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### Figures of Degeneration in French *fin-de-siècle* Literature

This dissertation explores how authors used the biological metaphor of degeneration to explain and condemn the decline of France in the first decades of the Third Republic. Degeneration was originally a medical coinage used in studies of specific forms of mental illness, but progressively became a recurrent term connecting biology and cultural criticism, and allowed late-nineteenth-century authors to theorize social decay. Faith in science having been adopted as the more or less official dogma of the Third Republic, and doctors having achieved great prestige as well as political power, the medical concept of degeneration took hold as an explanatory model for countless physical, social and moral afflictions. *Fin-de-siècle* France offers a remarkably rich ground for observing the diffusion of such a discourse into literature. While the Decadent, Symbolist and Naturalist movements have been studied extensively, the texts I examine have, in most cases, been left out of the literary canon. The purpose of this study is to rectify this oversight and to argue for the need to consider their significance as a response to the socio-historical conditions of their creation.

The introduction outlines the historical context surrounding both the rise of degeneration theory and the fictional works under study. The political and social anxieties brought about by the bruising defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and subsequent establishment of the republic were manifold: loss of relevance on the international stage, loss of political power to the uncivilized masses, decline of traditional social and religious values, confusion about gender roles, concerns over depopulation. At the same time, the life sciences provided a new societal model, replacing older mechanical conceptions associated with Enlightenment writers such as Condorcet. Therefore biology, physiology and medicine seemed valuable for social analysis and commentary. Degeneration conveniently described and explained various threats to the health and identity of the nation. It proved particularly useful to social observers in linking biological deviance and social and moral decay, by articulating the relationship between the degenerate individual (that it sought to identify) and the fate of the nation.

In the first chapter I examine Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple* and *L'Etape*, Alphonse Daudet's *L'Immortel* and *La Lutte pour la Vie*, and Maurice Barrès's *Les Déracinés*. These texts decry the young generation's lack of morals and criticize the Third Republic's institutions for bringing about social and moral disorder. More or less loosely based on a gruesome *fait-divers* from 1878, the texts present the *struggle-for-life* as a symptom and cause of social decomposition. The 1878 murder case offers a starting point for a consideration of the link between the purported social Darwinism associated with the republican system, and in particular its educational policies, and the perceived rise in violent crime. The protagonists in these texts are young men from the lower classes who aspire to rise in society, adopting the struggle for life as the guiding principle for their conduct. Described as degenerates themselves, because of innate, hereditary deficiencies that make them "born criminals," the protagonists are presented as regressive, atavistic

beings at odds with the standards of moral behavior. But they are also seen as products of an unnatural system, the post-revolutionary order, which the authors view as a historical aberration with grave consequences. The authors highlight the fact that the particular historical conditions of the last decades of the century make the contemporary social and intellectual milieu a breeding ground for degeneration, aggravating the protagonists' latent hereditary tendencies to violence and leading to their actualization in crime.

The topic of the second chapter is the representation of prostitutes as agents of degeneration. With the emphasis placed on the role of women as wives and mothers in nineteenth-century society, the prostitute's un(re)productive and overt sexuality posed a triple threat: to public morality, to bourgeois patrimony, and to health. The science of the day defined the prostitute as a fundamentally, organically corrupt woman, a being shaped by an aberrant biology. The prostitute could be construed as degenerate in various ways: mental illness, caused by disease or heredity, was often invoked as the source of her lack of moral sense; her sexuality was seen as depraved and primitive; her way of life exposed her and others to venereal disease, vice and excess. Hygienist discourse and policies sought to identify and circumscribe this threat. J-K Huysmans in *Marthe*, Edmond de Goncourt in *La Fille Elisa*, Emile Zola in *Nana* and Alphonse Daudet in *Sapho*, bring into play scientific assumptions about the nature of prostitutes. In particular, they deploy the metaphor of disease and contagion to emphasize the protagonists' degenerate nature and degenerative potential. However, unlike the scientific discourse that shapes the representation of prostitutes, these texts point to the diseased nature of the environment that the protagonists inhabit, a world of generalized sexual promiscuity.

The final chapter examines the affinities between scientific racism and degeneration theory in the context of literature about the colonies. Throughout the nineteenth century, race, construed as a biological category by thinkers such as Gobineau, became the dominant factor for explaining social and cultural differences. Race was also invoked as a determining motive for colonial expansion: the "civilizing mission" implied a betterment of "inferior" races; it was also seen as an alternative to and a substitute for *la Revanche*, as politicians argued that it would reenergize the French "race" and combat cultural and biological degeneration at home. Novels that describe the encounters between French colonial soldiers and settlers and Africans raise the question of the effect of contact with "inferior" races and with African nature. In Jules Verne's *Cinq Semaines en Ballon* and Pierre Loti's *Le Roman d'un Spahi*, contact with Africa and its inhabitants brings about a regression or reverse evolution in the protagonists. Africans, seen as primitive, arrested at an earlier stage of evolution, are characterized by animality, dominated by instincts. The white protagonists' "going native" is seen as a nightmarish degenerative scenario according to which their experience is viewed as an undeniable loss. However, in Louis Bertrand's *Le Sang des Races* the African experience results in an invigorating return to the source of French greatness, as an antidote to the excessive refinement of metropolitan France. The imaginary Sudan in Emile Zola's *Fécondité* likewise provides an opportunity for the renewed expansion of a new France.