

FOLLOWING DARWIN: BIOPOLITICS AND THE GROTESQUE
IN AMERICAN AND GERMAN CULTURE, 1890-1933

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ABSTRACT

Lina J. Kuhn: *Following Darwin: Biopolitics and the Grotesque
in American and German Culture, 1890-1933*
(Under the direction of Matthew Taylor and Eric Downing)

My dissertation investigates turn-of-the-20th-century fiction's fascination with 'other' bodies—their forms, constitutions, and meanings—and the corresponding biopolitical enterprises meant to address them. Prompted by Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories in the 19th century, and adopting his language of the "normal" and "abnormal," a host of wide-ranging efforts to optimize human development emerged on either side of the Atlantic during this period. My project examines the contemporaneous literary and filmic responses to such efforts, specifically those aimed at identifying and correcting 'abnormality' in the fields of degeneration, psychology, criminal law, and genetic science. I reconceptualize the aesthetic grotesque, as traditionally defined by Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin, to include a biological component that reveals how grotesque characters might simultaneously embody and destabilize the concept of abnormality. In attending to the grotesque as individualizing the impact of biopower's mass, population-based interventions, I demonstrate how the violence of biopolitical classifications results, paradoxically, from their instability—i.e., from attempts to 'fix' what, in essence, eludes human comprehension and control.

Each chapter studies a different biopolitical discipline and its target subjects, pairing a German and an American work to investigate the surprisingly under-examined parallels between the racist American after-effects of slavery and pre-Holocaust German anti-Semitism, especially

in their common systematic attempts to classify and then neutralize perceived threats to their populations. I look at American and German fictional texts by authors Frank Norris, Thomas Mann, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Georg Heym, Gertrude Barrows Bennett, Franz Kafka, H.P. Lovecraft, and director Fritz Lang. Reading across these texts, I uncover a surprising contrast between an American willingness to define difference as biological, while the German fiction remains more circumspect, refusing to either endorse or reject biological classifications of humanity. Ultimately, I show how literature and film, rather than providing solutions to the problem of biopolitics and its obsession with categorization, tease out the nuances of that problem; unfettered by real-world stakes, fictional characters have the freedom to test multiple modes of dealing with such issues of control.

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NOTE ON TRANSLATION

Whenever I discuss a German fictional work, I use my own translations into English for direct quotes, and add the original German in a footnote. While excellent English translations exist for the German works I examine, I use my own translations to ensure that the connotations of importance for this project are readily available to my English-speaking readers. For theoretical and critical texts originally in German, I use existing English translations when available as such translations are largely reliable and written to ensure comprehensibility as well as stylistic authenticity. When German critical texts are not available in English, I translate them myself and include the original in the footnotes.

INTRODUCTION

*“The mad criminal makes his appearance first and foremost as a monster, as an unnatural nature.” (Foucault, *Abnormal* 109)*

The proliferation of literature and film centrally figuring grotesque characters throughout history, from *The Odyssey*’s strange Skylla to *Frankenstein*’s corpse-creature, demonstrates an enduring fascination with imagining the ‘other.’ The *fin-de-siècle* grotesque, while retaining elements from its roots in the types of mythical monster/animal/human hybrids of previous centuries, introduces a new focus: the biological human. Following Charles Darwin’s revelations in the 19th century about evolution, and adopting his language of the ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ within species, a host of wide-ranging efforts to optimize human development emerged on either side of the Atlantic during this period. At the turn of the 20th century, then, the grotesque comes to signal the presence of anomaly, of individuals in some capacity deemed harmful to humanity’s evolution. In the above quote by Michel Foucault, we begin to see the multiplying and various criteria by which such harm is defined at this time: madness, criminality, and monstrosity, and “foremost” the concept of an “unnatural nature.” My project investigates these various categories of ‘abnormality,’ examining how literature and film of the late 19th and early 20th centuries respond to specific institutional and social efforts to correct and contain the ‘other.’

Theoretical Background

I will begin with some preliminary observations about the nature of the efforts made to classify and remove the ‘abnormal’ individual; these efforts are most easily defined as belonging to what Foucault names “biopower,” or “biopolitics.” Foucault defines biopower as that which first establishes biological norms based on data collection and analysis over large populations, and then creates “regulatory mechanisms” that will “establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations,” with the end goal of ensuring that the population in its entirety remains ‘healthy’ and viable (*Society* 246). The logic that creates a need to protect “the whole from internal dangers” is described thus (249):

‘The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I—as species rather than individual—can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate.’ (255)

In this language, we see the potential for the racism that Foucault identifies as an inescapable byproduct of a biopolitical society, if we take “races” to include, as he does, not only ethnicities but also “criminals,” “madness,” and “various [physical] anomalies” (258). Within biopower, racism has two functions: to “fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower,” and to encourage the elimination of certain groups since the “death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier: healthier and purer” (255). Biopower thus acts as a means of uncovering “biological threat” and then containing or removing that threat for “the improvement of the species or race” (256).

As specific institutions begin to turn to the biological as a means of defining ‘danger,’ those individuals deemed ‘outliers’ undergo treatment, punishment, and outright death in the attempt to push them back towards an acceptable norm. Literature and film at the turn of the 20th

century pick up on this biological shift, and this dissertation will explore how they move beyond mere illustration, adopting contemporaneous theoretical and scientific language to interrogate the efficacy and outcomes of biopolitical efforts. In each of my chosen texts, moreover, I demonstrate how the aesthetic grotesque acts as the beacon of ‘abnormality,’ sometimes in the service of endorsing biopolitical actions, and sometimes as the indication of its inherent flaws and failures. In either case, grotesque characters are the fictional rendition of the biopolitical norm’s opposite, precisely because of their biologically-read difference. This definition is corroborated by various statements from theorists of the grotesque: Wolfgang Kayser finds the grotesque occurring when “the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid,” and “the natural order of things has been subverted” (Kayser 21). Mikhail Bakhtin states in *Rabelais and His World* that the grotesque appears in the “suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin 10). Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund likewise point out that the “abnormal and the grotesque function [...] as a way to define and fix normality through a range of legitimate, rigid and authoritative norms” that are its opposite (Edwards 32).

Kayser and Bakhtin both add to this definition of the anti-normative grotesque its past artistic iterations, and their more concrete examples of *physical* grotesqueness will allow me to define and elaborate upon the ‘other’ qualities of the characters I examine. For Kayser, this includes the figure of the eccentric artist, individuals who blend plant, animal, and human characteristics, insanity/madness, and characters with multiple selves or identities. For Bakhtin, grotesque bodies involve as well a “degradation,” a “lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract,” and a “transfer to the material level” (Bakhtin 10, 19). In particular, Bakhtin’s grotesque involves a body “in the act of becoming, [...] continually built, created, and build[ing] and creat[ing] another body” because it is all orifices and openings that constantly link to the

material world around it (317). This manifests in a literary emphasis on various body parts such as bulging eyes, nose, and mouth, and “acts of bodily drama” such as sneezing, sweating, eating, drinking, pregnancy, etc.; many of these biological traits appear in my chosen texts (317).

Historical Background

The turn to biology following evolutionary theories of the 19th century thus results in specialized biopolitical actions against ‘abnormal’ individuals, who are signaled through biopower’s companion opposite, the aesthetic grotesque. My theoretical focus on the combination of biological sciences with power and aesthetics accounts for the first half of my title. As to the second half, I will now explain my project’s concentration specifically on German and American literature and film. Biopower is certainly not limited to any particular geographical region, and the interest in grotesque figures spans continents as well as centuries. However, the United States and Germany in particular have in their past two of the largest examples of systematic racism against ‘outlier’ populations: antebellum slavery and the Holocaust, respectively. By pairing American and German works, I investigate the surprisingly under-examined parallels between the racist American after-effects of slavery and pre-Holocaust German anti-Semitism; the concentration on biology in the time between these two events links them.¹ At the turn of the 20th century, scientific theories on subjects such as biology, eugenics, psychology, and degeneration circulate freely across continents. For instance, Darwin mentions his debt to German biologist Ernst Haeckel and to English scientist Herbert Spencer, while

¹ I begin in 1890 as the time in which authors begin to move away from realism and towards naturalism, a literary movement particularly concerned with biology, the evolution of our species, and ‘abnormal’ bodies. I end in 1933, when Adolf Hitler takes power as the chancellor in Germany and the Nazi party gains popularity and control. While this date is somewhat arbitrary in the American context, stopping at 1933 allows me to explore the increasing eugenic fervor in both countries, while leaving the rapidly changing German political climate and its fascist culmination in WWII to other scholars.

German theorist Max Nordau dedicates his work *Degeneration* to Italian scientist Cesare Lombroso, and in return is later critiqued by American psychologist William James, who exchanges ideas on psychology with Austrian Sigmund Freud.

Fiction writers and film directors of the time pick up on this exchange of information, and several of the works I examine use the same touchstone texts as validations for their conclusions. H. P. Lovecraft and Fritz Lang both reference Lombroso's theories on physiognomy, for example, while Frank Norris and Thomas Mann both use Nordau's *Degeneration* as an outline for descriptions of their main characters. It is the disparities between the conclusions of fictional works from the United States versus Germany, however, that makes the greatest case for the need to read these countries' artistic output side-by-side. In particular, the American texts I look at suggest a willingness to define difference as biological, and support biopolitical endeavors to remove biological 'anomaly,' if not providing an outright push to increase such endeavors. Surprisingly, however, their pre-Third Reich German counterparts remain more circumspect, refusing to endorse biological classifications of humanity, and in many cases actively rejecting the type of biological racism that will soon increase in their country. My dissertation will show how literature and film uniquely illuminate the inconsistent and contradictory cultural attitudes towards biological classifications, and how the biopolitics that Foucault characterizes as ubiquitous was not always a foregone conclusion.

Chapter Outline

To my knowledge, no one has written a longer project on German and American *fin-de-siècle* literature and film together. Furthermore, while much has been written about biology and

biopower at this time, and even in relation to individual texts that I examine,² my inclusion of the aesthetic grotesque in particular allows me to move beyond the texts' reflections of such themes, to their interrogations of the biological turn within specific disciplines. I have therefore organized this project so that each chapter examines one institution in particular, pairing an American and a German text that place their main characters in direct contact with that institution. I move roughly chronologically, first examining the scientific and aesthetic theory of degeneration in the late 19th century, which contains myriad internal contradictions and therefore acts as a catalyst for subsequent attempts to define 'abnormality' based on more specialized criteria. The next three chapters take up one discipline and its response to the 'crisis' of degeneration: Chapter Two looks at the shift in the budding field of psychology from a concentration on curable, environmentally-contingent mental illness to hereditary definitions of madness. Chapter Three reveals how this shift in psychology informs and drives the concept of the 'born criminal,' where criminality moves from being measured by arbitrary governmental yardsticks, to equally arbitrary, although biologically-based, definitions. The final chapter unveils how criminality, once biologically-defined, incites new genetic sciences to lay bare the complicated relationship between invisible genotypes and visible appearances and actions.

As each of these biopolitical or protobiopolitical institutions evolves, the concentration on the biological body moves as well from the macro to the micro; scientists and theorists read ever further below the surface of the body, chasing 'abnormality' ultimately to the level of genes. Conversely, the interest in individual biological bodies shifts to a larger scale, as 'abnormality' becomes definable through collections of data and subsequent generalizations about larger populations (e.g., a change in scale from the case-study of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's

² In particular, critics with whom I engage in multiple chapters include Sander Gilman, Dana Seitler (*Atavistic Tendencies*), and Angela Smith (*Hideous Progeny*).

‘hysterical’ narrator to an examination of the entire alien population of Lovecraft’s fictional Innsmouth). The stakes of the literary and filmic depictions of these shifts thus change as well; degeneration narratives ultimately fail to define abnormality, whereas narratives of madness and criminality gesture towards new biological modes of definition without fully realizing their implications. The final chapter, however, deals with a full-blown mania for uncovering and defining genetic background that continues today, as seen in current developments in biotechnological engineering which allow the active manipulation of human DNA. As the American texts of the *fin-de-siècle* suggest the positive possibilities of biologically shaping humanity’s future, the German texts anticipate the potential danger of this turn, pushing against the wave of eugenic fervor that culminates in the Holocaust.³ As I will demonstrate, the hesitancy of German authors and directors to speculate on alternatives to biopolitical means of defining the ‘abnormal’ thus becomes their mode of critique, a refusal to buy into the ‘scientific’ attempts to direct humanity that only increase into the 21st century.

My first chapter begins with an outline of degeneration theory as defined by Friedrich Nietzsche and his (begrudging) follower, Max Nordau. I trace several contradictions inherent in their writings, which posit degeneration as a mutually-influencing aesthetic and biological lack or excess of natural form. While Nietzsche and Nordau conclude that degeneracy is sterile (even though contagious), the proliferation of *fin-de-siècle* degeneration narratives suggests that in the cultural imagination, the threat still looms large. I therefore look at Frank Norris’s novel *Vandover and the Brute*, written in 1895, and Thomas Mann’s “The Blood of the Walsungs” from 1905, which present characters who precisely fit Nietzsche’s and Nordau’s definitions, but

³ Norris advocates for the uses of degeneration theory, Gilman writes pro-eugenic essays, Bennett enthusiastically endorses biological markers of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ and Lovecraft famously frets about miscegenation. On the German side, however, Mann mocks degeneration theory, Heym simultaneously sees the need for and critiques mental institutions, Kafka rejects all modes of governmental classification, and Lang presents the complication involved in defining ‘monstrosity,’ without picking sides.

who spill over the edges of degeneration theory and ultimately cannot be contained. In Norris's case, he fervently believes in the efficacy of Nordau's text as a field guide for identifying aberrancy, but his protagonist Vandover proves to be neither sterile nor ill-adapted. Instead, Norris details Vandover's increasing grotesqueness to suggest a pressing need for the types of specialized means of identifying and containing degenerates that will follow. Mann on the other hand uses Nietzsche's and Nordau's conceptions of degeneration only in order to critique them from within. He parallels his story to Richard Wagner's opera *The Valkyrie* to demonstrate the ridiculous distinctions that degeneration theory makes about who counts as biological threat (who should be considered grotesque), and he thereby disavows subsequent endeavors of biological classification.

My next chapter takes up psychology's response to degeneration theory, as psychologists shift at the turn of the 20th century from definitions of mental illness based on visible symptoms to the examination of inherited explanations of mental 'abnormality.' Their responses to mental illness thus undergo a change as well, from physical treatments meant to push individuals back into socially acceptable behavior patterns to attempting to uncover 'hidden' mental difference and then contain those individuals thereby deemed 'dangerous.' I look at works by two authors focused on mental issues: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Georg Heym. First, I examine Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) and Heym's "Jonathan" (1913) as stories which present "hysterical" protagonists who are confined and isolated, undergoing disciplinary treatment meant to correct their 'abnormal' mental states. That treatment, however, backfires and instead pushes them to become physically grotesque, suggesting a critique of authoritarian stances towards psychological cures. In reading across several pieces by these authors, however, it becomes clear that Gilman and Heym do not fully commit to their own critiques; Gilman published several later

essays, and the novel *Herland*, demonstrating a pro-eugenic stance, a disconnect that I argue reveals her ambivalence towards changing attitudes in psychology, which had not yet fully incorporated considerations of heredity during her time. For Heym, writing almost two decades after Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," biological concerns within psychology introduce the possibility that mental illness might be ubiquitous, and I read his story "The Madman" as demonstrating a simultaneous desire for and aversion to the types of mental institutions meant to uncover and contain inherited madness.

The protagonist of "The Madman" murders several passersby, so that his mental illness becomes conflated with his criminality; in fact, the same biological shift appears in criminal law in the early 1900s, where punishments and sentences move from an emphasis on the crimes to the criminals themselves. My third chapter thus explores two works caught between the old models of criminal law, based on arbitrary rules created by various systems of government, and the new model based on biological considerations. I look at Gertrude Barrows Bennett's *The Heads of Cerberus* and Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, both published in 1919, which combine the older governmental mode of sovereignty with socialism and bureaucracy, respectively, to portray dystopian societies where citizens are deemed criminal based on actions against the sovereign's will. I argue that Bennett and Kafka portray their fictitious governments, mirroring contemporaneous historical models, as corrupt and ineffectual, as evidenced by their grotesque effects on their citizens. Both texts then gesture towards the biological modes of defining criminality which will follow; Bennett embraces what she deems a less arbitrary means of classifying 'dangerous' individuals, while Kafka critiques what comes next as equally arbitrary and corrupt.

The shift towards classifying individuals as biologically ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal,’ as portrayed by my first three chapters, culminates with the eugenic actions predicated on new genetic sciences appearing in the late 1920s and early 1930s. My final chapter, therefore, examines how the logic of genetic sciences, which seek to uncover hidden ‘otherness’ below the body’s surface, drives the plot of two stories concentrated on genetic monstrosity: H. P. Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” and Fritz Lang’s film *M*, both from 1931. Lovecraft and Lang turn to physiognomy as a means of highlighting moments of visible genetics in their ‘monstrous’ protagonists, using the grotesque to signal the necessity of uncovering those genetic dangers hiding beneath a seemingly ‘normal’ human exterior. In both stories, however, classifications of the ‘monstrous,’ ‘abnormal,’ and ‘normal’ break down, rendering eugenic actions taken against the monsters especially horrific because they are predicated on a falsely constructed hierarchy. While Lovecraft’s personal racist views mean that his story reaches such conclusions in spite of himself, Lang purposefully demonstrates the impossibility of imagining ‘just’ punishments for monsters who, essentially, remain entirely human. By ending with the genetic sciences and eugenics of the 1930s, finally, I am able to gesture towards the biopolitical actions which follow in Nazi Germany, and biology’s continued importance today in various fictional imaginings of who we consider ‘other.’

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CHAPTER 1: ARTISTIC DEGENERATES: FRANK NORRIS AND THOMAS MANN

I. Introduction

In 1892, Max Nordau published his theory on degeneration, dedicating the book (originally titled *Entartung*) to Italian criminologist Caesar Lombroso. As an explanation for his work, Nordau writes:

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, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil. (Nordau vii)

Nordau lists ‘dangerous’ groups classified by Lombroso through the study of physiognomy and the biological body, lending his own book similar ‘scientific’ weight, yet Nordau takes as his focus instead the artistic world, those individuals who might not precisely fit one of Lombroso’s categories. Nordau’s exploration of artistic degeneracy follows closely on the heels of that of another famous German author, Friedrich Nietzsche, whose own concern with degeneration and the “style of *decadence*” is most clearly outlined in his 1888 essay “The Case of Wagner” (Nietzsche 626).⁴ Both writers correlate the perceived *fin-de-siècle* cultural decline, as noticed primarily through the body, with the influence of select artists on the whole of society; it is this link between aesthetics and biology that I will illuminate in this chapter, through works of literary fiction by Frank Norris and Thomas Mann.

⁴ Nietzsche often uses the terms “decadence” and “degeneration” interchangeably; both terms refer to the perceived cultural decline specific to the turn of the 20th century.

I will begin with a closer look at how, precisely, definitions of degenerate art in the late 19th century were constructed. Nordau and Nietzsche disagree fundamentally on *who* should count as degenerate; Nietzsche throughout his oeuvre makes clear his disdain for the masses, or herd (the ‘norm’), in contrast with its outlier artists. For Nietzsche, “in declining cultures, wherever the decision comes to rest with the masses, authenticity becomes superfluous, disadvantageous, a liability,” and the danger of degeneration increases as the “extraordinary human being stray[s] from his path and degenerate[s]” “into the perfect herd animal” (Nietzsche 635, 308). Nietzsche thus equates degeneration with a lack of authenticity, with the suppression of “extraordinary” qualities, that accompanies the aesthetic tastes of the masses. In works such as *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche clarifies this disdain for a norm, stating that “*morality in Europe today is herd animal morality*” which causes “everything that elevates an individual above the herd [. . .] [to be] called *evil*” while “the fair, modest, submissive, conforming mentality, the *mediocrity* of desires attains moral designations and honors” (305, 304).

While Nietzsche clearly prefers outlier aesthetics and warns against degeneration as the push of society *towards* a norm, Nordau on the other hand attributes degeneration to those outliers instead, naming it “a contempt for traditional views of custom and morality” (Nordau 5). Nordau points to a minority of degenerate artists who according to him have “the gift of covering the whole visible surface of society, as a little oil extends over a large area of the surface of the sea,” and as a result “it appears as if the whole of civilized humanity were converted to the aesthetics of the Dusk of the Nations” (7). Yet while his language echoes Nietzsche’s apprehension of the potentially wide-spread nature of degeneration (whether through the influence of the many or the singular), Nordau repeatedly characterizes this degeneration as “the

end of an established order, which for thousands of years has satisfied logic, fettered depravity, and in every art matured something of beauty” (5). Nietzsche and Nordau thus disagree fundamentally on the nature of degeneration’s danger, respectively as either pushing society closer to an established (and unimaginative) norm, or as breaking with that norm.

While Nietzsche and Nordau’s theories of degeneration might therefore seem at first incompatible, on several points Nordau (perhaps unconsciously) adopts Nietzsche’s language, resulting in several commonalities between their works. Their mutual concern with “the *over-all degeneration of man*” and its corresponding danger for humanity’s future leads both Nietzsche and Nordau to detail what traits, exactly, define a degenerate aesthetics, with the ultimate goal of identification as remedy or at least bulwark (Nietzsche 308). Nordau for instance states his primary reason for writing *Degeneration* as helping “accelerate the recovery of the cultivated classes from the present derangement of their nervous system”; in other words, to halt and reverse the spread of degeneracy (Nordau 550). By outlining the specifics of what counts as degenerate art, and how exactly that art begins to affect the rest of society, Nietzsche and Nordau figure degeneration as a contagion that must first be identified before humanity can attempt to overcome its threat.

Most surprisingly, given their divergent opinions, a close-reading of Nietzsche’s and Nordau’s conceptions of degenerate art reveals the same overall principle: for both, degenerate aesthetics entails a move away from a whole or natural form, either as an excess (spilling out of the form) or as a lack (reducing the form to nothingness, or to its parts). Nietzsche asks, “What is the sign of every *literary decadence*? That life no longer dwells in the whole”; rather, the whole becomes an “anarchy of atoms, disgregation of the will, [. . .] life pushed back into the smallest forms” (Nietzsche 626). In this formulation, degenerate aesthetics involves the disintegration of a

whole, a lack of form and willpower, seen as well in the subsequent terms “paralysis, arduousness, torpidity”; on the other hand, those same aesthetics might include “hostility and chaos,” or an excess, a spilling over (626). Nordau likewise defines degeneracy through terms indicating excess or lack: “unbridled lewdness, the unchaining of the beast in man,” and also “the negation of a supersensuous world, the descent into flat phenomenalism, [. . .] the vanishing of ideals in art, and no more power in its accepted forms to arouse emotion” (Nordau 5).

As Nietzsche and Nordau further clarify their conceptions of degenerate aesthetics, their language incorporates the biological, demonstrating a connection between excess and lack in art, and in the degenerate bodies producing and produced by such art. Nietzsche for example characterizes Richard Wagner’s music, where Wagner represents “*the modern artist par excellence*,” as demonstrating the “problems of hysterics—the convulsive nature of his affects, his overexcited sensibility, his taste that require[s] ever stronger spices,” and at the same time having an “incapacity for giving organic form,” instead concentrating on “spinning out the details” (Nietzsche 622, 626-627). The words “convulsive,” “overexcited,” and “stronger” imply excess while Wagner’s “incapacity” and concentration on “details” imply lack of form. With each of these phrases, however, Nietzsche also links to the “physiological types” of degeneration who are “pathological” and “sick,” through words such as “affect,” “hysteric,” and “organic”; Nietzsche summarizes that “*Wagner est une névrose*,” Wagner is a neurosis (622). Nietzsche thereby conflates the artist, Wagner, and his excessive and lacking art, with biological pathology, a theme he often repeats. For instance he states that “Wagner has the same effect as continual consumption of alcohol: blunting, and obstructing the stomach with phlegm,” causing “degeneration of the sense of rhythm” (640). Wagner “makes sick whatever he touches”; with

these statements, Nietzsche conceives of degenerate aesthetics as a contagion that infects and physically harms the masses (620).

For Nietzsche, degenerate aesthetics work like a sickness on the body—Nordau's account of degeneration likewise introduces the biological as he states that "the clearest notion we can form of degeneracy is to regard it as *a morbid deviation from an original type*," adopting scientific language to figure degeneracy as a divergence from an established species (Nordau 16). This "morbid deviation" shows in excessive acts of "vice, crime, and madness," or "moral insanity," and in excessive "emotionalism," or in physical features which are "completely stunted, others morbidly exaggerated" (17, 18). Degenerate bodies for Nordau, like Nietzsche, either exhibit an excess of action, physicality, and emotion, or a lack thereof as with "stunted" or asymmetrical physicality, and when degenerates demonstrate an "incapacity for action" or a "predilection for inane reverie" (17, 21). Finally, Nordau echoes Nietzsche's contagion model when he explains the seriousness of degeneracy's danger for humanity: he states that "certain micro-organisms engendering mortal diseases have always been present [. . .] but they only cause epidemics when circumstances arise intensely favourable for their rapid increase" (537). Like "the bacillus of cholera," degeneracy attacks the "Zeitgeist, weakened by fatigue, and rendered incapable of resistance" so that for Nordau, "We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria, and it is natural that we should ask anxiously on all sides: 'What is to come next?' " (537).

Even as Nietzsche and Nordau thus figure degeneration as a biological contagion, they simultaneously insist on the sterility of degeneration. In the case of Wagner, Nietzsche notes that among Germans "he was resisted like a sickness" and that "the German character still possesses some degree of health, some instinctive sense for what is harmful and dangerous," thereby

suggesting that Wagner and others like him will not be able to completely infect German society (Nietzsche 637). Nordau likewise attempts to reassure his reader, stating:

That which distinguishes degeneracy from the formation of new species (phylogeny) is, that the morbid variation does not continuously subsist and propagate itself, like one that is healthy, but, fortunately, is soon rendered sterile, and after a few generations often dies out before it reaches the lowest grade of organic degradation. (Nordau 16)

This ultimate sterility of degeneration directly contrasts its characterization as contagion, suggesting that Nietzsche and Nordau write their warnings ‘just in case,’ or primarily for reasons of taxonomy rather than cure. The immense *fin-de-siècle* proliferation of aesthetic and scientific theories of degeneration, and artistic interest in depicting degeneration in the United States as well as Germany, however, suggest a growing anxiety about humanity’s future, even if the threat appears to contain its own remedy.

I have introduced these preliminary characterizations of degeneration by Nietzsche and Nordau in order to demonstrate several salient features of their definitions: first, Nietzsche warns against degeneration as a push to a norm that cuts off the possibility of unique art, while Nordau fears the destruction of that norm precisely because of a proliferation of deviating art. They both, however, conceive of degenerate aesthetics as simultaneous lack and excess of form, and as mutually influencing and influenced by lack and excess in the biological body. Lastly, while they define degeneration as a contagion negatively affecting humanity’s future, both likewise introduce the idea of its sterility, its inability to infect entire populations. Thus degeneration, both within each theorist’s conception and in reading their theories together, can be defined as a series of oppositions and contradictions. As Nietzsche puts it, “biologically, modern man represents a *contradiction of values*,” yet while he attempts to expose that contradiction in favor of one set of values (the destruction of modern morality), I will turn to the particular aesthetics of literature in

order to demonstrate precisely humanity's inability to reconcile contradiction (Nietzsche 648). Specifically, I will look at degeneration narratives by Norris and Mann which closely follow Nietzsche and Nordau's theories, as they introduce degenerate artists who affect and are affected by the aesthetics around them. Nietzsche and Nordau theorize the realm of aesthetics and art, yet the art (literature) that provides examples of their findings likewise theorizes degeneracy itself, and Norris's and Mann's works end up troubling degeneration theory as much or more than they mirror it.

Norris's novel *Vandover and the Brute*, written in 1895, introduces a degenerate character whose 'abnormality' is primarily figured as inherited and biological, and as mutually influencing and influenced by the degenerate aesthetics which surround him. While Norris closely follows Nordau's definition, presenting his novel as a field guide for the identification of threat in upper-class society, he ends his story with the image of a degenerate who will continue to live, and perhaps even procreate. Norris's anxiety about the threat of degeneration thus manifests itself ultimately as a contradiction to Nordau's certainty of sterility, suggesting the need for further specialized means of identifying and containing such biological hazard. Mann, on the other hand, likewise presents what seems at first a taxonomy of degeneration with his 1905 story "The Blood of the Walsungs," closely following both Nordau's and Nietzsche's definitions, but several moments of irony make clear that in fact Mann adopts their theory only to critique it from within. Most notably, Mann's story parallels Wagner's opera *The Valkyrie*, and Mann uses ironic comparisons to suggest first the absurdity of attempts to identify specific individuals as degenerate, and second the flaws inherent in more general endeavors of biological classification. I end this chapter with the turn to just such biological institutions as Norris gladly anticipates, and Mann critiques; as Mann's story "Tristan" intimates, the concept of degeneration

does not disappear, but rather morphs as it encounters individual disciplines attempting to tame the ‘other.’

II. Relentless Degeneracy in *Vandover and the Brute*

Frank Norris, born in 1870 in Chicago, remains an important figure in the study of literary naturalism in part due to his own interests in biology and nature, as well as his affinities with other writers focused on “a deterministic view of the human condition like [. . .] Crane, London, and Dreiser,” or “his principal transatlantic mentor, Émile Zola” (McElrath 17). Norris took his ideas about human nature partially from Darwin, believing that “rational mankind descended from lower, non-rational life forms that were determined in their actions solely by instinct” and that the human “did not—and could not—sever its ties with its ancestors, and many of the predispositions and traits its antecedent species genetically transmitted are not vestigial” (21). Norris was likewise influenced by evolutionary theorist Joseph Le Conte, his “revered professor at Berkeley,” who “warned that ‘the mixing of primary races is bad, and such mixed races, as weaker varieties in the struggle for life, must perish’ ” (Bender 75, 81).

Norris’s interest in heredity, human evolution, and the racist fears of inherited “weakness,” show most prominently in his treatment of degeneration in several of his short stories and novels. As David Holmberg argues, in the American context naturalist authors adopt a scientific mode, the Foucauldian “clinical gaze,” thus “impart[ing] naturalism with a new level of purpose and authority: the doctor tasked with discovering the disease” (Holmberg 53).⁵ Inspired by the proliferation of scientific inquiries into evolution at the time, Norris undertakes

⁵ Holmberg’s article focuses on the oscillation between the objective scientific gaze and the fantasy voyeurism of Norris’s novels in their detailing of deviant sexual acts, and how that oscillation likewise implicates the reader as voyeuristic.

the serious task of illustrating the disease of degeneration through fiction. In particular, Norris was familiar with both Nordau's *Degeneration* and Lombroso's writings on 'dangerous' individuals, as evidenced by Norris's story "A Case for Lombroso" (1897). Donald Pizer notes that the story was "less an allusion to Lombroso's specific beliefs about criminals than to their adaptation by Max Nordau in his 1895 best-seller *Degeneration*" and clarifies that "Norris signified this debt when he wrote on a clipping of the story, 'A subject for Max Nordau' " (Pizer 17). Several critics concentrate on Norris's interest in degeneration theory; notably Dana Seidler, Sherwood Williams, and Stephanie Bower all construct arguments linking degeneration theory to sexuality in *Vandover and the Brute*. However, no critics so far have concentrated on the novel's portrayal of a curious feedback loop between aesthetics and biology, closely following Nordau's writing, that suggests the paradoxical inability of aesthetics to cure degeneracy, even as aesthetics contribute to its spread. As I will show, Norris presents the full scope of Vandover's degeneration in terms of lack and excess, mingling aesthetics with the body in order to demonstrate the ultimate danger of biologically-determined degeneracy.⁶ Most dangerous, Norris suggests (in contrast to Nordau), is Vandover's adaptability and his will to continue living; Vandover represents an ever-present threat to humanity's future, without easy cure.

Vandover and the Brute works as an anti-*bildungsroman*, showing the rise and fall of Vandover as he slowly deteriorates. Vandover, born to a prominent Californian family, at first experiences all possible advantages, including an endless supply of money, his father's support,

⁶ While that danger is not overtly racialized in *Vandover and the Brute*, Bower demonstrates how several short stories by Norris "enact the causal connection between sexualized association with racial others and racial debilitation," linking sexual disease and promiscuity with racialized degeneration (Bower 45). Seidler in *Atavistic Tendencies* likewise remarks on a short episode in *Vandover* involving a Jewish man, stating that "the 'little Jew,' placed into such deliberate and nagging (not to mention anti-Semitic) proximity to Vandover confirms the status of Vandover's degeneracy" (Seidler 112). The implicit anti-Semitism and racism of *Vandover* foreshadow the prominence of racism in biopolitical interventions following degeneration theory.

and a prestigious education, with private art lessons. However, as he becomes older, he spends more time with male friends in various bars and gambling dens, and with women of ill repute, eventually being cast out from polite society for his sexual transgressions with two women of the upper classes. As Vandover loses his father, then his friends, and then the good-will of society in general, he undergoes mental and physical changes which render him and his artistic talents grotesque and destructive. Norris thus presents a long trajectory of descent, from Vandover merely having degenerate tendencies to becoming an example of the worst possible degeneration.

Norris uses Nordau's conception of degeneracy as a simultaneous lack and excess of a 'natural' form to demonstrate a constant feedback loop between biology and aesthetics. He first figures Vandover's affliction as a biological, most likely inherited trait. In the first pages, Norris describes Vandover's mother dying from an unspecified illness; her "tightly drawn" forehead hints at a 'nerve disease' such as "degeneracy [or] hysteria, of which the minor stages are designated as neurasthenia," and her illness foreshadows the increasing frequency of nerve disease in Vandover as well (Norris 4, Nordau 15). Seitler likewise reads Norris's description of the mother as coded allusion to "neurasthenia, atavism, and 'feeble-mindedness'," affirming that Vandover "inherits neurasthenia from his mother" (Seitler, *Atavistic* 104). Nordau clarifies that degenerates "possess the capacity of transmitting to its [their] offspring, in a continuously increasing degree, its peculiarities, these being morbid deviations from the normal *form*—gaps in development, malformations and infirmities" (Nordau 16, emphasis mine). Thus in Vandover, this nerve disease becomes heightened, as seen by several passages in which Vandover describes the "exalted, strained, and unnatural condition of his nerves," often in conjunction with extreme emotion (Norris 169).

Vandover's excess "emotionalism," moreover, manifests in an increased susceptibility to aesthetic influence: Nordau describes how a degenerate

[. . .] Laughs until he sheds tears, or weeps *copiously* without adequate occasion; a commonplace line of poetry or of prose sends a shudder down his back; he falls into *raptures* before indifferent pictures or statues; and music especially, even the most insipid and least commendable, arouses in him the most *vehement* emotions. (Nordau 19, emphasis mine)

That Norris accepts Nordau's portrayal of art as affecting bodily functions like emotion shows in several passages, such as a description of dancing women where "the heavy perfume of the flowers, [and] the cadence of the music [. . .] react[s] in some strange way upon their oversensitive feminine nerves," causing them to experience "a morbid hysterical pleasure [. . .] mixed with pain" (Norris 141). In both Nordau's and Norris's descriptions of these degenerates, the artistic surroundings create exaggerated physical reactions. Similarly, Vandover's excessive and violent sexuality (whether biological urge or emotional state) is first incited through the aesthetic influence of an "old Encyclopaedia Britannica" with an article about "'Obstetrics,' profusely illustrated with old-fashioned plates and steel engravings" (8). The visual and written descriptions of human anatomy influence Vandover instantly; "the whole of his rude little standard of morality [i]s lowered immediately" and he is set on a path of sexual crime (8). Even in this moment of awakening, however, Norris makes clear that the potency of the aesthetic influence stems from Vandover's biological predisposition; he describes how Vandover seeks knowledge about sexuality "with the instinct of a young brute," and how upon his reading the article "the first taint cre[eps] in, the innate vice stir[s] in him, the brute beg[ins] to make itself felt" (8). Norris returns to this concept of the titular "brute" throughout the novel as a shorthand that emphasizes the "innate" nature of Vandover's degeneracy.

Norris's descriptions of Vandover's increasingly deviant sexual encounters likewise conflate biological excess and lack with aesthetic influence. Nordau notes particularly: "that which nearly all degenerates lack is the sense of morality and of right and wrong," and this "lack" of morality allows Vandover to commit sexual crimes of ever greater degree (Nordau 18). Vandover begins his sexual descent by frequenting bars where prostitutes and 'loose women' work, often acknowledging and calling attention to his attraction to those women. Again aesthetics influence his biological urges, as Norris explains:

It was the sensitive artist nature in him that responded instantly to anything sensuously attractive. Each kind and class of beautiful women could arouse in Vandover passions of equal force, though of far different kind. Turner Ravis [upper-class woman] [. . .] call[ed] out in him all that was cleanest, finest, and most delicate. Flossie [presumed prostitute] appealed only to the animal and the beast in him, the evil, hideous brute that made instant answer. (Norris 39)

Norris links Vandover's attraction to women like Flossie to the "brute" in order to figure his subsequent sexual violence as a *biological* excess of sexuality, overpowering the positive aesthetic influence of women like Turner, and causing him to commit the violent crime of rape. While Norris does not depict these sexual encounters, he hints at rape through Vandover's mental turmoil: after his encounter with Turner one Sunday morning while drunk, Vandover "realize[s] the enormity of what he ha[s] done," the "worst thing he ha[s] ever done," and thinks that this encounter is "a long step onward in his progress of ruin and pollution" (48). However, even as Vandover regrets his actions, Norris foreshadows his sexual drive as ingrained and therefore unstoppable; Vandover declares that "he would take care never to do such a thing again," and Norris replies, "but this was not so" (48).⁷ This scene indeed repeats shortly thereafter with Ida Wade, a middle-class woman whom Vandover feels is slightly beneath him;

⁷ Williams in his article on Vandover's sexual corruption discusses a historical turn from conceptions of 'aberrant' sexuality as a willfully chosen vice to "locating desire in physical impulses, [. . .] [where] sexual drives [are] both given and fixed"; Williams confirms that Vandover's sexual 'aberrance' adheres to this latter, biological type (719).

after a meal together Norris hints at rape through Ida's exclamations, "No—no [...] no, Van—please," after which "with a long breath she abandon[s] herself" (Vandover later admits that "she had consented, but he had forced her consent") (58, 77).

The scene with Ida stands out particularly as it takes place in *The Imperial*, a bar frequented by Vandover and his friends, with "private rooms" where Flossie and her colleagues entertain male guests. Its unsavory reputation causes Ida to ask, "What kind of a girl do you think I am, anyway?" as Vandover steers her to the door (Norris 56). Norris intimates that the bar's setting contributes to Vandover's subsequent sexual attack, as its aesthetics create a particular atmosphere: in the main barroom a painting of a "*Sabbath*" includes "witches, goats, and naked girls," and another depicts "the ladies of a harem at their bath" (32). In the private rooms, "women and girls pass up and down with [. . .] a rattle of stiff skirts and petticoats, and a heavy whiff of musk," adding to the "heavy odorous warmth in which were mingled the smells of sweetened whiskey, tobacco, the fumes of cooking, and the scent of perfume" (37). These sensory details of nudeness and vice broken into composite parts make clear the degeneracy of *The Imperial's* aesthetics, which have the effect of allowing Vandover and his friends to "relax that restraint, that good breeding and delicacy" so that their "talk and manners bec[o]me blunt, rude, unconstrained, the coarser masculine fibre reasserting itself" into "obscene" language (35).

However, while aesthetics affect Vandover's actions, Norris includes details of Vandover's internal thoughts to make clear the simultaneous impact of his biological degeneracy on his aesthetic preferences. Vandover for instance actively seeks out *The Imperial*; when on his date with Ida, she asks about the bar and his thought—"Was it possible that Ida would go to a place like that with him?"—shows his secret desire to put her in such a setting, conducive to sexual activity (Norris 56). Though he describes the bar to Ida "indifferently," internally "his

pulse was beating fast, and his nerves were strung taut”; he experiences physical excess at the thought of entering *The Imperial*. Vandover’s aesthetic surroundings are thus selected by his biological aberrancy; this influence shows as well in his obsession with material possessions, as inherited from his father who “indulge[s] in any harmless fad, such as collecting etchings, china, or bric-à-brac” (5). Vandover’s “rage for collecting, the piling up, in dwellings, of aimless bric-à-brac,” as Nordau puts it, is foregrounded in several passages devoted to Vandover’s daydreams about his possessions and care in arranging his rooms (Nordau 27). Moreover, “all the details of one’s environment” are so important to him that when Vandover loses those possessions to a lack of funds, he writes their names on pieces of paper to use as placeholders in his room (11). His dwellings therefore swing from one extreme—packed with colors, textures, and trinkets of all sizes—to the other: empty rooms and possessions signified only by their lack.

Norris thus uses Nordau’s terms of lack and excess to set up an intricate relationship between aesthetics and biology, where Vandover’s predisposition to sexual violence, emotion, and nerve illness is both aided by and contributing to the degeneracy of his aesthetic surroundings. Norris uses the correspondence between aesthetics and biology, however, to move beyond a demonstration of the criteria by which one might, following Nordau, *identify* a degenerate in society. Instead, his concentration on the endless feedback loop of art and body opens the possibility of determining the *degree* to which a degenerate individual might be influenced, and therefore ‘cured,’ by the ‘right’ kind of aesthetics. For instance, the benevolence of Turner Ravis *should* counteract Vandover’s violent sexuality. Norris creates several other moments of potential salvation for Vandover, where his aesthetic surroundings seem to cancel out his degenerate tendencies and set him on an acceptable path. Ultimately, however, Norris

demonstrates Vandover's ever increasing degeneration, and his simultaneous tenacious grip on life, to suggest that in fact biology will overpower aesthetics, as when he attacks Turner, and 'cure' must therefore be sought elsewhere.

The first moment of potential salvation comes on the heels of three events—"Ida's suicide, the [ship]wreck, and his father's death"—after which "the fabric of [Vandover's] character ha[s] been shaken, jostled out of its old shape" of vice and debauchery (Norris 132). Vandover figures this moment as "the chance to begin anew, to commence all over again" by "merely [. . .] remain[ing] inactive, impassive" so that "his character [can] of itself re-form upon the new conditions" (132). In Vandover's estimation, by ridding himself of the aesthetic influences of his "life of luxury," he might remove his own degenerate tendencies; Norris, however, declares this inaction a "fatal mistake" (132). Norris clarifies that "the brute in [Vandover] had only been stunned," and to help himself stay on a socially-acceptable path Vandover would need:

[. . .] Not a continued state of inaction and idleness [. . .], but rather an active and energetic arousing and spurring up of those better qualities in him still dormant and inert. The fabric of his nature was shaken and broken up, it was true, but if he left it to itself there was danger that it would re-form upon the old lines. (132-3)

In other words, Vandover's biological lack and excess require an "active" balancing to neutralize them and reshape his "nature" into a more 'natural' form. For instance, he "lack[s] both the desire and necessity to keep him at his easel," and is "content to be idle, listless, apathetic"; as Nordau puts it, degeneracy is diagnosable in the "condition of mental weakness and despondency" which causes one patient to state, "ennui never quits me" (Norris 133, Nordau 19-20). This lack of will-power requires its opposite, an infusion of motivation and hard work, to bring a 'normal' balance to Vandover's "nature," but through his inaction the lack only

increases, until Vandover feels that “everything [i]s an *ennui*, and [...] beg[ins] to long for some new pleasure, some violent untried excitement,” thus swinging instead to excess (Norris 207).⁸

The cycle of Vandover’s desire to ‘better’ himself, only to decay even further, repeats shortly thereafter when he visits the opera *Faust* by French composer Charles Gounod; Norris makes clear that Vandover’s “love for all art,” or what Norris and Nordau might deem ‘good’ art,⁹ has a positive influence (Norris 154). Nordau characterizes ‘good’ opera indirectly through his description of degenerate opera as music which irritates the listener by constantly opposing expected flow: the *motif* “differ[s] entirely from th[e] anticipated development,” “a dissonant interval must appear where a consonant interval [i]s expected,” “keys and pitch must change suddenly,” and “particular instruments [. . .] must address the listener simultaneously without heeding each other” (Nordau 12-13). Norris figures Gounod’s opera, on the other hand, as harmonious and following expectations: he describes how “all the bows [go] up and down together like parts of a well-regulated machine [and] the kettle-drums roll sonorously at exact intervals” (Norris 155). The “well-regulated” and “exact” nature of the instruments thus have a beneficial effect, “little by little tak[ing] possession of Vandover” (157). Instead of a degenerate music that causes its audience to become “nervously excited” and succumb to “nervous exhaustion,” in Norris’s novel “the slow beat and cadence of the melodies of the opera [. . .] cradle all [Vandover’s] senses, carrying him away into a kind of exalted dream” (Nordau 13, Norris 158). The calm, peaceful aesthetics of the opera create in Vandover “a vague sense of

⁸ Norris again suggests the inherited nature of Vandover’s degeneracy by echoing the language used to describe his father at the beginning, who suffers from a “mortal *ennui* and weariness of the spirit” (Norris 5).

⁹ Biographer Joseph McElrath identifies the unnamed opera as *Faust*, and notes that Norris was “quite mad” about opera according to his brother Charles; *Faust* was his “perennial favorite” (McElrath 81). That Nordau would consider Gounod’s *Faust* ‘good’ art, as opposed to degenerate, shows in several passages in which he praises Goethe’s original literary work; particularly, Nordau claims that any attempt to add music and modernize *Faust* “is so sure of success that it is superfluous; Faust in dress-coat would be no other than the unaltered embodiment of Goethe’s own Faust” (Nordau 194).

those things which are too beautiful to be comprehended, of a nobility [. . .], all goodness, all benignity”; he thinks that “to be better, to be true and right and pure, [. . .] these were the things that he seemed to feel in the music” (Norris 158). Thus Norris provides a moment where the ‘right’ aesthetics have the potential to “wrestle with the brute” and halt Vandover’s “perversion and destruction” (158).

This beneficial influence of aesthetics, however, almost immediately dissipates in the face of Vandover’s overwhelming biological predisposition to degeneracy. Norris figures Vandover’s ultimate descent through the grotesque—an aesthetic mode that carries excessive form and formlessness to extremes—in order to signal the especial danger and persistence of Vandover’s degeneration. The grotesque turn begins with several descriptions of the innate “brute” living within: Vandover “look[s] inward and downward into the depths of his own character” and sees “the brute, squat, deformed, hideous,” which has “grown to be a monster, gluttoned yet still ravenous [. . .] horrible beyond words” (Norris 159). Vandover at this moment still conceives of the “brute” as separate from his ‘true’ or desired self, but Norris devotes the rest of the novel to demonstrating how Vandover becomes the brute, how his degenerate nature overpowers all other characteristics. The figure of the brute feeds on “the purest, the cleanest, and the best” parts of Vandover so that its “bulk [is] fattened upon the rot and the decay of all that [i]s good, growing larger day by day, noisome, swollen, poddy, a filthy inordinate ghoul, gorged and bloated” (159). Norris uses this grotesque “exaggeration of the inappropriate to incredible and monstrous dimensions” to foreshadow first the transformation of Vandover’s art from talented to grotesque forms, and then the transformation of the artist’s body as well (Bakhtin 306).

At the beginning of the novel, Vandover shows promise as an artist, as he “possesse[s] the fundamental *afflatus* that underlies all branches of art” and hones his skills through several art courses with private instructors (Norris 9). As his degenerate activities increase, however, Vandover experiences a “queer, numb feeling in his head, like a rising fog” or a “strange blurring mist,” and he is unable to “make his hand interpret what [i]s in his head” (167, 202, 166). Nordau explains that degenerates are “incapable of correctly grasping, ordering, or elaborating into ideas [. . .] the impressions of the external world” and remain stuck in “nebulously blurred ideas” (Nordau 21). The lack of mental clarity translates into a lack of form in his art: “forms lose their outlines and are dissolved in floating mist” (or “fog”), so that Vandover becomes a “wholly sterile” artist, unable to properly articulate or produce the images in his mind (6, 191). Instead he draws “grotesque and meaningless shapes, the mocking caricatures of those he saw in his fancy” (Norris 167). His biological predisposition to mental confusion thus overruns his artistic skill, rendering his aesthetics grotesque even as he tries desperately to regain a ‘good’ aesthetic.

During a second attempt, Vandover’s art becomes destructive; he tries to draw “the true children of his imagination” but creates instead “changelings, grotesque abortions” (Norris 169). The word “abortions” suggests that any progeny Vandover creates (including his art), will be destructive and destroyed. The brute within has “stolen away the true offspring of his mind, putting in their place these deformed dwarfs, its own hideous spawn,”¹⁰ effectively ending any possibility of Vandover contributing to ‘normal’ society, and in fact unleashing grotesque horrors (spawn) upon society instead (170). Mark Seltzer in *Bodies and Machines* analyzes more

¹⁰ In Norris’s use of the phrase “deformed dwarfs,” we see again an implied connection between physical ‘otherness’ and danger to society, which occurs as well in Mann’s “The Little Herr Friedemann.” Both Norris and Mann echo Nietzsche’s characterization (consciously or not) of the “degeneration and diminution of man, [. . .] this animalization of man into the dwarf animal” (Nietzsche 308). The figure of the dwarf will appear again in Georg Heym’s story “Jonathan,” discussed in the next chapter.

in-depth this paradoxical relation of generation and destruction (excess and lack), noting that in ‘feeding’ the brute growing within him, Vandover is involved in a “monstrous process of gestation,” and the brute’s influence on his artistic “abortions” reveals that the “gestation of the brute is at the same time an obstetrics-in-reverse” (Seltzer 36, 37). By figuring Vandover’s aesthetic output in this scene in terms of birth and birth-interrupted, Norris moves from biology’s influence on art to art as biology. He thereby proves Vandover’s danger as a simultaneously fertile and sterile individual, potentially spreading his dead “offspring” to the rest of society.¹¹

The shift to grotesque aesthetics causes in Vandover “all the sensations of terror, but without any assignable reason,” a “groundless fear” that culminates, following the warping of his mind and artistic talent, in the physical alteration of his body (Norris 178). In this moment, Vandover’s mental terror stems from his inability to articulate the cause of his affliction; as Wolfgang Kayser explains, the grotesque includes that which “remains incomprehensible, inexplicable, and impersonal,” and is “the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe” (Kayser 185). Vandover’s inability to “orient” himself, the lack of explanation and comprehension, lead to his “becoming” in a Bakhtinian sense physically grotesque as well. He undergoes “a slow torsion and crisping of all his nerves, beginning at his ankles, spread[ing] to every corner of his body,” and his hands begin to “swell, the fingers puffing to an enormous size, the palms bulging, the whole member from the wrist to the nails distended like a glove when one has blown into it” (Norris 179, 180). Mikhail Bakhtin states that “the grotesque starts when the exaggeration reaches fantastic dimensions,” as when the physical body begins to grow to incredible proportions, and “special attention is given to the shoots and

¹¹ Norris introduces the risk of degenerate progeny through hints that Vandover has made Ida pregnant, although Ida’s death removes that threat. Still, Vandover’s resilience and will to continue living, as I will demonstrate, leave open the possibility of future progeny.

branches” of the body (such as the hands) (Bakhtin 315, 316). Vandover in fact describes the changes to his body in Bakhtinian language: “it seemed to him that his hands and head were rapidly swelling to enormous size,” and “he fancie[s] that he [is] in some manner changing, that he [is] *becoming* another man” (Norris 203, emphasis mine).

Vandover thus exemplifies physical excess, spilling out of his human form “into an animal one” as he “sink[s] [. . .] to the level of some dreadful beast” (Bakhtin 316, Norris 204). A doctor diagnoses his new habit of “running along the floor upon the palms of his hands and his toes [. . .] like any dog” and growling “Wolf—wolf—wolf” as a result of “*lycanthropy-pathesis*,” suggesting that his animalistic qualities stem from a medical transformation into a canine (Norris 204, 205). At another moment Norris describes how Vandover’s behavior makes it seem “as though an angry dog were snarling and barking over a bone there under the table,” how Vandover “raise[s] his upper lip above his teeth and snarl[s]” like a dog when threatened (221, 222). Vandover’s inherited degeneracy changes his physicality, rendering his danger outwardly visible through the figure of a violent dog. Norris moreover adds flora to the mix when he describes Vandover’s “hysteria sh[aking] him like a dry, light leaf” (excessive motion) or calls him an “inert, plantlike vegetation” (motionlessness) after he loses the motivation to be productive in any sense (170, 205). In blending “plants, animals, and human beings” in his very physicality, Vandover enters a new stage, “the final decay, the last inevitable rot”; Norris states explicitly near the end that Vandover has “literally *become the brute*” (Kayser 21, Norris 205, 233). By emphasizing the primacy of the biological over aesthetics in determining degree of degeneration, Norris thus suggests: aesthetics alone will not provide the cure.

It is through his subsequent troubling of two other potential checks on degeneration—social pressure and natural selection—that Norris breaks with Nordau’s assessment of degeneracy’s threat to humanity. Nordau points to both beneficial social influence and the inevitable sterility of degenerates as proof that those individuals who cannot be cured will nevertheless remain self-contained. What renders Vandover’s degeneration particularly threatening, then, is its resistance to the primary form of remedy prescribed by Nordau, “the sacred duty of all healthy and moral men to take part in the work of protecting and saving those who are not already too deeply diseased” (Nordau 556-7). Prior to Vandover’s final breakdown, Norris enumerates several points at which social influence *should* contain Vandover’s slow degeneration and set him on an acceptable path, yet Vandover continues to decay. Most disturbing, Vandover himself demonstrates an extreme investment in social norms and a desire to adhere to those norms, yet even with externally- and internally-generated social pressure, he succumbs. For instance, in resistance to his sexual crimes, Vandover at several moments censors his own desires; when accompanying Ida, he is “not at all certain that he care[s] to be seen on Kearney Street as Ida Wade’s escort; one never knew who one was going to meet” (Norris 55). Besides a deeply-ingrained need to adhere to his perceived higher social class, Vandover experiences “the cold grip of hysterical terror” when he contemplates social reactions to his crimes, for example upon seeing Ida’s mother on the street after her suicide (111). When Ida’s parents file a lawsuit against him, Vandover feels “anxiety and exasperation,” as well as the same “hysterical terror”; he experiences shame because of his prior ‘abnormal’ deeds (his rape of Ida), and a wish to preserve his status in society (176).

Vandover’s social circle moreover attempts to correct his undesirable behaviors and afford him opportunities to fulfill a proper life-path; Turner Ravis asks him, “Won’t you be

better now? [. . .] I have faith in you. I believe it's in you to become a great man and a good man" (Norris 150). Vandover takes her words seriously, "resolv[ing] to lead a new and upright life," a resolution that repeats itself throughout the novel whenever Vandover commits a particularly egregious breach of social norms (151). On the brink of his final collapse (before discovering the loss of his artistic ability), Vandover enumerates all the positive social influences in his life that should have corrected any tendencies towards degeneration: his father who "exerted a great influence over Vandover," and Turner who "made him wish to be better" (160). Most importantly, Vandover ruminates that "public opinion had been a great check upon him, the fear of scandal, the desire to stand well with the world he knew," yet Vandover drives away each of these sources of positive influence (161). By writing his novel as a cycle of moments where Vandover breaks from social norms, realizes his mistake, and demonstrates the potential to refit himself to social convention, only to commit even greater crimes, Norris highlights the innate, biological nature of Vandover's degeneration, the impossibility of a cure. If a man at first so artistically productive, such an upstanding member of high society, degenerates despite every possible opportunity to course-correct, then Norris intimates the futility of Nordau's prescriptions and opens the possibility that an increase in 'born' degenerates might decimate 'normal' society.

Even more threatening than the lack of a cure is Vandover's tenacious grip on life which subverts "natural selection," removing the possibility of letting his disease run its course. Most critics concentrate on Vandover's decline, assuming his eventual death,¹² yet several moments in

¹² For instance Donald Pizer, one of the first and most cited Norris scholars, asserts that the passage illustrating the "herd of humanity" suggests that Vandover will "lag behind and be crushed" due to a weak nature, but as I demonstrate, in fact Vandover has the dangerous capacity to keep up with the herd (Pizer 41). Katherine Fusco likewise ends her analysis of narrative temporality with a characterization of Vandover as "a monster swept to his doom by the irresistible onward flow of natural, or narrative, time" (Fusco 38). Holmberg describes Norris's ending with similar vocabulary of "doom," pointing to Vandover's "destruction" and the "pleasure that ultimately consumes [him]" (Holmberg 57).

the novel suggest that in fact, Vandover's will to live keeps him an ever present threat. Norris asks his readers to take seriously this threat in one particular repeating passage portending a dismal future for humanity:

It was Life, [. . .] an engine that sped straight forward, driving before it the infinite herd of humanity, [. . .] crushing out inexorably all those who lagged behind the herd and who fell from exhaustion, [. . .] still driving on the herd that yet remained, [. . .] blindly on and on toward some far-distant goal, some vague unknown end, some mysterious, fearful bourne [. . .] (Norris 171)

Norris hints at the removal of the weak or lesser humans who "lag behind the herd," signaling that in some cases, degenerates are naturally removed from society, but he also forecasts a potentially gloomy ("vague," "mysterious," "fearful") end for humanity. In the case of Vandover and others like him, they are not removed organically, instead remaining at pace with the rest of the "herd" and threatening its direction. That Vandover will not "lag behind" shows in "the certain pliability of his character easily fitting itself into new grooves, reshaping itself to suit new circumstances," in direct contrast to Nordau's assertion that "degenerates, hysterics, and neurasthenics are not capable of adaptation" and are therefore "fated to disappear" (Norris 20, Nordau 540). By the end of the novel, instead of being "capable of no useful individual effort, and still less of a common labour which demands obedience, discipline, and the regular performance of duty," Vandover proves his ability to perform just such a labor as he spends an entire day cleaning a tenant apartment to their exacting specifications (Nordau 540). His ability to adapt to new circumstances proves that rather than "disappearing," he will continue to live, and to affect those around him.

Vandover's intention to continue living shows, paradoxically, most succinctly at the moment when he attempts to end his life, unwilling to give in to the "brute." He experiences a "strange impulse to seat himself before the mirror," and upon surveilling himself he "cram[s] the

[revolver] muzzle into his mouth” and pulls the trigger, but has forgotten to load the gun (Norris 183). When he realizes that his suicide attempt has failed, Vandover experiences “misery” and thinks that “the horror of life overpasse[s] the horror of death,” that if he continues living, he will lose his “anguish of conscience” and “return once more to vice” without the compunctions he currently experiences (183). He further agrees with Nordau that it is his “duty” to “destroy himself” for the good of society, yet upon steeling himself for a second suicide attempt, he decides:

It was only the better part of him that was suffering; in a little while this better part would be dead, leaving only the brute. It would die a natural death without any intervention from him. Was there any need of suicide? [. . .] His whole life had been one long suicide. (184)

In Vandover’s case, rather than the degenerate “perish[ing] in a slow decay,” the socially-acceptable parts of him will “die a natural death,” a “suicide” leaving behind only the insane brute, ferociously clinging to life (Nordau 540). Norris’s novel thus ends with a degenerate character whose danger is primarily biologically determined, and who remains a threat to humanity without the usual possibilities of correction or removal from society.

The disconnect between Norris’s warning¹³ to his audience of the danger of biologically-driven degeneration, and Nordau’s repeated insistence that in fact the threat will resolve itself eventually, demonstrates again the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding degeneration theory. Seitler takes up this uncertainty in her writings on Vandover’s atavism, although specifically regarding sexual perversion and “new modes of sexual personhood” (Seitler, *Atavistic* 100). She notes that “rather than fixing degeneracy as a stable and medically predictable object,” Norris’s

¹³ Bower likewise reads Norris’s novel as a warning; her concentration on race in his short stories leads her to conclude that *Vandover* “functions as a warning to the Anglo-Saxons who make up Norris’s reading audience since they too are exposed to the contagious germs of degeneracy” (Bower 53). As previously mentioned, the importance of race to degeneration theory has been well-documented (see for instance Daniel Pick’s *Faces of Degeneration*), and influences the racial inflection of subsequent biopolitical actions, but I focus in this chapter more generally on degeneration’s attempt to categorize threat, whether racial or not.

novel portrays the “perverse body [as] recapitulat[ing] scientific decree only to perform the instability of its terms and, in turn, suggest the irreducibility of the body to the regulatory regimes of human and subhuman taxonomy” (“Down” 540). While she insists that Norris’s novel thus thwarts the “attempt to identify and manage aberrance” as related to sexuality, I demonstrate that in the larger narrative Vandover remains a dangerous representation of how humanity might be overrun and destroyed by ‘abnormality,’ and therefore *spurs on* those biological interventions that “identify and manage aberrance” (*Atavistic* 100). Far from “cleansing the social world of specific liability by casting [Vandover’s] excesses as an individual’s biological anomaly,” I argue that Norris’s novel demands society come up with new and more efficient methods of taming such “biological anomaly” (103). Norris reveals with his ending his continued anxiety about the dangers of degeneracy as Vandover’s decline occurs *in spite of* the presence of “healthy and moral men” who attempt to help him, suggesting the necessity of more targeted actions to identify and contain the ‘abnormal.’ He therefore adopts degeneration’s contradictory language purposefully to demonstrate its efficacy in identifying the ‘other,’ while also pointing out its limitations and the need for further categorization.

The next section of this chapter will focus on Thomas Mann’s writing, which likewise adopts degeneration terminology purposefully, although Mann augments and enlarges its contradictions with the goal of exposing its fundamental flaws and therefore the flaws of other projects of classifying the ‘abnormal.’ I will concentrate on Mann’s “The Blood of the Walsungs” from 1905 as particularly focused on critiquing degenerate taxonomies as contradictory and arbitrary; although several of his stories take up the themes of degeneration and decadence, Mann’s earlier stories are less overtly critical of the degenerate label. As

biographer Ronald Hayman puts it, “instead of achieving ironic detachment from fin de siècle decadence, most of Thomas Mann’s early stories conform to the fashion for distasteful subject matter” such as “gloomy predictions that the world was going to end with the century” (Hayman 66). However, even in such early stories as “The Little Herr Friedemann” (“Der kleine Herr Friedemann,” 1896) and “The Dilettante” (“Der Bajazzo,” 1897) Mann’s awareness of degeneration theory’s internal contradictions is clear in his inconsistent use of his preferred motifs across stories.

For instance, Mann signals Wagnerian opera as harmful for the individual (following Nietzsche) in “Friedemann” and “Tristan,” but uplifting in “The Blood of the Walsungs.”¹⁴ Likewise, Mann equates degeneration with sterility in “Friedemann,” where the degenerate protagonist Herr Friedemann decides early in life to “renounce, renounce forever” any feelings of arousal or love, and thus experiences “impotent [. . .] rage” in relation to his unexpected love interest (Mann 62, 75). His love interest Gerda likewise is characterized as “ice-cold” and remains detached, sterile, rebuking all of Friedemann’s emotional advances until he finally drowns himself at the story’s end (66).¹⁵ In “Tristan” and “The Blood of the Walsungs,” however, Mann aligns degeneracy with fertility, as I will demonstrate shortly. By adopting the language and logic of degeneration theory, then, Mann purposefully emphasizes its

¹⁴ Interestingly, “The Dilettante” features Gounod’s *Faust*, just like Norris’s novel; further similarities include a section where the “Bajazzo somewhat pedantically accounts for six years’ spending of his money” (Vandover also devotes some time to accounting and his dwindling finances), and a section “detail[ing] the carefully selected locale and decor of Bajazzo’s new dwelling” (Vandover’s obsession with dwellings and decor is omni-present) (Lesér 48, 49). These similarities must stem from Norris’s and Mann’s equal interest in naturalist fiction (Zola) and degeneration themes; since Mann’s story was published in 1897 after Norris had already written *Vandover*, and *Vandover* was published much later, it is extremely unlikely that the authors read each other’s fiction.

¹⁵ In the German, “er verzichtete, verzichtete auf immer,” “ohnmächtige [. . .] Wut,” and “eiskalt.” All translations of Mann’s writing into English are my own, unless noted otherwise.

contradictions and ultimate inefficacy in determining ‘abnormality,’ while simultaneously critiquing the type of logic that would require such categorizations in the first place.

III. Parodic Degenerates in “The Blood of the Walsungs”

Born in 1875, Paul Thomas Mann remains today one of the most well-known German authors, primarily for his longer works such as *The Magic Mountain* and *Death in Venice*. However, his less-read short stories, written between the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th, are nonetheless worth critical attention as both reflecting and critiquing various *fin-de-siècle* anxieties about the progress of humanity. His story “The Blood of the Walsungs” (“Wälsungenblut”), written in 1905, uses a degenerate family to explore both contemporaneous definitions of the degeneracy attributed to the decline of German society, and anti-Semitic theories about Jewishness as a large factor in such decline. Mann’s treatment of degeneration stems primarily from his lasting interest in Nietzsche’s writings, as shown for example by his 1896 story “The Will to Happiness,” a nod to Nietzsche’s “The Will to Power” (Hayman 72). Specifically, Mann owned a copy of Nietzsche’s essay *The Case of Wagner*, and thus “learned a genius-critical philosophical discourse through the late Nietzsche,” directed against Wagner as degenerate (Sprecher 165).¹⁶

Mann follows Nietzsche’s conception of degeneration closely; Nietzsche claims that “all of us have, unconsciously, involuntarily in our bodies values, words, formulas, moralities of *opposite* descent—we are, physiologically considered, *false*” (Nietzsche 648). In other words, Nietzsche intimates that humanity holds both the degenerate (herd mentality) ideals, and the

¹⁶ For German critical works that have not been translated into English, such as the essays collected in the volume edited by Thomas Sprecher, all translations into English are my own. In the German, “lernte Thomas Mann mit dem späten Nietzsche einen geniekritischen philosophischen Diskurs kennen.”

more ‘natural’ opposition to socially-constructed ideals that stifle artistic genius. He tells his reader that “*a diagnosis of the modern soul*” would require “a resolute incision into this instinctive contradiction, with the isolation of its opposite values, with the vivisection of the *most instructive* case—the case of Wagner” (648). While Mann at first glance appears to follow Nietzsche’s instruction perfectly with “The Blood of the Walsungs,” as he indeed vivisects Wagner’s opera *The Valkyrie*, Mann’s motive in highlighting the contradictions inherent in degenerate individuals is not to “diagnose” or favor one set of ideals over another. Rather, Mann attacks degeneration theory from the inside out, calling into question the logic of classification methods that at their very core remain contradictory and arbitrary. He adopts the language of excess and lack, portraying a traditional biologically and aesthetically degenerate family, but several key moments in the novel parody such rigid conceptions of ‘abnormality,’ ultimately rendering everyone, and no-one, degenerate.

“The Blood of the Walsungs” provides a glimpse into the lives of the Aarenhold family: the parents Herr and Frau Aarenhold, and their four children, Kunz, Märit, and twins Siegmund and Sieglinde. Sieglinde is engaged to Herr von Beckerath, yet Mann reveals as the story progresses that she does not love her fiancé, instead committing incestuous acts with Siegmund. The story takes place over the span of a few days, in which von Beckerath visits for breakfast, and Siegmund and Sieglinde attend the opera *The Valkyrie*, thereafter consummating their love. Mann’s tale ends with the implication that Sieglinde becomes pregnant and will use her marriage to von Beckerath to hide the true origins of her progeny.

While no biographical evidence exists to prove Mann’s knowledge of Nordau’s *Degeneration* (although both were deeply influenced by Nietzsche), as Helmut Koopmann notes

the “correspondences, if not even dependence [on Nordau’s writing], are surprising[ly]” obvious in several of Mann’s stories (Sprecher 124).¹⁷ In particular, as Mann builds his descriptions of the Aarenhold family as conventionally degenerate, several details echo both Nietzsche’s and Nordau’s conceptions of degenerate biology and aesthetics as a simultaneous excess and lack. As with Vandover, biological predisposition to degeneracy is foregrounded; Mann devotes several passages to physical descriptions of the Aarenhold twins, who inherit their degeneration from their parents in “continuously increasing degree” (Nordau 16). As Nordau explains, “degeneracy betrays itself among men in certain physical characteristics,” enumerated by both Morel and Lombroso under the category of physiognomy (16-17). The twins, for instance, both have “a slightly pressed-down nose, the same full and softly touching lips, prominent cheekbones, [and] black and blank eyes,”¹⁸ which might recall Lombroso’s characterization of criminals as having a “flattened” nose, or “lips [that are] fleshy, swollen and protruding” (Mann 302, Lombroso 15, 16). Likewise, the “long and thin hands”¹⁹ of the twins connect to Lombroso’s idea that “long fingers are common to [...] sexual offenders”; their incestuous encounters certainly mark Siegmund and Sieglinde as such offenders (Mann 302, Lombroso 20). Siegmund, moreover, is often described as having a thick “unibrow which create[s] two black creases over the root of his nose,”²⁰ and Lombroso recounts that the “born criminal’s” “eyebrows are bushy and tend to meet across the nose” and “grow in a slanting direction” (Mann 312, Lombroso 18). Mann’s

¹⁷ In the German, “Übereinstimmungen, wenn man nicht gar von Abhängigkeiten sprechen will, sind überraschend.” Although several of the essays in Sprecher’s edited volume *Literature and Sickness in the Fin-de-Siècle*, including Koopmann’s, treat degeneration in Mann’s writing, none look at “The Blood of the Walsungs.”

¹⁸ In the German, “ein wenig niedergedrückte Nase, dieselben voll und weich aufeinander ruhenden Lippen, hervortretenden Wangenknochen, schwarzen und blanken Augen.”

¹⁹ In the German, “ihre langen und schmalen Hände.”

²⁰ In the German, “Zuweilen [...] bildeten seine zusammengewachsenen Brauen über der Nasenwurzel zwei schwarze Falten.”

concentration on repeated physical descriptions of the Aarenhold twins thus highlights the genetic degeneracy which becomes more pronounced in the second generation.

Siegmund moreover inherits from his father a “taste that require[s] ever stronger spices”; he thus “fare[s] [. . .] the same as Herr Aarenhold,” who explains his philosophy that of utmost importance is “that things stay new to one, that one does not actually become accustomed to anything” (Nietzsche 622, Mann 310, 304).²¹ Yet Siegmund’s degeneracy is soon proven as more pronounced than that of his parents; unlike his father who enjoys working to support his family, Siegmund experiences a lack of willpower or direction. “Siegmund, in his innermost self, f[inds] no time for a will [or desire], let alone for achiev[ing]” that desire, and spends most of his energy and time on “being unassailable and blameless in his outer appearance from head to toe” (Mann 311).²² Nordau notes that in degenerates there is “a disinclination to action of any kind, attaining possibly to abhorrence of activity and powerlessness to will,” or as Nietzsche puts it, a “disgregation of the will” (Nordau 20, Nietzsche 626). This lack of drive moreover might accompany “a condition of mental weakness and despondency, which, according to the circumstances of his life, assumes the form of pessimism [...] or self-abhorrence” (Nordau 19). In fact, Siegmund often questions his life choices and trivial occupations, yet “in moments when an unease weakly stir[s] in him, surrounding what ‘reality’ is supposed to be, he f[inds] that the lack of social expectations paralyze[s] and dissolve[s] that unease” (Mann 311).²³ Siegmund therefore quickly dismisses his own despondency and lack of will or direction; unlike Vandover, he has no

²¹ In the German, “Es erging ihm darin [. . .] wie Herr Aarenhold,” and “daß die Dinge einem neu bleiben, und daß man sich eigentlich an nichts gewöhnt.”

²² In the German, “dennoch fand Siegmund in seinem Innern keine Zeit zu einem Wollen, geschweige zu einem Vollbringen,” and “er mußte unangreifbar und ohne Tadel an seinem Äußeren sein vom Kopf bis zu Füßen.”

²³ In the German, “in Augenblicken, wenn eine Unruhe um das, was das ‘Eigentliche’ sein mochte, sich schwach in ihm regte, empfand er, wie dieser Mangel an fremder Erwartung sie wieder lähmte und löste.”

social checks on his degenerate tendencies, and his sexual crimes are correspondingly not a source of anxiety.

Siegmund occupies his time mostly with sexual pleasure, suffering, like Vandover, from a lack of “the sense of morality and of right and wrong” (Nordau 18). For degenerates, “there exists no law, no decency, no modesty, [and] in order to satisfy any momentary impulse, or inclination, or caprice, they commit crimes and trespasses with the greatest calmness and self-complacency”—in other words, what Nordau deems “moral insanity” (18). Siegmund both commits sexual crimes (incest),²⁴ and exhibits mental instability that borders on insanity, lacking remorse for his actions. The first time the twins have a sexual encounter, Mann describes their caresses with slow, stilted phrases full of the “s” sound to impress the languid nature of their encounter, the “calmness and self-complacency.” Sieglinde “kisse[s] [Siegmund] on his closed eyes; he kisse[s] her on the neck, next to the jewel [necklace]. They kiss each other’s hands,” and with a “sweet sensuality” enjoy each other’s “exquisite cleanliness and their good scents” (Mann 314).²⁵ Their second encounter, on the last page of the story, begins with the exact same sentences, but the twins’ sexuality becomes excessive as they “los[e] themselves in caresses which cross over into a hurried turmoil and finally bec[ome] only sobbing” (325).²⁶ Stefani Engelstein moreover notes that their incestuous encounter “accomplishes [. . .] what Narcissus can only long for,” as the “incest is transformed into a kind of masturbation” (Engelstein 292).

²⁴ In Henry de Halsalle’s 1917 text *Degenerate Germany*, he tracks an incline in “serious crime” from 1897 to 1907, revealing 573 cases of incest in Germany during that time (compared to only 56 cases in England) (De Halsalle 180).

²⁵ In the German, “**S**ie küßte ihn auf seine geschlossenen Augen; er küßte sie auf den Hals, zur Seite des Edelsteins. Sie küßten einander die Hände,” “süßen Sinnlichkeit,” and “köstlichen Gepflegtheit und seines guten Duftes” (emphasis mine).

²⁶ In the German, “verloren sich in Liebkosungen, die übergriffen und ein hastiges Getümmel wurden und zuletzt nur ein Schluchzen waren.”

Nordau likewise marks egotism as a sign of excess, where in the degenerate is found “a love of self never met with in a sane person in anything like the same degree” (Nordau 26). The twins thus exemplify the degeneracy of sexual urges which contradict social norms of behavior.

During their act of criminal consummation, Mann therefore calls them “egotistical sick people,” a phrase he repeats earlier when describing their exclusive bond, and moments before intercourse Sieglinde asks Siegmund, “are you sick?” (Mann 325, 324).²⁷ The word “sick” (“krank”) in German signifies not only physical malady, but also sickness of the mind, as well as moral ‘sickness,’ so that the twins’ mutual love takes on connotations of mental and moral ‘abnormality.’ Mann thereby echoes Nietzsche’s assessment of degeneration as a “total sickness, [an] overexcitement of the nervous mechanism” (Nietzsche 622). In fact, Mann hints at Siegmund’s potential mental illness earlier, noting that Siegmund has an “abnormal and continual need for cleanliness,” therefore spending much of his day making sure his body and clothing meet his singular standards (Mann 309).²⁸ Siegmund’s mental instability shows itself as well, as with Vandover, in his muddled thoughts and speech, “as if out of a confused dream,” although Sieglinde does not mind “hearing such rough, such cloudy, convoluted speech” and indeed lets Siegmund’s words draw her into the sexual act “which she had never previously reached” (325).²⁹ Nietzsche likewise characterizes degeneracy in terms of such mental obfuscation, the formless “throng of yet unborn thoughts,” “shaping clouds,” and “foggy

²⁷ In the German, “egoistische Kranke,” and “Bist du krank?”

²⁸ In the German, “ein außerordentliches und fortwährendes Bedürfnis nach Reinigung.” Critic German Berrios gives a history of hypochondriasis—a diagnosis that might include Siegmund’s “abnormal need for cleanliness”—noting that in 1860 Morel writes: “true hypochondriasis was a form of insanity (*folie hystérique*)” (Berrios 13).

²⁹ In the German, “wie aus wirrem Traum,” and “Sie schämte sich nicht, ihn so Ungefeiltes, so Trübe-Verworrenes reden zu hören,” and “wohin sie noch nie gelangt.”

distances” (Nietzsche 623, 634). In their physical, mental, and emotional states, therefore, the Aarenholds, and especially Siegmund and Sieglinde, exemplify degenerate excess and lack.

Their degeneracy moreover affects their aesthetic surroundings; like Vandover, the Aarenholds place particular emphasis on possessions, and their house decor corresponds precisely to Nordau’s descriptions of degenerate dwellings. Their dining room walls for instance are covered in “Gobelins [tapestries] with idyllic pastorals, like those panels which adorned a French castle in the distant past” (Mann 303).³⁰ Nordau mentions how often “in the drawing-room [of degenerate houses] the walls are hung with worm-eaten Gobelin tapestry, discoloured by the sun of two centuries” (Nordau 10). The Aarenhold dress and style also reflects their degenerate tendencies: Frau Aarenhold, for example, styles her hair “in many curlicues and projections leading to an intricate and towering Coiffure” topped with a “huge, colorfully sparkling [...] diamond hair-clip” (Mann 301).³¹ Nordau describes at length the appearance of degenerate women, who wear their hair “in such a fashion as to be startling in its revolt against the law of organic harmony, and the effect of a studied discord” (Nordau 8). Sieglinde, on the other hand, wears a “satin dress [...] in the style of the Florentine mode from 1500,” or as Nordau describes such apparel, “the stiff monumental trim of Catharine de Medicis,” and her brother also prefers elaborate and colorful dress (on which subject Mann devotes several paragraphs) (Mann 302, Nordau 8). Siegmund’s aesthetics are more directly affected by his degeneracy: he learns drawing and painting from a renowned artist but “what he dr[aws] [is] nevertheless laughable,” and he himself admits “that the conditions of his existence [are] not exactly the proper ones for

³⁰ In the German, “Gobelins mit Schäfer-Idyllen, die wie die Tafelung vorzeiten ein französisches Schloß geschmückt hatten.”

³¹ In the German, “Sie trug ihr graues Haar in vielen Schnörkeln und Ausladungen zu einer umständlichen und hochgebauten Coiffure angeordnet” and “eine große, farbig funkelnde [...] Brillant-Agraffe.”

the development of an impressive talent” (Mann 310).³² Although Siegmund has the same monetary advantages as Vandover to learn art, his degeneracy dominates from his birth on and he never gains the skills that Vandover eventually loses in his decline.

While Mann at first glance thus seems to present a straight-forward case of degeneration, perpetuating the social anxiety around ‘abnormality’ as something to be corrected, moments of irony in the story reveal that, in fact, the Aarenhold’s degeneration remains an arbitrarily-determined label and therefore an imaginary threat. Mann uses ironic humor to indicate that the Aarenholds, far from conceiving of themselves as deviant, find other, non-degenerate characters (e.g. von Beckerath) ‘abnormal.’ Indeed, the Aarenhold children even find their less-degenerate parents’ styles laughable; they attempt “more than once to admonish [Frau Aarenhold’s] Coiffeur with well placed words” though she “insist[s] doggedly on her own style” (Mann 301).³³ Herr Aarenhold likewise notes that his children are “united against him and that they despise him: for his origins, for the blood that r[uns] in him and that they received from him, [. . .] [and] for his hobbies that in their eyes [are] unbecoming” (304).³⁴ Although the Aarenhold children have inherited their degeneracy—and Mann insists on the primacy of this biological component through phrases such as “the blood that runs in him”—they disavow that inherited style, demonstrating that even among ‘degenerates,’ aesthetics remain subjective.

³² In the German, “Es war gleichwohl zum Lächeln, was Siegmund malte,” and “daß die Bedingungen seines Daseins für die Entwicklung einer gestaltenden Gabe nicht eben die günstigsten waren.”

³³ In the German, “die Kinder hatten ihr diese Haartracht mehr als einmal mit gut gesetzten Worten verwiesen,” and “Frau Aarenhold bestand mit Zähigkeit auf ihrem Geschmack.”

³⁴ In the German, “für seine Herkunft, für das Blut, das in ihm floß und das sie von ihm empfangen, [. . .] für seine Liebhabereien, die ihm in ihren Augen nicht zukamen.”

In relation to others as well, the Aarenholds make clear that ‘abnormality’ is arbitrarily determined. For instance, during breakfast Siegmund tells a story “in an ironic tone” about an acquaintance, a “Parsifal” who speaks of a “checkered tuxedo,” an egregious error against taste in Siegmund’s opinion (Mann 306, 307).³⁵ When his brother Kunz replies that he has “an even more moving story of innocence,” about a man wearing a tuxedo at “five o’clock tea,” Sieglinde remarks that “only animals” would commit such a faux-pas (307).³⁶ The tone of their stories—condescension, ironic humor, and disgust—suggests the Aarenhold aversion to those who do not adhere to their ‘degenerate’ aesthetic sensibilities. Von Beckerath, who “laugh[s] eagerly” even though he secretly remembers a time when he himself wore a tuxedo to tea, moreover becomes the stand-in for ordinary society, and therefore the Aarenhold’s scapegoat as representative of traits they find unbearable in others.³⁷ Every word he utters during their meal, the Aarenholds “maul it, destroy it and replace it with a new one, a deadly significant one, that whir[s] [and] hit[s] its mark” so that by the end von Beckerath has “red eyes and a deranged appearance” (308).³⁸ The Aarenhold contempt for ‘normal’ society thus renders von Beckerath abnormal in appearance, even as he sits opposite their degenerate physicality.

Mann continues his ironic reversal of those considered ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ through the most significant motif of his story, its connection to Wagner’s *The Valkyrie*, which premiered in 1870. Just as von Beckerath becomes grotesque in the presence of the Aarenholds, the twins

³⁵ In the German, “in ironisch gerührtem Tone,” and “einem karierten Smoking.” “Parsifal” refers to an opera by Wagner of the same name, in which the titular character succeeds in his quest only because of his extreme innocence and lack of knowledge about the world around him.

³⁶ In the German, “einen noch beweglicheren Fall von Unverdorbenheit,” and “nur die Tiere.”

³⁷ In the German, “lachte eifrig.”

³⁸ In the German, “zerzausten es, verwarfen es und trieben ein anderes auf, ein tödlich bezeichnendes, das schwirrte, traf,” and “rote Augen und bot einen derangierten Anblick.”

Siegmond and Sieglinde are grotesque in comparison to their Wagnerian counterparts (their namesakes). Unlike Norris, who uses the aesthetic grotesque to signal Vandover's particular biological danger, Mann includes the grotesque to mock that danger through explicit parallels between Wagner's opera and his own story. Mann demonstrates the subjectivity that allows an audience to deem his twins grotesque, yet Wagner's twins heroic, likewise figuring the aesthetics of Wagner's opera first as beneficial, and later as promoting degeneracy. By rewriting *The Valkyrie*, moreover, Mann moves from a parody of degeneration theory's minute criteria for classifying offending individuals, to a larger critique of the types of biological classifications that become increasingly popular in anti-Semitic Germany in the early 20th century.

Much has been written on the explicit parallels between Mann's story, "Walsungenblut," and Wagner's opera about the Walsung family, which both tell of the incestuous twins Siegmund and Sieglinde. In Wagner's version, Siegmund and Sieglinde Walsung are the children of the god Wotan, separated in childhood, who meet and fall in love as adults. In defending Sieglinde against her brutish husband Hunding,³⁹ Siegmund dies in battle, although Sieglinde first becomes pregnant with their son Siegfried who will become the "bravest hero" in Wagner's subsequent operas ("Synopsis"). As Mann describes, moreover, when his protagonists attend the opera, in Wagner's version Siegmund has "blue eyes under blond eyebrows, [and] a blond forelock," and "strong legs wrapped in fur and leather straps" while Sieglinde has an "alabaster bosom which heave[s] wonderfully in the cutout of her fur-lined muslin dress" (Mann 315).⁴⁰ The positive attributes of "strong legs" and "wonderful bosom," their 'natural' form, show how Wagner's

³⁹ Von Beckerath parallels Wagner's Hunding, as evidenced during breakfast when the twins ask von Beckerath's permission to attend the opera and their brother Kunz "drum[s] the rhythm of the Hunding-motif on the tablecloth" (Mann 308).

⁴⁰ In the German, "blauen Augen unter den blonden Brauen, dem blonden Stirngelock," "seine starken, mit Fell und Riemen umwickelten Beine," and "alabasternen Busen, der wunderbar in dem Ausschnitt ihres mit Fell behangenen Musselinkleides wogte."

godly twins strike an impressive and heroic image, especially in contrast to Sieglinde's husband Hunding, whom Mann calls "bulgy and knock-kneed as a cow," with "buffalo eyes" (316).⁴¹

When compared to Wagner's twins, Mann's twins become especially grotesque and unappealing, thus revealing the arbitrary nature of a distinction which would render incestuous acts heroic in one context, yet degenerate in another.⁴² For example, the presence of fur is grotesque for Mann's Siegmund and Sieglinde; Bakhtin states that "the combination of human and animal traits is, as we know, one of the most ancient grotesque forms," and Mann's twins are described, like Hunding, in animalistic terms (Bakhtin 316). Sieglinde aims a "serious glossy stare" at von Beckerath for instance, which "sp[ea]ks as uncomprehendingly as an animal's" (Mann 306).⁴³ Mann's descriptions of how "Sieglinde's dark little head half disappear[s] in the silver fox collar" of her coat, or how Siegmund, who has an intensely fast-growing beard/fur of his own, wears a "house jacket set with fur," emphasize their animalistic qualities (314, 323).⁴⁴ Even more explicitly, Wagner's heroic Siegmund "let[s] himself fall heavily on the bear fur rug" in his well-deserved and empathy-inducing exhaustion (315).⁴⁵ Mann's Siegmund, on the other hand, has a "polar bear fur rug [...]" in which his feet disappear," and when he later falls on the rug in *ennui* (described with the same phrasing as the Wagnerian scene), he blends into the fur such that Sieglinde "searche[s] for him in the room, without finding him right away" (312,

⁴¹ In the German, "bauchig und x-beinig wie eine Kuh," and "Büffelaugen."

⁴² Kayser's *The Grotesque in Art and Literature* includes a section specifically about Mann's writing (although he does not mention "The Blood of the Walsungs"), stating that for Mann, "the grotesque entails a distortion and exaggeration of reality which reveals the true nature of a phenomenon"; as I argue, by exaggerating his twins' flaws, Mann reveals the "true" absurdity behind biological labeling (Kayser 159).

⁴³ In the German, "einem glänzend ernsten Blick, der [...] begrifflos redete wie der eines Tieres."

⁴⁴ In the German, "Sieglindens dunkles Köfchen verschwand zur Hälfte in dem Silberfuchskragen," and "die mit Pelz besetzte Hausjacke."

⁴⁵ In the German, "ließ er sich schwer auf das Bärenfell fallen."

324).⁴⁶ Mann's twins moreover consummate their relationship on that same polar bear rug, rendering their association with fur ultimately degenerate and grotesque, rather than heroic as in Wagner's opera.

Siegmond and Sieglinde Aarenhold likewise exemplify Bakhtin's grotesque "becoming" bodies, where "special attention is given to the shoots and branches, to all that prolongs the body and links it to other bodies" (Bakhtin 316-17). Mann describes moments that suggest the twins' bodies as morphing together, linking them for instance during breakfast when they "h[old] each other between their chairs by their thin and damp hands"; like Vandover, their physicality exceeds their contained forms (Mann 305).⁴⁷ Siegmund later recalls how he often walked with Sieglinde, his "dark lovely double, whose thin and damp hand he held" while wandering the fields in their youth (311-12).⁴⁸ The emphasized dampness of their hands "ignores the closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface of the body" as the "bodily drama" of sweating connects the twins, and their constant remarks on how similar they are (Siegmund tells Sieglinde, "you are just like me"⁴⁹) furthermore suggests a grotesque blending into one another (Bakhtin 317, Mann 324). In contrast, at the moment when Wagner's Siegmund and Sieglinde realize their relation, that "their eyes and temples, foreheads and voices, [...] [are] the same," the music signals their "torrential passion" as a pleasing resolution to the unfairness of Siegmund's prior banishment and Sieglinde's forced marriage (Mann 318, 319).⁵⁰ The grotesqueness of Mann's twins,

⁴⁶ In the German, "dem Eisbärfell [...] in dem seine Füße verschwanden," and "Ihre Augen suchten nach ihm im Zimmer, ohne ihn gleich zu finden."

⁴⁷ In the German, "Sie hielten einander zwischen den Stühlen an ihren schmalen und feuchten Händen."

⁴⁸ In the German, "dunkel liebliches Ebenbild, dessen schmale und feuchte Hand er hielt."

⁴⁹ In the German, "Du bist ganz wie ich."

⁵⁰ In the German, "Ihre Augen und Schläfen, Stirnen und Stimmen, [...] fanden sie gleich," and "reißender Leidenschaft."

rendering their similarities repulsive rather than a symbol of their suitability together, thus serves as a rebuke to Wagner's twins.

Mann moreover uses the Aarenhold trip to the opera to highlight the subjectivity of "good" versus degenerate aesthetics in relation to music. The same music that renders Wagner's twins tragic heroes begins to work on Siegmund Aarenhold; the "work that appears up there [on the stage] in an exalted, simple vision" makes him contemplate his life's ambitions (Mann 320).⁵¹ Siegmund reflects that "a pain was in [his] breast, a burning or tearing, something like a sweet affliction" when he realizes the shortcomings of his own life in comparison to Wagner's creation (320).⁵² He enumerates his faults, much like Vandover after his visit to the opera; Siegmund reflects on his "life, that came together out of weakness and mockery, out of spoiledness and negation, luxury and contrariness, [. . .] this life which had [. . .] only deadly implications" (320).⁵³ R. A. Nicholls notes Nietzsche's philosophy that the "will to work and accomplishment" opposes degenerate tendencies; Nietzsche states that "it is our *feeling of nobility* which forbids us from being simply *enjoyers* of existence—this feeling rouses itself against hedonism—we wish to *achieve something against it*" (Nicholls 12).⁵⁴ Though Siegmund correctly identifies the contradictory (degenerate) characteristics of his life and experiences this "rousing feeling against hedonism," unlike Vandover, he has no clarity or insights on how to better himself, and makes no attempts to do so. Nonetheless, by having his protagonist so

⁵¹ In the German, "dies Werk, das dort oben in kindlich hohen Gesichtern erschien."

⁵² In the German, "Ein Schmerz war in Siegmunds Brust, ein Brennen oder Zehren, irgend etwas wie eine süße Drangsal."

⁵³ In the German, "dies Leben, das sich aus Weichheit und Witz, aus Verwöhnung und Verneinung, Luxus und Widerspruch [. . .] zusammensetzte, dies Leben, in dem es [. . .] nur tötendes Bezeichnen gab."

⁵⁴ Nicholls writes on Mann's earlier works in relation to Nietzsche's influence, but surprisingly makes no mention of "Wälsungenblut."

intensely question himself while watching Wagner's opera, even as Nietzsche insists that Wagner's music is "nihilistic" and "fatal and hostile to life in matters of the spirit," Mann ironically suggests the potential beneficial effect of its aesthetics (Nietzsche 639).

The Aarenhold twins soon thereafter, however, consummate their incestuous love in a manner that contradicts these beneficial qualities; Mann in this moment closely echoes Nietzsche and Nordau's assessments of Wagner's music as degenerate in order to emphasize again the subjectivity of valuing its aesthetics. Nordau for instance states that after watching such degenerate opera, "the audience [. . .] leave with all the nervous exhaustion of a young pair of lovers, who for hours at the nightly tryst have sought to exchange caresses through a closely-barred window" (Nordau 13).⁵⁵ In fact, as Siegmund and Sieglinde leave their opera its "world [. . .] works its magic on them, pulls them to it" so that even though they argue at dinner, Sieglinde seeks out her brother in his room (Mann 321).⁵⁶ Nordau moreover calls Wagnerian love "the love of those degenerates who, in sexual transport, become like wild *beasts*," and as previously noted, the Aarenhold sexual act occurs on a bear-skin rug, rendering Siegmund and Sieglinde beastly (Nordau 181-2, emphasis mine). Through purposeful oppositions between 'normal' and 'abnormal' personal style, 'heroic' and 'grotesque' incest, 'noble' and 'beastly' musical effects, Mann thus insists on the arbitrary nature of Nietzsche and Nordau's criteria for identifying degenerate individuals and their art.

Beyond his satirical portrayal of the specificities of degeneration theory aimed against individuals, Mann uses "The Blood of the Walsungs" to call attention to the larger implications

⁵⁵ Even here Mann's emphasis on contradiction is evident; Nordau characterizes Wagner's music as that which ends in frustrated or thwarted desire, yet Mann's twins are able to 'open' the "barred window" and act as they please.

⁵⁶ In the German, "Welt [. . .] die mit Zaubermitteln auf sie gewirkt, sie zu sich und in sich gezogen."

of such theory's concentration on biology as an indicator of "abnormality." The second part of his title, "Blut" ("blood"), hints at a deeper critique of social anxieties surrounding biological inheritance, including the racist logic that fosters an increase in anti-Semitism in Germany during his time. Indeed, the most controversial aspect of Mann's recasting of *The Valkyrie* stems from the original 1905 version of his story, in which Mann included the Yiddish word "Goy" to signal unambivalently that the Aarenhold family is Jewish. Due to a negative reception, which intimated that Mann's story was a thinly-veiled autobiographical account (and therefore satire) of his own wife's Jewish family, Mann both removed the offending word and kept his story from publication until 1921 (Vaget 369). However, the remaining hints of the Aarenholds as Jewish (mostly through their physical appearance), combined with the story's controversial past, have led most critics to concentrate on Mann's intentions regarding the anti-Semitism prevalent at the time.⁵⁷ As Todd Kontje remarks, some critics emphasize the presence of anti-Semitism in "Mann's potentially damning story," while "others have come to Mann's defense" in arguing that his story in fact critiques Wagner by rendering his Aryan heroes Jewish (Kontje 110).⁵⁸ As Paul Levesque puts it, "Mann, in *Wälsungenblut*, musters his parodic talents against Richard Wagner with a viciousness unparalleled in his other writings"; to wit, "a Jewish Siegmund: what

⁵⁷ That Mann in private life held an ambivalent view towards anti-Semitism has been well-documented; he married into a Jewish family, yet was a fan of Wagner's music, even visiting Wagner's country home (Hayman 436). In 1936 Mann publishes a letter in which he clearly states that "German anti-Semitism [...] is against Europe, [...] against the Christian and classical foundations of Western morality," etc., to finally declare openly his disgust for Hitler and fascist Germany (Hayman 424).

⁵⁸ Kontje himself reads Mann's story as partially autobiographical, mirroring Mann's own experience of marriage, and his potential self-identification in the character of Siegmund, the "modern, homosexual, racially mixed artist," in which case the anti-Semitic moments of the story stem from Mann's ambivalence and antipathy towards himself (Kontje 115). Critic Sander Gilman on the other hand reads Mann's story as perpetuating the anti-Semitic view of Jews as incestuous "parvenus," whether purposefully or not.

would have been more galling for an anti-Semite like Wagner, author of the 1850 pamphlet *Das Judenthum in der Musik?*” (Levesque 12, 15).⁵⁹

Debates around Mann’s relationship to Jewishness and anti-Semitism are certainly important, yet by introducing the consideration of degeneration in “The Blood of the Walsungs,” I show that in fact Mann’s critique aims more generally at the subjectivity of endeavors of biological classification. As I have demonstrated, the unsavory descriptions of Siegmund and Sieglinde in particular portray the arbitrary nature of labels of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal.’ Mann furthermore ascribes non-specific biologically-read qualities to his twins to intimate the artificiality of racial (and racist) classifications, including hints at their Jewishness in tandem with more vague vocabulary. While Mann’s story in its first iteration ended with the word “Goy” to indicate Jewishness, the word’s placement on the last page still allowed for ambiguity during a first reading, and his final published iteration hints at Jewishness without removing the possibility of other genetic backgrounds. Gloria Erlich claims that the removal of that certitude renders the published version “much less effective than the original,” because that original conclusion “gathers up the scattered allusions to race, blood, dark and troubling origins, and illumines them with a flash of retrospective meaning,” namely (according to her), the Aarenholds as representing “the troubled psychology of the assimilated German Jew” (Erlich 113-14). However, I would argue that only by retaining ambiguity can Mann critique more generally the trend of biological labeling so pervasive during his time. Rather than including definitive indications of which ‘races’ are degenerate in “The Blood of the Walsungs,” Mann purposefully employs empty language that contains infinite possible connotations.

⁵⁹ Levesque acknowledges the difficulty of declaring Mann’s story either anti-Semitic or not, so he focuses his reading instead on Mann’s critique of Wagner as an attempt to ruin Wagner’s hold on German artistic society. For Levesque, Mann’s story demonstrates his anger at Wagner’s dismissal of the novel form, and his disgust for the “‘dilettantish’ foundation of Wagner’s art” (Levesque 18).

For instance, in foreshadowing the end of his own story while describing Wagner's opera, Mann reveals that "in the woman's [Sieglinde's] womb, [...] it germinat[es] tenaciously, that hated, disrespected and god-picked lineage [*Geschlecht*], out of which a pair of twins join their needs and their suffering into such free bliss" (Mann 321).⁶⁰ By using the ambiguous "woman" and "pair of twins" without specifying whether referencing the Aarenholds or Wälsungs, Mann opens the possibility of multiple definitions for "*Geschlecht*" ("lineage," or "family," or "dynasty") and again marks the impossibility of drawing clear distinctions between the 'abnormal' Sieglinde Aarenhold or the 'heroic' Sieglinde Wälsung. In fact, John Whiton notes that Mann himself points out this ambiguity as purposeful in his unpublished essay "On the Jewish Question": the word "geschlecht" leads to "confusion: to wit, that of the reader, who does not know anymore which 'geschlecht' is being referenced" (Whiton 40).⁶¹ Soon thereafter, Siegmund Aarenhold studies himself carefully in the mirror (like Vandover), "investigat[ing] the indicators of his blood"; Mann then enumerates each physiognomical facial feature, using the same phrases discussed at the beginning of this section (Mann 323).⁶² By prefacing his enumeration with the general word "blood," Mann emphasizes the degeneracy of those facial features (flat nose, full lips, sharp cheekbones, black eyes), while making clear their ambiguity: they might belong to any genetic background. Similarly, right before Mann's twins consummate their incestuous love, Sieglinde "distort[s] her face in pain, so that the physiognomic singularities of her kind [*Art*] emerge especially"; again, Mann leaves the word "*Art*" ("kind," or "species," or

⁶⁰ In the German, "im Schoße des Weibes, [...] keimte es zähe fort, das verhaßte, respektlose und gotterwählte Geschlecht, aus welchem ein Zwillingsspaar seine Not und sein Leid zu so freier Wonne vereint."

⁶¹ Quoted in the original German in Whiton's article, translation is my own: "So ist auch das Verwirrung: des Lesers nämlich, der nicht mehr weiß, von welchem Geschlecht die Rede ist."

⁶² In the German, "[er] prüfte die Abzeichen seines Blutes."

“type”) purposefully open (324).⁶³ By unmooring degeneracy and its indicators from any specific genetic background, and by unmasking the ironies inherent in labeling some individuals degenerate and some not, Mann suggests with “The Blood of the Walsungs” the absurdity of the type of biological labeling that will only rise to greater prominence in the next decades.

Mann ends his story with one last jab at degeneration theory; the story’s final scene includes the hint of fertility, the suggestion that, in direct contradiction to Nordau’s and Nietzsche’s models of sterile degeneracy, Siegmund and Sieglinde will continue to propagate the Aarenhold family line. Mann’s degenerate Sieglinde has just as much ability to become pregnant as her heroic counterpart in *The Valkyrie*; as Whiton puts it, “the incest is not sterile or fruitless” (Whiton 42).⁶⁴ Upon consummation, Sieglinde asks Siegmund what will happen with von Beckerath, and Siegmund replies, “He should be thankful to us. He will lead a less trivial existence, from now on” (Mann 325).⁶⁵ Siegmund’s words signify that Sieglinde, pregnant, will be able to hide their criminal act by attributing her child to von Beckerath instead of to her brother. Engelstein likewise notes that, beyond this single encounter, Siegmund’s statement “introduces an indeterminacy in the paternity of any future children of Sieglinde’s” (Engelstein 293).⁶⁶ The fact that the twins, at least the second generation of degenerates themselves, will now contribute a third generation, suggests their virility rather than sterility, and the intimation that

⁶³ In the German, “verzog sie vor Schmerz das Gesicht, wodurch die physiognomischen Eigentümlichkeiten ihrer Art außerordentlich hervortraten.”

⁶⁴ Whiton’s article concentrates on these fertile implications of Mann’s new ending, in contrast to the old discarded ending, yet Whiton reads “The Blood of the Walsungs” ultimately as a parallel to Mann’s supposed bisexual tendencies and his anxieties about productivity in creating art.

⁶⁵ In the German, “dankbar soll er uns sein. Er wird ein minder triviales Dasein führen, von nun an.”

⁶⁶ Engelstein’s article looks more broadly at incest in German culture as simultaneously a method of preserving racial “purity,” and as an atavistic act denoting racial “otherness.” However, she reads “The Blood of the Walsungs” as “reintroduc[ing] a reified and static notion of race,” with the incestuous act “heighten[ing] the distinctiveness of racial markers,” while through the addition of degeneration theory I have shown how Mann unmoors those racial markers in order to reveal the constructedness of race (Engelstein 290).

their child will be readily attributed to von Beckerath suggests as well the possibility that hidden, this degenerate offspring might further propagate. Norris includes such a possibility in *Vandover and the Brute* as an intimation of the need for further and more effective methods of biopolitical classification and containment. Mann, however, ends his story not only as a declaration of the arbitrariness of biological classifications, but also presents the virility of precisely those deemed most “threatening” as an intentional mockery of theorists’ attempts to ease (to him ridiculous) anxieties around humanity’s future.

IV. Conclusion

The contradictions Mann and Norris employ in their stories of degeneracy, contradictions indeed inherent within the definitions of degeneration provided by Nietzsche and Nordau, extend to the labeling of degeneration theorists themselves. For instance, Wagner’s anti-Semitism has been well-documented, especially in his essay “Judaism in Music” which attacked ‘Jewishness’ in German art and music in order to explain “the *involuntary repulsion* possessed for us by the nature and personality of the Jews” (Wagner 80). Yet the same logic which causes anti-Semites to generalize an entire culture as “repellent” based on their “nature” allows Nordau to make sweeping generalizations about the nature of degenerates; in fact, Nordau spends a large section of his tome defining Wagner as degenerate. Nordau charges Wagner “with a greater abundance of degeneration than all the degenerates put together with whom we have hitherto become acquainted” (Nordau 171). Moreover, for the Jewish Nordau, Wagner’s “delirium inspired by his furious anti-Semitism” also marks him as degenerate; Nordau later explains that “German hysteria manifests itself in anti-Semitism, that most dangerous form of the persecution-mania, in which the person believing himself persecuted becomes a savage persecutor, capable of all

crimes” (172, 209). Yet Nordau does not acknowledge that in writing an entire volume on the identification and eradication of the ‘degenerates’ who ‘persecute’ German society, he, too, “becomes a savage persecutor.” Paradoxically, many characteristics that Nordau associates with degeneracy (mental illness, sexual deviance, etc.) are also historically associated with Jewishness in Germany: Sander Gilman explains that in the late 19th century, “the illness dominating the discourse of the antisemitic science was madness, and its origin was in the ‘dangerous’ marriages of the Jews: their refusal to marry beyond the inner group” (Gilman). Thus anti-Semitism is degenerate, but Jewishness is also seen as degenerate.

This arbitrariness of labeling shows further in Nietzsche’s assessment of Wagner: “This decadent corrupts our health—and music as well. Is Wagner a human being at all? Isn’t he rather a sickness?” (Nietzsche 620). As I have demonstrated, Nietzsche considers Wagner the “Protean character of degeneration that here conceals itself in the chrysalis of art and artist” (622).⁶⁷ Yet a mere four years later, Nordau includes a lengthy section in his work enumerating the ways in which Nietzsche is likewise degenerate, citing his “intellectual Sadism, and his mania of contradiction and doubt, or mania for questioning” and his “misanthropy, or anthropophobia, megalomania, and mysticism” (Nordau 465). Nordau, in labeling those artists (Zola, Tolstoy, Hauptmann) who write degenerate characters as degenerate themselves, moreover opens himself to the same critique: namely, that his ‘obsession’ might likewise mark him as degenerate. Indeed, Daniel Pick notes that “Nordau’s imprudent generalisations and his ‘hysterical’ style of address” caused “accusations of degeneracy [. . .] to fly back upon him” (Pick 25). Frank Norris, who

⁶⁷ According to critic Thomas Rütten, Mann “turned against himself” Nietzsche’s critique of Wagner (“wendete sie [Nietzsches Angriff] gegen sich selbst”) (Sprecher 165). Mann moreover “regarded himself as a neurasthenic”; in that sense, he, like Wagner, might be considered degenerate by Nietzsche (“betrachtete er sich selbst als Neurastheniker”) (165). For a more in-depth look at Mann’s relation to health and medicine, see Sprecher’s *Literature and Sickness in the Fin-de-Siècle*.

wrote narratives of social decay with similar goals as Nordau, would also be considered degenerate by Nordau's yardstick. In every instance, those naming others as aberrant and dangerous to society (Wagner, Nietzsche, and Nordau), are likewise subject to labeling which marks their 'abnormality.'

If everyone comes under suspicion of degeneracy, one might argue that in fact, 'abnormality' remains an impossible to define concept (as Mann demonstrates). Yet authors such as Norris focus on degeneration theory's contradictions as a sign instead that more specific, biologically-based methods are needed to suss out the threat. Works such as Émile Zola's *Nana* (1880), J.K. Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884), Gerhart Hauptmann's *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (1889) and Ellen Glasgow's *The Descendant* (1897),⁶⁸ in combination with the proliferation of 'scientific' accounts of degeneration (Nordau, Lombroso, Morel, etc.), contribute to a growing social concern in Western countries about the presence of the 'dangerous individual.'

Nordau ends his tome with a call to action, specifically regarding the field of psychology: "Medical specialists of insanity have failed to understand their duty. It is time for them to come to the front," to show the public "the mental derangement of degenerate artists and authors, and teach them that the works in fashion are written and painted delirium" (Nordau 559). We have already seen how Vandover creates art easily classified as "painted delirium," and his "approaching insanity" marks him as a potential candidate for psychological intervention (Norris 180). Mann likewise presents mental 'abnormality' in his story "Tristan," in which a degenerate

⁶⁸ As mentioned, Zola was a dominant influence on Norris, causing contemporaneous critics to refer to Norris as the "American Zola," and *Vandover and the Brute* takes up many similar themes as *Nana* (including shocking sexuality and beastly physicality) (McElrath 152). Norris also read Glasgow; he expressed admiration for her in his essay "Why Women Should Write the Best Novels—and Why They Don't" (407). Mann likewise knew of Zola's works—his brother Heinrich famously wrote an essay praising Zola's support of Alfred Dreyfus, while simultaneously attacking Thomas's support of WWI (Hayman 288). Biographer Ronald Hayman speculates that Mann might also have been familiar with Hauptmann and Huysmans, as reflected in "The Little Herr Friedemann," although as I have demonstrated, he would have been critical of their brand of biological determinism (66).

woman, Gabriele, undergoes treatment at a sanatorium for her mental illness, only to succumb to the influence of a fellow patient who insists that she play Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* on the piano. Mann intimates that Gabriele herself will die due to the shock of Wagner's music, yet he ends his story with an image of her "fat son," a baby full of "laughter" and "unexplainable delight" who presumably will continue to grow up healthy and strong, further propagating his degenerate heritage (Mann 206).⁶⁹ In both instances, the continued threat of inherited madness echoes the social desire for better methods of containment, if not cure.

As Michel Foucault states, "the notion of degeneration provides a way of isolating, covering, and cutting out a zone of social danger while simultaneously giving it a pathological status as illness," yet the proliferation of potential causes and criteria suggests the necessity of targeting degenerate individuals based on the specific threat they present (Foucault 119). Thus individual fields concentrate on 'abnormality' within their specialties; psychology, for instance, makes "the knowledge, prevention, and possible cure of mental illness function as an absolutely necessary form of social precaution against a number of fundamental dangers linked to the very existence of madness" (119).⁷⁰ My three remaining chapters, therefore, will concentrate on the biological turn in and specific aims of three disciplines—psychology, criminal law, and the genetic sciences—spurred to action by the perceived decline in humanity's health at the *fin-de-siècle*, and committed to classifying and containing those individuals responsible. The Aarenhold twins and Vandover might equally belong to the categories of lunatic, criminal, or genetic

⁶⁹ In the German, "Gabriele Eckhofs dicker Sohn," "lachen," and "unerklärlicher Lust."

⁷⁰ As individual disciplines react to the 'threat' of degeneration, they likewise adopt and change the term "degeneration," which then implies mental, behavioral, and physical 'abnormality' depending on its context. For an interesting discussion of this transformation, see Daniel Pick's *Faces of Degeneration* which aims "to trace important shifts in this conception during the second half of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century" in various European countries (Pick 7).

monstrosity, and as I will demonstrate in the remainder of this project, those categories feed into one another, eventually culminating in the eugenic fervor of the 1930s.

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CHAPTER 2: CONFINED LUNATICS: CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN AND GEORG HEYM

I. Introduction

The beginnings of modern psychology are often traced to the mesmerism movement of the late 18th century, which started with Franz Mesmer's theories in the 1770s about a fluid present in human bodies. For Mesmer, "disease originates from the unequal distribution of this fluid in the human body; recovery is achieved when the equilibrium is restored" through various therapeutic means (Ellenberger 62). The unequal balance of fluid was considered the sole cause of mental illnesses, and physical treatment, such as using magnetic fluid baths to influence the patient's internal fluid, was expected to cure any symptoms. In the 19th century, the field of psychology passed through several subsequent phases, including a focus on spiritualism in the 1850s and 60s, and a turn to neurology lead by the physician Jean-Martin Charcot at the end of the 19th century (Ellenberger). For each of these early movements, psychology remained heavily intertwined with a focus on the physical body, drawing from medical sciences to promote physical treatments which would 'cure' mental illnesses.

At the turn of the 20th century, however, psychology turns to questions of the mind and the unconscious, as heralded by Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas about "the unconscious as an area of confused thoughts, emotions, and instincts, at the same time as an area of reenactment of past stages of the individual and of the species" (Ellenberger 273). The most well-known figure in psychology, Sigmund Freud, partially drew his conception of psychoanalysis and its ability to 'unmask' the "hidden unconscious motivations" of the individual from Nietzsche, although he

downplayed Nietzsche's influence on him (277).⁷¹ This shift, starting in the 1880s, from physiological-based treatments of visible symptoms to psychoanalytical treatments based on a hidden unconscious, is paradoxically accompanied by a turn in psychology to inherited, or biological, explanations of mental illness. This chapter focuses on the biological turn, looking specifically at the mental illness historically named "hysteria" as a case study. As Elaine Showalter points out, hysteria in particular becomes a cultural phenomenon; "by 1900 hysteria had become widespread in the United States and Western Europe [and] doctors explained the epidemic as a product of hereditary weakness and cultural *degeneration*" (Showalter 16, emphasis mine). I trace the transformation of the hysteria diagnosis from the 1890s in the United States, to the 1910s in Germany, in short stories from two authors uniquely focused on questions of mental abnormality and the medical treatment thereof: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Georg Heym. By comparing their stories, I will demonstrate a change in emphasis in psychology from physical treatments meant to push individuals back towards desired social norms, to the biopolitical goal of sussing out hidden mental abnormality and containing those thereby deemed 'dangerous.'

Heym and Gilman reveal the adverse effects of totalizing physiological control and isolation prescribed in response to health anomalies. Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," and Heym's "Jonathan" portray individuals confined within medical 'institutions' who become grotesque as a result of the disciplinary treatment, including isolation, to which they are subjected. The emergence of the grotesque in these stories serves as a critique of medical professionals who render their patients passive objects who must submit. In the case of Gilman, I

⁷¹ Henri Ellenberger gives an accurate account of the many parallels between Nietzsche's philosophies and Freud's own writing, which become especially obvious in a comparative reading of Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* and Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* (Ellenberger 277).

read the disparity between her anti-authority stance on mental treatments, and her pro-eugenic stance on social health, as seen in several essays and her novel *Herland*, as the result of a lingering disconnect between questions of heredity and mental maladies during her time. For Heym, however, the incorporation of a biological component in definitions of mental illness, and the turn to the theory of the unconscious, suggests danger to social health is ubiquitous; everyone is mad. The second Heym story I analyze, “The Madman,” makes clear his ambivalence around medical institutions; while he critiques their effect on individuals, they remain potentially necessary as a way to contain an otherwise perceived troubling social decline. This chapter will end with a closer look at the idea of the “dangerous individual,” which conflates heredity, mental illness, and crime as a justification for the increasing confinement of those deemed particularly hazardous to society.

II. Gilman’s Grounds-Creepers

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, born in 1860 in Connecticut, wrote both fiction and nonfiction extensively. Her famous story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” published in 1892, has been discussed at length not only by Gilman herself, but by contemporaneous as well as contemporary critics from a variety of disciplines. Gilman’s own assessment of her story has been oft-quoted: “It was not intended to drive people crazy, but to save people from being driven crazy, and it worked” (Gilman, *Yellow* 332). While “The Yellow Wallpaper” certainly should be read as an indictment of specific treatments of mental illness, critics have not yet tied the story’s significance to its placement within a larger historical biological shift in the field of psychology. Critics focus on Gilman’s biographical past and its influence on “The Yellow Wallpaper,” as with Jeffrey Berman’s *The Talking Cure* and Helen Horowitz’s *Wild Unrest*, or on the significance of the

story for women's rights and changing characterizations of women, as with Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity*. By looking instead at the disciplinary aspects of the narrator's medical treatment, I trace a link to the subsequent turn in psychology to genetics-based diagnoses which justify the isolation and treatment of large populations, rather than individuals. The increase in the narrator's grotesqueness and that of her surroundings makes clear Gilman's *aversion* to discipline in cases of mental difference; however, I will end this section with a discussion of how other Gilman texts demonstrate an *endorsement* of biologically-based disciplinary mechanisms.

Gilman's story, written in the first person by an unnamed female narrator, tells of the narrator's slow descent into hallucinations and madness as a result of the treatment prescribed by her husband John and other physicians. The narrator has been diagnosed with "temporary nervous depression—a slight hysterical tendency" by John and "a physician of high standing," presumably S. Weir Mitchell whose name is mentioned later in the narrative (Gilman, *Yellow* 3). In the second half of the 19th century, nervous conditions such as hysteria or neurasthenia, which manifest primarily in mental symptoms such as depression or anxiety, are nonetheless treated as physical ailments. The cause of these illnesses is placed in the physical body, or specifically in the nervous system, a "want of strength in the nerve," and treatments thus likewise focus on the physiological (Beard 217). As Horowitz writes in her biographical account of Gilman's struggles with illness, "a group of American physicians, including S. Weir Mitchell, established themselves as neurologists" and "asserted that research on the brain and the nervous system demonstrated that mental disorders were physical disorders, with clearly traceable causes" (Horowitz 118).

Mitchell, practicing medicine in the second half of the 19th century, became famous for his prescription of the “rest cure” in cases of hysteria or neurasthenia. As Mitchell describes in one case, patients recover “when secluded” and the rest cure involves “shut[ting] out friends, relatives, books and letters,” and confining the patient to bed (Mitchell 371). George Beard, a physician practicing at the same time as Mitchell, insisted that “the one principle on which neurasthenia is to be treated is by the concentration of all possible tonic influence on the nervous system—air, sunlight, water, food, rest, diversion, muscular exercise, and the internal administration of those remedies [...] which directly affect the central nervous system” (Beard 219). These prescriptions become the basis of Gilman’s narrator’s treatment: she “take[s] phosphates [...], and tonics, and journeys, and air, and exercise, and [is] absolutely forbidden to ‘work’ until [she] is well again,” instead expected to spend most of her time resting in bed (Gilman, *Yellow* 3). Likewise, John marks her health through physiological aspects rather than her mental state; when she expresses doubts about the efficacy of the treatment, he rebukes her by stating that she is “gaining flesh and color, [and her] appetite is better” (11). I mention the physical aspects of the narrator’s hysteria here to highlight the connection between this iteration of psychological practices with those prominent in early 19th century, where theories of the hidden mind are not yet the primary interest for those classifying mental abnormality.

Gilman incorporates these treatments in her story, partially influenced by her own extensive experience with Mitchell and the “rest cure.”⁷² In what follows, however, I will focus rather on the *mental* effects of the physiological treatment in order to demonstrate the detrimental nature of disciplinary mandates aimed at the individual body, mandates which only grow in scope in the 20th century as they become biopolitical. In her declaration that she is “forbidden” to

⁷² For a more detailed account of Gilman’s own illnesses and experience with Mitchell, see Horowitz’s biography *Wild Unrest*, or Cynthia Davis’ biography.

work, the narrator reveals the disciplinary nature of her treatment. The rigid prescriptions she follows correspond with the “existence of a whole set of techniques and institutions for measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal,” pushing individuals beyond mere health towards a socially-accepted mental and physical norm (Foucault, *Discipline* 199). In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault explicitly points to the ‘hysterical woman’ as a “target [...] for the ventures of knowledge,” where women’s bodies are “integrated into the sphere of medical practices, by reason of a pathology intrinsic to it” which must be institutionally corrected (Foucault, *History* 105, 104).

Gilman’s narrator experiences isolation as a result of her label as hysterical: throughout the story, she is unable to amend or discuss her diagnosis with her husband, becoming the object of classification rather than a subject in her own treatment. Isolation as a disciplinary mechanism is primarily associated with the prison system, where “solitude assures a sort of self-regulation of the penalty and makes possible a spontaneous individualization of the punishment”; the prisoner experiences a “change of ‘morality’ ” (Foucault, *Discipline* 237, 239). In Gilman’s story, John prescribes isolation with similar goals, of allowing the narrator to change her mental state and better fit the desired social norms. However, in his execution, John includes a contradiction which causes his wife to become a pliable object, rather than a subject able to “self-regulate” or “individualize.” As the narrator explains, “I sometimes fancy that in my condition if I had less opposition and more society and stimulus—but John says the very worst thing I can do is to think about my condition” (Gilman, *Yellow* 4). John forbids her from talking about or dwelling on her illness; he states that “there is nothing so dangerous, so fascinating, to a temperament like [hers]” as talking about the possibility that she has not gained in health, and he often dismisses her fears by asserting his authority as a physician (12). She is also not permitted to interact with

others who might treat her as a normal member of society, for instance with her cousins, because according to John she wouldn't be "able to stand it" emotionally or physically (10). Gilman's narrator thus remains in limbo—unable to resume normal activities with a familiar sense-of-self, and unable to reconcile her emotional and mental state while actively forbidden to ruminate on that state. Once diagnosed as having merely "a slight hysterical tendency," the narrator loses any sense of autonomy over her own conception of health or the proper course of treatment.

Surveillance of the individual, or "hierarchical observation," is another disciplinary mechanism meant to facilitate treatment and the individual's return to a norm (Foucault, *Discipline* 170). In "The Yellow Wallpaper," surveillance takes the shape of John and his sister Jennie's constant watching of the narrator, as when John "ask[s] Jennie a lot of professional questions" about the narrator's movements and actions during the day (Gilman, *Yellow* 16).⁷³ Discipline uses surveillance to "control or correct the operations of the body"; eventually the watched individual begins to regulate his or her own actions to better fit the desired norms (Foucault, *Discipline* 136). The narrator's treatment begins as a strictly enforced disciplinary confinement; she is placed in an attic room and given "a schedule prescription for each hour in the day," unable to openly engage in activities her husband finds dangerous (Gilman, *Yellow* 4). Foucault describes the "time-table" "found in schools, workshops and hospitals" as meant to "establish rhythms, impose particular occupations, regulate the cycles of repetition" in order to discipline the unruly body (Foucault, *Discipline* 149).

⁷³ John Bak in "Escaping the Jaundiced Eye: Foucauldian Panopticism in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" reads the narrator's confinement as paralleling that of prisoners in a Panopticon under constant surveillance, although Bak characterizes the wallpaper as the observer, rather than the narrator's husband. Bak's reading diverges from my own, however, as he conceives of the narrator's descent into madness as a triumphant overthrow of the patriarchal identity forced upon her.

The narrator's behavior under this strict treatment suggests the extent to which she has internalized the disciplinary push towards a desired norm. She strives seriously to 'fix' herself by obeying her husband's wishes, even though the effects on her body and mind prove devastating by the end. For instance, she heeds John's constant admonitions that she must exercise "proper self-control," that she must not give in to her own emotions or imagination, but use her "will and self-control and not let any silly fancies run away with [her]" (Gilman, *Yellow* 4, 10). Beyond using her "will and good sense to check the tendency" of giving in to her imagination, the narrator hides her writing from John because it "weigh[s] on [her] so not to do [her] duty" in following his instructions (7, 6). Perhaps the biggest indicator of the deeply ingrained disciplinary mechanism comes at the end of the story, when the narrator reveals that even at the peak of her mental breakdown, although she wants to, she does not jump out of a window because "a step like that is improper and might be misconstrued" by society (18). In each instance, her status as mental patient is reinforced by the necessity of her adhering to John's prescriptions, while her inability to conform entirely is evidenced by the continued presence of 'abnormal' "fancies" and desires.

Gilman's critique of such ineffectual discipline arises from the narrator's slow descent into madness as a result of her prescribed physiological treatments. Most critics writing on this short story debate whether "the narrator's heroism lie[s] in her defeated resistance to the male hegemony or in her triumphant escape from the external forces responsible for her confinement"; in other words, whether the narrator's end state should be read as positive or negative (Bak 40). By characterizing her reaction in grotesque terminology, however, I highlight instead the paradoxical nature of the disciplinary mechanism that, rather than achieving its desired norm, pushes its object to the opposite end of the spectrum. Whether or not Gilman's narrator finds her

transformation beneficial (and plenty of scholarship exists to support either side), the disciplinary mechanism has proved ineffective, as well as distressing, in producing a grotesque subject.

As Wolfgang Kayser states in *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, “the encounter with madness is one of the basic experiences of the grotesque which life forces upon us” (Kayser 184). Gilman’s narrator, as the story progresses, becomes increasingly grotesque in body as well as mind, in tandem with her surroundings. At first she becomes obsessed with the idea that the wallpaper in her room contains a “faint figure behind [who] seem[s] to shake the pattern, just as if she wanted to get out” (Gilman, *Yellow* 11). As the story progresses, the narrator’s madness is marked by the progression of this obsession; first she begins to speak of the figure behind the wallpaper as actually present, able to move, and finally she becomes the figure herself, in the narrative move which shocked contemporaneous audiences. In succumbing to madness, the narrator becomes physically grotesque: she begins crawling around the room, causing Jennie to find “yellow smooches on all [her] clothes” rubbed there from the wallpaper (13). She also “creep[s] by daylight” and gnaws on the bedpost although it “hurt[s] [her] teeth”; her crawling and gnawing mark her as the grotesque mixture of animal and human (16, 18). The final scene, where she “creep[s] smoothly on the floor, and [her] shoulder just fits in that long smooch around the wall,” exemplifies her transformation into Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque body (18). For Bakhtin, the grotesque body involves a “degradation,” a “lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract,” and a “transfer to the material level,” seen in the narrator’s literal proximity to the ground (Bakhtin 19).

Bakhtin further characterizes the grotesque body as “in the act of becoming, [...] continually built, created, and build[ing] and creat[ing] another body” in connecting to the world around it (Bakhtin 317). Gilman’s narrator is a body “in the act of becoming” by virtue of her

connection to the yellow wallpaper which surrounds her, as she moves from observing the “figure” in the pattern to becoming that figure. As the narrator becomes more grotesque, so too does the wallpaper: it conforms to Kayser’s notes on grotesque art as portraying “a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid” (Kayser 21). The wallpaper is “one of those sprawling flamboyant patterns committing every artistic sin,” including lines that “plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions”; it is “not arranged on any laws of radiation, or alternation, or repetition, or symmetry” (Gilman, *Yellow* 5, 9). Moreover, the wallpaper combines human elements, as with the “two bulbous eyes [that] stare” and the woman behind the pattern, with plants such as “wallowing seaweeds” and “an interminable string of toadstools, budding and sprouting in endless convolutions” (7, 9, 12). The narrator herself calls the wallpaper “the interminable grotesque,” and she spends more and more time concentrating on the wallpaper, describing its various elements as she slowly becomes part of the wallpaper herself (10).

Kayser states that “in the insane person, human nature itself seems to have taken on ominous overtones [... as] an impersonal force, an alien and inhuman spirit, ha[s] entered the soul” (Kayser 184). In the case of “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the “inhuman spirit” of the wallpaper has entered the narrator and in the end she becomes the “woman stooping down and creeping about behind that pattern”; it is her transformation which causes John to “faint” when he sees her (Gilman, *Yellow* 11). The narrator has become someone else entirely, as evidenced by her calling her husband “that man” rather than John, as if he were a stranger, and John’s shock may be attributed to the fact that the narrator’s treatment for ‘slight hysteria’ has not cured her, but has pushed her further into mental delusions and physiological grotesqueness (19). Instead of

conforming more closely to the desired norms of mental health, the narrator embraces their opposite; her grotesqueness, resulting from disciplinary treatment, rather “mark[s] the suspension of [...] norms” (Bakhtin 10).

While the narrator seems untroubled by her transformation, calling her occupation of creeping “pleasant,” Gilman wrote the story not to glorify an embracing of the descent into madness, but rather to shock her audience, alongside John, into realizing the detrimental effects of Mitchell’s rest cure (Gilman, *Yellow* 18). Gilman hints at the wider applicability of her story through veiled references to other women or persons unknown suffering the same illness as her narrator. The room is described as previously used as a “nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium [...] for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls” (5). Moreover, the wallpaper is “stripped off [...] in great patches all around the head of [her] bed, about as far as [she] can reach,” which the narrator blames on boisterous children (5). At this early point in the narrative, the reader has no reason to doubt the narrator’s state of mind, but in light of the ending of the narrative, the “barred windows” and “rings” in the walls, and the wallpaper torn precisely in a reachable distance from the bed suggests the confinement of other mentally ill patients. The hint of other patients is further reinforced by later descriptions of the room: the “floor is scratched and gouged and splintered, the plaster itself is dug out here and there, and this great heavy bed [...] looks as if it had been through the wars” (8). While the narrator each time blames the destruction on the previous presence of children, the ominous tone of words such as “gouged” suggests instead great mental distress inciting destruction, as seen later in the narrator herself who similarly rips at the wallpaper and pushes the bed around the room. Most damningly, “there is a very funny mark on th[e] wall, low down, near the mopboard [...], a long, straight, even smooch,” and the “bedstead is fairly gnawed” (15, 17). The narrator

marks these features as pre-existing and puzzling, stemming from children or from persons unknown, and while she herself may be the cause (she does later smooch along the wall, and bite the bedpost), her descriptions suggest the possibility that other women have been confined, like her, to the room with the yellow wallpaper to slowly lose their minds.

Gilman's critique of Mitchell's rest cure is most explicitly recognizable as an aversion to disciplinary control when we consider "The Yellow Wallpaper" in conjunction with another short story, written in 1915: "Dr. Clair's Place." This second story acts as a foil, portraying an effective and beneficial (in Gilman's view) treatment style for hysteria and depression. While the treatment shares certain similarities, such as requiring the patient to rest and sleep as much as possible at first, the key difference is the patient's autonomy and control over her situation. A sign at the door declares, "You come here of your own choice, for your own health and pleasure, freely; and are free to go when dissatisfied"; unlike the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper," the patients in this later story choose their treatment and are able to discontinue treatment they do not find beneficial (Gilman, *Yellow* 299). A closer look at Gilman's encounter with Mitchell demonstrates the importance of patient autonomy for mental health: Gilman wrote a letter to Mitchell prior to treatment in which she stated, "I want to work, to help people, to do good" (Horowitz 115). Mitchell's prescription of the opposite, that Gilman should not write or exert herself intellectually, had the adverse effect which dominates the plot of "The Yellow Wallpaper." Mitchell moreover wrote, "to think too much about their disorders is, on the whole, one of the worst things which can happen to a man or a woman," and counseled his female patients especially to avoid crying as much as possible (135). These instructions, which made their way into "The Yellow Wallpaper" through John's commands for his wife, again show Gilman's dislike of those aspects of Mitchell's rest cure which require the patient to conform to

disciplinary pressure by governing one's behaviors. As critic Berman puts it, "what seems most offensive about Mitchell's rest cure was its aim to make patients tractable," to make (female) patients into docile objects (Berman 47).

Gilman's thoughts on Mitchell and the treatment of women deemed hysterical at the turn of the 20th century become significant when considered in juxtaposition with her other writings, including the novel *Herland* (1915) and nonfiction writings, which highlight her approval of classifications of abnormality contingent on biology and heredity. Although her fictional responses to Mitchell make clear that Gilman's main gripe with mental health prescriptions is the disciplinary mechanism that enforces compliance, she paradoxically does not translate that concern to biological prescriptions. Gilman was well-versed in contemporaneous theories on biology; as Horowitz explains, "although Charlotte read Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* as early as 1880, her primary understanding of evolution came from *Popular Science Monthly*'s presentation of the works of Herbert Spencer, the British philosopher" (and social Darwinist) (Horowitz 24). While Spencer advocated a laissez-faire approach to social health, confident that evolutionary trends would lead inherently to the betterment of humanity, Gilman took a stronger stance and adopted eugenic rhetoric as the appropriate response to perceived biological decline.

For instance, in her article "Birth Control, Religion, and the Unfit," Gilman says, "we propose to check the undesirable increase [reproduction] by the simple device of sterilizing the unfit" (Gilman, "Birth Control" 108). In the same article, Gilman advocates for 'positive eugenics' as well in stating that "parents above the average, parents to be proud of, should give the world as many children as they can" (109).⁷⁴ These eugenic suggestions call for the

⁷⁴ Eugenics is often classified as positive or negative, where negative eugenics includes "marital restrictions for those with conditions deemed genetically transmissible; [...] [and] sterilization of individuals deemed feeble-minded

disciplining of biological reproduction upon classifying certain individuals as either deviating from or conforming to the desired norm; in other words, a direct example of the type of disciplinary enforcement Gilman condemns in “The Yellow Wallpaper.” In another article, “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem,” Gilman goes further in declaring that “the whole body of negroes who do not progress, who are not self-supporting, who are degenerating into an increasing percentage of social burdens or actual criminals, should be taken hold of by the state” and made to serve in military, factory, or agricultural capacities (“Suggestion” 81). Again, Gilman prescribes a specific treatment to aid social health, which does not take into account the individual being treated, but renders them biological objects.

Other scholars, notably Thomas Peyser, have commented upon the eugenic themes of Gilman’s novel *Herland*,⁷⁵ which presents biological control in an ideal (or utopian) setting where the participants are, at least on the surface, willing subjects. Peyser reads *Herland* as proof that “for Gilman, collective action that overrides any individual objections, or rather collective action that arises spontaneously from rigorously like-minded citizens, has an unquestioned value” (Peyser 11). He further states that “Gilman clearly favors reliance on authority to independence of thought, and, indeed, values conformity for its own sake”; these statements confirm Gilman’s reverence for biopolitical mechanisms of normalization (12). In *Herland*, conformity is enforced from the reproductive conception of an individual until her death; the women who live in the utopian society have spent “some fifteen hundred years” “work[ing] to

[...] or otherwise deviant” (Smith 11). Positive eugenics on the other hand promotes reproduction among desirable groups, calling on the ‘fit’ to “produce more children in the name of racial and national health” (11). Eugenics is intricately tied to race during the early 20th century; the racism of concepts like the “Negro Problem” shows most succinctly in the burgeoning genetic sciences which are the subject of my final chapter.

⁷⁵ For an interesting reading of *Herland* in light of its eugenic themes, specifically in reference to Lester F. Ward’s theories as an influence, see Cynthia Davis’s essay “His and Herland: Charlotte Perkins Gilman ‘Re-presents’ Lester F. Ward.”

improve that population in quality” in terms of health, intelligence, and abilities (Gilman, *Herland* 71). They also practice “ ‘negative eugenics’ which must have been an appalling sacrifice [...] to forego motherhood for their country”; those mothers who do not fit the desired social norms abstain from giving birth (69). In the utopian setting, the women represent the “collective” of like-minded individuals, while outside visitors with their “independent thought” represent a threat to the community’s mental and physical health.

Peyser reads a continuance of thought between “The Yellow Wallpaper” and *Herland* through the idea of the collective; his analysis of “The Yellow Wallpaper” deems the narrator’s transformation at the end “the erasure of the boundary between the me and the not-me,” or a “conflation of self and other” where the narrator colonizes the body of the woman behind the wallpaper (Peyser 12). For Peyser, then, both pieces “depict a self that can survive its own liquidation, whether it becomes lost in the idiosyncrasies of a private pathology or absorbed into the unquestioned beliefs of the collective” (12). Similarly, Dana Seitler makes the case for continuity between the feminist themes of “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the eugenics of *Herland* by exploring the fusion of eugenics and feminism in “regeneration narratives,” where women alone have the power to redeem “the vices of the modern world through an adherence to biological law” (Seitler 179). Peyser reads Gilman as encouraging the subsumption of the individual into a collectively decided ‘greater good,’ and Seitler reads Gilman as primarily promoting female rights and autonomy. Both Peyser and Seitler therefore reconcile the seeming disparity between Gilman’s best-known works; I wish instead to preserve that gap as indicative of the changing nature of psychology at the turn of the 20th century.

When reading the disciplinary mechanism in Gilman’s works, it becomes clear that in fact the only selves that ‘survive’ in any benevolent sense are those who have some measure of

autonomy over decisions involving their health. My goal in identifying the paradoxical gap between Gilman's convictions relating to the treatment of women with hysteria, and those relating to genetic inheritance, is not to undercut the feminist scholarship that demonstrates Gilman's importance for women's rights during her time. Rather, I wish to highlight the consequences of the biological turn in the discipline of psychology and its potential reduction of compassion for those with 'abnormal' medical issues. Gilman suggests with her fictional and nonfictional writings that the needs of the individual remain secondary to considerations of collective health; once psychological illnesses gain a biological component, therefore, individual health must necessarily remain secondary to the prescriptions of those with social health in mind. In other words, the shift from disciplinary focus on the individual to biopolitical surveys of larger populations, accompanied by a turn to inheritance models of 'abnormality,' precludes the possibility of individualized (and therefore optimal) treatments. It is possible that Gilman, writing the same story decades later, might have entirely changed the tone of "The Yellow Wallpaper"; indeed, in her "preconsultation letter to Dr. Mitchell she had asked if he was the 'first authority' not only on 'nervous diseases' but on 'brain troubles' as well" (Horowitz 119). Gilman's distinction between, and anxiety about, "nervous diseases" which were curable and "insanity caused by brain disease" which was permanent suggests already a preoccupation with the possibility of biologically-determined mental difference (121).

During Gilman's time, in the American context, hysteria does not yet include a genetic component; Jane Thraikill in *Affecting Fictions* lists the various 'known' causes for nerve disorders at the time, such as industrial growth—"new technologies, market growth, expanding cities—[that] were depleting the nerve resources of individuals" (Thraikill 127). In general, "nervous exhaustion was in fact a pathology resulting from too great an expenditure of

willpower” so that women over-taxed in their domestic duties, or men traumatized after war, were both groups especially susceptible to illnesses like hysteria (129). Thrailkill further points out that in “Dr. Clair’s Place,” the female patient admitted for depression heals to the point where she “becomes a professional who specializes in invalids” (134). While Thrailkill mentions this in the service of explaining Gilman’s unique conception of the proper treatments for mental disorders, the patient’s complete recovery highlights the fact that for Gilman, hysterical illnesses, unlike racial degeneration, did not include any innate aspect that would compromise a patient’s ability after treatment to function in society. The shift to genetics in determining ‘abnormality’ in the United States becomes all too clear in subsequent years in cases such as *Buck v. Bell* from 1927, where Oliver Wendell Holmes writes that since “heredity plays an important part in the transmission of insanity, imbecility, etc.,” “the health of the patient and the welfare of society may be promoted in certain cases by the sterilization of [individuals with] mental defects” (*Buck v. Bell*). Situated between the old, physiological, and new, biological models of psychology, Gilman’s writing thus remains entrenched in conflicting ideas about the merits of forced treatments.

This chapter will end with a closer look at how the move to genetics in psychology relates to criminal law and the perceived danger of those with mental illnesses. First, however, I will turn to the literature of Georg Heym, a German expressionist primarily known for his macabre poetry. Heym’s short stories were published in 1913, two decades after Gilman’s story, at a time when German psychology was dominated by Freud’s theories on the unconscious. Gilman, upon reading Freud in the 1910s, “linked her loathing for psychoanalysis to its reductive nature [of] attributing all human conduct to sex” and “offered lectures on ‘The Falsity of Freud’

and ‘The Freudian Fallacy’ ” (Davis, *Charlotte* 342). For Gilman, Freud’s suggestions of “inward- and backward-looking therapeutics reversed her outward- and forward-looking methodology”; Freud’s theories, in focusing on the internal mental status of an individual, promoted self-discovery which might not turn up desired insights for someone worried about their mental state (343). Indeed, by turning the “medical gaze” inward to hidden parts of the psyche, Freud opened the possibility that anyone might actually be insane.

The German expressionist movement of the early 20th century was largely characterized by this possibility of madness hidden within. As Allen Thiher states in *Revels in Madness*, “in expressionist art the mad are present everywhere: they are the ubiquitous psychic double of every writer, wandering in every expressionist landscape and city scene” (Thiher 252). Moreover, “the pathology to be explored could apparently be one within or one without”; expressionists did not exclude the possibility that they themselves, their subjects, or the medical doctors tasked with diagnosing mental illness were in fact afflicted by madness (254). One of the more famous examples of this expressionist attitude is the 1920 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene, which in its original iteration ended with the revelation that the medical director of the insane asylum is himself insane, but in the released version ended with the narrator revealed as a patient of the asylum, and the narration merely a hallucinated invention. In both instances, the movie’s lasting impact stems from the sudden reveal at the conclusion that an individual previously deemed reliable is, in fact, dangerously mad. In the following section, I will demonstrate how Heym, writing about the detrimental effects of the disciplinary mechanism in similar ways to Gilman, does not establish divisions between the disciplined, objectified individual and the collective social body that must remain healthy. Instead, Heym’s stories, like other expressionist works, demonstrate a concern with pervasive and hidden mental illness that

collapses such divisions, and that precipitates an increased reliance on the biological for classification.

III. Heym's Troubled Flyers

Georg Heym, born in 1887 in what was then part of Germany but now Poland, wrote primarily poetry for which he became well-known only after his death at the young age of 24. Heym wrote prose as well, although his prose has received little critical attention; as Allan Blunden puts it, the few pieces written about Heym's stories have caused "the coffin lid [to be] briefly lifted, but only to demonstrate that Heym's prose is indeed buried" (Blunden 107). However, Heym's stories warrant a closer look, particularly as works concerned with health and medical treatment in the first decades of the 20th century. Heym's story "Jonathan," published in a collection in 1913, follows the suffering of a man whose legs have been broken in an accident on a ship, and who lies on a hospital bed to heal. As in Gilman's story, Heym's protagonist undergoes disciplinary treatment by medical professionals, and while his initial condition is a physical illness, he too descends into grotesque madness as a result of his treatment.

The nurses and doctors exert total control over Jonathan's physical state as he lies inert in bed, dictating the levels of light, pain medication, and stimulation Jonathan receives. Their treatment takes on disciplinary qualities in Jonathan's interpretations⁷⁶ of his responsibilities as a patient to suppress negative emotions and submit to medical prescriptions. Just as Gilman's narrator experiences isolation in not talking about her illness with John, Jonathan too is barred from discussing his situation with medical professionals. Whenever the nurse "hear[s] him

⁷⁶ Heym's story is written in a third person limited perspective, most closely aligned with Jonathan; as a result, many statements about disciplinary measures are clearly meant as Jonathan's interpretations of his surroundings, not as mandates handed down by those in charge, although the effect is the same.

complaining about his pains, she refuse[s] to tolerate this useless bellyaching,” instead leaving Jonathan to deal with the pain on his own (Heym 233).⁷⁷ However, unlike Gilman’s narrator, Jonathan does feel obligated to reflect on his situation, and in fact experiences his isolation as forcing such reflection. Jonathan remarks how the patients “must lie quietly in their beds, they must surrender themselves to their bodily pains, they [are] tortured alive” (235).⁷⁸ According to Jonathan, the Christ figure hung at the foot of each bed serves to “mock their suffering, to hold their helplessness endlessly in front of their eyes”; in other words, to ensure their reflection and submission to the status of patient (235).⁷⁹ Jonathan moreover compares his nurse to a “guard” who is “able to order him” around, and he submits to prescribed treatments with little protest, as when the doctor amputates his legs without first informing him (240).⁸⁰ Just as Gilman’s narrator loses subjectivity through her husband’s refusal to consider her thoughts or feelings about her treatment, Jonathan likewise becomes merely a physical problem for the doctors and nurses to solve. His emotional subjectivity, his inability to allow the patient identity to overpower all other desires, does not interest them.

Jonathan’s greatest desire is to remove his sense of isolation by connecting with others; he often declares that patients “become healthy much quicker [...] [if] one doesn’t lock them up in this horrible loneliness like criminals” (Heym 237).⁸¹ He attempts to build a connection to the woman in the next room, informing her that a visit from her would “help [him] more than any

⁷⁷ In the original German, “Als sie ihn über seine Schmerzen klagen hörte, verbat sie sich diese unnütze Nörgelei.” All translations of Heym’s writing into English are my own, unless noted otherwise.

⁷⁸ In the German, “sie mußten ruhig in ihren Betten liegen, sie mußten sich den körperlichen Schmerzen hingeben, sie wurden bei lebendigem Leibe geschunden.”

⁷⁹ In the German, “um ihre Leiden zu verhöhnen, um ihre Ohnmacht ihnen ewig vor Augen zu halten.”

⁸⁰ In the German, “ein Wächter [...] der ihm befehlen konnte.”

⁸¹ In the German, “sie werden dabei viel eher gesund, denn man sperrt sie nicht ein wie Verbrecher in diese gräßliche Einsamkeit.”

doctor”; for Jonathan, physical and mental health are inseparable, even though the doctors in charge do not share his opinion (238).⁸² The “terrible loneliness,” the fact that he has “no-one to hold on to, no hand, no comfort, no tender words” exacerbates Jonathan’s physical pain, while speaking to the female patient relieves it (233).⁸³ In fact, upon the doctor’s stern pronouncement that Jonathan absolutely may not partake in conversation, for the sake of his physical healing, Jonathan frantically enumerates the probabilities that he will never again see the woman. Immediately, his physical symptoms return and multiply: “a cramp shakes him, he is freezing. His hands become ice-cold. He can feel the fever returning” (240).⁸⁴

The finality of Jonathan’s isolation, in combination with the involuntary act of amputation to ensure his physical health, mark the beginning of Jonathan’s mental slide into madness. Heym’s descriptions of Jonathan and the other patients become increasingly grotesque, in protest against the medical institution’s objectification of those patients. Jonathan succumbs to pain and becomes animalistic, like Gilman’s narrator, in “clutch[ing] at the iron bedpost with all his might” and “scream[ing] full-throatedly” (Heym 241).⁸⁵ The other patients as well are reduced to their diagnoses, stripped of subjectivity and described as Bakhtinian grotesque decomposing bodies. Jonathan’s scream is echoed:

[...] by the cancer patients [...] in whom the white pus in their intestines again begins to flow, by the doomed patients, whose bones are rotting away, slowly, piece by piece, and by those on whose heads a terrible tumor proliferates, which from the inside-out eats

⁸² In the German, “wenn Sie kommen, hilft mir das mehr als alle Ärzte.”

⁸³ In the German, “entsetzlichen Einsamkeit” and “niemand, an dem er sich festhalten konnte, keine Hand, keinen Trost, kein zärtliches Wort.”

⁸⁴ In the German, “Ein Krampf schüttelte ihn, er fror. Seine Hände wurden eiskalt. Er fühlte, wie das Fieber wiederkam.” I’ve changed the verb-tense from past to present without indication in the English version.

⁸⁵ In the German, “Er klammerte sich mit aller Gewalt an den eisernen Bettpfosten” and “dann brüllte er aus voller Kehle.”

away, erodes, drinks up, their noses, their jaws, their eyes, and rips open huge stinking holes, huge pits full of yellow sludge in their white faces. (241-2)⁸⁶

These patients exemplify the grotesque body that “ignores the impenetrable surface that closes and limits the body as a separate and completed phenomenon” by “display[ing] not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs” (Bakhtin 318). Heym concentrates on bodily fluids and facial features in his extreme descriptions, reducing the patients to their physical parts just as the medical institution of his story erases their identity as anything but patient.

The patients become not only animalistic, but also plant-like, the “red swollen heads of the sick heaped like huge turnips in an autumnal field” (Heym 242).⁸⁷ Jonathan’s legs, first compared to “two big corpses,” are amputated and his remaining body grows out of the bandages “like the body of an exotic God out of a flower-bud” (242, 243).⁸⁸ In Heym’s other writings as well, medical patients take on grotesque plant-like qualities in the service of critiquing medical procedures. In another short story in the same collection, “The Autopsy,” Heym describes the corpse as “resembling the huge iridescent flower-bud of a mysterious plant from Indian jungles,” before the doctors open the body and, focused on the Bakhtinian “inner features,” “take its contents out” (231).⁸⁹ In this story, Heym makes clear the problematic nature of a medical

⁸⁶ In the German, “ein schreckliches Echo bei den Krebskranken, [...] denen nun der weiße Eiter wieder in ihren Därmen zu rinnen begann, bei den Verdamnten, denen die Knochen wegfaulten, langsam, Stück für Stück, und bei denen, denen auf dem Kopf ein furchtbares Sarkom wucherte, das von innen heraus ihre Nase, ihren Oberkiefer, ihre Augen wegfraß, ausfraß, austrank, und riesige stinkende Löcher, große Trichter voll gelber Jauche in ihrem weißen Gesicht aufgerissen hatte.” Again, I’ve changed the verb-tense from past to present without indication in the English version.

⁸⁷ In the German, “die roten geschwollenen Köpfe der Kranken staken wie große Rüben in einem herbstlichen Acker.”

⁸⁸ In the German, “zwei große Leichname” and “wie der Körper eines exotischen Gottes aus einem Blumenkelch.”

⁸⁹ In the German, “Sein Leib glich einem riesigen schillernden Blumenkelch, einer geheimnisvollen Pflanze aus indischen Urwäldern,” and “holten seinen Inhalt heraus.”

profession so concerned with rendering visible and classifiable the ill body, through what Foucault calls “the medical gaze” (Foucault, *Birth* 135). For Foucault, the “medical gaze” moves “vertically from the symptomatic surface to the tissual surface; in depth, plunging from the manifest to the hidden” in order to render knowable the “pathology” in question (135). For Heym, the consequences are “the screams of endless torment” of the patients, and that “the corpse quietly shiver[s] in [the] bliss” of death until the doctors “br[eak] open the bones of his temples”; in other words, the emotional and physical agony of those objectified by medicine (Heym 231, 233).⁹⁰

Jonathan and his peers thus embody Kayser’s grotesque blend of “plants, animals, and human beings,” but Heym’s most explicit critique of disciplinary medical treatment shows in Jonathan’s further grotesque swing to madness and hallucinations. In a surprisingly similar manner as Gilman’s narrator,⁹¹ Jonathan begins to hallucinate: “Suddenly it seems to him as if the wallpaper of the room is moving in several spots. It seems to shiver here and there and to bulge, as if someone stands behind it who is pressing against it in order to rip it” (Heym 244).⁹² In Jonathan’s hallucinations, just as in the female narrator’s, the wallpaper does rip and lets out the figure who has been standing behind it; in this case, “whole legions of small tiny men,” or “dwarves” (244).⁹³ Jonathan’s hallucinations continue in minute detail for several paragraphs, until the conclusion of the story where Jonathan “haul[s] himself over the fields, over deserts,

⁹⁰ In the German, “die Schreie unendlicher Qualen,” and “der Tote zitterte leise vor Seligkeit,” and “die Knochen seiner Schläfe aufbrachen.”

⁹¹ The striking similarities between their descriptions suggest that Heym read Gilman’s story, although so far no biographical or critical writings place their works in conversation.

⁹² In the German, “Plötzlich schien es ihm, als wenn sich die Tapeten des Zimmers an einigen Stellen bewegten. Sie schienen leise hin und her zu zittern und sich aufzubauchen, als wenn dahinter jemand stände, der sich gegen sie anstremte, um sie zu zerreißen.” I’ve changed the verb-tense from past to present without indication in the English version.

⁹³ In the German, “ganze Heerscharen kleiner winziger Männchen” and “Zwergen.”

while the ghost fl[ies] ahead of him, always further through darkness, through terrible darkness” (246).⁹⁴ The ghost presumably figures as Death, as it is described as a skull, but Heym’s ending remains intentionally unclear, whether Jonathan does succumb to his injuries and die, or stays locked in hallucinations while his body remains in the hospital bed. In either case, his lack of human contact, and his reduction to physical object by the medical staff of the hospital, has directly caused his negative mental collapse.

The focus at the end of “Jonathan” on descriptions such as the “blue [dwarf] heads swaying like an ocean of huge cornflowers on breakable stems” and the deathly ghost foregrounds the necessity of interpretation, in the vein of Freud’s ideas about dream symbolism, in order to make sense of Jonathan’s hallucinations (Heym 244).⁹⁵ Whereas Gilman disliked Freud’s theories, Heym indirectly gestures towards his ideas on dream interpretation, which were published originally in 1900 as *The Interpretation of Dreams* and again in 1911 under the title *On Dreams*. That Heym knew of Freud is evident, beyond the fact of Freud’s immense popularity in Germany in the early 1900s,⁹⁶ from a eulogy written by his friend Erwin Loewenson in 1922. Loewenson describes how Heym was told at a club about Freud’s “book, with which one can interpret dreams very precisely,” upon which Heym declared the book to be “magnificent”⁹⁷ in a joking manner (Loewenson 11).

⁹⁴ In the German, “er schleppte sich über die Felder, über Wüsten, während das Gespenst ihm voran flog, immer weiter durch Dunkel, durch schreckliches Dunkel.”

⁹⁵ In the German, “blaue Köpfe schaukelten, wie ein Meer riesiger Kornblumen auf zerbrechlichen Stengeln.”

⁹⁶ The enormous popularity of Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* in Germany is further discussed by Henri Ellenberger in his historical work *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (Ellenberger 783).

⁹⁷ In the German (dialect), “Das Buch is jrooßartig!!” Dream interpretation shows up again in Heym’s story “The Madman,” which I will discuss in the remainder of this section: the madman imagines telling his Doktor (perhaps modeled on Freud) about his dreams, to which the Doktor would only reply “so, so” (Heym 229).

According to Freud, dreams constitute a change “from a mode of expression which is immediately intelligible to us to another which we can only come to understand with the help of guidance and effort,” or interpretation work (Freud 148). Dreams convert material from waking life to the unconscious, in sometimes recognizable, sometimes unrecognizable forms. Important for our purposes is not uncovering a definitive interpretation of Jonathan’s hallucinations, but rather how those hallucinations mark a shift beyond a critique of the medical institution (the type of critique at play in “The Yellow Wallpaper”) to a generalization of madness which erases the line between the treated and those prescribing the treatment. Freud begins *On Dreams* with an interpretation of his own dreams, making clear that the possibility of hidden meaning, emotion, and expression exists in every individual, whether doctor or patient. Moreover, as Kayser points out, “from an early date, insanity, quasi-insanity, and dreams were used to define the source of creativity,” and the very artists creating portraits of insanity were suspected, or claimed, to themselves suffer from the same mental conditions as their characters (Kayser 184).

Heym’s own thoughts on the pervasiveness of insanity, and the blurring of categories, become clear when considering his short story “The Madman” (“Der Irre”), also published in the 1913 collection. While “Jonathan” critiques how the medical profession, supposedly concerned with increasing physiological health, instead pushes Jonathan into insanity, “The Madman” portrays similar failings within psychological institutions. Biographer Patrick Bridgwater notes that in fact several of Heym’s “diary entries show ‘Der Irre’ [“The Madman”] to be a self-study”; Heym writes that his fate is “to go mad like Hölderlin” (Bridgwater 262). In a later entry he writes: “Facing me I see a poor madman. In my head there is a spark of genius; in his there is only darkness. And yet I have much in common with him” (262). These statements illuminate

Heym's conception of himself as a madman, and make the dream-like descriptions of extreme violence in his story the more troubling, as the main character swings between calm and insanity without warning. The unconscious and its interpretation might reveal hidden insights about any individual, and Heym suggests with his story "The Madman" that in some cases, those insights are troubling in the extreme. In what follows, I will demonstrate how "The Madman" at once condemns and simultaneously proves the necessity of mental institutions, ultimately suggesting that dangerous minds are ubiquitous and unstoppable.

"The Madman" follows the actions of a man who has been released from a mental institution, as he journeys home with a plan for revenge. He blames his wife for his involuntary committal to the institution (in actuality, he violently beat her and was sentenced by a court). On the one hand, the man obviously requires mental care and treatment, considering his violent thoughts.⁹⁸ Immediately upon leaving the institution, he declares "it was high time that they let him out, because otherwise he would have killed everyone, all of them," including the Direktor, whom he would have "taken by his red goatee and pulled under the sausage-machine" (Heym 215, 215-6).⁹⁹ During his walk home, moreover, a "peaceful smile fl[ies] across his face" as he imagines the field in front of him full of "people, all with their heads on the ground," and he stomps around to hear the sounds the various heads make when he breaks them (217).¹⁰⁰ He finds it "really lovely" to imagine breaking skulls, to imagine how some are so soft that they "stay glued to his feet" and how from some the "brain positively squirt[s] out" as he clomps

⁹⁸ This story uses the same narration device as "Jonathan"; it is told in third person, but solely from the perspective of the madman.

⁹⁹ In the German, "Es war aber auch höchste Zeit, daß sie ihn herausgelassen hatten, denn sonst hätte er alle umgebracht, alle miteinander. Den dicken Direktor, den hätte er an seinem roten Spitzbart gekriegt und ihn unter die Wurstmaschine gezogen."

¹⁰⁰ In the German, "ein seliges Lächeln flog über sein Gesicht," and "Da lagen viele, viele Menschen, alle mit dem Kopfe auf der Erde."

around (218).¹⁰¹ This gruesome imagined scene portrays not only his violent tendencies, but also his removal from reality, as seen again when he later chases a rat, convinced it is his wife. At another point he deems it “laughable” how crazy some of the other inmates of the institution are; the madman exhibits a complete lack of self-awareness concerning the ‘abnormality’ of his thoughts and fantasies (218).¹⁰²

Unfortunately for those around him, the protagonist’s violent thoughts are soon translated into action: he kills four people on his journey home, and the manner in which he commits murder proves his mental instability and his need for treatment. First he encounters two children, whose crying angers him so that he “beat[s] the heads of the two children together” rhythmically until they bleed, which “intoxicate[s] him, ma[kes] him into a God,” and causes him to start singing (Heym 219).¹⁰³ The festive atmosphere surrounding his brutal beating of two children shows the madman’s extreme disconnect from others, his lack of empathy. Soon thereafter, he becomes animalistic upon encountering an old woman who might potentially make fun of him; he runs after her “on all fours” and “the animal springs upon her neck,” biting into her throat and drinking the blood (221, 222).¹⁰⁴ Here again the madman experiences a break from reality, as he first characterizes his anger as a hyena, and then becomes that hyena in an animalistic killing that, as in the case of the children, he justifies with nonsensical reasoning. Unlike Jonathan, the madman from the first embodies the grotesque, and his committal to a mental institution seems well-justified.

¹⁰¹ In the German, “wunderschön,” and “Sie blieben an den Füßen kleben,” and “das Gehirn ordentlich spritzte.”

¹⁰² In the German, “Das war ja zum Lachen.”

¹⁰³ In the German, “Er schlug die Köpfe der beiden Kinder gegeneinander,” and “Das berauschte ihn, machte ihn zu einem Gott.”

¹⁰⁴ In the German, “auf Händen und Füßen,” and “Nun springt das Tier ihr auf den Hals.”

The madman's attempts at self-control and self-discipline as well justify his involuntary committal, if those attempts are seen as resulting from his stay in the institution. Foucault names mental and medical institutions as disciplinary mechanisms which use a "policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviour" in order to create " 'docile' bodies" (Foucault, *Discipline* 136). Upon spending the prescribed amount of time in just such an institution, the madman does seem to enact several of the desired characteristics of such disciplinary endeavors. After killing the children, for instance, "his mood change[s] in an instant" and he feels a "untamable compassion for the two poor children," thereupon attempting to wipe them clean and breathe life back into them (Heym 220).¹⁰⁵ While his attempt does not last long, his capacity for remorse and his tears after killing suggest his ability to grasp the severity of his crimes. Several other moments as well demonstrate an ability to view himself in accordance with social norms; while playing naked in a river, "he suddenly ha[s] the thought that he was doing something indecent" and that if his old warden were to see him, "he would scold him good, he would tell the Direktor on him" (224).¹⁰⁶

Beyond socially-conditioned regret, the madman moreover often experiences a complete disconnect, a disassociation, from his crimes and mental illness, suggesting the need to conceive of himself as 'normal.' Several times he indicates his aversion to the label of "madman": his reason for killing the old woman is that "she will think [he's] the madman from [house] number 17" and will "laugh at [him]" (Heym 221).¹⁰⁷ At another point he considers returning to the

¹⁰⁵ In the German, "Mit einem Male schlug seine Stimmung um," and "ein unbezwingliches Mitleid mit den beiden armen Kindern."

¹⁰⁶ In the German, "Plötzlich kam ihm der Gedanke, daß er etwas Unanständiges täte," and "der wird schön schimpfen, der zeigt das dem Direktor an."

¹⁰⁷ In the German, "verrückter," which may also be translated as "insane person" or "nut job." The next quote: "die denkt, ich bin ja der Verrückte aus No. 17," and "die lacht mich ja aus."

mental institution, but refuses to ask for directions because the person asked would then “take him for a madman, and that wouldn’t do at all” (224).¹⁰⁸ Often in the midst of committing his violent acts, he disassociates and does not connect himself to the murder, as when he finishes tearing out the woman’s throat and upon looking down, wonders “Where does all this blood come from?” (223).¹⁰⁹ As previously mentioned, he conceives of himself as a hyena in the moment of violence, and when a man runs away from him in fear (because of his bloody appearance), he thinks to himself that the man is right to run, “because the hyenas could re-emerge from the corn at any moment” (223).¹¹⁰ During his most intense bouts of violence, therefore, the madman remains separate, not acknowledging that in fact he and the “hyena” are one and the same.

While the disconnect might suggest that the madman’s desire to fit social norms is so deeply ingrained that he is mentally unable to reconcile his heinous actions with his sense-of-self, it might also be read as a sign that the disciplinary mechanism of the institution has failed to produce adequate self-reflection in the madman. In fact, Heym includes other critiques of the institution’s efficacy, not least of which is the fact of the madman’s continued murderous actions upon his release. The story begins with “the warden g[iving] [the madman] his things, the cashier count[ing] out his money, the doorman unlock[ing] the big iron door before him”; these actions prove that those in charge of the institution have decided the madman no longer poses a threat to himself or others, a clearly incorrect assessment (Heym 215).¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ In the German, “Dann würde er sicher für einen Verrückten gehalten werden, und das ging denn doch nicht.”

¹⁰⁹ In the German, “Wo kommt denn das viele Blut her?”

¹¹⁰ In the German, “Denn hier konnten gleich wieder die Hyänen aus dem Korn kommen.”

¹¹¹ In the German, “Der Wärter gab ihm seine Sachen, der Kassierer händigte ihm sein Geld aus, der Türsteher schloß vor ihm die große eiserne Tür auf.”

Their efficacy, and even their desire to help others is further called into question by various comments from the madman which suggest the opposite, that the workers of the institution actually do not care about the well-being of the patients. The madman claims that “the wardens in their white striped aprons [...] those villains, stole from the men and raped the women in the bathrooms,” actions which would cause anyone “to become insane” (216).¹¹² The madman also witnesses wardens punishing misbehaving patients by placing them in hot baths, where “more than one was scalded, on purpose, he knew,” and when he mentions these occurrences to the head doctor, the doctor’s attempt to talk him out of the possible delusions makes him suspect the doctor as complicit (216).¹¹³ The reader has been primed to distrust the veracity of the madman’s claims due to his repeated violent outbursts and hallucinations. However, these abhorrent actions by medical personnel are described vividly enough to not be entirely discounted, leaving open the possibility that far from treating mental illness, the institution actually increases mental distress. Indeed, as critic Blunden asserts, “we know that patients in asylums do sometimes suffer maltreatment at the hands of sadistic guardians, and in Heym’s day, when mental illness was even less understood, that maltreatment must have been gross” (Blunden 110).¹¹⁴ Richard Sheppard likewise claims (albeit taking suggestion as fact) that “far from curing the madman, this legally sanctioned medical violence has had the effect of reinforcing and worsening his psychopathic tendencies” (Sheppard 154).

¹¹² In the German, “die Wärter in ihren weiß gestreiften Kitteln, [...] diese Schufte, die die Männer bestahlen und die Frauen auf den Klosetts vergewaltigten. Das war ja rein zum verrückt werden.”

¹¹³ In the German, “Da war mehr wie einer verbrüht worden, mit Absicht, das wußte er.”

¹¹⁴ Blunden, however, misses the mark in suggesting that Heym completely severs the “respected alliance of established medicine with the forces of law and order”; I have shown that in Heym’s story, medicine in fact does retain its ties to discipline, and is at least partially effective (Blunden 110).

Just like Wiene's film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, Heym's story thus remains ambiguous about the possibility of corruption within the mental institution, questioning whether the patients or those running the institution are more mentally 'abnormal.' In fact, the disciplinary mechanism does affect both its subjects and objects; critic Bak reads the Foucauldian Panopticon as creating "elements of fear and paranoia, not just in the observed but also in the observers, since they too did not know when they were being watched" (Bak 42). Likewise Angela Smith in *Hideous Progeny* devotes a chapter to horror films about mad doctors, claiming that in those films, "the doctors fail to recognize that, even as they occupy the position of vision and power, they, too, are subject to the material effects of their own reductive fictions" (Smith 175). The doctors "not only wield the medical gaze but are also, eventually, subjected to its disciplinary measures," causing the blurring of divisions between medical subject and object, creator and character, which so preoccupies expressionist artists (175). If the madman's madness is merely "the extended trace of a social madness, represented in the custodians appointed by society," the medical professionals, then social breakdown becomes a probability (Vietta 155).¹¹⁵

In both "Jonathan" and "The Madman," the very institutions meant to produce healthy individuals fail in their goals. Both stories end with their protagonists lost at sea, the madman hallucinating that "he [is] a big white bird over a large lonely ocean" before he is shot by a citizen trying to save another victim from his murderous rage (Heym 228).¹¹⁶ In both cases, mental breakdown is not aided but rather exacerbated by the disciplinary actions of medical professionals, suggesting the incurable quality of the madness that breaks out unpredictably in

¹¹⁵ In the German, "Die Schizophrenie des 'Irren' [...] erscheint als die verlängerte Spur eines gesellschaftlichen Wahnsinns, repräsentiert in den von der Gesellschaft bestellten Aufsichtspersonen."

¹¹⁶ In the German, "Er war ein großer weißer Vogel über einem großen einsamen Meer."

these individuals. One possible reason behind Heym's anxieties about pervasive mental illness is the change in psychological explanations of hysteria in the 1910s. While Gilman wrote her story during a time dominated by S. Weir Mitchell's physiological ideas on hysteria, Heym would have been influenced more heavily by Freud's account of hysteria.¹¹⁷ That Heym was concerned with the concept of hysteria while writing his stories shows in one of his diary entries, where he notes that he was experiencing "hideous dreams ... Sexual repression. In short, on the threshold of a nice bout of hysteria" (Bridgwater 263).

The possibility that his characters likewise suffer from hysteria shows in his allusions in both stories to modern inventions and the industrial boom. As Paul Lerner explains in his historical work *Hysterical Men*, Germany at the turn of the 20th century underwent "widespread economic and demographic change" as the population "expanded by some 60 percent" from the 1870s to the 1910s, and more and more people migrated to the cities and factory work (Lerner 19). This extreme growth was not seen only as positive; instead, "a common contemporary assumption, shared by psychiatrists and numerous other medical thinkers, was that the era's vertiginous changes were taking their toll on national health and fitness" (19). One consequence was trauma, and specifically "the traumatic hysteria diagnosis" for men which was "linked to jarring physical experiences" such as injuries obtained during labor (26). In "Jonathan," Jonathan's leg injuries occur during his passage home on a ship (he works as a ship mechanic): he is "descend[ing] the iron staircase to the boiler" when the ship turns suddenly and he "f[alls] down the stairs into the machinery" where the "piston rod" breaks his legs (Heym 238).¹¹⁸ The

¹¹⁷ Interestingly, Freud wrote a review of Mitchell's work praising his 'rest cure' as beneficial, in conjunction with other therapeutic techniques, while Mitchell, like Gilman, disliked Freud because of his perceived obsession with sex (Berman 306-7).

¹¹⁸ In the German, "die eiserne Treppe nach dem Kessel heruntersteigen," and "die Treppe hinuntergestürzt in das Maschinenwerk hinein," and "die Kolbenstange."

focused description of metals and machinery links Jonathan's subsequent mental breakdown in the hospital to the type of hysteria induced by the industrial boom and workplace injuries.

In "The Madman," several allusions as well suggest the pressure of adjusting to new technological advances, such as when the madman sees how "an electric train dr[ives] past" and comments on how much the streets have changed since his time in the institution, that "the Electric even dr[ives] here already" (Heym 224, 225).¹¹⁹ The madman also often references the mental institution's "butcher shop" with its various machines, although in the context of violent fantasies (216).¹²⁰ One final hint of the possible detriment of the population boom at the turn of the 20th century comes at the end of the story, when the madman attempts to kill a woman in a crowded department store. Heym describes in gruesome detail how the madman thus incites a panic, where "the masses flee through the aisles, tumbling down the stairs on top of each other" and at the end when the store has emptied, "only a pair of small children lie in front of the entrance, trampled or crushed to death" (230).¹²¹ Such negative descriptions of the masses in the city suggest Heym's concerns about social structure and urbanization in the early 1900s, similar to the concerns about industrial growth in the United States. The incurable aspect of the resulting hysteria in Heym's characters, however, stems from the addition in the German context of a biological, or inherited, component to mental illness.

Lerner explains that in the 1910s, the definition of hysteria changes, "locat[ing] the pathology's source in the subject's constitution (rather than exogenously in an accident event)"; while accidents might still instigate or exacerbate hysterical tendencies, those tendencies must be

¹¹⁹ In the German, "Eine elektrische Bahn fuhr vorbei," and "jetzt fuhr hier sogar schon die Elektrische."

¹²⁰ In the German, "die Fleischerei."

¹²¹ In the German, "die Menge flieht durch die Gänge, stürzt die Treppen übereinander herab," and "Nur ein paar kleine Kinder liegen vor der Treppentür, totgetreten oder erdrückt."

already present in the individual (Lerner 36). Therefore “both normally disposed people and those with hysterical constitutions could react hysterically to the same stimuli, but only those with premorbid personalities would develop serious neuroses” (38). Freud’s writings on hysteria confirm this shift, as he states that “we have [...] introduced into the aetiology of hysteria a factor which the patient himself never brings forward [...] namely, the hereditary disposition derived from his progenitors” (Freud 97). Freud further points out that his contemporary Charcot claims that “heredity alone deserves to be recognized as the true cause of hysteria, while all other noxae of the most various nature and intensity only play the part of incidental causes” (97). Heym must have been aware of this new factor of hysteria, as seen in another diary entry where he writes: “That genius is somehow allied with disease, is proved by the case of my own family...When all is said and done genius really does seem to be a kind of degeneration [or mental disease]” (addition by Bridgwater, 262). Heym’s comments suggest the inherited element of both genius and disease in referencing his family, and definitions of degeneration likewise contain a biological component.¹²² As critic Thiher explains, “in conformity with psychiatric views of madness, the expressionists saw themselves as victims of their constitution, of an *Anlage* that imposed hereditary determinism on them” (Thiher 252). By the 1910s in Germany, then, psychology increasingly incorporates the biological in its definitions, and the social fear, seen especially in the expressionist movement, that madness is spreading and ubiquitous, requires new methods for ensuring social safety and health.

¹²² Although Bridgwater connects this quote by Heym to Max Nordau’s writings on degeneration, it is equally possible that Heym is referencing Cesare Lombroso’s book *The Man of Genius* which directly links artistic genius to inherited insanity.

IV. Conclusion

In the 19th century, psychology still conflates mental and physical cause and effect, and therefore remains as yet problematic as a general tool of classification for larger populations. However, as psychology increasingly focuses on genetic and hereditary understandings of mental illness in the 20th century, it becomes an instrument of discrimination; “medicine as power and the psychiatric hospital as institution existed to sanction” the exclusion and containment of those not conforming to established norms of conduct (Foucault, *Abnormal* 153). Psychology becomes about “treating a social ‘danger,’ [...] because [madness] was perceived as a source of danger for oneself, for others, for one’s contemporaries, and also for one’s descendants through heredity” (“Dangerous” 7). Therefore “psychiatry will tend to seek out pathological stigmata which may mark dangerous individuals: moral insanity, instinctive insanity, and degeneration” (“Dangerous” 10). “Moral” insanity might include for instance hysterical women who are unable to care for their children properly, as in the case of Gilman’s narrator, while “instinctive” insanity could apply to Heym’s madman who seems unable to act otherwise. Insanity “is that part of the subject which is beyond his responsibility; that is, the insanity which hides in him and which he cannot even control because he is frequently not even aware of it” (“Dangerous” 5). If madness is inherited, and might lurk beneath the surface of individuals who erupt suddenly, then heredity and violent acts (as well as perceived degeneracy) become the justification for the confinement of individuals thereby deemed ‘dangerous.’

Lerner’s extensive historical research on madness reveals that in Germany in the early 20th century, “increases in crime and disease replaced the optimistic reformism of mid-nineteenth-century medicine with the fears of disorder, decline, and degeneration” (Lerner 19). As a result, “state statisticians recorded staggering increases in admissions to the already

crowded mental asylums,” for instance in Prussia where “between 1880 and 1910, the number of asylum inmates rose 429 percent,” leading to the creation of the German word “Irrenboom,” or a “boom in insanity” (19). In the United States as well, “by the late nineteenth century, nearly every state had one or more asylums and most mental patients resided in them” (McCandless 173). The asylums, meant to function as “a hospital, not a prison or an almshouse,” nonetheless “function[ed] largely as a custodial welfare institution” with patients who were “violent, suicidal, epileptics, idiots, criminally insane, feeble-minded and senile of all ages mixed” (188). Moreover, at the turn of the 20th century in the United States “the nature of the patient population in mental hospitals underwent profound changes,” as “the proportion of short-term cases fell and that of long-term cases increased” (Grob 538). In other words, at the end of the 19th century, as mental illness and crime become conflated by way of their hereditary components, more and more mental patients become confined to asylums and mental institutions for increasingly long periods of time.

The conflation of mental ‘hospitals’ and disciplinary institutions such as prisons meant to contain the “dangerous individual” shows in Gilman and Heym’s stories. In “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the description of the narrator’s attic room, with its “windows [that] are barred,” and the yellow wallpaper which changes in various light so that “by moonlight, it becomes bars” behind which the woman is stuck, evokes the bars of a prison cell (Gilman, *Yellow* 13). In “Dr. Clair’s Place,” mental illness itself becomes a type of prison, as one of the patients is described as “so sunk in internal misery that her expression was that of one who had been in prison for a life-time” (295). Similarly in Heym’s story “Jonathan,” the patients are directly compared to prisoners, as Jonathan thinks that “someone sentenced to death had it better, since his agony would only last one day,” in contrast to the patients who die more slowly, without an end in sight

(Heym 235).¹²³ Jonathan moreover states that the enforced isolation which separates him from the other medical patients (inmates) makes him feel “locked up” like a “criminal” (237).¹²⁴ In the case of “The Madman,” the comparisons are even more pronounced: the main character has been arrested due to violence against his wife and sentenced to the mental institution, and he repeatedly commits violent, criminal acts during periods of mental frenzy and turmoil.

For Gilman, the disciplinary nature of strict mental treatments which objectify their patients and prescribe absolutist labels remains problematic, something to protest through social writing and conversation. However, Gilman is unable to connect the problems in mental treatments with the same type of disciplinary mechanism at play in eugenic rhetoric, which likewise classifies and then attempts to correct perceived ‘abnormality.’ For Gilman, mental illness on the whole does not yet include an inherited, biological, component; Heym, writing over 20 years later, does connect the mental and genetic. As a result, while Heym points out the detrimental nature of disciplinary medical treatment both physical and mental, he and other expressionists simultaneously portray the need for such disciplinary institutions as a protection against a biological madness that pervades the entire country. However, Heym’s critiques can also be read as suggesting that “the line between social normality, and insanity, is in flux, and an individual’s insanity is much influenced by collective forms of insanity and their corresponding deformation of reality” (Vietta 156).¹²⁵ In other words, for Heym, society contributes to its own problematic decline; either institutions meant to treat the symptoms must improve, or society itself must change to effect a decrease in madness.

¹²³ In the German, “ein zum Tode Verurteilter hatte es besser, denn seine Qual dauerte nur einen Tag.”

¹²⁴ In the German, “[einge]sperrt” and “Verbrecher.”

¹²⁵ In the German, “die Grenzen zwischen gesellschaftlicher Normalität und Wahnsinn fließend sind, und daß die Schizophrenie eines Individuums vielfach bedingt ist von kollektiven Formen des Wahnsinns und der ihr entsprechenden Deformation von Wirklichkeit.”

During the first decades of the 20th century, the fear of the ‘dangerous individual’ thus follows a shift in psychology towards the biological, which is then taken up by legal discourses surrounding criminality. As Foucault puts it, “psychiatry has functioned as knowledge and power within the general domain of public hygiene or protection of the social body, [and] has always sought to discover the secret of the crimes that all madness is in danger of harboring, or the kernel of madness that must haunt all individuals who may be dangerous for society” (Foucault, *Abnormal* 120). In turning to the biological, psychology is able to regain a measure of control over its methods of classification, and criminal law adopts the language of psychology to justify the imprisonment of those with perceived abnormality. The gradual inclusion of questions of heredity in legal discourse is the subject of the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 3: ARBITRARY CRIMINALS: GERTRUDE BARROWS BENNETT AND FRANZ KAFKA

I. Introduction

In the early 20th century, criminal law in the United States and Germany experienced a shift regarding the importance of an individual's background when assessing the proper punishment for their crime. Prior to this shift, criminal law focused on punishing crime, the acts themselves, according to a legal code unwilling and unable to take individuals' circumstances and backgrounds into account. As Michel Foucault states in his lectures on the "abnormal," the early 1900s saw a shift from punishment for a "legal subject who is recognized as being responsible" to a legal "technique that consists in singling out dangerous individuals and of taking responsibility for those who are accessible to penal sanction in order to cure them or reform them" (*Abnormal* 25). Instead of criminality defined by an individual's actions against accepted norms of behavior, criminality became synonymous with the individual's very being, biologically and mentally, which in turn became an object of the law.

Two figures in particular mark the changing nature of law in Germany: Rudolf von Jhering, whose ideas about 'norms' stemmed in part from writings by Karl Binding, and Franz von Liszt, a student of Jhering. Jhering's writings reflect the former iteration of criminality; he held the belief that "only coercion transforms social norms into law, and since the state holds the monopoly on coercion, it is the 'only source of law' " (Canale 309). For Jhering, "law and state appear almost exclusively in relation to social aspects, as institutions and means to control the actions and behavior of individuals"; in other words, Jhering believed not only in the need for

strong governmental enforcement of criminal law, but also that those laws are directly tied to accepted social norms (309).

Liszt revised Jhering's ideas by adding attention to the individual committing the crime, and his writings echo Foucault's concept of the 'dangerous individual.' For Liszt, the "reasons for the perpetrator's actions were to be examined," so his or her punishment would "take into account the personality of the offender and the punishment's purpose of education and securing the criminal" (Canale 317). His 1883 essay "The Idea of Purpose in Law" called for "punishment as protection, i.e., punishment with the purpose of establishing security" by either reforming, deterring, or neutralizing offenders (Vormbaum 118). By focusing on punishment, Liszt removed the "concept of blameworthiness, for the culprit's attitude, the decisive issue, is less an expression of his *blameworthiness* than of his *dangerousness*" (119). In this model of criminal law, criminality is directly connected to an individual's being, although not yet through the concept of genetics. Subsequent legal theorists used Liszt's ideas about tailoring punishment to the criminal to support "an individual criminal etiology that focused on factors of predisposition," most famously seen in the works of Cesare Lombroso who defined criminality as inherently biological (124).

In the United States, a similar trend occurred in criminology, as seen through debates surrounding the death penalty: in the late 19th century "as crime came increasingly to be viewed as a consequence of biological or social forces beyond the criminal's control, as certain people came to be understood as genetically or environmentally predisposed to commit crimes, the death penalty correspondingly ceased to be seen as a just punishment" (Banner 208-9). If a criminal was inherently predisposed to commit a crime, then the question of responsibility, conflated with the idea of free will, made death a problematic sentence. In both countries,

criminal law thus moved “from the crime to the criminal; from the act as it was actually committed to the danger potentially inherent in the individual; from the modulated punishment of the guilty party to the absolute protection of others” (Foucault, “Dangerous Individual” 13). This shift follows a larger trend, as outlined by Foucault throughout his oeuvre, from hierarchies of the normal and ‘abnormal’ based on socially-constructed norms to hierarchies based in biological data collection—from sovereignty (through discipline) to biopower.¹²⁶

It is this shift that this chapter explores through two literary works caught between the old and new models; *The Heads of Cerberus* by Gertrude Barrows Bennett, and *In the Penal Colony* by Franz Kafka, both published in 1919. By focusing on the figure of the criminal, an individual in direct contact with power and its consequences, Bennett and Kafka make clear the arbitrary and thus corruptible nature of various contemporaneous power structures, mirrored in their stories by fictitious sovereign governments. Both authors likewise gesture towards the biopolitical modes which follow sovereignty, though Bennett suggests biologically-based classifications as a remedy to the arbitrary hierarchies upheld by old government forms, while Kafka portrays biopower as equally suspect. They use the Bakhtinian grotesque to signal the corruption and breakdown of contemporaneous government forms (for Bennett—autocracy, communism, and meritocracy; for Kafka—monarchy and bureaucracy), as those governments *create* the grotesque rather than bringing their subjects in line with desired norms. Paradoxically, “the grotesque [thus becomes] one of the essential processes of arbitrary sovereignty” (and other forms of government) (Foucault, *Abnormal* 12). However, Bennett ends her novel with the

¹²⁶ Foucault defines sovereignty, prevalent until the end of the 18th century, as identifying the criminal with anyone who “attacks the sovereign,” and the sovereign “demands reparation, because [his] right [as] superior man is violated and because it offends the dignity of his character” (*Discipline* 47). In this model, the sovereign arbitrarily assigns norms of behavior (what is considered ‘offensive’) as well as the corresponding punishment for deviation from those norms. Biopolitics, beginning in the 19th century, is distinguished from preceding types of power by its concentration on large populations and on the biological body, establishing norms with the goal of ensuring that the population in its entirety remains ‘healthy’ and viable (Foucault, *Society*, 246).

possibility of a less corrupt method of classification through biology, while Kafka extends corruption to both biopower and whatever power structures might come next, ending with a wariness of power that is all-too-fitting considering the eugenic movements that follow in the 1920s and 30s.

II. Unintentional Criminals in *The Heads of Cerberus*

Not much is known about Gertrude Barrows Bennett, and less still has been written critically on her works, published under the pseudonym ‘Francis Stevens.’ What little biographical information exists, stems from the introduction to *The Heads of Cerberus* written by Lloyd Arthur Eshbach in 1952, and an introduction to her short stories in 2004 by Gary Hoppenstand. Bennett was born in Minnesota in 1883, and disappeared in 1939, although Hoppenstand, citing research by R. Alain Everts, reveals that she likely did not die until 1948. As Eshbach states, “if any one word can describe the work of ‘Francis Stevens,’ its background and its author, that word is ‘mystery’ ” (Bennett, *Heads* 13).¹²⁷ She wrote all of her fiction within a span of six years, including several novels and short stories, and Eshbach claims that “when planning each of her stories, [she] spent a great deal of time in research” (14). Unfortunately, the nature of her inquiries is not known, but her marriage to a news reporter and later work for a University of Pennsylvania professor suggests at least that Bennett had access to contemporaneous debates around the most important social issues of her time. While I am unable to demonstrate, as with other authors I discuss, on which issues precisely Bennett conducted

¹²⁷ Even her influence on other authors remains a mystery: Hoppenstand spends much of his introduction drawing parallels between Bennett’s writing and that of H. P. Lovecraft, partially based on a letter supposedly written by Lovecraft in praise of a short story by Bennett. However, biographer S. T. Joshi insists that the letter is falsely attributed to Lovecraft; if a link exists between them, it can thus only be found in their fictional style (Joshi).

research, the themes present in her writing suggest a preoccupation with government corruption, the law, and the ‘nature’ of humans.

Bennett’s interesting writing style has led science fiction critic Sam Moskowitz to name her “ ‘the most gifted woman writer of science fiction and science-fantasy between Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and C. L. Moore’ ” and Hoppenstand to “add that she was also the woman who invented dark fantasy” (Bennett, *Nightmare* xxiv). Her novel *The Heads of Cerberus*, first published serially in 1919, has not yet been taken up by literary critics, but the relevance of its themes for literary scholarship on the biological turn suggests the worth of further critical study. I will begin by demonstrating the parallels between the fictitious government in *The Heads of Cerberus* and the contemporaneous forms of autocracy, communism, and meritocracy which occupy many of the American newspapers published in 1919, at the end of World War I. Bennett portrays these government structures as corrupt and arbitrary in their distribution of power, and the presence of the grotesque makes clear that these power structures inherently fail in their goals. Moreover, several moments in Bennett’s novel suggest that a more ‘natural’ system of classification and power distribution might exist, especially if linked to biological indicators in individuals of their strengths and weaknesses. Therefore I end this section by analyzing Bennett’s portrayal of an alternative, bio/political method for classifying individuals, which Bennett connects to the type of eugenic rhetoric prevalent at the time, without fully realizing its implications.

The Heads of Cerberus follows the story of Drayton, a lawyer in Philadelphia in 1918, who is accidentally transported by a mysterious dust (along with his friends Trenmore, Viola, and Bertram) to the year 2118, where Philadelphia and its surrounding environment are renamed

Penn. Drayton and his friends are immediately arrested as law-breakers upon arrival, and told that to escape their death-sentence they must take part in Exams where people compete for positions of power. While preparing for the Exams, they meet several top government officials, including a man named Cleverest and a woman named Loveliest who attempt to help them. In the end, Drayton and his friends escape certain death by ringing a magical bell (presumably the Liberty Bell) which dissolves Penn and transports them back to their own century.

Hoppenstand claims in his introduction to a collection of Bennett's stories that *The Heads of Cerberus* is a "reworking of Edward Bellamy's novel, *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888), transforming Bellamy's urban utopian narrative into a bleak vision of tomorrow" (Bennett, *Nightmare* xiv). While Hoppenstand does not provide evidence or further contextualize this statement, several points in Bellamy's and Bennett's novels bear out his claim. Both authors write about futuristic societies, where a traveler from their contemporaneous year accidentally finds himself a century forward in time, able to comment 'objectively' upon the changes wrought by the years. Bellamy portrays a socialist society in the year 2000, where the citizens labor for a set amount of years, and each earn an equal amount of credit, with one small central government elected from and by the citizens maintaining the status quo.

While Bellamy writes his utopia as a model for a perfect and fulfilling society, where each individual has his or her needs entirely met, his description of the governing system leaves grey areas of potential power imbalances. For instance, the President and a small cabinet of the heads of industry maintain the "discipline" of society and its work force, and "the administration [...] holds always in reserve the power to call for special volunteers, or draft any force needed from any quarter" (Bellamy 63). Moreover, the President's "right hand [...] the inspectorate" is "on the alert to catch and sift every rumor of a fault in the service [...] [and] by systematic and

constant oversight and inspection of every branch of the [industry] army, to find out what is going wrong before anybody else does” (124). Finally, the President “appoints the necessary judges year by year,” and “it is a judge who states each side of the case as well as a judge who hears it,” so that the President and his elected judges are solely responsible for legal rulings (130). Bellamy’s explanations of this fictitious socialist system on the surface seem to account for any possible corruption or ill-usage of power by those who make up the government, mainly based on the premise that humans with all needs met will not act nefariously towards others. However, the possibility of the President’s drafting labor as he sees fit, the inspectorate’s all-invasive surveillance, and President’s complete control of the legal system suggest that if desired, those few in power might quickly topple the status quo.

The Heads of Cerberus takes to an extreme the possibility of such an imbalance in power, demonstrating the potential dangers of a government with only a few individuals at the top enforcing rules on the rest of the population. While Bellamy shows the merits of a socialist system, Bennett pushes against his utopic vision, instead portraying a dystopian version of the future in which various government types, including socialism, have deteriorated through corruption. Bennett connects the fictitious government in *The Heads of Cerberus* to several contemporaneous forms of government particularly of public interest in the 1910s—autocracy, communism, and meritocracy—presenting these systems as corrupt and arbitrary in their distribution of power.

The Penn version of autocracy, for instance, vests all power in one individual, Mr. Justice Supreme, who functions as a king with complete control over his citizens’ lives. Cleverest explains that “Penn, the mighty All-Father, stands behind his Servants and justifies their acts,” and Mr. Supreme rules over all other Servants, as Drayton sees it, as their “very arbitrary tyrant

[...] [with] power absolute” (Bennett, *Heads* 115, 145). The Oxford English Dictionary defines autocracy as “a state or society governed by one person with absolute power,” or as Bennett puts it, a “tyrant” with “power absolute” (Oxford). Indeed, Mr. Supreme wields all the authority of a traditional sovereign, including the ability to name and enforce compliance with arbitrary norms, and to dole out punishment (when desired) for noncompliance. Foucault states that “the sovereign exercised his right of life only by exercising his right to kill, or by refraining from killing; he evidenced his power over life only through the death he was capable of requiring” (Foucault, *History of Sex* 136). In Penn, most ‘crime’ is met with immediate death, seen for instance by an incident when the citizens rebel and Mr. Supreme commands the use of machine guns to massacre them. Only when “both his hands went up, palms outward,” do the machine guns cease firing, showing his ability to ‘refrain from killing’ as well (Bennett, *Heads* 135).

The Penn government is explicitly connected to autocracy when Trenmore declares that “whoever has done these things to your [Loveliest’s] people has certainly hit a new low in autocratic government” (Bennett, *Heads* 111). Bennett’s reference to autocracy reflects the proliferation in 1919 of negative reports on Germany, which was a monarchy (and considered in the United States an autocracy) until the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1918 at the end of World War I. *The Philadelphia Inquirer*¹²⁸ in 1919, while Bennett was drafting *The Heads of Cerberus*, published extensively about the conclusion of World War I and the consequences to the countries involved. In particular, news articles made clear that the German form of autocracy

¹²⁸ Bennett’s husband was a news reporter in Philadelphia until his death in 1910, and while the lack of by-lines makes it difficult to ascertain exactly when and for whom he wrote, researcher R. Alain Everts claims that Mr. Bennett wrote in particular for *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Everts). As his wife, Gertrude Bennett would have had access to *The Philadelphia Inquirer* as well as other news publications; therefore I draw several of my examples from newspapers specific to Philadelphia at the time.

was ‘dangerous,’ and that subsequent Bolshevism in Russia might likewise become a ‘dangerous’ autocracy. For instance, one editor writes:

We went to war to put an end to what was termed autocracy. Our idea of autocracy, when we declared hostilities in April, 1917, was rule as established by the Kaiser. [...] Out of the welter of war has arisen a new autocratic power, that of Lenine [sic], the Bolshevist, who rules from Moscow by bloody force. (“Facing a New Form”)

Almost every newspaper in Philadelphia for the year 1919¹²⁹ holds mentions of “German autocracy, the foe of civilization and sane liberty”; Bennett almost certainly therefore models her own version of autocracy on that of Germany (“World Opinion”).

As an overthrown and failed system, Germany’s monarchy demonstrates the shortcomings of government ruled by one all-powerful individual, and Bennett exaggerates the potential dangers even further, demonstrating the total corruption of Mr. Supreme’s rule. For example, Mr. Supreme bends his own laws on crime when a man legally “condemned to lose both means of living and life” is told with a wink that his punishment will take place “some other time, chief, [since] the pit is not working right to-day” (Bennett, *Heads* 140, 141). The fact that a lowly citizen has mere minutes before been killed in the “pit,” a hole full of spikes, makes this lie obvious. Moreover, Mr. Supreme ensures that the logic behind his rulings remains obscure to the Penn citizens, again demonstrating his kingly status. As Foucault points out, for most sovereignties:

The entire criminal procedure, right up to the sentence, remained secret: that is to say, opaque, not only to the public but also to the accused himself. It took place without him, or at least without his having any knowledge either of the charges or of the evidence. In the order of criminal justice, knowledge was the absolute privilege of the prosecution. (*Discipline* 35)

¹²⁹ In a search for the term “autocracy” in digitalized Philadelphia newspapers from 1919, over 1,000 occurrences appear, a majority of which are negative opinion pieces on German rule and growing fears of a Russian shift to a similar government structure.

However, Mr. Supreme takes enforced ignorance to an extreme; in Penn the masses are allowed “no concern either with the past or with anything outside [their] own boundaries[.] The law says, let every good citizen live his own life. It is forbidden that he should do more than that,” i.e. ask questions about other aspects of Penn (Bennett, *Heads* 111). All information about the city’s past, and how the current governmental structure came into being, is strictly guarded, along with books and other printed material. In fact, “no one in this city, barring those born in Penn Service or the officials under their control, is allowed to read any literature more informing than a sign post, an instruction pamphlet or a telephone directory” (114). Thus Mr. Supreme determines legal norms and the punishment for failing to obey them, while for the citizens those norms remain unexplained. Mr. Supreme and his officials are able to act however they see fit; their corruption of their own rules is blatant.

As American fears about the replacement of German autocracy with a Russian version make clear, communist forms of government are equally suspect in 1919. Bennett picks up the rampant anti-Bolshevik rhetoric by further connecting her fictitious Penn to communist economic models, again exaggerating the potential for corruption. Drayton reveals that Penn was created as a direct result of communism: according to historical records he finds, “Communism had its way of Europe [and] class war, which spells social chaos, ensued,” causing the (fictional) United States to sever all communication with other countries (Bennett, *Heads* 153). Drayton further explains that not only was “the whole world [...] mad, in this country, too, Communism had been lifting its disorganizing clamor” (154). In order to prevent its spread, officials decided that “if some States were rotten, let them rot alone; not infect the others”; thus each state ostensibly became a “democratic” republic of its own, “completely isolated from the world”

(154). Similarly, in the United States in the 1910s, the popularity¹³⁰ of socialism begins to rise; as historian Richard McCormick explains, “under Eugene V. Debs’s leadership, the Socialist Party of America reached a peak of strength between 1910 and 1912 when dozens of towns and cities elected Socialist mayors and Debs won nearly a million votes as a presidential candidate” (McCormick 177).

However, the prevalence of anti-Bolshevik news reports demonstrates that overwhelmingly, socialism retains its negative connotations in the real United States, as in Bennett’s fictitious country. For instance, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in 1919 runs several columns with sentiments such as: “sympathizers with the murderous maniacs who have appealed to bloodshed in Russia have found a foothold in the United States” and “Bolshevism must be stamped out, no matter where it appears” (“Editorial Comment”). In Philadelphia in January of that year, Bolsheviks bomb several private homes of city officials, resulting in fear and panic, and in the surveillance and arrest of “well-known Socialist[s]” such as Edward Moore, who “has been associated with the Industrial Workers of the World and their Bolshevik sympathizers” (“Arrest I.W.W. Leader”). Drayton’s statement that “many clever, wealthy men foresaw opportunities for absolute despotism under open colors,” clarifies the potential dangers Bennett, and other Americans, saw behind socialist government structures, even as people like Bellamy exalted their benefits (Bennett, *Heads* 154). The economic system in *The Heads of Cerberus* suggests that even socialism, meant to provide an equal distribution of power to entire populations, would fall prey to corruption, as it already had (according to American newspapers) in its Russian context, instead vesting all power in one violent sovereign-type ruler (i.e. Lenin).

¹³⁰ Another indication of the popularity of socialism in the United States during this time is the bestseller status of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*.

Bennett includes details about the Penn government that highlight its socialist traits, while demonstrating that the true spirit of socialism absolutely fails as power remains in the hands of a few wealthy men. The tension between actual and utopic socialism shows best in Drayton's question: "Was this system a tyranny, as he had indefinitely suspected, or was it the freest and most orderly of governments?" (Bennett, *Heads* 109). For instance, the Penn monetary system follows what Marx would call a C-M-C exchange; their "currency is not based on gold or silver," but rather "the Service sets a valuation on the different sorts of labor" and the laborer receives a "certificate of labor" with the hours worked stamped upon it (109, 108). The laborer is then "free to spend these [hours] as they please," on whichever commodities they choose (109). Similarly, the laborers in Bellamy's socialist society receive credit cards, and while the "hours of labor in different trades differ according to their arduousness," each laborer receives the same amount of credit to use as they wish (Bellamy 62). As Marx states, "the simplest form of the circulation of commodities is C-M-C, the transformation of commodities into money, and the change of the money back again into commodities" (Marx 329). In this model, seen in Bennett and Bellamy's novels, the focus is not on money (as with a capitalist model), but rather the "certificates of labor" are used as a place-holder to allow a fair exchange of labor and goods.

However, while Bellamy's government changes the hours a worker works per day based on the difficulty of the labor, in Penn the work hours do not change, but the amount of credit received changes based on arbitrary valuations. Thus Bennett's monetary system holds the potential for corruption, if those in power choose to change valuations to benefit or detract from certain citizens. Indeed, we immediately see the corruption present in Loveliest's statement that "the Servants of Penn and we Superlatives charge everything to the Service," and Drayton's reiteration that "the Service itself never pays for anything and takes what it likes of goods or

labor” (Bennett, *Heads* 109, 110). As Drayton rightly points out, the fact that those in power thus receive commodities without doing labor renders the “whole population mere slaves, and their ownership of property a mockery” (110). Marx makes clear that when “the product of labour does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, this can only be because it belongs to some *other man than the worker*,” for instance those in power who can confiscate the products at will (Marx 78).

The economic imbalance is likewise evident in the distribution of property and government positions in Penn. The laborers supposedly “own all the property—except the Temple itself and the officials’ private residences,” which suggests Marxist communal property (Bennett, *Heads* 108). However, Bennett’s descriptions of the ruling class and their abodes makes clear a disconnect between the ideal of communal property and its actual manifestation. Mr. Justice Supreme for instance resides within “a long series of luxurious living apartments, smoking, lounging, and drawing-rooms, each furnished in a style compatible only with great wealth or the system of ‘credit’ peculiar to Penn Service,” suggesting that those outside the ruling class would not reside in such luxury (121). Moreover, in a Marxist system laborers would choose their own work (as explained in detail in Bellamy’s novel), and everyone would have equal opportunity to fill various official positions; indeed, Cleverest states at one point that the numbered citizens “have their opportunity to be of those who make the laws” (102). However, he goes on to explain their absence in positions of power as a result of being “too lazy or vicious to compete,” while in fact, in Penn those in power cheat in order to ensure that ordinary citizens have no real chance of gaining official positions (102). Although the Penn government thus at first appears to emulate a type of socialism, Bennett emphasizes the corruption which allows a

few men and women to remain the most wealthy, and to wield the most power over others rather than allowing an even distribution across the entire population.

The cheating rampant during the Exams which decide positions of power in Penn provides a link to one final mode of government under scrutiny in Bennett's novel: meritocracy. Bennett describes the complicated procedure by which Penn officials decide, once a year, who will fill various necessary government positions, based on exams meant to determine the individual 'objectively' most qualified for those positions. These "Civic Service Examinations" call to mind the Pendleton Civil Service Act of 1883, which "created a federal Civil Service Commission and introduced competitive examinations" to decide on governmental appointments (Foulke 8). While the Pendleton Act was passed in 1883, the publication of the book "Fighting the Spoilsmen: Reminiscences of The Civil Service Reform Movement" by William Dudley Foulke in 1919, concentrating primarily on civil service laws such as the Pendleton Act, shows a lasting interest in the United States in such forms of government. In 1919, Senator Penrose moreover promises that he will "give the city [Philadelphia] the most business-like form of commission government that could be devised," providing a possible impetus behind Bennett's particular portrayal of civil service ("Penrose"). Drayton explains that Penn "began under a sort of commission government," where individuals hold power over various branches and agencies (Bennett, *Heads* 155). Newspapers inundated with political promises for reform and suggestions for better methods of electing officials potentially motivate Bennett's combination of a commission government with meritocracy, where each official in charge of a specific service *should* be the best qualified.

However, as seen in the proliferation of 'muckraking' articles and the strength of the progressive movement in the 1910s, many Americans worried that even such government

structures closer to home held the potential for corruption and nepotism. For instance, several politicians endorsed what “George Washington Plunkitt of New York’s Tammany Hall [...] [called the] ‘honest graft’ ” (also known as the ‘corrupt bargain’), where officials would strike deals with businesses in return for favors, or simply because of family ties (Flanagan 77). Philadelphia, in particular, was seen as “not merely corrupt, but corrupted” by “vicious circles of special privilege, fostered by civic neglect, and abetted by a popular hypocrisy,” as Professor Arthur Dudden puts it in his 1931 response to Lincoln Steffens’ famous 1904 analysis of corruption, *Shame of the Cities* (Shapiro 71). Indeed, the real Philadelphia in the early 1900s parallels Bennett’s fictional portrayal, since “all of the municipal departments obeyed James McManes, who at that time was ‘the recognized Boss of Philadelphia,’” just as Mr. Supreme acts as the ‘boss’ of Penn (74).

Bennett demonstrates the potential corruption of a meritocracy by emphasizing the ‘rigged’ and unfair aspects of the Exams. Superlatives gain their positions by competing in the exams, and are thereafter named after the won job; for instance, Cleverest is the ‘cleverest’ citizen in Penn, and therefore responsible for the legal system, while Swiftest “ha[s] control of the City Messenger Service” (Bennett, *Heads* 102). However, the reader quickly realizes that in fact, the names of those holding positions of power (Mercy, Virtue, Justice Supreme, etc.) are ironic, given the corrupt way in which they gain their positions, and how they act (Mercy shows no mercy, Virtue has no morals when it comes to killing, etc.). When speaking of the hierarchical system, those in power refer to it as “a system as democratic as it is natural and logical,” a statement obviously false to the reader as the story progresses (102). For instance, during the exams an ordinary citizen, No. 57403, competes for the position of “Sweetness of Voice” which involves acting as the “Director of Civic Music” (129). No. 57403 sings with a “clear young

voice” which causes those watching to sigh in happiness, while the incumbent competitor sings “hopelessly off key,” with a “roar [that] crescendo[s] to a terrible disharmonic laugh” and makes Viola question what “music he [is] murdering” (131, 132). While the decision is obvious for those watching, No. 57403 is declared the loser and sentenced to death in the Pit while the incumbent “will continue in office” (133). At another point, Cleverest confirms that the examinations are completely rigged, and he, in a privileged position of power, can be sure of the outcome; for example, he tells Bertram that he has “excellent reasons for prophesying [Bertram’s] success” (104). Instead of merit-based placement, the Exams function through nepotism: “every man of the Superlatives [...] held his job by pure favor, aided by the pull he could exercise through family connections” (152). By rendering the “Civic Service Examinations” such an obvious farce, Bennett amplifies the ‘muckraking’ opinions of progressives on political organization during her time.

Social anxieties about various forms of government in the 1910s, including autocracy, socialism, and meritocracy, thus drive Bennett’s descriptions of the corrupt ways in which Penn and its leaders enforce arbitrary rules and punishment on their citizens. Beyond surface corruption, moreover, the presence of the aesthetic grotesque in *The Heads of Cerberus* confirms the flaws inherent in the Penn government. If the various hierarchies of power functioned as they were meant to, at the very least those holding the majority of power would presumably benefit from their positions. However, Bennett’s use of the grotesque makes clear that instead, both the ordinary citizens and the Servants of Penn have become twisted and deformed as a result of their contact with the corrupt power structures in place. During the exams, for instance, the Superlatives, required to attend, are:

[D]ressed with a gayety which verged—in many cases more than verged—on distinct vulgarity. [...] Colors shrieked at one another, or were gagged to silence by an overpowering display of jewelry. Some of the older and plainer ladies were quite masked in the enamel of their complexions. (Bennett, *Heads* 123)

The official function of the Exams, to “assert all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions,” becomes a carnivalesque mockery instead, as those in positions of power take on aesthetically ridiculous qualities (Bakhtin 9). For example, the ‘king’ himself, Mr. Supreme, is described during this event not in the regal terms one expects for a sovereign, but rather as “decrepit with a loathsome senility [...] and his clothes the apotheosis of dandyism” (Bennett, *Heads* 126). He wears mirrored shoes and hat, “a yellow chrysanthemum as a boutonniere [...] his vest was of white flowered satin, [and] his hands were ungloved yellow claws”; this clash of colors and fabrics suggests a court jester rather than a king (126). The overwhelming amount of color, clothing, jewelry and makeup renders their wearers a grotesque imitation of what should in fact be an elegant display of power.

The grotesqueness of those in power shows even more prominently in Bennett’s descriptions of their physical appearance; Mr. Supreme has a face “lined and scarred by every vice,” with “rheumy and red-rimmed” eyes that “blink evilly above purple pouches,” in stark contrast to his extravagant clothing (Bennett, *Heads* 126). Kindness’ wife is a “very fleshy, bediamonded and prosperous-looking lady,” while the incumbent music director is described as a “waddl[ing] mountain of flesh [...] [with] a pair of small, piglike eyes” (129, 130). The apparent obesity of the ruling class, and the repeated emphasis of their unappealing eyes, recalls Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “grotesque forms of exaggerated body parts” such as “monstrous bellies (a typical grotesque hyperbola)” (Bakhtin 328). Drayton further describes the judge Mr. Virtue as “hawknosed, fat-jowled, coarse-featured and repellant” and says that “his appearance singularly

belie[s] his name”; in this instance, physical traits become a more reliable indicator of identity than the Exams (Bennett, *Heads* 81). Kindness is likewise described as having “thin cruel lips, narrow-set eyes, and [a] low, slightly protruding forehead [which] indicate[s] several possible qualities; but benevolence was hardly of the number” (129). Thus, paradoxically, those in power are physically opposite to their titled positions; Bennett’s grotesque descriptions highlight their unsuitability for their jobs, and therefore the bankruptcy of the Penn government.

Within the lower class, as well, the Penn government affects the opposite of its intentions; Penn citizens participate in and submit to a type of Foucauldian discipline meant to deter nonconformity, through surveillance and a push towards normalized behavior. Penn norms include the requirement that each citizen “wear a numbered mark of identification” on their clothing, the number acting as their name (Bennett, *Heads* 101).¹³¹ Trenmore makes explicit the connection between this labeling system and disciplinary nodes of power when he states, “in jails men have numbers, and perhaps in the lunatic asylum [...] they have numbers, and wear buttons with those same numbers on them” (70). Foucault demonstrates at length how both jails (as seen in *Discipline and Punish*) and mental institutions (as seen in *History of Madness*) are disciplinary institutions, designed to label and correct individual behavior to bring it in line with desired norms. Discipline shows as well in Penn’s social surveillance, for instance when a cab driver calls the police on Drayton and his friends for their “very serious and peculiar offense” of “going about without [their] buttons” (72). Loveliest confirms a systematic web of surveillance when she tells Drayton and his friends to “never speak against [Penn Service], even when you believe yourself alone or in the safest company. It has a million eyes and a million ears, and they are

¹³¹ Bennett’s use of “insignia” that each citizen must wear again shows the influence of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*; in that novel, each “industry has its emblematic device [...] in the shape of a metallic badge” which the laborers wear to identify their specific rank and employment (Bellamy 90).

everywhere” (111). When citizens do not conform to expected behavior, they are sentenced to punishment meant to enforce compliance: an Official sentencing Bertram declares, “Let him have that three hours to consider and repent of his sacrilege” in isolation, before being thrown into the Pit (141). As Foucault states, “solitude assures a sort of self-regulation of the penalty and makes possible a spontaneous individualization of the punishment”; the prisoner in solitude must reflect on his or her crime and thereby self-regulate, or ‘normalize’ (*Discipline* 237).¹³²

In *The Heads of Cerberus*, however, the disciplinary measures do not produce the desired effects; rather, the citizens of Penn are alienated through constant self-regulation, and once labeled criminals (because of arbitrarily decided crimes), they become physically grotesque when undergoing punishment. The citizens have become absolutely complacent in following the norms of behavior, to an extreme which removes their sense of self and ability to interact with the world around them. A hotel clerk is described as “a trifle too obsequious for a normal hotel clerk,” and other citizens on the streets as well exhibit a “slavish” respect towards those in power (Bennett, *Heads* 92, 108). Living under strict Penn rule has caused these people to “undergo positive physical deterioration,” to have a “hangdog, spiritless appearance, as if caring little what their labor or their goings to and fro might bring them” (107, 108). Such descriptions echo Marx’s conception of alienating labor models, which create a “relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating”—in short, “self-estrangement” in the worker (Marx 74-5).

Moreover, when the citizens of Penn behave against desired norms, they face immediate death, as when Mr. Supreme commands the slaughter of the lower class by machine guns, or when individuals are sentenced to be thrown into the Pit. The “space at the bottom of the Pit [is]

¹³² In Kafka’s novella as well, the criminal’s punishment is meant to provide him with clarity about the nature of his crime so that he dies enlightened and repentant.

filled” with “sharp steel spikes,” and “anything falling there must of necessity be impaled—if not fatally, so much the worse for the thing” (Bennett, *Heads* 86). In both cases, punishment riddles the physical body with holes, rendering it a Bakhtinian grotesque body which “display[s] not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs”; the traditional borders between the body and everything outside it dissolve (Bakhtin 318). After the machine guns, for example, the floor of the Penn temple “resemble[s] more nearly the pit of a slaughter house, [...] smeared and slimy with trampled blood, fragments of clothing, and other fragments less pleasant to contemplate” (Bennett, *Heads* 138). The citizens have left body parts on the floor; rather than normalized citizens, they become estranged and grotesque¹³³ through Penn’s power structure, even as they struggle to comply with its arbitrarily-decided norms.

The presence of the grotesque in Bennett’s novel, while pointing out the flaws in Penn’s system of government, conversely suggests the possibility for a type of government that would work as intended. If the rulers as well as the ruled in Penn are grotesque as a result of their contact with power, an alternative arrangement might indicate its success by the *lack* of the grotesque instead. Bennett reinforces the possibility of a functional government by emphasizing the unfairness of the current Penn system, as shown by the incompatibility of the officials’ facial features with their assigned roles, for instance, or by the obvious cheating involved in the Exams. As an alternative, Bennett indirectly proposes a meritocracy connected to one’s individual biology and therefore (presumably) not subject to corruption. Bennett uses biological and physiognomic descriptions at several points to reinforce her portrayal of Drayton and his friends as inherently good, in contrast to the Penn citizens surrounding them. For example, while

¹³³ Wolfgang Kayser posits a connection between the grotesque and alienation; for Kayser, “the grotesque is the estranged world,” or rather, the individual estranged from the world around him (184).

Drayton first appears in the novel as a thief accidentally attempting to rob his friend Trenmore, Bennett makes clear that Drayton's momentary lapse in judgment is in direct contradiction to his innate qualities and sense of self. Once caught by Trenmore, Drayton at first refuses to "grasp the friendly, powerful hand which his innate and self-denied honesty had prevented his taking except on a basis of open understanding" (Bennett, *Heads* 27). After explaining his mistake, he moreover declares himself "cured of crime," as if the attempted robbery were the result of a brief illness, and when he meets an actual thief, Bertram, he is "sickened" because "the parallel to be drawn between this sneak thief and himself was not pleasant to contemplate" (31, 96). Drayton's 'innate' honesty causes physical illness when he considers crime.

Trenmore and Viola are likewise set apart from other Penn citizens based on their innate esteemed traits. Trenmore's extreme strength, for instance, is constantly referenced; Drayton refers to him as a "giant" on several occasions, and only his physical strength, the "bulging lumps over his laboring shoulders," allows him to ring the bell that saves their lives in the end (Bennett, *Heads* 161). Viola's most valued traits, on the other hand, are her virtue and innocence, as seen when Cleverest intimates that she has had "former lovers" and she reacts with a "little, horrified cry" and "a burning flood of color" rushing to her face (156). Trenmore responds to Cleverest's statement by physically throwing him against the wall; Viola's virtue is so highly valued (and so far beyond question) that the mere act of suggesting otherwise is met with anger. At another point Drayton states that the police treating "Viola of the clear blue eyes and innocent white brow" as a criminal causes "an intolerable agony in whose endurance he alternately flushed red with shame and paled with ineffective rage" (74). In both instances, her male companions become irate that her innate qualities are questioned, precisely because those qualities set Drayton and his friends apart from the unsavory rulers of Penn.

The rulers reveal their innate corruption and malevolence through their grotesque physical appearance, while in the description of Viola's 'innocent white brow' we see the converse physiognomic¹³⁴ suggestion of her benevolent qualities. Bennett thus uses the language of physical and innate traits to indicate a more accurate method of classifying individuals than that used by Penn's corrupt sovereignty. The tension between Penn's system, and this other, more privileged method of labeling shows best when Drayton describes the other "convicts" placed under arrest: "their ugly heads were close cropped; their faces stupid and bestially cruel" (Bennett, *Heads* 85). The harsh language used to describe these men suggests that unlike Drayton and his friends, these convicts deserve their label and subsequent punishment, as evidenced by their true nature, read biologically.

Bennett's novel, in suggesting biological classifications of criminality, gestures towards eugenic rhetoric aimed at culling undesirable individuals based on 'scientific' reasoning. While Bennett's novel overall critiques *unfounded* accusations against individuals, the presence of physiognomy in her novel nonetheless suggests the influence of contemporaneous conversations around social and cultural decline and criminality. One possible influence is the book *The Jukes in 1915*, written by Arthur Estabrook of the Eugenics Records Office and published in 1916. This volume takes up the earlier account *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease and Heredity* by Richard Dugdale, which describes the criminal lives of the Juke family in particular as stemming from environmental factors (more so than heredity). Estabrook on the other hand emphasizes the hereditary aspect,¹³⁵ noting that "not only was much of the original stock bad, but

¹³⁴ For a detailed description of physiognomy and its practice at the turn of the 20th century, see Chapters 1 and 4.

¹³⁵ Estabrook's touchstones for his ideas on heredity must stem from August Weismann's germ-plasm theory; although not explicitly mentioned by Estabrook, he writes sentences like: "it is probably that, in the long run, the cheapest way to improve a bad germ-plasm is to scatter it" (Estabrook iii). My next chapter takes up the importance of genetic sciences and Weismann's theory for the literary imagination.

improvement which might otherwise have occurred was prevented by constant inbreeding” (Estabrook iii). Most importantly, in Estabrook’s view the dominant hereditary aspect of the Jukes is their “feeble-mindedness,” which corresponds with a tendency towards criminality; “indeed, assault and battery, murder, and rape are rather common,” and a change in environment moreover does not rid the Jukes of those criminal traits (iii). This study makes clear a contemporaneous concern with criminality, and how biology (discernable through physiognomy) influences individual behavior. Bennett’s descriptions of the other criminals as ‘bestially cruel’ suggests such a correspondence between physical appearance and criminality.

One other possible influence on the physiognomic details in *The Heads of Cerberus* is Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*; in one chapter Bellamy’s protagonist learns about the futuristic method of dealing with criminality, where “all cases of atavism are treated in the hospitals,” and the “old state prison” has been removed entirely (Bellamy 127). Atavism here is “a word applied to the cases of persons in whom some trait of a remote ancestor recurred in a noticeable manner,” and “crime is nowadays looked upon as the recurrence of an ancestral trait” because the socialist society has removed all environmental causes of crime (127). Bellamy thereby suggests that a properly functioning socialism makes clear the hereditary aspects of undesirable traits in individuals, just as Bennett posits that the “truth” about individuals might be read biologically as a remedy to corrupt political structures (and perhaps if Bennett believed in the possibility of a non-corrupt form of socialism, she would agree with Bellamy’s take).

However, while Bennett echoes physiognomic language and the type of rhetoric which leads to a resurgence in American fervor for eugenic practices, she also includes details which suggest that she does not fully recognize the racial connections in eugenic rhetoric. For instance, Bennett describes Trenmore as having a “fierce shaggy mane above a dark savage face”; several

times she repeats the image of his “great, black-maned head” (Bennett, *Heads* 22, 25). Trenmore is also Irish, a fact made clear by descriptions such as him shaking “his head like an angry bull of the wild Irish breed” (173). According to the eugenic conventions at the time, Trenmore should demonstrate criminal or other undesirable traits, as a ‘dark savage’ and member of an oft-discriminated-against immigrant minority—even the word ‘breed’ connects to eugenic rhetoric.¹³⁶ However, Trenmore’s innate good character remains unquestionable in Bennett’s narrative; Trenmore, “his faith once given, resembled a large, loyal mastiff [...] ready to give at need all that was his, good, gains, or the strength of his great brain and body” (29). Bennett therefore suggests biological and physical classifications on an individual-case basis as a remedy to corrupt government-determined hierarchies, yet does not anticipate how extrapolating genetically-based conclusions to an entire population might again result in dangerous power dynamics. Approving of the Foucauldian trajectory from sovereignty to biopower, Bennett does not conceive of the possibility that in fact, a biopolitical model might likewise rest on arbitrary distinctions of ‘good’ and ‘bad,’ as taken to an extreme in the eugenic movements of the 1920s and 30s. Franz Kafka, on the other hand, remains acutely aware of the corruptibility of governmental structures, no matter whether founded on biological hierarchies or not.

III. Tortured Criminals in *In the Penal Colony*

Franz Kafka, born in 1883 in Bohemia (part of what is now Austria), became one of the most canonical authors of the 20th century such that critics from many disciplines, including

¹³⁶ Franz Boas for instance rejects what he deems an “unprofitable discussion of the hereditary mental traits of various branches of the White race,” including “of the Jews, of the Gypsies, of the French and Irish,” in his writings against biologically-determined racism in 1938 (Boas 138). The stereotypes against Irish immigrants show as well in crime statistics; “an incipient racial approach to incarcerating individuals has often been alluded to in the case of the high incarceration rate of the Irish” in the late 19th century (Wright 120).

well-known theorists Walter Benjamin and Gilles Deleuze, have written on myriad aspects of Kafka's works. However, more remains to be said about *In the Penal Colony* in particular, especially on Kafka's assessment of arbitrary power structures as related to historical forms of government. *In the Penal Colony* (*In der Strafkolonie*) sets up a government which functions mainly as a sovereignty, and like Bennett, Kafka uses this fictional system to critique contemporaneous monarchy (or autocracy, as the Americans view it), demonstrating its corruption and ultimate failure through the presence of the Bakhtinian grotesque. Within the sovereign's device for punishing the colony's criminals, moreover, Kafka gestures towards a biopolitical method of classifying abnormality through the body, but while Bennett endorses such biologically-based classifications, Kafka's ending makes clear that any hierarchical power structure, including biopower, ultimately remains suspect.

In Kafka's novella, a Traveler¹³⁷ ("Reisende") comes to a penal colony to oversee the execution of a Convict ("Verurteilte") and take notes about the legal system at work. The execution takes place on a machine, made of three parts (a Bett/bed, Egge/harrow, and Zeichner/drawer), which carves certain words into the prisoner until he or she dies of blood loss after 12 hours. An Officer ("Offizier") explains the procedure to the Traveler, hopeful that he will convince the Traveler of the necessity and righteous nature of this legal system, which has been put into place by a Commandant ("Kommandant") who has since died and been replaced. However, hearing about the torture involved instead horrifies the Traveler, causing the Officer to execute himself with the machine, and the Traveler leaves the colony as soon as possible thereafter.

¹³⁷ As Kafka does not give any of his characters proper names in this story, I will refer to them by their titles for the sake of clarity.

Kafka, living most of his life in Prague, part of the Austria-Hungarian empire at the time, and having a connection as well to Germany through language and intellectual interests, experienced the final decades of two European ‘autocracies.’ In both cases, the sovereign governments of Germany’s Wilhelm II (1888-1918) and Austria’s Franz Joseph I (1848-1916), while focusing power in the hands of the emperor, also included elements of bureaucracy. Anthony Northey notes that “bureaucracy formed one of the mainstays of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of its life [...] [and] Emperor Franz Joseph laid great stock in bureaucratic duty,” as seen for instance in the existence of Kafka’s own insurance company, the “Workers’ Accident Insurance Company for the Kingdom of Bohemia, a semigovernmental agency” (Northey 198, Koelb 25). James Retallack describes how in Germany as well, “the head of the federal state was the emperor or Kaiser,” and “although gradually an imperial bureaucracy was built up, federal legislation was initially drafted in the offices of the Prussian bureaucracy”; the emperor largely left administrative and legislative issues to the federal states (Retallack 36). While monarchy and bureaucracy are thus two sides to the same government, I will examine the significance of these contemporaneous models for Kafka’s novella individually, first focusing on connections to the German monarchy.

John Röhl discusses the nature of Kaiser Wilhelm II’s rule in Germany, stating that “the political system of the German Kaiserreich is to be understood in essence as a *monarchy*” in which “the Kaiser and his court [...] exercised political power and decision-making authority and thus laid down the fundamental guidelines of domestic, foreign, and armaments policy” (Röhl 3, 4). The German monarchy, vesting all power into the person of the Kaiser, becomes the model for Kafka’s fictitious government which functions primarily through the power and will of one man, the Commandant, who ultimately controls the “right of life” of his subjects (Foucault,

History of Sex 136). The “organization of the entire penal colony is his work,” and his “power” as a type of sovereign is seen for instance in the “palatial” nature of his home (Kafka 206, 246).¹³⁸ Just as Kaiser Wilhelm II established his “monarchy by the grace of God,” the Commandant also takes on religious qualities for his subjects (Röhl 5). For instance, the Officer speaks of him with extreme reverence and will not touch the Commandant’s old drawings until his hands have been washed “pure enough” (Kafka 210).¹³⁹

Like the sovereign in Bennett’s novel who wishes to keep everything “stable, unchanging, perennial,” here the Commandant sets up a system “so closed in itself” that “nothing from the old [system] is able to be changed,” ensuring that his will is carried out even after his death (Bakhtin 9; Kafka 206).¹⁴⁰ The Commandant reinforces his status as the head of the sovereign system through state-sanctioned events of spectacle and ceremony that keep his power visible to his subjects. For instance, the Commandant carries out punishment of those individuals who commit crimes in an arena filled with spectators: at the height of his power, “already one day before the execution the entire valley would be overfilled with people; all came only to watch” (Kafka 225).¹⁴¹ As with Bakhtin’s descriptions of official feasts where “everyone was expected to appear,” at the penal colony executions “no higher officials were allowed to be absent,” to keep the social hierarchy present in the population’s minds (Bakhtin 10; Kafka

¹³⁸ In the original German, “die Einrichtung der ganzen Strafkolonie sein Werk ist,” “Macht,” and “Palastbauten.” All translations of Kafka’s writing into English are my own, unless noted otherwise.

¹³⁹ In the German, “seine Hände [...] schienen ihm nicht rein genug.”

¹⁴⁰ In the German, “die Einrichtung der Kolonie so in sich geschlossen ist, daß [...] man] nichts von dem Alten wird ändern können.”

¹⁴¹ In the German, “Schon einen Tag vor der Hinrichtung war das ganze Tal von Menschen überfüllt; alle kamen nur um zu sehen.”

225).¹⁴² The new Commandant also “makes a spectacle out of” his “large meetings with all high-ranking officials,” holding those meetings in a room with a “gallery [...] that is always full of spectators” (Kafka 232).¹⁴³ Kaiser Wilhelm II, adhering to the old sovereign models, was equally concerned with maintaining the status quo through official events, using court life “to reinforce the vassal loyalty to the Hohenzollern monarch” (Röhl 105). Eva Giloi notes that he “extend[ed] ceremonial [sic] to a far greater number of festive occasions and enforc[ed] court etiquette more strictly,” and “the trappings of court dress and military uniforms played a significant role in Wilhelm’s visual extravaganza” (Giloi 269). The unusual importance the Kaiser placed on military uniforms is mirrored in Kafka’s novella by the Officer’s reverence for his uniform: when undressing he “handle[s] every garment very carefully, [and] he even r[uns] his fingers specially over the silver cord on his military jacket and shakes a tassel into place” (Kafka 240).¹⁴⁴ For both Kaiser Wilhelm and for Kafka’s Commandant and officers, then, visible displays of their all-encompassing power reinforce as well as reassure the population that their rule continues as it should.

However, Kafka, like Bennett, adopts the sovereign model to demonstrate the potential for corruption inherent in a political structure where one individual controls everything. During the imagined scene at the new Commandant’s ‘official’ meeting, for instance, Kafka makes clear the corruption present among the penal colony’s elite by implying their attempts to influence the Traveler’s opinions about their legal system. The Officer warns that if the Traveler wishes to yell

¹⁴² In the German, “kein hoher Beamte durfte fehlen.”

¹⁴³ In the German, “aus solchen Sitzungen eine Schaustellung zu machen,” “eine grosse Sitzung aller höheren Verwaltungsbeamten,” and “es wurde eine Galerie gebaut, die mit Zuschauern immer besetzt ist.”

¹⁴⁴ In the German, “[er] behandelte [...] jedes Kleidungsstück sehr sorgfältig, über die Silberschnüre an seinem Waffenrock strich er sogar eigens mit den Fingern hin und schüttelte eine Troddel zurecht.”

out his opinions from the gallery, “a lady’s hand will hold your mouth closed” (Kafka 230).¹⁴⁵

Likewise, if the Traveler does have the opportunity to speak his mind from a podium, the Officer tells him to “lay [his] hands visible for everyone to see, otherwise the ladies will grab them and play with the fingers” (234).¹⁴⁶ This bizarre image suggests the covert way in which the penal colony’s elite might influence outsiders and maintain their control over the colony.

Kafka’s portrayal of corruption within the sovereign system stems in part from the political discontent present in German society in the early 1900s. Röhl argues that “the restoration under Kaiser Wilhelm II of a genuinely functioning monarchy claiming legitimation by Divine Right [...] was even more forced, artificial, anachronistic, reactionary, *grotesque*” (emphasis mine) and was “bound to lead to severe tensions,” appearing as it did after the dissolution of most former monarchies (as in the French Revolution) (Röhl 5). Kafka’s novella picks up those tensions by emphasizing the arbitrary and unfair nature of the penal colony’s legal structure under the Commandant, who acts as judge, jury, and executioner, every position of importance “consolidated in his person” (Kafka 210).¹⁴⁷ As a type of sovereign, the Commandant decides which crimes constitute an “insult to the superiors”¹⁴⁸ (or put in Foucauldian terms, which crimes “offend the dignity of [the sovereign’s] character”) (Kafka 203; Foucault, *Discipline* 47). For instance, the Convict is condemned because he has failed to fulfill the arbitrary task of “stand[ing] up and salut[ing] in front of the Captain’s door” every hour

¹⁴⁵ In the German, “eine Damenhand hält Ihnen den Mund zu.”

¹⁴⁶ In the German, “Legen Sie die Hände für alle sichtbar hin, sonst fassen sie die Damen und spielen mit den Fingern.”

¹⁴⁷ In the German, “alles in sich vereinigt.”

¹⁴⁸ In the German, “Beleidigung des Vorgesetzten.”

throughout the night whether or not the Captain sees him, opting to sleep instead (Kafka 213).¹⁴⁹ The Commandant moreover decides guilt, or rather that “guilt is always doubtless,” a mandate that the Officer acknowledges is unique to the penal colony since “other legal structures [...] are many-headed and have even higher courts above them” which could overturn verdicts of guilt (212).¹⁵⁰ In Kafka’s system with one head, then, legal decisions about what constitutes crime and guilt rest with the sovereign Commandant, who likewise determines and oversees proper punishment for convicted criminals.

Not only are all aspects of the law arbitrarily decided by one individual, the potential for corruption is increased by the imbalance of knowledge available to the sovereign versus to his subjects. As in *The Heads of Cerberus*, in Kafka’s penal colony the “criminal procedure, right up to the sentence, remain[s] secret” with the prisoner having no “knowledge either of the charges or of the evidence,” and only those in positions of power are privy to knowledge (Foucault, *Discipline* 35). The Officer tells the Traveler that the old Commandant used to provide all explanations of the legal procedures, and that the Traveler, as “such an exalted visitor,” likewise deserves knowledge of the procedures (Kafka 210).¹⁵¹ The Convict, on the other hand, “does not know his own sentence,” or “that he has been convicted at all,” which the Officer relays to the Traveler as self-evident (211).¹⁵² Although the Convict attempts to follow the Officer’s

¹⁴⁹ In the German, “Er hat nämlich die Pflicht, bei jedem Stundenschlag aufzustehen und vor der Tür des Hauptmanns zu salutieren.”

¹⁵⁰ In the German, “Die Schuld ist immer zweifellos” and “Andere Gerichte können diesen Grundsatz nicht befolgen, denn sie sind vielköpfig und haben auch noch höhere Gerichte über sich.”

¹⁵¹ In the German, “einen so hohen Besuch.”

¹⁵² In the German, “Er kennt sein eigenes Urteil nicht?” and “Aber daß er überhaupt verurteilt wurde, das weiß er doch?”

explanations, those explanations occur in a language he does not speak, so that he remains voiceless and uninformed during the entire process of his conviction and punishment.

The obscured nature of the colony's legal system reflects not only the sovereign's ability to arbitrarily decide an individual's fate, but also the incomprehensibility of contemporaneous bureaucratic law. The Traveler's position as an outsider able to pass 'objective' judgment on the penal colony's legal system leads to the Officer's insistence that the Traveler use his influence to convince the new Commandant that the system must remain as it has always been. In the Officer's long imagined scene of how the Traveler will speak with the new Commandant, Kafka's prose becomes properly Kafkaesque as the Officer's insights demonstrate the bureaucratic side of the sovereign penal colony. Reza Banakar explains how Kafka's work in various legal capacities, as an insurance lawyer and a student of criminal law under Hans Gross and Alfred Weber,¹⁵³ influences his stories, in particular the bureaucratic tales *The Trial* and *The Castle*. Banakar illuminates the "paradox that lies at the heart of the relationship between modern law, which strives toward *generality* and *universality*, and justice, which requires the recognition of *singularity* and *specificity*"; in other words, individuals in contact with the law must deal with general laws which nevertheless in some cases do not fit their singular situations (Banakar 480). According to Banakar, Kafka interprets this paradox in his stories by creating a form of law that "encompassed not only an understanding of law as an organizing tool of *Gesellschaft* (i.e., the top-down structure of state law) but also a consideration of law as it is experienced by the modern individual" (481). Put another way, Kafka's speculative legal structure is "highly bureaucratic in a modern rational sense, but overtly arbitrary and nonrational with respect to its substantive outcomes and judgments" because of the disconnect between the law as theorized,

¹⁵³ Kafka studied law at the University of Prague and graduated "under the *pro forma* direction of Alfred Weber" with a J.D. degree in 1906 (Koelb 20).

and the law as actually experienced (479). Kafka marks this disconnect at several moments in his novella, critiquing bureaucratic law at the level of language, through a break between signifier and signified, and at the level of sentencing, where the reasoning behind the punishment and the criminal's experience of that punishment is disjointed.

Kafka highlights the absurdity of bureaucracy through the proclamations of the Officer about his beloved machine and government, where a rupture exists between the Officer's intended meaning (signifier), and the meaning the Traveler (and reader) can find in his statements (signified). Banakar identifies Kafka's "rhetoric" as a result of his familiarity with "legal forms of 'double thought'," with the difficulty in legal systems of constructing words and phrases carefully to either allow or disallow multiple meanings (Banakar 477). While Banakar connects 'double thought' to contradictions within other Kafka stories, the following explanation succinctly summarizes its importance in *In the Penal Colony* as well:

Kafka's "rhetoric"—which exploits discourses' openness to divergent interpretations, allowing him to identify and employ "double thoughts" in his narratives—places him in the company of postmodern writers and legal scholars whose works often highlight the fragmentary, contradictory, and paradoxical nature of modern law. (477)

The Officer remains convinced of the value of the penal colony's method of punishment, and states for instance that during executions spectators would sometimes close their eyes in supposed bliss for "they knew: now Justice will happen" (Kafka 226).¹⁵⁴ After hearing a long description of the machine's lengthy torture process, the Traveler however certainly does not think of such executions as justice, and those spectators might just as well close their eyes in horror instead. While the Officer assumes that the Traveler finds this system "the most human and humane," his actual opinion is the opposite (229).¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ In the German, "[sie] lagen mit geschlossenen Augen im Sand; alle wußten: Jetzt geschieht Gerechtigkeit."

¹⁵⁵ In the German, "das menschlichste und menschenwürdigste."

In fact, the Officer speculates that in his conversation with the new Commandant, the Traveler's thoughts will be twisted from pro-execution machine to anti-machine, when in fact the Traveler has already made clear his position as anti-machine. For instance, the Officer says to the Traveler, "Your judgment is certainly already made; if however some small uncertainties should remain, the sight of the execution will remove them" (Kafka 231).¹⁵⁶ The reader knows in this moment that the Traveler's judgment is already made against the machine's execution method, and that having to watch such torture would certainly strengthen that opinion, while the Officer assumes that the Traveler will be delighted by the viewing and lose all doubts about the machine's fairness. Later, the Officer again states that "for the resentfulness that one will notice in you [the Traveler], there is plenty cause, even if not for the reasons the Commandant thinks"; the Officer assumes the Traveler's resentment of the procedure will stem from the current Commandant's budget-cuts, which have forced the machine into disrepair (232).¹⁵⁷ However, the Traveler's resentment would stem from exactly the reasons that the new Commandant would assume: that the mechanical execution is inhumane and outdated. Through such instances of double-speak, Kafka points out the inherent obscure and undecipherable nature of bureaucratic communications.

A disconnect between intended meaning and actual experience occurs moreover in the carrying out of the legal sentencing; in the penal colony, the criminal is condemned to have his crime "written onto the body" in front of an audience, so that everyone including the criminal

¹⁵⁶ In the German, "Ihr Urteil steht gewiß schon fest; sollten noch kleine Unsicherheiten bestehen, so wird sie der Anblick der Exekution beseitigen."

¹⁵⁷ In the German, "Für die Verbitterung, die man Ihnen anmerken soll, ist ja genügend Anlaß, wenn auch nicht im Sinne des Kommandanten."

will understand the nature of his transgression (Kafka 210).¹⁵⁸ However, the writing used in the machine is unreadable to all but the Officer. The words are indecipherable; as Britta Pawlak points out, “in the unreadable, cryptic drawings of the old Commandant [...] is mirrored the intransparency and the arbitrariness of the judicial evidence-gathering,” i.e. the Captain’s complaint against the Convict (Pawlak 14).¹⁵⁹ The sovereign uses public torture to “publish the truth of the crime in the very body of the man to be executed,” yet without a trial the criminal is not privy to the logic that has ascertained the ‘truth’ of the crime, nor can the criminal ‘read’ his crime prior to his punishment (Foucault, *Discipline* 44). Instead of becoming enlightened, therefore, the criminal is alienated when the phrase representing his crime—in the case of the Convict, “Honor your Superiors”—is tattooed into his skin (Kafka 210).¹⁶⁰ For someone like the Convict who has not been given any indications of his new classification as condemned criminal, the carrying out of his sentence causes self-estrangement as his classification becomes a permanent mark on his skin. On a large, theoretical scale the execution machine perhaps achieves its goals, but on the smaller scale, it fails to produce a compliant subject because its intentions (in the form of written commands) remain obscured, just as bureaucratic law fails in the ‘experience’ of the ‘modern individual.’

Kafka thus demonstrates the arbitrary nature of the penal colony’s method of governance to indict the European monarchies and their version of modern bureaucracy. In the remaining sections, I will focus primarily on the moment of punishment, so alienating to the ‘criminal,’ as

¹⁵⁸ In the German, “auf den Leib geschrieben.”

¹⁵⁹ For German critical works that have not been translated into English, such as Pawlak’s book, all translations into English are my own. In the German, “In den unleserlichen, kryptisch erscheinenden Zeichnungen des alten Kommandanten [...] spiegeln sich die Intransparenz und die Beliebigkeit des Beweisverfahrens.”

¹⁶⁰ In the German, “Ehre deinen Vorgesetzten!”

reinforcing the inherent failures of the penal colony's power structure through the aesthetic grotesque, and as gesturing towards a new biopolitical mode of power which likewise ultimately breaks down. The execution machine of the penal colony, rather than enforcing the sovereign's desired norms of behavior and maintaining the status quo, turns those it encounters into grotesque bodies through its very mechanism. Bakhtin describes grotesque bodies as marked by "convexities and orifices" where "the confines between [...] the body and the world are overcome"; as previously mentioned, such bodies "display not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs" (Bakhtin 317, 318). Kafka's machine enacts such border-erasing through multiple facets: first, the Convict must lie face-down on the machine and take a piece of grimy cloth into his mouth, upon which he "closes his eyes in irresistible nausea and vomits" (Kafka 223).¹⁶¹ His stomach contents become outward, just as the machine's workings will later cause the Officer's blood to "pour in a hundred streams" out of his body (245).¹⁶² The machine, by writing¹⁶³ on the body, moreover makes that body grotesque in permeating the otherwise closed border of skin, forcing contact to the outside world (and to the machine) through newly created 'orifices.'¹⁶⁴

The grotesque is further seen in the animalistic traits developed in those subjected to the penal colony's power structure. Bakhtin states that "the combination of human and animal traits is, as we know, one of the most ancient grotesque forms," and on the first page Kafka describes how the Convict looks "dog-like" in his position as prisoner, covered in chains (Bakhtin 316,

¹⁶¹ In the German, "als der Verurteilte in einem unwiderstehlichen Brechreiz die Augen schloß und sich erbrach."

¹⁶² In the German, "Das Blut floß in hundert Strömen."

¹⁶³ The script used to write on the body is also grotesque; it incorporates "labyrinthine lines constantly crossing" ("labyrinthartige, einander vielfach kreuzende Linien") (Kafka 217).

¹⁶⁴ Just as the sovereign killing pit in Bennett's novel 'impales' prisoners thrown in, Kafka's execution machine likewise impales its victims with several small spikes.

Kafka 203).¹⁶⁵ The Convict's obedience is clear from the humorous observation that he looks so much like a dog that one feels "one could let him run around free on the hills and at the start of the execution would only need to whistle, for him to come back" (Kafka 203-4).¹⁶⁶ As his punishment is meant to begin, the Convict's clothes are ripped from him even though he tries "to grasp the falling things, to cover his nakedness"; here again the system requires its objects to lose their humanity (220).¹⁶⁷ Once strapped into the machine, the Convict immediately "begins to snap up the mush [rice pudding] with his tongue"; although in imminent danger, he becomes animalistic in caring only about his hunger, oblivious to the intricacies of the situation in which he finds himself (227).¹⁶⁸ The legal system of the penal colony through its mechanism of punishment thus causes those within to become physically grotesque, losing their human sense of self and bodily autonomy rather than moving closer to the colony's desired norms.

The colony's execution machine, which therefore participates in the failures of the sovereign/bureaucratic government model already in place, simultaneously gestures towards a new biopolitical mode which might follow. Like Bennett, Kafka provides hints of a turn to a biologically-based system of classifying people, as the execution machine causes an individual's crimes to be "written onto the body" for all to see. The machine is built in a way that highlights that crime for the rest of society; "in order to make it possible for everyone to monitor the carrying out of the verdict, the Egge was made out of glass" to not obscure sight, simultaneously

¹⁶⁵ In the German, "hündisch," a word which also implies a canine (slavish) devotion.

¹⁶⁶ In the German, "als könnte man ihn frei auf den Abhängen herumlaufen lassen und müsse bei Beginn der Exekution nur pfeifen, damit er käme."

¹⁶⁷ In the German, "er wollte nach dem fallenden Zeug greifen, um seine Blöße zu bedecken."

¹⁶⁸ In the German, "als er mit der Zunge nach dem Brei zu schnappen begann."

writing and spraying water to keep blood from obscuring the words (Kafka 215).¹⁶⁹ While the length of punishment remains the same in Kafka's work, the words being carved into the criminal change according to the crime, so that the criminal's body becomes a legible representation of their 'abnormality.' Mark Anderson also notes that the 'tattoo' punishment references Lombroso's thought that "certain human types—"born" criminals [...]—displayed symptoms of 'graphomania' " and therefore often "had tattoos applied to large parts of their bodies" (Anderson 178).¹⁷⁰ The machine, thus recalling contemporaneous theories of biologically-based 'abnormality,' moreover does the work of removing that abnormality from society through death. After 12 hours, the criminal has lost enough blood to succumb to his injuries and his corpse is thrown by the machine into a ditch, symbolically separate and no longer harmful to the health of the penal colony.

Critic Britta Pawlak has written a thought-provoking piece on the presence of biopower in Kafka's novella, investigating "to what degree the barbaric punishment ritual, in whose center a highly-technical execution-apparatus stands, is steeped in modern power mechanisms, and [to what degree] the transition to biopolitics is reflected in *In the Penal Colony*" (Pawlak 10).¹⁷¹ Pawlak compares the Officer's beloved apparatus to the Hollerith-Machine invented by Heinrich Rauchberg, which analyzes data and statistics about individuals, stating that the Officer's machine, collecting data from human flesh, operates the same as the Hollerith-Machine

¹⁶⁹ In the German, "Um es nun jedem zu ermöglichen, die Ausführung des Urteils zu überprüfen, wurde die Egge aus Glas gemacht."

¹⁷⁰ Anderson's book *Kafka's Clothes* provides several insights into Kafka's relation to physiognomic thought during his time, although Anderson's reading of *In the Penal Colony* remains focused on ornament, the aesthetic, and Kafka's meta-commentary on his own writing style.

¹⁷¹ In the German, "Inwiefern das barbarische Strafritual bei Kafka, in dessen Zentrum eine hochtechnisierte Hinrichtungsapparatur steht, von 'modernen' Machtmechanismen durchdrungen ist und sich in der *Strafkolonie* bereits der Übergang zur Biopolitik niederschlägt."

collecting and sorting data from “Individual-Cards” containing information about citizens (27). She also takes a quote about the “dim-witted wide-mouthed man [Convict] with shabby hair and face” as possibly referencing “the beginning of race-biology thoughts, according to which a person deemed ‘lowly’ or ‘degenerate’ is no longer considered human and therefore does not deserve pity”¹⁷² (Kafka 203, Pawlak 33).

While Pawlak’s insights reinforce the possibility of the execution machine as biopolitical, her evidence misses the significance of Kafka’s critique of modern power structures—Kafka makes clear the arbitrary and corruptible nature of not only sovereignty and bureaucracy, but also of biopower and any structure that might follow. Rather than collecting data from flesh (as with the Hollerith-Machine), the colony’s apparatus is only shown as imparting information onto the body through its tattoos. Moreover, once placed onto the machine the body is rendered immediately grotesque, therefore blocking the machine from collecting accurate data about that body in its usual state. Most importantly, in the final pages of the novella the machine entirely falls apart, marking the failure of biopower. At the end of the novella, the Officer suddenly decides that he has become criminal himself in failing to follow the order, “Be Just” (Kafka 238).¹⁷³ Upon learning of the Traveler’s negative opinion of his beloved machine, the Officer experiences his own moment of ‘enlightenment’; “with clear eyes” he places himself on the machine, becoming the ‘abnormal’ body to be corrected rather than an enforcer of norms (236).¹⁷⁴ Unfortunately for the Officer, the machine malfunctions, stabbing him so quickly that

¹⁷² In the German, “der Verurteilte, ein stumpfsinniger, breitmäuliger Mensch mit verwahrlostem Haar und Gesicht,” and “Möglicherweise spielt Kafkas Erzählung hier auf ein beginnendes rassenbiologistisches Denken an, nach welchem einem als ‘nieder’ und ‘entartet’ angesehenen Individuum das Menschsein aberkannt wird und es demnach kein Mitleid verdient hat.”

¹⁷³ In the German, “Sei gerecht!”

¹⁷⁴ In the German, “mit hellen Augen.” Just as those in power in Bennett’s novel become part of the spectacle, here the abhorrent manner in which the Officer dies makes him a spectacle as well.

he dies without experiencing the clarity promised to criminals in the 6th hour, and leaving his body a mangled mess rather than a legible representation of his crime.

Not only is the Officer consumed and destroyed by the legal apparatus he supports, the killing machine itself begins to explode its parts into the air and break down entirely. The machine consumes itself, vomiting its inner workings one by one onto the ground, and becoming grotesque in that act of vomiting. Nicholas Dungey elaborates that in this moment “the act of defining and naming, and the discursive powers from which it flows, are circular and unstable. As circumstances and those in power change, so too does the dominant paradigm of whom and what is normal and abnormal” (Dungey 36). Although Dungey remarks that the reversal of Officer and Convict as criminal is troubling in suggesting that “we are all equally susceptible to the strategic exercise of [...] marginalizing judgment” (implying that the colony’s mechanism does succeed in controlling its subjects), I find that the arbitrary nature of the penal colony’s categories suggests instead the corruptibility of biopower, alongside those power models which precede it (36).

Kafka’s critique of biopower as equally grotesque and arbitrary as bureaucratic sovereignty, in contrast to Bennett’s hopeful portrayal of such a biological mechanism, stems perhaps from his awareness of the changing nature of criminal law in Europe at the turn of the 20th century. Kafka, as a student of the criminologist Hans Gross, was certainly aware of Gross’s support for “the creation of penal colonies and the deportation of ‘degenerates’ who must be removed from society” (Pawlak 9). Gross was an avid follower of Lombroso’s theories about physiognomy and criminality, and for Gross, “prostitutes, homosexuals, gypsies, anarchists, the mentally insane, and to a certain extent *Jews* and women, all exhibited [...] physiological and moral traits resembling those of the ‘born’ criminal” (emphasis mine) (Anderson 148). As

Foucault states, “once the mechanism of biocriminal was called upon to make it possible to execute or banish criminals, criminality was conceptualized in racist terms”; in other words, the addition of biological considerations to labels of abnormality allowed the type of discrimination already prevalent in German culture at the time (*Society* 258). Röhl notes that “*anti-Semitism of the salon*, consisting of personal prejudice and collective but still informal discrimination against Jews [...] was the type of anti-Semitism with which the Jewish minority [...] was faced in the imperial period” under Kaiser Wilhelm II (Röhl 194). Anti-Semitic writings and speeches by celebrities such as Richard Wagner, Otto Weininger, and Karl Kraus moreover prove a similar “anti-Semitic atmosphere of the Austro-Hungarian *fin de siècle*,” so that Kafka was faced with such racism from multiple directions (Anderson 198). Kafka, as a Jewish man,¹⁷⁵ therefore would have been wary of biologically-based decisions about criminality, perhaps even using *In the Penal Colony* to directly push against his professor’s beliefs.

Rolf Zimmermann contends that Octave Mirbeau’s novel *Le Jardin des Supplices* from 1899 heavily influences Kafka’s novella, not only in content (both deal with torture), but because Mirbeau is one of the few authors in France who sides with Émile Zola in favor of Alfred Dreyfus, in the infamous Dreyfus Affair (Zimmermann 184).¹⁷⁶ As evidence that Kafka’s novella in part refers to Dreyfus, Zimmermann points to several factors such as the story’s location, on an island easily linked to the Île de Diable where Dreyfus serves his banishment, and to the fact

¹⁷⁵ Clayton Koelb describes how Kafka’s father suppressed their Jewish roots during Kafka’s early life, so that he grew up speaking only German, but that Kafka began to immerse himself in Jewish culture in 1911 following a theater performance by Yiddish players. Prejudice and general anti-Semitism meant that “Austrian Jews were still in many ways second-class citizens” during his lifetime, giving Kafka a sense of the ‘outsider’ or minority position which became a major theme of his writing (most famously, in *The Metamorphosis*) (Koelb 12).

¹⁷⁶ Zimmermann goes on to show how Kafka’s story accurately predicts the concentration camps of the Nazis and the gulags in Russia, to support his overall argument that speculative settings allow authors to write in a way that moves beyond their own contemporaneous historical settings, while my own argument remains focused on those historical settings.

that the Officer and Traveler converse in French (186). The Dreyfus Affair involves the condemnation of an innocent man largely based on his Jewishness, in the European anti-Semitic climate at the turn of the 20th century. Kafka's own Jewish heritage, his position as an 'outsider' (as evidenced by many critics), explains his critique of the type of 'natural law' endorsed by Bennett's novel. Critic Sander Gilman points out that Kafka "avoids any mention of the Jewishness of the prisoner[;] neither the word 'Jew' nor any easily decoded reference appears" in his novella (Gilman 82). However, through images of torture, Gilman highlights an implicit link to the Dreyfus Affair, stating that "for Kafka, the lesson of the Dreyfus case was that Dreyfus [...] remained the condemned Jew" even after his innocence was proven (85). Kafka's relation to biopolitical thought therefore is twofold: he refuses an explicit portrayal of biological categories which condemn Jewishness as 'abnormal,' while simultaneously referencing the harmful effects of such categorization. Kafka, like Dreyfus, would find himself on the wrong end of a legal system based on biological classifications.

If Kafka critiques both more traditional power structures such as sovereignty, as well as the beginnings of biopower, as ultimately arbitrary and corrupt, failing in their intentions, what alternatives does he provide? In fact, it is Kafka's refusal to speculate on possible well-functioning legal systems that renders his novella particularly insightful. Unlike Bennett, Kafka ends *In the Penal Colony* with an intentional rejection of alternatives, instead suggesting the inescapability of power structures aimed at organizing populations according to arbitrary hierarchies. Kafka hints at further alternatives through the character of the new Commandant, who apparently has ideas for changes which have not yet been implemented. The Officer states that the "new one [Commandant] has already shown the desire to mix himself in [the Officer's]

justice system,” but so far the Officer has been able to “fend him off” (Kafka 212).¹⁷⁷ His comments lead the Traveler to “place many hopes in the new Commandant, who apparently, even if slowly, was intending to introduce a new system,” and who is clearly “no supporter of the [old] system, and acts almost hostile towards the Officer” (214, 223).¹⁷⁸ The Traveler seems to assume that a new system would be modeled more closely after modern laws, without the use of torture or execution. This is corroborated by the fact that the new Commandant has done away with the budget for the execution machine parts (in the Officer’s mind, as a “pretense to fight old infrastructures”) (221).¹⁷⁹

While Kafka therefore hints at a new legal system to replace the old, he never gives explicit indications of what that system might look like. The closest indication of a new system comes during the Officer’s speech of hypotheticals, when he speculates on what the new Commandant will say:

‘A great researcher [the Traveler] [...] has just said that our legal system based on old customs is inhumane. After this verdict from such a personage I am obviously no longer able to tolerate this [old] system. As of today, therefore, I mandate that—and so on [usw.].’ (Kafka 229)¹⁸⁰

The Officer uses the abbreviation “usw.” to indicate that the Commandant would next enumerate which new mandates he will use to replace the old, but the Officer’s speculation ends there

¹⁷⁷ In the German, “Der neue hat allerdings schon Lust gezeigt, in mein Gericht sich einzumischen, es ist mir aber bisher gelungen, ihn abzuwehren...”

¹⁷⁸ In the German, “Außerdem aber setze er einige Hoffnung auf den neuen Kommandanten, der offenbar, allerdings langsam, ein neues Verfahren einzuführen beabsichtigte...”; and “der Kommandant [...] kein Anhänger dieses Verfahrens war und sich gegenüber dem Offizier fast feindselig verhielt.”

¹⁷⁹ In the German, “wie der neue Kommandant behauptet, dem alles nur zum Vorwand dient, alte Einrichtungen zu bekämpfen.”

¹⁸⁰ In the German, “‘Ein großer Forscher [...] hat eben gesagt, daß unser Verfahren nach altem Brauch ein unmenschliches ist. Nach diesem Urteil einer solchen Persönlichkeit ist es mir natürlich nicht mehr möglich, dieses Verfahren zu dulden. Mit dem heutigen Tage also ordne ich an—usw.’ ” “Usw.” is the abbreviation for “und so weiter.”

abruptly. Kafka, at first introducing the hope that a less troubling legal system might soon be implemented in the penal colony, thus refuses details of what might replace the old.

Instead, Kafka ends his novella with a sense of futility, that in fact the system will not change (the old Commandant has after all ensured that “nothing from the old [system] is able to be changed”), by emphasizing the continued presence of the old Commandant. Even though the Officer admits that there are “no more open supporters” of the old legal system in the penal colony, he insists that “the supporters have holed up, there are still many, but they do not admit it” (Kafka 224).¹⁸¹ Not only his supporters, but also the old Commandant himself remain present in the colony, his burial place in a teahouse under a table where men gather and drink. The engraving on his headstone holds an ominous tone, stating that “there is a prophecy, that the Commandant will be resurrected after a certain number of years and will lead his supporters out of this house to reconquer the colony. Believe and wait!” (247).¹⁸² Soon after reading this headstone, the Traveler abruptly flees the colony, violently forcing the Convict and his guard to remain behind; his refusal to let them on his boat suggests that they remain entrapped in the old system, even if the Convict has escaped his imminent execution. Kafka’s novella, displaying the Foucauldian trajectory from sovereignty to biopower like *The Heads of Cerberus*, nevertheless ends without alternatives to such corruptible forms of governance and suggests instead a wariness of whatever future system might follow.

¹⁸¹ In the German, “infolgedessen haben sich die Anhänger verkrochen, es gibt noch viele, aber keiner gesteht es ein.”

¹⁸² In the German, “Es besteht eine Prophezeiung, daß der Kommandant nach einer bestimmten Anzahl von Jahren auferstehen und aus diesem Hause eine Anhänger zur Wiedereroberung der Kolonie führen wird. Glaubet und wartet!”

IV. Conclusion

The Heads of Cerberus and *In the Penal Colony* reveal the inherent failures of systems of government which force arbitrary norms onto entire populations, even, in the case of Kafka, when those norms are attached to biological ‘science.’ Bennett and Kafka use the figure of the criminal in particular to demonstrate the consequences to individuals classified and punished by power structures which do not take into account their personal circumstances. However, classifications of criminality based on (supposedly) less arbitrary means, for instance through the practice of physiognomy, introduce their own problematic consequences. As criminology moves towards an interest in sussing out and containing the biologically ‘dangerous individual,’ criminality becomes conflated with the idea of monstrosity. Stefan Andriopoulos points out, following Foucault, that in the early 20th century the definition of ‘criminal’ changes:

A delinquente nato [born criminal] is not a *criminal* in the juridical sense, not a legal body with free will, who has committed an offense, but rather a ‘dangerous monster’ with specific anatomical stigmata, from whom society must be protected. (Andriopoulos 52)¹⁸³

My next chapter looks at two stories from 1931, which reflect this new biological mode of labeling the individual, and which extrapolate perceived ‘monstrosity’ as a justification for the larger-scale biopolitical and eugenic actions aimed at certain population categories.

¹⁸³ In the German, “Ein *delinquente nato* ist nicht ein *Verbrecher* im juristischen Sinn, also nicht ein Rechtssubjekt mit freiem Willen, das ein Delikt ausgeführt hat, sondern ein ‘gefährliches Monster’ mit bestimmten anatomischen Stigmata, vor dem die Gesellschaft geschützt werden muß.”

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CHAPTER 4: GENETIC MONSTERS: H.P. LOVECRAFT AND FRITZ LANG¹⁸⁴

I. Introduction

The monster has long dominated our imagination; Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park in *Wonders and the Order of Nature* locate depictions of humanized monsters as early as the 15th century. Previously the term ‘monster’ referred to flora and fauna, but in the 15th century the term became anthropocentric, encompassing “men completely wild in appearance and way of life” (Daston and Park 175). During the 16th century in particular, monstrosity was associated with physiological difference, in the form of babies with deformities, and these births provoked a horror stemming from “the perceived violation of moral norms” (181). The term ‘monster,’ then, applied to human-like beings whose abnormal appearance was seen as “divine retribution in response to human sin” (181). In the 20th century, the concept of ‘monster’ still conveyed a sense of horror, and of moral violation, as certain actions or behaviors were deemed monstrous (for instance in the case of violent criminals). However, advances in science and medicine shifted the focus from mystical causes to biological ones, and ‘monster’ no longer applied only to those with outward differences. Instead, in the 20th century “monstrosity and grotesquerie merge in the hybrid forms that disrupt the borders separating what is acceptable within the categories of ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ ” (Edwards 40). Defining the monstrous thus becomes the task of revealing visible and invisible markers of the crossing between human and nonhuman.

¹⁸⁴ Portions of this chapter, on Fritz Lang’s *M*, previously appeared as an article in the *University of Toronto Quarterly*. The citation is as follows: Kuhn, Lina. “Oh the Monstrosity: Vigilante Mobs and Biopolitical Justice in 1930s Film.” *U. of Toronto Quarterly* 87.1 (Winter 2018): 62-80. Print.

In this chapter, I look at how the new paradigm of partially-hidden monstrosity becomes conflated with contemporaneous genetic science's investment in determining the invisible causes behind human development. Many scientists explored the significance of Darwin's theories of evolution for human society at the turn of the 20th century; two in particular tied genetics and character development together. The first is August Weismann, whose germ-plasm theory from the late 19th century states that "all the biological information for organic development inher[e]s in the germ plasm of the sex cells," meaning that genetics, rather than external factors, holds primary influence over an individual's development (Lovett-Graff 176). This theory confirmed the "notion that not only were individuals the cumulative products of their unvaried, randomly generated genetic heritage, but, more significantly, they were *stuck* within that heritage" (177). As Richard Hofstadter points out in *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, "Weismann's germ-plasm theory stimulated a hereditarian approach to social theory"; if an individual's actions were the result of their biological background, consequent responses to those actions would need to be based on that background as well (Hofstadter 163).

Weismann's contemporary Ernst Haeckel also published theories about evolution and biology that caused him to be labeled a social Darwinist. Haeckel believed that "ontogenesis, or the development of the individual, is a short and quick repetition (recapitulation) of phylogenesis, or the development of the tribe to which it belongs, determined by the laws of inheritance and adaptation" (Haeckel 310). In other words, for Haeckel one's development was determined by the longer historical development of one's particular race (Haeckel believed in ten distinct human races). Following Haeckel, individual actions could then be generalized as directly corresponding to their biological heritage, including their race or ethnicity.

For both Weismann and Haeckel, therefore, one's genetic past was a large determinant of one's physical and mental development, although of course the technological tools for laying bare that past through genetic mapping did not yet exist. Instead, the early 1900s saw a renewed interest in professional expertise in physiognomy and phrenology as methods of rendering genetics visible (Seitler ch. "Late Modern Morphologies"). The 'scientific' practice of physiognomy, of reading facial features to reveal biological 'truths' about an individual, was in part an attempt to regain control over the perceived decline (or degeneration) of a culture. As Dana Seitler explains in *Atavistic Tendencies*, biologists following Darwin "understood the evolutionary concept of retrogression not simply as a possibility, but as an actuality and a threat" (3). Only by making racial background readable through scientific means could society classify and contain those individuals who threatened it. The internalization of monstrosity, where outward appearance no longer necessarily contains obvious markers of one's inner nature, therefore precipitates the emergence of new professional methods for detecting and interpreting monstrous qualities. As Michel Foucault states in his lectures on the 'abnormal,' "the recurring problem of the nineteenth century is that of discovering the core of monstrosity hidden behind little abnormalities, deviances, and irregularities," a preoccupation which continues into the 20th century (Foucault 56).

In the humanities, literature and film act as equally expert technologies, able to bring inner and outer qualities into focus, to make visible otherwise unknowable or unexplored possibilities. For H. P. Lovecraft's *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* and Fritz Lang's *M* from 1931, the logic of genetics in the 1920s and 30s¹⁸⁵ drives the plot of danger hiding beneath a seemingly

¹⁸⁵ Theories related to biology and genetics circulated freely at the turn of the 20th century across the United States and Europe, as evidenced for instance by the correspondence between Darwin and Haeckel (Kelly). Lovecraft read theory by American, English, and German scientists with equal interest, and even for Lang, not explicitly interested

‘normal’ human exterior. The stories’ protagonists carry a hidden monstrosity which calls into question their humanity, and both stories turn to scientific tools such as physiognomy and genetic inheritance to interpret those moments where monstrosity reaches the surface and becomes visible. For Lovecraft’s narrator, his monstrosity comes from generations of interbreeding between humans and aliens, whose progeny are biologically human and non-human, and who violate social morals in the act of procreation. In Lang’s film, a man who abducts and kills young girls is labeled a monster and condemned by the community from the start; his actions are so particularly heinous that he is seen as inhuman.

Both Lang’s killer and Lovecraft’s narrator do not at first glance outwardly show their monstrous quality, and in both cases, the horror of the stories arises from the hidden quality of the monstrous. Monstrosity “in its movement back and forth between the exterior and the interior of the body, its surface and its depth, [...] seems intent on concealing itself in the hidden, impenetrable spaces beneath the surface,” making categorization the most pressing concern (Hantke 34). Lovecraft and Lang both posit physiognomy as a potential solution to that concern, highlighting moments of visible genetics through the aesthetic trope of the grotesque face, as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin. In their stories, the aesthetic grotesque provides the impetus for physiognomic readings of their characters, which in turn supply potential taxonomies of the characters’ personality traits and genetic background. Thus the grotesque occurs where the division between surface and depth, visible and invisible, collapses and hidden monstrosity rears its ugly head.

In *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* and *M*, the moments where the monstrous appears briefly on the surface are moreover closely linked with characters’ most intense emotional outbursts,

in Darwinism, the general debate around nature or nurture dictating a person’s development would have been ever-present (Hofstadter, ch. “Evolution, Ethics, and Society”).

both in horror and sympathy. Looking at moments of grotesqueness and the character reactions it provokes (neither wholly benevolent, nor wholly negative) thus brings into relief the fraught nature of subsequent social and governmental response. In these two stories, that response is biopolitical in attempting to classify, to make visible and knowable the nature of the monstrosity, and then in trying to control the underlying genetics through eugenics. However, in both stories classifications of ‘human’ and ‘non-human’ break down, and as a consequence in Lovecraft’s tale eugenics fails because it is predicated on a falsely constructed hierarchy, and in Lang’s film the proper course of action, eugenics or institutionalization, cannot be decided. Lovecraft and Lang have almost opposite political views (Lovecraft’s infamous racism, versus Lang’s rejection of fascism), yet their constructed tales operate under the same logic of genetics, and for both that logic leads to the collapse of biopolitical categorization, without offering alternate solutions to the problem of monstrosity among humans. Lovecraft and Lang pose the question: How are we to react to monstrosity, once brought to the surface, when that monstrosity is merely an estranged version of humanity, recognizable yet horror-provoking?

II. Monstrous Aliens in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*

Howard Phillips Lovecraft, born in 1890 in Rhode Island, spent most of his life devoted to writing weird, fantastic, and horror fiction, whose singular nature has spawned a cult following. Lovecraft died in 1937, yet only in recent years has his fiction been taken up by literary scholars as rich ground for analysis,¹⁸⁶ in part due to the efforts of biographer S. T. Joshi who links Lovecraft to the biological and eugenic debates of his time. The logic of Haeckel and

¹⁸⁶ One reason that Lovecraft has been previously overlooked is due to the genre of his writing: science fiction in general still holds a stigma as non-serious, frivolous, or unworthy of critical attention in academic circles, although works such as Fredric Jameson’s *Archaeologies of the Future* show the tide turning.

Weismann's genetics drives *The Shadow Over Innsmouth's* plot of danger hiding beneath a seemingly 'normal' human exterior. Only by making racial background readable through scientific means could society classify and contain those individuals who 'threatened' it. Eugenics, using genetic background as the justification for reproductive control of groups deemed inferior, became one such response aimed at correcting social decline. Hofstadter shows how eugenic ideas about actively shaping human development gained popularity in the United States during the first decades of the 20th century via England, mainly through the writings of Francis Galton, Darwin's cousin. Galton was also a strong proponent of physiognomy (as were many eugenicists), and the same racist tendencies of physiognomy carried over into eugenics.

Galton coined the term eugenics as not only referring to restrictions on procreation, but also to "tak[ing] cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had" (Galton 25). For Galton, taking "cognisance" of 'influence' included identifying and activating social means of aiding desirable groups, and the 'less suitable' people were those of non-white races, or those with mental or physical 'defects' of some kind. The popularity of eugenics in the United States at this time was largely driven by Galton's adherence to 'conclusive' scientific data about individuals based on the 'objective' technology of photography, and on physical and mental measurements (Seitler 71). Hofstadter states that, "accompanied by a flood of valuable genetic research carried on by physicians and biologists, eugenics seemed not so much a social philosophy as a science," and therefore gained credibility as a method of dealing with people considered 'undesirable' (Hofstadter 161). Groups such as the American Breeders' Association, the Eugenics Record Office, and the National Conference on Race Betterment prove the intensity of American desire in the early 1900s to have

an impact on human development, as do the subsequent sterilization programs, some of which have only recently been repealed.¹⁸⁷

While the fervor for actively shaping human populations through eugenics somewhat lessened in the U.S. by the 1930s, Lovecraft's novella remains entrenched in the eugenic rhetoric of the early 20th century. As Angela Smith states in *Hideous Progeny*, "official eugenics directed much of its energy toward identifying, representing in monstrous terms, and seeking to control the agglomerate body of America's and the world's 'unfit' " (Smith 13). Likewise, Lovecraft represents his characters as "fabulous monsters of abhorrent grotesqueness and malignity," to recall eugenic rhetoric which according to Smith conceived of the monster as "the product of 'inferior' racial, class, or national groups, whose innate genetic defect and danger to normative reproduction was manifest as visible deformation" (Lovecraft 595, Smith 36). A closer look at Lovecraft's scientific influences makes clear his investment in categorizing humanity based on genetic hierarchies and neutralizing those deemed monstrous, which carries into his fictional writings.

Lovecraft's ideas about human development were heavily influenced by scientists and philosophers from this period, including Haeckel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and John Fiske (Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft*). Through them, Lovecraft honed his own materialist belief that a scientific focus on the body provides 'truths' about human life. Lovecraft's confidence in science encompassed everyday experiences; he believed, for example, that "psychological discovery, and chemical, physical, and physiological research, have largely destroyed the element of emotion among informed and sophisticated people by resolving it into its component parts—intellectual

¹⁸⁷ For an account of the lasting impact of early eugenic fervor on American political policy as well as on popular culture, see the volume *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s*, edited by Susan Currell and Christina Cogdell.

idea and animal impulse” (309).¹⁸⁸ His materialist views extended to the macro as well; following Nietzsche and Hugh Elliot in particular, Lovecraft decided that there is no guiding force or telos towards which human development tends, likewise rejecting spiritual or religious explanations of human existence (Joshi, *Dreamer*, 131). As he says, “I think it is *damned unlikely* that anything like a central cosmic will, a spirit world, or an eternal survival of personality exist” (Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft*, 208). Rejecting spiritual forces as the drive behind humanity, Lovecraft turned instead to various scientific ideas about how humans could, in theory, influence their own evolutionary process—through eugenics, for instance.

Although not specifically discussed by Lovecraft, his interest in scientists such as Haeckel and Fiske suggests that he was exposed to the types of debates around genetics incited by those scientists, including Weismann. Indeed, Joshi shows how several of Lovecraft’s personal letters reveal his determination to prove his own racially pure English ancestry through careful research of his paternal and maternal background. Similarly, Joshi asserts that “to the end of his life Lovecraft retained a belief in the *biological* (as opposed to the cultural) inferiority of blacks, and maintained that a strict colour line must be enforced in order to prevent miscegenation” (Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft*, 70-1). Even in his remarks to his Jewish wife, that she “no longer belonged to these mongrels” because she had assimilated sufficiently to American culture, we see Lovecraft’s two-fold racism, based on genetic background (Joshi, *Dreamer*, 222). First, he had an extreme dislike for racial mixing (as seen in the word choice “mongrel”), and second, that dislike came out of his conviction that certain groups of people are inherently inferior. Lovecraft’s primary touchstones for his ideas on race and genetics stemmed from the

¹⁸⁸ This insistence that science lays the emotional mechanism bare, pulled from Freud’s works, shows in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* through the main character’s constant attempts to use logic and reason to govern his own bodily reactions.

mid- to late 19th century, and he did not update those beliefs to match new scientific evidence (such as Franz Boas's proofs in the 1930s against biologically-based racism). Until his death, Lovecraft remained racist in his personal views, even voicing support of Adolf Hitler's anti-Semitic fears (360).

Consequently, most Lovecraft critics focus on how his racist and eugenic affinities enter his fiction. Such interpretations are certainly necessary, but in the case of *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, looking only at the anti-miscegenation overtones gives an incomplete account of the story. In what follows, I will show how Lovecraft's racist logic, which assumes genetic hierarchies, contains inherent instabilities. Focusing on the classification of 'abnormal' individuals in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* reveals not only Lovecraft's concern with maintaining hierarchies, but more importantly how those hierarchies fall apart. I will look first at the hidden quality of the monstrous in Lovecraft's story, and the horror it provokes as driving the need to make individual genetic backgrounds visible. Then I turn to the role of physiognomy as a means of categorization and, along with the protagonist's emotional reactions, as a literary mechanism meant to 'naturalize' the story's implicit favoring of racial purity. Finally, I demonstrate how Lovecraft's writing in fact undermines such preferences, as distinctions between 'human' and 'non-human' break down both biologically and through the parallel eugenic actions of the humans and aliens. The story thus ends with ambiguity, not moral certitude, surrounding the valuing of human and nonhuman life.

Lovecraft's novella takes the form of a journal entry written by an unnamed narrator (identified in Lovecraft's notes as Robert Olmstead) that details the events following his journey

to find out about his ancestry. Olmstead¹⁸⁹ travels to Arkham, Massachusetts in 1927, hoping to look at historical records on his ancestors, but instead becomes drawn to the shunned and decrepit town named Innsmouth. Although warned not to visit due to the unpleasant nature of the Innsmouthers, Olmstead spends the afternoon there talking to locals and wandering around alone. The locals respond to his inquisitiveness by trying to kill him, a fate which Olmstead only narrowly escapes. By the end Olmstead (and the reader) realizes that the Innsmouthers are so protective of their secrets because they have a deal with amphibious aliens, the Deep Ones, who give them gold and plentiful fishing in return for their cooperation in inter-species procreation.

In this story “Lovecraft’s monsters do not stray radically from the human form,” but instead are “characterized above all by their *hybridism*—a hybridism that is not the simple juxtaposition of disparate elements [. . .] but a result of a sort of contamination or collective pollution” (Lévy 56).¹⁹⁰ We are here faced with a hidden ‘contamination’ of the categories of human and nonhuman; Olmstead emphasizes the unknown nature of the monstrous by providing several possible reasons for the Innsmouther’s slightly odd appearance. He first invites us to entertain the idea that their look might stem from an “insidious disease-phenomenon”:

Only a very rare affliction, of course, could bring about such vast and radical anatomical changes in a single individual after maturity—changes involving osseous factors as basic as the shape of the skull—but then, even this aspect was no more baffling and unheard-of than the visible features of the malady as a whole. (Lovecraft 605)

The narrator moreover proposes “biological degeneration” and “alienage” as further possibilities of cause, both concepts tied to inherited genetics (598). Even if “the ‘Innsmouth look’ [is] a disease rather than a blood strain,” though, the ‘abnormal’ appearance of the Innsmouth residents

¹⁸⁹ Although the namelessness of the narrator is important in terms of the reader’s ability to project onto him as a blank slate, I will refer to him as Olmstead for the sake of clarity.

¹⁹⁰ Lévy, like other Lovecraft scholars, focuses on the “degenerate” and contaminated aspect of the Innsmouthers as an allegory for Lovecraft’s fears about race, and as a metaphor for the dark places in the human psyche (using psychoanalytic theory). He, too, misses the importance of the ambiguity of Lovecraft’s ending.

connects to their biology, through inherited illness or contagion (609). The specific causes of their outward appearance may be at first unknown, but the fact that it is an inborn danger remains certain.

Lovecraft keeps the full truth about the alien interbreeding in Innsmouth suppressed until the end of the tale; the horror in the story arises from this partially hidden¹⁹¹ quality of the characters' monstrosity. The uncertainty, or "failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe" due to the "incomprehensible" nature of the characters connects to Mikhail Bakhtin and Wolfgang Kayser's conception of the grotesque as horror-inducing (Kayser 185). Lovecraft belongs to Kayser's category of "*Schauerliteratur* [which] aims at making the reader's flesh crawl (a sensation he seeks for himself) and at revealing abysses to him (at the brink of which he gladly stands)" (141). Surrounded by the grotesque, Olmstead experiences a "cosmic terror, the fear of the immeasurable, the infinitely powerful" which he does not yet have the tools to define, making identification and categorization the most pressing concern (Bakhtin 335).

Lovecraft posits physiognomy as a potential solution to that horror, highlighting moments of visible genetics through the aesthetic trope of the grotesque face. Lovecraft ensures that his readers will search for coded meaning behind the visible manifestations of monstrosity by giving several physical descriptions of the Innsmouthers' faces:

[The bus driver] had a narrow head, bulging, watery blue eyes that never seemed to wink, a flat nose, a receding forehead and chin, and singularly undeveloped ears. His long, thick lip and coarse-pored, greyish cheeks seemed almost beardless [...] (Lovecraft 597-8)

This depiction repeats whenever Olmstead encounters an Innsmouth native; for instance, at the beginning of his journey he remarks about the "queer narrow heads with flat noses and bulgy,

¹⁹¹ This sense in Lovecraft's story of a mounting horror where the reader only gains knowledge slowly, piece by piece, mirrors the same type of device at work in Lang's film; for Lang, the hidden space is instead "off-screen."

stary eyes,” and later in a restaurant he describes a “stooped, narrow-headed man with staring unwinking eyes, and a flat-nosed wench” (591, 627).

Bakhtin conceives of the “nose and mouth [as] the most important part in the grotesque image of the body,” as well as “protruding eyes” (Bakhtin 316, 317). The emphasis on facial orifices, for Bakhtin, reveals a body “in the act of becoming,” a body where strict divisions between human and non-human are permeable because the body is not physically autonomous and contained (317).¹⁹² In Lovecraft’s story, this mutability also includes the traditional sense of the grotesque as blending human and animal (or alien), when Olmstead for instance illustrates locals as “simian-visaged,” or draws our attention to the fingers of his bus driver which “seemed to have a tendency to curl closely into the huge palm” like those of an ape (Lovecraft 601, 598).¹⁹³ In fact, Olmstead describes the Innsmouth people as not only “hideous and abnormal,” but often uses the word “grotesque” regarding his experience in Innsmouth (609). The grotesque hybridity of Lovecraft’s characters focuses Olmstead’s (and the reader’s) attention on deciphering those characters.

The ‘scientific’ practice of physiognomy would have provided readers one method of making the Innsmouthers’ monstrosity legible, by supplying potential taxonomies of the characters’ personality traits and genetic background based on their abnormal faces. Looking at Johann Caspar Lavater’s 18th century physiognomic descriptions provides a possible motive for Lovecraft’s characterizations. Just as the Innsmouthers often have “narrow heads,” Lavater notes

¹⁹² Few critics focus on the presence of the grotesque in Lovecraft’s writing, although in his article “From beyond: H. P. Lovecraft and the place of horror,” James Kneale reads another Lovecraft story, “The Unnamable,” in relation to Bakhtin’s ideas about the grotesque as that which allows permutation across thresholds, as the body that is “becoming.”

¹⁹³ Abel Alves in “Humanity’s Place in Nature, 1863-1928: Horror, Curiosity and the Expeditions of Huxley, Wallace, Blavatsky and Lovecraft” gives an interesting analysis of the affinity of apes and humans in Lovecraft’s texts, including both species’ propensity for simultaneous xenophobia and curiosity, but does not explicitly discuss the concept of atavism, which becomes important when considering physiognomy.

that where “the back part of the skull [. . .] is compressed [. . .] it is a sign of a weak mind,” and likewise “a narrow forehead is usually the sign of a froward disposition,” and if the forehead “incline[s] backward, we may then anticipate rashness and want of reflection” (Lavater 23-4, 27). Cesare Lombroso’s racially-charged update of this science agrees with Lavater; he states that for criminals (recalling the bus driver with the “receding forehead” and ape fingers), “sometimes the forehead is receding, as in apes [. . .], or low and narrow” (Lombroso Ferrero 12). As for the “watery blue eyes” of the bus driver, “blue eyes are frequently found in persons of phlegmatic character; they are often indications of feebleness and effeminacy” (30). And for his “long, thick lip,” Lombroso states that “if the lips are thick and fleshy, this is a sign of sensuality and of slothfulness; it is always a characteristic of a phlegmatic temper” (33). For each specific that Lovecraft gives about the typical Innsmouth face, the slightly older, yet highly popular ‘science’ of physiognomy gives a corresponding negative characteristic associated with criminality, animality, and degenerate tendencies.¹⁹⁴

In the United States the interest in physiognomy often corresponded with the social concepts of degeneration and atavism, the fear of a general backward evolution or return to an animalistic state (explored in the first chapter of this project). As Seitler explains, at the turn of the 20th century scientists in various fields and disciplines were “convinced that certain social behaviors, practices, and other modern realities, including criminality [. . .] were both causes and symptoms of an imminent and widespread cultural degeneration” (Seitler 55). The idea of cultural degeneration or atavism was moreover linked to race; physiognomic traits were often used to indicate “which people had the capacity for modernity and which did not,” with non-

¹⁹⁴ The characteristics of ‘effeminacy’ and ‘sensuality’ connect to Max Nordau’s description of degenerate artist figures in his work *Degeneration*, and indeed Nordau dedicated this text to Lombroso. Criminality for Lovecraft might equate to the Innsmouthers breaking human or natural law by procreating with aliens. In Lang’s film, we will see a more detailed version of how the criminal becomes monstrous.

white ancestry, and especially African ancestry, largely connected to primitive characteristics (63). The practice of physiognomy therefore already assumed the hierarchical superiority of ‘pure’ racial background, and in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* the descriptions of the Innsmouthers encode their undesirable degenerate and atavistic qualities.

Physiognomy and its latent hierarchical indicators, emphasized through the grotesque, mark the Innsmouthers as dangerous, a conclusion corroborated by Olmstead’s intense negative bodily and emotional reactions while in Innsmouth. Olmstead’s initial ignorance about Innsmouth’s history results in his reactions being chalked up to natural instinct, an innate sense of the biological danger of those surrounding him. Literary critic Mitch Frye locates the reason for this instinctive reaction in Lovecraft’s own prejudice, explaining that Lovecraft justifies “his fear of the racial unknown and his creative reaction thereto [as] perfectly natural byproducts of ‘an instinct as old as history’ ” (Frye 240). Olmstead’s first encounter with the bus driver causes a “wave of spontaneous aversion which could be neither checked nor explained,” and he thereafter finds it “very natural” that outsiders want nothing to do with the Innsmouth folk (Lovecraft 597). When he first sees an overtly alien/human mix in an Innsmouth church, he again feels “sharp intensity and unaccountable horror” which “analysis” and logic cannot dispel (602). That this negative reaction is instinctual is reinforced when Olmstead later recalls the “face for whose horror [his] conscious mind could not account” (628). Throughout the story, our narrator feels “horror,” “terror” and “shock” that cannot be displaced by “reason,” “logic,” or “rationality,” although he often tries to explain away his bodily reactions against the Innsmouth folk. The ‘naturalness’ of his negative feelings reinforces the sense that the monstrous Innsmouthers are inherently an undesirable group, as compared to their all-human counterparts.

Finally, as it dawns on Olmstead that the ramblings of the old man Zadok might be accurate, that the Insmouth locals might actually breed with an alien species living underwater, he comes face to face with some of those locals. Immediately, he is “horrificed by the bestial abnormality of their faces and dog-like sub-humanness of their crouching gait”; it is the monstrous dissolution of the line between human and nonhuman that incites such a negative response (Lovecraft 641). Olmstead’s most intense emotional reaction occurs, in fact, when his own categorization as human is threatened. At the end of the novella, he begins to change physically, and soon realizes that his grandmother (and therefore he himself) shares genetics with the Deep Ones. When Olmstead begins “to study the mirror with mounting alarm,” he notices on his own face the very characteristics which have previously defined the ‘other’ for him (652). He comes face to face with his own inner monstrosity, a trope that repeats in Lang’s film, causing him to experience an emotional crisis as surface (appearance) and depth (genetics) collapse, and he becomes part of the grotesque previously shunned. Olmstead “acquire[s] a sort of terror of [his] own ancestry,” and upon learning further details about his family, he claims his life has become “a nightmare of brooding and apprehension, nor do[es he] know how much is hideous truth and how much madness” (649, 650). Frye explains this reaction as belonging to the genre of the “genotypic horror story [which] shows the individual at war with a cold, chaotic world as well as with the mysterious machinations of his own genes” (Frye 239). At this point Olmstead, and the reader, associate only negative emotions with such a connection to the Deep Ones, mirroring the contemporaneous social fear that “the actions and behaviors of families are encoded in their descendants, always threatening to reemerge” and become visible (243).

However, Lovecraft’s writing complicates a straight-forward condemnation of the biological monster in the last few paragraphs of his novella:

The tense extremes of horror are lessening, and I feel queerly drawn toward the unknown sea-deeps instead of fearing them. I hear and do strange things in sleep, and awake with a kind of exaltation instead of terror. [. . .] In that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever. (Lovecraft 652-3)

Other scholars have read this ending as proof of Lovecraft's aversion to biological mixing. For instance, Bennett Lovett-Graff reads this story as a "public allegory of the threat of immigration," which combines horror and disgust for those with different genetic backgrounds with a taboo fascination (Lovett-Graff 186). For Lovett-Graff, the ending contains a revulsion for biological 'otherness,' and Olmstead's ecstasy at returning to the Deep Ones stems instead from Lovecraft's love for his mother, and a secret desire to return to that maternal ancestry, to let "her protection mask the tragic condition of his biological being and origin" (188). He moreover contends that Olmstead does not have agency in his decision to rejoin the aliens; the ending shows the "powerfully disturbing effects of the narrator's biological coercion" (186). In either scenario (mother love or coercion), Olmstead's willing embrace of an alien existence is regarded as the ultimate horror.

Frye likewise reads Lovecraft's tale as promoting a racist worldview; Lovecraft describes the aliens as a "limitless stream" that is always "surging" from place to place, and therefore links to the racist rhetoric of Lothrop Stoddard who speaks of a "sea" of non-whites threatening to overwhelm populations (Frye 249). Frye thus states that while "a commonality between the Deep Ones, the villagers, the narrator, and the entire human race" might serve to "lessen the horror of Olmstead's concluding resolution to join his relatives under the sea, 'Innsmouth' does not seem to support such a reading" (251). Rather, in Frye's reading, the ending "acknowledges that general truth underlying the theory of common descent, but [. . .] argues that some races are further along a presumed evolutionary 'track' than others" (251). In this reading, Olmstead,

because his genetic background is revealed as connected to the inferior ‘race,’ must be removed from the general human population in order to prevent further miscegenation.

Joshi too acknowledges the possible ambiguity of the ending, but decides that Olmstead’s ecstatic embrace of his change is the “pinnacle” of the “horrific scenario” as his mind decays as well (Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft*, 500). Therefore, Olmstead is seen by these critics as a pawn for genetic drives and impulses, and the ending increases a sense of horror as our reliable narrator loses his ability to resist the monstrosity within. However, this sudden turn-about from a narrator who associates Innsmouth with abominable degeneracy and dread, to someone slowly drawn to the underwater alien community, instead suggests an ambiguity present in Lovecraft’s writing which deserves further scrutiny. In what remains I will demonstrate how Lovecraft, in spite of himself, undermines a purely xenophobic account of the ‘other’ (in this case aliens) by dismantling the hierarchy his story implicitly sets up. Instead of a clear distinction between the human and alien cultures, a closer look at those cultures reveals their similarities, and therefore the inherent problems with biologically-based classification and subsequent action against perceived monstrosity.

The ambiguity dismissed by the above critics has multiple sources, including Olmstead’s sudden use of phrases such as “queerly drawn,” “exaltation,” and “wonder and glory” to describe a situation that the entire novella has previously primed as abhorrent and ‘abnormal.’ The implicit hierarchy of heroic humans against monstrous aliens is called into question by Olmstead’s decision to join the Deep Ones. Moreover, Olmstead’s loss of pure humanity suggests that no one can ultimately be sure of his or her ancestry (in fact, humans in Lovecraft’s speculative fictions often stem from ancient alien races). Several moments in the novella signal

that for Lovecraft, humans remain fundamentally connected to the nonhuman in terms of their evolutionary background, a fact kept present by his reliance on animal imagery (such as the ape comparisons to the bus driver). For instance, when Olmstead finally sees the aliens clearly, their “bestial babel of croaking, baying, and barking” reminds him of dogs and their “fishy odour” recalls the amphibious origins of life on Earth (Lovecraft 644, 641). Even the atavistic vocabulary of the novella, for example referring to the Innsmouthers as “degenerate creatures,” emphasizes the connection between modern individuals and previous human states closer to animality (644). While Lovecraft attempts to limit such descriptions to undesirable populations, his foregrounding of evolutionary theories instead naturalizes a biological link between humans and the nonhuman, undermining the anti-miscegenation fear of non-purity. Olmstead, the easily relatable human narrator whose physical changes place him firmly on a family tree populated with the nonhuman, is not the exception but rather the rule. Beyond biological connections, a closer look at alien and human actions in the story further demonstrates that objectively, distinctions cannot be drawn between the cultural values of the two groups.

Both humans and aliens use eugenics to control their respective population development; a sympathetic reader concentrates on the eugenic response of the American government against Innsmouth as understandable. If natural instinct tells us to fear the monsters (and their grotesque physiognomy upholds the implicit sense of their inferiority), then they must hold some danger for humans. In fact, in Lovecraft’s created world, the monsters supposedly do have the potential to annihilate the whole human population, or to overcome humans through forced procreation. Negative eugenics, including “marital restrictions for those with conditions deemed genetically transmissible” and the removal of the ‘unfit’ from the population, becomes the primary means of response against this biological threat (Smith 11). On the first page of the story Olmstead tells us

the outcome of his sharing this tale with others; the government begins with “a vast series of raids and arrests [. . .] followed by the deliberate burning and dynamiting” of Innsmouth so that it is left largely depopulated (Lovecraft 587). In other words, the government here identifies a threatening population, and deliberately kills off as many inhabitants as possible in a straightforward attempt at preserving ‘pure’ humanity. Socially as well, those living in towns surrounding Innsmouth make sure the population doesn’t expand outward, in part by “everybody rais[ing] Cain” when one of their own attempts to marry someone from Innsmouth (590). Even more extreme, in a different part of the world a community of islanders who also have a relationship with the Deep Ones are “all wiped aout” by other islanders, and their buildings entirely destroyed (617).¹⁹⁵ These eugenic practices, to contain and destroy all humans who have potentially bred with the alien species, are treated as the only logical reaction; even “complaints from many liberal organisations” are withdrawn once those organizations are “taken on trips to certain camps and prisons” and can see the offending individuals for themselves (587).

Although Lovecraft focuses on this human reaction, and his personal sentiments would appear to endorse such a reaction, the story itself complicates easy separations of the human from its ostensible other. The aliens have their own sense of hierarchy, and utilize surveillance as a way to protect their positive eugenics agenda, of producing more hybrid children to maintain their populations. Innsmouth holds countless abandoned, or seemingly-abandoned, buildings and warehouses, and as Olmstead wanders through town, “the tightly shuttered condition of many third-story and attic windows” gives him the “sensation of being watched from ambush on every hand by sly, staring eyes that never shut” (Lovecraft 610). The Innsmouth residents purposefully

¹⁹⁵ Interestingly, the Kanakys (islanders) who wipe out the offending community are in possession of several little stones that have “somethin’ on ‘em like what ye call a swastika naowadays,” which protects them from retaliation. Lovecraft here draws a link between the eugenicist islanders and Nazis, a move which Lovett-Graff explains is an intentional nod at Lovecraft’s own sympathy for Nazi sentiments.

foster this sense of surveillance: they tell Olmstead not to wander in certain areas of the city and not to talk to certain citizens, and he is constantly reminded that his movements are being watched. Beyond merely keeping outsiders from prying into their affairs, the Deep Ones themselves also enact a type of negative eugenics by killing off anyone who opposes their breeding with humans. If threatened, Zadok explains, the Deep Ones could “wipe aout the hull brood o’ humans ef they was willin’ to bother” (615). Indeed, in Innsmouth’s past the Deep Ones had killed all humans unwilling to adhere to the agreement of breeding with them. Lovecraft therefore connects the practice of eugenics to both sides (the human norm and the alien grotesque), through their attempts to ensure the ‘health’ of their populations through biological control.

Reading Lovecraft’s story in this way, where the human and alien societies enact similar agendas of population control, makes unclear who, exactly, are the villains. Just as a fear of biological contamination has caused the U. S. government to bomb towns and imprison survivors, the fear of biological extinction causes the Deep Ones to enforce community-wide secrecy and kill any opposition. The last few pages of the novella reveal that the eugenic practices of the American government have not, in fact, resulted in lasting damage to the Deep Ones, suggesting the futility of such measures. Likewise, several times the enforced secrecy of the Deep Ones is broken, such as when the drunkard Zadok spills the entire story to Olmstead, and the growth of their hybrid community remains limited. In the end, both sides have attempted to categorize and contain ‘external’ threats, with little efficacy and at great cost.

At the conclusion of this chapter, I will return to the implications of the ineffective nature of eugenics, and the difficulties of definitive categorization of human and nonhuman in *The*

Shadow over Innsmouth. First, however, I will turn to filmmaker Fritz Lang; born in the same year as Lovecraft, and directing his film *M* in the same year as Lovecraft first penned his story, Lang has unmistakably similar interests driving his narrative. Lang, however, approaches these interests from an almost opposite political point-of-view. To my knowledge, no criticism exists which places works by Fritz Lang and H. P. Lovecraft into conversation. This is due, in part, to the difference in discipline; I acknowledge that difficulties exist when ‘reading’ written fiction and visual film side by side,¹⁹⁶ but the payoff is clear when considering their similarities. The stories belong to different genres; Lovecraft’s narrative fits the categories of science fiction and horror, while Lang’s film is often placed in the genre of New Objectivity. We have on the one hand a racist author who uses allegorical and fantastical landscapes as a way to project his ideas into the realms of deep time and deep space, and on the other hand a more politically moderate artist whose film remains firmly rooted in a recognizable, ‘realist’ city. What remains fascinating about reading these two story-tellers together, then, is how, exactly, they seem to converge upon the same conclusion of ambiguity in racial (bio)politics.

III. Monstrous Murder in *M*

Fritz Lang, born in 1890 in Vienna, Austria, has a less fraught biographical background than Lovecraft in terms of his political and social alliances. However, certain pieces of his biography are equally important as potential inspirations for the themes of monstrosity, eugenics, and the grotesque present in several of his films. Lang as a child had a general interest in science fiction and fantasy writing, as evidenced by his sci-fi films *Metropolis* and *Woman in the Moon*, which both deal with problematic technology and humans pushing the limits of science. While

¹⁹⁶ For instance, the two disciplines require a distinct vocabulary, and I will therefore adhere to literary terminology versus film terminology where appropriate.

his film *M* does not generally fit the genre of sci-fi, or deal overtly with technological discovery, certain salient aspects of science remain in the film, such as an interest in physiognomy and forensics. Indeed, biographer Patrick McGilligan claims that “Lang valued the work of Cesare Lombroso, who pioneered the theory of the ‘criminal type’ and used phrenology to ‘prove’ antisocial tendencies by measuring face shapes and the bumps on people’s heads” (McGilligan 148). Lombroso’s theory, that biological development reflects and influences criminal behavior, shows in Lang’s murderer character, who distorts his face in physiognomically strange ways and whose motivations remain ambiguously psychological, biological, and social. Lang moreover frequented dinners in the company of authors such as Thomas Mann, so presumably would also have had familiarity with the concept of degeneration and its connections to physiognomy (McGilligan).

As for his stance on racial issues, Lang had Jewish ancestors on his mother’s side, although he was raised Catholic. Before Hitler’s rise as chancellor in 1933, McGilligan intimates that Lang’s Jewish background was either ignored or underplayed by Lang, but after 1933 it became clear that his heritage would be held against him in Germany. Unlike Lovecraft, whose desperate concern about his ancestry led to an extreme right-wing politics against the ‘other,’ Lang was much more liberal politically. His Jewish heritage led to him disavowing Nazi Germany and fleeing to France, and later the United States, but while in Germany he was also part of an artistic community with left-wing radicals, including his mistress Lily Latté. He divorced his wife Thea von Harbou in 1933, in part because of the rift caused by her pro-Nazi leanings, and in the late 1930s Lang became active in donating time and money to anti-fascist causes. While some of his films have been subsequently deemed “condescending and, at best, politically naïve” in relation to racial issues in the United States, overall Lang’s relationship to

the question of race remains much less problematic than Lovecraft's (McGilligan 227).

Therefore, unlike with Lovecraft, film critics interested in Lang do not focus so heavily on his biographical background.

Film critics have analyzed almost every conceivable theme of *M*; however, so far no critics have concentrated on the potential biological and eugenic implications following hidden monstrosity in the film.¹⁹⁷ By placing this canonical film in juxtaposition with Lovecraft's story, I show how in both, the monster hiding within the body of an otherwise unremarkable man gives insight about biopolitical impulses to control human development. I will explore first the concept of hidden space and its accompanying horror in *M*, then the city-wide desire to make the hidden visible, then the monster himself, Hans Beckert, and how his grotesqueness is presented to the audience. Finally, I examine how distinctions between the 'inhuman' monster and the enforcers of the human 'norm' break down, as in Lovecraft's story. Lang's film ends with what critics dub a 'kangaroo court,' where Beckert's motivations and his inner workings are scrutinized. This ending, I argue, shows an inability to make decisions about responses to monstrosity, advocating neither eugenics nor mental institutions as proper facility for someone who *needs* to murder. As with Lovecraft, neither death nor institutionalization provide the answer to erupting monstrosity.

Fritz Lang's film *M* begins with a similar type of hidden menace as Lovecraft's novella, although for Lang the hidden becomes literal off-screen space, that which remains outside the frame of the camera. In *M*, an unnamed city (reminiscent of Berlin) searches for a child-murderer, Hans Beckert (played by Peter Lorre), whose true identity is at first elusive; like Lovecraft, Lang keeps his audience in suspense for the first half of his film in order to emphasize

¹⁹⁷ Tom Gunning, for instance, does take up the theme of the monster in his analysis, as synonymous with "bogeyman," but does not examine the link between *M* and the logic of genetics.

the menace of a lurking monstrosity. Lang begins his film in a manner that primes the audience for off-screen space, with the famous gong sounding against a black screen, followed by the sound of children chanting before finally an image appears. Tom Gunning in his chapter “*M: The City Haunted by Demonic Desire*” interprets this opening scene as setting up an affinity with the genre of New Objectivity, and a “camera [that] does not align itself with any character” (Gunning 166). Gunning emphasizes the impersonal aspects of the film, how the city swallows individuals and takes their place as protagonist because the camera refuses to place any one person in the forefront. However, I intend to focus, against the camera’s will, on the character of Beckert and how his monstrosity, flitting across the surface of his face at unexpected moments, parallels the logic of hidden genetics even if Lang, unlike Lovecraft, does not explicitly reference genetic sciences.

Our first encounter with the ‘other’ comes five minutes into the film, when the shadow of the murderer hovers over a telephone pole covered in a flyer asking for information on his whereabouts. The audience hears his whistling and his menacing soft voice, but Lang deliberately refuses a visual of the murderer, or his actions. Lang continues to keep the murderer off-screen, or barely legible, for the first half of the film: whenever we catch glimpses of Beckert, we see either his back, or the back of his head, or his face mediated/blocked by various objects such as a mirror, leaves, shadows, or his hat. As Gunning puts it, “Beckert plays hide and seek with us, appearing, usually indirectly or obliquely, then withdrawing into the darkness, the realm of the unseen,” so that the nature of his monstrosity remains unknowable, just as the Innsmouthers’ affliction is unknowable at the beginning of Lovecraft’s story (Gunning 164).

The murderer’s actions likewise are ‘unseen,’ so that the audience must fill the gaps visually and aurally themselves, a technique which increases the suspense and horror. For

instance, at the moment of Elsie Beckmann's murder, we get a series of still images devoid of humans: a shot of a staircase, an attic with clothes drying, a chair at a dinner table. Through these images, Elsie's mother's voice rings loudly, yelling "Elsie" in vain, but the last two shots in the sequence contain only silence instead: first, a ball (Elsie's) that rolls across the grass, and second, a balloon (also Elsie's) that dances through telephone wires before floating away. As Stephen Brockmann points out in *A Critical History of German Film*, the specifics of the murder are hinted at when "a policeman tells his colleagues, 'and we know *how* [in what state] we have found them,' but he never elaborates on the 'how' "¹⁹⁸ and we are left to imagine what, exactly, Beckert does with his victims (Brockmann 118). The silence, and lack of human presence in this murder sequence, serves to dehumanize Beckert, leaving his actions all the more horror-inducing because they are grotesque: "incomprehensible" and "impersonal" (Kayser 185).

Not only is the moment of murder visually off-screen; Lang also refuses his audience any sound clues, a motif which he repeats several times throughout the film. For instance, during a police raid 20 minutes into the film, Lang gives us a full minute of absolute silence, while images of men fighting, marching, and running make clear that the absence of aural information is deliberate. Here, too, the lack of aural clues destabilizes the viewer and renders the danger of the uncaught murderer solemn. The empty shots in buildings also repeat near the end of the film as the criminals close in on the murderer in his hiding place: like Lovecraft, Lang uses blank windows and abandoned buildings to increase menace, as the potential danger lurking within the buildings remains hidden from view. The buildings mirror the logic of the human body, where

¹⁹⁸ Translation is Brockmann's; in the original German, "Wenn man sie [die Opfer] wiederfindet, na, wir wissen ja, wie wir sie gefunden haben." Due to the relative difficulty of obtaining the German film transcript, I include the original German dialogue in footnotes wherever I (or another critic) quote directly, based on my own viewing as well as on an incomplete version of the transcript edited by Gero Gandert and Ulrich Gregor. Unless noted otherwise, as in this case, all translations of Lang's dialogue into English are my own.

the surface might suggest one state (emptiness, or normalcy), while the interior/depth holds a different state (inhabited, or ‘abnormality’).

As in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, the citizens in Lang’s film react to such hidden danger with an impulse to classify and explain the ‘other,’ in order to lessen their fear. Again we have two groups of people, the government (represented by the police force) and the community (represented by the criminal underground), who wish to delineate a strict division between themselves and the child-murderer, to understand the cause of his actions. The persona of ‘child-murderer,’ synonymous with ‘monster’ in the film, becomes a separate category against which both government and community define themselves. As film critic Stephen Brockmann puts it, “both [groups] rely on structures of order and hierarchy, and both discourage individual peculiarities,” which gives them the common goal of drawing a line around Beckert (Brockmann 121). In Lovecraft’s story, the two categories of ‘human’ and ‘nonhuman’ each have their own ‘norm’ to protect; in *M*, the same two categories exist, although only Beckert is placed into the second, and the position of ‘non-human’ (‘monster’) does not have a ‘norm’ to defend. The film thus follows a struggle between those attempting to define the ‘nonhuman’ and who belongs there, and Beckert who sways from ‘monster’ to human without the agency to wholly embrace either category.

As Gunning states, Lang “anticipates Foucault, not only in founding this modern space in actions of surveillance and the discursive organization of the archive, but as thoroughly absorbed into the practices of everyday life” (Gunning 181). The biopolitical impulse to classify shows not only in official channels, but also in the general public reaction; for instance, one man is almost beaten to death by a mob because he speaks to a young girl, an action which automatically marks him as suspicious, with the potential of ‘monstrosity.’ The criminals

moreover refer to Beckert as a “beast” (translated in the English subtitles instead to monster), an “outsider,” and insist that “between the man wanted by the police and [themselves], [they] draw a thick line” (Lang, *M*).¹⁹⁹ Although technically a murderer and a gangster are both criminals, the ‘normal’ criminal element places the murderer in the entirely different category of the non-human. The murderer himself, at the end of the film, reinforces that division, telling the criminals that they cannot possibly understand his actions, as they practice a different sort of crime.

While the criminals complain about the police tendency to search for the murderer in their midst because they think of themselves as separate from Beckert, the police also desperately try to make the off-screen visible and legible, through biopolitical methods of classification and analysis. Instead of words like ‘beast’ and ‘outsider,’ however, the police refer to Beckert through his intellect and drives; they call him “heavily pathological,” and try to identify him accordingly (Lang, *M*).²⁰⁰ The police gather massive amounts of evidence, and search biopolitical nodes of power—“welfare offices, prisons, medical clinics, insane asylums”—in order to find clues, even hiring a graphologist to analyze Beckert’s handwriting.²⁰¹ Graphology, the methodical analysis of writing, has been largely discredited as an unreliable practice, especially because of the open question as to whether genetics or environment has a greater impact on handwriting. Still, Lang’s use of graphology emphasizes that one can read personality and intention through the body, a theme that runs through the entire film. The results of handwriting analysis include remarks about the murderer’s personality and character traits; he

¹⁹⁹ In the German, “Bestie,” “Außenseiter,” and “zwischen dem, den die kriminal Polizei sucht, und zwischen uns, da ziehen wir einen dicken Strich.”

²⁰⁰ In the German, a “schwer pathologische Mann.”

²⁰¹ In the German, “Fürsorgeanstalten, Gefängnisse, Nervenkliniken, und Irrenanstalten.”

has a “pathologically strong sexuality,” exhibits signs of “indolence” and “lethargy,” and most importantly, of “madness.”²⁰² The graphologist reads all of these traits in his handwriting, but also speaks to the murderer’s potential motives when he calls Beckert a “triebmenschen,” which has no direct translation but means something like “a man reduced to his drives.” I will return to the question of cause and motive for murder, but first will look at the transition from off-screen to on-screen danger, and its accompanying introduction of the grotesque.

Only half-way through the movie does the audience know the murderer’s name, and finally get an unmediated shot of his face. However, the most important (and famous) scene in the film for analysis of Beckert’s face arrives fairly early, when we see Beckert study himself in the mirror as the graphologist classifies his traits in a voice-over. The audience now shares the criminal and police impulse to make the hidden legible, as we are forced to examine every minute movement in Peter Lorre’s face. Like Lovecraft’s alien-human hybrids, Beckert’s face fits Bakhtin’s grotesque characterizations perfectly: he pulls on his thick lips and bulges out his eyes, emphasizing again the “nose and mouth [as] the most important part in the grotesque image of the body,” and the “bulging eyes [that] manifest a purely bodily tension” (Bakhtin 316, 317). The shot of Beckert in the mirror, echoing Olmstead’s mirror scene, serves to direct our attention to Beckert’s (and Olmstead’s) own examination of himself. Gunning states, “what we see in the mirror in horrifying compression is the essence of Beckert’s private drama which begins with attraction and ends with repulsion and self-horror” as Beckert “enacts his own transformation into a monster” (Gunning 179). As we discover later, Beckert does not himself comprehend the

²⁰² In the German, “pathologisch starke Sexualität,” “Schauspielerei, die nach außen hin die Form der Indolenz, ja der Trägheit wählen kann,” “wahnsinn.” The graphologist’s remarks echo Max Nordau’s definition of degeneration including “a sexually psychopathic nature;” Beckert, like Olmstead, thus combines elements of criminality and degeneration (Nordau 452).

impulse that drives him to murder, and as he pulls on his cheeks and grimaces, we understand that he finds himself grotesque as well.

The grotesqueness²⁰³ of the face repeats in most shots of Beckert: we see him eating a piece of fruit (with the focus on his chewing), and when he catches a glimpse of a young girl later on, again the eyes bulge. As Steffen Hantke explains in his article “Monstrosity Without a Body,” in most serial killer films “bodily inscription of monstrosity is relegated to a secondary ontological level, distinct from (yet dependent on) the primary level where serial killers are physically inconspicuous,” and manifests on screen “every once in a while, [when] the mask of normality slips, revealing the face of evil underneath” (Hantke 40, 37). These slips occur when the killer is at his or her most agitated state, when desires and fears can no longer be suppressed. Thus, at the trial scene at the end of Lang’s film, Beckert’s face never returns to a resting position: when confronted by photos of his victims, for instance, he sticks his entire fist into his mouth, and when trying to escape, fighting his captors, his entire face scrunches up to be almost unrecognizable. He moreover continues to pull at his face and lips, sweats profusely, and snarls and yells, showing his teeth. Throughout, his eyes retain their exaggerated wide state. In fact, the only moment during this scene when his face relaxes is in his describing the actual murder act, where his eyes roll back in his head and he has a slight grin on his face, a change in demeanor even more horrifying than the previous tension.

The utter concentration through camera angle and shot length on Lorre’s face emphasizes the grotesque features, and asks the audience to read those features for clues about the reason behind his gruesome actions. Lang, like Lovecraft, makes the face most prominent to ask his audience to read those bulging eyes or thick lips in accordance with popular

²⁰³ Like with Lovecraft, there is also an element of animal grotesqueness with Beckert, as the citizens and criminals often call him “Hund” (dog), “Schwein” (pig), or more generally “Tier” (animal).

physiognomic opinions of the time about the appearance of criminals. While of course Peter Lorre only has so much control over aspects such as the shape of his skull, he does purposely distort his face in ways which call to mind certain aspects of Lombroso's descriptions of the criminal man. For instance, when Lorre's face relaxes at the moment of describing the actual killing, he exhibits a "drooping of the upper eyelid, which gives the eye a half-closed appearance," a feature Lombroso connects to anomalies of the face particular to a criminal (Lombroso Ferrero 14). Lorre also frequently over-emphasizes his words and expressions to draw attention to his lips; as Lombroso states, "the lips of violators of women and murderers are fleshy, swollen and protruding" (16).

In Germany, physiognomy had different objectives than in the U.S. context; instead of a connection to atavism and racism against African Americans, here it is Jewish ancestry that corresponds to negative identity traits. For instance in her article "The Art and Science of Reading Faces" Jennifer Hansen discusses how the 1940 Nazi propaganda film *Der ewige Jude* uses "cinematic techniques such as close-ups [etc.] to 'unmask' the most accessible level of the visual, to scratch the surface of that which appears to the untrained eye and to uncover a hidden, deeper reality" about the characteristics of Jewish people (Hansen 84). Of course the 'science' of physiognomy has long been discredited, but at the time, Lorre's performance was so convincing that *Der ewige Jude* even used a clip of Lorre to prove that "the Jew is interested instinctively in all that is abnormal and depraved," conflating his real identity (his Jewish background) with the fictional identity of his character (96).

Thus we have again a character whose facial features cause him to be labeled criminal and monstrous; however, for Lang these classifications do not contain a straight-forward connection to genetic background. Unlike Lovecraft, who eventually reveals the hidden genetic

danger which causes the monstrosity of Innsmouth, Lang refuses to reveal the causes of Beckert's drive to kill. Instead, he provides several possible biographical clues to Beckert's actions, using the *logic* of genetics as hidden, instead of actual genetic sciences, to maintain the ambiguity of Beckert's monstrosity. The police search the records of mental institutions, where they find his file, suggesting that Beckert has been diagnosed with mental illness. As Paul Jensen says in *The Cinema of Fritz Lang*, Lang originally intended his film to be an in-depth portrayal of mental illness; Beckert's compulsion to kill young girls might therefore be read as a mental issue with little relation to genetics. However, several moments in the film connect his compulsion to his body, and suggest that in fact Beckert's monstrosity potentially stems from biological causes. Jensen himself connects Beckert's actions to his body, calling him "a fat psychopath who murders involuntarily" (Jensen 95). As one police official explains, "the instincts of the moment drive the murderer," emphasizing that the murderer kills from a bodily, pre-cognitive "instinct" rather than by mental decision (Lang, *M*).²⁰⁴ This is reinforced by Beckert himself at the end, explaining that he "must" obey the "compulsion" to kill no matter how much he doesn't "want" to do so, that he has no control over his actions.²⁰⁵ In the field of psychology, it has been proven that the compulsion to kill often stems from a combination of nature (genetics) and nurture (life circumstances). Lang does not give a definitive answer to the mystery of Beckert's past; the hidden cause of the monstrosity remains hidden.

Beckert's past, then, stays off-screen unlike Olmstead's, but Lang echoes Lovecraft in complicating the biopolitical classifications²⁰⁶ that have been set in place by the various

²⁰⁴ In the German, "die Instinkte des Augenblicks bestimmen den Mörder."

²⁰⁵ In the German, "muss," "Zwang," "will nicht," "kann ich denn anders?"

²⁰⁶ For instance, Lang famously uses a sound bridge and crosscutting to connect the criminal element with the police when the Schränker begins the phrase "I ask" and sweeps with his hand, and a cut reveals the police chief likewise sweeping his hand, ending the phrase "you to give your opinions" (in the German, "Ich bitte ... sich dazu zu

communities. Just as Lovecraft's ending decimates the strict division between alien and human, Lang's stylistic choices complicate the categories of human and 'inhuman,' drawing parallels between Beckert and others, for instance through whistling. Beckert's capture results from his tell, a nervous whistling of composer Edvard Grieg's "In the Hall of the Mountain King,"²⁰⁷ which he does prior to his killings and which quickly symbolizes danger and threat for the audience. When the criminal element, through their agents the beggars, searches for Beckert, they whistle sharply upon spotting him, creating an auditory link between the hunters and the hunted. Maria Tatar likewise examines "the implicit blurring of the boundaries between victim and perpetrator," between the sacrificed children and their killer (Tatar 166). In her chapter "The Killer as Victim: Fritz Lang's *M*," Tatar gives a psychoanalytic reading of Beckert as driven by sexual urges, and identifying with the position of children who find their own urges sanctioned by maternal regulations. Tatar points out that not only does Beckert enjoy the same pleasures (candy, toys) as children, he also becomes victimized in the final scene, someone to pity.

At another moment, the visual creates an association between Beckert and Herr Lohmann, the police chief; late in the film, we have a low angle, medium-long shot of Lohmann sitting in his chair. The extremely unflattering angle highlights his overweight body, making him somewhat grotesque and recalling for the audience Beckert's likewise plump body. Tatar, in marking multiple ways in which Beckert blurs the line between victim and perpetrator, also notes that Lohmann is linked to Beckert through their mutual passionate fits. When Lohmann discovers that Beckert has been captured, he must "suppress his excitement by dousing himself

äußern.") (Lang, *M*). This linking of two groups who otherwise think of themselves as opposing forces intimates that in Lang's created city, any classification of desired versus undesired groups is problematic.

²⁰⁷ Critic Maria Tatar points out that this particular song comes at a moment from Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* where the protagonist is "nearly turned into a monster" while among "trolls and goblins" (Tatar 158).

with cold water,” just as Beckert becomes overly agitated at several points in the movie (Tatar 167). Lang’s film *M*, famous precisely for its unique use of sound, does not include a single superfluous or trivial auditory component, and the visual shots likewise are purposeful. Thus these connections between Beckert, the criminals, and the police, far from incidental, prove an intentional blurring of boundaries, and Beckert is a true monster swaying between ‘beast’ (nonhuman) and humanity. Tatar’s analysis in particular notes the importance of this blurring; she states that the film “reveals the ineffectuality and collapse of the visible power structure in the face of the irrational, of the foreign body that resists assimilation, taming, or expulsion” (169). However, she does not elaborate on the profound implications of this classification breakdown for a biopolitical structure all too real in its portrayal, as I will in the remainder of this chapter; instead she moves on to further analysis of how the film both condemns and beseeches the maternal figure.

Lang, like Lovecraft, ends his story ambiguously: two possible solutions are proposed (eugenics and confinement) for dealing with the monster, yet neither is foregrounded as preferable. Siegfried Kracauer, in his 1947 tome *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, reads Lang’s ambiguous ending as a “statement on the psychological situation of the time,”²⁰⁸ a time of economic distress and an increasing divide between left-wing, socialist movements and the totalitarian right-wing movement of National Socialism (Kracauer 215). For Kracauer, *M* confirms a moral view that “in the wake of retrogression terrible outbursts of sadism are inevitable;” the film therefore “anticipate[s] what

²⁰⁸ The language Kracauer uses here connects to the German view of physiognomy as reflecting social context; Kracauer wrote a novel considered by Walter Benjamin an important study of physiognomy (Gamper). Benjamin also reviewed the physiognomic study *Face of Our Time*, by German photographer August Sanders, as a scientific view of the influence of historical circumstances (Aiken). Thus Lang’s concentration on the face possibly also comments on the ‘psychological situation’ in Germany; Lorre’s facial performance suggests the situation is dire.

was to happen on a large scale unless people could free themselves from the specters pursuing them” (222). Kracauer sees Lang’s film as poised between “anarchy and authority,” at a time when the potential for the ‘specter’ of politically-sanctioned sadism was just growing. Kracauer suggests this indecisiveness as a purposeful cautiousness, a desire to grapple with themes of social and political importance while retaining a “sustained detachment,” although I will contend that *M* resides instead in the realm of helpless inaction (215).

The criminal element decide that extermination is the only solution that guarantees Beckert will not have the chance to murder again. Their particular language (and the shouts of the watching crowd) makes clear that the killing of Beckert is a duty to future generations, a way of ensuring that one undesirable category disappears. Early in the film the Schränker states that the ‘beast’ must “disappear,” must be “exterminated” (or “eradicated” or “wiped out”) “without clemency or mercy” (Lang, *M*).²⁰⁹ Tatar notes that the Schränker “describes his plans for exterminating this ‘beast’ in precisely the terms (*ausrotten* and *vertilgen*) that the Nazis used to frame their genocidal campaign against the Jews” (Tatar 59). As previously noted, Beckert (and Lorre’s) coding as Jewish therefore allows the suggestion of Beckert’s extermination to connect to the eugenic rhetoric against Jewish people at this time. As Tartar puts it, “like the real-life serial killers who were apprehended during the years of the Weimar era, the criminal Beckert and the actor-criminal-alien-Jew Peter Lorre are cast as pathogens—as sources of fatal contamination that must be eliminated before infecting the general population” (171).

At the scene of Beckert’s trial, the Schränker elaborates on this sentiment, telling Beckert that the reason they wish to exterminate him is “to make [him] harmless” and the only way to do

²⁰⁹ In the German, “Die muß weg! Die muß ausgerottet werden, vertilgt, ohne Gnade und Barmherzigkeit.”

so with certainty is through his “death.”²¹⁰ The language of extermination, and harmfulness, again suggests a biological component to Beckert that cannot be fixed and therefore must be removed from the human gene pool. Indeed, Joseph Goebbels, a top advocate of eugenics in Germany at the time, famously read the film in line with his beliefs, writing of the film: “Against humanitarian sopiness. For the death penalty.” (McGilligan 157). Even if the film itself does not immediately suggest the danger of Beckert’s genes to the larger population development, its historical audience certainly draws such conclusions. Because of the horrible nature of his crimes, and the devastated faces of the mothers watching him, Beckert at the moment of his trial seems potentially deserving of a death penalty.

In Germany, Ernst Haeckel was among those scientists whose writing on genetics included a racial component, as “he believed that the development of culture was dependent on innate biological, intellectual, and moral traits” and therefore “ ‘civilized’ peoples with their allegedly higher intellectual capabilities have a higher value of life than the ‘primitive’ people” (Weikart 109). These ideas led eugenicists such as Alfred Ploetz, Wilhelm Schallmayer, and Ludwig Woltmann to emphasize the difference between inferior and superior races, and “campaign to rid the world of ‘inferior’ (*minderwertig*) or ‘degenerate’ people” (196). In Germany, “racial extermination was becoming more and more intellectually acceptable by the early twentieth century,” and the category of ‘inferior’ included non-whites of any kind, disabled people, and most prominently Jewish people (203). The end result of this swell in eugenic thought has been well-documented, in the form of the Holocaust perpetrated by Hitler during World War II. However, as Richard Weikart makes clear in his book *From Darwin to Hitler*, the wave of scientific and social ideas leading to the Holocaust began much earlier, and culminated

²¹⁰ In the German, “Wir wollen dich unschädlich machen, das wollen wir. Und ganz sicher unschädlich bist du nur, wenn du tot bist.”

in the 1930s. Lang's film *M* in some cases reflects the fervor of citizens concerned with categorizing and then eliminating those deemed too 'abnormal' to live, especially in the character of the Schränker. However, even as Goebbels attempts to claim Lang's film as a pro-eugenic piece, *M* ultimately refuses to either advocate or speak against this social trend, instead presenting an equally balanced account of two possible reactions to a child murderer who cannot help his monstrous urges.

Lang does not leave us merely with the perspective of those advocating eugenics; he also presents a pitiable side to Beckert as someone with mental issues, with physical compulsions who cannot help himself. As Jensen says, Lang "creates tension in the viewer by forcing him, almost sadistically, to observe the writhings of a helplessly trapped victim," and in the ending scene of the film Beckert straddles the line between victim and perpetrator (Jensen 103). Beckert explains his perspective as best he can, that he always feels a pressure as though being chased by the "ghosts of mothers...of children" from whom he desperately wants to escape, and that the pressure only disappears in the moments when he kills another child (Lang, *M*).²¹¹ His manic demeanor while explaining his compulsions reveals a desperation; here is a serial killer who does not enjoy being a serial killer (although he does enjoy the moment of killing), but rather acts in order to relieve painful feeling. As his defense attorney suggests, he is a "sick man, and one doesn't give a sick man to the executioner, one gives him to a doctor."²¹² From the modern legal perspective, this solution of placing Beckert into a mental hospital makes logical sense; after all, a defendant declared mentally insane is not responsible for his or her crimes. However, the

²¹¹ In the German, "Und mit mir rennen die Gespenster von Müttern...von Kindern...Die geh'n nie mehr weg...Die sind immer da! [...] Nur nicht...wenn ich's tue."

²¹² In the German, "Ich will damit sagen, daß dieser Mensch ein kranker Mensch ist! Und einen kranken Menschen übergibt man nicht dem Henker, den übergibt man dem Arzt!"

Schränker points out that criminals are released from mental hospitals, that Beckert's impulses will never disappear, and that alive, he will always pose a threat.

Lang ends his film with a fade to a courtroom, where Beckert will presumably stand (legal) trial, and a group of mothers sitting on a bench speak the last line: "One just needs to keep an even better watch over the children, all of you!"²¹³ (Lang, *M*). After this pronouncement, a fade to black ensures that Beckert's fate remains off-screen; whether he is killed, or sent to an asylum remains unclear, as does Lang's ultimate motive for the film. Like Lovecraft's story, Lang's film ends with intense emotions and multiple possible readings, leaving the audience to decide for themselves how to feel about monstrosities in their midst. The mother who speaks the last line forces this decision on us, by breaking the fourth wall in staring directly into the camera, and speaking the word "ihr" (you all), just as Lovecraft's narrator, through journal form, seems to expect the reader to come to his or her own conclusions about the events that have unfolded. However, in the case of Lang not one of the solutions presented is accompanied by benevolent emotion; the children remain murdered no matter what, and whatever happens to Beckert will be unsatisfying. There is no question of 'let live' for Lang, for even if Beckert were able to live, albeit in a facility which prevents his further murdering,²¹⁴ his haunting feeling would remain to shadow him.

IV. Conclusion

Michel Foucault in his lectures on the 'abnormal' takes up the issue of the monster from the 16th century onward. Especially for the monster of the 19th and 20th century, he demonstrates

²¹³ In the German, "man muß eben noch besser auf die Kinder acht geben, ihr!"

²¹⁴ For argument's sake, if 'let live' in Beckert's case meant letting him continue with his murders, he still would not feel the ecstasy of Olmstead; Lang makes clear that his existence would still be plagued by negative emotion.

a connection to criminality²¹⁵ and poses the following question: “As a being of a monstrous nature and the enemy of the whole society, should not society get rid of him without calling upon the might of the law?” (Foucault 96). In the case of *M*, the kangaroo court at the end attempts precisely such a solution to the monstrous; if a criminal acts contrary to laws, then the law will also be inadequate in rectifying the criminal’s behavior. Foucault further explains that “crime is to be punished at the level of the interest that underpinned it,” that the criminal’s reasons for acting should determine his or her punishment (114). However, for Beckert, the reason for his murders remains off-screen; his genetic or circumstantial motivations cannot be explained, so neither exile nor death can be foregrounded as proper punishment. At the end Beckert remains a ‘monster,’ ‘beast,’ but ultimately also a human male, a “Mensch” no matter how often his accusers insist that he is “not a human!” (Lang, *M*).²¹⁶ Thus Lang portrays an utter breakdown of biopolitical classification; ultimately his characters cannot decide who deserves the title of ‘human’ and the Foucauldian “right of life” it names (Foucault, *Society* 240).

For Lovecraft’s story, a similar dilemma arises, although the cause of the Innsmouthers’ monstrosity is known; these citizens straddle the line between human and nonhuman, and because of the striking similarities between the human and alien cultures, neither gains a position of superiority. Although Lovecraft would have outright rejected Boas’s contemporaneous theory of cultural relativism, it nevertheless provides a potential way to understand this ambiguity in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*. Boas refutes previous assumptions about the mental, physical, and cultural superiority of white communities when he states:

²¹⁵ For instance, in the 1931 film remake of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, James Whale adds an important detail: the brain of Frankenstein’s monster is taken from a jar with the label “abnormal,” and once belonged to a murderous criminal. For a more comprehensive look at the monstrous and eugenic aspects of other 1930s films such as *Frankenstein*, or Tod Browning’s *Freaks*, see Angela Smith’s *Hideous Progeny: Disability, Eugenics, and Classic Horror Cinema*.

²¹⁶ In the German, “Das ist ja kein Mensch!”

What then is the difference between the civilization of the Old World and that of the New World? It is only a difference in time. [. . .] This difference in period does not justify us to assume that the race which developed more slowly was less gifted. (Boas 224)
The gap between our society and theirs always remains open and for this reason their mind cannot be expected to work in the same manner as ours. (234)

Throughout his writings Boas makes clear that two difference races, or cultures, or species, cannot be deemed inferior or superior; rather, their qualities are just *different*. Likewise, in Lovecraft's story, the similar actions of the aliens and humans, and their evolutionary commonality suggests that though their cultures appear on the surface vastly different, we cannot make hierarchical distinctions between them. Given enough time, the blurring of alien and human genes might even close the Boasian gap and render categorization moot. *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, then, reveals the inherent fallacy of Lovecraft's racist logic; even an author ostensibly writing in support of hierarchical distinctions instead shows their arbitrariness.

The film *M* and the novella *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* deal with a genetic 'other,' recognizable to us as monstrous only through coded facial features, and whose realization of his own alterity provokes horror and regret. Lang and Lovecraft elicit both sympathy and disgust for their protagonists in order to reflect and comment upon conflicting social ideas about who deserves to live, and who should be eliminated. The ambiguity in proper response to the monster, stemming from the breakdown of classification, mirrors both sides of the eugenics debate at this time: to employ eugenics dehumanizes and strips a population of their rights, while to abstain in some cases could mean sanctioning an undesirable abnormality. Ambiguity allows these fictional tales to both illustrate and deconstruct the inherent danger Foucault locates in biologically-based classifications of a "racism against the abnormal, against individuals who, as carriers of a condition, a stigmata, or any defect whatsoever, may more or less randomly transmit to their heirs the unpredictable consequences of the evil, or rather of the non-normal, that they carry

within them” (Foucault 316).²¹⁷ Ultimately Lovecraft and Lang both demonstrate the difficulties of biopolitical classification and action against those considered ‘abnormal’ or monstrous due to their genetic background, without decisively providing solutions—an entirely preferable attitude in light of the historical circumstances which follow.

²¹⁷ While Foucault makes clear that his term ‘racism’ is distinct from historical racism based on race, because it is based on an individual’s internal characteristics, he acknowledges that in the case of Germany (and in the United States as well), the racism against ‘abnormal’ genetics becomes conflated with the more historical type, as we saw with *M* and *The Shadow over Innsmouth*.

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