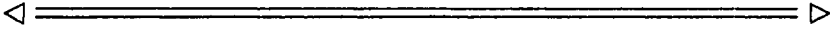


## 1



## Contexts

## INTRODUCTION

Pécuchet takes a gloomy view of the future of mankind.

Modern man had been diminished and has become a machine.

Final anarchy of the human race (Buchner, 1, ii).

Impossibility of peace (id).

Barbarity caused by excessive individualism and ravings of science.

Three hypotheses: 1. Pantheistic radicalism will break every link with the past, and inhuman despotism will result; 2. if theistic absolutism triumphs, the liberalism which has pervaded mankind since the Reformation will collapse, everything is overturned; 3. if the convulsions existing since the Revolution of 1789 continue endlessly between two outcomes, these oscillations will carry us away with their own strength. There will be no more ideal, religion, morality.

America will have conquered the world.

Future of literature.

Universal vulgarity. There will be nothing left but a vast working-class spree.

End of the world because heat runs out.

Bouvard takes rosy view of future of mankind. Modern man is progressing.

Europe will be regenerated by Asia. The law of history being that civilization goes from East to West – role of China – two branches of mankind will finally be merged.

Future inventions; means of travel. Balloon. Submarine boat with windows; always in calm waters, as the sea is only disturbed on the surface – It will be possible to see fish go by and landscapes at the bottom of the ocean. – Animals tamed – All kinds of cultivation. Future of literature (other side of industrial literature).

Future sciences – Control magnetic pull.

Paris is a winter-garden – fruit espaliers on the boulevards.

The Seine filtered and warm – abundance of artificial precious stones – lavish gilding – house lighting – light will be stored, because certain bodies have this property, like sugar, the flesh of certain molluscs and Bologna phosphorous. House façades will be compulsorily painted with the phosphorescent substance and their radiation will light up the streets.

Evil will disappear as want disappears. Philosophy will be a religion.

Communion of all peoples. Public holidays.

There will be travel to the stars – and when the earth is used up mankind will move over to the stars.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Flaubert, *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, pp. 286–7.

The plan for the ending of *Bouvard and Pécuchet*, the novel left unfinished by Flaubert on his death in 1880, includes that passage counterposing the evidence for and against 'progress', or rather, setting each up as the object of laughter and derision. What these notes, indeed, may suggest in the context of the novel, is the symbiotic fatuity and futility of either such given gloomy or rosy view of human history. If the passage had been drawn out by Flaubert, the hapless Bouvard and Pécuchet would no doubt have sought to flatten all contradictions and difficulties as they proceeded in their advocacy of absolute optimism or pessimism, ransacking the encyclopaedia and the newspaper, conflating a miscellany of historical and cultural images in the quest for a singular, definitive vision of change.

This study is an attempt to bring into focus and analyse key elements in the immense dictionary of received and contested ideas about degeneration in and beyond the mid nineteenth century. Although referring at various points to the nineteenth-century novel, the discussion is not primarily of fiction. The aim is to trace something of the culture, politics and language of degeneration across disciplines and forms. At the very moment of publication of *Madame Bovary* (1856), another writer in Rouen, Dr Bénédicte Augustin Morel, had been completing a *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine*. Published in 1857, it recorded a much wider unease at the direction of French history during the previous decade, but was in its turn to have a powerful influence in later-nineteenth-century psychiatry, criminology and anthropology, and across a very large range of social commentaries and debates. New discourses of degeneration, it will be argued, emerged during the nineteenth century and powerfully appealed to the natural sciences, particularly to evolutionary theory. The research offered here maps out various conceptions of atavism, regression, relapse, transgression and decline within a European context so often identified as the quintessential age of evolution, progress, optimism, reform or improvement.

My exposition is not centrally concerned with Literary Decadence and its innumerable lyrical laments and aesthetic discontents, nor twentieth-century modernist representations of culture as a wasteland or as a world which 'is, was and will be writing its own runes for ever',<sup>2</sup> but rather with the formation and dissemination of a medico-psychiatric and natural-scientific language of degeneration. What is attempted, in this necessarily highly selective study, is a recognition of the political complexity of the idea of degeneration, its over-determination and irreducibility to a single cause or origin. At the same time, I stress the historical specificity of the model of degeneration which, in the shadows of evolutionary naturalism,

<sup>2</sup> Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 19.

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inflected so much writing of the period. Contemporary fiction registered that wider social, scientific debate, sometimes challenging, sometimes simply assuming the stock assumptions of its language.

To take one example; even a socialist novel as critical of dominant ideologies and rationales for inequality as Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, published posthumously in 1914, assumed the socio-biological reality of degeneration: 'Under existing circumstances the community is degenerating mentally and physically because the majority cannot afford to have decent houses to live in.' Revolutionary transformation was indispensable, we are told, 'if we are to keep our old place in the van of human progress. A nation of ignorant, unintelligent, half-starved, broken-spirited degenerates cannot hope to lead humanity in its never-ceasing march onward to the conquest of the future.'<sup>3</sup> It is easy now to read over that reference, to miss the specific image of degeneration or to take it as an innocuous euphemism for poverty, disease, destitution, degradation and misery in general. Certainly the political solutions proposed for the problems of contemporary society by the speaker in the novel are in no way a fatalistic acceptance of the arrest of progress; nonetheless he has taken for granted notions about the degenerate and the process of degeneration which in themselves have complex and arguably ominous political implications. Part of the aim in this study is indeed to draw attention to the political, ideological and historiographical implications of that 'taken for granted' language.

I have subjected certain figures to especially close scrutiny: most notably Bénédict Augustin Morel (1809–73) and Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909). Each forms a point of focus in my survey of the interlocking languages of progress and degeneration. Both were doctors who wrote influentially on French and Italian society respectively. Lombroso appears on the face of it to have followed the direction of investigation into crime and madness opened up by Morel in the 1850s and his successor Magnan in the 1870s and 1880s, but there were important differences in nuance and emphasis which were not only the effect of the vagaries of each personal intellectual evolution (interesting though that was), but a consequence of the strikingly different discursive contexts in each country. The work of an English doctor, Henry Maudsley (1835–1918), is also discussed at some length and again I seek to suggest the specificity of the immediate socio-political concerns it addressed and symptomatised, as well as to indicate its place within wider shifts across late-nineteenth-century European thought.

The work which follows is divided into three sections. Part 1 looks in some detail at the intellectual career of Morel and then considers the

<sup>3</sup> *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, p. 472.

importance of hereditarian theory and *dégénérescence* in a variety of French writers such as Buchez, Taine, Le Bon, Sorel and Zola. It shows how Buchez's endorsement of *dégénérescence* in the 1850s related to the crisis of his Catholic-socialist faith in revolution and progress after 1848. But this is not to suggest the doctrine was the exclusive preserve of Catholics, progressives or disillusioned utopian socialists, and most especially not by the 1870s. Taine's history of the Revolution is used to consider the deployment of *dégénérescence* in an explicitly counter-revolutionary historiography after the crisis of France's military defeat in 1870–1871. The notion of inherited criminality and endemic social pathology can be found across the political spectrum in the troubled climate of the Third Republic. From Durkheim to Sorel the resonances of a medical model of degeneration and pathology can be felt, although in each case with a rather different inflection. I argue in my chapter on Zola that the great novelist of heredity and degeneration not only disseminates but also interrogates ideas about *dégénérescence* and medical authority. Zola declared that his writing 'mirrored' science. Too often, however, critics have simply accepted that view unreservedly. Thus the Rougon-Macquart cycle is seen as naively and narrowly faithful to a facile determinism and positivism. Instead, one can show how *Dr Pascal*, the final novel in the cycle, dramatises the contradictions, indeed even the disintegration, of the positivism which had hitherto partially structured Zola's own project.

My discussion describes a late nineteenth-century fascination with the ancestry and atavism of the crowd in Zola and Gustave Le Bon. It focusses on their common graphic representations of the mob as sexually degenerate 'avenger'. The dominant scene of degeneration, I suggest, was displaced from the individual (specific cretins, criminals, the insane and so on) and even the family (whose neuropathic strains were explored by Féré and Magnan) to society itself – crowds, masses, cities, modernity. But the nuances of the medico-psychiatric theory were still present and sometimes significantly productive in the social visions of new sciences of the crowd and elitist theories of 'civilisation and its discontents'.

Part II considers Cesare Lombroso and the formation of criminal anthropology in Italy. Concepts of atavism and degeneration articulated the horror of a largely northern Italian medical and scientific intelligentsia in the face of a fragmented and 'backward' countryside on the one hand, and, increasingly, by the perceived volatility and delinquency of urban populations. Again the politics of the Lombrosian school are complex and plural, as my account endeavours to suggest. The discussion of the international congresses of criminal anthropology which were held in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries analyses some discursive

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relations between Italian and French sciences of crime, and traces some of the differences between their respective conceptions of degeneration.

Part III begins with a brief discussion of certain late-nineteenth-century English fictions of crime and degeneration. I then consider the influence of, and the resistance to, criminological and psychiatric notions of degeneration and atavism in some key English social debates. The image of the 'habitual criminal' both in England and on the Continent was increasingly conceived through the language of degeneration. I argue that texts such as Goring's *The English Convict* (1913) which are often seen as the definitive environmentalist refutation of Lombrosianism in particular and Continental positivism in general, in fact opt only for a different brand of hereditarian theory. Existing work on degeneration in England has often focussed the question specifically with regard to institutional developments (there is no shortage of histories of the formation of the eugenics movement<sup>4</sup>) and the effects (or non-effects) of Continental positivism in English social theory and law.<sup>5</sup> These usually end by conceding that England was far more guarded in its response to the supposed need for 'social defence', perhaps because the state was so rarely decisively threatened. I discuss that point here, but also shift the ground by emphasising how a language of degeneration in fact informed much wider representations of culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The debate then appears more diffuse than on the Continent, less easily specified. But from the fear of 'Outcast London' in the 1880s to the disenchanted new-liberal perception of democracy, mass society and urban life around the turn of the century, social critique was powerfully inflected by biological theories of decline. The shared emphasis was on degeneration more than the degenerate, hence the difficulty of changing the law, imprisoning or institutionalising the 'problem'.

The constitution of a language of degeneration in and beyond the metropolitan crises of the 1880s was not simply a reflection of changes in London society, labour and politics. By describing certain aspects of the descent of evolutionary thought across the Victorian period, and emphasising the European-wide context of anxiety about degeneration, my argument suggests that the perception of urban 'pathology' was powerfully enhanced and shaped by a discourse which went much wider than the alarmist debate on the capital and its poor. Of course that language interacted with, and was inflected by, the particular economic and political situation of London society, but was not only a consequence of the immediate sense of crisis in the 1880s. My aim is to locate a shift in the very

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Radzinowicz and Hood, *Penal Policy*, pts. 1 and 4.

terms of social criticism from the early to the late-Victorian period, and, more specifically, the move towards a central preoccupation with the economy of the body and the social effects of its reproduction.

Each part offers a somewhat different chronology of degeneration, and traces specific features of its discursive rise, critique and apparent demise. To deal with the complex later-twentieth-century history and politics of socio-biology and evolutionism would involve different intellectual and social contexts from those which are here under discussion. This is not to say, however, that the images of *dégénérescence*, atavism, regression, do not have their resonances within the politics of science and the sciences of politics today.

There is now a significant and rapidly growing body of work on the politics of Darwinism.<sup>6</sup> Evolutionary theory, it has been made plain, must be understood historically; we can trace in Darwin's metaphors and narrative patterns, wider Victorian social concerns and fears. Darwinism was undoubtedly social, inextricably enmeshed in the language, politics, culture of a past.<sup>7</sup> We have now been convincingly shown that evolution has an extremely complex discursive genealogy irreducible to 'two family trees' (say, Darwin versus Spencer, Huxley versus Galton, good against bad, true against false, pure against impure).<sup>8</sup>

But whilst evolution is widely explored, very little critical historical attention has been paid until recently to the related nineteenth-century theme of degeneration. Somewhere along the line, degeneration had receded from view; it had slipped out of focus in the mainstream history of ideas, perhaps relegated to a footnote in literary criticism or brief mention in specialist histories of biology, psychiatry and criminology. Degeneration, once such a 'key word', became something of a lost word. Where discussed at all, it was characteristically confined within a narrowly defined exegesis of nineteenth-century psychiatry,<sup>9</sup> or else distanced from British culture and portrayed as primarily part of the history of Nazism.

In the last few years, however, several books have been published in the

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, many of the contributions to Kohn (ed.), *Darwinian Heritage*, an important recent collection of essays with extensive bibliographical notes.

<sup>7</sup> See Young, *Darwin's Metaphor*; 'Darwinism is social'; Beer, 'Plot and analogy'; *Darwin's Plots*; 'Darwin's reading'.

<sup>8</sup> See Kohn (ed.), *Darwinian Heritage*; Moore, 'Socialising Darwinism', (per.); Helfand, 'Huxley's "Evolution and ethics"'; Durant, 'Meaning of evolution', (diss.); 'Roots of sociobiology', (per.).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, the useful but entirely internalist discussion of degeneration in Ackernecht's *Short History of Psychiatry*, pp. 47–8.

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United States which begin to address the question of degeneration and provide a great deal of interesting material and discussion. Thus, for instance, Robert Nye has looked in considerable detail at French debates on 'national decline' during the Third Republic.<sup>10</sup> Gilman and Chamberlin have edited a collection of essays which document, albeit rather compartmentally, the fear of degeneration in a variety of fields: theatre, fiction, sociology, anthropology, biology, and so on.<sup>11</sup> What is offered in the present study is not only an exposition of figures and contexts inadequately dealt with in or largely beyond the scope of such existing work (Lombroso's criminal anthropology in Italy for example), but also a more sustained attempt to compare and contrast the language of degeneration in several different national contexts of debate. The aim is to focus more sharply than hitherto the terms of the language of degeneration; to provide some sense of historical periodisation; to trace important shifts in this conception during the second half of the nineteenth century and early part of the twentieth century. This research has involved the excavation and analysis of a large primary literature, but it also draws on the existing studies, biographical material, social histories of crime and madness, criminology and psychiatry in the period, and aims to draw out some of the available archival research of others into a wider discussion.

Degeneration was never successfully reduced to a fixed axiom or theory in the nineteenth century despite the expressed desire to resolve the conceptual questions once and for all in definitive texts. Rather it was a shifting term produced, inflected, refined, and re-constituted in the movement between human sciences, fictional narratives and socio-political commentaries. It is not possible to trace it to one ideological conclusion, or to locate its identification with a single political message. But it is perhaps possible to suggest something of the political range of its connotations.

Issues of language will be important in the present study; it will not be a matter of searching for the pure essence of a theory shorn of its figurative veils, but of seeking out the forms, oppositions and denials of a language inextricably bound up in metaphors and analogies, a language whose real, material 'objects' were variable and numerous, if never arbitrarily chosen. The term *dégénérescence*, after all, developed in a later-nineteenth-century European psychiatry 'obsessed' with the naming and fixing of conditions: disorders such as agoraphobia, claustrophobia, astrophobia, thastophobia, dipsomania, aboulia, kleptomania, algophilia, algophobia, satyriasis, nymphomania, necrophilia, onomatomania, coprolalia, *folie du doute*, arithmomania, pyromania, pyrophobia, exhibitionism, syphilophobia,

<sup>10</sup> Nye, *Crime*.<sup>11</sup> Gilman and Chamberlin (eds.), *Dark Side*.

nosophilia, nosophobia, necrophobia, thanatophobia,<sup>12</sup> might all embellish an expert diagnosis at the time. But although deployed by medical authorities, the terms were always slipping out of focus, leading into one another, crossing borderlines, signifying only another signifier. Nevertheless 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.

Many of these terms were first coined or brought to prominence in late-nineteenth-century Vienna by Richard Krafft-Ebing,<sup>13</sup> a famous contemporary of the young Freud and a keen admirer of Morel. But *dégénérescence* was more than just another mental condition to set alongside the others in an interminable *psychopathia sexualis*; it became indeed the condition of conditions, the ultimate signifier of pathology. *Dégénérescence* was thus perceived as the resolution to a felt imprecision of language and diagnosis. It served to anchor meaning, but paradoxically its own could never be fully stabilised, indeed was in doubt more than all the others; it explained everything and nothing as it moved back and forth between the clinic, the novel, the newspaper and the government investigation. It suggested at once a technical diagnosis and a racial prophecy. In short, it was a complex term. As Dr Cullerre complained in the *Annales médico-psychologiques* in 1895, the word was widely used but nobody was able to agree precisely on what it meant:

*Dégénérescence* is one of the most divisive problems amongst contemporary alienists . . . is it useful in the understanding of mental illnesses? . . . At the present time, such questions preoccupy not only congresses, but also books, the press, clinics . . . the quarrel turns as much on the words as on their contents; nobody agrees to speak the same language.<sup>14</sup>

But despite the sense of confusion and division about the scientific validity of degeneration which reached something of a crescendo in the 1890s, the term continued to be widely used or presumed as a virtual orthodoxy. The late nineteenth century was after all the age when, as Henri Ellenberger argues in his classic work, *The Discovery of the Unconscious*,

<sup>12</sup> For such terms and many others see the index to Féré, *Pathologie*, and Nordau, *Degeneration*.

<sup>13</sup> See Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

<sup>14</sup> Cullerre, *Difformités*, (per.), p. 52; see Tuke, *Dictionary*, 1, p. 332, 'There seems to be a danger of employing the term degeneration in so comprehensive a sense as to comprise forms of mental disorder under one head which differ widely in their form, their prognosis, and their treatment.' Also see Maudsley, 'Criminal Responsibility' (per.), p. 663: 'Has not the theory of degeneracy been somewhat abused of late? As used by Morel the term had scientific meaning and value; but of late much has been done to rob it of all definite meaning by stretching it out to cover all sorts and degrees of deviation from an ideal standard of feeling and thinking'.



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'almost all diagnostic certificates in French mental hospitals began with the words *dégénérescence mentale avec . . .*'.<sup>15</sup> In the decades after the Franco-Prussian War (1870–1), *dégénérescence* was indeed a fundamental term in the world of French psychiatry. And certainly by contrast, Ellenberger could never have written that there came a time when almost all diagnostic certificates in English mental hospitals began with the words 'mental degeneration with . . .'. But the term degeneration was picked up in Victorian psychiatry and in many other fields. I suggest below that the medico-psychiatric discourse inaugurated by Morel continually invoked some notion of the degenerate, a given individual whose physiognomic contours could be traced out and distinguished from the healthy. But degeneration also connoted invisibility and ubiquity – thus suggesting the inadequacy of traditional phrenology and physiognomy; it was a process which could usurp all boundaries of discernible identity, threatening the very overthrow of civilisation and progress. There were two overlapping conceptions at issue: one concerned with the degenerate and another with degeneration. English culture in the later nineteenth century, I suggest, did not question the possibility of degeneration, so much as the legal and political implications of distinguishing the degenerate outside society and the polity.

It will not be part of my aim to engage in any extended discussion of my theoretical approach and methodology – its efficacy and its limitations should be apparent in the course of the specific historical exposition and argument. Nevertheless, the word 'discourse' should be briefly situated at the outset. As a common term in modern critical theory, it has come to stress the idea of a movement to and fro of a given mode of language within historically specific boundaries. This is to emphasise the etymological root of the word, *discurrere*. Discourse here means more than the articulation of an argument, or the deployment of a set of rhetorical figures. It suggests rather the sense of a discursive space and thus of confines, horizons. There will inevitably be, as it were, 'blind-spots' in any discourse, places assumed or incorporated whilst in fact remaining unseen. Moreover, to persist with the optical metaphor, there will be areas of what is seen and of the process of seeing, which are so taken for granted at a given time as to be barely perceptible. The history which a discourse 'sites' (the pun is not superfluous for this certainly includes a selective process of seeing, positioning and referencing the past) will bear the traces of antecedents, but will also be founded upon the rejection and dissolution of other conceptions and narratives. Discourses are historical but generate different versions of what

<sup>15</sup> Ellenberger, *Discovery*, p. 281.

history means. This prompts certain questions in what follows here. When did degeneration become a social-scientific term? How can it be periodised? Above all, in the pursuit of whose desire or interests and in response to what historical contingencies, did the nineteenth-century discourse of degeneration seek to de-politicise itself altogether, through the signification of a stern and unyielding 'Nature'?

This study seeks to trace a particular cluster of themes, a crack, as it were, 'which runs zig-zag across the front of the House of Usher'.<sup>16</sup> It shows the common terms of a debate about degeneration and stresses simultaneously the irreducibility of the various discussions: hence in tracing the constitution of the language of degeneration, I emphasise wider perceptions about revolutionary and counter-revolutionary inheritance in France, post-unification politics in Italy, and, in the case of England, the convergence of a supposed crisis of the city as a viable system, with deep conservative and liberal fears of socialism, democracy and 'mass society'. These did not constitute exclusive preoccupations; moreover there were many overlaps between them. My claim is not that, in some simple way, these alone can be proved to have been determining 'in the final instance', but rather that these are crucial, and in some cases now crucially neglected, emphases. I describe how certain narratives of history were construed in the development of each theory of degeneration. Clearly my analysis seeks to trace not simply what the authors declared to be the subject-matter of their discourse (too often the limitation imposed by traditional 'histories of ideas'), but also the images and narrative sequences which haunted their writing – the skeletons in the cupboard as well as the skulls on the laboratory table. Or rather something of the terrors and desires which in part produced this 'science' of skulls, bodies and ancestors. Lombroso after all was actually to 'see' his mother return from the dead, conjured by a spiritualist medium, as though to challenge the naturalist terms in which decade after decade he had studied the problem of heredity in his motherland.<sup>17</sup>

There were always 'ghosts' in the writing of our authors, to be glimpsed not only in the margins of their 'formal' ideas, but in the constant and anxious displacement and merging of conceptions one into another, even as the texts insisted on their scrupulous singularity, objectivity and detachment. There were unconscious levels of the discourse never successfully repressed in this Victorian construction of 'impersonality'; degeneration constituted an impossible endeavour to 'scientise', objectify and cast off whole underworlds of political and social anxiety. *Is not Dr Jekyll and Mr*

<sup>16</sup> I take the phrase from Praz, *Romantic Agony*, p. xi. Praz in turn is referring to Poe's tale.

<sup>17</sup> See the concluding pages to part II below.