

‘Decadence and Aesthetics’
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The relationship between decadence and aesthetics is an intimate and complex one. Both the stock figure of the aesthete and the aestheticism of ‘art for art’s sake’ are classic decadent tropes with obvious sources in figures such as Théophile Gautier, Walter Pater, Joris-Karl Huysmans. Yet the links between aesthetics and decadence are more conflicted than might first appear: historically, aesthetics has served both as a site for the theorisation of decadence and as the basis of an attempt to stem it. The purpose of this chapter is to examine these intricate ties.

I will begin from Kant’s formulation of the aesthetic space, a formulation which, whether evaluated positively or negatively, came to dominate the modern discussion. I then examine the effects of Kant’s legacy on writers such as Gautier and Pater, before turning to the philosopher who placed perhaps the greatest emphasis on decadence and on the importance of art in responding to it: Friedrich Nietzsche. I conclude by sketching some possible lines for further development, lines running through Heidegger, Adorno and Bataille.

(§1) Kant and Modern Aesthetics

Nietzsche once mocked Kantian aesthetics for manifesting the “naïveté of a country parson” and Kant’s foundational role in the theorisation of decadence is, unsurprisingly, a largely unintentional one (Nietzsche 1994: Essay 3/§6).

Kant’s writings certainly contain a recognisable model of decadence, embedded within worries about conflicts between theoretical and practical, i.e. moral, reason. The danger, as Kant saw it, was that our intelligence extends and incite desires beyond their natural limits, particularly through acts of comparison (Kant 1991:223-4). Operating in a clearly Rousseauian vein, Kant notes that modern civilization exacerbates this trend, allowing a ceaseless, artificial multiplication of wants: this reaches its peak in the demand for “luxury” [*Üppigkeit*], a demand that can never be stably satisfied (Kant 2011:96,117-8). This threat is characterised by Kant in terms familiar from the later rhetoric of decadence: luxury produces “effeminacy, our delicacy of senses” (Kant 2011:150) The immediate solution he offers is a form of asceticism: it would be better “to get free of inclinations and to learn how to do without them” (Kant 2011:118).

These remarks on decadence, whilst important for mapping Kant’s debts to Rousseau, are not, however, his principal contribution to that concept’s development. That lies rather with his theory of aesthetics. Kant’s use of the term “aesthetics” simultaneously builds on and utterly radicalises earlier work by the neo-Leibnizians Alexander Baumgarten and Georg Friedrich Meier. Baumgarten understood “aesthetics” as both the “science of sensitive cognition [*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*]” and the “science of the beautiful [*Wissenschaft des Schönen*]” (Baumgarten 1986:§1; Baumgarten and Meier 2013:§533).¹ For Kant the relationship between these two definitions was a delicate one. Indeed, the first *Critique* explicitly takes Baumgarten to task for using the term to “designate that which others call the critique of taste”: his objection, at that point in time, was that there are no a priori rules

¹ The second remark is Meier’s German reformulation of Baumgarten’s Latin; the exact relationship between the two authors is contested, but for present purposes we can treat them as one.

governing beauty and thus no possible science of “aesthetics” (Kant 1998:A21/B35-6). Kant therefore initially reserves the term for the a priori study of sensibility, and it is in this context that the first *Critique* introduces the anti-rationalist “Transcendental Aesthetic” (Kant 1998:A21/B36). By the time of the *Critique of Judgment* in 1790, however, Kant had reversed course and was now willing to use “aesthetics” in something very close to the second Baumgarten/Meier definition, to designate the analysis of taste and beauty. It is “Kantian aesthetics” in this sense which is important in the present context.

Fundamental to Kant’s aesthetics is an attempt to separate judgments of taste from other forms of judgment; following him, I will focus on the case of beauty. First, judgments of beauty are neither objective nor cognitive: to say that an object is beautiful is not to attribute a property to it, but rather to articulate something of my reaction upon encountering.² Such judgments thus:

[G]o beyond the concept of the object, and even beyond the intuition of the object, and add...a feeling of pleasure (or displeasure). (Kant 1987:288)³

Second, judgements of beauty differ from both instrumental and moral assertions, understood by Kant as claims that something is good for some end or that it is good in itself. This is because a predication of beauty, unlike these other two, requires no concept:

To deem something good, I must always know what sort of a thing the object is intended to be, i. e., I must have a concept of it. That is not necessary to enable me to see beauty in a thing. Flowers, free patterns, lines aimlessly intertwining technically termed foliage, have no signification, depend upon no definite concept, and yet please. (Kant 1987:207)

Third, judgements of beauty are distinguished from judgements based on desire or interest, judgments that I “like” something, that it “gratifies” me, that it is “agreeable” (Kant 1987:205-7). Kant draws this boundary in several ways, but what is clear is his aim in doing so: such judgements lack any claim to universality, since there is no reason that what pleases me should do the same for you.

As regards the agreeable [*des Angenehmen*] everyone acknowledges that his judgment, which he bases on a private feeling and by which he says that he likes some object, is by the same token confined to his own person. Hence, if he says that canary wine is agreeable he is quite content if someone else corrects his terms and reminds him to say instead: It is agreeable to me. (Kant 1987:212)

In contrast, judgments of taste have an “aesthetic-universal validity, which does not rest on a concept”: in asserting that something is beautiful, I demand that others ought to agree with me (Kant 1987:214;237). One of Kant’s great challenges will be to explicate how such “subjective universality” is possible: if a claim is neither factual nor moral nor conceptual, how can it demand assent from others? (Kant 1987:214). In doing so, he appeals centrally to what he calls the “free play” of imagination and understanding, the pleasurable reaction we experience as our faculties respond to the way in which beauty eludes standard conceptual classification (Kant 1987:240). In Kantian terms, beauty thus correlates with a particular form of “synthesis”, of mental combination.

² The underlying metaphysics here are delicate. It is clear how Kant understands the contrast between judgments of taste and ascriptions of primary qualities such as extension; it is much less clear how judgements of taste differ from, say, colour ascriptions and their objectivity or lack of it. A closely linked issue arises with respect to nonconceptualism: the one hand, he declares that “beauty is not a concept of the object” (Kant 1987:290); on the other he states that it is “indeterminate concept” (Kant 1987:341).

³ I use the standard *Akademie* pagination for this text.

(§2) Kant Among the Decadents

Kant's analysis is without doubt the dominant moment in modern aesthetics. It is also, much more specifically, one of the key texts in understanding the view that became known as "aestheticism": a theory whose development was closely aligned with decadence by opponents and supporters. This is not to deny that individual supporters of aestheticism might reject either or both the term "decadence" or the views associated with it; to take a recent example, Gagnier seeks to distinguish and valorise Victorian "aesthetes" (including Ruskin, Morris, and Wilde) precisely by contrasting them with mere "decadents" (Gagnier 1994:265). My point is rather that aestheticism created the intellectual space for decadence as a concept to develop – as we will now see, it was an intellectual space whose architecture was remarkably Kantian.

First, and most obviously, Kant's view licenses a separation of art from utilitarian or didactic concerns. The Kantian aesthetic defines a distinctive zone of pleasure lacking any external purpose: in Kant's terms, beauty is defined by "purposiveness" in the absence of any particular purpose (Kant 1987:221). There is a clear resonance between this view and the aestheticist doctrine that art is not properly subject to moral or instrumental evaluation. Indeed, in its strongest form, aestheticism treats moral appraisal as radically inappropriate, akin to a category mistake such as asking the colour of the number six: as Wilde put it, "[t]here is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book" (Wilde 2006:36). Similar thoughts underlie Gautier's attack on the idea that art should serve some kind of social purpose.

Nothing is really beautiful unless it is useless; everything useful is ugly, for it expresses a need, and the needs of man are ignoble and disgusting, like his poor weak nature. The most useful place in a house is the toilet. (Gautier 1981:39)

Sloganized, such aestheticism yields the familiar rallying cry of "art for art's sake". As Armstrong neatly put it, Gautier's thus position amounted to a "perverse twist on the Kantian notion of the autonomy of the beautiful" (Armstrong 2002:402).

Second, Kant's system embeds taste and beauty within a story revolving around our reactions to objects and our awareness of ourselves as sites of a distinctive form of pleasure, a distinctive form of synthesis irreducible to the conceptual. This strand of Kantianism is clearly visible in thinkers such as Pater: as Prettejohn observes, it is thus vital to see Pater's work as supported "not casually but rigorously by the German tradition of philosophical aesthetics that proceeded from Kant's Critique of Judgment" (Prettejohn 2007:3). It is thus natural for Pater to begin his *Renaissance* by privileging the following questions about art:

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence? (Pater 1997: xviii)

The infamous conclusion to that text likewise showcases the emphasis on synthesis characteristic of Kant's account: objects are "loosed into a group of impressions— colour, odour, texture - in the mind of the observer" (Pater 1997:119). The result is a system that combines aestheticism with an emphasis on the fragmentary experience of pleasure through a combination that is neither fully free, nor fully determined, that is "playful" in Kant's terms. Similar themes are visible in Wilde when he has Vivian make a deeply Kantian sounding appeal to:

[T]he aesthetic sense alone, which, while accepting both reason and recognition as stages of apprehension, subordinates them both to a pure synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole. (Wilde 2001:242).

Indeed, Benjamin Morgan recently suggested that:

Perhaps what is aesthetic about aestheticism is not just its obsession with ‘convulsed sensuousness’ or purified ideals, but rather its recognition that physical beauty dramatizes the dilemma of the modern subject who is immersed in the material world, but striving to be free of material contingency. (Morgan 2010:749)

Kant’s free play of the imagination, an escape from logical stricture, but one necessarily grounded in a dynamic response to sensory input, provides a natural model for such a thought.

Kantian aesthetics thus provides some of the central intellectual architecture for aestheticism and so for the theorisation of decadence. But I described Kant’s links to decadence as ironic and it is also vital to appreciate just how far removed someone like Pater was from Kant’s own position. This distance holds even outside the obvious questions of hedonism and morality. As Hext neatly observes, Pater “valued Kant as a sceptic” (Hext 2013:55). The result is that his understanding of the texts is frequently staggeringly unorthodox. For example, his “Prosper Mérimée” declares that:

After Kant’s criticism of mind, its pretensions to pass beyond the limits of individual experience seemed as dead as those of old French royalty. (Pater 1910:1)⁴

This fits exactly with the solipsism Pater toys with in the Conclusion to his *Renaissance*. But it is an extraordinary reading of a philosopher whose every effort was dedicated to seeking universal forms of experience – be they the first *Critique*’s categories of the understanding or the third’s “*sensus communis*” (Kant 1987:238). But by far the most important distortion concerns the relationship between aesthetics and morality. Whilst Kant did indeed seek to distinguish the beautiful from the moral, he also envisaged a vast web of incentives and intimations linking the two. Most obviously, he holds that the divide between beauty and desire allows the beautiful to prepare us for the moral obligation to set aside our mere interest: as he puts “the beautiful prepares us to love something, even nature, without interest” (Kant 1987:267). The converse also holds: developing and reflecting on moral ideas is the “true propaedeutic” for taste (Kant 1987:356). To put the point another way, Kant’s “purposiveness without a purpose” is very far removed from Gautier’s “uselessness”: for Kant, the awareness of beauty suggests, albeit without proof, that the world is essentially hospitable to us and to the realisation of an aim “independent of all interest”, namely morality (Kant 1987:167).

Perhaps the deepest explanation for these divergences is as follows. The third *Critique* sought to unify the various parts of Kant’s system. This unification was widely assumed to be a failure by Kant’s successors and, as a result, the carefully calibrated links which Kant had envisaged between domains such as the beautiful and the moral fall. What succeeded them was either the type of full-blown unificatory project beloved of German Idealism on the one hand, or the blunter distinction between aesthetics and morality found in aestheticism on the other. In this sense, what decadence thrives off is not so much Kant’s project, but, fittingly, its corpse.

(§3) Nietzsche and the “Decadence Problem”

I want now to turn to Nietzsche. Nietzsche plays several roles in what one might call the “genealogy of modern decadence”. He was accused by Max Nordau in his 1892 *Degeneration*, of supplying its theoretical underpinnings:

The deification of filth by the Parnassians with ink, paint, and clay; the censuring among the Diabolists and Decadents of licentiousness, disease, and corruption; the glorification, by Ibsen, of the person who ‘wills,’ is ‘free’ and ‘wholly himself’ - of all

⁴ I owe the citation to Hext’s excellent treatment of Pater’s philosophy of mind (Hext 2013:55).

this Nietzsche supplies the theory, or something which proclaims itself as such.
(Nordau 1895:415-6)

Nordau is cautious about positing an actual line of influence, not least due to some obvious issues of chronology, but he opts instead for a diagnosis on which Nietzsche exemplifies a deep, common malady.

At the same time, it is unquestionable that Nietzsche could not have known the French Decadents and English aesthetes whom he so frequently approaches, because his books are in part antecedent to those of the latter; and neither could they have drawn from him, because, perhaps with the exception of Ibsen, it is only about two years since they could have heard as much as Nietzsche's name. The similarity, or rather identity, is not explained by plagiarism; it is explained by the identity of mental qualities in Nietzsche and the other ego-maniacal degenerates. (Nordau 1895:416)

This is followed by a laughably crude survey of Nietzsche's ideas, glued together by Nordau's trademark bluster: Nietzsche is "a madman, with flashing eyes, wild gestures, and foaming mouth" who "has not thought out one of his so-called ideas" (Nordau 1895:416).

Nietzsche's role in Nordau's text is of interest because it exemplifies the close linkage between cultural decadence and biological degeneration defended there: Nietzsche, the mad invalid, is the poster boy of a broader, social sickness. But it is, unsurprisingly, Nietzsche's own treatment of decadence that has been of far greater philosophical and cultural import, and it is that on which I will now focus.

Decadence, typically in the French spelling "*décadence*", is one of the central targets throughout Nietzsche's work: as he put it himself, "nothing has preoccupied me more profoundly than the problem of decadence" [*das Problem der decadence*] (Nietzsche 2010c:233). In particular, he saw himself as potential turning point, both the scion of a decadent culture and an alternative to it, someone who "knows both" because "I am both...at the same time decadent and beginning" (Nietzsche 2010a:75). He continues:

My task, preparing for humanity's moment of highest self-examination, a great noon when it will look back and look out, when it will escape from the domination of chance and priests and, for the first time, pose the question 'why?', the question 'what for?' as a whole -, this task follows necessarily from the insight that humanity has not put itself on the correct path, that it has absolutely no divine governance, that instead, the instinct of negation, of corruption, the decadence-instinct [*décadence-Instinkt*], has been seductively at work, and precisely under humanity's holiest value concepts. (Nietzsche 2010a:121)

As is suggested here, Nietzsche fundamentally understands decadence in terms of life-denial:

The wisest men in every age have reached the same conclusion about life: it's no good... Always and everywhere, you hear the same sound from their mouths, - a sound full of doubt, full of melancholy, full of exhaustion with life, full of resistance to life. Even Socrates said as he died: 'living that means being sick for a long time: I owe Asclepius the Saviour a rooster'.... What does this prove? What does it demonstrate?... 'There has to be some sickness here' - is what we will reply: these wisest men of all ages, let us start looking at them more closely! Perhaps they had become a bit unsteady on their feet? Perhaps they were late? doddering? decadent? (Nietzsche 2010d:162)

As Silk summarises, "[f]or Nietzsche, decadence is any kind of saying no to life" (Silk 2004:594). We will now see how Nietzsche undertook to map this threat in immense detail in both Greek and Christian culture.

I will take the Greek case first. For Nietzsche, the key here is Socrates: both Socratic rationalism and the disdain for life the philosopher exhibited by his final words are seen by Nietzsche as symptomatic of a "declining, weary" instinct (Nietzsche 2010d:162).

My readers perhaps know to what extent I regard dialectic as a symptom of decadence [*Décadence-Symptom*], in the most famous case of all, for example: the case of Socrates. (Nietzsche 2010a:75)

The first accusation here is that Socratic dialectic arose out of an inability to embrace and tolerate the tragic nature of life, instead seeking refuge in an illusion of control on which virtue and knowledge and happiness neatly aligned:

Conversely, those things which gave rise to the death of tragedy - Socratism in ethics, the dialectics, smugness and cheerfulness of theoretical man - might not this very Socratism be a sign of decline, of exhaustion, of sickness, of the anarchic dissolution of the instincts?...For the virtuous hero must now be a dialectician; there must now be a necessary, visible connection between virtue and knowledge, faith and morality. (Nietzsche 1999:70)

Platonic idealism provides the metaphysical accompaniment to this weakness, by sanctifying another world sanitised of the imperfections of this one: Socrates and Plato are thus “agents of Greek disintegration” (Nietzsche 2010d:162).⁵ A second charge is that Socratic methods allowed “the rabble”, particularly those unable or unwilling to engage in open combat, to subvert and ultimately “humiliate” a noble culture, one in which “nothing with real value needs to be proved first” (Nietzsche 2010d:164). Socratic rationalism is thus a human all too human power play, a triumph of one set of instincts over another, a victory for “plebeian *ressentiment*” (Nietzsche 2010d:164).

The advance of decadence is famously cemented for Nietzsche with the coming of Christianity.

From the very outset, Christianity was essentially and pervasively the feeling of disgust and weariness which life felt for life. (Nietzsche 1999:9)

Christ is thus ‘this most interesting decadent’ (Nietzsche 2010b:28) and the task of the priest is to cultivate these nea-saying, anti-life instincts (Nietzsche 2010a:122) – for example, through shepherding the slave revolt chronicled in the *Genealogy of Morality*. One sees here a central aspect of Nietzsche’s model of decadence: it identifies an unavoidable set of instincts - weariness, *ressentiment*, weakness - which are present in all cultures and yet which have come to dominate in some.

Decadence belongs to all epochs of mankind...

Decadence itself is nothing to fight against. It is absolutely necessary, and belongs to every age and every people. What should be fought with all one’s might is the creeping contagion of the healthy parts of the organism...(Nietzsche 1968:§339)

Silk elegantly summarises:

For Nietzsche, decadence exists in any age, but in the modern age it is dominant, and in the modern age, accordingly, any positive move must involve constructive confrontation with it. (Silk 2004:595)

(§4) Nietzsche: Aesthetics and The Response to Decadence

How is such a “constructive confrontation” to occur? Nietzsche employs a huge range of tools, from genealogy to the deliberate creation of new values, in his attempts to reverse the

⁵ Depending on the context, Nietzsche alternately emphasises Socrates’s agency in bringing about this degeneration or his status as a symptom of an already ongoing decline. For example, in the early period, *Birth of Tragedy* commends Aristophanes for “scenting the characteristics of a degenerate culture” in Socrates, Euripides and “the music of the new exponents of the dithyramb” (Nietzsche 1999:122). Similarly, *Twilight of the Idols* describes Socrates as recognising his own decadence as mirrored in society at large:

[H] understood that *his* case, his idiosyncrasy of a case was not an exception any more. The same type of degeneration was quietly gaining ground everywhere: old Athens was coming to an end. (Nietzsche 2010d:165)

dominance of decadence. But the one I want to focus on in the present context is art, particularly art understood within a broadly aesthetic framework.

There are two examples that are particularly important here. The first is the appeal in *Birth of Tragedy* to Greek theatre and ultimately to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a means of combatting decadence. Nietzsche frames his project as an exercise in “the science of aesthetics” and it promises to offer an “aesthetic” justification for life, a way of reconciling ourselves to it and embracing it, rather than distorting and denying it as Socratic tradition supposedly does (Nietzsche 1999:14).

Our highest dignity lies in our significance as works of art - for only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified. (Nietzsche 1999:33)

The details of Nietzsche's original argument here are deeply interwoven with a Schopenhauerian metaphysics that he later came to satirise for treating music as a “telephone to the beyond” (Nietzsche 1994:3/5). But what is vital for current purposes is that art, once one has grasped its twin Apolline and Dionysiac aspects, is the key means to reversing the decline instituted by Socrates and allowing a justification of the world that avoids his rationalism.

The second and related case is Nietzsche's later emphasis on self-creation: by this point, aesthetic justification is no longer a matter of music or theatre specifically but of a broader self-stylisation.

As an aesthetic phenomenon existence is still bearable for us, and art furnishes us with the eyes and hands and above all the good conscience to be able to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon. (Nietzsche 2001:§107)

This project is framed in terms that would have been eminently recognisable to aesthetes in both London and Paris: we must become “poets of our life” (Nietzsche 2001:§299). Again, art is key vehicle for escaping decadence, although it is also a risky one. There is always a danger that:

The ceaseless desire to create on the part of the artist, together with his ceaseless observation of the world outside him, prevent him from becoming better and more beautiful as a person, that is to say from creating himself. (Nietzsche 1996:236)

There is a highly aestheticist ring to this. Yet it is vital to see that Nietzsche cannot subscribe to slogans of ‘art for art's sake’: the cultural mission he ascribes to art is too important to allow that: its task is to recreate a ‘yea-saying’ culture in the face of Socratic and Christian denial.

Art is the great stimulus to life: how could it be thought purposeless, aimless, *l'art pour l'art*? (Nietzsche 2010d:204)

So far, I have presented a relatively simple model of the relationship between aesthetics and decadence in Nietzsche: crudely, the former is a potential mechanism for fighting the latter. Yet, as throughout his work, Nietzsche's full position is both more conflicted and more interesting than such a summary would suggest. The best way to see that is to examine the man he came to call “a model decadent”, the man who “has made music sick” - Wagner (Nietzsche 2010c:240).

(§5) Nietzsche, Wagner and The Ambiguous Status of Art

In the *Birth of Tragedy*, Wagner was, as sketched above, very much part of the solution. By *The Case of Wagner* in 1888, Nietzsche had come to see him as the highpoint of contemporary decadence; we will see, this shift also illustrates the multi-faceted nature of that concept for Nietzsche.

Nietzsche sees Wagner as gradually aligning himself with precisely the decadent life-denial found in Christianity. Parsifal is the most obvious case, and the degeneration on show

there is considered so extreme by Nietzsche that he toys with the idea of its being deliberately ironic:

We might be tempted to assume... even to wish that Wagner's Parsifal was meant to be funny, like an epilogue, or satyr play with which the tragedian Wagner wanted to take leave of us, of himself and above all of tragedy in a manner fitting and worthy of himself, namely by indulging in an excessive bout of the most extreme and deliberate parody of the tragic itself, of the whole, hideous, earthly seriousness and misery from the past, of the finally defeated, crudest form of perversion, of the ascetic ideal... it would be nice to think so: because what would an intentionally serious Parsifal be like? ... A curse on the senses and the mind in one breath of hate? An apostasy and return to sickly Christian and obscurantist ideals? (Nietzsche 1994:3/3)

This, Nietzsche suggests, is indeed the case: late Wagner possesses "a secret desire" to "preach a straightforward reversion, conversion, denial, Christianity, medievalism" (Nietzsche 1994:3/3).

The Wagner case illustrates the full range across which Nietzsche understands the concept of decadence. First, he presents it in physiological and psychological terms. "*Wagner est une névrose*": Wagner is a neurosis, whose "art is sick" (Nietzsche 2010c:242). In line with this diagnosis, Wagnerian music spreads decadence through "convulsions" and a theatrical excess that uses "music to stimulate tired nerves" (Nietzsche 2010c:242). This echoes Nietzsche's diagnosis of the priest in the *Genealogy* as manipulating an "excess of feeling" to simultaneously anesthetize and exhaust his subjects (Nietzsche 1994:3/3). Second, decadence is a stylistic phenomenon:

For the moment, I am only going to look at the question of style. – What is the hallmark of all literary decadence?... Life, *equal* vitality, the vibration and exuberance of life pushed back into the smallest structures, all the rest impoverished of life.... The whole does not live at all any more: it is cobbled together, calculated, synthetic, an artefact. (Nietzsche 2010c:245)

Wagner, as the perfect decadent, was thus the perfect "miniaturist" (Nietzsche 2010c:246).

Third, decadence is inescapably a political issue. Faced with the "anarchy" of his own instincts, Socrates sought to tyrannize them through rationality; resentful of the Athenian nobles and conscious of his own ugliness, he sought revenge by dialectic (Nietzsche 2010d:163). Similarly, Wagner is:

A typical decadent, who has a sense of necessity in his corrupted taste, who uses it to lay claim to a higher taste, who knows how to enforce his corruption as a law, as progress, as fulfilment. (Nietzsche 2010c:241)

Wagnerian decadence for Nietzsche is thus a profound physiological, stylistic and political threat: in it, one of the key means to combat decadence, art, has become subordinated to it.

Yet whilst Wagner come to exemplify this threat, it is one with important parallels in Nietzsche's own thought. There is a persistent concern in Nietzsche that by beautifying life art serves simultaneously as incentive to embrace it and as a way of escaping its realities. Crudely put, is it truly affirmation if what one affirms is whitewashed? In the *Birth of Tragedy*, this anxiety is managed by appeal to the supposedly metaphysical insights granted by the Dionysiac and preserved within Greek theatre's fusion of Dionysiac and Apollonian moments. Without such a fusion, without the Dionysiac dimension, art itself risk degeneration:

[I]nto an empty, amusing distraction... [Here] music is deprived of its true dignity, which consists in being a Dionysiac mirror of the world, so that all that remains to music, as the slave of the world of appearances, is to imitate the forms of the world of appearances and to excite external pleasure in the play of line and proportion. (Nietzsche 1999:93)

As I noted, the Schopenhauerian metaphysics of the “Dionysiac mirror” are rapidly abandoned by Nietzsche, but the basic problem remains.

On the one hand, he wants to applaud art as that in which “lying sanctifies itself and the will to deception has good conscience on its side” (Nietzsche 1994:3/25). This illusion is vital in a situation where “honesty would lead to nausea and suicide” (Nietzsche 2001:§107). As he puts it in a famous note, we thus “possess art less we perish of the truth” (Nietzsche 1968:§822). On the other hand, however, such “rounding off” of reality is closely linked to its denial (Nietzsche 2001:107).

Perhaps there is even an order of rank for these wounded children, the born artists, who find pleasure in life only by intending to falsify its image, in a sort of prolonged revenge against life –. We can infer the degree to which life has been spoiled for them from the extent to which they want to see its image distorted, diluted, deified, and cast into the beyond – considered as artists, the *homines religiosi* would belong to the highest rank. (Nietzsche 2002:53)

In short, Nietzsche alternately presents art as both the solution to decadence and as just another of its guises. It is the former moment which leads him to question whether Wagner “was even a musician” as opposed to a mere actor or a physiologist, practising the “corruption of the nerves (Nietzsche 2010c:247;257). It is the latter, which leads him to warn of “the artists of decadence, who fundamentally have a nihilistic attitude toward life [and] take refuge in the beauty of form” (Nietzsche 1968:§852).

(§6) Three Lines of Development

I have focused on Kant, Pater and Nietzsche because their systematic aesthetics is profoundly interlinked with the conceptual development of decadence. I want to close by indicating three lines along which the discussion might be extended.

The first would be to pressure the notion of the “aesthetic”: what precisely marks an “aesthetic” theory in contrast to a philosophy of art more broadly construed? After all, a number of 20th century thinkers offer detailed philosophies of art that actively reject the term: Heidegger, for example (Heidegger 1981:80-4). This is a deeply complex question and the answer will depend on whether one starts from a Kantian or Hegelian conception of aesthetics. But one option would be to align aesthetics with a spectatorial approach, an emphasis on the viewer, rather than the creator of an artwork. The choice between an aesthetics of decadence as opposed to a more broadly decadent philosophy of art might then be developed in dialogue with the idea on self-curation, touched on above, that one sees in Nietzsche and then in authors such as Wilde.

The second option would be to retain the term “aesthetics” and explicitly insert the ‘decadence problem’ and its history into those 20th century authors where “decadence” is no longer a central explanatory category, even if it still carries some of the old rhetorical force. Adorno is an obvious candidate: at the very crudest level, “decadence” and “decadent” occur only a handful of times in his *Aesthetic Theory*, less than on many of Nietzsche’s single pages. It would be interesting, in particular, to see how the complex social role which Adorno allows for autonomous art might ground a resistance to decadence or serve as a site for its development and play.

The third possibility would be to go back to Kantian aesthetics and to focus on those aspects left out of the narrative above, aspects such as the sublime. This played a relatively limited role in Kant’s unintentional contributions to 19th century work on decadence. But some of the thinkers one could easily align with decadence in the 20th century rely on a combination of a “transgressive sublime” and an aggressive rejection of autonomism in which art actively fractures or subverts the instrumental or moral world. Bataille would be a

natural case to focus on - provided, of course, one preserves the full range of ambiguities in both “natural” and in “case”.

My aim in this chapter has been to chart the relationship between decadence and aesthetics. At its head, lies a Kantian paternity that Kant himself would certainly disavow. This Kantian inheritance is at once appropriated and deformed in writers such as Gautier and Pater. By the time of Nietzsche, both the philosopher himself and art are deeply implicated in decadence's ambiguity: each is simultaneously a product of it and the potential solution to it. Finally, as I suggested in closing, "decadence" now marks several lines along which the idea of an aesthetics might be further developed or challenged or warped. I began this chapter by describing the relationship between decadence and aesthetics as intimate yet conflicted - I hope, with this overview in place, that it is now clear why.

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