This book began with points to which I kept returning since I began to write on the nineteenth century and social theory. These included, first, Holbrook Jackson’s description of the 1890s as “a decade singularly rich in ideas, personal genius and social will” whose “central characteristic was a widespread concern for the correct – the most effective, most powerful, most righteous – mode of living.” Second, the compatibility in that period of individualism and socialism that has been increasingly difficult for later generations to comprehend. Third, polarized reactions to the excesses of modernization that could culminate, on the one hand, in political action to the point of physical force (William Morris) and, on the other, in hagiography and religious conversion (J. K. Huysmans). And fourth, the intricate dissection of relationships of symmetric and asymmetric mutuality. It also began with the experiments of people who attempted to live their lives creatively, as if they were works of art, and treated decorum as formed behavior, civility as formed interaction, beautiful objects as formed labor, beautiful Nature as formed matter, games as formed competition, ascesis as formed self, and, often, socialism as formed society, forming self-interest for the social good: people, that is, who embodied and performed detachment as both critical and aesthetic. I also repeatedly returned to an anatomy of the will, what Jackson called “social will,” but also to individual will, when functional but also when occult, diseased, and weak, as in the acrasiacs and figures of resentment of the fin de siècle and after. What connected these points, which could not be pursued in depth amid other projects, was a particular problem in conceptualizing the relation of parts to wholes, especially the individual to larger social units.

*Individualism Decadence and Globalization* is a genealogy of liberalism from the individual in the abstract to the concrete individual in the
couple or parent–child dyad, in the workshop and commune, in the state, and in cosmopolis or world. It follows nineteenth-century formulations of the relationship of part to whole in both science and culture and argues that this analytic of relationship – locating the appropriate units of analysis amid changing functions and relations – is more conducive to understanding than identity, essence, property, or linear causality. This chapter introduces some social, aesthetic, and scientific models of individualism and globalization and shows how they evolved from different conceptions of the relationship of part to whole.

In a passage that had resonance across every area of life in the period, the psychologist Havelock Ellis defined Decadence in 1889 as when the individuation of parts led to the disintegration of the whole, and a Decadent style in literature as an anarchistic style in which everything was sacrificed to the development of the individual parts. His language is biological and functional.

The individual is the social cell. In order that the organism should perform its functions with energy it is necessary that the organisms composing it should perform their functions with energy, but with a subordinated energy, and in order that these lesser organisms should themselves perform their functions with energy, it is necessary that the cells comprising them should perform their functions with energy, but with a subordinated energy. If the energy of the cells becomes independent, the lesser organisms will likewise cease to subordinate their energy to the total energy and the anarchy which is established constitutes the *decadence* of the whole. The social organism does not escape this law and enters into decadence as soon as the individual life becomes exaggerated beneath the influence of acquired well-being, and of heredity. A similar law governs the development and decadence of that other organism which we call language. A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the page, in which the page is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word. A decadent style, in short, is an anarchistic style in which everything is sacrificed to the development of the individual parts. (1889)²

Whether one thought this sacrifice of whole to the development of the part was a sign of Degeneration, or, as I think, of thought-experiments on the limits of self and other, this was the key tension at the end of the