Nietzsche’s Critique of Musical Decadence: The Case of Wagner in Historical Perspective

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In one of his last publications, Der Fall Wagner: Ein Musikanten-Problem (The Case of Wagner: A Musician’s Problem, 1888), Nietzsche presented his most sustained critique of Wagner and his legacy, a scathing indictment of the composer as decadent.\(^1\) Appearing just five years after Wagner’s death, his pamphlet was badly received upon its initial publication, dismissed by Wagnerians as an impulsive tirade by an embittered erstwhile devotee.\(^2\) Despite his provocative tone, however, Nietzsche intended to approach Wagner’s art project with serious critical scrutiny, treating it as an integral component in his broader critique of modern culture. Indeed, if the initial reception of The Case of Wagner was characterised by polarised polemics, scholars have since shown how Nietzsche’s turn against Wagner was pivotal to his wider critique of metaphysics and Romanticism, motivating his development of renewed aesthetic values following his first book, Die Geburt der Tragödie (The Birth of Tragedy, 1872).\(^3\) Meanwhile, historical and biographical accounts of the relationship have long analysed the complex circumstances surrounding the demise of the friendship, questioning the extent to which Nietzsche’s

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alleged ‘break’ from the composer amounted to a sudden or conclusive rupture.⁴ While there is certainly a strong contrast between the tone and argumentation of Nietzsche’s two principal musical texts (The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner), his extensive unpublished writings reveal important points of continuity and contradiction. The emergence of a critical stance is evident at least as early as his background notebooks coinciding with the fourth of his Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen (Untimely Meditations), ‘Richard Wagner in Bayreuth’ (1876). These notes (which date from 1873-1875) contain unflattering remarks on Wagner and his music that look ahead to his later critique of the composer as an actor, a musical rhetorician and dilettante. Yet even as he developed his most forthright criticisms in later years, he never wholly abandoned his passion for the man and his music. Away from the fraught dynamics of the friendship, Nietzsche’s published and posthumous writings reveal the extent to which Wagner’s music and ideas continued to have a positive impact on his overall thought.⁵

Considered within the context of Nietzsche’s individual career, The Case of Wagner thus stands as a seminal critique of Wagnerian metaphysics, and as a culmination of his life-long, conflicted involvement with German music and philosophy. In this article, however, I want to locate The Case of Wagner and surrounding writings within a wider cultural milieu, emphasising the ambivalence of Nietzsche’s Wagner critique against the historical backdrop of nineteenth-century decadence and degeneration. Exploring the

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relationship between Nietzsche’s Wagner critique and contemporary French literature and theory, I suggest that his late writings on the composer advance a valuable critical concept of decadence, one relevant to current music history and criticism. Moreover, in locating *The Case of Wagner* within a broader discourse of cultural degeneration, my analysis seeks to distinguish Nietzsche’s analysis of decadence from other prominent opponents of Wagnerism and musical modernism at the turn of the century.

Although the idea of modern culture in decline is a theme common throughout Nietzsche’s writings, including in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the specific concept of decadence is one we tend to associate above all with Nietzsche’s late texts, *The Case of Wagner* in particular. Throughout *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche consistently employed the French term *décadence*, reflecting his knowledge of the modern artistic movement as distinct from traditional connotations of decline. It is generally acknowledged that he adapted the idea of literary decadence from the French critic Paul Bourget – whose essay on Charles Baudelaire in *Essais de psychologie contemporaine* (*Essays in Contemporary Psychology*, 1883) contained one of the first significant attempts to theorise decadence as a positive literary style. At the same time, Nietzsche’s idea of *décadence* was informed less by the influence of a single figure or source, more by his wider affinity with French literature and culture. In view of these cultural references, some of the most sustained analyses of *The Case of Wagner* have appeared not just from individual accounts of the philosopher’s life and works, but also from cultural and literary studies of decadence and modernism more broadly. Matei Calinescu, for instance, includes an extended reflection on Nietzsche’s concept of decadence as part of his larger theoretical study of modernity. Against the background of French literary decadence, Calinescu emphasises the dialectical character of Nietzsche’s concept, as exemplified in his ideological critique of Wagner. The relevance of Nietzsche’s theory, he argues, lies not only in his insightful diagnosis of the styles, topics and traits that constitute decadence as an artistic phenomenon, but also in his incorporation of decadence as a major theme in his existing critique of modern culture. In a similar manner, Dieter Borchmeyer has explored the influence of French

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6 The concept of decadence in French literary criticism and Nietzsche’s philosophy will be defined in more detail below.


literary sources on Nietzsche’s idea of décadence, while also acknowledging the wider relevance of the term in his individual thought. Borchmeyer highlights the contradictory nature of Nietzsche’s concept, seeing it as combining a modern, positive revaluation (as derived from Baudelaire) with the negative connotations associated with its conventional historical usage. Taking this comparison further, Andrea Gogrof-Voorhees offers a more in-depth parallel reading of Nietzsche and Baudelaire, exploring their contrasting involvement with the shared themes of Romanticism, modernity, decadence and Wagner. Moving beyond a dialectical reading of Nietzsche’s concept of decadence, literary critics have more recently discussed The Case of Wagner as relevant to broader contemporary problems of interpretation and criticism. Charles Bernheimer, in his book Decadent Subjects, argues that Nietzsche does not present a clear and fixed definition of decadence, but rather reinforces the concept’s ‘semantic mobility’. According to Bernheimer, decadence does not operate in Nietzsche’s philosophy as a stable, totalising term, evoking an unchanging moral standard outside of itself. The significance of his philosophy of decadence resides more in the constellation of topics it sets in motion.

Rather than interpret The Case of Wagner as a way to arrive at the meaning of decadence, therefore, we can appreciate Nietzsche’s text as crucial to understanding the concept’s multiplicity and discontinuity. Nietzsche’s writings can lead us to question how we approach the study of decadence beyond an analysis of styles, themes, topics and tropes. Moreover, his relationship with decadence raises wider critical problems about how we interpret decadent art and writing more broadly, without reinforcing rigid binaries between health/sickness, artificiality/nature, decadent/classicism or degenerate/progressive. But whereas literary scholars have explored Nietzsche’s theory of decadence primarily as relevant to issues of language and textuality, they often

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12 Decadent Subjects, 8.

overlook the central topic of Wagner (and music more generally). Even in those accounts that deal with Nietzsche’s concept of decadence as reflected in his case against Wagner, commentators have tended to portray the composer somewhat as an interchangeable artistic figure for a larger cultural concept, neglecting the historical specificity of his late musical writings. In a similar vein, these critics have tended to underplay the larger background of nineteenth-century degeneration as a relevant context for the musical arguments of The Case of Wagner, emphasising the primary importance of French literary sources.

Turning to scholarship closer to home, musicologists and Wagner scholars have increasingly engaged with ideas of cultural decadence and degeneration as a key framework for interpreting modern music and aesthetics within and beyond the late-nineteenth century. In his book, Music and Decadence in European Modernism, Stephen Downes offers a broad analysis of cultural decadence as it informed Central and Eastern European musical works from the mid-nineteenth century to the immediate aftermath of the First World War.\(^\text{14}\) Downes provides a sustained analysis of the styles, themes and forms of musical decadence – not only in terms of surface compositional details and techniques, but also deeper-level formal processes in musical works. Such an approach offers rich insights into the multiple connotations of decadence as it relates to compositional style and aesthetics across a broad geographical range. In locating and defining musical decadence as a set of intrinsic compositional styles and artistic themes, however, Downes neglects some of the broader, more reflective issues arising from a specific application of decadence to music – issues to do with the politics of musical aesthetics and listening, or indeed the role of criticism or philosophy more generally in the diagnosis of certain music as decadent.

In contrast to Downes’s analytical approach to decadence in music, Thomas S. Grey has explored how the related concept of degeneration – with its associated rhetoric of psychiatry, pathology and physiology – provides a relevant historical context through which to interpret a range of nineteenth-century responses to Wagner, including those of Max Nordau, Eduard Hanslick and the later Nietzsche.\(^\text{15}\) Going in a similar direction, James Kennaway has likewise suggested that Nietzsche’s ‘psychiatric attack’ on the composer ought to be seen as consistent with emergent ideas of degeneration and


modern medical and scientific discourse. Kennaway cites in particular a prominent psychiatric case study of the composer published in 1877 by Theodor Puschmann, seeing this text as an important precursor to *The Case of Wagner*.\(^{16}\) Admittedly, Kennaway notes in passing a key distinction between Nietzsche’s critique of decadence and outright anti-Wagnerians such as Puschmann or Nordau: while the latter advanced their ‘anti-decadent’ polemics in defence of positivism and Enlightenment progress, Nietzsche used medical rhetoric more as a strategic component in his opposition to scientific reason and philosophical pessimism in the name of a vitalistic philosophy.\(^{17}\) But in reading Nietzsche’s rhetoric of decadence as largely consistent with the language of degeneration and anti-Wagnerism, writers such as Kennaway and Grey tend to assimilate *The Case of Wagner* to this larger discourse, without sufficiently accounting for his nuanced relationship to this surrounding context, not to mention the ambivalence of his individual critique.

As I shall argue in what follows, Nietzsche drew on wider critical and cultural references to advance a highly personal evaluation of Wagner’s music and its legacy, intervening in contemporary debates to problematise decadence in music as more than a set of artistic or moral values to be dismissed or condemned. Taken together, his late texts on Wagner offer a way of thinking about music and decadence not only to denote aspects of compositional style and thematic content, but also issues of listening and response, the relationship of music aesthetics to gender and the body, and the interaction between music and philosophy. Despite their brevity and discontinuity, his published and unpublished writings on Wagner combine his knowledge of style of decadence with his appropriation of degeneration and scientific language, not to mention his own theory of decadence and his background as a Wagnerian. As such, his critique of musical decadence involves a cultural and philosophical richness that diverges from a far-reaching critical discourse of degeneration. Moreover, in approaching Wagner as a case study in decadence, he ultimately advocated a pivotal role for music in the philosophical critique of modernity. In this sense, *The Case of Wagner* not only provides valuable insight into Nietzsche’s complex concept of decadence but also reveals his unique quest to come to terms with Wagner’s music as an object of philosophical analysis and cultural critique.

\(^{16}\) See James Kennaway, ‘Psychiatric Philosophy in Nietzsche’s *Der Fall Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner***’, *New German Review*, 20 (2005), 83-94. See also ibid, *Bad Vibrations: The History of Music as a Cause of Disease* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), especially Chapter 3.

\(^{17}\) ‘Psychiatric Philosophy in Nietzsche’s *Der Fall Wagner* and *Nietzsche contra Wagner***’, 93.
Following a brief discussion of the concept of decadence in French criticism and cultural studies, I outline the discourse of degeneration and anti-Wagnerism as a relevant historical backdrop to *The Case of Wagner.* Turning to Nietzsche’s explicit antagonism toward Wagner in his writings from the late 1880s, I explore how he came to incorporate the concept of *décadence* as a central motif. My discussion differentiates Nietzsche’s deployment of decadence in *The Case of Wagner* from his surrounding concepts and vocabulary – including his opposition to Romanticism, his reference to *dégénérescence* (degeneration) and his established rhetoric of cultural decline. The penultimate section focuses on Nietzsche’s central critique of musical decadence in *The Case of Wagner* and surrounding writings, exploring comparisons with contemporary critics and illuminating the tensions between his public and private comments. The conclusion offers some further reflection on the relevance of Nietzsche’s theory of decadence, and the related issue of historicising *The Case of Wagner.*

**Defining Decadence**

The general concept of decadence (as derived from the Latin term *decadentia*) has long-held historical connotations of decline, decay, and corruption, evoking a loss of traditional values or a fall from an imagined ideal. Yet the term took on a new cultural significance in the second half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the emergence of a self-conscious decadent movement in European art and literature of the 1880s and 1890s. In this context, decadence explored themes of decay, fatality and death as productive sources of creativity. Challenging traditional stylistic boundaries, decadent art and writing emphasised structural dissolution and fragmentation, as well as surface ornamentation, decoration and excessive detail. The anti-realism of decadence can also be seen in terms of artificiality and over-refinement – as reflected in the idea of the Dandy as aloof and indifferent to everyday life and the crowd. The decadent movement developed above all as a reaction against the myth of progress and the limits of scientific positivism. Subverting traditional morals and classical ideals, decadent artists and writers explored spirituality and idealism, melancholy, introspection and the unconscious, evocations of a mythical past or locale, or else projections of a utopian future. They also explored the poetic potential of such provocative themes as sensuality and eroticism, morbidity, obsession, and hysteria. In so doing, they aspired to realise a hidden, unlicensed realm of imagination and feeling.
As a reflection of the self-styled artistic movement of the 1880s and 1890s, these characteristics are generally associated with the work of such archetypal ‘decadents’ as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Gustave Moreau, Théophile Gautier, Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, Anatole Baju, Paul Verlaine, Oscar Wilde and Gabrielle D’Annunzio. Yet the scope of decadence is by no means limited to a specific community of fin-de-siècle aesthetes and provocateurs. As Mario Praz argued in his seminal study, *The Romantic Agony*, late-nineteenth-century decadence is less a stand-alone movement, more a development of the fundamental ‘erotic sensibility’ underlying Romanticism as a whole.\(^\text{18}\) For the Romantics, as for the Decadents, ‘beauty was enhanced by exactly those qualities which seem to deny it, by those objects which produce horror.’\(^\text{19}\) According to Praz, works such as Moreau’s *L’Apparition* and Huysmans’s *À Rebours (Against Nature)* stand as two of the most vivid expressions of decadence, reflecting in embryo the movement as a whole. Yet these works also deal with a paradoxical conception of ‘Medusean beauty’ that harks back to earlier writers such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, John Keats, Victor Hugo, Gustav Flaubert, Edgar Allen Poe and, above all, Charles Baudelaire.\(^\text{20}\)

Although Baudelaire himself did not self-define as a decadent writer, his poetry and aesthetics became a crucial exemplar for later artists and theorists. What is more, Baudelaire’s fleeting critical references to decadence already indicate an ambivalent stance, one generally regarded as pivotal to the modern revaluation of the term.\(^\text{21}\) In his 1857 essay, ‘Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Allan Poe’ (Further Notes on Edgar Allan Poe), Baudelaire reclaimed *décadence* from its derogatory connotations to denote an imaginative poetics at odds with classical values of beauty and realism.\(^\text{22}\) He mocked the negative phrase ‘a literature of decadence’, seeing it as displaying ignorance of stylistic developments and a misguided view of literary history.\(^\text{23}\) In a central reflection on the metaphor of the dying sun, he challenged the linear conception of decadence as decline and lateness to suggest a rich new horizon of potential:

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\(^{19}\) Ibid, 27.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, 305-395.


\(^{23}\) ‘Littérature de décadence’; *Critique Littéraire et Musicale*, 191; *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, 188-189.
That sun which a few hours ago was crushing everything beneath the weight of its vertical, white light will soon be flooding the western horizon with varied colours. In the changing splendours of this dying sun, some poetic minds will find new joys; they will discover dazzling colonnades, cascades of molten metal, a paradise of fire, a melancholy splendour, nostalgic raptures, all the magic of dreams, all the memories of opium. And the sunset will then appear to them as the marvellous allegory of a soul, imbued with life, going down beyond the horizon, with a magnificent wealth of thoughts and dreams.24

Baudelaire’s evocative depiction of the sunset points to the new ambivalence of decadence in its modern configuration, its contradictory character as both negative and illuminating at the same time. This paradoxical idea of decadence – as denoting both lateness and progress – would later emerge more explicitly in Paul Bourget’s influential chapter on Baudelaire in his Essays in Contemporary Psychology. Here Bourget discussed Baudelaire as one of the most influential writers in contemporary French thought, depicting the poet as pioneer of decadence as a literary style and creative movement.25 In a section devoted to the ‘Théorie de la Décadence’ (‘Theory of Decadence’), he defined the style of decadence as one ‘where the unity of the book disintegrates to make way for the independence of the page, where the page disintegrates to make room for the independence of the sentence, and the sentence to make room for the independence of the word.’26 This aesthetic of decomposition and individualism, he argued, reflects the dissolution of modern society at large. Likening society to a living organism, he depicted decadence in conservative political terms as unavoidable historical pessimism and malaise. However, he also saw Baudelaire’s style in a positive light as a compelling enrichment of literary modernity.

Bourget’s theory of decadence proved influential for various nineteenth-century writers and critics, not least for Nietzsche’s concept of décadence in The Case of Wagner. Yet Bourget’s theory has also informed contemporary scholarship concerned with defining decadence in relation to modernism and modernity more broadly. Jean Pierrot, in his The Decadent Imagination, notes that the originality of Bourget’s analysis lies not only in his

24 ‘Ce soleil qui, il y a quelques heures, écrasait toutes choses de sa lumière droite et blanche, va bientôt inonder l’horizon occidental de couleurs variées. Dans les jeux de ce soleil agonisant, certains esprit poétiques trouveront des délices nouvelles; ils y découvrirent des colonnades éblouissantes, des cascades de métal fondu, des paradis de feu, une splendeur triste, la volupté du regret, toutes les magies du rêve, tous les souvenirs de l’opium. Et le coucher du soleil leur apparaîtra en effet comme la merveilleuse allégorie d’une âme chargée de vie, qui descend derrière l’horizon avec une magnifique provision de pensées et de rêves.’ Critique Littéraire et Musicale, 194; Selected Writings, 189.


26 ‘Un style de décadence est celui où l’unité du livre se décompose pour laisser la place à l’indépendance de la page, où la page se décompose pour laisser la place à l’indépendance de la phrase, et la phrase pour laisser la place à l’indépendance du mot’; Ibid, 20.
insightful diagnosis of *décadence* as a social condition and literary style, but also in his acceptance of its progressive implications.\textsuperscript{27} According to Pierrot, Bourget proposes ‘the first true manifesto of the decadent aesthetic’.\textsuperscript{28} Echoing Mario Praz, Pierrot sees the artistic and philosophical origins of decadence in Romanticism, emphasising the influence of Schopenhauer in particular. Yet he also identifies decadence with an affirmation of modernity, manifesting as a quest for new realms of human experience and psychology that push the limits of literary expression: ‘by dissociating art once and for all from the goal that had always been assigned to it – the faithful imitation of nature regarded as the supreme norm – the decadent period does constitute an essential line of cleavage between the classical aesthetic and the modern aesthetic.’\textsuperscript{29}

Going beyond the idea of decadence as a coherent aesthetic, or as a collection of themes and topics, other theorists have approached the concept more critically, emphasising its resistance to a literal or static definition. As Vladimir Jankélévitch put it in an influential essay of 1950, ‘there are no historical contents that are decadent “in themselves”. Decadence is not *in statu*, but *in motu*; it is not a structure, it is a manner and a tendency.’\textsuperscript{30} This perception of the mobility of decadence informs Calinescu’s broad discussion of decadence as a fundamental facet of modernity.\textsuperscript{31} Rather than apply the concept to a catalogue of works, Calinescu traces its history within and beyond nineteenth-century France, exploring the deeper paradoxes at stake in the modern revaluation of the term. He argues that the idea of decadence is not easily opposed to the modern idea of progress as scientific and technological advancement.\textsuperscript{32} In a similar manner, Calinescu goes on to question the assumption that decadence can be easily categorised as apolitical aestheticism. The critical nature of *décadence* and *decadentism* in the 1880s, he argues, clearly represented an early manifestation of avant-garde incitement,

\textsuperscript{27} *The Decadent Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 16.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 16.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid, 11. The idea of decadence as a transition between Romanticism and modernism is also central to David Weir’s *Decadence and the Making of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995). Following Pierrot’s line of argument, Weir presents a broad portrait of the decadent aesthetic, one that challenges traditional notions of the movement as merely an ephemeral trend limited to French literary history of the 1880s.
\textsuperscript{31} *Five Faces of Modernity*, 151-178.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid, 155-157.
undermining the common preconception of decadence as characterised by contempt for everyday reality, or indeed any sense of community.  

Calinescu’s approach resonates with more recent scholarly interest in the aesthetics and politics of decadence, and in the attendant problems of decadent criticism and interpretation. Introducing a collection of interdisciplinary essays by contemporary scholars in the field, Liz Constable, Dennis Denisoff and Matthew Potolsky reflect on decadence as more than a compendium of themes, images and styles. Through a broad critique of the ideological biases implicit in much twentieth-century scholarship on the topic, they draw attention to the ‘dramas of differentiation’ that tend to play out even in sympathetic studies of the movement: ‘for in their attempts to distance themselves by means of taxonomy and description from their object of study, critics of decadence inadvertently become decadent critics of sorts, deploying the same oppositions and the same evaluative categories that they find problematic in their subject matter.’ Criticism of decadence, they argue, requires not only a diagnosis of its meaning, but also a consideration of its deeper textual strategies. Hence the major figures of decadence – including Baudelaire, Nietzsche, Wilde and Huysmans – challenged the moralising and differential terms of its traditional usage. In this way, decadence takes on a renewed relevance for contemporary literary theory, anticipating the radical textual politics of post-structuralism, or pre-empting progressive theoretical debates about cultural difference and political resistance.

Wagner, Decadence and Degeneration
The concept of decadence was characteristically fluid in transcending disciplinary or artistic divides, encompassing not just literature and fine art, but also music – most notably through the influence of Wagner. As Erwin Koppen has noted, ‘it is significant

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35 Ibid, 4-5.
36 Ibid, 11.
37 Ibid, 24-27.
38 It has been well documented how the aesthetic revaluation of decadence in European literature and art directly coincided with the dawn of Wagnerism. See in particular, Erwin Koppen, Dekadenter Wagnerismus: Studien zur europäischen Literatur des Fin de siècle (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973); idem, ‘Wagnerism as Concept and Phenomenon’, trans. Erika and Martin Swales, in Wagner Handbook, 343-353; Raymond Furness, Wagner and Literature (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982), 32-68; Gerald D. Turbow, ‘Art and Politics: Wagnerism in France’, in
that the writer who first attributed a positive value to the word decadence and who first endowed the concept with its morbid appeal, Baudelaire, is one of the standard-bearers of Wagnerism.\textsuperscript{39} In his 1869 essay, ‘Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser a Paris’, Baudelaire celebrated Wagner in the face of his critics in a manner similar to his defence of Poe.\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, just as Baudelaire translated and promoted Poe’s writings for French audiences, so a similar theme of translation and kinship is central to his Wagner essay. Here Baudelaire reflected on an implicit tension within artistic media – such as painting, language, and music – between the medium’s capacity to convey meaning or emotion, and the potential for this to be realised through the imagination of the recipient. In this way, Baudelaire responded to Wagner’s music and aesthetics in relation to his own theory of correspondences – the idea of natural reciprocity between the senses, such as sound, colour, and scent.\textsuperscript{41} Depicting the experience of the prelude to Lohengrin, he described the effect of the music in terms of an overall impression of dream:

I felt freed from the constraint of weight, and recaptured the memory of the rare joy that dwells in high places [...] Soon I became aware of a heightened brightness, of a light growing in intensity so quickly that the shades of meaning provided by a dictionary would not suffice to express this constant increase of burning whiteness. Then I achieved a full apprehension of a soul flowing in light, of an ecstasy compounded of joy and insight, hovering above and far removed from the natural world.\textsuperscript{42}

Baudelaire’s rapturous reception of Wagner’s music in terms of reverie and elevation clearly became bound up with a more general musical aspiration at the heart of decadent aesthetics, especially when considered in relation to the growing reception of Schopenhauer’s philosophy in the later nineteenth century. Indeed, Nietzsche too – at least in his early writings – can be seen as a significant proponent of this aspect of decadent Wagnerism: in The Birth of Tragedy he echoed Baudelaire in his lauding of

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\textsuperscript{39} ‘Wagnerism as Concept and Phenomenon’, 348.
\textsuperscript{40} Critique Littéraire et Musicale, 358-396; Selected Writings, 325-357.
\textsuperscript{41} Baudelaire quotes from his poem ‘Correspondences’ from \textit{Les Fleurs du Mal (The Flowers of Evil)} to illustrate the point; see Critique Littéraire et Musicale, 361-364; Selected Writings, 328-331.
\textsuperscript{42} ‘Je me sentis délivré des liens de la pesanteur, et je retrouvai par le souvenir l’extraordinaire volupté qui circule dans les lieux hauts [...] Bientôt j’expérimentai la sensation d’une clarté plus vive, d’une intensité de lumière croissant avec une telle rapidité, que les nuances fournies par le dictionnaire ne suffiraient pas à exprimer ce savoir toujours renaisissant d’ardeur et de blancheur. Alors je conçois pleinement l’idée d’une âme se mouvant dans un milieu lumineux, d’une extase faite de volupté et de connaissance, et planant au-dessus et bien loin du monde naturel’; Critique Littéraire et Musicale, 364; Selected Writings, 331.
Wagner’s music dramas as a reciprocal enhancement of sound and vision, a modern exemplar of Dionysian intoxication.\textsuperscript{43}

If Baudelaire and early Nietzsche celebrated Wagner’s music as a liberation of inner feeling, however, other critics deplored the composer and his influence as symptomatic of degeneracy, hysteria and pathology. Distinct from literary decadence, the idea of degeneration initially arose in the context of mid-nineteenth century French psychiatry, later appealing more widely to the natural sciences. For Bénédict Auguste Morel, whose influential \textit{Traité des dégénérescence physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l’espèce humaine} appeared in 1857, \textit{dégénérescence} denoted physical and psychological deterioration thought to have resulted from hereditary deviations from a ‘normal type.’\textsuperscript{44} While concerned with degeneration as a condition of physical and psychological decline in individuals, Morel’s \textit{Traité} was crucial in disseminating the broader concept of degeneration as a larger condition within civilization, promoting perceptions of historical change as linked to biological processes. Retaining its association with medical psychology and evolutionary biology, degeneration later filtered into such diverse fields as anthropology, criminology, social criticism, literature and the arts. By the turn of the century, it encompassed broader tropes of atavism, regression, irrationality, disturbance, transgression and decline, depicting a wider sense of cultural crisis and malaise. In this way, discourses of degeneration were closely bound up with deeper anxieties about the alienating effects of urbanisation, expanding populations, widening access to travel and mobility, and new forms of social and political organisation.\textsuperscript{45}

Despite the implicit conservative and racialist implications of degeneration, the far-reaching influence of the term precludes any straightforward reduction to a single ideological perspective. As Daniel Pick has argued, degeneration was ‘a shifting term produced, inflected, refined, and re-constituted in the movement between human

\textsuperscript{43} In the closing sections of \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, Nietzsche identified Wagnerian opera with a countermovement to Socratic rationalism, seeing in modern German music and philosophy a resurgence of Dionysian creativity capable of undermining the complacency of modern scientific optimism and faith in progress. See \textit{K.S.A}, i, 102-149; \textit{The Birth of Tragedy}, in \textit{The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings}, ed. and trans. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 77-111.

\textsuperscript{44} Bénédict Auguste Morel, \textit{Traité des dégénérescence physiques, intellectuelles, et morales de l’espèce humaine, et des causes qui produisent ces variétés maladiives} (Paris: J. B. Bailliére, 1857), 5.

sciences, fictional narratives and socio-political commentaries. By tracing a widespread discourse of degeneration, Pick reveals how the language of degeneration did not amount to an essential theory or definition, but produced diverse cultural representations across varying disciplines and national contexts. As the idea of degeneration expanded and transformed, it became something of a catch-all term for a multitude of psychological, social and physiological conditions: ‘it explained everything and nothing as it moved back and forth between the clinic, the novel, the newspaper and the government investigation.’ What critics of degeneration had in common, however, was a rationalistic idea of degeneracy as an objective condition, a condition from which the critics themselves remained immune: ‘the experts on degeneration were remarkably united in their own self-exclusion from the field of pathology; they invariably seemed to position themselves beyond its reach’.

In view of this scientific discourse of degeneration, with its concomitant tropes of self-exclusion and othering, we can understand some of the most prominent responses to Wagner at the turn of the century. Indeed, it is no coincidence that one of the most extreme attacks on the composer occurred within the most well known example of nineteenth-century pseudo-scientific criticism: Max Nordau’s Entartung (Degeneration, 1892). In this widely read text, Nordau (a physician and journalist) launched a wide-ranging diagnosis of the pessimistic culture and mind-set of fin-de-siècle Europe, denigrating a whole host of decadent artists, writers and philosophers as psychologically and morally reprehensible. In a chapter devoted to ‘The Richard Wagner Cult’, he attacked the composer as perpetuating what he saw as the widespread problem of ‘mysticism’ pervading modern art from the Pre-Raphaelites, to Symbolism and Tolstoy. Nordau included a number of clichéd attacks on Wagner’s so-called theories of ‘leitmotiv’ and ‘unending melody’ as symptomatic of degeneration, associating the effects of his music with feminine hysteria and mindless rapture. He suggested that the composer’s attempt to unify words and music transgressed the natural differentiation of

46 Faces of Degeneration, 7.
48 Ibid, 8.
49 Max Nordau, Entartung, 2 vols. (Berlin: C. Duncker, 1892-93). The book was translated into many languages and the first English edition appeared three years after the original publication in German; see Degeneration, trans. (unaccredited) from the 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton, 1895); reprint, ed. George L. Mosse (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993).
50 See Degeneration, 171-213. Nordau devoted a separate chapter to literary decadence and aestheticism (including Baudelaire, Huysmans and Wilde), and also included chapters on Zola and Nietzsche.
51 Ibid, 210-211.
the arts attained through centuries of evolution. Moreover, he perceived a more general correlation between advanced musical talent and pathology, revealing an implicit disdain for music itself as the most anti-intellectual and irrational amongst the arts. Nordau associated Wagner’s degeneracy not only with his music, but also with his personality and psychology, which he saw evident in the themes and problems of his prose writings and libretti. As a staunch defender of scientific optimism, rationality, and human progress, Nordau diagnosed Wagner’s character, ideas, and influence as the embodiment of physiological degeneration and atavism pervading modern culture and society at large.

Nordau’s extreme attack on Wagner marked the apex of a long tradition of conservative critical reaction against the composer dating back to the first performances of Tannhäuser and Lohengrin in the 1840s and 1850s. Responses to these works reveal how, early on, critics began to perceive Wagner’s musical language as an affront to classical aesthetic values, reflecting wider cultural and social anxieties about modernism and musical identity in the nineteenth century. In keeping with emergent ideas of degeneration, however, critics increasingly perceived Wagner not just as a threat to classical values, but as an immediate psychological and physiological danger to modern culture. Beyond the immediate field of music criticism, the first significant medical or psychological ‘diagnosis’ of Wagner as degenerate appeared in 1873 with the publication of Theodor Puschmann’s case study Richard Wagner: Eine psychiatrische Studie (Richard Wagner: A Psychiatric Study). Puschmann’s study coincided with the wave of polemics against Wagner the degenerate that emerged following the premiere of Tristan in 1865. But whereas music critics notoriously denigrated Wagner’s opera as nerve-music and sensuality in sound, Puschmann’s pamphlet stands as the first in a number of psychological studies of the composer’s mentality that continued to appear well into the twentieth century. Puschmann anticipated Nordau in his pseudo-scientific analysis of Wagner’s character and theories, which he saw as demonstrating symptoms of mental

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52 Ibid, 198.
53 Degeneration, 196.
54 Degeneration, 171-172.
57 For further discussion of Puschmann’s study and its context, see for example Kennaway, Bad Vibrations, 91-97; and Isolde Vetter, ‘Wagner in the History of Psychology’, trans. Stewart Spencer, in Wagner Handbook, 118-132.
illness. Appearing after the republication of ‘Das Judentum in der Musik’ (Judaism in Music, 1850), Puschmann’s study was more importantly concerned with denouncing Wagner’s deplorable anti-Semitism as symptomatic of megalomania and delirious paranoia. Here again, Puschmann provided an important precursor for Nordau. Indeed, as an assimilated, cosmopolitan Jew, Nordau condemned Wagner’s anti-Semitism in almost identical psychopathological terms. As Thomas Grey has suggested, in deploying the rhetoric of degeneration against Wagner’s anti-Semitism, Nordau ‘would seem to be deflecting this discourse from his own type – the well-adjusted, rational, educated, law-abiding, and assimilated Jew with a healthy respect for bourgeois institutions and classical European culture – onto more genuinely “dangerous” types: the self-identified cultural anarchists, decadents and revolutionaries.’ For all their conservative, hyperbolic condemnation of decadence, radical anti-Wagner critics such as Puschmann and Nordau reflected a deeper constellation of anxieties about European modernism and the fate of liberalism and Enlightenment values in the closing decades of the nineteenth century.

Such anxieties about Wagner’s music as both musically and morally reprehensible are clearly apparent in one of the composer’s most outspoken early critics: Eduard Hanslick. Indeed, while Hanslick’s notorious antagonism toward Wagner might be traditionally seen to reflect merely conservative formalism and condemnation of the music of the future, his objections were clearly founded on deeper critical concerns. As Dana Gooley has suggested, ‘some of Hanslick’s most rigid, “systematic” critical viewpoints concerned not the New German School or the aesthetics of feeling but the position of music in the public sphere, the importance of reciprocity between composers and audiences, and the need for intellectuals such as critics and historians to leave listeners alone in their aesthetic judgements.’ Both in his 1854 treatise, Vom Musikalisch-Schönen (On the Musically Beautiful), and in his more specific reviews of Wagner’s individual music dramas, Hanslick maintained a conviction in the freedom of individual listeners to achieve a rational appreciation of music: one based on clarity of musical form and reasoned aesthetic judgement. Hanslick frequently employed medical rhetoric of pathology and illness to denigrate excessive expressivity and raw physiological response, seeing such attributes in music as a deviation from healthy aesthetic norms of clarity, beauty and rational contemplation. He initially put forward such a distinction in chapter

58 Ibid, 27.
59 Degeneration, 172.
60 ‘Wagner the Degenerate’, 79.
Five of *On the Musically Beautiful*, discussing musical perception in terms of two types of listening: the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘pathological’. The former corresponds, he argued, to a mode of cultivated appreciation grounded in pure contemplation and alert aesthetic enjoyment of musical beauty. Pure aesthetic listening consisted in the mental activity of following and anticipating the formal designs of the individual musical work. By contrast, ‘pathological’ listening equates to a kind of anti-intellectual, passive consumption: ‘it is the elemental in music’, he claimed, ‘i.e. sound and motion, which shackles the defenceless feelings of so many music lovers in chains which they rattle quite merrily.’

According to Hanslick, this kind of unconscious musical appreciation is merely a physical response to auditory vibrations rather than the mental processing of tonal relationships and formal logic. Anticipating a common criticism of decadence, he went on to compare this kind of base musical pleasure to the intoxicating, debilitating effects of drugs: ‘incidentally, for people who want the kind of effortless suppression of awareness they get from music, there is a wonderful recent discovery which far surpasses that art. We refer to ether and chloroform.’

In keeping with his aesthetics of musical beauty, Hanslick perceived Wagner’s recourse to expressivity and base physical response not only as a threat to the freedom of individual listeners, but also as a more specific danger to the rational intellectual standing of the critic and analyst. With its paradoxical combination of harmonic complexity and primitive musical sonority, Wagner’s music posed a significant challenge to the analyst seeking to pioneer an objective knowledge of composition for the benefit of reasoned musical appreciation and the listening public. In his 1874 review of *Die Meistersinger*, Hanslick derided what he saw as Wagner’s obsessive manipulation of individual motifs through continuous repetition, variation and modulation. Such over-elaboration of musical details, he argued, reduced music to sensual resonance, stunting any genuine thematic or melodic development: ‘anxiously omitting every conclusive cadence, this boneless tonal mollusc floats on towards the immeasurable, renewing itself from its own substance.’ Similarly, in his 1882 review of *Parsifal*, Hanslick described Wagner’s use of leitmotiv technique, together with his innovations in free modulation, as promoting an

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63 Ibid, 59.
64 Ibid, 59.
66 Ibid, 119.
oppressive form of listening based on passive affective states: ‘In Parsifal there is no longer any real modulation but rather an incessant undulation, in which the listener loses all sense of a definite tonality. We feel as though we were on the high seas, with nothing firm under our feet.’ Continuing this line of thinking, he presented his most severe objections in his review of the 1883 Vienna premiere of Tristan und Isolde. Here he criticised the dramatic plot and characterisation for its lack of genuine human drama and moral insight. The characters of Tristan and Isolde, he argued, are ‘helpless victims of a purely pathological process, free of moral responsibility and thus the very opposite of the tragic heroes of a drama.’ He went on to align this lack of dramatic moral substance with the musical components of the opera, referring to Wagner’s destruction of musical form and excessive elevation of the orchestra at the expense of the traditional primacy of song. While Hanslick certainly admired Wagner’s innovations in instrumentation, motivic development and harmonic modulation, he also strongly objected to what he perceived as the unnatural demands placed on both performer and listener alike: ‘The overall impression of the work, despite its outstanding individual beauties, remains one of oppressive fatigue resulting from too much unhealthy over-stimulation – a condition unchanged by the fact that it has been occasioned by a great genius.’

Nietzsche contra Wagner: From Romanticism to Décadence
Against the backdrop of these cultural and aesthetic debates, Nietzsche launched his pamphlet The Case of Wagner in 1888. Having staunchly defended the composer in the face of his opponents in such works as The Birth of Tragedy and ‘Richard Wagner in Bayreuth’ (1876), the later Nietzsche publicly denounced his erstwhile conviction in Wagnerian music drama as a renewal of modern culture. In his preface to the republication of The Birth of Tragedy, ‘Versuch einer Selbstkritik’ (‘Attempt at Self-Criticism’, 1886), he argued that the major flaw of his first book had been its naïve conflation of Greek tragedy with ‘the most modern things’: namely, German music, and Wagnerian opera in particular. This historical levelling had, he argues, hindered the possibility of a true engagement with Wagner’s cultural legacy in the present – a task he now sees as paramount to his mature critical project. In denouncing his former conviction in German music and philosophy, he went on to characterise Wagner as

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67 Ibid, 198.
68 Ibid, 217.
69 Ibid, 223-224.
70 Ibid, 226.
71 ‘Der modernsten Dinge’; KSA, i, 20; The Birth of Tragedy, 10.
‘Romanticism through and through’. While Nietzsche had previously echoed Baudelaire in his celebration of Wagner’s music of the future, his later association of the composer with French literary Romanticism forms a major component of his critique. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), he describes how ‘late French Romanticism of the 40s and Richard Wagner belong most closely and intimately together’. Reiterating the point in his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, he acknowledges Wagner’s true followers and successors:

They are the late French Romantics, that high-flying, upwards-raging type of artist like Delacroix, like Berlioz, with a *fond* of sickness, of fundamental incurability, all of them fanatics in *expression*, virtuosos through and through…Who was the first intelligent follower of Wagner? Charles Baudelaire, who was also the first to understand Delacroix, that typical decadent in whom a whole generation of artists recognized themselves.

Within the broader context of Nietzsche’s philosophy, his use of the term Romanticism to describe Wagner and Schopenhauer not only evokes the literary and philosophical movement of the early- to mid-nineteenth century, but also conveys the distinctive idea of a psychophysiological condition. In Nietzsche’s formulation, Romanticism is a state of suffering and longing arising from hatred and fear of a life devoid of higher meaning and religious significance. This condition can lead to nostalgia for an idealised past, or longing for a transcendent, timeless realm beyond the here and now. In an aphorism ‘Was ist Romantik?’ (What is Romanticism?) from book five of *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft* (The Gay Science, 1887), he explicitly reevaluates his early advocacy of Wagner and Schopenhauer, associating his former mentors not only with metaphysical aesthetics, but with an underlying ‘impoverishment of life’, manifesting as escapism or intoxication by

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72 ‘Romantik durch und durch’, *KSA*, i, 20; *The Birth of Tragedy*, 10.
75 For further discussion of Nietzsche’s concept of romanticism see Julian Young, *Nietzsche’s Philosophy of Art*, especially Chapter 5; Matthew Rampley, *Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity*, Chapter 4; Gogröf-Voorhees, *Defining Modernism*, 107-121 and 147-153.
means of art and philosophy.\footnote{76}{‘Der Verarmung des Lebens’; KSA, iii, 620; The Gay Science, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 234.} He opposes this reactive yearning for transcendence to another kind of aesthetic impulse, one deriving from ‘superabundance of life’, a Dionysian classical outlook that affirms life and reality without recourse to a higher ideal.\footnote{77}{‘Der Überfülle des Lebens’; KSA, iii, 620; The Gay Science, 234.} He goes on to formulate this distinction between a romantic and Dionysian aesthetic as one of underlying conditions: ‘nowadays I avail myself of this primary distinction concerning all aesthetic values: in every case I ask, “is it hatred of life or superabundance of life that has become creative here?”’\footnote{78}{‘In Hinsicht auf alle ästhetischen Werthe bediene ich mich jetzt dieser Hauptunterscheidung: ich frage, in jedem einzelnen Falle „ist hier der Hass gegen das Leben oder der Überfluss an Leben schöpferisch geworden?”’; KSA, iii, 621; The Gay Science, 235.}

This combined understanding of Romanticism – as both an artistic movement and as a physiological condition – is in many ways central to the development of Nietzsche’s broader cultural critique of decadence in The Case of Wagner. On a philosophical level, the sense of turning away from life that Nietzsche identifies with Schopenhauer’s Romantic pessimism continues to inform his analysis of Wagner’s operas as decadent. Defending the ‘seriousness’ of his case study in The Case of Wagner, he argues that Wagner (particularly in Parsifal) exploited music’s archaic and elemental properties in the service of metaphysical idealism and Christian morality. Wagner successfully advocated through music the ‘whole counterfeit of transcendence and the beyond.’\footnote{79}{‘die ganze Falschmünzerei der Transscendenz und des Jenseits’; KSA, vi, 39; CW, 254.} At the same time, Nietzsche continues to emphasise the artistic affinity between Wagner and French literary Romantics (such as Victor Hugo and Eugene Delacroix) through his analysis of the composer’s theatrical and rhetorical tendencies. In Beyond Good and Evil, he had defined Wagner’s affinity with French Romanticism in terms of a shared obsession with literature, a fascination with mixing the arts and senses and advocating ‘expression “at any cost”’. In The Case of Wagner, he continues this line of argument, declaring that Wagner ‘vastly increased the linguistic capacity of music - : he is the Victor Hugo of music as a language’.\footnote{80}{‘Er hat das Sprachvermögen der Musik in’s Unermessliche vermehrt - : er ist der Victor Hugo der Musik als Sprache’; KSA, vi, 30; CW, 247.} From both a philosophical and a historical vantage point, then, Nietzsche depicts decadence as an intensification and enhancement of late Romanticism, rather than as a separate phenomenon. Yet this close affinity between Nietzsche’s anti-Romanticism and his critique of decadence has led the philosopher Julian Young to treat the two terms as virtually synonymous. He suggests that Nietzsche criticises Wagner’s
aesthetics as Romantic in the psychological sense, while also conveying a stylistic interpretation of the term through his analysis of decadent art in *The Case of Wagner.* In this way, Young portrays decadence more as a supplement to Nietzsche’s anti-Romanticism, neglecting the distinctive cultural and philosophical connotations of the term as a pivotal theme in his late thought.

As suggested above, the importance Nietzsche placed on the idea of decadence is reflected in his specific emphasis on the French term – a term he introduced for the first time into his published writings of 1888, beginning with *The Case of Wagner.* In this text, Nietzsche supplants the concept of Romanticism with the more heterogeneous concept of *décadence,* which now emerges as the central motif. Prior to *The Case of Wagner,* Nietzsche’s knowledge of cultural decadence dates back at least to 1876, when he began to incorporate it into his unpublished notes and letters. His first reference to decadence occurs in a fragment from 1876 regarding Cervantes *Don Quixote.* In a letter from 1882 he used the term for the first time (without the accent on the first e) in connection with Wagner’s *Parsifal,* having received the vocal score shortly prior to the work’s premiere at Bayreuth: “What sudden decadence! And what Cagliostroism.” Aside from these references, decadence took on a new significance throughout Nietzsche’s background writings of the mid-1880s, particularly following his encounter with French literary theorists. During his stay in Nice in the winter of 1883-1884, he encountered Bourget’s *Essai de Psychologie Contemporaine* – the work that would inform his idea of decadent style in *The Case of Wagner.* In section seven of this text, he paraphrased Bourget’s idea of decadence as style as the literary equivalent of Wagner’s compositional method:

> What is the sign of every literary décadence? That life no longer dwells in the whole. The word becomes sovereign and leaps out of the sentence, the sentence reaches out and obscures the meaning of the page, the page gains life at the expense of the whole – the whole is no longer whole.

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81 Nietzsche’s *Philosophy of Art,* 140-147.
82 He first introduces the concept of *décadence* in section five of *The Case of Wagner* and goes on to employ the term ten or more times throughout the remainder of the text. Nietzsche refers only on one occasion to Romanticism in section three of *The Case of Wagner.* Here he alludes to Wagner’s Romanticism in connection with the philosophical problem of ‘redemption’ in his operas, *Parsifal* in particular. See *KSA,* vi, 19; *CW,* 239.
83 See *KSA,* viii, 254.
85 See Brobjer, *Nietzsche’s Philosophical Context,* 88.
86 ‘Womit kennzeichnet sich jede literarische décadence? Damit, dass das Leben nicht mehr im Ganzen wohnt. Das Wort wird souverain und springt aus dem Satz hinaus, der Satz greift über
Although Nietzsche does not acknowledge Bourget directly within the main text of *The Case of Wagner*, he refers to the author in a related background fragment from 1883-1884. Here he notes: ‘Style of Decay in Wagner: the individual phrase becomes sovereign, subordination and coordination become random. Bourget p. 25.’ Nietzsche goes on to refer to his reading of Bourget in numerous letters and notes, as well as in *Ecce Homo*, wherein he discusses his admiration of French literature and culture more widely. Here he alludes to Bourget, alongside Anatole France and Guy de Maupassant, as representative of a new generation of Parisian writers whom he admires both for their psychological insights and their departure from German metaphysics. Despite Nietzsche’s positive incorporation of Bourget’s theories, however, it is important to acknowledge that his idea of decadent style is more than a straightforward application of a prior concept. While he may appear to borrow Bourget’s definition of decadent style virtually verbatim, Nietzsche actually achieves a subtle differentiation: rather than depict decadence as disintegration and fragmentation of an organic whole (as described by Bourget), he adopts a more nuanced vision of the dynamic life and vitality of individual words and sentences, operating independently of a larger structural unity. In affiliating decadence with a specific structural logic – one deriving from an over-emphasis on the life of individual details at the expense of an organised whole – Nietzsche exceeded more general, conservative complaints of decomposition and formlessness. Indeed, he refers to decadence as a term that ‘does not condemn something but merely describes it’, remarking that ‘even in *décadence*, there are an immense number of qualities that are attractive, valuable, new, most admirable – our modern music, for example, and anyone who may be its true and brave apostle’. This hints at a more positive perception of modernism, one that evokes the productive revaluation of decadence as derived from Baudelaire. We shall see that this tension between condemnation of decadence and appreciation of its progressive implications underpins Nietzsche’s central analysis of compositional style in *The Case of Wagner*.

In deliberately adopting the French word *décadence*, Nietzsche thus clearly sought

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88 *KSA*, vi, 285-286; *Ecce Homo*, 90.


90 SL, 233.
to convey specific connotations distinct not only from Romanticism, but also from the German term Dekadenz – a term that denotes more general ideas of historical decline and decay. His concept of decadence is significant in evoking the broader cultural revaluation of the term in French Romanticism and modernism. Indeed, his understanding of literary decadence as applied to Wagner ultimately played a major part in the wider dissemination of French literature in the German-speaking world. In this respect, his critique can be read alongside later, more sympathetic mediators and theorists of decadence in Austro-German culture, including Hermann Bahr, Thomas Mann and Robert Musil. Although Nietzsche drew substantially on French literary theorists to formulate his analysis of musical decadence in The Case of Wagner, he also alluded to nineteenth-century critics of degeneration. In a central passage, he used medical and biological metaphors to depict Wagner as a case study for contemporary doctors and physiologists of neurosis and hysteria:

Wagner est une névrose. Perhaps nothing is better known these days – at any rate nothing is studied more than the protean character of degeneration that is pupating here as art and artist. Our doctors and physiologists have their most interesting case in Wagner, or at least a very complete case. Nothing is more modern than this total sickness, this maturity and over-excitement of the neurological mechanism, which is why Wagner is the modern artist par excellence, the Cagliostro of modernity.

Nietzsche’s ironic rhetoric of degeneracy to describe Wagner’s success as both cause and symptom of modern neurosis owes much to his reading of contemporary physiologists

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91 The German term Dekadenz does not feature within Nietzsche’s oeuvre, although the larger theme of cultural decline recurs throughout his writings from The Birth of Tragedy onwards. Although Nietzsche did not use the term decadence in the distinctive sense it took on in his later writings, he deployed associative concepts such as Niedergang (decline), Verfall (decay) and Erkrankung (sickness) to lament the broader state of crisis and malaise afflicting modern culture and society. Such vocabulary continued to feature in his most sustained early analysis of the ills of modern culture: ‘Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben’ (‘On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’), published in 1874 as the second of the Untimely Meditations (Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen).


and psychiatrists, including Charles Féré, Claude Bernard and August Krauss. Just as Nietzsche deploys the French concept of décadence to depict distinct literary and cultural connotations, so he specifically appropriates the concept of dégénérescence (degenerescenz). In so doing, his criticisms amount to more than a generalised attack on Wagner as promoting the decline and corruption of modern art. They also point to the relevance of new scientific fields of psychiatry, evolutionary biology and physiology to the interpretation and analysis of art and culture. As he puts this in the conclusion to The Case of Wagner: ‘a diagnosis of the modern soul – where would it begin? […] by performing a vivisection on its most instructive case.’

Nietzsche’s analysis of Wagner’s music thus combines theories of French literary decadence with scientific discourses of degeneration to advance a culturally relevant critique of the composer as symptomatic of modernity. But for all his appropriation of literary and cultural references typical of his nineteenth-century milieu, the concept of decadence ultimately constituted one of the most important tenets of his philosophy and criticism as a whole. Looking beyond the immediate context of The Case of Wagner, he frequently deployed the terms decadence (décadence) and degeneration (degenerescenz or Entartung) in connection with those problems he considered fundamental to the decline of European thought since antiquity: the categories of ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge’ in philosophy since Socrates, the development of idealist metaphysics, the asceticism of Christian morality, and the inevitable erosion of such values in modern secular culture. In short, the concept of decadence was integral to Nietzsche’s seminal diagnosis of nihilism as the underlying condition of modernity. In approaching the analysis of culture and society according to biological tropes of growth, decay, sickness and health, Nietzsche

94 See for example Charles Féré, Dégénérescence et Criminalité: Essai Physiologique (Paris: Germer Baillièere, 1888); August Krauss, Die Psychologie des Verbrechens (Tübingen: H. Laupp, 1884); and Claude Bernard, Introduction à l’étude de la Médicine Expérimentale (Paris: J.B. Baillière, 1865). In the wake of Morel’s treatise on degeneration and heredity, these figures were important in advancing such diverse areas as criminology, experimental medicine and the study of sexuality and hysteria. On Nietzsche’s reading of medical and scientific treatises see Gregory Moore, Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

95 Nietzsche used the German translation degenerescenz to denote the French term. See Moore, Nietzsche, Biology and Metaphor, 127.

96 ‘Eine Diagnostik der modernen Seele – womit begönnen sie? […] mit der Viveksection vollzogen an ihrem lehrreichsten Fall’; KSA, vi, 53; CW, 262.

effectively redefined the role of the philosopher as 'physician of culture'.

As the philosopher Daniel A. Ahern has put this: ‘sickness and health serve as a standard for Nietzsche, one through which he judges the value of everything from individuals and cultures to philosophy and political ideologies, according to what he called an order of rank’. Nietzsche’s application of the concepts of decadence and degeneration, therefore, need to be read in the context of his wider mobilisation of physiology and the body as the major starting point for his cultural criticism. In his later writings in particular, he does not just categorise figures and events as decadent per se, but interprets various phenomena as symptomatic of decadence as an underlying condition – a state of suffering arising from the reality of life as change, becoming, death, procreation and growth. Nietzsche perceives Socrates’ decadence as both an underlying condition and as an attempted cure. It is not just Socrates’ excessive rationalism that is decadent, he argues, but the resistance to life as transitory, incoherent and purposeless, a resistance that leads Socrates to deny the instincts and to insist on the value of dialectics and reason as necessary routes to attaining absolute truth: ‘rationality was seen as a saviour; neither Socrates nor his “patients” had any choice about being rational, - it was de rigeur, it was their last resort.’

In a similar manner, Nietzsche depicts Christian morality and Kantian idealism as decadent symptoms arising out of exhaustion in the face of existence without meaningful unity and purpose in itself: ‘to divide the world into a ‘true’ half and an ‘illusory’ one, whether in the manner of Christianity or in the manner of Kant […] is just a sign of decadence, - it is a symptom of life in decline.

In light of Nietzsche’s idea of the philosopher as cultural physician of decadence – understood both as condition and symptom – we can understand further his attitude to the term as one that ‘does not condemn something but merely describes it’. Decadence in this sense does not refer to a particular set of values or circumstances to be rejected outright, but rather depicts the inevitable sickness of his culture as a whole. As he stressed in *Twilight of the Idols*, his critique of modern times was far more than a

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98 'Der Philosoph als Arzt der Kultur'; *KSA*, vii, 545.
99 Nietzsche as Cultural Physician, 1.
100 ‘Die Vernünftigkeit wurde damals errathen als Retterin, es stand weder Sokrates, noch seinen “Kranken” frei, vernünftig zu sein, - es war de rigueur, es war ihr letzter Mittel’; *KSA*, vi, 72; *Twilight of the Idols*, 165.
A conservative call for a return to a lost past, or indeed a detached, moralistic diagnosis of cultural decline:

What people did not use to know, what people these days do know, can know - a regressive development or turnaround in any way, shape, or form is absolutely impossible. This is something that we physiologists, at least, do know. [...] It is no use: we have to go forwards, and I mean step by step further into decadence (this is my definition of modern "progress"...) You can inhibit this development and even dam up the degeneration through inhibition, gather it together, make it more violent and sudden: but that is all you can do.102

In this denigration of conservative cultural critics, Nietzsche expresses his stance on cultural decadence as one of both resistance and affirmation. The same paradox operates in The Case of Wagner: here he depicts Wagner’s decadence as a serious challenge to the philosopher-critic involved in the interpretation of modernity more generally. In this respect, his broader conception of decadence diverges from an encompassing discourse of degeneration beyond just the philosophical basis of his opposition. Unlike contemporary critics of degeneration, such as Morel or Nordau, Nietzsche overtly integrated himself into his critical narrative of decadence, effectively blurring the boundaries between the analyst and analysed.103 Given his close personal involvement with Wagner, it is hardly surprising that this strategy of self-inclusion is most obvious in his writings on the composer. In the semi-autobiographical preface to The Case Wagner, he presented decadence as an internal tension between the experience of sickness and decline and the capacity to resist or recover: ‘I am just as much a child of my age as Wagner, which is to say a décadent: it is just that I have understood this, I have resisted it.’104 Decadence is in this respect less a set of external values to be opposed, more a condition or experience to overcome: ‘my greatest experience was a recovery. Wagner was just one of my sickesses.’105 But while Nietzsche contrasted illness with recovery, he also offered a dynamic view of decadence in terms of both aversion and gratitude for the

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102 ‘Was man früher nicht wusste, was man heute weiss, wissen könnte – eine Rückbildung, eine Umkehr in irgend welchem Sinn und Grade ist gar nicht möglich. Wir Physiologen wenigstens wissen das. Es hilft nichts: man muss vorwärts, will sagen Schritt für Schritt weiter in der décadence (dies meine Definition des modernen “Fortschritts”...) Man kann diese Entwicklung hemmen und, durch Hemmung, die Entartung selber stauen, aufsammeln, vehementer und Plötzlicher machen: mehr kann man nicht.’ KSA, vi, 144; Twilight of the Idols, 217.

103 On the larger question of the role of self-reference in Nietzsche’s philosophy of decadence in general, see Conway, Nietzsche’s Dangerous Game, especially chapter 1.

104 ‘Ich bin so gut wie Wagner das Kind dieser Zeit, will sagen ein décadent: nur dass ich das begriff, nur dass ich mich dagegen wehrte. Der Philosoph in mir wehrte sich dagegen”; KSA, vi, 11; CW, 233.

105 ‘Mein grösstes Erlebniss war eine Genesung. Wagner gehört bloss zu meinen Krankheiten”; KSA, vi, 12; CW, 233.
new insight it opened up. As the most interesting and complete case of modern
decadence, there is – he says – a necessity and relevance to Wagner that cannot be cast
off, least of all by a philosopher: ‘I argue here that Wagner is harmful, but I also argue that
there is nevertheless someone who cannot do without him – the philosopher. Other
people might be able to get along without Wagner: but a philosopher has no choice in
the matter. He has to be the bad conscience of his age, – and that is why he needs to
know it best.’

A Musician’s Problem
Having stated the serious significance of Wagner for the philosopher of decadence, it is
perhaps surprising that Nietzsche should go on to present in the main text of The Case of
Wagner such a provocative and fragmentary analysis, one so lacking in technical details. In
the opening sections, he outlines a number of justifications for understanding Wagner as
the archetypal ‘artist of décadence.’ Wagner’s operas depict pathological themes and
hysterical characters, and fixate on the problem of redemption. Wagner is also
decadent in his aspirations to monumentality and spirituality. Nietzsche accuses the
composer of sacrificing the intimate listening and beauty of classical melody, exploiting
artificial pathos and histrionic gesture on a mass scale. Wagner’s music, he says,
‘propagates exhaustion: and that is why weak and exhausted people were attracted to
him.’ In short, his art as whole represents a ‘gallery of pathology’ and a ‘clinical picture
that leaves no room for doubt.’ On the basis of this opening critique, The Case of
Wagner might be read merely as an amalgamation of decadent characteristics – reflecting
both the French literary movement of the late nineteenth century and the broader
pessimism of idealist metaphysics and Christian morality. Yet given the complexity of
Nietzsche’s wider concept of decadence, and the range of his cultural references, his
analysis inevitably amounts to more than a portrait of decadent symptoms in music and
musicians.

As we know, Nietzsche adapted Bourget’s theory of decadence to denote a

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106 ‘Wenn ich mit dieser Schrift den Satz aufrecht halte, dass Wagner schädlich ist, so will ich nicht
weniger aufrecht halten, wem er trotzdem unentbehrlich ist – dem Philosophen. Sonst kann man
vielleicht ohne Wagner auskommen: dem Philosophen aber steht es nicht frei, Wagner’s zu
entrathen. Er hat das schlechte Gewissen seiner Zeit zu sein, – dazu muss er deren bestes Wissen
haben’; KSA, vi, 12; CW’, 233-234.
107 ‘Dem Künstler der décadence’; KSA, vi, 21; CW’, 240.
109 KSA, vi, 23-26; CW’, 242-244.
nuanced picture of artistic decadence as style, one characterised by the liberation of individual details at the expense of an organic unity between form and content. Yet much of the originality of Nietzsche’s analysis in the central sections of *The Case of Wagner* lies in his convergence of literary decadence with his existing knowledge of Wagnerian aesthetics and contemporary music theory. Nietzsche’s analysis of decadence is not only indebted to literary criticism, but also to contemporary music theorists, including Hugo Riemann – whose 1884 treatise *Musikalische Dynamik und Agogik* Nietzsche would have discovered shortly after his reading of Bourget’s essay.111 Through his knowledge of Riemann’s theoretical work on musical rhythm and phrasing, together with his own long-standing interest in Wagner’s compositional techniques, Nietzsche was able to conceive of decadent style not only as a literary concept, but also in specifically musical terms. In a letter to the music theorist Carl Fuchs (a close colleague of Riemann), dating from 1886, he defined musical decadence in direct reference to the rhythmic character of *Tristan*. Here Nietzsche adapted Bourget’s theory of decadent style to apply not just to the organisation of words, phrases and pages of a novel, but also to the motifs, phrases and melodies that constitute the language of music:

> Ambiguity in rhythm, the effect of which is that one does not know, and *should* not know, whether something is this way or that way round, is doubtless a technique which can procure wonderful effects – *Tristan* is full of it – but as symptom of an entire art, it is and remains the sign of dissolution. The part dominates the whole, phrase dominates melody, the moment dominates time (also the tempo), pathos dominates ethos (character, style, or whatever you want to call it); finally even esprit dominates ‘sense’.112

This description of decadent musical style subsequently underpins Nietzsche’s central analysis of Wagner’s compositional technique in *The Case of Wagner*. On the one hand, he

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111 In *The Case of Wagner*, Nietzsche refers to Riemann as an example of how the influence of Wagnerism has extended ‘even into the realm of knowledge’ (‘Die Bewegung, die Wagner schuf, greift selbst in das Gebiet der Erkenntnis über’); *KSA*, vi, 38; *CW*, 253. For more detailed discussion of Nietzsche’s relationship with Riemann, see for example Leslie David Blasius, ‘Nietzsche, Riemann, Wagner: When Music Lies’, in *Music Theory and Natural Order from the Renaissance to the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 93-110.

berates Wagner’s music for its lack of organic thematic development. He argues that Wagner’s musical structures consist of over-elaborate motivic units worked out within an artificial, preconceived whole: ‘Wagner begins with a hallucination: not of tones but of gestures. Then he searches out a tonal semiotics for them.’\textsuperscript{113} Yet he also admires Wagner’s innovative motivic technique for dramatizing musical units to the point where they become almost visible to the mind’s eye: ‘If you want to admire him, just watch him at work: how he separates, how he forges little unities, how he animates them, drives them out, makes them visible.’\textsuperscript{114} Similarly, one of Nietzsche’s best-known statements on Wagner’s compositional decadence in \textit{The Case of Wagner} entails a conflict between condemnation and esteem, reflecting the broader ambivalence of decadence as both a style of dissolution and as an expression of artistic modernity: ‘Wagner is admirable, amiable only in his inventiveness with the very small, in spinning out details, - it would be right to declare him a first-rate master in this regard, our greatest \textit{Miniaturist} in music, who can urge an infinity of meaning and sweetness into the smallest spaces.’\textsuperscript{115}

Nietzsche thus deliberately uses the literary concept of decadence to emphasise Wagner’s rhetorical approach to musical composition, his transformation of music into a language of expression. Yet Nietzsche was not only preoccupied with musical decadence as stylistic tendencies and compositional techniques, but also as a subjective condition or experience afflicting listening subjects and modern musical culture more widely. In a famous aphorism, ‘Wagner als Gefahr’ (Wagner as a Danger) from \textit{Nietzsche contra Wagner}, Nietzsche objects to Wagner’s musical innovations, not only for promoting an alteration in musical logic, but also for provoking a harmful physical effect on listeners and resulting in a detrimental legacy for music history: ‘the objective pursued by the new music in what is now, in a strong but nonetheless obscure phrase, designated “infinite melody” can be made clear by imagining that one is going into the sea, gradually relinquishing a firm tread on the bottom and finally surrendering unconditionally to the watery element: one is supposed to \textit{swim}.’\textsuperscript{116} He goes on to refer to Wagner’s musical

\textsuperscript{113} ‘Bei Wagner steht im Anfang die Hallucination: nicht von Tönen, sondern von Gebärdé. Zu ihnen sucht er erst die Ton-Semiotik’; \textit{KSA}, vi, 28; \textit{CW}, 245.

\textsuperscript{114} ‘Will man ihn bewundern, so sehe man ihn hier an der Arbeit: wie er hier trennt, wie er kleine Einheiten gewinnt, wie er diese belebt, heraustreibt, sichtbar macht’; \textit{KSA}, vi, 28; \textit{CW}, 246.


\textsuperscript{116} ‘Die Absicht, welche die neuere Musik in dem verfolgt, was jetzt, sehr stark, aber undeutlich, “unendliche Melodie” genannt wird, kann man sich dadurch klar machen, dass man in’s Meer geht, allmählich den sicheren Schritt auf dem Grunde verliert und sich endlich dem Elemente auf
legacy in terms of ‘a complete degeneration of the feeling for rhythm’. Wagner’s most
decisive innovation, he argues, was that he ‘desired a different type of movement, – he
overthrew the physiological presupposition of previous music’. Nietzsche is concerned
more widely here with Wagner’s effect on the subjective experience of music, with a loss
of ‘self-possession’ in the listener brought about by the orchestral unfolding of so-called
‘infinite melody’. Outlining his ‘physiological objections’ to the music, he characterises
the experience of rhythm and movement in Wagner as a tyrannical assault on the senses,
a threat to health, a cause of illness and fatigue. Wagner’s music, he argues, has a
melancholic, weakening effect on the body and the psyche.

In stark contrast to his youthful view of Wagnerian music theatre as a renewal of
German culture, Nietzsche now radically calls into question the composer’s musical
credentials and his place in music history. Having initially emerged as one of the most
enthusiastic supporters and publicists of the Bayreuth project during the years of
friendship, he now regards Wagner’s theatre not only as reflecting crude German
nationalism and imperialism, but also as commercialised mass culture and an affront to
the artistic values of Greek drama they once shared. What is at stake in the culture of
Bayreuth, he argues, is a loss of individual freedom for the listening subject: ‘In Bayreuth
one is honest only as a mass; as an individual one lies, lies to oneself’. Particularly in
the later sections of The Case of Wagner, he emphasises the idea that Wagner stood for ‘the
appearance of the actor in music’. What Wagner instigates through his musical
decadence, he argues, is the emergence of an aggressive histrionic impulse antithetical to
genuine musical integrity: ‘Wagner the actor is a tyrant’, he claimed, ‘his affect throws
every taste, every resistance out of the window. – who else has this persuasive power of
gestures, who else sees gestures so distinctly, so immediately! This breath-holding of the
Wagnerian affect, this sense of not wanting to break loose from extremes of feeling, this

Gnade und Ungnade übergibt: man soll schwimmen'; KSA, vi, 421-422; NCW, 269 (translation
modified).
117 ‘Die vollkommne Entartung des rhythmischen Gefühls'; KSA, vi, 422; NCW, 269.
118 ‘Richard Wagner wollte eine andre Art Bewegung, – er warf die physiologische Voraussetzung
der bisherigen Musik um'; KSA, vi, 422; NCW, 269.
119 ‘Meine Einwände gegen die Musik Wagner’s sind physiologische Einwände'; see ‘Wo ich
Einwände mache’ (Where I offer objections), in Nietzsche Contra Wagner, KSA, vi, 418-419;
NCW, 266-267.
120 KSA, 30; CW, 247.
121 KSA, 42; CW, 256.
122 ‘In Bayreuth ist man nur als Masse ehrlich, als Einzener läügt man, belügt man sich’; KSA, vi,
420; NCW, 267.
123 ‘Die Heraufkunst des Schauspielers in der Musik’; KSA, vi, 37; CW, 253.
horrifying duration of states where even the moment threatens to strangle us.'

Wagner’s essential significance, he argues, is the transformation of music into a pathological means of expression, ancillary to literature and drama and determined from the point of view of the listener-spectator. With his propensity for theatrical rhetoric and affect, Wagner’s music – for all its technical complexity – depends on exploiting the elementary, physical properties of sound: ‘The elementary is enough – tone, movement, colour, – in short, the sensuality of music.’

When considered against the background of a wider critical tradition of degeneration and anti-Wagnerism, such criticisms can be read not only as reflecting Nietzsche’s distinctive critique of metaphysics and Romanticism, but also broader cultural concerns surrounding Wagner and modernity in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. In some respects, Nietzsche arguably goes even further than Puschmann and Nordau in deploying metaphors of illness not only to denounce Wagner’s musical influence and legacy, but also his cultural politics of nationalism and anti-Semitism. As a number of commentators have noted, it is no coincidence that Nietzsche’s turn against Wagner’s music as degenerate should have coincided with a renewed interest in Jewish composers such as Mendelssohn and Offenbach. Nietzsche’s advocacy for such composers in his late writings operates as an implicit reversal of Wagner’s ideological agenda: in place of the regenerative power of German music, Nietzsche proposed the music of Jewish composers as an integral component in his attack on Wagner’s regressive nationalism as symptomatic of pathological decline.

If Nietzsche appropriates and subverts the rhetoric of degeneration as part of a progressive critique of nationalism and anti-Semitism, though, his vocabulary of physiology is

125 KSA, vi, 29-35; CW, 247-251.
126 ‘Das Elementarische genügt – Klang, Bewegung, Farbe, kurz die Sinnlichkeit der Musik’; KSA, vi, 30; CW, 248.
nevertheless implicated in a reactionary critical discourse, one that is not without dubious political and moral undercurrents. This is particularly apparent if we look beyond the main text of The Case of Wagner to consider the incomplete background notebooks posthumously known as Der Wille zur Macht (The Will to Power). In a series of aphorisms from these background notes, Nietzsche more overtly juxtaposes decadent musical language and Romantic aesthetics of feeling with the idea of the ‘grand style’, embodying classical ideals of control, law, force and will. He defines Wagner’s music as lacking in creative masculine strength, logic and integrity, but also as inducing a feminine effect in propagating passive affective states. With this pejorative association of Wagnerian music with traits of theatricality, superficial gesture and rhythmic ambiguity, Nietzsche reinforces the opposition (implicit in The Case of Wagner) between a receptive, feminine aesthetic of passivity and affective response, and an authentic masculine creativity that produces genuine art.

This gendered rhetoric against Wagner’s music suggests – at least on a surface level – a comparison with Hanslick, whose aesthetics and criticism also distinguished between the pathological and degenerate qualities of Wagnerian music, and the beauty and moral virtue of a classical creative impulse. Just as Hanslick had objected to Wagner’s music dramas as promoting unwarranted expressivity and a regression of listening, so Nietzsche likewise focuses on the composer’s impact both on compositional style and subjective response. Both critics emphasise in particular the liberation of musical content from traditional harmonic and rhythmic conventions, employing aquatic metaphors (derived in part from Wagner’s own writings) to depict both the newfound sovereignty of orchestral melody and the harmful physical and psychological experience

129 In The Case of Wagner Nietzsche alluded to a projected chapter entitled ‘Zur Physiologie der Kunst’ (On the Physiology of Art), intended for publication in a forthcoming ‘Hauptwerk’ (‘major work’); See KSA, vi, 26; CW, 245. The new work to which Nietzsche alludes is the substantive project of his last years, which he referenced on at least one occasion as Der Wille zur Macht, Versuch einer Umwerthung aller Werthe (The Will to Power: Attempt at a Revaluation of all Values); see KSA, v, 409; On the Genealogy of Morality, trans. Carol Diethe and ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 118. Nietzsche’s unpublished notebooks from the late 1880s contain numerous preparatory writings for his project, including comments relating to Wagner, music and the philosophy or ‘physiology’ of art more generally. Nietzsche never compiled these notes into a complete work for publication and changed his plans substantially towards the end of 1888. Following his death in 1900, however, his sister Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche and his friend Peter Gast heavily edited a selection of the notes for publication as Der Wille Zur Macht in 1906. This text subsequently formed the basis for the 1967 English translation, The Will to Power, ed. Walter Kaufmann and trans. R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967). The reception history of The Will to Power is thus a controversial one, and the text is now considered highly dubious as an authoritative work on a par with Nietzsche’s completed philosophical works.

130 See KSA, xiii, 489-491; trans. The Will to Power, ed. 440-441.
provoked in the listener. Both also object on similar grounds to Wagner’s orchestral timbre as a perceived regression to superficial musical resonance at the expense of inner thematic development. More fundamentally, Nietzsche shares with Hanslick a sense that Wagner’s music – particularly in its dependence on physical stimulus and passive response – indicates a radical violation of rational musical contemplation and analytical judgement. On this point, Nietzsche’s description of the harmful physiological effects of Wagner’s decadent music overlaps with Hanslick’s deployment of medical metaphors to describe the hysterical character and impact of Tristan and Parsifal. What is more, Nietzsche might even be seen to recollect Hanslick’s aesthetic opposition between contemplative and pathological listening in his famous depiction of Bizet’s Carmen as a healthy, natural antidote to the decadence of Wagnerian opera. In the opening section of The Case of Wagner, he describes how the music of Carmen ‘treats the listener as intelligent, even as a musician.’\textsuperscript{131} He goes on to suggest that the familiar, conventional logic of Bizet’s music encourages a more detached, contemplative mode of listening: ‘I actually bury my ears under this music, I listen to its causes. […] Has anyone noticed that music makes the spirit free? Gives wings to thought? That you become more of a philosopher, the more of a musician you become?’\textsuperscript{132}

Nietzsche’s ‘physiological objections’ to musical decadence might thus be read as sustaining a series of music-aesthetic oppositions – oppositions that substantially overlap with or anticipate the gendered language of degeneration. Both within the main text of The Case of Wagner and in his surrounding background notebooks, Nietzsche opposes the dissolution and atomisation of Wagner’s compositional logic with the idea of genuine organisation embodied in ‘grand style’; he contrasts the theatrical effects of Wagner’s Gesamtkunstwerk with the ideal of autonomous creative production; and he differentiates the pathological affective state of Wagnerian listening from a healthy, enlightened experience of musical contemplation. But whereas The Case of Wagner and background notebooks contain some of Nietzsche’s most derogatory comments against Wagner’s music, his late writings also involve a peculiar resurgence of praise for the composer. In his unpublished writings, and in his retrospective commentaries on The Case of Wagner, Nietzsche refutes the popular misconception of his critique as a purely negative appraisal or a clear-cut opposition. In the second Postscript (which he added soon after the book’s initial publication and reception), he acknowledges that his critique of the composer

\textsuperscript{131} ‘Diese Musik nimmt den Zuhörer als intelligent, selbst als Musiker’; KSA, vi, 14; \textit{CW}, 235.
should not be mistaken for a simplistic polemic against the ‘New German School’, or indeed a nostalgic defence of classicist values as exemplified in composers such as Bizet or Brahms. It is not a question – he argues – of contrasting Wagner with other musicians: ‘when it comes to Wagner, other musicians do not even come into the picture’.

In a similar vein, he remarks in a letter to Fuchs from 1888 that Tristan in particular ‘is the central work and of a fascination which has no parallel, not only in music but in all the arts.’ Moreover, in a letter to Peter Gast from 1887, he reflects positively on hearing for the first time the orchestral prelude to Parsifal:

Did Wagner ever compose anything better? The finest psychological intelligence and definition of what must be said here, expressed, communicated, the briefest and most direct form for it, every nuance of feeling pared down to an epigram; a clarity in the music as descriptive art, bringing to mind a shield with a design in relief on it; and, finally, a sublime and extraordinary feeling, experience, happening of the soul at the basis of the music, which does Wagner the highest credit [...] Has any painter painted such a melancholy gaze of love as Wagner did with the last accents of his prelude?

The positive tone of Nietzsche’s response here seems more in keeping with the enthusiasm of some of his early Wagnerian writings than the vitriolic tenor of his late publications. His appreciation of the intelligence and clarity of expression, the refined reduction of means, the sense of the sublime, as well as the visual, spatial quality of the sound: all these seem to stand in sharp contrast to his more derogatory critique of miniaturism, melancholy and painterliness put forth just a year later in the main text of The Case of Wagner.

Perhaps these private background comments on Wagner’s music might be read as just that: personal responses to the music that do not pertain to the public philosophical arguments worked out in the final version of The Case of Wagner. Hence the philosopher George Liébert suggests that Nietzsche’s private, positive response to this opera simply shows a pleasure in the music that ‘he forbade himself as a philosopher.’

Liébert does not explore in detail the implications of this passing assertion. Instead, he gives the impression that the positive strain implicit in Nietzsche’s unpublished reflections on Wagner amount to little more than a lingering passion or nostalgia for the man and his music – a passion that simply conflicts with his critical arguments against Wagner put forth in his published philosophical texts. Yet Liébert’s suggestion of an

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133 ‘Andre Musiker kommen gegen Wagner nicht in Betracht’; K.S.A, vi, 46; CIW, 258.
134 KGB, III.v, 554; SL, 341.
135 Letter to Peter Gast (January 21 1887), SL, 259.
136 See Nietzsche and Music, 131.
implicit conflict between Nietzsche’s private and public attitude towards the composer nevertheless points to an interesting question, one that concerns Nietzsche’s conflicted relationship with Wagner, but also a broader conflict between music and philosophy more generally. Is it simply the case that Nietzsche’s personal enjoyment of Wagner’s music was a wholly separate pleasure, a private sphere entirely independent of his role as a philosopher or critic – a role in which musical enjoyment and aesthetic experience was somehow forbidden from the realm of reasoned judgment and musical knowledge?

While Liébert seems to accept without question such a separation between these two spheres – the personal and the philosophical – the extent to which Nietzsche’s critical analysis of Wagner constitutes such a rigid departure from his subjective experience of the music is highly questionable. Indeed, the conflict between Nietzsche’s public analysis of Wagner and his more private aesthetic response takes on a wider critical significance within the broader context of ideas about decadence and degeneration, especially when considered in relation to his denunciation of the composer’s transgressive music and its harmful physiological effects on the listener. In reflecting on his continued positive admiration for such works as Tristan and Parsifal, Nietzsche not only reveals a residual admiration for the composer, but overtly undermines his philosophical condemnation of Wagner’s decadence by way of his own affective response to the music. Rather than reading Nietzsche’s background positive comments on Wagner’s music merely as a private, secondary adjunct to the ‘true’ philosophical analysis worked out in the published texts, therefore, we might better understand his remarks as bridging the gap between the experience of decadent music and the role of the critic. Indeed, it is precisely his unique closeness to Wagner’s music that Nietzsche saw in the end as justifying and authenticating his distinctive analysis of the composer as the summation of modernity.

Conclusion: Reading The Case of Wagner
As musicology becomes increasingly attendant to the wider cultural history of musical modernism, not to mention the broader relationship between philosophy and music, it would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Nietzsche’s late musical writings as a seminal engagement with decadence and Wagnerism. The Case of Wagner provides us with lasting historical insight into the aesthetics and politics of decadence and degeneration as applied to musical composition, performance and listening in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. His evaluation of the composer stands as a
major contribution to aesthetic debates about modern musical culture and criticism within and beyond the late-nineteenth century. Drawing on ideas of decadence as style inherited from Baudelaire and Bourget, alongside his knowledge of Wagner’s aesthetics and contemporary music theory and criticism, he articulated a rich analysis of compositional decadence. In this sense, it would be highly misleading to reduce Nietzsche’s analysis of musical decadence to a straightforward attack on formlessness or a conservative call for order and a return to traditional values of musical beauty. Although *The Case of Wagner* can be seen as a constructive evaluation of decadent compositional style, his evaluation resonated nonetheless with wider socio-political and moral concerns about Wagnerism and European musical culture at the turn of the century. Indeed, his critique of musical decadence went beyond issues in composition to address wider concerns about orchestral timbre, listening and subjective response – concerns that were not only pivotal to the critical reception of Wagnerism, but also continued to resonate with political responses to music and modernity well into the twentieth century.137

*The Case of Wagner* occupies a highly ambiguous position within the larger history of decadence and degeneration in critical discourse on music. On the one hand, Nietzsche’s condemnation of Wagner’s music stands as an important contribution to a far-reaching tradition of degeneration and conservative anti-modernism extending from the mid-nineteenth-century to the early decades of the twentieth century. On the other, Nietzsche drew on the productive potential of decadence to analyse Wagner’s style as valuable, new and enriching, not just for contemporary musical culture but for modern art as a whole. Despite the polemical tone of his critique, his analysis was never entirely negative, suggesting a conflicted attitude toward Wagner that reflects the paradoxical dynamics of modern decadence more generally as denoting decline or decay as well as affirmation and progress. Seen in this context, the contradictory character of *The Case of

137 As Karen Painter has shown in her discussion of responses to Mahler’s symphonies, the physicality of orchestral sonority (Klang) or timbre (Klangfarben) became a pressing issue in Viennese criticism at the fin-de-siècle. Just as Hanslick, Nietzsche and then Nordau denigrated as irrational and unmusical the sensuality of Wagner’s orchestral sound, so subsequent Viennese critics such as Robert Hirschfeld and Walter Niemann continued the critical rhetoric of degeneration to condemn Mahler’s music as an affront to formal coherence and rational development associated with the traditional German symphonic ideal. If nineteenth-century critics of Wagner’s musical decadence had advanced their objections partly in opposition to the composer’s anti-Semitism, however, Viennese critics of musical modernism after Wagner often deployed the rhetoric of degeneration in converse support of an explicit nationalist and discriminatory agenda, particularly to apply to the case of Mahler. See Karen Painter, “The Sensuality of Timbre: Responses to Mahler and Modernity at the “Fin de siècle””, 19th-Century Music, 18:3 (1995), 236-256.
Wagner might be read as evoking a broader constellation between the positive dynamics of artistic decadence (as exemplified by Baudelaire) and the negative rhetoric of degeneration (as represented above all by Nordau). But whereas Nietzsche’s ambivalence toward Wagner certainly draws substantially on surrounding influences, the historical relevance of The Case of Wagner also amounts to more than an amalgamation of competing critical traditions.

Going beyond the immediate cultural embeddedness of Nietzsche’s critique, his analysis of Wagner’s music hinged on the distinctive idea of decadence as a personal experience to be known and overcome. While he advanced his critical objections to artistic decadence according to various stylistic features and aesthetic values, he also portrayed Wagner as a fundamental expression of modernity, incorporating his own immediate experience and knowledge of the composer as an essential component in his philosophical critique. At stake in the conflicting musical arguments of The Case of Wagner, in other words, is more than a detached conflict between decadence as a negative value judgement and as a productive aesthetic of the new. Underlying Nietzsche’s critique of decadence is also a personal tension between his philosophical analysis and subjective response. This tension is evident in The Case of Wagner particularly in light of Nietzsche’s background comments relating both to the critical value of decadence, and to his positive experience of Tristan and Parsifal in particular. Taking such comments as an integral part of Nietzsche’s philosophical relationship with Wagner, we found that his desire to know and judge the music as expressive of decadence came up against his continued impulse to eulogise this same music as an experience resistant to rational analysis and philosophical understanding. If Nietzsche mobilised a contemporary rhetoric of decadence and degeneration as part of a rich evaluation of Wagner’s music and its legacy, his distinctive critique also revealed an implicit conflict between his desire to analyse and evaluate decadent music at a distance, and his awareness of the impossibility of achieving any genuine critical separation. Ultimately, it is this broader critical tension – between objective analysis and aesthetic experience – that lies at the heart of his critique of musical decadence, distinguishing his evaluation from surrounding critics of his time.
Abstract

Although philosophical and biographical accounts of Nietzsche and Wagner abound, the musical issues at stake in his late text Der Fall Wagner (The Case of Wagner, 1888) have rarely been addressed within their wider cultural context. This article explores the nineteenth-century concepts of decadence and degeneration as relevant for understanding the ambivalence of Nietzsche’s late critique of Wagner. Emphasising his affinity with contemporary French criticism, it argues that his late texts advance a theory of decadence pertinent to current music history and criticism. It locates The Case of Wagner within the larger discourse of degeneration, probing similarities and differences with surrounding critics of Wagnerism. Nietzsche’s critique combines a condemnation of Wagner’s music with a more positive appreciation of the composer’s historical relevance. Yet his writings also reveal a fundamental conflict between his personal involvement with Wagner’s music and his philosophical quest to analyse this music as expressive of modernity.

Key words: Wagner, Nietzsche, decadence, degeneration, philosophy.

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