Sexualities in Victorian Britain
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Degeneracy theory has always drawn on notions of the perverse, but not confidently; this essay is about how perversion disturbs and draws into contradiction the theory which appropriated it. Notoriously, perversion was at the same time being appropriated by two other theories, sexology and, later, psychoanalysis. In fact, in the late nineteenth century perversion was transformed from a mainly theological to a mainly psycho-sexual category. This was indeed a momentous shift. This essay is also about how the earlier category remains obscurely active within the latter, again disturbingly so.

Max Nordau's *Degeneration* was published in 1892, an English translation appearing early in 1895, the year of the Wilde trials. Nordau's notion of degeneracy is thoroughly implicated in the notion of perversion; following the pioneering theorist Benedict Morel, he defines it as a morbid deviation from an original type or normal form (*Degeneration* 16). Deviation has been the essence of perversion, from Augustine and before to Freud and beyond. Those such as Nordau and Morel believed degeneration could be transmitted through heredity, although its origins could be environmental. One environmental cause was modernity itself, especially its frantic pace. Modernity could induce, for instance, narcotic abuse or nervous illness, which would result in debility, which might then be transmitted through the father. And once degeneration takes root, its effects accelerate and magnify in each generation, quickly producing insanity and extinction. Whereas biological and social evolution had proceeded slowly across millennia, degeneration could disintegrate the highest evolved forms in a moment. Obviously, degeneration theory articulated fears about the failure of evolution, and notions of progress generally, most apparently in its obsession with atavism. But in the way it focused on the eruption of the primitive within the civilized it also expressed a fear that evolution was going into reverse. Even more even than that: this was evolution simultaneously accelerating forward out of control and regressing backward out of control; a terrifying forward and backward unbinding of the arduously achieved
higher forms of civilization and biology. In this general sense of resisting internal forces which are imagined to unbind and disintegrate relentlessly, degeneration theory can be regarded as a reaction formation to the death drive. Hence Nordau’s advice: “the march of progress is characterized by the expansion of consciousness and the contraction of the unconscious, the strengthening of will and weakening of impulses; the increase of self-responsibility and the repression of reckless egoism” (554). Arguably, the more evolved a culture regards itself, the more it fears its own internal dissolution—fears, to paraphrase Freud, that the social body is finding its own way back to death, and in a way which suggests that civilization was only ever a detour on the way to death.

Today degeneration theory is sometimes regarded as absurd and unworthy of attention. It is true that it was sufficiently irrational, obsessive, and persecutory to explain every kind of evil, from individual illness to national economic decline to the decay of an empire, and to demonize any group or individual perceived as threatening or merely different. But degeneration theory also swept across Europe: Max Nordau’s Degeneration was one of the most popular of all texts in Europe in the 1890s. Moreover, degeneracy theory was a manifestation of anxieties present in Western culture from its beginnings and persisting today.

I will consider Nordau’s work alongside two novels, Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1902) and Mann’s Death in Venice (1912). All three texts speak to a widespread contemporary fear that perversion and deviation are agents of degeneration, a fear most vivid when the civilization in question is thought to be declining. These texts also reveal that it is the perverse that forces the oppositions on which degeneration theory founds itself into unstable proximity. One such opposition is that between the barbaric and the civilized. Perversion in these novels not only accelerates civilization into decadence (the over-civilized), it simultaneously regresses it back to the primitive (the pre-civilized). Through mediating concepts like obscenity, the excessively civilized is seen to have an affinity with the excesses of the primitive.

If this paradoxical double movement—decadent forward decline, and regressive return to the primitive—is what degeneracy theorists identify and warn against, it is also what subverts the narratives deployed to explain it.

Consider this example. There is one familiar narrative which warns that we are not as civilized as we think; that remnants of our primitive history may always resurface, usually in acts of barbarity. An instance of this: Meg Greenfield in an article in Newsweek (Dec. 4, 1978) about what has come to be called the Jonestown massacre, remarks rightly how commentators on the political right and the left immediately jumped in to make political capital from that event, each blaming it on the diverse political and religious values which they opposed. But, continues Greenfield, all such “political” accounts were axe-grinding evasions:

I think we don’t want to acknowledge that the aberrational behaviour we have witnessed is at least dimly familiar to us in an individual, human way, that in some respects it represents not an antithesis of our own behavior, but rather a parody or caricature of it.
She adds that the horror of what occurred was not the consequence of any particular political position but stemmed from

the dark impulses that lurk in every private psyche, the impulses whose control and channeling into constructive humane acts is the very definition of civilization. What made the Jonestown affair such a disturbing metaphor and called forth so many diversionary “explanations” was its reminder that the jungle is only a few yards away. (132)

That Greenfield can use this kind of analogy in an article whose very thesis is that we must not simplify evil is telling indeed; so too is the article title, “Heart of Darkness,” and Jeffrey Burton Russell’s remark in his wide-ranging study of “evil,” that Greenfield’s piece conveys a profound truth about the nature of evil (15). Alan Sinfield describes this myth of universal savagery in the following way: as an aspect of the European intelligentsia’s crisis of self-esteem, precipitated by the expulsion from empire, there occurred a reluctant abandonment of Western “Man’s” claim to superior rationality and a universal culture; this in turn involved a readjustment of imperialist and humanist ideologies whereby the savage is relocated inside all of us as an aspect of the incorrigibility of human nature.

The myth of universal savagery is the final, desperate throw of a humiliated and exhausted European humanism. It is informed by both an anxiety about and a continuing embroilment in imperialist ideology. . . . When it was just the natives who were brutal, the British were enlightened and necessary rulers. But if the British are (have been) brutal, that’s human nature. (140-41)

The savage is no longer the absolute other—that which we are not and against which we conveniently define ourselves—but the cautionary exemplar of what we obscurely were and might frighteningly be once again. The insights which desublimate the racial and sexual repressions of the civilized, and demystify its exploitation of the savage other, nevertheless reintroduce a revised self-justifying “necessity” and mystification. Hence the charge of racism in Heart of Darkness. But, as I will suggest shortly, even as civilization shores itself up through the internalization of its primitive other, it becomes more vulnerable to being internally undone by the same, especially by that contradictory double movement which it involves: a regression into primitive origins, and a progression, even an acceleration, into decadent decline. Before (i.e., behind) is the scandal of its origins, while before (i.e., ahead) is the scandal of its destiny, to become everything which it is not yet, yet always was.

In both Heart of Darkness and Death in Venice perverse desire is the focus for this dynamic; desire is simultaneously in the grip of regression and progression, both of which drive it deathwards. In each novel a brilliant subject of an “advanced” culture makes a fatal deviation from that culture’s normative trajectory, embracing in the process what it defines itself over and but also against. The deviation is seen to be neither an accident, nor entirely a consequence of the inherent instability of the solitary genius/pervert; each has deviated because he has followed one of his culture’s most advanced trajectories. In Death in Venice, resurgent “homosexual” desire, the most feared of all the sexual perversions, is the
vehicle and focus for this terrible paradox. This novel dramatizes the sexualizing of perversions, perhaps the single most significant development in the creation of "modern" sexuality.

In both novels, as well as Nordau's Degeneration, perversions also reveal degeneration chronic and potentially catastrophic, rather than manageable. Whereas the view of degeneracy as manageable saw it as something like a natural internal decline, or a containable external threat, the view of it as chronic identified degeneracy as irrupting within that from which it should be most removed from—for example, progresses—and with an intensity which threatened nothing less than social death. Daniel Pick, in the fullest recent account of European degeneration theory, and with due regard to his own caution against underestimating the diverse and incompatible forms in which it emerged, finds a repeated tension between these two views. While regarding degeneration as manageable meant that the agents of degeneration could be isolated through, for example, segregation, transportation, or castration, regarding it as chronic meant that it was uncontrollably everywhere, a problem of and for whole populations. Thus

the shared problematic of degeneration across the period could perhaps be summarized as follows: was degeneration separable from the history of progress (to be coded as "regression," "atavism," or "primitivism"), or did it reveal that the city, progress, civilization and modernity were paradoxically, the very agents of decline? (106)

If the manageable view sees degeneration as a problem of the other, the chronic view sees it as a problem of both the same and the other; civilization is threatened from without, but also from within, by the other, but also by the proximate. Once again it is perversions which forces an antithesis into an unstable proximity; the very definition of degeneracy as a morbid (perverse) deviation from within involved a simultaneous insistence on, and confusion of, the inside/outside separation. Hence the fears which Pick identifies—"fears of inundation, the subject overwhelmed at every level of mind and body by internal disorder and external attack" (44; cf. 43 and 235–36).

The confusion between inside and outside corresponds to the tendency for degeneracy to shift disconcertingly from being a manageable problem of the individual (for example, the cretin and the criminal) to a chronic one of modern society as a (disintegrating) whole; from individual pathology to a sense of social death (4). Thus Nordau writes: "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? '" (537). Mapped socially and psychically, the perverse degenerate is both outside and inside; mapped teleologically, both behind and before.

"CONNECTING LINKS ABOUND": USING PERVERSION

Degeneration theory imagined extensive evolutionary connections between sexual perversions, primitivism and race; the sexual pervert was identified with the primitive and vice versa. Thus the sexuality of primitives was represented as
quintessentially excessive, flooding over indiscriminately into the perverse, while (as Mosse indicates in his study of nationalism and sexuality) the over-cultured decadent pervert was said to be marked by an excess of libido which links him or her with the primitive.\(^5\) Freud vividly attests to the seductiveness of this association between the perverse and the primitive:

I am beginning to grasp an idea: it is as though in the perversions, of which hysteria is the negative, we have before us a remnant of a primeval sexual cult, which once was—perhaps still is—a religion in the Semitic East (Moloch, Astarte). Imagine, I obtained a scene about the circumcision of a girl. The cutting off of a piece of the labium minor (which is even shorter today), sucking up the blood, after which the child was given a piece of the skin to eat. . . . Perverse actions, moreover, are always the same—meaningful and fashioned according to some pattern that someday will be understood.

I dream, therefore, of a primeval devil religion with rites that are carried on secretly. . . . Connecting links abound. (Letter to Fliess, January 24, 1897, in Masson 227; see also Pick 228)

Freud eventually rejected degeneracy as an explanation of perversion, and with important consequences.\(^6\)

Degeneracy theory also made explicit the connections between sexual perversion and race (already implicit in the connections between perversion and primitivism). In fact, the sexual stereotype of the degenerate was "transferred almost intact to the 'inferior races.'"\(^7\) Identifying the way anti-Semitism associated Jews with sexual perversion, Richard Plant cites the following passage from Hitler's official newspaper in August 1930:

Among the many evil instincts that characterize the Jewish race, one that is especially pernicious has to do with sexual relationships. The Jews are forever trying to propagandize sexual relations between siblings, men and animals, and men and men. We National Socialists will soon unmask and condemn them by law. These efforts are nothing but vulgar, perverted crimes and we will punish them by banishment or hanging. (49)

Foucault regards "the medicine of perversions and the programs of eugenics" as the two great innovations in the technology of sex in the second half of the nineteenth century, with the theory of "degenerescence" making it possible for them to refer to one another. This theory explained how a heredity that was burdened with various maladies . . . ended by producing a sexual pervert (look into the genealogy of an exhibitionist or a homosexual: you will find a hemiplegic ancestor, a phthisic parent, or an uncle afflicted with senile dementia); but it went on to explain how a sexual perversion resulted in the depletion of one's line of descent—rickets in the children, the sterility of future generations. The series composed of perversion-heredity-degenerescence formed the solid nucleus of the new technologies of sex. (118)
Perverse Dynamics

I remarked earlier that deviation is the essence of perversion. But it is a paradoxical deviation. Why is the prima facia innocent activity of separating or departing from something felt to be such a threat to it; why does deviation become a subversion, corruption, or contradiction of that from which it departed (which we will call the norm); why, for theology, was perversion the antithesis of conversion? The answer lies partly in the origin of deviation within that which it perverts. Literally so: to deviate from something presupposes an antecedent point of congruence with it, either as the identical or (much more worrying) the proximate or indistinguishable. Typically this means that perverse deviation discloses a split, a contradiction, a difference within or about (in proximity to) the normal which the latter must disavow in order to remain itself; this is one reason why perversion is regarded as dangerous. However, this original proximity (or identity) of the perverse with the normal also enables the latter to displace its own contradictions onto the former; proximity is a condition of displacement which in turn marks the same or the similar as radically other. Mythologically and historically, politically and medically, the category of perversion bears the violence of this displacement, but also the potentially subversive knowledge both of what is disavowed and of what is displaced. The perverse has the potential always to return along the very route of the deviation/displacement, to subvert the normal. I call this the perverse dynamic.

One of our culture’s founding narratives, that of the Fall, is rife with the perverse dynamic. It is pertinent to see briefly how—not least because Benedict Morel based the theory of degeneration on his reading of Genesis, recasting the Fall narrative in pseudo-medical terms. In that narrative evil not only erupts from within a divine order which (in virtue of God’s omnipotence) should have precluded it, but also originates with those beings closest to God—Satan and then “Man”—who allegedly pervert their most divine attribute, free will, becoming in the process the source of all evil (Augustine). Original sin is thus more aptly regarded as original perversity, the means whereby evil is displaced via Satan onto Man and then onto woman. At the same time evil remains so subversively implicated in divinity that a whole branch of theology (theodicy), has grown up to explain the fact. But these explanations are never successful; the problem of evil remains intrinsic to divinity. Either God is omnipotent, in which case he created evil, or evil is not God’s fault but is independent of and opposed to him—which means he is not omnipotent.
CIVILIZATION AND DEGENERATION: MAX NORDAU

Defining degeneracy as a morbid deviation from an original type or normal form, Nordau elaborates the concept in terms of movement, both of acceleration and retardation. The accelerated pace of modern urban life in the second half of the nineteenth century produces fatigue, aberration, decadence, and mental disorder. Culturally and aesthetically, these conditions are manifested in different forms, including mysticism—“the expression of the inaptitude for attention, for clear thought and control of the emotions [caused by] the weakness of the higher cerebral centres”—ego mania, which is characteristic of, among others, decadents and aesthetes (for instance, Wilde), and “false realism,” exemplified by Zola and others. In all of these tendencies, “we detect the same ultimate elements, viz., a brain incapable of normal working, thence feebleness of will, inattention, predominance of emotion, lack of knowledge, absence of sympathy or interest in the world and humanity, atrophy of the notion of duty and morality” (536). Though from a clinical point of view these pathologies are “somewhat unlike each other,” in fact they are only “different manifestations of a single and unique fundamental condition, to wit, exhaustion” (536).9

Exhausted and unable to maintain their place in the evolutionary ascent, degenerates regress to

the most forgotten, far-away past . . . they compose music like that of the yellow natives of East Asia. They confound all the arts, and lead them back to the primitive forms they had before evolution differentiated them. Every one of their qualities is atavistic, and we know, moreover, that atavism is one of the most constant marks of degeneracy. (555)

An acceleration forwards producing a regression backwards; degeneracy and atavism, decadence and primitivism. When some of Nordau’s critics pointed to these apparently opposite characteristics of the degenerate, he replied that the contradiction was only apparent, and rested on “the stubborn superstition which sees in disease a state differing essentially from that of health” (555). Nordau insists, or rather has to concede, that disease and health are much more closely connected than is imagined—not a difference of kind but of quantity, sharing the same “vital activity.” Sometimes this activity is accelerated, sometimes retarded, “and when this deviation from the rule is detrimental to the ends of the whole organism, we call it disease” (552–53). So, what would count as a diseased state now, would include a return to what was, at the primitive stage of the organism’s development, a perfectly appropriate and therefore healthy state of things. Though medically conventional, this is a compromising admission, given Nordau’s ethical and political project. What separates the healthy from the sick, the normal from the diseased, the natural from the unnatural, is not a difference of kind, but merely the intensification or retardation of a “vital” process that they all share in common.

And what determines whether someone or something is diseased or healthy is re-
markably relativist: "the circumstances and purposes of the organism." Thus, "according to the time of its appearance, one and the same state may very well be at one time disease and at another health" (555, my emphasis). The witch-hunting paranoia of some advocates of degeneracy derives from this fact: those who now carry the seeds of social death within them embody a condition which was once normal and healthy and which leaves them barely distinguishable from the normal.  

Nordau’s theory resembles a medical version of Augustinian privation/perversion, with the crucial addition of progress as itself disease-producing; degeneracy is caused not only by falling away from the higher, but by the very effort of reaching toward it. Because it is a question of “more or less,” says Nordau, it is impossible to define the limits of the degenerate: “extreme cases are naturally easily recognised. But who shall determine with accuracy the exact point at which deviation from the normal, i.e. from health, begins?” (553). Who indeed? One group called upon by Nordau to make just this decision, and to do so with a certainty impossible by his own account, is psychiatrists. He urges them to identify and publicly denounce the degenerates, to “unmask” their imitators as enemies to society, and to caution the public against their lies (559–60).

It is partly the indeterminacy in Nordau’s theory between the normal and the degenerate that makes the latter so terrifying, and leads him to declaim, in the closing pages of Degeneration, that “whoever looks upon civilisation as a good, having value and deserving to be defended, must mercilessly crush under his thumb the anti-social vermin,” i.e., degenerates (557). For all its 560-odd pages of unflaggingly confident denunciation of the degenerate, and its equally confident affirmation of the truly, self-evidently, civilized, this is a book written in the knowledge that the two are in a terrifying proximity and are often indistinguishable.

In one respect, Nordau is only complying with the thesis which Georges Canguilhem considers so revealingly in The Normal and the Pathological (1966). Generally adopted in the nineteenth century, this was the medical principle “according to which pathological phenomena are identical to corresponding normal phenomena save for quantitative variations.” This positivist conception of disease should be contrasted with the ontological conception which insisted on a qualitative difference. Whereas the positivist regards disease as a deficiency or an excess of the normal, and thereby posits a relationship of homogeneity or continuity between the pathological and the normal, the ontological sees it as a fundamentally different condition, obeying laws completely different from those governing the normal state (35, 275, 49, 56). The positivist conception of disease rejected what Canguilhem calls “medical Manichaeanism” whereby “Health and Disease fought over man the way Good and Evil fought over the World” (103)—health being associated with salvation and goodness, and disease with sickness, evil, and sin. The refusal of the ontological conception of disease is a refusal to confirm evil medically. Canguilhem cites Claude Bernard, who wrote in 1876: “These ideas of a struggle between two opposing agents, of an antagonism between life and death,
between health and sickness, inanimate and living nature have had their day. The continuity of phenomena, their imperceptible gradation and harmony must be recognized everywhere" (72). In *Degeneration*, Nordau seeks to advance a socio-political vision based on the old Manichean dualism, by recourse to the positivist medical model which repudiated the most basic tenet of that dualism. It is hardly surprising that Nordau is pressed into one contradiction or inconsistency after another. For instance, he deploys his own criterion of degeneracy in the very campaign which he advocates to eliminate it: it is possible, he says, "to accelerate the recovery of the cultivated classes from the present derangement of their nervous system" (550). In this very affirmation he acknowledges explicitly that, for all the talk of the primitive, his real concern lies in the degeneracy of the cultivated classes (the over-cultivated). And while on the one hand he declares that degenerates will perish of their own accord, on the other he insists they must be ruthlessly exposed and crushed. Further, he insists that exhaustion is the essence of degeneracy, yet sees actual degenerates as full of a wilful, perverse energy. This final contradiction is particularly apparent in his thoughts on the degenerate basis of contemporary geniuses who exert a powerful but invariably baneful influence on culture, their brilliance disintegrating and perverting the social, psychic, and sexual orders (6, 22-24, 260, 317ff).

A RIOTING INVASION OF SOUNDLESS LIFE:

**HEART OF DARKNESS**

A great man, whose brilliance is quintessentially civilized—"All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz"—deviates into his savage antithesis. And this because, not in spite, of being a supreme instance of the civilized: having all of Europe within him included being a "great musician" and being entrusted to produce a report to "the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs (71 and 103).

Of Kurtz, Cedric Watts has remarked his "unforgettably perverse individuality," oriented toward what the novel describes as monstrous appetites and passions—"sexual, sadistic, avaricious, megalomaniac" (Watts 151, 114). Conrad does not make sexuality the key to Kurtz's perversity; his "unspeakable rites" (71) include the sexual but they cannot be explained exclusively, or even primarily, by it. There is a more inclusive dimension to his deviation, as befits a text which, though chronologically only just prior to Freud's first and major work on the sexual perversions (*Three Essays*, 1905), might be described as pre- or non-Freudian in conception. Watts sees Conrad as more reminiscent of Nordau than anticipatory of Freud (133–34). Both Kurtz and the narrator of the tale, Marlow, are described as wanderers (Conrad, *Heart*, 8, 80). But it is Kurtz who wanders perversely, deviating from his assigned task; Marlow only follows, seeing and understanding a great deal more than most, but never as much as Kurtz, whose deviation becomes the focus for a radically paradoxical narrative full of dangerous knowledge (see Watts
3–4 and Miller, esp. 172). In the process, a desolate affinity between the primitive and the civilized emerges.

"Going up that river," says Marlow "was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world . . . we penetrated deeper and deeper into the heart of darkness" (48, 50). Discovered there are not so much the distant, obscure origins of civilization, as its present identity: "all of the past is still in the mind of man." Culture and civilization are merely a "surface truth," involving a necessary disavowal of this other, always-present truth of present origins (52, 55). But this other truth is not clear; it is, rather, "deeply" obscure. Marlow discovers a deserted hut, inexplicably vacated and (equally inexplicably) containing a remnant of its civilized inhabitant, a tattered book called An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship. The surface of things, including this hut and this book, does not confirm by contrast a deeper truth, but on the contrary becomes increasingly indecipherable and disorienting. This is the truth—a kind of desublimation which is not yet Freudian.

An Inquiry into Some Points of Seamanship, as its all too apt title proclaims, is a purposeful rather than a remarkable book; it reminds us of the chief accountant encountered earlier who, elegantly dressed and even slightly scented, "in the great demoralisation of the land . . . kept up his appearance." His books are in apple-pie order; Marlow encounters him in the middle of the colossal and dark jungle "making correct entries of perfectly correct transactions" while "fifty feet below the doorstep I could see the grove of death" (28). Like this accountant, the book expresses "a singleness of intention, an honest concern for the right way of going to work" (54); both present the obsessively narrow, undeviating civilized quest as it was supposed to cut through the jungle. Marlow subscribes to the same; to be preoccupied with the mundane tasks, to keep the ship going, is the wise person's blinkered choice; attending to "the mere incidents of the surface" keeps the "reality," the "truth" of the "mysterious stillness" almost hidden: "There was surface-truth enough in these things to save a wiser man" (52). Thus the preoccupation with the rivets—"to stop the hole" (40). Civilization itself is only an intensity of concentration, a blinkered adherence to the straight and narrow, which is also therefore an inevitable and not an accidental blindness, epitomized by the "civilized" quest itself, the collecting of ivory: a brutal, industrious, determined operation executed by agents oblivious to all else.

But there occurs the fatal swerve into knowledge, the more terrifying for being only a knowledge of the falsity of what "counts" as knowledge, and of the assumed difference between the civilized and the primitive upon which the operation depends. In civilization's frenzied, blind expression of its own acquisitive dynamic (the quest for ivory), it becomes disorganized, unraveled, confused; in the very process of defining oneself over and against, superiority (over) is invaded by the other through the proximity (against) it both presupposes and disavows.

Kurtz deviates from the "singleness of intention" into the obliterating silence which it disavows, a wilderness which whispers to him things he did not know, which "echoed within him because he was hollow at the core . . . " (83). Yet it is
from within this hollowness that "forgotten and brutal instincts" are also awakened, "the memory of gratified and monstrous passions. This alone, I was convinced, had driven him out to the edge of the forest . . . had beguiled his unlawful soul beyond the bounds of permitted aspirations" (94–95). For his part, Marlow returns to civilization, maintaining its necessary pretense to the last, lying to Kurtz’s "intended."

What Marlow was unable or unwilling to speak to her is hardly revealed, or revealed only as that which confuses what we thought we knew: in the foreground a mindless contemporary civilization scarcely removed from its origins in a frenzied primeval anarchy; and behind both of these, something into which both the contemporary moment and the primeval past fade indistinguishably—from it, and from each other—the oblivion, the sea of inexorable time, the great solitude which dissolves all into an entropic oblivion (105, 97, 83). The perverse frenzy of the "primitive" is both the energetic antithesis of death, and its intimate familiar, its prime mover.

What disturbs Marlow is perhaps less Kurtz’s perverse frenzy of the primitive resurfacing within the blind plundering energies of the civilized, than the forces of oblivion inside both: the sea of inexorable time and the great solitude are not only that into which we eventually dissolve but also that which pervades the present and the identity of the living, flooding it with a past which can be neither known nor escaped in the future—that is the heart of darkness.

All of this inheres within Kurtz; he is the quintessentially “civilized” subject who discovers not only the “savage within” but a deeper hollowness, the subjective counterpart of a universal emptiness which surrounds and informs all. Kurtz’s existential angst cannot plausibly be read as an affirmation of authentic selfhood; it is much more like the appalled recognition of a subjectivity at once informed and rendered utterly insignificant by what has preceded, what surrounds, and what will survive it. But this is not merely regression, because the historical narrative which regression presupposes is also obliterated by that “rioting invasion of soundless life” (43).

This movement is not yet, not quite, Freud’s death drive. A profoundly regressive encounter with almost-oblivion—that is reminiscent of the death drive:

We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms. . . . We could not understand because we were too far and could not remember, because we were travelling in the night of first ages, of those ages that are gone, leaving hardly a sign—and no memories. (51)

It is not yet the death drive because it occurs in the shadow of “the incomprehensible frenzy” of the primitive. It is not that the primitive signifies or affirms the life-force; it too is ultimately as insignificant as the civilized along “the interminable miles of silence” (53). It is rather that Marlow remains fascinated by it all: “wondering and secretly appalled” (51). As for Kurtz’s sense of horror, there can be no horror, only relief, in the silence which the death-drive delivers us to. For Marlow and Kurtz, there is residual terror in the encounter with non-being.

Conrad is more interested in the metaphysical than the social implications of
this, which means that even if this darkness “is shown to be the same in London as in Africa,” it nevertheless conceals the fact of a “non-European world resisting imperialism” (Said 33). But if the darkness really is also there in the drawingroom of Kurtz’s “intended” (105–106), so is this other world.

THE DECADENT AND THE PRIMITIVE:

DEATH IN VENICE

Separated from Conrad’s novel by a decade, Mann’s Death in Venice is also about another excessively civilized subject who deviates. An intellectual, von Aschenbach, is wrecked by his obsession with a 14-year-old boy. And now deviation is specifically and irrevocably sexual.

Mann clearly experienced homoerotic desire, and inclined toward a Platonic rationalization of it. It seems he planned and possibly wrote a more lyrical, affirmative treatment of Aschenbach’s homoerotic desire in Death in Venice, one explicitly sanctioned by extensive and precise Platonic allusion. This Platonic conception of homoeroticism, “necessarily infused with mind” (Letters, 102), enabled Mann to describe the project in 1911 as “serious and pure in tone, treating the case of an elderly artist’s passion for a boy. ‘Hm, hm!’ you say. But it is all very proper” (cited in Reed, 150). Retrospectively, an important letter in 1920 to Carl Maria Weber reveals he intended the novella to be a reconciliation of “the difference between the Dionysian spirit of lyricism, whose outpouring is irresponsible and individualistic, and the Apollonian, objectively controlled, morally and socially responsible epic. What I was after was an equilibrium of sensuality and morality” (Letters, 102–103).

In the novel, Platonic idealization fails. Perversion destroys the idealization invoked to justify it and wrecks the rationalization which would contain it. This is true not only of Aschenbach, but also the writing of the novel—which is not at all to say that Mann is Aschenbach. It might be truer to say that Mann disowns Aschenbach because he also identified with him. Such speculations derive from the trouble that Mann had in finishing the novel. He spoke of being “tormented” by the work calling it an “impossible conception”; and on another occasion of being “terribly strained and worried by it.” Before beginning the novel, he wrote of suffering from fatigue. T. J. Reed, who records these difficulties, also shows how they are related to a change of emphasis in the work. Somewhere in the writing, and under great strain, he changes from the Platonic redemption of Aschenbach to the more judgmental ending we have, drawing on Lukács’s more pessimistic view of Platonism (Reed, 150–54, 163, 166). In a letter to Weber he indicates why he made this change, quoting lines from the introduction to Gesang vom Kindchen:

Amid tears the struggling spirit
Pressed forward to speak in song. But alas there was no change.

For a sobering effort came then, a chilling command to control.

Behold, the intoxicate song turned into a moral fable.

(Letters, 103)
Are we to conclude from this that Death in Venice is the intoxicate song turned moral fable? If so then, on the face of it, the moral is straightforward, as Reed suggests: Aschenbach’s disaster stems from his failure to suspect passionate motives in his interest in Tadzio. But Reed misses a crucial point, or perhaps takes it too well—takes the narrative voice at its own rationalization—when he writes: “Despite the ambiguities which are rooted in the genesis of Der Töd in Venedig, at least the direction of development is clear: in what it implies about the Artist, the story constitutes a moral victory which is nothing to do with the morality of homosexual love” (177). Reed sees the novel as marking the creation of an ambivalent style, the breakthrough in Mann’s long-standing program to elevate the genre of the novel, and to move the novel of ideas beyond allegory; hereafter ambivalence is the central technique of Mann’s art: “Less permanent than the acquisition of this technique was Mann’s commitment to critical intellect as the watchdog over human aberration. This had been reaffirmed after a testing experiment” (178). But it is not that simple, as the story’s complex genesis and composition make clear.

Explaining in the same letter to Weber his attitude to homosexuality and its part in Death in Venice, Mann said that he originally wanted to deal with nothing “homoerotic at all” but “Passion as confusion and as a stripping of dignity” suggested by the aged Goethe’s determination to marry a little girl who didn’t want to marry him. However, “what was added to the amalgam at the time was a personal, lyrical travel experience that determined me to carry things to an extreme by introducing the motif of ‘forbidden’ love . . .” (Letters, 103–104). Here, intriguingly, the letter to Weber breaks off. Speculation as to why takes us back to the novella, a “personal lyrical travel experience” which Mann also had trouble finishing, in which simply the act of traveling is represented as a kind of deviation; the solitude of the traveler encourages thoughts which are “wayward, and never without a melancholy tinge,” and which give birth to the original, the beautiful, and to poetry, but also “to the perverse, the illicit, the absurd” (25).

Resuming the letter—“I had to put this letter aside for a while”—Mann declares: “I see nothing unnatural and a good deal of instructive significance, a good deal of high humanity, in the tenderness of mature masculinity for lovelier and frailer masculinity.” He respects this mode of feeling because it is “almost necessarily infused with mind,” a point reiterated later: “in spite of its sensuality [it] has very little to do with nature, far more to do with mind.” How simultaneously confident and implausible this attitude was can be glimpsed in a 1934 diary entry where Mann reflects upon, and rationalizes, homoerotic attraction as aesthetic and requiring no fulfillment. That day he has been “pleasurably smitten by the sight of a young fellow working . . . very handsome, and bare to the waist”:

The rapture I felt at the sight of such common, everyday, and natural ‘beauty’, the contours of his chest, the swell of his biceps, made me reflect afterward on the unreal, illusionary and aesthetic nature of such an inclination, the goal of which, it would appear, is realized in gazing and ‘admiring’. Although erotic, it requires no fulfillment at all, neither intellectually nor physically. This is likely thanks to the influence of the
realism principle on the imagination; it allows the rapture, but limits it to just looking. (Diaries, 207)

Mann's biographer, Richard Winston, claims that Mann's "understanding of the homoerotic urge" was something that he never admitted openly because he considered it a "defect in his nature." However, continues Winston, Mann nursed that secret as "a source of pleasure, of interest, of creative power." He cites a diary entry in which Mann says "For myself, there is no doubt in my mind that even the Betrachtungen [Reflections of an Unpolitical Man] is an expression of my sexual inversion" (see Letters, 105). Winston describes this as "a startling admission, and one we might expect him to enlarge on. But he said no more on the subject" (273–74). Other diary entries indicate a strong homoerotic appreciation of male beauty and acknowledgment of homoerotic desire (see, for instance, 118, 119, 207). Some days after writing the letter to Weber, Mann notes in his diary a "stimulation failure" in relation to his wife which he attributes to "the customary confusion and unreliability of my 'sex-life' " and accounts for it "by the presence of desires that are directed the other way. How would it be if a young man were 'at my disposal'?" (Diaries, 101).

In contrast to this diary entry, the letter to Weber affirms a sublimated homoeroticism, referring appreciatively to Hans Blüher's The Role of the Erotic in Male Communities (1917). In this and another book influential in the formation of the German youth movement (The German Youth Movement as an Erotic Phenomenon, 1912) Blüher argued that it was the homosexual who created communities and held them together through male bonding which was libidinally invested, but, crucially, in a sublimated form, and hence spiritual rather than physical (see Mosse, 56–58, and Plant, 42–43). Mann describes Blüher's ideas as "greatly and profoundly Germanic" (Letters, 103). The important point for Mann is that this idealized, intellectualized, homoerotic love is not allied to "effeminacy." It is further distinguished from what he calls its "repulsively pathological" forms, as in degeneracy and hermaphroditism. In short, while Mann repudiated the idea that homoeroticism is unnatural, and refused to denounce it, his public defence of it was as sublimated desire, a mixture of Greek idealism, Freudian sublimation, and contemporary German advocacy of what is now called the homosocial. Death in Venice is partly about how all these sublimations are wrecked by that which they would contain.

**THE PATH OF PERILOUS SWEETNESS**

Aschenbach, quite unlike Kurtz, is a compelling incarnation of the tormented Freudian subject, strung out somewhere between desublimation, repression, and neurosis. We encounter him at a point when his creativity is haunted by neurotic conflict consequent upon the failed attempt to repress sexual perversity and sublimate it into art. The two main types of sublimated activity described by Freud, artistic creation and intellectual inquiry, both apply to Aschenbach, and in a way
which closely follows Freud's further contention that perversion is sublimated in the service of civilization: Aschenbach is a hero of the cultural establishment, having written books like _The Abject_, "which taught a whole grateful generation that a man can still be capable of moral resolution even after he has plumbed the depths of knowledge" (9). But not the depths of repressed desire, which—and again this is a Freudian idea—returns with exquisite irony through the mechanism of its initial cultural repression: Platonism. According to those such as Nietzsche, Plato is one of the founding fathers of Western repression. Aschenbach repeatedly invokes Plato to rationalize his desire—only to desublime it even further.

This is because the sublimation is so very fragile; Aschenbach is "the poet-spokesman of all those who _labour at the edge of exhaustion_; of the over-burdened, of those who are already worn out but still hold themselves upright" (12, my emphasis). The psychic cost is terrible; Aschenbach is "consumed" by "high fatigues, the sacred and fasting service" of his art (43). Forever on the edge of this neurotic exhaustion, he bears out Freud's contention that repression is not a one-off event but a consuming, interminable struggle:

> the process of repression is not to be regarded as an event which takes place once, the results of which are permanent . . . repression demands a persistent expenditure of force, and if this were to cease the success of the repression would be jeopardized . . . in obsessional neurosis the work of repression is prolonged in a sterile and interminable struggle. (Repression, 11.151, 158)

_Death in Vénice_ begins at the point where Aschenbach is not just exhausted by, but apparently losing, the struggle: "art was war—a grilling, exhausting struggle that nowadays wore one out before one could grow old" (60). As the novel progresses, perversion increasingly undergoes desublimation, and civilized achievement gives way to an overwhelming, self-destroying desire.

The blank nothingness, which in Conrad's _Heart of Darkness_ and _Nostromo_ saps and dissolves social and psychic organization, here becomes something much more like Freud's death wish. According to Freud, whereas Eros is a binding force for unification, coherence, and integration, the death drive is exactly the opposite: a force of disintegration, decoherence, and unbinding which seeks to dissolve living substance itself, to bring its units back "to their primeval, inorganic state" (Freud, 12.310). Crucially, the death drive does not come after Eros but is in some paradoxical, seductive sense always already before it; the death drive animates Eros—in a sense death drives life. Hence one of Freud's more shocking contentions, namely that "the aim of all life is death." This is from _Beyond the Pleasure Principle_ 1919—some 8 years after _Death in Vénice_.

In Mann's novel the death drive operates at three related levels: first there is the overwhelming subjective desire to _become unbound_; that is, the desire for oblivion, for a dissolution of consciousness, the irresistible desire to regress back to a state of zero tension before consciousness, before life. Second, the death drive figures as the unbinding or disintegration of the fragile, artificial unity which is human iden-
tity, especially sexual identity, a disintegration which occurs in and through the return of the repressed, which is to say from within. Third, the death drive figures as the unbinding of civilization itself, the degeneration or unbinding of life's highest cultural forms on a scale which threatens nothing less than social death. Aschenbach is death driven in all three senses. He gravitates to the (literal) archetype of the degenerate city, Venice, his identity chronically destabilized by the returning repressed, and overwhelmed by a desire for oblivion:

His love of the ocean had profound sources: the hard-worked artist's longing for rest, his yearning to seek refuge . . . in the bosom of the simple and vast; and another yearning, opposed to his art and perhaps for that very reason a lure, for the unorganised, the immeasurable, the eternal—in short, for nothingness. (Death 32)

It is the price of maintaining civilization over, which is to say through, repressed/sublimated desire.

If Aschenbach exemplifies the desublimation of that perverse desire which, in its sublimated form, helps hold civilization together, Death in Venice, much more so than Heart of Darkness, is amenable to a psychoanalytic reading not least because, unlike Conrad's novel, where perversion includes sexuality but is not reducible to it, Mann's novel does in fact render perversion essentially sexual. Yet it is precisely because Death in Venice is so susceptible to that reading that I would suspend it, approaching the novel from a different perspective, and with a different question, which is also a question for psychoanalysis: Why should—how can—resurgent homosexual desire become the ground of so very much? Here it is at the center of an extraordinary narrative of terrifying acceleration into decline and an equally terrifying regression to a primitive past, and in both, homosexuality is also the permanent focus for what is so much more than sexual while always remaining at heart “deeply” sexual. Both Freud and Mann (in this instance) center homosexuality in this way. But rather than use the first to “explain” the second, we should see both as aspects of a development whereby homosexuality is centered and invested to an astonishing degree, becoming not only the source of intense ambivalence, but also the aesthetic vehicle of that ambivalence as it epitomizes fundamental social, psychic, and aesthetic conflicts which it precedes and exceeds. In short, Death in Venice emerges from something larger, something of which psychoanalysis also is in part an effect, and of course a critique. Further, to assimilate this novel to the psychoanalytic narrative which it undoubtedly incorporates would be to leave unexamined its other equally significant representations of deviant desire, including the Platonic one.

Aschenbach rationalizes his desire for Tadzio by comparing the latter’s beauty with his own art—both the artist and nature work with discipline and precision to create perfect form (46); Tadzio’s beauty is the physical counterpart of the beauty of the spirit. In pursuit of this ideal, Aschenbach invokes the Platonic ideal of the same; in the words of Socrates, as invoked in the novel, beauty “is the beauty-
lover's way to the spirit—but only the way, only the means, my little Phaedrus’” (48). Perverse desire is rationalized into the service of civilization in and through one of its most influential founding narratives. This recalls Mann’s declaration that what he wanted to achieve was “an equilibrium of sensuality and morality such as I found perfected in the Elective Affinities, which I read five times, if I remember correctly, while working on Death in Venice” (Letters, 103).

But isn’t it precisely the impossibility of such an equilibrium that the novel discovers? Maybe this is why it is from inside the Platonic rationalization that the “truth” of Aschenbach’s transgressive desire is suggested. Socrates again: “do you believe that such a man can ever attain wisdom and true manly worth, for whom the path to the spirit must lead through the senses? Or do you rather think—for I leave the point to you—that it is a path of perilous sweetness, a way of transgression, and must surely lead him who walks in it astray?” (76, my emphasis).

It is Mann’s achievement to give Aschenbach his most fully redemptive moment, one which briefly achieves that equilibrium, though in the form of its perversion, at just the point when his appropriation of the Platonic integration of the sensual and the spiritual is blown apart—when desublimation is agonizingly complete and he has recourse to the least philosophical, the most “hackneyed phrase of love and longing” simply, “I love you.” This is uttered after Tadzio smiles at him—“a speaking, winning captivating smile.” It is the smile of Narcissus; curious, coquettish, and faintly uneasy, “enthralling and enthralled.” Aschenbach literally collapses and rushes into the dark night “composure gone to the winds.” Yet the collapse, the desublimation, and this cliche in all its radical unoriginality, confirm him as momentarily more alive than at any other time in his life:

He leaned back, with hanging arms, quivering from head to foot, and quite unmanned he whispered the hackneyed phrase of love and longing—impossible in these circumstances, absurd, abject, ridiculous enough, yet sacred too, and not unworthy of honour even here: “I love you!” (55)

In this extraordinary passage the equilibrium is achieved, but precariously and unsustainably; it is as if desublimated desire meets with and momentarily animates the repressed ego before shattering it. To be wrecked by a winning smile—from such moments as these there might yet be told the truth, pleasure, arrogance, vulnerability, and pathos of desire and its inflection by masochism.

But not by Mann; or not quite. To have allowed Aschenbach this far was necesarily also to regard him, or at least his desire, as unredeemable. From here on a third representation of homosexual desire comes into prominence, one which renders that desire pathological, and identifies it with degeneracy, decadence, and the primitive. The homoeroticism which Mann wanted to defend he also insisted on distinguishing from its “repulsively pathological” forms. He was, he says, compelled to see Aschenbach “also in a pathological light” with the consequence that “in Death in Venice the highest is drawn down into the realm of decadence” (Letters, 103). He was also compelled to write the novella from a perspective described as...
the altogether non-“Greek” but rather Protestant, Puritan (“bourgeois”) basic state of mind not only of the story’s protagonists but also of myself; in other words our fundamentally mistrustful, fundamentally pessimistic relationship to passion in general. (Letters, 105)

In a word, ambivalence: Tadzio radiates a beauty which is said to be noble, “virginally pure and austere” (35); yet, almost immediately, he is observed to have unhealthy teeth, a sign of the chlorotic, the delicate and the sickly. Aschenbach reflects that the boy will not live to grow old, but “did not try to account for the pleasure the idea gave him” (36). This is not exactly the heroic, romantic, or tragic refusal of age and failure through early death; more the decadent pleasure of realizing that the object of his desire will succumb to an inherent degeneracy.

It is the “progressive” city, much more so than “timeless” nature, which bears the traces of the primeval. Marlow, moored on the Thames at Gravesend, London, remarks, “this also has been one of the dark places of the earth” (Heart of Darkness, 7). Before arriving in Venice, a city built on swamps, Aschenbach’s “desire projected itself visually” and he saw “a landscape, a tropical marshland, beneath a reeking sky, steaming, monstrous, rank—a kind of primeval wilderness-world” (5). Desire projected visually: again, homoerotic desire becomes the focus and the medium for so very much, binding together disease, death, and the decadent city, and mediating between the primeval past and decadent present. “The city’s evil secret mingled with the one in the depths of his heart. . . . Death unseen and unacknowledged was devouring and laying waste in the narrow streets, while a brooding, unseasonable heat warmed the waters of the canals and encouraged the spread of the pestilence” (57, 68). Forbidden desire, like disease, is at first latent, then spreads, then erupts: “Asiatic cholera had shown a strong tendency to spread. Its source was the hot, moist swamps of the delta and of the Ganges, where it bred in the mephitic air of that primeval island-jungle . . . where life of every sort flourishes in rankest abundance, and only man avoids the spot” (67).

Disease here works as a metaphor for the resurgence of the primeval in and through the decadent, and homosexual desire is its trigger. It culminates in a “fearful dream,” an orgy of lust whose “theatre seemed to be his own soul” and which rapaciously overcame “the profound resistance of his spirit; passed him through and left him, left the whole cultural structure of his life-time trampled on, ravaged, and destroyed” (70, my emphasis). The Freudian narrative of desublimated perversion unites with the pathological narrative of degenerate perversion, while the platonic rationalization is shattered by both. The subtext of the dream may indeed be precisely homosexual: fear is mixed with desire and (fine touch) with “a shuddering curiosity.” The desire is to some extent passive, again masochistically so: “shamelessly awaiting the coming feast and the uttermost surrender” (72), Aschenbach fantasizes fearfully about being annihilated or being fucked senseless, unsure of the difference. The sequence of the dream does indeed follow the process of violent desublimation, fear, resistance, beguilement, naked desire—“a whirling lust”—a craving “with all his soul to join the ring that formed about the obscene
symbol of the godhead” (72). Aschenbach awakens and, “lost to shame,” follows Tadzio through the Venetian streets, it seeming as though “the moral law were fallen in ruins and only the monstrous and perverse held out a hope” (73). If the death drive delivers oceanic dissolution, desublimated Eros drives toward Dionysiac self-destruction in a way, and to an extent, which bind together Eros and Thanatos more closely even than Freud imagined.

On desire as the ruin of identity, the shattering of self, *Death in Venice* is insightful, occasionally sublime. Fortunately, if unsurprisingly, its success in this respect wrecked Mann’s rather banal original aim of affirming an equilibrium between sensuality and morality. But this made it all the more important to try to discriminate civilized homoeroticism from its degenerate and decadent forms. Aschenbach deviates from the one to the other with the result, in Mann’s words, that “the highest is drawn down into the realm of decadence.” And into disease and death. 16 But everywhere the novel speaks the other truth of perversion; the challenge, not so much of homosexuality per se, the definitive sexual perversions in the discourses of sexology and psychoanalysis, but of the perverse dynamic working in and through homosexuality. *Death in Venice* is evidence for what Guy Hocquenghem said some sixty years later in a different context: “homosexual desire is neither on the side of death nor on the side of life; it is the killer of civilized egos” (136). The return of the perverse wrecks its former disavowal with a vengeance made possible by the fact that the perverse is now deeply sexual and its disavowal an organizing repression of an identity, an aesthetic, and, increasingly, an entire culture.

That is what the novel explores. So do Mann’s *Diaries*, and in ways which still apparently require censorship more than seventy years later. That is because yet again the perverse emerges in just the place it might least be expected—conventionally, and according to Mann himself—that is, inside the bourgeois family. Mann confessed himself divided between “bourgeois” family life and something else—“associations of men . . . eroticism, unbourgeois intellectually sensuous adventures . . .” (*Letters*, 105). Recall that Aschenbach reflects that passion is like a crime, welcoming “every blow dealt the bourgeois structure, every weakening of the social fabric, because therein it feels a sure hope of its own advantage” (56–57). Days after outlining his thoughts on homoeroticism in the letter to Weber, Mann records an experience similar to Aschenbach’s, only now incestuous as well as homerotic; it occurs in relation to his son, aged 14, the age of Tadzio in the novel (the bracketed elipses at the end of this quotation indicate a passage censored in the German edition of the *Diaries* on the grounds that it was too private):

Am enraptured with Eissi, terribly handsome in his swimming trunks. Find it quite natural that I should fall in love with my son. . . . I came back Friday evening on the very fast new train . . . short conversation with the attractive young man in white trousers sitting next to me in third class. Very pleasurable. It seems I am once and for all done with women. . . . Eissi was lying, tanned, and shirtless on his bed, reading; I was disconcerted. (Sunday, July 25, 1920)
Three months later, seeing his son naked:

Deeply struck by his radiant adolescent body; overwhelming—[...]" (Diaries, 101, 103)

NOTES

1. Thanks to James Eli Adams, Rachel Bowlby, Andrew H. Miller, Alan Sinfield, Norman Vance, and Cedric Watts for their help with an earlier draft of this piece.

2. Conrad quite probably used Nordau as a direct source (Watts, Conrad’s Heart of Darkness 132–34).

3. Most notably from Chinua Achebe in an article on the novel in Hopes and Impediments. Craig Raine disputes this in a review of Hopes and Impediments in the London Review of Books (22 June 1989, 16–18). This article gave rise to a dispute in the letter column extending to December 1989. See also Brantlinger, Rule of Darkness, especially chapter 9.

4. The extent of these paradoxical fears is suggested by the way they apparently enabled the recriminalizing of homosexuality in Russia in 1934. According to Wilhelm Reich, two concepts of homosexuality crystallized during the preceding period of growing reaction: the first being that homosexuality was a “sign of a barbaric lack of culture, an indecency of half-primitive Eastern peoples,” the second that it was a “sign of a degenerate culture of the perverse bourgeoisie” (209).

5. See Mosse, chapters 2, 7, and 8, pp. 17, 25, 34, 36; see also Gilman pp. 73–74.

6. It is interesting to find in Foucault’s History of Sexuality, otherwise one of the most influential modern challenges to psychoanalysis, a recognition of the way it nevertheless “rigorously opposed the political and institutional effects of the perversion-heredity-degenerescence system” (119). But, still, Freud’s idea of normality as a sequential, evolutionary development, and perversion as a fixation at, or regression to, an earlier stage warrants comparison with the basic principle of degeneracy, if only to indicate how otherwise divergent theories retain revealing connections, not so much through direct influence, but shared cultural contexts and interconnecting intellectual histories. Thus Max Nordau: “The disease of degeneracy consists precisely in the fact that the degenerate organism has not the power to mount to the height of evolution already attained by the species, but stops on the way at an earlier or later point” (556). Like psychoanalysis, though very differently, degeneration theory might challenge Darwinism in evolutionary terms. Edwin Lankester, in Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism contested the optimistic view that evolution and progress implied each other; on the contrary evolution could be a return from a complex to a simpler state—what he called a “progressive simplification of structure” (cited in Pick, p. 218).

7. On the connection between the perverse and the primitive see Gilman, “Sexology, Psychoanalysis, and Degeneration,” pp. 73, 87–89. On the racist transfer of the sexual stereotype of the degenerate see Mosse, Nationalism and Sexuality, p. 36.

8. See my Sexual Dissidence, especially parts 5 and 6; for an article-length account see “The Cultural Politics of Perversion: Augustine, Shakespeare, Freud, Foucault.”

9. As well as deviation and exhaustion, disintegration might also characterize degeneracy, especially when conjoined with decadence; compare Paul Bourget, who in Essais de psychologie contemporaine described decadence as the process whereby the separate units or cells—of for instance language or an organism—become independent; integration gives way to anarchic independence (see Nalbantian 12).

10. Some advocates of degeneration tried to prove it phrenologically, in for instance the shape and weight of the skull. Others, like Morel, also invoked the hidden workings of
degeneracy. This tension between its visible and invisible workings is paralleled the representation of the degenerate urban classes: "Perceived as visibly different, anomalous and racially 'alien', the problem was simultaneously their apparent invisibility in the flux of the great city" (Pick, 51-52).

11. Compare William Hirsch, another advocate of degeneration theory, in 1887: "Between any form of disease and health there are only differences of degree. No disease is anything more than an exaggeration, or disproportion, or anharmony [sic] of normal phenomena" (73).

12. See also the suicide of Decoud in Nostromo: doubting his own individuality, unable to differentiate it from the inanimate world around him, and perceiving the universe as a "succession of incomprehensible images," Decoud shoots himself. The sea into which he falls remains "untroubled by the fall of his body"; he disappears "without a trace, swallowed up by the immense indifference of things," the proverbial, quantifiably indistinct and indiscernible drop in the ocean (409, 411-12).

13. But, characteristically, in the same letter Mann cites Bliicher's definition of Eros as the "affirmation of a human being, irrespective of his worth," adding that, although this definition "comprehends all the irony of eros," the moralist replies "no thanks!" Compare the distrustful remark in Death: "in almost every artistic nature is inborn a wanton and treacherous proneness to side with the beauty that breaks hearts, to single out aristocratic pretensions and pay them homage" (27-28).

14. For a single-minded psychoanalytic interpretation of this type see Kohut.

15. See Tanner: "From the Aschenbach-Munich point of view, Venice is an oriental city where the East more than meets the West—rather, penetrates, suffuses, contaminates and undermines it. . . . Venice is notoriously a site where opposites begin to blur and distinctions fade" (354, 356).

16. Compared with one of his sources, Euripides' The Bacchae, Mann might be said to have tried to demonize some of his best insights. The Bacchae is a terse and brilliant dramatization of the perverse dynamic, the authoritarian Pentheus being destroyed from within by the selfsame forces he seeks to define and suppress as other. On this see Cedric Watts' brief but illuminating reading of Mann's indebtedness to Euripides in The Deceptive Text, 167-75.

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Perversion, Degeneration, & the Death Drive


