

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: The Problem of American Decadence

However decadence is defined—as cultural decline, physical degeneration, aesthetic imbalance, moral transgression, hedonistic excess, pathological sexuality—the concept seems incompatible with the Puritan, progressive, capitalist values of America. Nineteenth-century Europe, by contrast, provided ample opportunity for social, medical, aesthetic, and moral fulminations against the decadence of the age. In France, the artist Thomas Couture and the critic Désiré Nisard compared their nation to the Roman Empire in decline.¹ Likewise, the German eugenicist Max Nordau took decadent Rome as the paradigm case in making his diagnosis of degenerate Europe. From Nordau's perspective, a major symptom of degeneracy could be found in the artistic irregularities of the late nineteenth century: impressionist artists, for example, painted as they did because their nervous disorders made their eyeballs vibrate.² From another perspective, artists and poets departed from earlier, rule-bound styles of art because those styles were simply inadequate to represent civilization in its last hours, with all the attendant psychological unease such a situation involved: hence the critic Théophile Gautier understood the poet Baudelaire to be an artist of decadence, not a decadent artist.³ In the moral sphere, the combination of Catholic and aristocratic traditions gave the European the advantage in cultivating a life of refined corruption. The Church not only provided in its dogma clear moral categories to violate but also supplied in the sacrament of confession the vehicle to violate them again and again. Add to this the leisure and material resources of the aristocratic class, and a life of Continental decadence becomes a real possibility.

In America, the cultural conditions that produced the possibility of decadence in Europe simply did not exist. What would the poor decadent do in a country that had legislated against aristocratic corruption in favor of democratic idealism? How attractive could capitalism be, really, to one who preferred passivity to progress? And how easy could it be to violate moral codes—to go against the grain—when all morality was viewed as the variable product

of the inner light of Protestant conscience? Only by reverting to near-defunct Marxist formulations might one describe American culture—so vigorous, so commercial, so crass—as “decadent.” But the Marxist assessment of the decadence of America really belongs to the twentieth century and is hardly an assessment contemporary with Marx himself. In fact, the whole notion of America as a decadent culture is the product of Stalinist-era agitprop that was obliged to promote the superiority of Communist “progress” over Capitalist “decline.”⁴ Similarly, conservative analyses of historical decline, most famously Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West* (*Untergang des Abendlandes*, 1918), might have counted America among the nations of the West that were in the process of going under (*Untergang*), but it was hardly the best example of that process.⁵ An empire in decline is a far better breeding ground for decadence than an energetic, ascendant nation. In nineteenth-century Europe, conditions of political decline and social disintegration—or the perception of such—called forth the cultural response we now know as decadence. In the United States, that response was not so easy to justify, but surely American ingenuity and resourcefulness count for something: by the end of the century at least some of the nation’s hard-working citizens had made themselves into creatures every bit as weak-willed, degenerate, and neurasthenic as their decadent Continental counterparts.

i

Because empire appears to be the necessary precondition of both historical decline and cultural decadence, fin-de-siècle America would seem to be the last place to look for the kinds of dandies, aesthetes, and decadents that populated the clubs of London and the salons of Paris. In Europe, a particular interpretation of history could be combined with a specific identification with a certain social class to produce a unique culture of decadence—unique, that is, to the interpretation of history as decline and the identification with the aristocratic class. To be decadent, then, it was necessary to believe that civilization was nearing its end and to maintain membership in the social class most responsible for that which was most civilized: the refinements of culture at the farthest remove from the barbarities of nature. What was not necessary was that either of these beliefs be true; in fact, decadent culture appears to emerge not so much from the reality of decline or the fact of the aristocracy as from a bourgeois fantasy of both. The examples of Joris-Karl Huysmans and Oscar Wilde help to make this point. Huysmans worked as a clerk for the French Ministry of Information and was about as far from the Faubourg St.-Germaine as it was possible to be; perhaps his own bourgeois removal from the aristocratic class was somehow cognate with his decadent hero’s detachment from it, but it is still true that the Duc des Esseintes, whatever his relation to the comte de Montesquieu and other real-life models, is a fictional enactment of a reality

largely denied to Huysmans himself. The same is true of Wilde, with the tragic difference that the Irish writer felt the need to enact the fantasy of aristocratic decadence not only in his fiction but also in his life. One of the most striking things about Wilde's *De Profundis*, his excoriation of his life with Lord Alfred Douglas, is how thoroughly at odds the hard-working author and the dilettante aristocrat seem to have been. Time and again, Wilde chides himself for sacrificing his art to the various forms of degradation his association with Bosie entailed.

In Europe, one medium for the bourgeois fantasy of the aristocratic life was aestheticism, and, indeed, in England especially this fantasy was played out almost exclusively among the educated class—meaning educated young men. In the United States, the aesthetic movement had found an audience much more domestic and female than its audience in England. On 31 January 1882, early in his American tour, Oscar Wilde delivered a lecture in Boston on the aesthetic movement with the Paterian title “The English Renaissance,” the impact of which was widely felt among New England’s intelligentsia.⁶ To say that Wilde received an enthusiastic response that evening in Boston in late January 1882 would be a gross understatement. Newspaper accounts of the lecture describe “[c]ertain young men of Harvard” in the audience who behaved like the characters from the operetta *Patience*, Gilbert and Sullivan’s lighthearted satire of the aesthetic movement in England. No doubt inspired by recent American performances of that work, they “appear[ed] in ‘aesthetic’ costume and play[ed] all sorts of pranks. . . . Over a half a hundred young men were there. . . . They filed down the aisle in pairs, arrayed in all the ‘aesthetics’ that ingenuity could devise. . . . They wore blond wigs and black wigs, wide-floating neckties of every hue and fashion . . . beards and moustaches of startling dyes, knee breeches and black stockings . . . and in every hand the . . . lily or the . . . sunflower. As the gracious youths entered they assumed all sorts of poses and held aloft or looked languishingly down on the flower.”⁷ The reaction suggests mockery mixed with tribute, with at least a modicum of sympathy. Wilde chided the young men by telling them “that there is more to the movement of aestheticism than kneebreeches and sunflowers.”⁸ As Richard Ellmann puts it, “It was one of the great moments of his tour, certified as a triumph by no less an authority than the Boston *Evening Transcript* on 2 February” (Ellmann, 193).

The enthusiastic reception of Wilde’s lectures, not just in Boston, but throughout the United States (he visited more than a hundred cities in 1882), shows that many Americans were cultivating aesthetic interests well in advance of Wilde’s visit. When the advance manager of the tour canvassed booking agents throughout the country to determine the subject matter that most Americans wanted Wilde to expound upon, the overwhelming response was “The Beautiful,” rather than, say, “the poetical methods used by Shakespeare” (qtd. in Ellmann, 152). In her study of this celebrated tour, the historian Mary

Blanchard says that Wilde “entered a culture prepared for his visit. The aesthetic revolution was indeed an accomplished fact” in America by the time Wilde arrived (Blanchard, 3). She goes on to argue that this aesthetic revolution was much more populist and domestic than its better-known British counterpart and that it existed to a significant degree as a reaction to the Civil War: “A certain war-weariness induced some Americans to seek alternate modes of self-definition, as new formats—*aesthetic style*, for one—competed with older categories like the manly soldier in defining manhood. For many, concepts of manhood shifted from the Civil War battlefield to the artistic parlor” (Blanchard, 4). Americans had also turned to the artistic parlor to escape the Puritan church. In an 1884 essay, “Christianity and Aestheticism,” the theologian Washington Gladden wrote that “[l]ife was never meant to be so bleak and bare as the Puritans made it. . . . The old Puritan doctrine, that art is sinful, has been roundly repudiated, as it ought to have been.”⁹ But these notions of aestheticism as a means of either mitigating the severity of Puritan religion or expressing disenchantment with the soldierly ideal of traditional masculinity belong mainly to the 1870s and 1880s.

As America entered the 1890s, many expressed concern that the great national energy that had opened the frontier and settled the continent was on the wane. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner made his reputation by arguing in 1893 that the enlightenment values of liberty and individualism on which the country was founded had been realized most fully on the frontier: it was “the source of American greatness,” and the passing of the frontier signaled an inevitable decline.¹⁰ Turner’s audience for the original airing of his now-famous “frontier thesis” was limited to a handful of professional historians at a conference held in conjunction with the Columbia Exposition in Chicago. The paper was not especially well received, in part because of competition from the world’s fair itself, but also because of Turner’s departure from the “germ theory” of American history favored by his colleagues in the profession. The theory held that the institutions and values of American democracy had evolved by adapting European ideas to a new environment. A leader of this school of Darwinian historiography was Herbert Baxter Adams of Johns Hopkins University. Adams explained that it would be “just as improbable that free local institutions should spring up without a germ along American shores as that English wheat should have grown here without planting. Town institutions were propagated in New England by old English and Germanic ideas brought over by Pilgrims and Puritans.”¹¹ Adams and other germ theorists tried to explain America as the product of Old World ideas; Turner focused on the New World circumstances “that modified those ideas in human practice” (Brands, 22). As Turner put it, “The peculiarity of American institutions is the fact that they have been compelled to adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people, to the changes involved in crossing a continent, in winning a wilderness, and in developing at each area of this progress, out of the

primitive economic and political conditions of the frontier, the complexity of city life” (qtd. in Brands, 23). If Americans were more individualistic, energetic, egalitarian, and practical than their European cousins, it was the frontier that had made them so.

Turner was eager to convey his ideas to people outside the narrow circle of his colleagues in the history profession. To this end he gave frequent public lectures and made arrangements with Walter Hines Page, the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, to contribute a series of articles explaining the frontier thesis to the common reader. An article from the September 1896 issue of the magazine lays out the double conclusion of Turner’s thinking: that life on the frontier had forged the American character and, more important, that the closing of the frontier could not but result in a deterioration of that character—hence the title, “The Problem of the West.” First, Turner lays out the main points of his theory:

The West, at bottom, is a form of society, rather than an area. It is the term applied to the region whose social conditions result from the application of older institutions and ideas to the transforming influences of free land. By this application, a new environment is suddenly entered, freedom of opportunity is opened, the cake of custom is broken, and new activities, new lines of growth, new institutions and new ideals, are brought into existence. The wilderness disappears, the “West” proper passes on to a new frontier, and, in the former area, a new society has emerged from this contact with the backwoods. . . . Decade after decade, West after West, this rebirth of American society has gone on, has left its traces behind it, and has reacted on the East. The history of our political institutions, our democracy, is not a history of imitation, of simple borrowing; it is a history of the evolution and adaptation of organs in response to changed environment, a history of the origin of new political species. In this sense, therefore, the West has been a constructive force of the highest significance in our life.¹²

It is easy to hear in all this the common misconception of Darwin’s scientifically neutral “descent with modification” as a form of progressive amelioration, transferred from the biological to the social and political realms (Turner goes so far as to echo the title of Darwin’s study in the phrase “origin of new political species”). Against this pseudo-Darwinian “constructive force,” however, Turner balances another nineteenth-century scientific theory—the second law of thermodynamics, likewise transposed from natural to sociopolitical terms:

We are now in a position to see clearly some of the factors involved in the Western problem. For nearly three centuries the dominant fact in American life has been expansion. With the settlement of the Pacific coast and the occupation of the free lands, this movement has come to a check. That these energies of expansion will no longer operate would be a rash prediction; and the demands for

a vigorous foreign policy, for an interoceanic canal, for a revival of our power on the seas, and for the extension of American influence to outlying islands and adjoining countries, are indications that the movement will continue. (Qtd. in Smith and Dawson, 405–06)

In this passage, Turner anticipates the first great wave of American imperial expansion that began with the Spanish-American War of 1898 and predicts a couple of significant events associated with the rise of America's empire. Since in ancient Rome and modern Britain decadence followed and possibly caused the collapse of empire, the pursuit of empire might make it possible for America to avoid decadence and its discontents.

Turner's demands for an "interoceanic canal" were not met until the Panama Canal was opened in 1914, but by the end of the 1890s America's power on the seas had been impressively revived by Commodore Dewey's conquest of the Philippines. It is hard to say to what extent Turner's ideas actually influenced the events he predicted in 1896, but it is at least worth noting that the frontier thesis was known to Theodore Roosevelt, who read the 1893 Chicago address and commented that the historian had put "into shape a good deal of thought that had been floating around rather loosely" (qtd. in Brands, 24). If Roosevelt continued to follow the development of Turner's thought in the popular format of the *Atlantic Monthly*, he would no doubt have been struck by the conclusion of "The Problem of the West." There Turner speculates about a possible union of western and southern energies: "The old West, united to the New South, would produce, not a new sectionalism, but a new Americanism. It would not mean sectional disunion, as some have speculated, but it might mean a drastic assertion of national government and imperial expansion under a popular hero" (qtd. in Smith and Dawson, 406).

ii

With the frontier vanishing, the wholesome energy that had gone into civilizing the wilderness lacked the outlet that the open spaces provided. Bottled up in crowded cities, Americans were no longer truly themselves but pitiable "neurasthenics" who suffered from overcivilization. The New York neurologist George Miller Beard, who popularized the term *neurasthenia*, diagnosed his late-nineteenth-century compatriots as pitiful creatures indeed: "pathetic descendant[s] of the iron-willed Americans who had cleared forests, drained swamps, and subdued a continent."¹³ However pathetic they might have been, *fin-de-siècle* Americans were not, paradoxically, inferior to their more vigorous ancestors. Quite the contrary, in fact: in Beard's view, neurasthenia, or "nervous exhaustion," afflicted only those who were most civilized and modern. Indeed, Beard believed that the "primary cause of this development and very rapid increase of nervousness is *modern civilization*."¹⁴ It stands to reason,

then, that “lack of nerve-force” should be most prevalent and most severe “in the Northern and Eastern portions of the United States” (vi) where civilization is most “intense” (152).

The intensity of modern civilization is distinguished by five factors completely unknown to the ancients and largely unknown to generations prior to the nineteenth century: “steam-power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women” (vi). These factors are not unique to America, of course, so the British and the Europeans also suffer from neurasthenia, though not to the same degree that Americans do: “The greater prevalence of nervousness in America is a complex resultant of a number of influences, the chief of which are dryness of the air, extremes of heat and cold, civil and religious liberty, and the great mental activity made necessary and possible in a new and productive country under such climatic conditions” (vii). Thus neurasthenia was a “distinguished malady” (22) that indicated the superiority of Americans so afflicted. Indeed, neurasthenic Americans were superior not only to their own ancestors but also to peoples of other nations, races, and religions. According to Beard, neurasthenia was “modern, and originally American; and no age, no country, and no form of civilization, not Greece, nor Rome, nor Spain, nor the Netherlands, in the days of their glory, possessed such maladies” (vii–viii).

Beard also argued that neurasthenia attacked only the most “advanced” races, hence the severity of the affliction among the “native” stock of Anglo-Saxon Americans. After all, only those with a “fine organization” are predisposed to the disease. Quite clearly, what Beard calls a “fine organization” is a collection of Anglo-Saxon racial features: “fine, soft hair, delicate skin, nicely chiseled features, small bones, tapering extremities.” Those likely to become neurasthenics possess a “superior intellect” because a fine organization is characteristic of “the civilized, the refined, and educated, rather than of the barbarous and low-born and untrained. . . . It is developed, fostered, and perpetuated with the advance of culture and refinement, and the corresponding preponderance of labor of the brain over that of the muscles. . . . It is oftener met with in cities than in the country” (26).

By contrast, those races with “coarse” rather than “fine” features are not susceptible to neurasthenia at all. Beard goes to some lengths to detail the hardness of the uncivilized, noting, for instance, that “[t]he Indian has less sickness than the white, and is, as a rule, in perfect health and well-developed,” despite less-than-ideal living conditions: “bad air, bad water, and bad food do not have any provably injurious effect on his constitution” (183). Not only the Indians, but also the “Southern Negroes” provide Beard with a kind of living laboratory to study the relationship of nervous disease and civilization: “on our own soil, barbarism can be well investigated” (183). Beard studies what he calls “Africa in America”—former slaves living on the islands off the coast of South Carolina, a group “who at no time [has] been brought into relation with our civilization”

(188). This “bit of barbarism at our door-steps” enables Beard to deduce certain key “facts of comparative neurology.” In contrast to the educated white citizens of Boston and New York, “[t]here is almost no insanity among these Negroes; there is no functional nervous disease or symptoms among them of any name or phrase; to suggest spinal irritation, or hysteria of the physical form, or hay fever, or nervous dyspepsia among these people, is but to joke” (189). The rude vigor of Indians and Negroes make Beard painfully aware of all that the white races have lost: “All this freedom from nervousness and nervous diseases we have sacrificed for civilization: we cannot, indeed, have civilization and have anything else; as we advance we lose sight and possession of the region through which we have passed” (191). In short, as the historian Tom Lutz puts it, “Beard argued that neurasthenia was caused by the highest levels of civilization and that the epidemic of neurasthenia was proof that America was the highest civilization that had ever existed.”¹⁵ Likewise, only the practitioners of the more “advanced” Protestant religions were likely to be affected, since “no Catholic country is very nervous” (126). There was, of course, nervous affliction aplenty in Catholic France, but where the American illness appeared to afflict just about all members of the upper classes, broadly speaking, in Europe the disease, whatever it was called, was confined largely to hypersensitive artists such as the Goncourt brothers.

To imagine that any American could approach the level of cultural sophistication possessed by the Goncourt brothers is strange to contemplate; stranger yet is the notion that *most* Americans did just that. Yet in 1897 the attorney Henry Childs Merwin wrote an essay for the *Atlantic Monthly*, “On Being Civilized Too Much,” in which he adjudged the typical American “a creature who is what we call oversophisticated and effete—a being in whom the springs of action are, in greater or lesser degree, paralyzed or perverted by the undue predominance of the intellect.”¹⁶ The 1895 English translation of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* found a ready audience in a nation where the masculine values of the founders had so recently foundered. Mayo W. Hazeltine, the editor of the *New York Sun*, read Nordau and agreed with the general diagnosis of social decline but disagreed as to its cause. Indeed, Hazeltine’s reading of Nordau was challenged by no less an authority than Nordau himself, mainly because the esteemed editor placed too much weight on immorality alone in seeking to account for “the *fin de siècle* malady.”¹⁷ According to Nordau, Hazeltine’s views differ from his own in three important respects: “Mr. Hazeltine does not believe that this malady is a new manifestation; he does not believe that it is caused by degeneration; and he does not recognize its etiology in the effects of the new inventions, the growth of the great cities, and the ravages of the stimulating poisons, particularly of alcohol; but, rather, in the loss of religious faith” (90).

Nordau faults Hazeltine for failing to see that “delirious tendencies” are at work alongside the “immoral tendencies” that are apparent to both writers. But Nordau does credit Hazeltine for noting analogies between the present age

and prior periods of decline, since he “makes religious decay responsible for the disease of this age as well as for the morbid phenomena of the twelfth century and of the time of the Roman empire” (92). Indeed, Nordau places a great deal of emphasis on the historical similitude and repeats his own observation that “[i]n Rome, at the Decline, we find precisely as at the present day, an unraveling of all moral bonds, ferocity in manners, unsparing egotism, sensualism and brutality; we find multitudes whose loathing of life impels them to suicide” (90–91). But Hazeltine’s refusal to fully credit the effects of “organic ruin”—that is, degeneration—along with religious ruin prevents him from seeing, in Nordau’s estimation, that the malady of the *fin de siècle* is far worse than any that have gone before: “Our age certainly has individual features in common with other ages, but at no time known to me were there, in addition to the phenomena of mere brutality and lewdness, so many symptoms of organic ruin observable as now” (93).

Despite the general acceptance of his theories in the United States, Nordau’s insistence on organic ruin is something that sets him apart from nineteenth-century medical theory in America. Nordau’s claims hinge on the bizarre notion that evolution cuts both ways: that some species advance while others—or, at least, certain individual members of a particular species—regress or devolve; these latter are the atavistic “throwbacks” to a more primitive stage of evolution. Hence Nordau is able, in effect, to attribute the ills and anxieties of modern civilization to the presence and activities of degenerate individuals. By contrast, American theorists like Beard and his Philadelphia counterpart S. Weir Mitchell believe that it is modern civilization itself that causes the symptoms in the countrymen they see around them. Significantly, Americans are not degenerate; rather, they are exhausted. In Nordau’s Europe, degeneracy is the ruin of civilization; in Beard’s and Weir’s America, civilization is the ruin of the citizenry, or, at least, that portion of the citizenry charged with doing the “brain-work” that keeps the capitalist economy humming.

S. Weir Mitchell uses the phrase “cerebral exhaustion” to refer to the afflictions of “all classes of men who use the brain severely.”¹⁸ The symptoms of an overtaxed brain include “giddiness, dimness of sight, neuralgia of the face or scalp, . . . entire nights of insomnia” (Mitchell, 72). Such symptoms of cerebral exhaustion are most likely to strike “manufacturers and certain classes of railway officials,” followed by “merchants in general, brokers, etc.; then less frequently clergymen; still less often lawyers; and more rarely doctors.” We are also told that “distressing cases are apt to occur among the overschooled of both sexes” (Mitchell, 63). Lawyers are less susceptible to cerebral exhaustion than are other professional men largely because of “their long summer holiday” (Mitchell, 65). Not surprisingly, the cure for the overworked brain is less work and more leisure, less time indoors and more time outside. Indeed, Mitchell avers early on that nature is the great healer; moreover, nature can strengthen man sufficiently to allow him to indulge in mild

vices without suffering the deleterious effects evident in the closed spaces of the city: “The man who lives an outdoor life—who sleeps with the stars visible above him—who wins his bodily sustenance at first hand from the earth and waters—is a being who defies rain and sun, has a strange sense of elastic strength, may drink if he likes, and may smoke all day long, and feel none the worse for it” (Mitchell 7–8). Mitchell strongly advocated “[s]ome such return to the earth” for the purposes of restoring not only the health of individuals but also that of the nation at large.

In an odd complement to Turner’s frontier thesis, Mitchell remarks on the earlier benefits of the outdoor life, which gave “vigor and developing power to the colonist of an older race cast on a land like ours” (Mitchell, 8). Strangely, the energies of America’s colonists and frontiersmen have the contradictory effect of both preserving and destroying the national welfare:

A few generations of men living in such fashion [i.e., outdoors, as on the frontier] store up a capital of vitality which accounts largely for the prodigal activity displayed by their descendants, and made possible only by the sturdy contest with Nature which their ancestors have waged. That such life is still led by multitudes of our countrymen is what alone serves to keep up our pristine forces and energy. Are we not merely using the interest on these accumulations of power, but also wastefully spending the capital? (Mitchell, 8)

Fortunately for Mitchell, a sufficiency of Americans continue to live and work in the country to keep the overall effects of the “prodigal activity” of city life in check, at least temporarily. Although Mitchell was writing well before Nordau published his theory of degeneration, his ideas made for a ready fit with that theory, especially as interpreted by Nordau’s American followers. Hazeltine, for instance, might have placed more emphasis on the problem of immorality, but he accepted that fin-de-siècle Americans were physically inferior, not only to the soldiers of the Roman legions but also to their own ancestors who had fought the War of Independence. In the end, Hazeltine concluded that a way out of the morass of physical lassitude and moral turpitude might lie in a purifying “return” to the crusading age of medieval violence that America had never, of course, had the chance to experience.¹⁹

Hazeltine was not alone in celebrating the virtues of medievalism against the ills of fin de siècle America. Many late nineteenth-century Americans cultivated an interest in the Middle Ages by reading the novels of Sir Walter Scott and the criticism of John Ruskin, who helped to spur the Gothic Revival in the United States. Also, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, which Ruskin had helped to inspire, established a following in America in the mid-1850s and achieved a measure of success at least the equal of its standing in Great Britain.²⁰ Oscar Wilde’s lecture tour of 1882 may have contributed to a resurgence of interest in Pre-Raphaelite art, though it had never really gone out of fashion.

The fascination with the Middle Ages is also evident in Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) by way of the satiric reversals that show how utterly different late nineteenth-century America really was from the storied world of medieval romance. But Twain's satire was lost on those who combined their aesthetic interests in Pre-Raphaelitism with an earnest belief that the kind of culture promoted by latter-day medievalists such as Scott and Ruskin was genuinely superior to fin-de-siècle America.

iii

Among those most interested in understanding the social and economic underpinnings of medieval art was Brooks Adams, the youngest of the three brothers descended from two U.S. presidents. "To Adams, medieval character seemed an exhilarating fusion of martial virtue and religious faith, a sharp counterpoint to the sordid commercial ethic of the Gilded Age."²¹ The diminished status of the Adams family in the last decade of the nineteenth century also had something to do with the young scion's interest in the problem of historical decline, which he investigated at length in *The Law of Civilization and Decay* (1896). Together with his better-known brother, Henry, Brooks Adams became fairly obsessed with theories of entropy and degeneration, thereby lending scientific support to his ideas of historical and personal decline. Indeed, the Adams brothers felt that their case was representative of a larger, downward-tending dynamic, which, in private, they acknowledged as having particular relevance to their own once-powerful family: "It is now full four generations since John Adams wrote the constitution of Massachusetts. It is time that we perish. The world is tired of us."²² In 1890, Henry Adams toured the South Seas "and observed the contrast between the healthy nudity of Samoa and the Westernized degeneration of Tahiti." The brothers also took a scientific interest in their own father's decay, with Nordau's *Degeneration* as a guide.²³ Moreover, they understood the applicability of Nordau's theory to themselves and even contemplated a trip to Germany to allow the famous eugenicist to study them in person, since "he seems to have had no degenerates or hysterics of our type—fellows who know all about it but manage to get a world of fun and some pleasure from it."²⁴

Personal interest aside, Brooks Adams's investigation of the decay of nations was certainly precipitated by the widespread impression that the United States was in the midst of a period of decline in the 1890s. Adams's explanation for this decline differed from Turner's frontier thesis in that Adams understood America in the broader context of civilization itself, which was regulated by certain immutable laws that produced the same patterns again and again throughout history. Like other nineteenth-century positivists, Adams couched his theory in thermodynamic terms. In 1852, William Thompson, later titled Lord Kelvin, formulated the second law of thermodynamics and identified "a universal tendency in nature to the dissipation of

mechanical energy." In 1854, Kelvin's concept of 'dissipation' was further elaborated by Hermann von Helmholtz, who explained that eventually "all energy will . . . be transformed into heat at a uniform temperature," whereupon all natural processes would come to an end. This "heat-death" theory of the universe and the underlying principle of energy dissipation were restated by Rudolf Clausius in 1865 and given the name *entropy*, derived from the Greek word ἐντροπή, meaning transformation.²⁵ Kelvin's second law of thermodynamics, as elaborated by Helmholtz and renamed by Clausius, underwent a broad cultural diffusion in the late nineteenth century, and Brooks Adams's *Law of Civilization and Decay* is one of the documents of this diffusion. His analysis of civilization's inevitable decay begins by evoking the scientific authority of the second law of thermodynamics: "The theory proposed is based upon the accepted scientific principle that the law of force and energy is of universal application in nature, and that animal life is one of the outlets through which solar energy is dissipated."²⁶ It follows from "this fundamental proposition" that "as human societies are forms of animal life, these societies must differ among themselves in energy, in proportion as nature has endowed them, more or less abundantly, with energetic material" (ix). An important "manifestation of human energy" is thought, which early on is divided into two simple but "conspicuous" phases: fear and greed. Fear "stimulat[es] the imagination, creates a belief in an invisible world, and ultimately develops a priesthood"; greed, by contrast, "dissipates energy in war and trade" (ix).

Under certain conditions, then, solar energy is dispersed or vented through the medium of human thought in one of three competing forms: imaginative, martial, or economic. One or the other of these three types of thought—motivated by fear, greed, or some mixture of fear and greed—will dominate depending on the degree of consolidation or centralization in any given society. This last point is key because civilization itself hinges on the concept of centralization: Adams's theory purports "to classify a few of the more interesting intellectual phases through which human society must, apparently, pass, in its oscillations between barbarism and civilization, or, what amounts to the same thing, in its movement from a condition of physical dispersion to one of concentration" (viii). The theory is summed up in one of Adams's more scientific-sounding paragraphs:

Probably the velocity of the social movement of any community is proportionate to its energy and mass, and its centralization is proportionate to its velocity; therefore, as human movement is accelerated, societies centralize. In the earlier stages of concentration, fear appears to be the channel through which energy finds the readiest outlet; accordingly, in primitive and scattered communities, the imagination is vivid, and the mental types produced are religious, military, artistic. As consolidation advances, fear yields to greed, and the economic organism tends to supersede the emotional and martial. (ix)

The objective, "scientific" language does not convey what later becomes evident—that the dominance of economic interests in Adams's own age involves a weakening of both imaginative life and martial temper.

Adams's analysis of the fall of Rome leaves no doubt that ruin is wrought by economic dominance: "The evolution of this centralized society was as logical as every other work of nature. When force reached the stage where it expressed itself exclusively through money, the governing class ceased to be chosen because they were valiant or eloquent, artistic, learned, or devout, and were selected solely because they had the faculty of acquiring and keeping wealth." Paradoxically, the weakness of this governing, "monied class lay in their very power, for they not only killed the producer, but in the strength of their acquisitiveness they failed to propagate themselves" (44). The choice between making babies and making money is one that Adams sees repeated in his own gilded age: "Taking history as a whole, women seem never to have more than moderately appealed to the senses of the economic man. The monied magnate seldom ruins himself for love, and chivalry would have been as foreign to a Roman senator under Diocletian, as it would be now to a Lombard Street banker" (370–71). Just as the Romans of "the third and fourth centuries" were deficient in "the martial and the amatory instincts" (370), the men of the nineteenth century are guilty of a "decisive rejection of the martial and imaginative mind" (324). Adams has the facts to back up the claim that "there has been a marked loss of fecundity among the more costly races" and is concerned that the fate of France awaits the United States: "In 1789 the average French family consisted of 4.2 children. In 1891 it had fallen to 2.1, and, since 1890, the deaths seem to have equaled the births" (350).

The facts most important to Adams's argument, however, concern not the propagation of the species but the production of specie. Practically every civilization he studies is at its height when economic values are based on silver currency. In Rome the purity of the silver denarius is maintained until Nero begins to add copper alloy to the coin, a process of debasement that continues until, by the time of Elagabalus in 220 AD, the denarius "degenerate[s] into a token of base metal" (26). Likewise, the empire of Charlemagne disintegrates as more and more alloy is added to the silver pence (128–29). The fortunes of Venice, Spain, and finally Great Britain rise and fall with the quantity and purity of silver currency, at least until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Adams claims that the victory of Simon Bolivar in Latin America and the defeat of Napoléon in Europe ushered in a new economic age: "From the year 1810, nature has favored the usurious mind, even as she favored it in Rome, from the death of Augustus" (325). What he means is that with the decisive defeats of the Spanish in the New World and the French in the Old World, Great Britain took effective control of the international economy through the introduction of the gold standard, which it had used to finance the war against Napoléon. As James Buchan puts it, "With the defeat of Bonaparte

at Waterloo, the gold standard became a legal concept . . . that served the interests of certain classes of society so obediently that those classes came to regard it as natural, perfect, and timeless."²⁷ The United States adopted the gold standard in 1873, which for Adams is the signal event marking the problems of the age: "When the mints had been closed to silver, the currency being inelastic, the value of money could be manipulated like that of any article limited in quantity, and thus the human race became the subjects of the new aristocracy, which represented the stored energy of mankind" (349). Earlier, we are told that "capital may be considered as stored energy" and that "money alone is capable of being transmuted into any form of activity" (313). Adams's history shows that the type of money that is most flexible and capable of the most rapid transmutations of human energy is silver currency. The adoption of the gold standard in 1873 and the elevation of a handful of bankers to positions of unprecedented power and control indicate, for Adams, that civilization has entered "the last stage of consolidation," in which "the economic, and, perhaps, the scientific intellect is propagated, while the imagination fades, and the emotional, the martial, and the artistic types of manhood decay" (x).

Adams devotes only a few pages at the very end of his treatise to the way art "reflects" the various transformations of solar energy that make up the different martial, imaginative, and economic ages he has described. Nonetheless, he makes the point in the strongest possible terms that imaginative art has been overwhelmed by "the economic taste" (381). The fresco, for example, is nothing more than a cheap substitute for a mosaic devised by some "Florentine banker" who "had his interior painted at about one-quarter the price" (380). Likewise, portrait painting "has usually been considered to portend decay, and rightly, since the presence of the portrait demonstrates the supremacy of wealth . . . for it is a commercial article, sold for a price, and manufactured to suit a patron's taste" (380–81). But Adams is most critical of modern architecture, which has "reflected money . . . since the close of the fifteenth century" (382). Because Adams is dealing in underlying laws of civilization and decay, "what was true of the third century is true of the nineteenth." Like third-century Romans, nineteenth-century Americans favor the type of architecture produced by the economic spirit, "at once ostentatious and parsimonious, . . . a cheap core fantastically adorned" (382). There are, however, differences: "[T]he Romans were never wholly sordid, nor did they ever niggle. When they built a wall, that wall was solid masonry, not painted iron" (382).

For Adams, as for the Boston architect Ralph Adams Cram, the school of American architecture led by Louis H. Sullivan of Chicago represented more than the novel use of iron and steel to engineer the first skyscrapers: Sullivan's work was evidence that America had entered another Age of Iron, for modernity in any form is the antithesis of the Golden Age of medieval art:

No poetry can bloom in the arid modern soil, the drama has died, and the patrons of art are no longer even conscious of shame at profaning the most sacred of ideals. The ecstatic dream, which some twelfth century monk cut into the stones of the sanctuary hallowed by the presence of his God, is reproduced to be-dizen a warehouse; or the plan of an abbey, which Saint Hugh may have consecrated, is adapted to a railway station.

Decade by decade, for some four hundred years, these phenomena have grown more sharply marked in Europe, and, as consolidation apparently nears its climax, art seems to presage approaching disintegration. The architecture, the sculpture, and the coinage of London at the close of the nineteenth century, when compared to those of the Paris of Saint Louis, recall the Rome of Caracalla as contrasted with the Athens of Pericles, save that we lack the stream of barbarian blood which made the Middle Age. (383)

The closing reference to “barbarian blood” shows that Adams’s scenario of cultural decline includes a component of racial degeneration. Indeed, degeneration and decline combine to produce the larger condition of decadence, even though the word is not used in this particular passage. Adams does use “disintegration,” however, which is a fair substitute for *decadence* in the context he has devised: “art seems to presage approaching disintegration.” The sentence is ambiguous, implying either that art itself forebodes its own disintegration or that the state of art in Adams’s day is predictive of the disintegration of society. Most likely both meanings underlie Adams’s anxiety about the decay of civilization in his own age, which lacks the organic unity—the integration—of art and society characteristic of the Middle Ages, or, at least, of the Middle Ages as John Ruskin and his acolytes understood the era. Another author might have seen “the close of the nineteenth century” as a particularly ripe time for art precisely *because* of the conditions Adams describes. To experience decay, to observe decline, to capture the dynamics of social disintegration—might very well require an artist of unusual sensitivity and uncommon skill. This is one of the larger paradoxes of decadence that Brooks Adams, despite his affinity for degeneration, was in no position to appreciate.

iv

Brooks Adams was far from being alone in his pessimistic views, especially as concerns the perception of declining birthrates and other markers of racial decline. The belief was widely held that Americans—that is, the so-called native stock of Anglo-Saxon Americans—were on the verge of committing “race suicide,” as the future president Theodore Roosevelt put it, soon to be replaced by masses of vigorous but somehow “inferior” immigrants.²⁸ So it was not quite true, as Adams stated at the end of *The Law of Civilization and Decay*, that America lacked the prospect of a fresh infusion of “barbarian”

blood. Perhaps the analogy never occurred to Adams because, unlike the barbarians who swept through Rome, the immigrant masses, or so Adams and Roosevelt thought, came not to renew but to destroy. The immigrant threat contributed to but did not cause, all by itself, the widespread perception of American weakness. But there was no mistaking that, in the middle of the 1890s, a nostalgia for a more martial and masculine ideal of manhood had set in.

American culture had become too aesthetic, too feminine—so much so that many women were concerned that *they* had become excessively delicate and domestic. An 1896 short story by Edna C. Jackson titled “A Fin de Cycle Incident” tells how a young woman struggles to conform to the daintily feminine ideal her fiancé has of her, which prohibits her from riding her beloved bicycle. The fiancé finally approves of the cycle when the heroine furiously pedals the machine to warn him of a plot against his life. She arrives in the nick of time, explaining breathlessly the necessity of the bloomers she is wearing: “I—I never could have made it with a skirt on” (qtd. in Smith and Dawson, 202). As this story suggests, the 1890s saw increasing interest in outdoor activities and physical exercise. The naturalist John Muir published *The Mountains of California* in 1894 and encouraged Americans to experience the great outdoors for themselves. In 1895 the first professional football game was played in Latrobe, Pennsylvania, which, paradoxically, spurred concern that sport might become “the sole possession of experts and champions,” as H. W. Foster wrote in an essay titled “Physical Education vs. Degeneracy.” Foster encouraged the adoption of physical education programs in all American schools, with “exercises [and games] specifically designed [to] bring out manliness, as well as the bodily powers” (qtd. in Smith and Dawson, 306).

American concern with physical culture toward the end of the nineteenth century is not always understood as an antidote to the dangers of decadence. In fact, the word *decadence* is rarely used. More often, the active life seems the necessary alternative to either national decline or nervous debility: the former problem a resultant of the vanishing frontier and the latter a product of the stresses of modern civilization. To be decadent one would have to develop an attitude of knowing acceptance of the prospect of collective ruin while also accepting or even relishing personal degeneration. The remedy for the threat of national ruin is the promotion and pursuit of political empire, as Turner had counseled, while the remedy for individual debility is the outdoor life, as S. Weir Mitchell had advised. In this dual context, no better exemplars of active opposition to decline and degeneracy can be found than Theodore Roosevelt and Thomas Wister. Early in the twentieth century, both men stood for everything that decadence was not, because both had become successful through a revival of frontier values, in one form or another. Roosevelt was elected president largely because of the national attention he received

when he led the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill in 1898; and Wister had become the best-selling author in America because his novels of the Old West, like *The Virginian* (1902), were based on his firsthand experience working cattle ranches in Wyoming territory. Yet both Roosevelt and Wister had personal histories that included physical debility and cultural decadence. As young men at Harvard during the early 1880s, both Wister and Roosevelt cultivated aesthetic pretensions that have since become identified with decadence. Earlier writers used “Harvard indifference” to refer to “the cult of cleverness, exquisiteness, and boredom at that time, as exemplified by Whistler, Wilde, ‘The Green Carnation,’ etc. . . . the ‘indifference’ at Cambridge was partly, at least, an attempt to get into the mode.” “Harvard indifference” was also said to include “an honest pose of restraint, calm, understatement, a distaste for exaggeration, expansiveness, [and] a kind of passive resistance to the cult of money.”²⁹

Wister had gone to Harvard to study music and, like many well-born young men of the time, was a devotee of Richard Wagner. He made the pilgrimage to Bayreuth in 1882, which he recalled as “that first summer of *Parsifal*,” and managed an introduction to Franz Liszt, for whom he played one of his college piano compositions, titled *Merlin and Vivien*. Based on the title and the site of performance, the piece seems likely to have been a work of late romanticism inspired by medieval legend—Wagnerian, in short. According to Wister, Liszt approved of the piece and said that the young composer had “un talent prononcé” for music.³⁰ Nevertheless, Wister’s father pressured him to abandon his music career for the law, and in 1885, as Wister puts it, “my health very opportunely broke down” (Wister, *Roosevelt*, 28). Perhaps even more opportunely, Wister was related to S. Weir Mitchell (they were cousins), who prescribed a cure at a cattle ranch in Wyoming. Twenty years later, this type of cure was close to cliché, as implied by the narrator of *Confessions of a Neurasthenic* (1908), who decides to “turn cowboy” in order to recover his “appetite and vigor”: “I had frequently read of Yale and Harvard graduates going out and getting a touch of life on the plains; so, as such a life did not seem to be beneath the dignity of cultured people, I would give it a trial.”³¹ The Western experience does not work out so well for this latter-day neurasthenic, but Wyoming made all the difference for Wister. Going from Wagner to Wyoming in so short a time is a cultural *volte-face* of dizzying dimensions, and, while being a Wagnerite does not, by itself, certify Wister as “decadent,” that particular cultural marker, along with his physical weakness and “Harvard indifference,” at least put the man on a widely recognized, downward-tending cultural path.

Perhaps even more than Wister, Roosevelt cultivated an aesthetic persona while he was at Harvard and affected a highly dandified appearance. His affectations were such that his friend Wister satirized them in a Harvard musical entertainment as:

Awful tart,
 And awful smart,
 With waxed mustache and hair in curls:
 Brand-new hat,
 Likewise cravat,
 To call upon the dear little girls.³²

At the time he entered the New York legislature, Roosevelt had come to be known by a number of less-than-manly epithets, including “Young Squirt,” “Weakling,” “Jane Dandy,” and “Oscar Wilde.”³³ The latter epithet was bestowed upon Roosevelt when Wilde arrived in America, which happened to be on the same day that Roosevelt entered the legislature.³⁴ Roosevelt continued to be satirized as a dude or a dandy throughout the 1880s in the cartoons that appeared in *Puck* and other publications. A reporter at the Republican National Convention of 1884 described Roosevelt as “a rather dudish-looking boy with eye-glasses [who] applauded with the tips of his fingers; he had his hair parted in the middle, banded in front, rolled his *r*'s and pronounced the word *either* with an *i* sound instead of the *e*. He may have ability but he also has an inexhaustible supply of insufferable dudism and conceit, that will some day be fittingly rebuked.”³⁵ After the convention, Roosevelt made a trip to the West—“I think it will build me up,” he said.³⁶ This trip, and others like it, clearly helped to transform Roosevelt’s political image. By the twentieth century, Roosevelt was frequently pictured on horseback as a crusading cowboy. It is almost as if Roosevelt had taken George Miller Beard’s observations to heart on the relation of statesmanship and horsemanship: “It would appear . . . that the qualities which are necessary to make a good, strong nation are precisely the qualities which make a good horseman, and that he who can ride well makes a good founder of states” (Beard, 35).

In the context of the increasingly vigorous 1890s, to continue the aesthetic preoccupations of the 1870s and 1880s was to go against the American grain and, in fact, to run the risk of decadence. “In literature, even more than in politics, one sees the evil effects of getting far from nature,” warned Merwin in his essay “On Being Civilized Too Much”: “In a peculiar sense literature is the business and the amusement of persons who are oversophisticated. In fact, to take literature seriously is in itself almost a sign of decadence” (in Smith and Dawson, 314). Not surprisingly, some Americans preferred not to combat the condition of degeneracy they were alleged to exemplify but chose, instead, to take literature seriously indeed and to intensify their aesthetic interests. In fact, it is now clear that the alleged discovery of Continental literature by American modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound was really a revival of literary interests that first emerged in the United States during the 1890s among a segment of an elite, urban class who called themselves “decadents.”

In *The Mauve Decade*, Thomas Beer, writing in the mid-1920s, says that the survivors of this first group of Anglophile and Francophile Americans “must have grinned, and . . . groaned aloud, when the new sophisticates of 1916 solemnly disclosed the works of Rimbaud, Laforgue, Vielé-Griffin,”³⁷ and others whom Beer does not name: Mallarmé, Maeterlinck, Verlaine, and Huysmans. Translations and appreciations of such authors appeared in a variety of short-lived literary magazines in key cities throughout the country. Any study of American decadence would have to highlight such journals as *M’lle New York* in New York City, *The Mahogany Tree* in Boston, *The Chap-Book* in Chicago, and *The Lark* in San Francisco.

Of course, translations of Continental literature and appreciations of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood do not by themselves merit the name of decadence—but in America they do, precisely because these types of aesthetic preoccupations ran so counter to the increasingly muscular—and moral—culture of the 1890s. Symbolism, aestheticism, and decadence formed an alternative to the moral realism recommended by William Dean Howells, who in 1886 had “invite[d] our novelists . . . to concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American.”³⁸ When this now-famous passage was reworked for his 1891 manifesto *Criticism and Fiction*, however, Howells made it an observation, not an invitation, and he balanced the observation about a fiction “true to our well-to-do actualities” with the wish to restore “the humanitarian impulse” to the art of the novel.³⁹ But this, too, is remote from the decadent-aesthetic sensibility, which Howells aptly describes as he sketches out his own notions of a morally responsible, realist literature: “The art which . . . disdains the office of teacher is one of the last refuges of the aristocratic spirit which is disappearing from politics and society, and is now seeking to shelter itself in aesthetics. The pride of caste is becoming the pride of taste; but as before, it is averse to the mass of men; it consents to know them only in some conventionalized and artificial guise. It seeks to withdraw itself, to stand aloof; to be distinguished, and not to be identified.”⁴⁰ Howells adds that “[d]emocracy in literature is the reverse of all this,”⁴¹ and he is right to say so. But “all this” is precisely what the antidemocratic decadents of the fin de siècle demanded—an aristocracy of taste averse to the mass of men.

The cultural decadence of this period, then, is a reaction to the kind of moral culture Howells espoused, but it is also a response to larger cultural, social, and political concerns. Most Americans, like Roosevelt and Wister, saw the necessity of turning away from the feminine, domestic aestheticism that followed the Civil War. Such a shift was felt to be necessary in a very real sense, as America geared up for its first imperial age. But unlike most Americans, small groups and isolated individuals in New York, Boston, Chicago, and even San Francisco rejected the muscular culture the age of empire demanded. To go against the American grain in this way was decadent, all right, and many