DEGENERATION
THE DARK SIDE OF PROGRESS

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Contents

Preface vii

Degeneration: An Introduction ix

1 History and Degeneration: Of Birds and Cages MODRIS EKSTEINS 1

2 Anthropology and Degeneration: Birds, Words, and Orangutans JAMES A. BOON 24

3 Sociology and Degeneration: The Irony of Progress ROBERT A. NYE 49

4 Sexology, Psychoanalysis, and Degeneration: From a Theory of Race to a Race to Theory SANDER L. GILMAN 72

5 Biology and Degeneration: Races and Proper Places NANCY STEPAN 97

6 Medicine and Degeneration: Theory and Praxis ERIC T. CARLSON 121

7 Technology and Degeneration: The Sublime Machine WILLIAM LEISS 145

8 Political Theory and Degeneration: From Left to Right, from Up to Down STUART C. GILMAN 165

9 Literature and Degeneration: The Representation of “Decadence” SANDRA SIEGEL 199

10 Art and Degeneration: Visual Icons of Corruption PATRICK BADE 220

11 Theater and Degeneration: Subversion and Sexuality SIMON WILLIAMS 241

12 Images of Degeneration: Turnings and Transformations J. EDWARD CHAMBERLIN 263

Degeneration: Conclusion 290

Index 295
"Progress is / The law of life, Man is not man as yet," or at least so for Robert Browning in "Paracelsus." The myth of progress, especially as it charmed the nineteenth century, has been a stock in trade of studies in the history of ideas reaching back before World War I. There is no longer much doubt that progress is a structure which, often willy-nilly, has been superimposed on human endeavor in order to provide it with shape and meaning. But the complementary notion that there is a necessary and antithetical structure in human thought against which the concept of progress is precariously balanced has been little considered. When any attention has been given to this opposing force, it has usually been labeled "decadence" and has been observed as reposing quite quaintly in such tangential areas as literature and the arts.

The present collection of essays is an attempt to sketch against a broad background this force which complements the idea of progress in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We have selected the term "degeneration" for it; and like "progress," it is a term widely employed in numerous and often contradictory contexts. There is no one area in which the concept of degeneration is dominant. It permeates nineteenth-century thought with a model (or a series of models) for decline, and it permeates nineteenth-century feeling with images of decay. Its roots are—as roots tend to be—embedded in biological models and images, but its import soon incorporated, not to say overwhelmed, the purely biological character of the paradigm. It borrows or subverts other terms, such as decadence, but it remains for the nineteenth century the most frightening of prospects, as well as at times the most enthralling.

Degeneration is a topic that has been little explored in the history of ideas, and it has never been the subject of a systematic presentation. These essays, all commissioned for this volume, present an overview of the idea of degeneration as it operated within nineteenth- and early twentieth-century thought. The essays span the natural and social sciences and the humanities. The divisions are arbitrary, reflecting more our traditional manner of dividing up western thought than the nature of the topic itself. And yet the logic of degeneration weaves themes among all the essays; ideas that appear in one reappear in others from a different perspective, or with a different emphasis.
No little reason for the power of the paradigm of degeneration is the institutional structure in which it was involved. For it was formed and functioned within institutional arrangements—such as those of medicine, anthropology, or the theater—which reflected and furtherted the needs of nineteenth-century European culture to reify its own power and to institutionalize the powerlessness over which it exercised its dominion. This dominion was both literal and figurative and included the real world of the European colonies, or the shops and factories and hospitals and asylums of the cities of Europe and America, as well as the imaginative structures which gave life to many of the most powerful images of literary, dramatic, and scientific enterprise. The control that sustained these arrangements was exercised through the use of the models of progress and degeneration. The fear of losing control meant that the negative model, the model of degeneration, was a particularly powerful one, caught as it was between its own negative power as the opposite of progress, and a positive energy which gave the model a fascinating appeal on its own, an appeal not manageable by any dialectic. It lurked in the nature of the Other, whether black or homosexual, as it lurked within those who generated it.

This volume attempts to make some connections between the history of ideas and the history of perception, and in doing so to illuminate both the subject matter and the informing logic of degeneration which link many of the most important nineteenth-century intellectual and social preoccupations.

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DEGENERATION:
An Introduction

Nineteenth-century obituaries sometimes used to describe the passing of the dearly beloved as a result of "simple decay of nature." The nice courtesy of the phrase marks one limit of the discussion of degeneration. The other limit concentrated on its morbid and grotesque affiliations, usually with a grim superiority. It was never an easy commerce between these points of view.

The word degeneration was itself a curious compound. First of all, it meant to lose the properties of the genus, to decline to a lower type... to dust, for instance, or to the behavior of the beasts of the barnyard. It also meant to lose the generative force, the force that through the green fuse drives the flower. During the nineteenth century, the pattern of degeneration was further identified in the physical as well as the natural sciences. Scientists formulated the law of increasing entropy as the second law of thermodynamics, according to which the available energy of any closed system (such as the universe) decreases over time—its "work-content" declining to a lower order, as it were. In addition, the idea of degeneration encouraged typological, just as much as it organized physical and biological, speculation; and in its more popular aspect it invited some very unscientific stereotyping. Finally, and for all of its connection with natural phenomena, its most powerful association was with something unnatural, even—or perhaps especially—when associated with natural desire or supernatural dread.

This volume of essays was undertaken as an experiment in intellectual history, and it took shape as a source book in one of the great topics of the nineteenth century. Degeneration belongs with those topics that are compelling as ideas and unnerving as realities. In a century that came increasingly to believe that the visible world is no longer a reality, and the unseen world no longer a dream, the ubiquity of degeneration had a powerful appeal. It provided a context for the interpretation of situations, and a text for speculation. It inhered in but also extended beyond the forms of life, whether microscopic or macroscopic. It focused some perennial but often unrecognized disagreements about the continuities or the discontinuities of natural history. And it is with history that our study begins, moving then to the social and natural sciences toward the arts.
Degeneration was part of a convenient dialectic for the organization of contemporary thought and feeling—a kind of fiction, if you will. But also, it was part of the inevitable structure of reality, an indisputable fact. People, nations, perhaps the universe itself, all run down, grow old and die. Those who talked about such things were usually well aware of their ambivalent obligation to the imperatives of fiction and fact; but they also accepted the convenience of fashioning their commentary according to quite tidy contraries, especially the contraries of rising and falling, going forward or going backward, regenerating or degenerating. These contraries were in part rhetorical strategies, in part logical orderings. They expressed the speaker's attitude toward his subject as much as they mirrored that subject; and they did much to determine the way in which people began to think about reality. And while the idea of degeneration was in a sense only one side of the coin, it was the magical side, for it seemed to be the image of a profound and disturbing power that operated in the universe. The theologians and the scientists of the period shared very little, but the common ground they both claimed was the perception that the only kind of account that really mattered was an account of decline and fall. Just as the nature of evil has always had a more compelling appeal to the imagination than the nature of goodness, so the idea of degeneration engaged the nineteenth-century mind with a troubling sense that there, perhaps, might be found the essential reality. In some measure, this was because with the idea of degeneration they came closest to the sanctity of types, or genera, or species, a sanctity that was the more frantically embraced as it became more uncertain. Nineteenth-century science combined a fiercely categorical instinct with a fierce interest in the nature of things, and degeneration was a perfect focus for this. It was not only an interest in processes and forces, but also an interest in the character and permanence of the distinctions, orderings, and coherences upon which nineteenth-century thought—and in particular scientific thought—depended. Not just the autonomy of species, but their very authority as entities, was called into question by all of this.

The questions that arise with regard to degeneration are the ones that in general perplexed nineteenth-century thought. Is the astonishing authority of degeneration as an intellectual principle an authority grounded in reality, or in the imagination? Is it a part of nature, or a part of us? Do the accounts need to be considered according to categories of truth and falsehood, or of fact and fiction? or do they belong instead with the aesthetic categories of symmetry, unity, and elegance? And what exactly is the difference anyway, in a century in which scientific theories are among the most beautiful inventions of the human mind, and the discoveries about the workings of the artistic imagination among its truest? Are the laws of nature merely consistent with, or are they consubstantial with, the laws of the human imagination? or of the divine? Is the idea of degeneration a mirroring or a making? Is the reality of degeneration objective or subjective?

These are the kinds of questions that perplex any discussion, historical or otherwise; but they arise with a peculiar and persistent urgency with regard to degeneration. The question which underlies this book is why this should be so.

Degeneration seemed to develop a particular sort of conceptual autonomy. In some ways the questions about its relationship to reality or its status as an idea became less important than its authority as an organizational scheme or discursive mode. Nineteenth-century scientists worried about this kind of authority but they also exploited it with compelling assurance, especially in organizing their favorite ideas. Charles Darwin, for example, tried to extricate himself from the teleological toils of Natural Selection, and in doing so confirmed his commitment to one of his most elusive yet most authoritative figures of speech.

Several writers have misapprehended or objected to the term Natural Selection. Some have even imagined that natural selection induces variability, whereas it implies only the preservation of such variations as arise and are beneficial to the being under its conditions of life. No one objects to agriculturalists speaking of the potent effects of man's selection; and in this case the individual differences given by nature, which man for some object selects, must of necessity first occur. Others have objected that the term selection implies conscious choice in the animals which become modified; and it has even been urged that, as plants have no volition, natural selection is not a term applicable to them? In the literal sense of the word, no doubt, natural selection is a false term; but who ever objected to chemists speaking of the elective affinities of the various elements?—and yet an acid cannot strictly be said to elect the base with which it in preference combines. It has been said that I speak of the natural selection as an active power or Deity; but who objects to an author speaking of the attraction of gravity as ruling the movements of the planets? Everyone knows what is meant and is implied by such metaphorical expressions; and they are as little necessary for brevity. So again it is difficult to avoid personifying the word Nature; but I mean by Nature, only the aggregate action and product of so many natural laws, and by laws the sequence of events as ascertained by us. With a little familiarity such superficial objections will be forgotten.

With a little familiarity such superficial objections will indeed be forgotten, and the very confusion of the literal and the figurative that Darwin cautioned against will prevail. And did prevail. The figurations of degeneration established their own imaginative autonomy in an entirely analogous way by creating an image of a process that had the authority of a natural or a divine law, and an image of a force that had the authority of a supernatural or an organic power. As an indication of this, it is easy to note
a tendency to speak of the degenerate as damned, just as those who survive (being the fittest) might be described as the chosen. Insofar as degeneration, like natural selection or gravity, was perceived as both a process and a force, it provided a mode of coherence and continuity for the descriptions of phenomena.

In part, the hovering between figurations that Darwin apologized for constitutes a familiar ambivalence—not just between the literal and the figurative, but also between what D'Arcy Thompson used to call the teleological and the mechanistic, between that which operates toward some end according to a purpose or design, and that which operates from some beginning according to a logic of causal relationships and consecutive events. The uncertainty about which prevails is basically an uncertainty about what it is that we are talking about, as well as an uncertainty about what we are saying about it. Or, put differently, it is an uncertainty about whether it is a matter of knowledge or belief.

They are formidable words, knowledge and belief; but they are words by which poets and scientists alike set some store. The idea of degeneration provided a framework and a focus for knowledge about human institutions, and a locus of belief about transcendent forces affecting the pace of natural processes in social and cultural and historical as well as biological and direction of change as well as the vitality of races and nations. The idea of degeneration provided a way of organizing impressions and of projecting desires, of reconciling the logics of the physical with those of the psychical worlds. In doing so, it provided an impetus for the astonishing development of new intellectual disciplines and of new institutional structures—legal, educational, administrative—to which we are still committed.

The essays in the volume were commissioned to bring together an appropriately wide range of disciplinary perspectives, and to establish through these perspectives a sense both of the topic and of the way in which the nineteenth-century mind—to use a nineteenth-century notion—organized its most troubling thoughts and feelings. This book demonstrates how the imaginative structures informing the arts were continuous with the imaginative structures informing the sciences, and how both were engaged by the notion of degeneration. It is intended as a source book not only for the history of ideas, but also for the study of the nature of history, and of one of its strongest ideas.

The presence that thus rose so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all "the ends of the world are come," and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which

the soul with all its maladies has passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the reverie of the middle ages with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary for all this has been of her, but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

This is Walter Pater's celebrated description of Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Mona Lisa. It is a catalogue of images of degeneration, complete with a decadent weariness, a new testament apocalyptic vision when "the ends of the world are come," a sensuous sickness of the soul, and a nice company of vampires, Borgias, and other suitably sinister presences. It is also an image of eternal beauty, and an emblem of a perennial rebirth, the spirit of the Renaissance. Birth and death went hand in hand in the nineteenth century. Regeneration and degeneration. The forces of nature, which rust iron and ripen corn. The forces of desire, which ruin the flesh and raise the spirit. Or is it all the other way around?

Degeneration was one of the most uncertain of notions, and—like some viruses—one of the most difficult to isolate. The idea of degeneration could comfortably be caught up in tapestries of ambivalences, to be sure, and whether it was conceived as warp or woof could be a matter of taste. But as any account must keep insisting, degeneration was also a reality. It was on the one hand an element of a dialectic of thought which became in the Hegelian heyday of the second half of the nineteenth century a nice balance to the idea of progress. On the other hand degeneration embodied something of the structure of an evolutionary reality in which everything moved not only toward a more advanced state but also toward death. But perhaps first of all degeneration was simply a word.

"Nothing dies so hard as a word—particularly a word nobody understands." Harry Quilter, writing in the 1890s, was lamenting the widespread misunderstanding of the word "Pre-Raphaelitism." So of course he wrote a book to straighten things out. This book is in a certain sense an attempt to perform the same magic on the word degeneration. Historians of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood have found how difficult it can be to separate the idea from the reality, and how much both are caught up in a network of popular misconception, deliberate misconstruction, and accidental emphasis. The indeterminacy of word degeneration makes such confusion look almost trivial.
It could certainly be said to be a word that nobody in the nineteenth century rightly understood. As is often the case, it was also a word of which many people were certain that they alone knew the true meaning. Its apparent importance as an element both in abstract speculations and in concrete situations generated a zealous corps of interpreters. But the interpretations did not always, indeed on the surface did not usually, agree.

Of course, interpretations are rather dubious things anyway. Hermes was the messenger of the gods, and in due course gave his name to hermeneutics, the science of interpretation. Hermes was also a trickster and a thief. Biblical criticism has been in his spell for a long time, mainly because of a perennial disagreement over whether the text should be read literally or figuratively. It is, as we have noted, precisely this kind of disagreement that bedevils any account of degeneration. This volume of essays is an attempt not so much to resolve the disagreement as to outline its character, and to provide the basis for a much more solid understanding of the idea of degeneration in the nineteenth century, as well as of the reality that the idea supposedly reflects. Often, needless to say, the idea was a making as much as it was a mirroring.

When the American poet William Carlos Williams took stock in 1919 of the legacy that this volume chronicles, he did so in images that betray both the fascination of the reality of degeneration—in this case, his own fascination as a doctor with decay and death—and the fascination of the idea of degeneration—his own fascination as a poet with beauty and fear. But even in saying this, it becomes obvious that the reverse may be more accurate: it may be the idea of decay and death, and the reality of beauty and fear. This is one of Williams' observations from a series of "improvisations" that he titled Kora in Hell.

Pathology literally speaking is a flower garden. Syphilis covers the body with salmon-red petals. The study of medicine is an inverted sort of horticulture. Over and above all this floats the philosophy of disease which is a stern dance. One of its most delightful gestures is bringing flowers to the sick.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, William Wordsworth said that his imagination was fostered alike by beauty and by fear. Degeneration as the nineteenth century understood it, and as the new intellectual disciplines constituted it, was in some sense the institutionalization of fear. Hope was looked after by the idea of progress, and seemed to be the tenor of the times. But fear—fear was contagious. It infected the air, and poisoned the wells.

That is the legacy. The prerogatives of the imagination, and those of reality, mirrored each other in the processes and forces of degeneration that interested the nineteenth century. In an age in which nature and nurture competed for authority, degeneration bridged the gap between the two by seeming to defy the laws of both. Defy may not be the right word. Transcend might be better.