

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-13112-4 - Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940

William Greenslade

Excerpt

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## Introduction

### I

In *The Fifth Child* (1988) Doris Lessing deploys a concept of degeneration which she makes account for the anomalous nature of a strange and horrifying child – from his gestation through to his adolescence. Ben is a monster, and the serviceable myth of degeneration, in one of its common manifestations – atavism, offers a rational structure for his inexplicability, capturing and fixing him as if definitions must needs bend to accommodate and stabilise the rush of violent emotions aroused within his family. It is Ben's mother who finally invokes the myth of a degenerate 'type', when she sees in her son an atavistic throwback: 'she felt she was looking through him at a race that reached its apex thousands and thousands of years before humanity, whatever that meant, took the stage'.<sup>1</sup>

The feelings of incredulity, anger, resentment and fear aroused by this encounter with a reversionary embodiment, provide Lessing with a workable but dubious typology. For she allows Ben to be labelled quite unironically. Her implied revulsion from the barbarism of the 1980s rests on a schema which permits her to fix on Ben's reverted 'nature' as the reason why at the end of the novel, Ben is an expectant recruit-in-waiting to a global army of teenage vandals and delinquents, as viewed, apocalyptically, on television, in the major cities of the world. Lessing's novel is a work of science fiction, offering a parable for our time, but its mythic component hails from a now discredited family of ideas, active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These ideas and the different ways they were assimilated and deployed by British writers of fiction in this period is the subject of this book.

The idea of degeneration was an important resource of myth for the post-Darwinian world. The late Victorian establishment and the

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propertied classes generally harboured anxieties about poverty and crime, about public health and national and imperial fitness, about decadent artists, 'new women' and homosexuals. The loose assemblage of beliefs which can be marked out as 'degenerationism', especially when these beliefs claimed the ratification of empirical science, offered a displacement and transference of guilt, and of fear of the uncontrollable and baffling energies of material existence. Degeneration offered boundless scope for both attacking the irrational and sustaining it. Late nineteenth century 'learned men', with their 'inclination ... to frighten themselves and their audiences', as Peter Gay puts it, 'dreaded spectres that they themselves had painted on the wall'.<sup>2</sup>

Such fears at the *fin de siècle* were at work shaping institutional practices – medical, psychiatric, political – and their assumptions. Degeneration facilitated discourses of sometimes crude differentiation: between the normal and the abnormal, the healthy and morbid, the 'fit' and 'unfit', the civilised and the primitive. Degeneration was at the root of what was, in part, an enabling strategy by which the conventional and respectable classes could justify and articulate their hostility to the deviant, the diseased and the subversive. At times when the social order was under particular pressure (London in the mid-1880s is an example, or much of Europe after 1917) the pathological element in the discourses of social panic was pressed into service to undermine the intentionality of the oppositional voice, by rendering it as irrational or 'sick' – whether it was the voice of organised labour, Jewish immigrants or psychoanalysis. In the rhetoric of establishment anxieties (which extends to doctors, politicians, novelists, feature and leader-writers) there are, at times, striking and tenacious continuities which it is one aim of this book to trace.

As is by now well recognised, the work of Michel Foucault has been most instrumental in directing attention to such fields of discourse embodying whole 'ensembles' of beliefs, and traceable to quite discrete origins – despite their apparent contiguity. Such a 'discursive field', for Foucault, is psychopathology. Here assumptions about the human subject and institutions form a frame around discrete 'objects' of that discourse: the criminal, the 'feeble-minded', the neurotic woman, the hooligan, the artist. Degeneration is one 'surface of emergence' of that discourse in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe.<sup>3</sup>

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These discursive relationships, Foucault argues, are not passively reflected, but actively elaborated, asserted – even defined – through the forms of language itself: for this is one way the exercise of power happens. Power is not to be solely identified with a monolithic state apparatus, it is disseminated through many and varied discourses, institutions and institutional contexts. In Foucault's terms, degeneration is discursively activated to produce, for example, typologies of 'inclusion' and 'exclusion'. Regulating morality or sexuality entails not only repression (or indifference) but the active production of categories and distinctions. The prostitute or the hooligan are defined in terms of their variation from a posited ideal or norm – the womanly woman, the manly ideal: the same is true of the neurotic woman, the homosexual or introspective adolescent. As the authority of norms falters, so the regulation through categories becomes more necessary.

Foucault has much to offer the literary historian for whom the literary text engages with, battens on to, yet can defy and move beyond the discursive. But to illustrate what novelists can do with the idea of degeneration, I want to use Frank Kermode's distinction between the function of myth and that of fiction as a starting-point. For Kermode, the mythic component of a concept and practice such as degeneration lies in the absence of a sense of its fictiveness, its constructedness. 'Myth', Kermode has written, 'operates within the diagrams of ritual, which presupposes total and adequate explanations of things as they are and were; it is a sequence of radically unchangeable gestures.' Fictions, on the other hand, 'are made for finding things out, and they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change.'<sup>4</sup>

The critical obligation is, as far as possible, to historicise the claims that degeneration makes to 'truth', to show how it might mythologise history, or, as R. P. Blackmur put it when thinking of those positivist synthesisers – Comte, Buckle and Nordau – how it represents 'history' as the 'science of thought'. This is not 'truth', for Blackmur, it is 'drama' – even melodrama.<sup>5</sup> The writers featured in this book, Thomas Hardy, George Gissing, H. G. Wells, Joseph Conrad, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf and others, dealt in different ways with this noisy, intrusive, public discursive practice: to listen to them addressing the world is to listen to how they dealt with its rhetorical configurations.

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On better acquaintance, it does become possible to talk about a text, 'arguing with the past', in Gillian Beer's phrase. This involves trying to recreate something of what Beer calls the 'hermeneutic circle of novel and first readers, the complexity of whose relations is written into the work'. For Beer, 'the presence of those voices (arguing, repeating, refusing, diversifying the range of the book's linguistic community)' makes for a 'fuller, more specific, and often more disturbing resonance to our reading now'.<sup>6</sup> In the reading and rereading of texts those voices reverberate, often unpredictably. To face head on the activity of degeneration in this period allows a way of testing the particular, local effectivity of these voices, and so of registering the pressure of that 'linguistic community'.

Historicising the text helps to reconstruct the effort writers make at writing within, alongside or, often, against the terms of discourse, consciously or unconsciously. While the question of 'influence' is rarely straightforward, I acknowledge the importance to writers of particular sources, the identification of which may help to clarify an interpretative question in the text. But of course influence can easily elude this empirical appeal to precise source and authority. In Beer's words 'profound habits of mind often leave only the slightest fossil traces within writing'.<sup>7</sup>

To hear the voices of influence in a text is to engage with its 'network of resistances', as Dominic LeCapra has it.<sup>8</sup> And of course within the network there may be a resistance from the author; the play of a polyvalent idea such as degeneracy can help to suggest what the author is repressing and how much can be allowed to show, or let slip. John Goode extends the point from poetry into history: like poetry, history 'needs to be *read*, transitively, like a dialogue'. But Goode goes on to say that 'its marks, its signs, like the signs motivated in literary texts, are veiled by the obscurity not merely of time but of domination and assimilation'.<sup>9</sup> To attend to the dialogue over degeneration in the text reveals both its resistance and its capitulation to the ideological engines which drive degenerationism into the utterance of 'truth', rather than 'myth'.

## II

Gissing is an interesting example of a writer whose novels capitulate (more wholeheartedly than one would like) before the forces of assimilation. Despite his insight into how the late Victorian cultural

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hegemony was sustained and how mainly marginal social groups were subjected to the processes of ideology (from his own marginal, unintegrated position), Gissing none the less holds out for models of biological essentialism which turn on his considerable investment in the 'natural'. For him, social classes are divided by 'natural antipathies'<sup>10</sup> (the phrase is from *Demos*), and in the psychopathology of Max Nordau spliced with Herbert Spencer, Gissing finds a convenient and serviceable short cut to the unresolved question of female 'nature' by reproducing, with considerable imaginative force, the teleology of the woman as index of a whole societal 'condition'.

There were few writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who were not vulnerable to the explanatory lure of forms of biological determinism. But Britain had little that could match the programmatic fictions of degeneration by naturalist writers on the continent. In France, the plots of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels were structured to demonstrate the power of inherited effects of pathologies acquired from the environment: alcoholism and mental disease led to crime and prostitution.<sup>11</sup> In Germany, authors like Voss and Kirchbach wrote plays about the 'ill-effects of degenerate parental behaviour'. Hauptmann's *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (*Before Dawn*) (1889), was a naturalistic study of the pathological degeneration of a peasant family – 'the first major statement in Germany on racial biology'.<sup>12</sup>

But scientific positivism did find its way into British fiction in much writing of the 1880s and nineties, drawing on the conventions of theatrical melodrama and sensationalist fiction. These works took on other kinds of shocking subject matter – mental instability, moral insanity, venereal disease and their threat to the sanctity and purity of marriage and family.<sup>13</sup> Writers such as 'Lucas Malet', R. L. Stevenson, Sarah Grand, Emma Frances Brooke assimilated the melodramatic and the hyperbolic for characteristically British didactic ends. The play of hyperbole, which, as Peter Brooks notes, makes 'the world morally legible, spelling out its ethical forces and imperatives in large and bold characters', has considerable relevance for the narratives of anxiety and fear, both in fiction and discursive writing, in the post-Darwinian period. For what is now 'legible' is the evidence of hereditary contamination, no less moral for being viewed through the lens of scientific rationalism. Science now competes for the right to display what Brooks calls 'the grand-

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ose moral terms of the drama' in which 'gestures within the world constantly refer us to another, hyperbolic set of gestures where life and death are at stake'.<sup>14</sup>

Gissing, Wells and Conrad, in their different ways, gained from post-Darwinian science resources for articulating consciousness under modern pressures. Hardy, as his notebooks show, was acutely attuned to the scientific debates and controversies from the 1870s to the late nineties. He was exceptionally sensitive to questions of heredity and its profounder mysteries, such as the interplay between the determining 'germ', and the indices of creative variability, playing through not just the lineaments but the character and destiny of the human subject. He worked both with and against the grain of these explanatory myths.

At the same time he accepted (albeit with increasing reluctance) the constraints placed upon him by editors, and resorted to strategies of subterfuge which allowed his texts to address controversial and sensitive themes – now advancing into dangerous territory, now withdrawing to more familiar ground – within the stages of composition and revision of the same novel, as he did in the writing and rewriting of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Hardy subjects his characters to all the forms of determinism needed to bring them into conformity with the contemporary discourse of heredity, without closing down the possibility of alternative readings by those who might understand the strategy of his writing: in both *Tess* and *Jude* determinism is ironically and painfully treated – internalised by his characters to offer an explicable myth for the inexplicability of their lives.

Hardy's achievement and challenge in his late fiction is to recuperate, from dominant discourses, alternative vantage-points from which the mythic component of these discourses can be weighed, so that from 'Mixer-Lane' in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, we see what was withheld or repressed in the 'darkest', 'outcast' London of the 1880s. Country and city, respectable and unrespectable, integrated and abject, 'fit' and 'unfit', 'nature' and 'society' – Hardy negotiated these oppositions through strategies of indirection, and yet (given the hegemony and power of the remit of these discourses of appropriation and control in the 1880s and nineties) the extent of Hardy's resistance commands considerable respect.

The fictional resources which Wells brought to evolutionary speculation in the last decade of the century prompt an extension or refinement of Kermode's distinction between myth-maker and

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fictionalist; Wells is so obviously an ambiguous, if rewarding, test-case. His 'fictions' of the nineties are never without their mythic element, and his 'myths', crystallised from new biological science and sociology, are neither pure science nor pure myth, and can only be, in a highly qualified sense, 'agents of change'. Wells understood with devastating clarity how post-Darwinian science was being used as a vehicle for what Lord Rosebery called the 'competition of the universe'. *The Time Machine* was his response to the facile progressivism and imperialism of the nineties. His use of degeneration, or of alien invasion, offers a speculative instrument for the penetration of late Victorian complacencies, but, at the same time, he colluded with the reader's understandable fascination with these bio-social myths – with his eye on the market-place.

Like Hardy, Conrad inhabits a post-Darwinian frame of reference, and was widely read in contemporary science; but his involvement with degeneration is paradoxical. He is attracted by the typologies of reversion and atavism, and by the strains of the pathological and criminal. Conrad sought out such ideas to arm himself with an authoritative scientific repertoire to explicate those states of mind which both fascinated and appalled him, but which precisely defied rational explanation. He sought a psychopathological clue to the inexplicable fact of the irrational, the transgressive, the evil.

In pursuit of the 'dark places' of the psyche, Conrad finds in Max Nordau's 'ego-mania' a serviceable idea which offers a provisional clue to the seductive plausibility of the men of defective 'nature'. With their powerful delinquency, their tenacious and charismatic malignity, they witness to what he called the 'eternal fitness of lies and impudence'.<sup>15</sup> These degenerate energies are reviled as 'other', because Conrad knows that they inhabit the civilised psyche too. The butcher and the criminal are uncomfortably close to home, even scandalously a requirement of the state with its evolving technologies of surveillance, control, law and order. This is a real advance towards the deconstruction of the *hubris* of turn-of-the-century apostles of progress, empire and conquest. But of course it is now a repertoire which he eventually, with precise irony, turns on the perpetrators of this positivism: in *The Secret Agent* it becomes the quarry in a supremely confident display of ironic gamesmanship: the game is cat and mouse, and the degenerationists are caught in the trap which the author neatly springs.

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So pervasive and seductive was the terminology of degeneration in this period that it was all but impossible to avoid: writers could be forgiven for resorting to its terms, even though, in other respects, their work serves notice on the value of its typologies. D. H. Lawrence, who is not a degenerationist but a primitivist, none the less keeps in circulation the small change of psychopathological diagnosis.<sup>16</sup> And Forster, even as he is contesting incorporation into the terms of degenerationist reductionism, uses a third-person narrator, or author-commentator, to pass off an unproblematic stock of commonsense, not liable to critical challenge.

The lure of degeneration sparkles in Forster's cult of uncorrupted yeoman stock, or in the 'morbidly' of a psychologically disturbed character like Helen Schlegel (a more complex creation than he realises). Yet Forster registers that those who pronounce on morbidity do so to keep their 'feminine' feelings at bay. It is – as for Conrad – a mask, to be worn against the suspicion of introspection and a besetting fear of consciousness, and mental breakdown. Forster's sure-footed exposure of the patriarchal fortress which harbours the imperial type (an underrated achievement of *Howards End*) brings out into the open the values of the Edwardian ruling-class male, and, for the first time, asks how the discourses of appropriation come to be wielded and why. Like Conrad before him and Woolf after him, Forster anticipates the Foucauldian idea that discourses of diagnosis are formidable coercive instruments of cultural and sexual power. Like Conrad, Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* subjects a discourse of control, as explained by her fictional doctors Holmes and Bradshaw, to corrosive irony. In their different ways, Conrad, Forster and Woolf permit the reader a resistant anger at the sufferings of victims of these late Victorian systems of containment. There is a clear line from Stevie to Helen Schlegel to Woolf's Septimus Smith; the doctors who oppress them symbolically represent systems of thought now suddenly rendered antiquated by war. But by 1925 the degenerationist way of looking at things was fast losing claim to serious attention. *Mrs Dalloway* is the first to fully comprehend and objectify the myths of degeneration: it is the last, in that no subsequent sophisticated fictional account could or would take degeneration seriously. By *Point Counter Point* (1928), Aldous Huxley allows it, po-faced, to play as one out of a cocktail of ideologies. It now offers only the insignia of an intellectual conviction, a rhetorical position to be taken up no more seriously than any other.



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A notable absentee from this study is Lawrence. In the context of degenerationism an important line has been crossed. The persistent grip of degeneration on late nineteenth-century culture derived essentially from the fear of what was repressed. It is the absence of that fear that marks Lawrence out as singular. This separates him from a major emphasis of degeneration – from the discourses of reversion and atavism, the ‘up-cropping’ of the ‘bestial’, the fear of the ‘other’ – which so preyed on the first and second generation of post-Darwinians. By embracing, in more or less idiosyncratic ways, the activity of the unconscious, the instinctual, the body, the primitive, Lawrence defused those particular sources of the ‘other’. In these respects he is unlike Hardy and Conrad, both of whom had more invested in late nineteenth-century positivism and Darwinism. Lawrence had less to lose, and so, perhaps, there was more that he could find. Conrad read primitivism from ‘within the stand-point of a moral civilization’, facing, but recoiling from the ‘destruction of the civilized self’, as Michael Bell puts it. But for Lawrence these were starting-points, which were developed in his later work: the primitive was not to be feared, but welcomed as permitting the ‘expanding and enriching of the . . . emotional life’.<sup>17</sup>

Yet there were also, less importantly, but more intractably, his negotiations with the typologies of race (from Gobineau and Houstean Chamberlain), with an attendant anti-semitism; his vision of ‘dissolution’, extinction and apocalypse, which, if eventually modernist property, had their origins in turn-of-the-century fears and phobias of decline and invasion.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, there is his Spencerian commitment to creative evolution,<sup>19</sup> his radical invasion of the territory of social Darwinist ‘force’, where (with Forster and Woolf) he pin-pointed its ideological foundations in industrialism, imperialism and patriarchy; above all, his diagnosis of the failure of vitality in the English body, not buried in the genes but in the ‘mechanical’.<sup>20</sup> Had Lawrence been writing a generation earlier, might not Clifford Chatterley have been a syphilitic, not a cripple, with Connie suffering the anxiety of hereditary taint, and Mellors her sympathetic ‘nerve-doctor’? Lawrence’s targets, twenty years later than Gissing and Hardy, were not so much biological as cultural and ‘spiritual’.

Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* can be read as penetrating so finely the primal error of degenerationism, in her treatment of the fate of Septimus Smith, as to prompt my hazarding that this novel is the

‘first and last fiction of degeneration’. In comparison with Woolf, Lawrence’s treatment of degeneration, centrally in *Women in Love*, belongs to a different imaginative dimension: the condition is absorbed into the larger prophetic theme of death and rebirth. The apocalyptic subsumes and transmutes the biological and hereditary essence of degenerationism. But that *Women in Love* accommodates and develops ‘degenerationist’ typologies and plots is amply demonstrated by David Trotter in his recent study.<sup>21</sup>

It is through the prism of historically and discursively embedded evidence that a way can be found of not ducking judgements about the resonance and sophistication of less canonical texts. While I did not start from this position, I have been confirmed in the view that what a particular writer does with an available discourse can constitute a test, not only of the defining angle of vision, but of its ‘truth’. I believe there is evidence enough to claim for the novelist, in this period, a role as critical, combative humanist – in the sense of having the insight to place certain values over others; of witnessing to the complex right of individuals to be themselves without having recourse to publically available labelling strategies with their simplistic appeal; of challenging the ‘typologising’ scientism of the sociologist or Darwinian propagandist.

In the fictions of Hardy, Conrad, Forster and Woolf, which, in various ways, take up the cudgels against the myths of degeneration, there is a commitment both to the complexities of human experience and to a concern with those sources of ideological power which shape the possibilities open to individuals: determinisms, not merely of biology, of course, but of money, class, status, education. By Kermode’s test, certain popular genre writers examined in this study, such as Warwick Deeping and John Buchan, do not measure up since they are not principally committed to using fiction to ‘find things out’. Theirs is another project: to reassert the conventional by the tried and trusted routes to readerly approval. While recent critics of genre fiction have been properly sceptical of reading off a whole set of beliefs or ideological programmes from such fictions,<sup>22</sup> the very transparency of such texts allows particularly direct access to a bedrock of ideology or of myth – whether of race, class or gender – active in a particular historical situation. We can hear in these fictions rhetorical strategies which, with narrative encouragement, re-present the tones and preoccupations of significant numbers of readers. No matter if this advances the argument out of literary into