases: Theme and Metaphor in the Italian Novel (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975).
Consciousness lives because it can be altered, maimed, diverted from its course, paralysed; societies live because there are sick declining societies, and healthy expanding ones.6

A “new” opposition magnetically reorders the linguistic expression of scientific, literary, and political observations; a contagious rhetoric spreads from the body to the already-made topos of the body politic. The very epithet “decadent,” uttered first by critics encamped on an island of normalcy, is filtered through a positivistic progressive ideology that can define itself only against a negative regressive pole. When writers accept the epithet, when Anatole Bajutitles his literary magazine *Le Décadent*, it is to make a statement both semiotic and ideological.7 “Le Décadent” collapses the opposition to an identity, denies the existence of an isle of health and of the clear-eyed ones who claim to reside there. There is only decadence, only sickness, and only those who welcome it can represent “progress”: “Déjà les décadents, précurseurs de la société future, se rapprochent beaucoup du type idéal de la perfection. . . . L’homme s’affine, se féminise, se divinise” [“Precursors of future society, the decadents are already quite close to the ideal type of perfection. . . . Man becomes more refined, more feminine, more divine”].8 Science speaks a language of decay and degeneration, progressive and regressive evolution. Literature and criticism, too, speak such a language, but whereas Foucault emphasizes the regularities of this formation, creating a finely etched monolith bordered by clifflike discontinuities, I hope to read the etchings within the monolith, to trace the battles fought within the space created by the rhetoric of sickness. Literature and science and criticism all speak through this rhetoric, yes, but they do not say the same thing.


As the example of *Le Décadent* suggests, a rhetoric of sickness does not automatically presuppose a rhetoric of health. Ideological inflections begin to be visible when we map the boundaries of discourse, the closures imposed upon the admissible and the imaginable. Health as a "logical" opposite of sickness appears in the criticism condemning decadence, where it stands for alternative practice, be it the realist novel (Lukács), the classicism of Giosuè Carducci (Croce), or the novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe (Nordau). Lukács is most straightforward in the essay "Healthy or Sick Art?": "Literary and art history is a mass graveyard where many artists of talent rest in deserved oblivion because they neither sought nor found any association to the problems of advancing humanity and did not set themselves on the right side in the vital struggle between health and decay." Decadents are decadent not because they depict illness and decay but because they do not recognize the existence of health, of the social sphere that would reunite the alienated writer to the progressive forces of history. Sickness, then, is a reactionary mode of insertion into the class struggle; sickness, writes Lukács, "produces a complete overturning of values." Though "sick art" may have its dialectical moment in the sun (Lukács cites only Antigone as an example), it is destined for the dust heap of history, while "healthy art" is a "reflection of the lasting truth of human relationships." Max Nordau would seem to be a kindred spirit; the doctor offers his own prescription in "Prognosis," the penultimate chapter of *Degeneration*:

We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria, and it is natural that we should ask anxiously on all sides: "What is to come next?" . . . Art cannot take any side in politics, nor is it its business to find and propose solutions to economic questions. Its task is to represent the eternally human causes


of the socialist movement, the suffering of the poor, their yearning after happiness, their struggle against hostile forces in Nature and in the social mechanism, and their mighty elevation from the abyss into a higher mental and moral atmosphere.11

Nordau, the physician, ideologizes the terms of his trade, his (pre-Freudian) physiology of hysteria, to diagnose the decadents vituperatively; Lukács, the metaphysician, attempts to “elevate” those terms to metaphysical categories. That attempt only emphasizes their most polemical and still recent history, their centrality in nineteenth-century forensic medicine, their ideologization in the literary battle over decadence, degeneration, and progress. Lukács’s historical perspective gropes for expression in a language that, on one hand, recalls recent history and, on the other, presents itself as an ahistorical equivalent of “good” and “evil.” His essay becomes an arena of violent clash between a rhetoric of class struggle and a rhetoric of sickness.

But why speak of clash? Nordau too prescribes the social mission of art as the road to health. Were not this rhetoric of sickness and that of class struggle perhaps spawned together, not warring brothers but brothers fighting the same battle? No, quite the contrary. Both Marxism and the social science of criminology can be seen as responses to the appearance of an urban proletariat; both deplore the present, but their analyses of causes and proposals for solutions are at odds. The discourse of what Lombroso calls legal psychiatry excludes revolution from the admissible and the imaginable; it is an ideology of evolutionary, not revolutionary, change. Degenerates, graphomaniacs, hysterics, epileptics, and the insane are examples of regressive evolution, the end of a line destined to die out. Socialism, yes, but no “anarchists,”12 please; reform, but


12. While Lombroso does refer to historical figures, citing Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin, as well as many less well known political assassins and criminals, as examples of anarchist physiology and psychology, his broad notion
no bloody uprisings: "But all these talks about sunrise, the dawn, the new land, etc., are only the twaddle of degenerates incapable of thought. The idea that tomorrow at half past seven o'clock a monstrous, unsuspected event will suddenly take place; that on Thursday next a complete revolution will be accomplished at a single blow, that a revelation, a redemption, the advent of a new age is imminent—this is frequently observed among the insane, it is a mystic delirium" (Nordau, 544). Nordau often outdid his master; indeed, Lombroso found it necessary, in the sixth edition of *Genio e degenerazione*, to chastise him severely for overzealous interpretations and applications of the master's theories. But on this point there is no dissent. In *Gli anarchici*, Lombroso discredits the aims of the Paris Commune by pointing out, "Se, fatta qualche rara eccezione, alcuno si sollevò, furono gli spostati, i criminali, i pazzi, gli alcoolisti" (69) ["If anyone rose up, with rare exceptions they were the misfits, criminals, madmen, and alcoholics"]). In his studies of genius, of criminals and anarchists, Lombroso employs of anarchism draws freely from other revolutionary discourses. The distinguishing feature of anarchism, for Lombroso, is its "prematurity": "E qui appare la distinzione fra le rivoluzioni propriamente dette che sono un effetto lento, preparato, necessario, tutt'al più precipitato da qualche genio nevrotico o da qualche accidente storico, e le rivolte o sedizioni, frutti di un'incubazione artistica a temperatura esagerata, di embrioni predestinati a morire. La rivoluzione è l'espressione storica dell'evoluzione, calma, ma estesa e sicura. . . . Questa non è dunque una malattia, ma una fase necessaria dello sviluppo della specie. Le sedizioni invece sono opera di pochi, corrispondono a cause poco importanti, sovente locali o personali, frequenti presso i popoli poco civili, come a San Domingo. . . . i delinquenti e i pazzi vi partecipano in maggior copia spintivi dalla loro morbosità a pensare, a sentire diversamente dagli onesti e sani" ["And here emerges the distinction between what are properly called revolutions, which are a slow, prepared, and necessary effect, at the most precipitated by some neurotic genius or by historical accident, and revolts or seditions, which are the fruit of an artificial incubation at an exaggerated temperature and of embryos predestined to die. Revolution is the historical expression of evolution, calm but wide-ranging and sure. . . . This, then, is not a sickness but a necessary phase in the development of the species. Seditions instead are the work of a few, they correspond to causes of little importance, often of a local or personal nature, frequent in uncivilized peoples, as in San Domingo. . . . criminals and madmen participate in them in greater numbers, urged on by their sickliness to think and feel differently from the healthy and honest)]. Cesare Lombroso, *Gli anarchici* (1894; rpt. Rome: Napoleone, 1972), 56–57, hereafter cited in the text.
a sort of magnified metalepsis whereby groups that have appeared most recently (decadent artists, political activists, urban criminals) are described as atavistic and archaic rather than, as in Marxist discourse, the products of modern industrialization. Degenerates, those who preserve characteristics of an earlier evolutionary stage, are in fact those newly generated in nineteenth-century cities. Lombroso's rhetoric of sickness removes these undesirables and relegates contemporary history to prehistory. For both Marxist literary criticism and the discourse on sickness, the decadents are political antagonists: for the former, they represent bourgeois decadence and thus are too far to the right; for the latter, they are too far to the left, criminal and even subhuman. The marriage of the two only thickens the screen, the blackened layer that obscures our view of decadent texts.

The deep distrust of the figuraiity of language which informs the notion that rhetoric is nothing but a grab bag of linguistic baubles, figures that disfigure thought, prevents another Marxist critic, Antonio Gramsci, from reading the decadents. Indeed, it makes reading itself difficult if not impossible, especially when the texts involved trace their genealogies to statements like Baudelaire's "éloge du maquillage" and to symbolist poetry. "D'Annunzio," writes Gramsci, "è stato l'ultimo accesso di malattia del popolo italiano" ["D'Annunzio was the Italian people's last bout of illness"]. One might expect this illness to be fascismo or superumanismo. But no, the malady D'Annunzio communicated to Italians is none other than style, and the awareness that language is not a transparent neutral vehicle for the transmission of thought. Rhetoric, in this rhetoric of antirhetoric, is sick. "La sobrietà, la semplicità, l'immediatezza" ["The sobriety, the simplicity, the immediacy"] that should characterize "spontaneous" expression become unrecognizable when pockmarked by "l'ipocrisia stilistica" ["stylistic hypocrisy"]. Led by this reasoning to apologetically reaffirm a distinction between form and content, Gramsci claims that those writers who emphasize content are more democratic while those who

D'Annunzio and his dishonest clique hide an intellectual vacuum behind their swollen, bombastic rhetoric; plain, simple speech lives instead on the island of health. Croce, less an adversary than Gramsci admits and certainly more sensitive to poetic resonance, nods in assent: Gabriele D'Annunzio, Giovanni Pascoli, and Antonio Fogazzaro labor together in "la grande industria del vuoto" ["the great industry of the void"].

Is an embarrassment of stylistic riches a cosmetic for intellectual poverty? Max Nordau spares no rhetorical riches in voicing his agreement. Let us look at the portrait of Verlaine that hangs in his gallery of the pathological:

We see a repulsive degenerate subject with asymmetric skull and Mongolian face, an impulsive vagabond and dipsomaniac, who, under the most disgraceful circumstances, was placed in gaol; an emotional dreamer of feeble intellect, who painfully fights against his bad impulses, and in his misery often utters touching notes of complaint; a mystic whose qualmish consciousness is flooded with ideas of God and saints, and a dotard who manifests the absence of any definite thought in his mind by incoherent speech, meaningless expressions and motley images. In lunatic asylums there are many patients whose disease is less deep-seated and incurable than is that of this irresponsible

Nordau offers a medical definition of the term *circulaire*: “This not very happy expression, invented by French psychiatry, denotes that form of mental disease in which states of excitement and depression follow each other in regular succession. The period of excitement coincides with the irresistible impulses to misdeeds and blasphemous language; that of dejection with the paroxysms of contrition and piety. The *circulaires* belong to the worst species of the degenerate. . . . The *circulaires* are, by the nature of their affliction, condemned to be vagabonds or thieves, unless they belong to rich families. . . . [Verlaine] has loafed about all the highways of France” (Nordau, 123). French psychiatry may have invented the term *circulaire*, but in doing so its practitioners did not invent the decadent phenomenon to which it refers, nor does the new term completely mask the “original” one, the flaneur. Lombroso had identified facial and cranial dissymmetries as stig mata of degeneration, to be found in criminals and geniuses alike. They are accompanied by other symptoms: limitation of the visual field (strange measure of artistic vision!), hypertrophy of facial features and various organs, atrophy of other characteristics, cellular disintegration, alcoholism, epilepsy, hysteria, and a generalized sensory obtuseness to which Nordau attributes the synaesthetic phenomenon whereby Baudelaire “saw with the nose” (Nordau, 296). Impressionist painters similarly suffered from “nystagmus, or trembling of the eyeball” (Nordau, 27), due to hysterical contraction of the retina. Lombroso had also specified certain peculiarities of linguistic practice, found especially in “graphomaniacs,” as degenerative symptoms: “l’interpretazione mistica dei fatti più semplici, l’abuso dei simboli, delle parole speciali che diventano a volte il modo esclusivo d’esprimersi” [“the mystical interpretation of the most simple facts, the abuse of symbols and of special words that at times become the only means of expression”]. The islanders of normalcy observe a pathological other, tyrannized by physiology; to this other is transferred any and all aberrant sexuality (woman, already the Other, is *ab ovo*
decadent). Paul Verlaine, then, is just what the doctor ordered: his poetic style and his style of life perfectly fit the degenerate nosology. Symbolist poetry merely confirms Nordau's diagnosis of this asymmetrical "Mongolian." I quote at length to let the "average" speak:

The Symbolists, so far as they are honestly decadent and imbecile, can think only in a mystical, i.e., in a confused way. The unknown is to them more powerful than the known; the activity of the organic nerves preponderates over that of the cerebral cortex; their emotions overrule their ideas. When persons of this kind have poetic and artistic instincts, they naturally want to give expression to their own mental state. They cannot make use of definite words of clear import, for their own consciousness holds no clearly-defined univocal ideas which could be embodied in such words. They choose, therefore, vague equivocal words, because these best conform to their ambiguous and equivocal ideas. . . . Clear speech serves the purpose of communication of the actual. It has, therefore, no value in the eyes of a decadent subject. (Nordau, 118).

Nordau is perhaps not so "stupid" as he might seem, in much the same way as the readers of the Inquisition were remarkably shrewd in identifying texts that might be poison for popular consumption. Decadents were not interested in clear speech and "the communication of the actual." He listens, at stethoscope's length, to Verlaine's poetry: "The second peculiarity of Verlaine’s style is the other mark of mental debility, viz. the combination of completely disconnected nouns and adjectives, which suggest each other, either through a senseless meandering by way of associated ideas, or through a similarity of sound" (Nordau, 126).

This stylistic appreciation leads us back to Gramsci, having learned through our detour that decadents do have ideas: ambiguous and equivocal ones. "Rhetoric" in Gramsci's discourse is a translucent screen through which we glimpse the shadowy presence of a repression. That which is ideologically unacceptable does not exist as thought but "merely" as rhetoric, as jargon, as "senseless meandering." Negation of the very existence of "decadent ideas" stems from a repudiation of the validity of those ideas: Nordau the
positivist cannot admit the possibility of a mystic mode of thought (and "mystic," you will remember, has as at least one of its interpreters "revolutionary"); he retranslates the word, hurriedly reducing it to "confused." Gramsci’s denial is perhaps more ambiguous; D’Annunzian sickness has already been cured by journalistic prose, but the cure has rendered the patient perhaps too healthy:

Però l’ha impoverita e stremenzita e anche questo è un danno. . . . Nè si dica che di tale quistione non occorre occuparsi: anzi, la formazione di una prosa vivace ed espressiva e nello stesso tempo sobria e misurata deve essere uno dei fini culturali da proporsi.¹⁸

[Yet it [journalistic practice] has impoverished and stunted it [prose] and this, too, is harmful. . . . And let no one say that one should not worry about this problem: on the contrary, the formation of a lively and expressive prose that would at the same time be sober and measured must be one of the cultural goals that we set for ourselves.]

An ideal prose, at once lively and sober. Is there not perhaps a touch of reseentiment in this disdain of D’Annunzio by a man who, as Pasolini sacrilegiously and courageously pointed out, did not write well?¹⁹ In the context of the Italian critical tradition, such a suspicion is not merely a bellettristic smear tactic but a truly political problem. Indeed, Italian critics find themselves in some-

¹⁸. Gramsci, 72–73.
¹⁹. See Pier Paolo Pasolini, “Due righe sulla lingua di Gramsci,” in Le belle bandiere (Rome: Riuniti, 1977). This essay first appeared in 1965 in Pasolini’s weekly column in Vie Nuove, and anticipated the elaborated version, “Laboratorio I: Appunti en poète per una linguistica marxista; II, La sceneggiatura come struttura che vuol essere altre strutture,” in Nuovi Argomenti, n.s. 1 (January–March 1966): 14–54. Pasolini describes the young Gramsci’s Italian as “bad” (Nuovi Argomenti, 14) and “impossible” (Le belle bandiere, 305) and points out that even after Gramsci’s style seems to have matured, it is still marred by the sloppiness, political jargon, and manualistic blandness of his earlier style. An alternative or adversary must be invoked in defense of Gramsci, and that adversary is, not surprisingly, D’Annunzio or, more precisely, the D’Annunzian tradition, which represents, according to Pasolini, “aestheticizing authoritarianism” (Nuovi Argomenti, 17).
thing of a quandary over D'Annunzio's style. Paradigms of "good" and "bad" writing are, of course, ideologically conditioned, but by valorizing literary representations of the petite bourgeoisie (Luigi Pirandello, Federigo Tozzi, Italo Svevo) Italian criticism has honored as great writers authors who, as Giacomo Debenedetti has suggested, seem to be bad translators of beautiful books. "Good" writing is thus considered the vice of the right; "bad" writing, the virtue of the left. How, then, could the left write well? Is Gramsci perhaps forced to sever form from content in order to split the "bad" D'Annunzio (the unproblematicized "Fascist" D'Annunzio) from the "good" D'Annunzio (who wrote "a lively and expressive prose"), to deny the existence of his ideas in order to make his prose an acceptable element in an ideal prose, to empty him of content in order to declare him vacuous? A touch of sickness makes health more visible.

In The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche himself exposes a bit of ressentiment: "Sickness itself can be a stimulant to life; only one has to be healthy enough for this stimulant." It is Nietzsche's text that we see in filigrana through the pages of Gramsci, Nietzsche's voice railing against Wagner that we hear: "Is Wagner a human being at all? Isn't he rather a sickness? He makes sick whatever he touches—he has made music sick."20 Its volume increased by the critical self-awareness of its tone, Nietzsche's voice drowns out Gramsci's. Nietzsche, the theorist of ressentiment, knew quite well when he himself exhibited it, when rancor upset his stomach. Wagner had been his sickness, Nietzsche writes; now he spits it back at Wagner, just as "slave morality" had spit back the epithet "evil" at the nobles who had labeled the slaves "bad." Wagner is a rival, a German (but not too German) rival. In the postscript to The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche adds as an "afterthought" on Parsifal: "I admire this work; I wish I had written it myself; failing that, I understand it."21 Nietzsche's earlier admiration for Wagner turns into bilious criticism only when Nietzsche knows he has become Nietzsche and Wagner has, triumphantly, become Wagner: "My practice of war can be summed up in four propositions. First: I

21. Ibid., 184.
only attack causes that are victorious. . . . Thus I attacked Wagner—more precisely, the falseness, the half-couth instincts of our 'culture' which mistakes the subtle for the rich, and the late for the great." The two have become worthy of rivalry not only because the cause attacked has become victorious (for Wagner, the elder, had been "victorious" for some time), but also because the attacker feels sure of his own victory. If Wagner "gives his name to the ruin of music," then Nietzsche gives his to the "ruin" of philosophy, to the death of philosophy as metaphysics and to its rebirth as literature. It is when philosophy becomes poetry that Nietzsche perceives Wagner as an artistic rival. Energized by an ulcerous anxiety of influence, Nietzsche adds two postscripts and an epilogue to *The Case of Wagner* and later gathers other drops of venom in *Nietzsche contra Wagner* as a further antidote to his youthful sickness.

Gramsci was perhaps not healthy enough to absorb the D'Annunzian stylistic germ, but Benedetto Croce allowed himself to be contaminated. D'Annunzio is for Croce, in some though not all ways, what Wagner was for Nietzsche—an ever-present figure in his writing, an object of both admiration and vituperation: "Egli non ha avuto quel che si dice evoluzione o progresso, ma un mutare apparente e un persistere reale" ["He did not have what one calls evolution or progress, but rather an apparent change and a real persistence"].

Benedetto Croce's description of D'Annunzio's non-development perhaps better describes the nondevelopment of anti-D'Annunzian criticism. The ideologeme of D'Annunzian sickness is passed on from Croce and G. A. Borgese to Gramsci and his nipotini, Carlo Salinari and Arcangelo Leone de Castris, like a package unexamined by tired customs officers too intent upon sequestering other forbidden Crocean goods. Apparent change but real persistence—each time we return to our task of unpacking we discover a new element in examining the "same" object. Another facet of the "sickness" of rhetoric, of D'Annunzio's prose style, is angled into visibility as we read Croce's analysis of D'Annunzio,


Pascoli, and Fogazzaro, an antitrinity in Italian literature, a “trina bugia” [“triple lie”] opposed to the true Carduccian faith: “Nel passare da Giosuè Carducci, a questi tre, sembra, a volte, come di passare da un uomo sano a tre ammalati di nervi” [“In passing from Giosuè Carducci to these three, it seems at times as though we were passing from a healthy man to three neurotics”].

In the 1907 essay “Di un carattere della più recente letteratura italiana” [“On a characteristic of the most recent Italian literature”], Croce defined this sickness as spiritual emptiness and, once again, insincerity, an emptiness created by the absence of Carduccian ideals—heroism, love, country, family, glory, death, and “la virile malinconia” [“virile melancholy”]. That D’Annunzio’s representation of love is not wholesome enough but violent and sadistic, Croce tells us; that his patriotic ideas are not nationalistic but rather too imperialistic, Croce tells us; that D’Annunzian babies are merely “complessi di cellule che si contraggono o esseri malati o deformati” [“complexes of cells that contract or sick or deformed beings”] and that incestuous titillation does not become the ideal family, Croce tells us that, too.

But virile? Would it not seem that D’Annunzio’s preoccupation (according to Croce and Croceans alike) with sensuality and voluptuousness, with cruelty and sadism, were at least virile? Does Croce not tell us that Tullio Hermil, protagonist of L’Innocente, is motivated by “tormentose visioni falliche” [“tormenting phallic visions”], which, it is implied, also plague the author? Or is it perhaps Croce who is tormented by such visions? Certainly “virile melancholy” seems to be not a Carduccian ideal so much as a stylistic description, and a stylistic description that we find once again in La storia d’Italia dal 1871 al 1915, when Croce dismembers the body of D’Annunzio’s work in order to repackaging it for posterity.

In questa cerchia, egli era artista splendidissimo, e talune delle liriche del Canto Novo e della Chimera, e molte pagine

del Trionfo della Morte e di altri romanzi, certe scene della Figlia di Iorio e le maggiori liriche del libro di Alcione saranno ricordate nella storia della poesia, se non della grande poesia italiana: ché, per la grande, a lui mancava la pienezza di umanità, la virilità carducciana o foscoliana.  

[In this circle, he was a most splendid artist, and some of the lyrics of the Canto novo and of the Chimera, and many pages of The Triumph of Death and of other novels, certain scenes of The Daughter of Iorio and the major lyrics of Alcione will be remembered in the history of poetry, if not that of great Italian poetry, for he lacked the fullness of humanity, the virility of a Carducci or a Foscolo necessary for greatness.]

Though lacking in fullness and virility, D’Annunzio had “gonfiato e falsato alcune sue brevi ispirazioni” [“swollen and falsified some of his brief inspirations”]; in D’Annunzio’s style, in his very titles, there is “un certo che di gonfio e di sproporzionato” [“something swollen and out of proportion”]. “Stile gonfio” is a syntagm usually translated as “bombastic style,” yet Croce himself (and even more so, Borgese) gives us reason to hear the literal “swollen, turgid” beneath the transferred meaning. Turgidity of style alternates with fiacchezza, “limpness,” and sterility; clarity and simplicity of style are replaced by tumid images that deflate upon examination (“ampie volute di frasi immaginifiche, che parevano dire grandi cose, e sfumavano nel vago, illudendo e deludendo” [“ample spirals of imaginific sentences that seemed to say great things, and vanished into the haze, deluding and disappointing”]).  

Rhetorical richness not only falsifies but is also a symptom of eviration. Or is an objection to D’Annunzio’s fuller exploration of eros, and to the feminization of the male protagonist thematized in decadent narrative, here projected into a stylistic analysis? An image of a D’Annunzio exhausted by orgies appears in both Croce and Borgese, but such an orgiastic image has perhaps less to do with his writings than with critics titillated by anecdotes of the author’s life.

26. Ibid., 50, 51, 260.
G. A. Borgese, in *Gabriele D'Annunzio*, reads the life through the works, the spiritual condition of the author as a first period of sensual and sexual vigor followed by “una languida voluttà nella contemplazione della propria facchezza” (“a languid voluptuousness in the contemplation of his own limpness”). The fourth and following chapters of his monograph are devoted to an analysis of “la malattia dannunziana” (“the D'Annunzian sickness”), of the “bad” D'Annunzio (here, once again, the good D'Annunzio is split from the bad). The D'Annunzian malady seems to be hereditary; it joins a long line of -isms (or is it -itises?): Boccaccism, Petrarchism, Arcadism—which in turn stem from Ciceronian rhetoric (“Cicerone fu, in tutte le malattie della letteratura italiana . . . il modello della prosa” (“Cicero was the model of prose . . . of all illnesses of Italian literature”). The D'Annunzian illness is further aggravated by injections of Wagner and Venetian painting. But the real objection is to the poeticization of prose, to what is perceived as a surfeit of signifiers that conceal a poverty of the signified, of syllables that “esasperano anche fuor di proposito il significato” (“irrelevantly exasperate the meaning”), an abuse of superlatives and adjectives.

A questo modo il suo stile diventa gonfio e lungagginoso; e quel suo periodo, che a prima vista sembra un miracolo di dirittura, di logica e di forza, considerato più da vicino si rivela troppo spesso per una pinguedine inerte, scarsa di giunture e d'ossa, incapace di reggersi in piedi e studiosamente arrotondata in una floridezza molle, che tappa tutti i buchi e biancheggia di uno splendore che non è forza nè luce. Manca di snellezza, di asciuttezza, di rapidità. E vedendolo così prospero, ed impettito per la mal celata difficoltà che ha di procedere e di muoversi, voi desiderate qualche volta il fervido anacoluto di Cellini, il ritmo zoppicante di Machiavelli, la durezza granitica di Alfieri, la bonomia quasi sciatta di Manzoni, la magrezza sanguigna di Leopardi.

28. Ibid., 187. “Stile gonfio” appears only in the 1932 edition; in the 1909 and 1951 editions, we find “stile tronfio” in its place.
[In this way his style becomes swollen and long-winded, and that sentence of his, which at first seems a miracle of rectitude, of logic and strength, when considered at closer range too often reveals itself to be an inert fattiness with few joints and bones, incapable of standing on its own and deliberately rounded out in a soft rosy glow that stops up all the holes and glows white in a splendor that is neither strength nor light. It lacks slenderness, dryness, rapidity. And seeing it so prosperous and stiff on account of the poorly concealed difficulty that it has in proceeding and moving along, you sometimes desire Cellini’s fervid anacoluthon, Machiavelli’s limping rhythm, Alfieri’s granitelike hardness, Manzoni’s almost care­less good humor, Leopardi’s sanguine slenderness.]

Style, at first tumid and a miracle of rectitude, recoils at the critic’s touch and becomes inert fleshiness deprived of rigidifying bone. A soft rosy glow whitens and “stops up all the holes.” Yet the critic’s desire remains unfulfilled; immediately the image of erection (impettito) is recalled, an erectness incapable of movement (because all the holes are blocked?), and desire is displaced to the granitelike hardness of Alfieri. “The question of style,” writes Derrida, “is always the examination [examen], the weight of a pointed object.”

D’Annunzio’s style does not satisfy the critic; it is too soft, too round, too moist . . . almost too feminine. A promise unfulfilled, desire turns to the fervor of Cellini, to the rhythm of Machiavelli. Desire disappointed cloaks its disillusion in a diagnosis of sickness. Whiteness that is neither strength nor light is also whitewash. D’Annunzio’s style is a whitened sepulcher; the promise of sensual refinement is betrayed. Borgese continues:

Anche qui la malattia verbale non è che un sintomo dell’ispirazione malata. Come nell’ispirazione del D’Annunzio il crimine, la viltà, la libidine animale hanno aspetto di eroismo, così nel suo stile si drappeggiano di paludamenti grandiosi anche le cose più semplici. Come un certo tipo di bel tiranno

[Here, too, the verbal sickness is nothing other than a symptom of sick inspiration. Just as crime, cowardice, and animal lust take on the appearance of heroism in D’Annunzio’s inspiration, so in his style even the simplest things are draped in grandiose paludaments. Just as a certain kind of beautiful tyrant or a certain sadistic-warlike imagination dominates his brain with the fixity of a mania, so a certain ideal of sentence and verse cuts short his style’s aspiration to freedom.]

What is “low” is disguised and elevated by a turgid style; what seems to be an upright style is instead feminine softness. If sadism dominates the author’s imagination (something that remains to be explored), there is at least a hint of longing for a bel tiranno in the critic. It is not eros as a poetic concern which disturbs Croce and Borgese but the sort of eros D’Annunzio seems both to depict and to personify, an eros at once too high and too low, too powerful and too languid, expressed in a style seemingly too virile and yet somehow too feminine. Accepting D’Annunzio’s own paronomastic motto, Erotica/Heroica, they interpolate the missing third term, Retorica, and transfer to it their objections to any other term in the triad.

From the Lombrosian island of normalcy, the view of genius includes sterility as an important degenerative feature, complemented by various forms of aberrant sexuality: “La natura ha, come gli uomini, orrore del genio e sterilizza (vedasi anche qui un’altra analogia del genio con l’ingegno) quegli animali che osano pensare qualche poco di più dei loro compagini di specie” [“Like men, nature abominates and sterilizes (note here another analogy of genius to brilliance) those animals who dare to think a little more than their fellow members of the species”].31 Hypertrophy of any organ must be accompanied by atrophy of another; an overdevel-

30. Borgese, 188.
31. Lombroso, Genio e degenerazione (Palermo: Remo Sandron, 1897), 258.
oped intellect provokes nature into abolishing fecundity. Sterility does not, however, imply the absence of sexual activity but rather its unrestrained and irregular development. Lombroso's theory, which so often relies upon anecdote, photographs, quotations from Balzac or Stendhal rather than upon an explanatory model, here finds confirmation in a list of "genii alienati" ["alienated geniuses"]:

Quasi tutti, poi, questi grandi, presentarono anche anomalie nelle funzioni riproduttive. Tasso fu di esagerata libidine nella giovinezza, di rigida castità dopo i trentotto anni; viceversa Cardano, impotente da giovane, a trettacinque si fa libidinosissimo. —Pascal, sensuale nella prima gioventù, più tardi crede fin delittuoso il bacio materno. —Rousseau era affetto da ipospadia e spermatorrea, e, come Baudelaire, Cesare, Winckelmann [sic], Cellini, Michelangelo e molti altri, aveva una perversione sessuale. (L'uomo di genio, 536)

[Almost all of these great men exhibited anomalies in their reproductive functions. Tasso possessed exaggerated lust in his youth, rigid chastity after the age of thirty-eight. Cardano was precisely the opposite: impotent as a youth, at the age of thirty-five he became extremely lustful. Sensual in his early youth, Pascal later thought even his mother's kiss was criminal. Rousseau was afflicted by hypospadias and spermatorrhea, and like Baudelaire, Caesar, Winckelmann, Cellini, Michelangelo, and many others, had a sexual perversion.]

"Genius" is a sort of dinosaur, so top-heavy that it can no longer reproduce itself, too overspecialized in the struggle for survival, where mediocrity wins out. Its sexuality follows the paths of perversion. Genius represents both the highest evolutionary development and the most atavistic throwback, for sterility appears in the lowest animals as intelligence grows. As organisms specialize, sexual differentiation is blurred. Lombroso addresses the problem as it appears in bees, ants, and termites:

Ora queste tre specie d'animali sono le sole nella natura . . . che offrano una sterilità completa negli individui che lavorano, sì che costituiscono una specie a parte nelle stesse famiglie, di
femmine assolutamente sterili con organi nervosi ipertrofici e sessuali atrofici—che si chiamano neutri; mentre i veri maschi e le vere femmine, che conservano l'attività sessuale, non mostrano traccia di maggiore intelligenza. (L'uomo di genio, 623)

[Now these three animal species are the only ones in nature . . . that exhibit complete sterility in the individuals who work, such that they constitute in their own families a separate species of absolutely sterile females with hypertrophic nervous organs and atrophic sexual organs. These are called neuters. The true males and females, who retain sexual activity, do not show traces of greater intelligence.]

This sudden appearance of ants, bees, and termites may jar the reader, but Lombroso takes the term atavism seriously; his chapter “L'atavismo del genio” [“The atavism of genius”] relies on just such zoological scenarios. In this “lower” example, we may read more clearly what is implied by the “higher” one—that sterility is a front for the confusion of sexual difference. The highest development is a neutered being, a being in whom high and low, masculine and feminine are inseparable. Advanced human development takes place in the male rather than the female, however, for the human female is several rungs down, arrested in her upward climb: “Anche nella scala zoologica le specie più basse si sviluppano più precocemente di quelle d'ordine più elevato: e la donna è più precoce dell'uomo” (L'uomo di genio, 625) [“On the zoological ladder as well, the lower species develop more precociously than higher orders; and woman is more precocious than man”]. Lombroso is a pre-Freudian, yes, but he shares with Freud the conclusion that a woman is but an undeveloped man. Yet this blurring of difference is not utopian, it does not represent a longed-for androgyny, nor is it the appearance of a Jungian anima in an artistic temperament. What Freud theorizes in individual ontogeny, Lombroso explains through phylogeny: in the amoebic beginning, there was no sexual difference, only a sort of polymorphic perversity. The degenerative return of nondifference is not utopian but criminal.

Lombroso, unlike Nordau, describes sexual aberration in genius with equanimity; his study of genius is colored by admiration for, and self-identification with, greatness and artistic achievement, no
matter how degenerate. It is rather in his monumental study, *La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale*, that we discover criminality in the abolition of difference. Genius had been an entirely masculine phenomenon, for as Lombroso affirmed in *L'uomo di genio*,

> E quando la genialità compare nella donna è sempre associata a grandi anomalie: e la più grande è la somiglianza coi maschi—la virilità. Goncourt aveva scritto giustamente: “Il n'y a pas de femmes de génie: lorsqu’elles sont des génies, elles sont des hommes.” (261)

[And when genius appears in woman it is always associated with great anomalies, the greatest of which is their resemblance to males: virility. Goncourt wrote correctly: “There are no women genuises; when women are geniuses, they are men.”]

In *La donna delinquente* it becomes clear that even the normal woman has but a precarious existence. Normal femininity must be a perfect mirror-negative of masculinity, a negative mirror image rarely discovered. Lombroso searches for such a face in his readings of the *visages moralisés* that he describes, reproduces in photographs, measures with craniometers, *visages moralisés* that appear along a continuum from amoebas which have no distinct sex or have both, to the human range of masculine and feminine. The slippage between the two causes delirium, and his science grips a grid of control—of numbers, of statistics presented without interpretive keys or scales—laid upon an indistinct flow of characteristics. The scientist himself despair, and he admits how rickety is his grid:

> Quando trent'anni fa, uno di noi iniziò questi studi, giurava sull'antropometria, specie cranica, applicata allo studio di delinquenti; vi vedeva la tavola di salvezza contro la metafisica, l'apriorismo dominante in tutti gli studi che toccavano dell'uomo. . . Ma, come accade delle cose umane, l'uso degenerando in abuso, mi mostrò la vanità delle mie speranze, il danno, anzi, enorme della troppa fiducia. Tutta la discrepanza, infatti, dei moderni anche più ponderati antropologi,
che non sono, infine, che antropometri, contro noi, dipende appunto da questo che le differenze in misure dall'anormale al normale sono così poche che, salvo una delicatissima ricerca, non si rinvengono. . . . Ma non però quelle misure devonsi abbandonare, non fosse altro come cornice del quadro, come simbolo, come bandiera di una scuola che fa della cifra la migliore sua arma. 32

'When, thirty years ago, one of us began this research, he swore by anthropometry, especially cranial, applied to the study of criminals. He saw in anthropometry its salvation from metaphysics, from the a priorism dominant in all the fields that dealt with man. . . . But as is the way with all things human, as use degenerated into abuse I saw the vanity of my hopes, indeed the enormous harm of excessive faith. In fact, all of the disagreement between us and even the most cautious modern anthropologists, who are finally merely anthropometrists, depends on the fact that the differences in measurements between the abnormal and the normal are so small that they do not even appear except in the most delicate research. . . . And yet those measurements must not be abandoned, even if only as the picture frame, as a symbol, as the banner of a school that makes the number/cipher its best weapon.]

Such a painful admission appears in none of the other, frequently revised and republished studies, L'uomo delinquente, Gli anarchici, L'uomo di genio, Genio e degenerazione, though the same methods and physiognomic measures are adopted for them all. 33 The drawings


33. The desperately empirical register of physiological description employed in all Lombroso's studies is supplemented in La donna delinquente by a greater quantity of nonempirical material and commentary. The folklore, proverbs, and literary representations included in that study are symptomatic of a mentalité more resistant to the will to "scientific" observation. While the literary references included in L'uomo di genio and Genio e degenerazione are often taken from the "patient's" writings, such evidence is presumably unavailable when dealing with women, because of "quella inferiorità nei centri grafici che notammo anche nella donna normale" ["that inferiority in the graphic centers which we noted in the normal woman as well"] (464). Deprived of a means of self-representation,
of the skulls of Ugo Foscolo and Immanuel Kant, the photographs of Russian prostitutes and Wagner, the measurements of Hottentot hymens—all remain as symbols but no longer as scientific evidence. They remain as icons of a lost positivistic faith. Is it the search for the visage of normal femininity that leads Lombroso to despair of the “cifra,” a femininity that is itself a cipher? He does find the virile woman of genius, the virile female criminal, the virile prostitute, but feminine normalcy seems an impossibility. Female virility returns as a refrain to every category examined. Of prostitutes: “Ora le nostre ree si avvicinano più alle femmine antiche e ancor più ai maschi antichi” (La donna, 280) [“Now our female criminals are closer to ancient females and closer yet to ancient males”]. Of born criminals: “Tale è in complesso la fisonomia morale della criminale nata che mostra cioè una tendenza fortissima a confondersi col tipo maschile” (La donna, 467) [“Such is, on the whole, the moral physiognomy of the born female criminal, who exhibits a very strong tendency to be confused with the male type”]. And of common criminals: “Quello che soprattutto colpisce è la virilità; sono tipi (e qualche volta vestiari) di maschio grossolano sopra corpi di femmina” (La donna, 342) [“What is most striking is their virility: they are crude masculine types, and sometimes masculine clothing, on female bodies”]. Crude masculinity that dresses a female body, a seemingly virile style that conceals a languid softness—Lombroso’s description of the degenerate woman is not far from Borgese’s analysis of a sort of decadent literary transvestitism.

My intention is not to “lower” Borgese’s stylistic description to Lombroso’s evolutionary delirium or to “elevate” Lombroso’s criminological meditation to the level of sophisticated literary criticism. On the contrary, I mean to “average” them, apart from questions of cultural hierarchies, in order to uncover the coordinates of the antidecadent rhetoric of sickness. Croce and Borgese do not speak from a Jungian point of view of the reconciliation of opposites woman can only be represented. Thus statistics from “scientific” experiments can appear alongside age-old commonplaces; the quantified results of a test of women’s “ottusità dolorifica” [“obtuseness to pain”] are followed by the “conclusion”: “Il fatto è anche notato dai proverbi: Li femmini hannu setti spiridi comu li gatti / Le donne hanno l’anima attaccata con la colla cerviona” (61) [“The fact is also noted in proverbs: Females have seven souls like cats / Women have their souls attached with collagenous glue”].
or from a Freudian point of view (though they are contemporaries of Freud); instead, they object to con-fusion, to "femininity," and they recommend virility. Croce is more subtle because more literary than Lombroso, but the preoccupation persists. Both Croce, in *Storia d'Italia dal 1875 al 1915*, and Carlo Salinari, in *Miti e coscienza del decadentismo italiano*, recall the enchanted Circean gardens where the heroes of Ariosto's and Tasso's poems are waylaid as a figure for the confusion of masculine and feminine symptomatic of the D'Annunzian malady. A seductress enslaves the hero: Alcina, in *Orlando furioso*, enslaves Ruggiero in her "regno effeminato e molle" ["soft and effeminate realm"], stripping him of his warrior's strength. Tasso's Armida enchants Rinaldo and holds him until a fellow warrior offers Rinaldo a mirror-shield in which he observes his most unwarlike appearance, "dal troppo lusso effeminato" ["effeminated from too much luxury"].

Rinaldo and Ruggiero, however, free themselves of the bewitching siren songs and return to their virile pursuits; D'Annunzio, it would seem, remains garlanded and "molle," even when he becomes the D'Annunzio of political oratory. Croce writes, of the *Canzoni della gesta d'oltremare*:

> Quel che si avvertiva di sentito nelle nuove canzoni del D'Annunzio erano sempre le impressioni sensuali, soprattutto delle cose crudeli, turpi e ripugnanti, come fin dai primi suoi tentativi di uscire dai giardini di Alcina e affacciarsi agli spettacoli della patria e della guerra.  

[What one felt were sincere in D'Annunzio's new poems were always sensual impressions, especially of cruel, foul, and repugnant things, as was the case since his first attempts to leave Alcina's gardens and face the spectacles of the fatherland and of war.]

That the gardens are recalled as a locus not only of sensuality but also of eviriation becomes even clearer when Salinari takes up the

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topos. The Marxist Salinari, whose introduction is predictably anti-Crocean, cannot but be aware that he cites Croce while citing Nietzsche, that, by referring to Armida rather than Alcina, he plays Tasso to Croce's Ariosto. Indeed, his study of decadentism is tailored to fit the Crocean paradigm: each of the three “ammalati di nervi” receives a chapter, and Pirandello replaces Carducci as sanity, as the “consciousness of the crisis.” The Tassian Salinari, bound by ideological constraints, relies nonetheless upon the Ariostean Croce for the backbone of his tale:

Dietro le danze e le risa di Zarathustra vi sono, dunque, questa stanchezza, questa tristezza, questi rimpianti. D’Annunzio, invece, si ferma nei giardini di Armida, non lascia dietro le cose belle: caso mai lascia innanzi la ricerca del vero e del certo. La sua stanchezza si deve al fatto che ha troppo goduto, la sua insoddisfazione (quando c’è) deriva dall’essersi fermato troppo e troppo spesso, di aver percorso poca strada sulla via dell’idea. Il dramma nicciano si capovolge, si svirilizza e s’immeschinisce. 36

[Behind Zarathustra’s dances and laughter there are, then, this fatigue, this sadness, these regrets. D’Annunzio, instead, lingers in Armida’s gardens; he does not leave behind the beautiful things. If anything, he leaves aside the search for the true and the certain. His fatigue is due to the fact that he has enjoyed too much, his dissatisfaction (when there is any) comes from having lingered too much and too often, from having made little progress on the road to the idea. The Nietzschean drama is overturned, evirated, made petty.]

The figure of Armida/Alcina is perhaps even stronger than the straightforward statement that D’Annunzio “evirates” Nietzsche and that this eviration is equivalent to a petty reading. This moment of fantasy (which dreams of another moment of fantasy) blooms as a symptom not only of an obsession with virility but of the powerful attraction D’Annunzio’s siren song exerts upon the

critic. Ah, to have enjoyed “too much,” to have dallied, like D’Annunzio, “too long and too often!” One must stop one’s ears to this siren song in order to continue along the path of the intellect to a more virile, warlike mode. D’Annunzio would have been “better” had he had the strength to abandon his “regno effeminato,” Salinari tells us; yet even when he does venture away toward Nietzsche and toward political speeches, he continues to represent (for the critic) “effeminate sensuality.” If Wagner was, for Nietzsche, a Midas who sickened all he touched, D’Annunzio is, for Croce and Salinari, a Midas who evirates all who come into contact with him. It is not surprising, then, to find yet another variation that figures D’Annunzio’s texts themselves as sorceress, siren, and whore. Gian Pietro Lucini writes:

Comunque, l’irrequieto viaggiatore ch’io ero di quel tempo, in cerca di mia strada, che desiderava far altra, in ricognizione delle altrui virtù, che non desiderava imitare, piuttosto emulare, —e pur confuso e ben carezzato, nella mia ingenua giovanezza, dai suoni dell’Abruzzese, stregato, nelli occhi, dal suo lussuoso caleidoscopio, compiaciuto dal vanto della sua purezza, cui già si accostavano i professori delle scuole secondarie, maestri de’ giornalisti d’ogiddi; —comunque, anch’io diedi nella ragna tessami dai vezzi della allietatrice sua feminea prestanza. E non pensava ch’egli l’aveva messa in mostra di sulla finestra, come la Talantaresca, allo zimbello e per uccellare, specialmente i più giovani ed i più alacri, per nutrir, poi, del meglio delle loro scarselle il suo mignone, ed era tanto arida di cuore, da reale cortigiana, come doveva essere per le necessità del suo mestiere, imbellettata il volto e contiggiata di vesti, il tutto per eccitare, come la Babilonese biblica, alla lussuria, cioè alla idolatria.\(^\text{37}\)

[The restless traveler that I was then, in search of his path and wanting to do something else, in recognition of others’ virtues, did not wish to imitate but rather to emulate—and though confused and well caressed in my ingenuous youth by

\(^{37}\text{Gian Pietro Lucini, Antidannunziana (Milan: Studio Editoriale Lombardo, 1914), 15.}\)
the sounds of the Abruzzese, bewitched and bedazzled by his luxurious kaleidoscope, satisfied by the reputation of his purity, which high school teachers, the masters of today's journalists, were already accepting—I, too, fell into the web woven for me by the charms of his alluring feminine appearance. And that traveler that was I did not think that he had put it on display at the window, like Aretino's Talanta, as a decoy to catch the youngest and quickest, in order to nurture his darling with the best of their purses, and she was so hard-hearted like a true courtesan, as she had to be for her profession, with her face made up and adorned with robes, all to excite to lust and idolatry, like the biblical whore of Babylon.]

The text itself has become the sorceress's garden, and the critic, rather than D'Annunzio, bewitched. As in the Circean gardens of Armida and Alcina, the promise of satisfaction held out in the moment of enchantment is later deluded by an unveiling: the text is nothing but a painted whore. As we shall see, this "criticism" of D'Annunzio's texts is simply a repetition of their structure; Lucini is indeed caught in the web of the text. 38

Lombroso, more secure upon his island, more confident of the "pathos of distance" which separates him from the pathological other, coolly describes the phenomenon already noted by the decadents themselves ("L'homme s'affine, se féminise, se divinise") and later troped by literary critics:

L'influenza della degenerazione tende sempre più a ravvicinare

38. In "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," Shoshana Felman lucidly describes how critics "act out" the texts that they presumably analyze: "The scene of the critical debate is thus a repetition of the scene dramatized in the text. The critical interpretation, in other words, not only elucidates the text but also reproduces it dramatically, unwittingly participates in it. Through its very reading, the text, so to speak, acts itself out. As a reading effect, this inadvertent 'acting out' is indeed uncanny: whichever way the reader turns, he can but be turned by the text, he can but perform it by repeating it." See Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 101. The topos of the enchantress-turned-hag is discussed at greater length in Chapter 4.
e a confondere i due sessi, per cui si ha nei criminali l'infantilità femminile nel maschio che lo mena alla pederastia, a cui corrisponde la mascolinità delle donne, per una tendenza al ritorno atavistico verso il periodo dell'ermafroditismo. La prova ne è che in molte questa tendenza ha preceduto fino la pubertà; che molte si compiacevano a vestirsi da maschio . . . godevano a vedere organi femminili, sfuggivano i lavori femminili. Difatti, secondo Schüle, nella pazzia morale e nella epilessia, si riscontrano frequenti i casi di perversioni sessuali.

(La donna, 416)

[The influence of degeneration tends to confuse the two sexes and bring them ever closer together. Hence one finds in male criminals the female infantility that leads them to pederasty, and in female criminals, a corresponding masculinity on account of a tendency to return atavistically to the period of hermaphroditism. The proof of this is that in many women this tendency even preceded puberty, and that many took delight in dressing as males . . . enjoyed seeing the female organs, and avoided feminine tasks. In fact, according to Schüle, cases of sexual perversion are frequently associated with moral madness and epilepsy.]

Epilepsy and “moral madness” are metonymies for genius; the disease stands for the man; degeneration is also degeneration. What was intended as a meditation on difference (healthy vs. sick, pathological vs. normal, male vs. female, animal vs. human) ends by recognizing similarity and reveals the impossibility of the project. Nature’s upward evolutionary climb turns out to be a marching in place. What the literary critics view with hostility, Lombroso accepts with resignation and even optimism: there is no progress without regress. Lombroso had, in the introduction to La donna delinquente, warned the commonsensical reader that such contradiction is part of the complex that the clear-eyed scientist must discover and accept. And just as there is no progress without regress, so there is no “genius,” no literature, no music, no art, no philosophy without sickness. For Lombroso, the healthy art(ist) of Nordau or Croce or Lukács belongs to the realm of the counterna-
M. Nordau, volendo esagerare un principio nuovo e giusto, quello di servirsi nella critica letteraria, più dell’esame personale degli autori che non delle loro opere, non ha però abbastanza distinto il mattoide, il quale non è se non un imbecille colla larva del genio, inetto ad ogni creazione, dal vero genio larvato di alienazione (paranoia in genere, monomania, epilessia), i cui prodotti erano, si può dire, di tanto più sublimi quanto più era il corpo malato, anzi perché era malato; e allora avrebbe potuto accorgersi che il suo ostracismo colpiva tarquiniamente le più alte cime, da Wagner a Ibsen a Tolstoi, mentre lasciava intatte, perché veramente meno ammalate, le creazioni mediocri. (L’uomo di genio, xii)

[Max Nordau, in wanting to exaggerate a new and correct principle (that of utilizing more personal examination of the authors than of their works in literary criticism) has not, however, sufficiently distinguished the mattoid—who is nothing other than an imbecile with the outward sign of genius, inept at any creation—from the true genius marked by alienation (usually paranoia, monomania, epilepsy) whose products were, one might say, all the more sublime as the body was sicker, in fact, precisely because the body was sick. If he had distinguished between them, he would have realized that, in Tarquinian style, his ostracism struck down the highest peaks, from Wagner to Ibsen to Tolstoy, while it left intact mediocre creations because they were truly less sick.]
of anti-D'Annunzian critics and the language of D'Annunzio himself—a genealogical position, rather than that of “source” not because sources cannot be traced but because the relationships between these texts are fraught with all the tensions and disavowals, desires and repressions that feed the family romance.\(^{39}\) Despite geographical, ideological, and generic differences, these texts all participate in the decadent rhetoric of sickness and health, decay and degeneration, pathology and normalcy.

The critics' antipathy for D'Annunzio fixes on erotic discourse as a locus of pathology—either D'Annunzio's, or the critics', or both. Lombroso's perhaps surprising sympathy for “sick genius” suggests that we are dealing less with the representation of “period illnesses” (on the order of the popular novel's fondness for tuberculosis) or “illness as metaphor” than with a valorization of physiological illness and alteration as the origin of psychic alterity. In order to explore both suggestions, I leave behind the “bad air” of anti-D'Annunzian criticism and move on not to fresh air but to the air of the sickroom itself.