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LITERATURE AND DEGENERATION: THE REPRESENTATION OF "DECADENCE"

SANDRA SIEGEL
Cornell University

It is questionable whether any single idea can be said to have dominated any age, as Mill thought "comparing" had dominated modernity.[1] Darwin's *Origin* (published within two decades of Mill's essay) demonstrated considerably greater scrutiny than simple acts of comparison. We can be certain, though, that during the second half of the century classification and comparison, kindred activities, increased. Kindred, but not identical: unlike the more detached act of classifying, the act of comparing, when exercised habitually, usually elicits judgments. By 1900, the Victorians had placed nearly every act, whether social or literary, on one or another side of a great divide. No matter was too small for scrutiny. They evaluated. They took positions. And no matter was too large. While the social scientists celebrated how far contemporary civilization had advanced, social and literary critics lamented how far civilization had declined. This would not have been strange—differences have always prevailed—if attentiveness to each other's views, frequently published in the same periodicals, had led them to controversy as most other issues did. But on this issue, where one would have expected vigorous debate, there was silence.

It is worth recalling Ruskin's remark of the 1860s that "progress and decline" were "strangely mixed in the modern mind."[2] That "mix" became stranger as the Victorians classified events according to their power to carry them forward or cast them backward in time. In the discussion that follows I want to take up two questions: how are we to account for the ease and satisfaction with which readers assimilated opposing assessments

of the same facts? And how are we to account for silence where we would have expected bitter conflict? My purpose here is to illuminate the time itself by turning to certain arguments *about* progress and decline. Those arguments constitute events which, like other events that historians explain, are of interest because they need not have occurred. It will become clear in the course of considering how the Victorians presented their arguments that they might have presented them differently. (Let me say at once that a fuller discussion than space allows here would require comment on my method as well as my selection of representative examples.)

The writings of anthropologists, folklorists, and other antiquarians, the young James Frazer, Andrew Lang, Max Müller, for example, who contrasted modernity with antiquity, the urbane with the barbarous, were understandably self-congratulatory. Frazer's cartographies of primitive customs, beliefs, institutions, and behavior were sketched from the point of view of the superiority of the more advanced over the inferior, less advanced savage. He exalted his contemporaries. He flattered them. His vivid accounts provided readers with descriptions of what others, mostly social critics, characterized as decadent. The antiquarians' lurid accounts made available to the critics, whose muted interest in the past was equalled by their insatiable curiosity, ample imagery, abundant examples, and a powerful idiom for interpreting themselves and their contemporaries. In exchange they offered their antiquarian contemporaries animated descriptions of "decadence." They envisioned the possibility of becoming, by way of a backward movement in time, exactly like the savage—a condition that had long been likened to the natural condition of women and children. With that fear hovering over them, the social critics' descriptions intensified the anthropologists' desire to affirm progress, and, insofar as they did affirm that desire, subdued their worry that the condition of savagery might recur.

If the antiquarians took satisfaction in distinguishing "Us" from "Them," their need to preserve that difference increased as they acknowledged their fear. For as Frazer well knew, in spite of the persistence with which he affirmed how far civilization had traveled, civilization remained merely a fragile surface: savage survivals, ordinarily dormant, were a potential hazard. The social critics who were convinced that their time was "decadent" thought that they had erupted. The reciprocity the critics and antiquarians enjoyed drew them into a silent yet complicitous dependence from which both enclaves profited. To better understand their dependence as well as their silence we need to consider the unbounded optimism that characterized certain accounts of decadence—and the covert fear that prompted and sustained them.

The place of language in culture; the origin of religion; the significance of magic; the meaning of myth, ritual, and custom: on these subjects Victorian ethnographers were divided. Yet on two other issues—whether ethnography was a science, and whether it represented the newest evidence of progress—they were in agreement. Not all antiquarians who were influenced by Darwin actually read his work, but the young Frazer, whose first articles prefigured the copious volumes he produced over the next forty years, certainly did. All Frazerian anthropology recapitulated the general argument of *The Descent of Man:* animals evolve from lower (simple) to higher (complex) forms of life; humans evolve according to stages, from a position of moral and intellectual weakness to moral and intellectual strength; and, as part of the human species, women are superior to lower forms of life, but men are intellectually, physically, and morally superior to women. Two consequences followed: Anthropology presented itself as authoritative because it studied human institutions as a "science"; second, Frazer relied on the analogy of the development of the fetus in order to interpret social arrangements. The imaginative richness of his language, which constantly likened social institutions to something else—the fetus, for example—readily deferred conclusions. Such deferral, combined with his authoritative tone, helps to explain why Victorian anthropology is as hopeful—it was scientific—as it is fearful of failure. Ethnography's typically authoritative tone replaced definitive authoritative statements even as such statements were themselves necessarily cast in metaphor. One set of observations was presented, but only to be understood in terms of yet another about something different. As Darwin, throughout his writings, but especially in *The Descent of Man,* drew frequently on the analogy between the development of the fetus and the evolution from lower to higher forms of life, so Frazer extended the analogy to the domain of "social institutions." Darwin had argued that the human embryo repeats the history of the evolution of mankind: traces of previous stages survive.

The structural derivatives of Frazer's thought, the influence Darwin exerted, and the origins of Victorian ethnography are subjects of interest that have yet to be fully explored. Here, however, I want simply to point out that Frazer's argument delineated the boundaries that separate civilization from savagery by distinguishing between the primitive past and the present. At the same time, Frazer alerted his contemporaries to traces—I shall call them embryonic survivals—the existence of which were not only essential to anthropology, but made possible the study itself. Needful as traces were in order to see how far we had come, they were also a constant reminder of the "fragile surface" of civilization. Their exis-

tence threatened to dissolve the distinction between savagery and civilization, which made preserving the concept of difference all the more important. Ethnography promised to preserve those boundaries. Survivals were visible, provided one looked at the human fetus closely, as Darwin had. *The Expression of Emotions in Animals* extended consideration of survivals to the more ambiguous domain of gesture. Following Darwin, Frazer found that rather than being lost, moments of the past, or "stages" of the past, were preserved in social life even though the species (or social life) advanced. Darwin had turned to embryology for evidence of previous stages of development. Frazer applied this method to the study of primitives. Each relied on the embryonic model, the one to map the evolution of humans from lower forms of life, the other to map the evolution of civilization from savagery. Social life passed through stages similar to those through which the embryo passed. Frazer, who was fearful that evidence for charting the development of human cultures would vanish, admonished anthropologists to study existing savages. Even if survivals were lost—if existing savages were to perish before their customs and characteristics were recorded—survivals exist in social life (social equivalents of fetal survivals): "Embryology shows that the very process of evolution, which we postulate for the past history of our race, is summarily reproduced in the life history of every man and every woman who is born into the world."[3] If the life history of every man and every woman repeats the past history of the human race, then the child bears the same relation to the savage as the adult does to civilization: savagery and civilization stand in opposition to each other as the child does to the adult. The child, who represents an arrested stage of human development, provided a readily accessible embodiment of the vision of the savage in Victorian social science. Frazer described "Social Anthropology" as "the embryology of human thought and institutions."[4] Where savages were inaccessible one could turn to contemporary civilization: The savage past persists in the present.

Readers of *The Descent of Man* will recall that Darwin evokes the quadrumana, a half-bestial, half-human creature, so frequently, why it occupies so special a place in his account of how man came into being invites speculation. After his own laborious effort, Darwin must have been astonished by his vision of the mentally superior creature whose triumphant emergence from the animal world represented the culmination of a long process of evolution. Although the triumph of the quadrumana was no different in kind from those of other superior species, it was of considerably greater significance and interest as the essential link in the unfolding of events that led to the emergence of the fully human savage, the existing savage, and, finally, civilized man. For Darwin the quadrumana represented the end of the line. At precisely that juncture, Frazer began his inquiry. "Well handled," Frazer wrote, "the study of the evolution of

beliefs may become a powerful instrument to expedite progress if it lays bare certain weak spots in the foundations of which modern society is built. At present, we are only dragging the guns into position: they have hardly yet begun to speak."[5] There is more to be noticed here than Frazer's confident tone, or, even, the magnitude of the task he set for anthropology. Indeed, for Frazer the long-range effect of recovering the origin of civilization was the promise of expediting progress; but the immediate effect was to call attention to the differences that separate savagery from civilization.

Apart from the lurid pleasures of that empirical subject, really more speculative than empirical, the more fully the social scientists amplified the differences that separated "Them" from "Us," the more readily could they congratulate themselves on the progress of civilization: Modern western man was physically, mentally, and morally superior; his social arrangements and institutions were more complex; his religion and his science were more advanced. For Frazer and others the clearest sign that civilization had indeed approached the threshold of far-reaching advance was the development of the science of anthropology, the latest example of civilization. The immediate practical gain of an otherwise recondite subject was not negligible: turning to the savage was a means of reassuring contemporary culture of how far it had advanced. The further back in time one traveled, the further civilization could be said to have progressed.

"All *existing* savages," Frazer wrote, "are probably far indeed removed from the condition in which our remote ancestors were when they ceased to be bestial and began to be human."[6] Our contemporary habits of thought have diverged far enough from this typically Frazerian turn of mind that it may be a little difficult to recognize the implicit analogy that Frazer is drawing here. We may need to remind ourselves that because Frazer was simply applying Darwin's theory to social life he imagined an unrecognizably bestial, but equally unrecognizably human creature, whose successors were increasingly more advanced. Frazer admonished anthropologists not to confound the existing savage—"human documents"—as he called them, with his more remote ancestors.[7] The existing savage differed as greatly from his ancestor as he did from civilized man. Although Frazer did not delineate the differences sharply, he brought into clear focus a world inhabited successively by bestial creatures; half-bestial, half-human creatures; fully human savages; and, finally, by civilized man who represents the present threshold beyond which, armed with the new guns of anthropology, civilization might now advance further.

It is, perhaps, merely a striking coincidence, yet interesting nevertheless, that the two pairs of oppositions—human/beast and male/female—around which Darwin organized *The Descent of Man* are also played out, but to different purposes, by the later generation of social critics in their

discourse about decadence. While the first third of Darwin's *The Descent of Man* takes up the question of the differences that separate humans from lower forms of life, and accounts for the superiority of man, the balance of the book takes up the question of the differences that separate male from female, and accounts for the superiority of men over women. Although these are distinct considerations, as it turns out, the same qualities Darwin ascribes to men (as opposed to women) are also those that separate man from beast. While woman was thought to be finely wrought by nature, the formation of her skull indicated her intermediate position between the child and man.[8] As the quadrumana gained supremacy over lower forms of life through the principle of natural selection, males gained supremacy over females through the principle of selection according to sex. Darwin not only explains the ways in which women are inferior to men; he also explains the origin of their inferiority. In the course of fighting for the possession of their women, men rivaled other men. Through the law of battle he became greater in strength and in intelligence. Those who were successful in possessing and keeping their women triumphed. Thus civilization evolved and continued to progress.

Darwin repeatedly reminds his readers that man's greater physical, mental, and moral strength is due to his inheritance from his half-human male ancestors. During the "long ages of man's savagery" these characters would have been preserved, or even augmented, "by the success of the strongest and boldest men, both in the general struggle for life and in their contests for wives; a success which would have insured their leaving a more numerous progeny than their less favored brethren." The characteristics of primeval male progenitors—physical strength, perseverance, courage, intellectual vigor, the power of invention, and determined energy—are precisely those qualities that continue to separate male from female.[9]

Not everyone who had opinions about Darwin read *The Descent of Man*, but echoes of Darwin are strong and clear in *The Golden Bough*. "Even where the system of mother-kin in regard to descent and property has prevailed most fully, the actual government has generally, if not invariably, remained in the hands of men. Exceptions have no doubt occurred; women have occasionally arisen who by sheer force of character have swayed for a time the destinies of their people. But such exceptions are rare and their effect transitory; they do not affect the truth of the general rule that human society has been governed in the past, and human nature remaining the same, is likely to be governed in the future, mainly by masculine force, and masculine intelligence." That force and intelligence, as Darwin plainly said, is responsible for civilization: Frazer's language and thought resemble Darwin's so closely his own voice is often indistinguishable: "In the struggle for existence progress depends mainly on competition: the more numerous the competitors the fiercer is the struggle, and the more rapid, consequently, is evolution."[10]

The Golden Bough, twelve volumes in all, is animated by the contrast Frazer draws between the "childlike mind of the savage and his childlike interpretation of the universe" and the "forward thrust of civilization toward religion and science."[11] Frazer substitutes the "child" for the savage more often and more vividly than he emphasizes the affinities savages and children share, ignores the differences that separate them, and uses the words "child" and "savages" interchangeably to evoke the same imaginative configuration. Whatever "They" are like, "We" are different.

By 1890, the denigrated condition of children provided familiar evidence for the analogy to function effectively. Frazer had no interest in the child as such, at least if one is to judge from his writings. In the context of his anthropological writings, however, the invocation of the child enabled him to describe the obscure, and necessarily imaginary, past of the savage as though the savage he was describing were familiar. To trace how far civilization had advanced, the figure of the child mediated access to the savage. One could, by contrast with the savage, see more clearly what was not valued within and by civilization. "We must constantly bear in mind that totemism is not a consistent philosophical system, a product of knowledge and high intelligence, rigorous in its definition and logical in its deductions from them. On the contrary it is a crude superstition, the offspring of undeveloped mind, indefinite, illogical, inconsistent." The savage, like the child, "is probably indeed much more impulsive, much more liable to be whirled about by gusts of emotion than we are."[12]

At the turn of the century discussions of primitive man were invariably conducted from a moral point of view. That difference was neither neutral, as might be the difference between chairs and tables or circles and squares, nor was it abstract. Each time it was invoked it was recharged with meaning: unless we kept "Them" in clear focus, "We" could not understand ourselves—and vice versa. But the same difference that separates "Them" from "Us" separates the adult from child; higher from lower, vigor from pallor, strength from weakness, courage from cowardice, patience from frivolity, perseverance from capriciousness, intellect from passion, reason from emotion, idea from instinct, and science from magic. Yet such pairings, which were understood as part of a hierarchical design, originated from a more inclusive difference that distinguished men from women. The reverse was true too: discussion about the difference (of "masculine" and "feminine") preserved the validity of those oppositions, each one of which was gender marked.

The later Victorians associated the idea of culture—civilization was an interchangeable term—with "masculine force and masculine intelligence."[13] The answers that were given to two questions—what kind of education, if any, was appropriate for women; and what women's role in political life should be—which were debated at length during the second half of the century—depended on certain presuppositions about the sexes: controversy intensified and positions became explicit as the traditional

view of woman was reaffirmed more vigorously than ever before. It may seem that I am crediting Darwin with having exerted more influence than he properly deserves. While Darwinian science weakened biblical theology, which is well known, it strengthened the biblical view of the place of woman in the world.

In *The Descent of Man* Darwin produced evidence that supported the traditional view of the physical, mental, and moral superiority of male over female, evidence on which Frazer also relied to support his assumptions, assumptions that were so infused in the social thought of the tradition there was no need to address them unless one set out to challenge, or to meet the challenge, they posed. Rather than controvert or augment the traditional view, Darwin simply restated it and, in light of the evidence he gathered, proposed the principle of selection according to sex with fresh authority. To the degree that Darwin's thought confirmed the traditional view of gender, those who read or read about *The Descent of Man* may well have become less rather than more self-conscious about the presuppositions that justified the exclusion of women from cultural life. Although controversy over the natural equality of the sexes was vigorous by the 1980s, when cast in the metaphorical language of "separate spheres" or "woman's place," the issue inspired less controversy.

Arguments about "woman's place" had the effect of warning women—but men, too—about crossing conventional social boundaries. Women who trespassed ran the risk of becoming like men, while men ran the risk of becoming like women. Some social critics, particularly those who were fearful that such confusion was about to occur, attached the epithet "effeminate" to the time itself (and it has remained a salient figure in subsequent historiography). Although the idioms drew attention to "woman's place," there were comparable consequences for men. While the antiquarians set their sights on remote regions, yet confirmed the "masculinity" of their own civilization, others ranged over the local exotic. I will return to this subject shortly, after we observe the way the word "decadent" behaved in Victorian discussions about their own time, the fullest one of which was conducted by Max Nordau, German Hungarian physician and author. He argued, in a book that had the appearance of being scientific, that artists are insane and called them interchangeably "degenerated" or "Mattoids": persons of erratic mind, compound of genius and fool.

The first English translation of Nordau's *Degeneration* appeared in February 1895 and before the end of the year at least seven impressions had been printed. Nordau predicted that "after some centuries art and poetry will become pure atavisms and will no longer be cultivated except by the most emotional part of humanity—by women, by the mad, perhaps even

by children." In his reply to *Degeneration*, George Bernard Shaw circumvented the issue of art and madness by singling out the excess that characterized *Degeneration*.[14] He did not accuse Nordau of all the phobias and manias he had identified as signs of decadence. But he did accuse him of graphomania. With characteristic shrewdness, Shaw pointed out that in his inveterable effort to name the disease Nordau had overreached his purpose, exceeded the boundaries of rationality. He might have said that Nordau enacted his own phobia about disorder, exhibited a mania to put things in place. To enumerate all of the late Victorians' self-dramatizing acts, and to account for them, would divert us. Enough to take note of their penchant for shaping images of themselves, not as they were, but as they imagined they were (or might be), by rewriting the history of the past, and by inventing a past of their own. The idea of "comparing," whether of oneself with another or of one's own time with past times, encouraged this. Nordau's *Degeneration*, which belongs to the same genre of activity as Frazer's *Golden Bough*, provided a new idiom for discourse about decadence.

It would be foolish to describe either book as phobic or manic, although it should be kept in mind that both were guided by the same wish and motivated by the same fear. Nordau, who imagined that civilization was edging toward collapse, and who regarded much of contemporary life as threatening, scrutinized nearly every aspect of it. He searched as though with untoward acquisitiveness for phobias and manias. The need to order (according to which everything is one thing or the other, mania or phobia), was itself a sign of his fear of chaos—a phobia about chaos that quickly became a mania for ordering: he classified phobias and manias with manic excess. Although Nordau was not exemplary of the social critics who described decadence, nonetheless he represents the limiting instance of a prevailing attitude toward disorder. Pivoting on the twin ideas of restraint and manliness as the distinguishing characteristics of civilization, his argument, like the more general discussions of progress and decline, is governed by fear and lacking in restraint.

In the 1890s "decadent" typically referred to style, in its widest range of meanings. In the most pointed account Arthur Symons comments, defines, and describes the word. Where others were silent, he invoked the perfect sanity, and perfect proportion of classical Art as the measure of comparison for contemporary literature. Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans' *A Rebours*, is made to stand for the representative "decadent" in whom Symons finds "the sensations and ideas of the effeminate, overcivilized, deliberately abnormal creature who is the last product of society." He describes the novel as "barbaric in its profusion, violent in its emphasis, wearying in its splendor."[15] Although Symons stresses the excess, rather than the complexity, or even the madness of decadent art, more was at stake for him and for his readers than simple aesthetic judg-

ment. Symons was less Arnoldian than many of his more conservative contemporaries: like them however, he thought Art and Civilization reflected each other, thought the moral worth or health of the one was identical to that of the other.

Culture, Symons imagined, followed a circuitous path (not Frazer's linear pattern), eventually returning to its original condition. He pointed to the attributes shared by the "new barbarism," of which he did not entirely disapprove, and the "old barbarism," which Frazer's notion of savagery readily evoked. Symons' and Frazer's evaluations differed, but their descriptions, the one of contemporary life and the other of savagery, were remarkably similar. One singled out order, restraint, rationality, and faith to which he contrasted savagery; the other singled out excess, self-absorption, chaos, and effeminacy to which he contrasted the masculine ideal of the Victorian version of Greek culture. By conflating decline and effeminacy, Symons elaborated his idea of decadence in opposition to that imagined Greek ideal: his conclusions, different from Frazer's, were guided by the same conceptual frame and gender marked language. Moreover, the political consequences were identical, too, whether one wrote about the savage, or about the decadents, about progress or decline. Victorian ethnography and social criticism justified the power and privilege men held over women. At the same time, the emergence of feminism (and the political and social gains women made in the second half of the century), increased men's need to confirm their position.

Arthur Waugh, frequent contributor to the periodical press, described decadence with characteristic urgency, lamenting that "freedom of speech is degenerating into licence. . . . The writers and critics of contemporary literature have, it would seem, alike lost their heads." Waugh made explicit what a significant number of others of his generation believed: "The man lives by ideas; the woman by sensations; and while the man remains an artist so long as he holds true to his own view of life, the woman becomes one as soon as she throws off the habit of her sex, and learns to rely upon her judgment, not upon her senses. . . . It is unmanly, it is effeminate, it is inartistic to gloat over pleasure, to revel in immoderation, to become passion's slave; and literature demands as much calmness of judgment, as much reticence, as life itself."[16]

The Victorian poetic allowed for an easy allegiance between social and literary critics. If art represented the time, then the time could be understood by way of the literature it generated. Social critics, who addressed themselves as readily to literature as they did to the politics of social life, evaluated one as easily and authoritatively as the other. Frederic Harrison, who commanded a prominent position in letters, will serve as a representative example: "It is the lady-like age: and so it is the age of ladies' novels. Women have it all their own way now in romance . . . Up to a certain point, within their own limits, they are supreme. Half the modern romance, and many people think the better half, is written by women . . .

Let us accept what the dregs of the nineteenth century can give us, without murmuring and repining." When asked to amplify his position, Harrison responded: "I have spoken of a certain decadence. It is true that I have been showing examples of a certain slackness in creative force, sundry morbid tendencies, and an obvious state of chaos, and some false prophets in our midst: . . . Decadence in art is a sure sign of some organic change taking place in our moral sense. Healthy art is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual growth."[17]

If healthy art was a sign of inward and spiritual growth, as Symons had said it was as early as 1893, unhealthy art was a sign of disease. That issue was explored tirelessly in the periodical press. In an unsigned article in *The National Observer,* for example, the issue was reiterated somewhat differently, but the terms in which the subject was conceived remained constant: the author distinguishes between the decadents of earlier generations who were *men,* whereas the new decadent is an "invention as terrible as, and in some ways more shocking than, the New Woman." The new decadents "have been tolerated, why one does not know, and have presumed on toleration. The time has surely come when there should be an end of this, and when every man who cares for the manhood of literature should lift his pen against so disgustful a crew."[18]

This is an extreme position, but not an unreasonable one. So long as the words "civilization" and "masculine" were conceived as conceptual cognates, the New Woman *was* shocking and the new decadents *were* "an invention as terrible." The New Woman, like her mirror image, the new decadent, who was always male, confused what was essential to her nature. She not only moved in the public sphere, but behaved like a man, even as the new decadents, in their self-absorption and inaction, behaved like women, lost their masculine vigor. For the Victorians, any confusion of gender was bound to have implications for "civilization." Of the many consequences one was the elaboration of "separate spheres." Neither the idea—that woman is a thing apart—nor the figure of speech was new. But there can be no doubt that as women's sphere of activities widened, as gender roles overlapped, and as the separation of the "spheres" appeared precarious, the phrase was used more frequently than ever before. These considerations account for the surge of interest at the century's turn, chiefly on the part of men, in confirming and justifying the social reality that lay behind the figure of "separate spheres." If women had access to higher degrees in education, to the professions, and to property; if they rode bicycles, abandoned constrictive modes of dress, and moved freely in the public sphere—if all this were possible, how could it be said that the spheres were separate? And if they were not separate, what would justify the position of power and privilege men enjoyed? It is understandable that fresh arguments should have been articulated with a new sense of importance in order to eliminate the new decadents and the New Woman. Therefore, men argued that the spheres always had been separate, and

were intended by Nature and God to remain that way. What men claimed was at stake, however, was neither their own power nor their privilege, but civilization itself.

Frederic Harrison talked about the question in an address he gave at Newton Hall in a lecture, appropriately, in honor of August Comte.

> We come back to this—that in body, in mind, in feeling, in character, women are by Nature designed to play a different part from men. And all these differences combine to point to a part personal not general, domestic not public, working by direct contact not by remote suggestion, through the imagination more than through the reason, by the heart more than by the head . . . and all this works best in the Home. That is to say, the sphere in which women act at their highest is the Family, and the side where they are strongest is Affection. The sphere where men act at their highest is in public, in industry, in the service of the State; and the side where men are strongest, is Activity.[19]

To point to the different roles women and men are by Nature designed to play; to delineate what those are and why they need to be separated according to gender—the one belonging to the sphere of the Family or Home, and the other to the State or to Activity—were commonplace arguments in Victorian periodicals, although Harrison was more impassioned and more eloquent than many of his contemporaries. Neither his eloquence nor his passion prompted him to pause to consider the metaphoricity of his language. On the contrary, the transfer of the language of science to discourse about social life served much the same function as Frazer's transfer of the "New Biology" to the domain of social institutions. If Harrison had simply stated that increased opportunities for women in education and in the professions would cause the social order to collapse, he would not have been as persuasive: his persuasiveness, which derived from his authoritative tone rather than the cogency of his argument, depended on the notion that the spheres of social life are *like* the heavenly spheres. Harrison evoked this arbitrary analogy—of social life to the heavens—with such ease that the force of the figure eludes notice.

If the adjective "separate" had not been attached to the word "sphere," if the word "sphere" simply referred to the space occupied by women, as distinct from men, we would probably feel inclined to identify the two spheres as an orientational metaphor that designated some variety of spatial hierarchy. We might think, for example, of earthly and celestial space. But "separate spheres" implied two—perhaps more—spaces, set apart, neither one of which was necessarily preferable. Rather than suggest to their readers the outer limit of space—that is, the hollow globe that encloses the earth—or, the concentric, transparent, hollow globes astronomers of earlier centuries thought surrounded the earth, the phrase suggested the orbit of a planet, as well as the spherical planets themselves, both of which moved within naturally designated boundaries. The use of

metaphor, which involves understanding one thing in terms of another, necessarily evinces correspondences. The attributes of the second acquire those of the first. In this instance, the social order acquired the characteristics of the physical universe. To be understood each needed to be thought identical to the other, as though it were the other. Moreover, as Woman was thought to be the ordering principle of the Family, the Family was referred to as belonging to her; and, similarly, as Man was thought to be the ordering principle of the State, the State was referred to as belonging to him. Through a process that resembles understanding one thing in terms of another, as by a quantum leap, a part was also made to stand for the whole: "Woman" came to stand for one Sphere while "Man" came to stand for the other. Woman's activity, Harrison argued, should retain its home-like beauty, and should be "womanly and not mannish. All that we ask is that women, whether married or unmarried, whether with families of their own or not, shall never cease to feel like women, to work as women should, to make us all feel that there are true women amongst us and not imitation men." Before I consider the connections between "sameness" the notion of women as "imitation men," it will help to notice a few more passages from Harrison's talk:

> We are only seeking to assert a paramount law of human nature. We are defending the principle of the womanliness of women against the anarchic assertors of the manliness of woman. . . . In the name of mercy let us all do our best with the practical dilemmas society throws us. But let us not attempt to cure them by pulling society down from its foundations and uprooting the very first ideas of the social order.[20]

Harrison could count on his auditors to understand by the words "social order" and "society" the word "civilization." To uproot the foundations meant to uproot the two institutions, the Family and the State, that distinguished civilization from savagery. He appealed to his listeners, undoubtedly sympathetic to his view to "teach [women] that this specious agitation must ultimately degrade them, sterilize them, unsex them." Women's higher duties, Harrison argued, were neither to compete with men in professions, to participate in public life beside them, nor to engage in the strenuous labor required by work outside of the home. "The higher duties of love, beauty, patience, and compassion, can only be performed by women, and by women only so long as it is recognized to be their true and essential field." Thus, Harrison concluded: "It is impossible to do both together. Women must chose to be either women or abortive men. They cannot be both women and men. When men and women are once started as competitors in the same fierce race, as rivals and opponents, instead of companions and helpmates, with the same habits, the same ambitions, the same engrossing toil and the same public lives, Woman will have disappeared, society will consist of individuals distinguished physiologically, as are horses or dogs, into male and female specimens. Family will mean

groups of men and women who live in common, and Home will mean the place where the group collects for shelter."[21]

Harrison makes two claims: That unless women remain within their sphere, they will become "imitation" or "abortive" men; and, second, crossing from one sphere to another will bring about the ruin of civilization, return all of us to a condition of "Barbarism." Turn-of-the-century journals, letters, minutes of meetings, and articles in the periodical press by Mona Caird, Janet Hogarth, Millicent Fawcett, Emmeline Pankhurst, and others confirmed that conventional gender roles were being blurred. In addition to women's accession to political organization, their participation in the labor force and in the professions, which coincided with the social dislocation of the family, threatened to undermine their place in the home. In retrospect it is easy to see how arbitrary Harrison's conclusions were. Only one already convinced of his ideology would be persuaded that overlapping gender roles would dissolve gender differences or that civilization verged on collapse. Harrison understood that the changing social realities challenged the adequacy of the figure of "separate spheres." Conversely, invoking that metaphor served to stabilize increasingly precarious conventions about gender. But not without competing views.

While Harrison argued that women ran the risk of "sameness," which he thought was undesirable, there is little evidence that women were fearful of becoming like men. On the contrary, many were fearful that if they continued to be restricted by roles convention had assigned them, their capacity to realize themselves would continue to be aborted. Women willingly risked being different from what they were, perhaps because for them, being different held the promise of becoming more, rather than less like "women." But in Harrison's view when women crossed from one sphere to another, they violated "natural laws," challenged the natural order. If *women* were not fearful of becoming "abortive men," whose fear was Harrison addressing? And why did the prospect of women's widening sphere excite terror in men?

It does not seem farfetched to say that the power of Harrison's own rhetorical move engendered his fear. In arguing that men and women are different, he elided something as remote and abstract as the "heavenly spheres," and as immediate and particular as the social order. By likening social life to the galaxies, by conflating two separate spheres, Harrison enacted linguistically what he eschewed sociologically. His elision of Nature and social life enabled him to argue that unless spheres are kept separate, unless women remain in their place, civilization would revert to savagery. That difference *can* be dissolved seems to be true imaginatively, if not virtually. If social life could be thought of as being identical to the Heavenly galaxies, then women *could* be thought of as being identical to men. On the one hand Harrison argues against the power of metaphor to shape images of the world that exist apart from the metaphors themselves;

on the other, the metaphorical frame of his argument against the imminent dangers of confusing gender identity regenerates the force of metaphor against which he argues. Metaphor permits the possibility of imagining likenesses that cannot be imagined apart from metaphorical thinking. Harrison may well have been addressing women, but the women he addressed had no existence apart from his own imaginings. If *he* were a woman, he would not want that woman to *be* like him. He spoke as though he were that woman, from an imagined woman's point of view, yet one of his own making. To be *like* a woman imaginatively, was to have realized that possibility. He might have been less fearful (or not fearful at all) had he restrained himself from acting out that possibility. Having enacted what he feared, he became his own adversary. Other issues, one of which concerned sameness, undoubtedly contributed to Harrison's fears and accounts for the tone of panic that competed with cogent discourse about the vexed political issues that occupied the later nineteenth century.

From Harrison's point of view—and from Darwin's, Comte's, and Frazer's, for example—gender differences, marked according to a moral hierarchy, were congruent with privilege and power. If it were possible to eliminate physical, moral, and intellectual differences, if women could "disappear," as Harrison feared they might, that hierarchy would disappear too.

By now it should be evident why a "falling away" from civilization was thought to be "effeminate," and why "effeminacy" was thought to represent a decline. Darwin had confirmed, and Frazer after him had reconfirmed, that civilization was a result of masculine vigor and intelligence. A man who had failed to be sufficiently masculine (or a culture that failed to be sufficiently civilized) was thought to be less than itself. A woman who falls away from herself, however, is not less than what she naturally is; she is more womanlike: more excessive, irrational, impulsive, intuitive, childlike.

Moreover, the idea of "decadence" depended upon thinking about culture as though it were identical with the organic world of plants and animals which pass through their cycle of birth, growth, deterioration, death, and decay; Darwin's (and Frazer's) conceptions depended on the analogy of the fetus; the legend of "separate spheres" depended on the language of astronomy. Yet, such "facts" as "excess," "irrationality," "effeminacy," and such likenesses as those drawn between the galaxies and social institutions, or the fetus and the evolution of social arrangements, are of a very different order of truth than, for example, that in the year 1895, Justice Wills declared Oscar Wilde had been "the centre of extensive corruption of young men of the most hideous kind"; or, that in the year 1910, King Edward died; or, that in the same year there were strikes of mine and dock workers; or, even that, in the year 1908, Arthur Balfour, in exasperation over the failed attempts to define the word "deca-

dence," finally proposed that it "was rather like digestion: we knew it took place, but couldn't quite say how."[22] The failure to define "decadence" did not inhibit social critics, who appeared to be innocent of the conventions their language conserved and of the fictions they shaped, from using the word. They were at least as innocent as the ethnographers who might have observed—but they too failed to take note of themselves—their own repetitive descriptions, their fascination with the lurid, their interest in Magic and Naming, in the very notion of retrieving the arcane origin of mankind in order to uncover "weak spots" in modernity. It is not difficult to see that their own ethnographic enterprise had as fragile yet complex a surface as that of the civilization they imagined. Nor is it difficult to see why, in light of their arguments, they found descriptions of decadence useful. Each discourse enacted the same ideology.

In spite of the effect Frazer's anthropology had—of confirming that we were civilized and therefore superior—the impulse to confirm, and to confirm so loudly and insistently combatted the fear that "We" were, indeed, like "Them." While the presence of savage survivals—existing "human documents"—made the "science" of anthropology imaginable, it made equally imaginable the imminent eruption of the savage self. Children, the mad, and women were constant reminders of the condition from which civilization had evolved and to which civilization could revert. Adult and manlike behavior were salient signs of progress. But the threat remained: adults could become like children; men could become like women.

The enactment of the science of anthropology was one means of confronting the threat. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the Victorian savage was an elaboration of what the Victorians feared they might too easily become if they were not "civilized." Among the many uses of nineteenth-century anthropology, it reiterated those attributes of civilization that needed to be conserved if the Victorians were not to become like savages, children, or women.

The energetic ordering and arranging of the past assuaged the uneasiness the later Victorians felt about their time and themselves: the idea of comparison enabled them to differentiate themselves from what they feared they might be or might become. The subject of primitive man, which absorbed the attention of anthropologists, led them to anticipate the consummation of their wish to establish a science that would assure them of remaining civilized, although their method required postponement of their practical ambitions. Many undoubtedly felt themselves to be on the threshold of a perpetually deferred discovery throughout their lives. Although the controversy over the priority of "language" or "will," generated by Max Müller's hypothesis, persisted into the nineties, none

disputed that what needed to be understood about the world of primitive man was Magic.[23]

The ethnographers initiated their pursuit of origins with the study of Magic because they believed Magic, particularly the magic of transformation through power of naming (and all of the accompanying rituals, customs, and habits that arise from this wish), represents the initial stage of human activity. There is more to be said about why the early ethnographers selected this aspect of primitive experience when other questions might easily have absorbed their attention. The pertinent parallel I wish to draw here is that neither the early ethnographers nor their successors noticed, perhaps because they were straining to be scientific, the affinities between their own pursuit and the activities they described, classified, and scrutinized. To name primitive man, to identify him properly, would enable them to transform modernity. Their interest in Magic, particularly in naming, is especially strong, although seeing their own ambitious enterprise as being, in itself, a Magical activity, did not occur to them.[24] They reserved their wonder for the study of the primitive, whose history promised full knowledge of their own origins, seeking the knowledge of which obscured their own fear. The savage they imagined, more fictional than real, served to order and control the intellectual life of Victorian anthropologists: An imaginary double of their own making whose existence was mediated by accounts as lurid as the arcane world they described. The savage was a fearful version of what they suspected they might actually be. If others could be shown to be different, they could not be like those others.

Frazer's explorations into arcane origins is shrouded in astonishing excess. The study of myth and ritual that had begun earlier in the century culminated in 1889 with the publication of the first volume of *The Golden Bough*. The proliferation of articles about the subject during the second half of the century can be accounted for in a number of ways. It would be foolish to diminish the political context that nurtured the emergence of anthropology. Ethnographic and folklore studies aided colonialism even as the Celtic revival confirmed that such studies stirred national feeling. But apart from these considerations, there is something noteworthy about the individuals who devoted their sedentary lives to writing books about strange customs and beliefs, translating myths, fairytales, and epics, and finding vestiges of arcane rites in classical literatures without moving from the confines of their studies in Oxford, Cambridge, and London. Their studies are informed by a nostalgia for the past, a lament for the absence of myth and ritual from modern life, and a desire to recover something felt to be lost which science would remedy. The practical social-mindedness was oddly modulated by their pursuit of exotic excess in their most astonishingly excessive accounts. At rest in their libraries, they were buoyed by their imaginative energies to remote regions of the world. When they

returned, they proceeded to prepare fastidious descriptions of cannibalism, incest, self-affliction, headhunting, nakedness, marriage customs, and much other less-forbidden but equally unfamiliar behavior. In spite of their lurid subjects, their books are often tedious exercises in repetition, books about books, more than equal in their strangeness to the customs they described so laboriously. Their convictions about the possibility of amassing enough information to arrive eventually at significant conclusions, and their ambition to find a cure, need to be seen in the context of the enchantment with which they described modes of existence different from their own. Their sedulous descriptions, which were designed to recuperate and classify the strangeness, gave them a certain authority to speak with the confidence they needed to describe still more. The unself-consciousness with which they undertook veritable descriptions separated them from their avowedly literary contemporaries and from the social critics who were describing "decadence." But the ethnographers whose lives were austere, whose descriptions were as inflated as their imaginations were vivid, flattened their exotic subjects. The titles of their books were often beguiling, but the books themselves are ponderously inclusive and tedious. Their peculiar deflation of their exotic subjects contains an excess of its own no less lurid and peculiar than the lives they described.

If the anthropologists' excessive accounts of primitive man were self-protective, the social critics' descriptions of contemporary "decadence" could only have exacerbated their fear, heightened their desire to delineate differences more sharply, and strengthened their convictions about progress. They, in turn, provided the social critics with a conceptual analogue for describing "decadence": the world of the primitive was insufficiently controlled, measured, and developed by masculine vigor and masculine intelligence; the world of the "decadents," having "fallen away" from civilization, mirrored the world of the primitive. Whether one argued the mark of the age was "progress" or "decline," each made the same claim on the imagination. Literary activity, whether of reading or of writing, inspired traffic with the lurid and, simultaneously, assigned to that activity a privileged place apart. But like all privileges, this one appears to have been in perpetual need of confirmation. Whether one was imagined to differ from or to resemble the savage, each polemical move demarcated "Them" and "Us." Savages—"They"—were repeatedly likened to women in the writings of the anthropologists. In the writings of the social critics, "We" had become like "Them." Rather than controvert each other, or engage in bitter conflict over the issue of "progress" or "decline," each confirmed for the other that civilization was "masculine." And each eschewed, with equal fear, the "feminization" of civilization.

The threat to "masculinity"—examples were found in the lives of individuals, literature, and the wider realm of the "spirit of the age"—were countered in various ways, one of which involved identifying such signs

through repeated comparisons with yet other signs. Such social critics as Harrison engaged in eloquent lament, while such anthropologists as Frazer engaged in tedious affirmation: because they shared the notion that civilization was "masculine," gender mediated their discourse. As Frazer thought the savage self within culture might erupt at any time—existing savages were a constant reminder of what reversion might mean—for others, women, particularly women who moved out of their proper sphere, were a constant reminder of the possibility of what might occur if civilization reverted to barbarism, or became "effeminate."

I have argued that the legend of "separate spheres" was revived in the later part of the century as a response to anxieties about sexuality, which were acted out and intensified in discussions of "decadence" and "savagery." Both words were inseparable from political considerations. When sexuality itself became a distinct topos, men enacted their fears more boldly, yet with greater resistance to clarifying their own confusions.

Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds were responsible for having introduced the subject into British social thought and they, rather than Freud, or Krafft-Ebing, published the first articles about "sexual inversion," as Symonds, who borrowed the term from Italian social theory, called the phenomenon.[25] We can fairly suppose that Ellis' studies, which recounted the details of anonymous individuals' erotic lives and habits, like the anthropologists' studies of anonymous savages, activated a dormant interest in picturing the marginal world more vividly. If fear of inversion in themselves and in those around them prompted Ellis and Symonds to describe narcissism (as Ellis was the first to call it), reading and writing about this subject could be regarded as salutary acts which, joined as they were to anthropological discourse about the "savage" and to social criticism about "decadence," contributed to the Victorian idea of civilization as a masculine invention.

Would the Victorians recognize themselves in the picture I have constructed here? We might imagine they would have chosen to present their arguments differently according to how we answer this question. More importantly, their choices would have had different consequences.

Notes

1. "The Spirit of the Age," reprinted in *Essays on Politics and Culture*, Gertrude Himmelfarb, ed. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962). I wish to acknowledge my debt to Jerome Buckley whose work, most particularly *The Triumph of Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966), is among the most illuminating and provocative studies on this subject. It would be impossible to acknowledge my indebtedness to all of the other studies that have influenced my thinking and made it possible to bring together aspects of social thought that have generally remained isolated from one another. I want, nevertheless, to single out the work of J. W. Burrow, Linda Dowling, Karl Beckson, Richard Ellmann, Tom Gibbons, Sandra Gilbert, Barbara Gelpi, Susan Gubar, Gertrude Himmelfarb, Walter Houghton, Samuel Hynes, John Lester, John Reed, Martha Vicinus, and Judith Walkowitz. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Fifth Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, Vassar College, April, 1981.

2. Ruskin, *Modern Painters,* as quoted in Buckley, p. 58. For a fuller discussion see *Modern Painters* (New York: International Publishers, n. d.), vol. 3, ch. 16.

3. Frazer, "The Scope and Method of Mental Anthropology," *Science Progress*, (April 1922), 64:583. Although I have drawn in some instances from works of Frazer written after 1900, his earlier writings are cast in similar language and contain the same conceptual frame.

4. Frazer, "The Scope of Social Anthropology," *Psyche's Task* (London: Macmillan, 1913), p. 162.

5. Sir James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (Macmillan, 1911), "Preface to the Second Edition," September 1900, 1:xxvii. Andrew Lang echoes the passage in *Magic and Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, 1901), p. 7.

6. Sir James George Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy* (London: Macmillan, 1910), 4:17. See also *Questions on the Customs, Beliefs, and Languages of Savages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), pp. 5–10. My emphasis.

7. See n. 4, above; p. 172.

8. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: Collier, 1902), p. 717. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.

9. Darwin, pp. 724–25.

10. *The Golden Bough,* 2:209; *Totemism and Exogamy,* 1:93.

11. *Totemism and Exogamy,* 1:xiii–xiv; *The Worship of Nature* (London: Macmillan, 1926), 1:6. Compare Darwin, part 3, ch. 19.

12. *Totemism and Exogamy,* 4:4; *The Belief in Immortality* (London: Macmillan, 1913), 1:265–66.

13. *The Golden Bough,* 2:2.

14. Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (New York: Appleton, 1895), especially book 1, p. 543; George Bernard Shaw, *The Sanity of Art* (New York: Tucker, 1908).

15. Arthur Symons, "The Decadent Movement in Literature," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* (November 1893), 87(522):866.

16. Arthur Waugh, "Reticence in Literature," *The Yellow Book* (April 1, 1894), pp. 356–57, p. 355.

17. Frederic Harrison, "The Decadence of Romance," *Forum* (1894), 17:223–24; "Art and Shoddy: A Reply to Criticisms," *Forum* (1894), 17:718–19.

18. *The National Observer,* February 23, 1895.

19. Frederic Harrison, "The Emancipation of Women," *Fortnightly Review,* (October 1, 1891), 198:447, 448.

20. Harrison, "Emancipation," p. 448.

21. Harrison, "Emancipation," pp. 451–52.

22. *The Westminster Gazette,* May 27, 1895; Arthur Balfour, *Essays: Speculative and Political* (New York: Doran, 1921), p. 208.

23. See, for example, Andrew Lang, *Modern Mythology* (London: Longmans, Green, 1897), which is, in part, a response to Max Müller, *Chips from a German Workshop* (London: Longmans, Green, 1875), p. 4. See also E. B. Tylor's commentary on his exhibition of *Charms and Amulets Displayed at the Folk-Lore Congress,* Joseph Jacobs and Alfred Nutt, eds. (London: David Nutt, 1892), pp. 387–93. Among the countless examples, see *The Golden Bough.*

24. See Frazer, *Bibliography and General Index,* twelve, "Name," "Names," "Namesakes" and "Naming": 12:383; Edward Clodd, *Tom Tit Tot: An Essay on Savage Philosophy in Folk-Tale* (London: Duckworth, 1898), especially chs. 5 and 6.

25. Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, *Sexual Inversion* (London: Wilson and Macmillan, 1897), pp. 26–29.