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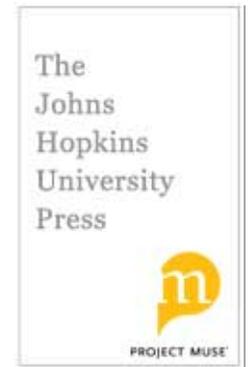
Productive Decadence: "The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought": Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde

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Productive Decadence:  
“The Queer Comradeship of Outlawed Thought”:  
Vernon Lee, Max Nordau, and Oscar Wilde

Richard Dellamora

As a conceptual category, decadence makes most sense as a set of interpretive strategies that work by systematically reversing, inverting, and otherwise unsettling commonly held assumptions. This assertion is true of writing within the aesthetic movement from the date of Théophile Gautier’s invention of the term *l’art pour l’art* in the 1830s.<sup>1</sup> The critical stance of decadence vis-à-vis contemporary society does not, however, imply adherence to a particular political point of view. Decadent critique can be directed from liberal, socialist, and/or anarchist perspectives, as well as from conservative or even reactionary ones. Whether from the left or the right, however, decadence is always radical in its opposition to the organization of modern urban, industrial, and commercial society.

The decadent movement in nineteenth-century Western Europe might be characterized as a critically antimodern tendency within modernity, which depends on vanguard aesthetic techniques and subject matter. The term *decadence* also partakes of the interest within liberal thought in the possibility of social transformation. As we will see in the discussion of the work of Max Nordau that follows, decadence implies difficult questions about ideas of temporality within liberalism. In particular, while liberal reform implies a continuous, gradualist sense of human time, revolutionary impulses and experience within liberalism depend upon a view of change in time as catastrophic and potentially liberating. I am principally interested in decadent culture as an element of critique and utopian aspiration within the liberal tradition. In the aesthetic and decadent movements, one of the ways in which this possibility is imagined is in terms of the creation of a modern counter-culture.<sup>2</sup> In this sort of work, utopian aspiration moves from the subjunctive mood into the present indicative.

Both the interpretive strategy and the performative aspect are witnessed in Vernon Lee’s response to the Wilde trials of 1895. Simultaneously with the conviction and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde occurred

the publication in 1895 of the English translation of Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892), an attack on innovative art in Europe, including the work of Wilde, which Nordau launches in the name of both cosmopolitan culture and modern science. Thinkers in England and the United States, both on the political left and within artistic circles, immediately recognized the threat to individual liberties and the development of countercultures posed by this unfortunate coincidence. George Bernard Shaw responded with a review in an American anarchist journal. Lee's review followed in an English journal in the following year. This essay focuses on the nexus of the trials and these three textual events.

In her review, Lee counters Nordau's association of artistic creativity with narcissistic solipsism by arguing that the aberrations of individual genius arise from their isolation within an indifferent, at times hostile social setting. Lee goes on to suggest that a corrective to this situation tends to arise from it, as if spontaneously, in the mode of what she refers to as "the queer comradeship of outlawed thought."<sup>3</sup> The term *queer*, of course, has a contemporary ring in the marked tendency from about 1985 onwards to associate cultural dissidence with queer activist responses to the onset of AIDS in England, the United States, and Canada. In the early 1990s, the term becomes salient in Anglo-American literary and cultural studies, particularly through the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler.<sup>4</sup> However, within a nineteenth-century context, while the term *queer* can connote or even denote sexual perversity, it has a far wider range of meanings, some specific to the criminal underworld, and some more general. In the late Victorian period, the term is often used as a synonym for *uncanny*.<sup>5</sup>

The word *comradeship*, with its associations of Walt Whitman's use of the term in the Calamus section of *The Leaves of Grass*, is more forward in its association of sociality with loving friendship between members of the same sex. In "Calamus," however, and in Whitman's writing more generally, the celebration of friendship between two men is linked with the notion of friendship in a civic sense.<sup>6</sup> This linkage is performative in character, drawing Whitman and his readers towards the work of imagining and effecting social justice. This effort has been recurrent in homophile movements, but it is by no means confined to them. It is, for example, a leading motive of Jacques Derrida's recent study *Politics of Friendship* (1994). What particularly attracts me in Lee's phrase is the association that she makes between comradeship and dissident—in her words, "outlawed"—thought. In this respect, she signals a necessary segue between friendship between two individuals and democratic fraternity/sorority.<sup>7</sup>

At the time of the death of her partner, the early twentieth-century writer Radclyffe Hall, Una Troubridge felt a need to memorialize their

relationship within the terms of female friendship tradition. In a letter posthumously written to "John," she confided: "I feel I must leave an unequivocal record of our life and love, just as the Ladies [that is, of Llangollen] did, to cheer and encourage those who come after us."<sup>8</sup> But Troubridge also understood her commitment to John as existing within the terms of male friendship writing. To her literary executor, she remarked that the relationship had been a "marriage of true minds."<sup>9</sup> This reference to Shakespeare's sonnet 116 inserts Una's union into a specifically male homoerotic literary tradition: in the first instance, referring to William Shakespeare's idealized friendship with a young man, whom many have identified with William Herbert, first Earl of Pembroke.<sup>10</sup> In the second instance, the allusion calls to mind Oscar Wilde's fictional recasting of the debate over the identity of this friend in his short story "The Portrait of Mr. W. H." (1889). Accordingly, the phrase links the best-known twentieth-century relationship between two women with the years at the end of the nineteenth century when the tradition of male friendship writing was being actively adapted to the purposes of homophile apology. The linkage indicates yet another way in which male and female cultural dissidence in the Victorian fin de siècle were mutually constitutive.

In her article, Lee not only passes judgment on the legal destruction of Wilde but also defends sexual dissidence as necessary to the very existence of reason. This affirmation of loving friendship between members of the same sex as both virtuous and rational is axiomatic within the philosophic tradition of male friendship writing.<sup>11</sup> Lee redeploys the axiom at a time when questions of sexual desire and practice were becoming openly intertwined with the validation of friendship. In turn, this linkage was pushing individuals such as Wilde and Lee towards the status of outlaws. Moreover, her argument occurs within a debate framed in terms of utilitarian and evolutionary thinking familiar in Victorian texts. In the 1890s, these assumptions were mobilized within diametrically opposed ideological arguments. In the instances that I consider here, the arguments circle around the well-established notion, presented for the moment in the phraseology of positive science, that genius is symptomatic of mental disorder.<sup>12</sup> For example, Frederic Myers in *Human Personality* (1903) writes of the man to whom Nordau dedicated his book: "Professor Lombroso and other anthropologists have discussed the characteristics of the 'man of genius'; with the result of showing (as they believe) that this apparently highest product of the race is in reality not a culminant but an aberrant manifestation; and that men of genius must be classed with criminals and lunatics, as persons in whom a want of balance or completeness of organisation has led to over-development of one side of their nature;—

helpful or injurious to other men as accident may decide."<sup>13</sup> Even more so after the Wilde trials, genius was also associated with sexual perversion.

In England and North America, the trials of Wilde put the aesthetic and decadent movements on the defensive. This strategic reversal was further exacerbated by the publication of the English translation of *Degeneration*. Benjamin Tucker, the anarchist editor of the American journal *Liberty*, was so "alarmed at the great impression this work was making on the American mind"<sup>14</sup> that he commissioned Bernard Shaw to write a critical response. Shaw immediately agreed, and the resulting article, "The Sanity of Art," was published in July 1895. In his response, Shaw defends critical thinking against personal attacks against its authors. He counters Nordau by arguing that geniuses on most counts are no better or worse than anyone else and are therefore liable to the same errors. This vulnerability, however, does not negate the important work they do. In his words, "When we turn from conduct to the expression of opinion—from what the man of genius dares do to what he dares advocate—it is necessary for the welfare of society that genius should be privileged to utter sedition, to blaspheme, to outrage good taste, to corrupt the youthful mind, and, generally, to scandalize . . . conventional people."<sup>15</sup> In response to the view that geniuses lack rational capability, Shaw argues that "passion" is the motive of all human thought and action—including that which is most important to social improvement. "Passion," he argues, "is the steam in the engine of all religious and moral systems" (331). In both instances, his position undoes key binary oppositions asserted by Nordau. The first argument subverts the contrast that Nordau draws between members of the responsible majority and cultural dissidents. The second argument negates Nordau's view that ethical behavior is based on law, not desire. Like Plato, Shaw perceives ethics to be grounded in eros: "Abstract principles of conduct break down in practice because kindness and truth and justice are not duties founded on abstract principles external to man, but human passions, which have, in their time, conflicted with higher passions as well as with lower ones" (331).

The debate, which by summer 1895 had engrossed Nordau, Wilde, and Shaw, posed significant dangers for Lee, a leading aesthetician and a prominent literary decadent in her own right.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as a woman with intimate ties to other women and one who counted male homosexuals such as Walter Pater and John Singer Sargent among her friends, Lee was vulnerable to allegations of degeneracy. Nonetheless, she decided to review Nordau's book in the pages of the *Fortnightly Review*. Her essay, which appeared in June 1896, offers an example of how feminist aesthetes attempted to distance themselves from Wilde's

crimes at the same time that they recognized how much they had at stake in his fate. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that, without specifically naming Wilde, she begins the essay by appearing to endorse his imprisonment: "The world is perfectly right in considering weakness of will, unchastity of thought and word, egotism and vanity as a contagious danger to the community."<sup>17</sup>

By the end of the essay, however, Lee implicitly challenges the ethical basis of the amendment of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, under which Wilde had been tried and found guilty of "gross indecency."<sup>18</sup> "Inquire into cases of infraction of social laws: have those who infringe them been dealt with wisely? Are the laws they break (however foolishly and selfishly) unselfish, all-wise laws, particularly framed in view to their happiness? In a word, does society not produce its own degenerates and criminals, even as the body produces its own diseases, or at least fosters them?" (942).

Lee's question is not merely rhetorical since in it she attempts to shift the ground of the debate from biology to sociology (932). In an important recent study of Nordau's turn, after the publication of *Degeneration*, to the cause of Jewish nationalism, Todd Samuel Presner has argued that Nordau, who was a social Darwinist, makes his case in sociological terms.<sup>19</sup> Social Darwinism, however, is a sociobiological mode of thought that is susceptible to varying emphases. In the introduction and book 1 of *Degeneration*, Nordau specifically locates his study within psychiatric theory. Instancing the Austrian-born, French psychologist Bénédict Augustin Morel as his chief point of reference, Nordau develops a psychiatric symptomology of degeneracy, which he then proceeds to apply to each of his artistic examples: Richard Wagner, Paul Verlaine, and Wilde, among others. Following the outdated views of psychiatrists in the 1870s, Nordau reduces sexual and other behavioral pathologies to the single disease of degeneration of the central nervous system. Unfortunately, psychiatrists proved to be unable to demonstrate the material existence of this ailment. And, already in the 1880s, Richard von Krafft-Ebing argued that sexual perversions were psychological not biological in character.<sup>20</sup> This new view opened the possibility of considering the perversions as abnormal but not unnatural—precisely the view that Hall was to adopt in 1928 when she prepared to take the stand in defense of *The Well of Loneliness*, her novel in defense of sexual inverts. Looking at the defects of genius from the perspective of sociology, Lee's review of *Degeneration* explores the social conditions that produce what she refers to not as degeneration but rather as "the deterioration of the soul's faculties and habits" (928). The shift from one word to another is crucial to her argument since *degeneration* refers to biological processes while *deterioration*, in her usage, refers to indi-

vidual effects of social processes much as the word *improvement* is used to refer to another set of effects.

Lee also challenges the utilitarian assumption that individuals exist to serve what Nordau refers to as “our social mechanism” (23). Taking a Millian (and Wildean) counter position, Lee poses a norm of utility based on the axiom of the primacy of the individual. Laws are to be judged on the basis of the “happiness” they enable or negate for particular individuals. At the same time, she places under the mark of erasure Nordau’s concept of individualism. For Lee, individualism has a social dimension. Genius needs friends—or at least *a* friend. And such friendship is necessary if cognitive gain is to accrue from the existence of exceptional individuals. The exceptional man needs “his friend to metaphorically feel his pulse or look at his tongue,” needs, moreover, “a friend to whom either pulse or tongue, in the spiritual order, could reveal anything” (940). This metaphor has a specific point of reference in the fact that, at the time that Lee wrote the essay, she was carrying on psychological experiments in art appreciation, in which she studied the physiological responses to artworks of her close associate Kit Anstruther-Thomson. Despite the antipositivist stance that Lee takes in the review, her search for physiological measurements to correspond with the sense of harmony that one experiences in front of certain aesthetic objects is a highly literal way of registering the psychological impact of works of art. And yet this study had a metaphysical objective since Lee, from the start of her career, held the traditional romantic belief that the appreciation of beauty led to moral awareness and ethical behavior, on both personal and social levels.<sup>21</sup>

In different ways, both Kathy Psomiades and Diana Maltz have argued that Lee’s experimentation occurred within the context of friendship, more specifically of love between two women.<sup>22</sup> Kit Anstruther-Thomson was, as Vineta Colby shows, one of the three great loves of Lee’s life.<sup>23</sup> During the 1890s, she showed extraordinary devotion to Lee; and when, at the end of this period, she drew back, Lee was devastated. In her review, written at a time of personal happiness, Lee recognized that the absence of such friends produces the deterioration of the exceptional individual as well as of that atomized mass known as “the majority” (942).

Critics such as Hilary Fraser and Sonny Kandola are now beginning to demonstrate that Lee is an important adapter of the philosophic tradition of male friendship writing to new ends in the cultural and social contexts of the fin de siècle.<sup>24</sup> Lee’s engagement with friendship is rich, exhibited not only in the energies, misdirected though she eventually recognized them to be, of her physiological aesthetics but in other ways as well. For example, in her thinking about genre. The genre

that her notion of queer comradeship calls for is that of conversation, an adaptation of the philosophic dialogue in a direction that is genuinely open and nonhierarchical in character. Among Lee's experiments in this form, at least one, *Althea* (1894), is a major, albeit virtually unread, contribution to the genre. The chapter of *Althea* that focuses on friendship shows what a virtuoso of friendship Lee was. In her words, one senses the weight of the complexities of her friendship both with other women and, across gender, with men, especially with sexual dissidents such as Pater.

In Florence in the late 1870s, Lee had fallen in love with Annie Meyer, a young married woman and devout Christian. After a rupture in their friendship and Meyer's early death, a friend of Meyer's informed Lee that her passionate attachment to Meyer had been one-sided and that Meyer had humored her out of concern for her salvation. Shocked, Lee began to retrace the relation in a set of "autobiographical notes," in which she referred to their friendship as stillborn.

This curious stillborn friendship was not absolutely wasted. For, as my story goes, this friendship, which, if we look at its dead face, seems to have been made to be so strong and keen and pure, was indeed a stillborn thing. But, even as it is conceivable that the souls of the little stillborn children were not left forever in that limbo nearest the gates of hell, but on the contrary, were removed thence and grew, perhaps as they might scarcely have grown on earth, in some part of heaven; so also this poor little stillborn friendship between these two women was not permitted to remain a mere little shivering thing in limbo but was removed into another sphere, the sphere of the love of those whom we can no longer love in real life, and there developed as perchance it might never have developed on earth.<sup>25</sup>

This passage seems to fall within a familiar tradition of sentimental, religious rhetoric. Viewed from a theosophical perspective, however, Lee's speculation has designs on sublunary existence. Her unfulfilled relationship with Meyer provides the horizon line of potentially realizable future reciprocities.

At issue in the dialogue in *Althea* is the complaint that Baldwin, the Pater-figure around whom it revolves, has withheld affection and commitment from his friends.<sup>26</sup> In a remarkably tough passage, in which he echoes the Pater of *The Renaissance*, Baldwin speaks of the way in which romantic projection recoils back upon the self:

There are in the life of every great affection moments of intense unrest and pain, when we feel that we cannot any longer share our life; that we must, morally speaking, rush out into solitude or shut ourselves up all alone; moments of cold misery, when we seem at once abandoned by our friend, and abandon-

ing; when we feel alone, terribly alone, the whole earth's breadth between us and him, the whole earth's surface depopulate—moments from which we return with spasmodic pain and relief, humbled, puzzled, feeling as if we had been betraying and betrayed. Where have we been? And why have we not thought of carrying with us the beloved one? Nay, rather, why has an imperious instinct taught us to slink away in silence; moments of humiliation and pain, whence we issue into a spasm of community of existence, burying ourself in the other's soul, trying to absorb its warmth, to feel its pulses, hiding our eyes therein. Moments these of the dispelling of a great delusion, a delusion which some insist upon carrying down to their graves, bruising themselves against the impregnable identity of another; or roving off, moral libertines, in hopes of finding elsewhere—what? Final fulfilment of that dream of absolute union? No; but once more that passing semblance thereof, through which, as the central moment of all great love, we have all of us lived.<sup>27</sup>

This passage converts the blame of Baldwin's apartness into a sympathetic recognition on Lee's part of a shared fate. At this moment, Lee's essay becomes queer, in the late twentieth-century academic sense, as a line of desire that crosses limits of gender and sexuality. Lee also speaks of herself, of the loss of another beloved friend, Mary Robinson, and even, in anticipation, of the coming loss of Anstruther-Thomson. Later in the essay, however, Baldwin provides a view of human connection that parses the meaning of Lee's notion of the queer comradeship of outlawed thought in a very different way:

We grow, as in the physical, so in the moral order also, by assimilation from without. Our self, as you said, is, to a large extent, the rearrangement of those other selves whom we have met and lived with; the originality of our personality being shown in the new pattern made out of these old materials. Can we doubt it? Is not our mind the collection of things outside us, sights, sounds, words—the thoughts and feelings of other folk, transmuted by the necessities of our special natures? Let us examine our consciousness, independent and original creatures that we are, and answer sincerely, how much it would contain had we never come in contact with others, in reality or in books? Where do I end, and you begin? Who can answer? We are not definite, distinct existences, floating in a moral and intellectual vacuum; we are for ever meeting, crossing, encroaching, living next one another, in one another, part of ourselves left behind in others, part of them become ourselves: a flux of thought, feeling, experience, aspiration, a complex, interchanging life, which is the life eternal, not of the individual, but of the race.<sup>28</sup>

Lee's essay on Nordau works to validate the concept of "intellectual friendship," which, as Linda Dowling and Joseph Bristow have emphasized, is Wilde's chosen term for understanding his sexual and emotional ties to other men.<sup>29</sup> Lee links loving friendship, which she refers to

as “*the marriage of true minds*” (936), with her and Shaw’s norm of sanity, namely, the honest and unremitting critique of what passes for common sense. On the one hand, sanity in this sense is necessary to counter general deterioration: “The individual, it seems to me, becomes weak and limited in proportion as he is isolated and self-centred. But we must not count too much upon the soundness of the majority, nor imagine that it is necessarily more complete than the individual. All class prejudice, half of what we call national character, is merely accumulated and inveterate spiritual degeneracy; and so far from the majority being able, in such matters, to protect the individual, it is only the individual, the eccentric, nonconforming, rebellious individual, who can, in the long run, save the majority” (942). Intellectual rebellion—what Lee calls “outlawed thought” (938)—is the mechanism of natural selection. Lee concludes the essay: “The rule of life is selection; not merely of us by nature and fate, but by us of fate and nature. Our souls are beset by dangerous tendencies, notions, and examples; let every individual, therefore, scrutinize and select among the tendencies and notions of others; scrutinize and select more carefully still among the tendencies and notions he may find in himself. Against degeneracy of soul there is, after all, but one sweeping remedy: the determination to alter continually for the better; the determination to become, rather than to remain, absolutely sane” (943). Such individualism—and such rationality—do not just happen; it requires a social surround to make it possible. Genius is a friend the Philistine needs; but genius also needs a friend, “the queer comradeship of outlawed thought” (938).

These linkages implicitly point to a gap in Nordau’s thinking in *Degeneration*, namely, the lack of a concept of sociality. In the quotation that he borrows from Paul Bourget, Nordau reduces society to two elements: the individual, which he calls “the social cell,” and the social body or society, namely, the totality of social relations understood in terms of an organic mechanism (301). He links the two terms through the concept of duty, the “subordination” (302) of part to whole necessary for the efficient functioning of society. Absent are mediating concepts that might link individual to individual.<sup>30</sup> When Nordau does speak of sociality, it is usually as a symptom of degeneration. For example, one of the “stigmata” (17) or symptomatic signs of degeneracy among artists is their tendency to form groups: “There is yet another phenomenon highly characteristic in some cases of degeneracy, in others of hysteria. This is the formation of close groups or schools uncompromisingly exclusive to outsiders, observable to-day in literature and art. Healthy artists or authors, in possession of minds in a condition of well-regulated equilibrium, will never think of grouping themselves into an association, which may at pleasure be termed a sect or band; of

devising a catechism, of binding themselves to definite aesthetic dogmas. . . . If any human activity is individualistic, it is that of the artist. True talent is always personal" (29). Later, Nordau offers the prospect of fascism as the form that a failed democracy might take in the twentieth century, that is, the "enslavement of the people by a few stronger and more violent personalities" (554).

In liberal political theory, the concept of sympathy provides the means which holds individuals together in a society. In phraseology of 1867, the liberal state will be a "community ordered and bound together by affection instead of force, the desire of which is, in fact, the spring of human progress."<sup>31</sup> Sympathy is an important concept for Nordau as well; but, in his understanding, it has lost its performative aspect. Instead, sympathy means the identification of the individual with popular opinion. For example, Nordau condemns Wilde's flamboyant aesthetic garb of the 1880s because it offends philistine taste: "It is above all a sign of anti-social ego-mania to irritate the majority unnecessarily, only to gratify vanity, or an aesthetical instinct of small importance and easy to control—such as is always done when, either by word or deed, a man places himself in opposition to this majority. He is obliged to repress many manifestations of opinions and desires out of regard for his fellow-creatures; to make him understand this is the aim of education" (318).

The absence of a forward-moving concept of sympathy in Nordau's political theory helps account for his turn in 1895 to militant Zionism, a national and racial movement that provided him with a concept of fraternity (xxiv–xxv). In the Darwinian terms of Nordau's argument in *Degeneration*, aesthetes and decadents are destined to extinction as a result of their inability to adapt to modern civilization; on the other hand, in the final words of the book, Nordau looks forward to the advent of the subject who will successfully adapt: "The criterion by which true moderns may be recognised and distinguished from impostors calling themselves modern may be this: Whoever preaches absence of discipline is an enemy of progress; and whoever worships his 'I' is an enemy to society. Society has for its first premise, neighbourly love and capacity for self-sacrifice; and progress is the effect of an ever more rigorous subjugation of the beast in man, or an ever tenser self-restraint, an ever keener sense of duty and responsibility" (560). Nordau believed that popular education, "cautioning the public" (560), would facilitate the success of the real modern man versus the ersatz one.

In the face of the intense anti-Semitism that characterized the Dreyfus Affair in France, however, Nordau lost confidence in cosmopolitan culture, at least as practiced by the goyim. His Zionism retains the same Darwinist cast as his analysis of modernity in *Degeneration*, but he now

identifies the successfully adapted modern subject as the subject of Jewish repatriation to Palestine.<sup>32</sup> In this way, cosmopolitanism joins hands with particularism—just as it does much earlier in the nationalism of Mordecai, the visionary Jewish figure of George Eliot's 1876 novel, *Daniel Deronda*. In a speech delivered to the second Zionist Congress in Basel on August 28, 1898, Nordau invoked the coming into existence of the modern subject in the form of what he referred to as the “muscle Jew” or of *Muskeljudenthum*.<sup>33</sup> The revitalized Jewish body is linked in Nordau's thinking with the regeneracy of European Jewry, to be accomplished by the project of nation-state formation in the Middle East. In Presner's pithy recapitulation, “National regeneration would come through moral and physical rebirth and, recursively, moral and physical regeneration would be achieved through nationality.”<sup>34</sup>

From Nordau's point of view, this new ideal remains nonetheless cosmopolitan. Both in contemporary illustrations of the muscle Jew and in Nordau's rhetoric, the muscle Jew is identified with masculinized classical nudes and with Greek culture, especially that of ancient Sparta.<sup>35</sup> Presner notes that “Nordau imagined Zionism as an ideology of the Jew-Greek warrior.”<sup>36</sup> The emphasis on physical culture within Zionism; the encapsulation of the muscle Jew in a Greek bodily carapace; his identification with ancient Spartan fighters; and the redefinition of duty, the social glue, as one's commitment to the Jewish national project, all indicate that Nordau's distaste for contemporary sexual dissidence is highly motivated. The Jewish counterculture that he helped constitute enlists sympathy between men in the service of body culture and nation-state formation. And the end to which Nordau puts Spartan pederasty is deliberately counter to its place in the writing of aesthetes and decadents such as Walter Pater.<sup>37</sup> The homoerotic edge of Zionist polemic was picked up by its antagonists, who quickly ripped it with anti-Semitic slurs on Zionists as themselves a band of homosexual degenerates.<sup>38</sup>

We know what Lee would make of Nordau's attempt to rescue cosmopolitan culture in the form of Zionism, for in her review she contends that the partisanship of class and nation produces barbarity (934). In contrast to Nordau, she argues that the “deterioration” of “soul” resulting from the persecution of nonconformists destroys the possibility of both sanity and sociality: “The *ego* [of exceptional individuals] becomes isolated in his own eyes, and assumes to himself an importance utterly out of proportion to the reality. Hence suspicion, irreverence, animosity towards others; and that refusal to unite one's thoughts with the thoughts of other men, that refusal of what might be called (most literally and worthily) the *marriage of true minds*, which dooms so much of the world's best talent to sterility” (936).

Nordau uses the word *sterility* to signify the failure of degenerates to contribute to social production and biological reproduction. At the beginning of her essay, Lee seems to endorse this usage in the passage cited earlier, in which she appears to sanction the imprisonment of lawbreakers such as Wilde. By the end of the essay, however, Lee argues that popular intolerance and the bigotry of men like Nordau, who confuse their preferences with those of "Nature" (940), impede the work of "civilisation" and "culture" (939). Nordau argues that degenerates are individuals unable to adapt to modernization. Lee argues instead that abnormal behavior by talented individuals is a negative social adaptation produced by popular indifference or prejudice (936). Secondly, she argues that philistine behavior itself is a negative form of adaptation. "Are religious bigotry, social snobbishness, official corruption, industrial grabbingness, tolerated vice, parental and conjugal tyranny, due to exceptional degenerate individuals or to the normal mass? What if the standard, the *norm* is low?" (942). Thirdly, the ignorance and intolerance of "the community of persecution" produces the crimes and misdemeanors of those who are labeled degenerate: "We know, all of us who have had freethinking or revolutionary grandfathers and grandmothers, that the waywardness and lawlessness of notion of a man like Shelley need not have been the result of any biological peculiarity; and that, if there were to any extent deteriorations, they were not necessarily what Nordau calls stigmata or degeneracy. Indeed, we need only search our own souls for the queer comradeship of outlawed thought" (938). The aggression of Nordau and his ilk provokes Shelley's—and Wilde's—provocations; but violence also provokes the coming into existence of a new mode of sociality, "the queer comradeship of outlawed thought" (938).

Finally, Lee sees scientific thought, at least insofar as Nordau purports to represent it, as yet one more mode of maladaptation: "Professor Nordau is the type of the specialist, highly valuable in his own specialty, but acquiring in its exercise a faith in his own infallibility, a blindness to all qualities save those treated by his own study or required for its prosecution, which allow him to approach all other fields without perception of their requirements and his incompetence; the very adaptation of thought to his own line preventing his understanding the different thought of others" (941). If the real enemy of progress is not individual deviation, then, what is? In her answer to this question, the implicit intellectual feminism of Lee's position emerges. One might say that the chief impediment to improvement is what poststructuralists refer to as logocentrism or what might be described as the reliance for belief on single principles, mastering terms that fail to acknowledge that knowledge is several and that the kinds do not necessarily coalesce. The

failure to do so is itself a mark of obsessive behavior or “ego-mania,” to use Nordau’s term.

The other leading term of Lee’s discussion is “soul,” which she uses in a way that resonates with the use of the word within the late nineteenth-century speculative science of theosophy. Lee’s openness to theosophical speculation indicates that sanity for her means both rejecting the limits of logical positivism and a willingness to consider preconscious and unconscious aspects of selfhood.<sup>39</sup> Within theosophy, *soul* is the term used for that aspect of the self which enables it to self-differentiate. One could almost use the nineteenth-century term for self-culture, *becoming*, as a synonym of soul in this sense. In theosophical mythmaking, the soul exists across normal limits of time and space so that the self is actualized in the form of different egos, of different gender, living in different times and places.<sup>40</sup> This myth is not necessary to Lee’s thinking in this essay; but the idea that the self can differ from itself, can become other to itself, so to speak, is essential. In her argument, *soul* understood in this way is, in the human realm, the very principle or capability of what selection and adaptation are in the natural order. And, in that sense, though speculative, the term is also scientific. I mention this usage to indicate, on the one hand, the radical, speculative character of Lee’s thinking, as well as to link her with Wilde, who also uses the word *soul* in this way both in the fairy tales and, later, in *De Profundis*.<sup>41</sup> Wilde and Lee also share the view that same-sex desire contributes to new, improved ways of knowing.

Lee’s and Wilde’s thinking share terms, tropes, and modes of argumentation: for example, the dissemination of meaning in terms that Nordau insists on using in univocal ways; in the redefinition of terms such as *common sense* and *sanity*; and in the use of antithetical thinking, reversals and inversions of meaning in considering linked pairs of terms. Shaw’s argumentative style in “The Sanity of Art” shares these features as well as the dramatic figure of the man (or woman) of humors, familiar in both playwrights’ comedies. And while readers today are likely to associate these rhetorical strategies most readily with the style of Wilde in his essays and comedies, the rhetorical means are a general feature of aesthetic and decadent writing.

The sole reference to Nordau in Wilde’s collected letters suggests yet another aspect of decadent rhetoric, in this case having to do with genre. In a letter sent to the Home Secretary in July 1896, at the beginning of Wilde’s second year of imprisonment, Wilde resorts to parody—of both the prison letter of petition and the apocalyptic scientism of *Degeneration*.<sup>42</sup> Wilde had two objectives in mind in writing the letter: first, to attempt to secure early release from prison on medical grounds; secondly, to gain access to writing materials and books. In the

event, it was the second of these objectives that he was able to achieve despite the fact that the new governor of Reading Prison, J. O. Nelson, canceled Wilde's request for two aesthetic texts: namely, a posthumous collection of essays by Pater and a collection of letters by Robert Louis Stevenson, edited by Sidney Colvin. With the writing materials, Wilde wrote one of his most important works, *De Profundis*. The reading material afforded him a place to lodge his sanity, so to speak, in the midst of the trying conditions of a persistent ear infection, prison labor, and solitary confinement. Therefore, while much was at stake, Wilde's letter to the Home Secretary is also an extended piece of mimicry, in which, among other things, he brags, with exaggeration, that Nordau devoted to him a chapter of *Degeneration*.

In the letter, Wilde adapts to his own purposes the argument from Nordau and Lombroso that geniuses are often members of the class of the criminally insane. Accepting the proposition that his behavior before the trials betrayed a form of "sexual insanity," Wilde argues that continuing imprisonment may cause him to lose his sanity completely.<sup>43</sup> Citing Lombroso and Nordau and noting the existence of "modern legislation, notably in France, Austria, and Italy" that had decriminalized sexual and emotional ties between men "on the ground that they are diseases to be cured by a physician, rather than crimes to be punished by a judge" (656), Wilde attempts to turn the language of modern sexology to the service of his immediate needs. Citing the findings of a science that, in other circumstances, he would have dismissed on intellectual and ethical grounds, Wilde ramps up the rhetorical voltage. Repeatedly excoriating his fall into "sexual perversity," "erotomania" (658), and so forth, he parodies the apocalyptic rhetoric of Nordau's text. In this way, Wilde produces a text which exhibits "the *fin-de-siècle* mental state" (1) that Nordau analyzes in *Degeneration*. By appropriating Nordau's invective, however, Wilde obliquely registers the fact that Nordau's text is infected by the very apocalypticism that he purports to diagnose. In other words, Nordau's text is a symptom of the conditions that he sets out to correct.

While the context of Lee's essay emphasizes the connection between "outlawed thought" and male same-sex desire, it is of interest as well that of the four writers whom I have considered, Lee is the only one who was British. Lee, however, spent most of her childhood on the Continent and made her home as an adult in Italy. In England, she was always an outsider. As Margaret D. Stetz points out, when Lee first met Oscar Wilde, in 1881, she recognized at once that they shared the same status in this regard. At the time, Lee wrote to her mother that she found Wilde to be "wonderful. . . . He talked a sort of lyrico-sarcastic maudlin cultschah for half an hour. But I think the creature is clever, and that a good half of his absurdities are mere laughing at people. The English

don't see that."<sup>44</sup> Lee signed one of her first published articles with the epithet "un cosmopolitana." In the words of her biographer, "Vernon Lee . . . did not 'become' a European; she *was* European. Although her passport was British, she was an adopted Italian with stronger roots in France, Germany, and Switzerland than she ever had in England."<sup>45</sup> Shaw and Wilde for their part were both Irish, and both were critical of the constitutional imposition that had incorporated Ireland into the United Kingdom, an error which made it virtually impossible for Parliament to legislate Irish Home Rule. In his book *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd traces in these writers rhetorical strategies like those that I have outlined here. This fact suggests other valences of the term *comradeship* that resonate with democratic dissidence.<sup>46</sup> But Wilde's and Shaw's self-conscious senses of their status as internal others took them in a very different direction from the one pursued by Nordau after his conversion to Zionism.<sup>47</sup>

As in the phrase "the marriage of true minds," the phrase "the queer comradeship of outlawed thought" refers, in an emergent homosexual code, to the same-sex couple in works such as Whitman's "Calamus" poems. When Lee says that "we need only search our own souls for the queer comradeship of outlawed thought," she invites her readers to imagine a similar capability or soul within themselves. But the sentence also works in other ways. Understood in historical terms, the sentence describes what was occurring in the 1890s, in part as a result of Wilde's provocations. And, understood performatively, the sentence works prophetically, calling in its very utterance a new "we" into existence, who, because we cannot accept as reason the proscriptive labels and aggressive philistinism of Nordau, are forced to recognize ourselves as sharing another mode of thought, another mode of culture, even at the risk of finding ourselves outlawed. Lee's essay, despite its evenness of tone, enacts the development of a modern counterculture. In doing so, it encourages its readers to understand how the actualization of same-sex desire has been at the very soul of that enforced development.

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#### NOTES

1 Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 45.

2 For a provocative discussion of the relation between publics and what he describes as counterpublics, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2002).

3 Vernon Lee, "Deterioration of Soul," *Fortnightly Review* 59 (June 1896): 938.

4 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,

1993); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

5 For nineteenth-century meanings of the term, see Richard Dellamora, *Friendship's Bonds: Democracy and the Novel in Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 44, 198n46.

6 Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 33–89.

7 For Lee's political views, see Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 270–91.

8 Richard Ormrod, *Una Troubridge: The Friend of Radclyffe Hall* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), 285.

9 Ormrod, *Una Troubridge*, 114.

10 Oscar Wilde, *Complete Short Fiction*, ed. Ian Small (London: Penguin, 1994), 270n60.

11 Jacques Derrida considers this connection at length in *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997).

12 Andrew Elfenbein traces this view from aesthetic texts, beginning circa 1750, to the new science of sexology in the late Victorian period in *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

13 Frederic W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1975), 1:71. Nordau writes in the dedication: "Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics and for the most part the same somatic features as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family." Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, trans. from the second German edition by George L. Mosse (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), v (hereafter cited in text).

14 Michael Holroyd, introduction to *Major Critical Essays*, by Bernard Shaw (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 17.

15 Shaw, "The Sanity of Art," in *Major Critical Essays*, 317, 316 (hereafter cited in text).

16 In the 1896 German-language edition of the book, Nordau added a long footnote bringing his coverage of Wilde up to date. See Wilde, *The Complete Letters*, ed. Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2000), 656n.

17 Lee, "Deterioration of Soul," 929 (hereafter cited in text).

18 The amendment is quoted in entirety in Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 243.

19 Todd Samuel Presner, "'Clear Heads, Solid Stomachs, and Hard Muscles': Max Nordau and the Aesthetics of Jewish Regeneration," *Modernism/Modernity* 10 (April 2003): 269–96.

20 For this shift in scientific thinking, see Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

21 For example, in "On Friendship," she writes: "How great a moral aid all true beauty must be to us." Lee, *Althea: Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: John Lane, Bodley Head, 1910), 102.

22 Kathy Psomiades, "'Still Burning from this Strangling Embrace': Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics," in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21–41; Diana Maltz, "Engaging 'Delicate Brains': From Working-Class Lesbian Liberation in Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson's Psychological Aesthetics," in *Women and British Aestheticism*, ed. Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 211–29.

- 23 Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 43–59, 152–72.
- 24 Hilary Fraser, Plenary Address (conference, “Vernon Lee: Literary Revenant,” University of London, London, England, 10 June 2003); Sonny Kandola, “Vernon Lee and the New, New Hellenism,” presented at the same conference.
- 25 Lee, “Some (slightly) autobiographical notes, viz., A[nnie] M[eyer] in Memoriam 1883,” 30 March 1885, Vernon Lee Archive, Miller Library, Colby College. Transcript courtesy of Kristin Mahoney. Quoted in part in Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 52.
- 26 Colby believes that Baldwin is a surrogate of Lee herself (*Vernon Lee* 53). But it makes more sense that, in 1894, Lee would attach the allegation of personal aloofness to Pater rather than to herself. My argument is that Baldwin works in both ways: Lee’s investment in Pater works to prompt a sense of self-recognition as well.
- 27 Lee, *Althea*, 116–17.
- 28 Lee, *Althea*, 133.
- 29 Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1–2; Joseph Bristow, “‘A Complex Multiform Creature’: Wilde’s Sexual Identities,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 203–04; Wilde, “*De Profundis*” and *Other Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 99.
- 30 Nordau uses the term “federation” (*Degeneration* 301) to refer to aggregates of particular sorts of individual cells or functioning parts of the social mechanism, but the term does not denote individual or group solidarity.
- 31 Dowling, *The Vulgarization of Art: The Victorians and Aesthetic Democracy* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), x.
- 32 In this and the following paragraph, I adapt the argument about Nordau and Zionism set forth in Presner, “Clear Heads,” 269–96.
- 33 See Presner, “Clear Heads,” 268.
- 34 Presner, “Clear Heads,” 270.
- 35 See Presner, “Clear Heads,” 271 (illustration) and 282 (on Sparta).
- 36 Presner, “Clear Heads,” 282.
- 37 I discuss Pater’s mode of “thinking Greek” in *Apocalyptic Overtures: Sexual Politics and the Sense of an Ending* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 43–64. More recently, Yopie Prins has changed my own thought by pointing out how important “thinking Greek” was in the formulation of female same-sex desire in the fin de siècle (*Victorian Sappho* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999], 77–78).
- 38 Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* underscores the homoerotic aspect of nascent Zionism (Dellamora, *Friendship’s Bonds*, 127–52.)
- 39 In *Human Personality*, Myers emphasizes unconscious aspects of human personality. See the chapter “Genius,” 70–120.
- 40 Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 127.
- 41 In “The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head,” Margaret D. Stetz argues that Lee pays homage to Wilde’s fairy tale “The Young King” in her fantastic tale “Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady,” which Lee published in *The Yellow Book* in 1896, the same year in which she reviewed Nordau. Stetz believes that Lee’s affirmation of a highly unconventional love in that story functions as an oblique defense of Wilde’s love for Lord Alfred Douglas. See Margaret D. Stetz, “The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head,” typescript (conference, “Vernon Lee: Literary Revenant,” University of London, London, England, 10 June 2003), 1–2.
- 42 On parody, see Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- 43 Wilde to Home Secretary, July 1896, in *Complete Letters*, 658 (hereafter cited in text).

44 Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 80; Stetz, "Snake Lady," 2. In 1885, Wilde and Lee had a falling out after she satirized him and other members of the aesthetic movement in England in her novel *Miss Brown*. Although Lee disapproved of his flamboyant sexual life in the period preceding the trials, the pair were reconciled in 1894 as a result of Wilde's thoughtful behavior towards her invalid brother (Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 106).

45 Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 21, 251.

46 Kiberd works from within a heterosexual framework, in which inversions and reversals play upon a general contrast between Irish "femininity" and English "masculinity" (Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995]).

47 On internal others, see Jonathan Boyarin, "The Other Within and the Other Without," in *Storm from Paradise: The Politics of Jewish Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 77–98.