

Science, Drugs and Occultism: Aleister Crowley, Henry Maudsley and Late-nineteenth Century Degeneration Theories

Justin Sausman

Science and the Occult in the late-nineteenth century

This article examines the relations between two cultural movements of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: theories of degeneration that predicted evolutionary regression, and the interest in occultism, especially in relation to psychological research and ritual magic. I will show how questions of pathology, of marking out a boundary between the human and non-human, the progressive and the degenerative, are key concerns of these movements, and that this also marks out the boundary between the scientific and non-scientific. Both theories of degeneration and the occult might be seen as pseudo-sciences, drawing on scientific authority in order to give legitimacy to non-scientific content. However, this term suggests a clearly marked boundary between science and other discourses that is now being questioned, emphasising instead that historically shifting centres of science are always being contested by more marginal theories, as Alex Warwick has put it:

If the creation of a new science is owed simply to the systematic identification of a new object of study, its coming into existence should be relatively straightforward, but what emerges alongside the 'new' science is a simultaneous uncertainty about what constitutes a delimited or even legitimate object of study.¹

This uncertainty about the object of study suggests that a newly emerging science might also need to engage in wider debates in order to establish its claim to legitimacy. I want to stress here the network of debates that surround these two marginal sciences, following Bruno Latour's view that "science – in quotation marks – does not exist. It is the name that has been pasted onto certain sections of certain networks."² I will be examining the ways in which occultism, degeneration and evolutionary theories interact in order to claim scientific legitimacy, by identifying and reversing the trends of evolutionary regression. These themes will be examined through the textual encounter between two key representatives of these theories, the psychologist Henry Maudsley and the ritual magician Aleister Crowley, staged in his 1922 novel *Diary of A Drug Fiend*.

Theories of degeneration applied evolutionary theory in reverse to cultural formations, Max Nordau (1849-1923) predicting the dusk of nations, the gradual regression of entire nations to a more primitive state. This drew upon the work of the criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), who measured the bodily features of criminals, in order to show that they all displayed common marks that departed from an implicit norm, and that these were inherited features. In these works the degenerate

¹ Alex Warwick, 'Margins and Centres.' *Repositioning Victorian Sciences: Shifting Centres in Nineteenth-Century Scientific Thinking*, ed. David Clifford, Alex Warwick, Elisabeth Wadge, Martin Willis. London: Anthem Press, 2006, 3.

² Bruno Latour. *The Pasteurization of France*. Trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988, 216.

is requested by such figures as the homosexual, the hysteric, the drug addict and the occultist, whereby social problems are seen in biological terms. These theories have been extensively studied, and it has become an influential paradigm through which the late-nineteenth century is read. Kelly Hurley's *The Gothic Body* examines these theories in relation to Gothic fiction, with its images of "a body metamorphic and undifferentiated."³ She sees the root of this in Darwinian evolutionary theory, which destabilises the notion of the human as a unique pinnacle of creation, showing the shared origins of human and animal. The body here becomes a site of crisis; the more that it is subject to the increasing advances in scientific knowledge, the more it becomes a site where the human loses uniqueness and slips further down the evolutionary tree, instituting both individual and national crisis.

For Nordau, occultism was a symptom of this crisis, one that is characterised by "inexplicable relations between distinct phenomena and ambiguous formless shadows."⁴ The late-nineteenth century saw the proliferation of occult societies and publications, expanding on the popular Victorian spiritualist movement that had originated in America during the 1840s. The Society for Psychical Research, set up to investigate spiritualism on a scientific basis, was founded in 1882, and included among its members the physicists William Barrett and Oliver Lodge, the philosopher Henry Sidgwick, classical scholar Frederic Myers and psychologist William James. The society became increasingly interested in the psychological underpinnings of mediumship, and speculated on a subliminal consciousness that would explain spirit communications, an idea that was seen as an alternative to the Freudian unconscious.⁵ The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was formed in 1888 to teach occult science to initiates through the practice of ritual magic. It drew on Kabala, alchemy and Hermetic magic, and promised to bring about the spiritual regeneration of modern man.⁶ It attracted high profile members, its most famous being W.B. Yeats, and the order's influence on his writing has been well established.⁷ It also included Moina Bergson, sister of the philosopher, who married Samuel MacGregor Mathers, one of the founders, and Aleister Crowley, who was initiated in 1898. Crowley later fell out with other members, and set up a rival group, the Argenteum Astrum, in 1907, and began to publish a periodical, *The Equinox*, which created controversy by publishing some of the secret rituals of the Golden Dawn. Alex Owen has suggested that these societies represented a move towards a more structured, scholarly or scientific investigation of occult ideas compared to the spiritualist movement of the earlier nineteenth century:

In certain respects the 'new' occultism represented a somewhat elitist counterpoint to the hugely successful Victorian spiritualist movement that had preceded it. [...] There was an implicit understanding that it was learning,

³ Kelly Hurley. *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin-De-Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 3.

⁴ Max Nordau. *Degeneration*. 1892. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1968, 57.

⁵ For the history of Psychical Research see Alan Gauld. *The Founders of Psychical Research*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968.

⁶ For the history of the Golden Dawn see R.A. Gilbert. *Revelations of the Golden Dawn*. London: Quantum, 1997.

⁷ See George Harper Mills. *Yeats' Golden Dawn*. London: Macmillan, 1974.

rather than the less predictable mediumistic ‘gifts,’ that underwrote the new spirituality.⁸

It is important to note that these different practices and beliefs of the occult field do not form a unified body: their magical doctrines drew on an eclectic mix of Eastern and Western esotericism, and ritual magicians were frequently hostile to spiritualism. Crowley defined magic as “the science and Art of causing change to occur in conformity with Will.”⁹ Ritual magic sought to change the perceived world and consciousness through focusing on ritual acts that would heighten the will, often invoking the powers of ancient pagan gods to aid this process. Crowley and other ritual magicians saw themselves as recovering a forgotten scientific knowledge, lost in the process of becoming modern, that could be used for mundane purposes, such as generating money, or for the more ambitious one of the spiritual regeneration of the human. In contrast, spiritualist mediums claimed to contact the spirits of the dead through surrender of the will, allowing the spirits to speak through them via automatic speaking or writing, or to appear as phantom limbs or ghosts. Whereas magic sought to recover ancient traditions, psychical research sought to uncover newly emerging forces on the body, as evidence that the spiritual world was becoming gradually accessible. Nevertheless, these diverging trends shared certain similarities, most notably a belief that their projects would bring about new kinds of knowledge that would overthrow the scientific materialism of the nineteenth century and bring about the evolution of the human body beyond its current limits. Having very briefly set out the background of the occult field, the remainder of this article is divided into three sections: the first considers how psychical researchers saw their project in terms of theories of evolution; the second examines Maudsley’s condemnations of the occult as degenerate; and the third interrogates Crowley’s engagement with Maudsley and the regeneration of the human that it promises.

Evolution

Writers in the occult field in the late-nineteenth century set out to make connections between Darwinian evolutionary theory and their own investigations, arguing that the phenomena of psychical research were evidence of newly emerging powers of the human body. They set out to appropriate the language of degeneration, arguing that the deformations of the body seen in the production of phantom limbs were evidence of new natural forces, not abnormal pathological symptoms. Frederic Myers argued:

The nervous system itself is probably tending in each generation to become more complex and more delicately ramified. As is usual when any part of an organism is undergoing rapid evolutive changes, this nervous progress is accompanied with some instability. Those individuals in whom the hereditary or the acquired change is the most rapid are likely also to suffer from this *peturbation which masks evolution* – this occasional appearance of what may be termed ‘nervous sports’ of a useless or even injurious type.¹⁰

⁸ Alex Owen. *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in late-nineteenth century England*. London: Virago, 1989, 4-5.

⁹ Aleister Crowley. *Magick in Theory and Practice*. 1929. New York: Dover, 1976, xxii.

¹⁰ Frederic Myers. *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*. 2 vols. London: Longmans & co. 1903, 93. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Myers here seems to run together two theories, that of evolution and neurasthenia: he seems to suggest that modernity has become more complex, leading to what appears a failure of nervous energy, a condition originally outlined in George Beard's *American Nervousness* (1881). But he also argues that this is only a temporary disturbance, that in fact what psychical research is promoting is an evolutionary leap forward. Hence, he argues that spirit messages "are likely at first to be misinterpreted, and to create an impression of pain or strangeness where, in my view, there is nothing beyond wholesome effort in the normal course of evolution among both incarnate and disincarnate men" (255-56).

The physicist Oliver Lodge, another key member of the Society for Psychical Research, who in the wake of the First World War became an ardent spiritualist himself, investigated the Italian medium Eusapia Palladino in 1894, and refused to pathologise her body as in any way degenerate:

This appearance as of extra limbs is so prominent a feature that actual physical malformation of the medium has been suggested to account for them. But I have authority to say that she has been medically examined, and I know that Mrs Sidgwick and Mrs Lodge took pains to assure themselves that there was nothing whatever abnormal about her external configuration.¹¹

In fact Lodge moves away from seeing her in biological terms at all, suggesting instead that Palladino is an advanced piece of scientific apparatus, a laboratory experiment where new traces of evolution can be discovered:

She is an instrument whose ways and idiosyncrasies must be learnt, and to a certain extent humoured, just as one studies and humours the ways of some much less delicate piece of physical apparatus turned out by a skilled instrument maker. (324)

In the views of both Lodge and Myers, there is nothing contrary to the idea of evolutionary progress in occult phenomena; and there is nothing anti-scientific in the study of them. The most direct example of a positive embrace of both evolutionary theory and the occult is provided by Alfred Russel Wallace, Darwin's co-theorist of natural selection, and an ardent spiritualist. Wallace saw man's creative or moral abilities (which seemed to serve no evolutionary purpose) as evidence of his spiritual nature:

The special faculties [...] clearly point to the existence in man of something which he has not derived from his animal progenitors, something which we may best refer to as being of a spiritual essence or nature, capable of progressive development under favourable conditions.¹²

¹¹ Oliver Lodge, 'Experience of Unusual Phenomena Occurring in the Presence of an Entranced Person (Eusapia Palladino): Report to the President and Council of the S.P.R.' *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 6 (November 1894) 306-360, 321. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

¹² Alfred Russel Wallace. *Darwinism*. London: Macmillan 1889, 474.

Indeed Darwin had been sufficiently disturbed by the claims of spiritualism to attend a séance in 1874, although afterwards he declared it to be trickery.¹³ It should also be noted that two of the key figures of degeneration theories, Nordau and Lombroso, later came to embrace spiritual beliefs themselves. In the late 1890s Nordau underwent a conversion to Zionism,¹⁴ while Lombroso, to whom Nordau had dedicated *Degeneration*, rejected his earlier materialist position after investigating Eusapia Palladino, thus bringing to an end his “indefatigable pursuit of a lifetime to defend the thesis that every force is a property of matter and the soul is an emanation of the brain”.¹⁵ Occultism and mysticism here seem to haunt degeneration, suggesting a corrective to its diagnosis of regression. Yet, as the next section will explore, Henry Maudsley, a representative of degeneration theories, attacked occult beliefs as having no part in the process of evolution, or the science that would explain it.

Degeneration

Henry Maudsley (1835-1918) was a key figure in Victorian psychology, editor of the *Journal of Mental Science* from 1863-1878, and founder of the Maudsley Hospital in South London for the treatment and research of psychiatric illness. He was a proponent of psychophysiology, viewing psychological states as symptoms of underlying physiological conditions, so that, as Bruce Haley puts it “a truly psychophysical concept of health evolved, [...] The immediate cause of chronic disease was their failure in a physical sense, but their predisposing condition was their failure in a mental or moral sense.”¹⁶ Maudsley was also a key theorist of degeneration, seeing mental pathology as both symptom and cause of evolutionary regression, as he pessimistically puts it: “There is a broad and easy way of dissolution, national, social or individual, which is the opposite of the steep and narrow way of evolution.”¹⁷

The anthropologist Edward Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* (1871) had argued that spiritual beliefs were survivals, remainders of civilised man’s primitive origins. Agreeing with this view, Maudsley associated spiritual beliefs with the degenerate body, arguing that “in all places and at all times abnormal states of the nervous system, morbid and artificial, in which sense is thrilled in ecstasy, have been esteemed ways of communication with the supernatural.”¹⁸ This pathological condition meant that man began to regress to a more primitive state: “The belief is really a reversion to the old belief of ignorant folk among whom spirits and ghosts abounded; an example of the revival or recrudescence of a still-surviving superstition, not a new conquest of scientific thought” (*Natural Causes*, 84).

¹³ See Roger Luckhurst, ‘Demon Haunted Darwinism.’ *New Formations* 49 (2003) 124-35, see 127-8.

¹⁴ See Todd Samuel Presner, “‘Clear Heads, Solid Stomachs and Hard Muscles’: Max Nordau and the Aesthetics of Jewish Regeneration.’ *Modernism/Modernity*. 10:2 (April 2003) 269-96, and Michael Stanislawski. *Zionism and the Fin-de-Siècle: Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism from Nordau to Jabotinsky*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.

¹⁵ Cesare Lombroso. *After Death - What? Spiritistic Phenomena and their Interpretation*, trans. by William Sloane Kennedy. Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1909, 1. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

¹⁶ Bruce Haley. *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978, 45. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

¹⁷ Henry Maudsley, ‘Lessons of Materialism.’ *A Selection of Lectures Delivered Before the Sunday Lecture Society, Fourth Selection*. London: Sunday Lecture Society, 1886, 15. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

¹⁸ Henry Maudsley. *Natural Causes and Supernatural Seemings*. 1886. London: Watts, 1939, 93. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

Maudsley believed that spiritualism, which he here takes to mean not just the actual practices of mediumship, but a general philosophical outlook that would also include orthodox religions, turns away from the body to emphasise an intangible spirit, whereas materialism teaches “not to despise and call unclean the last and best work of his Creator’s hand” (“Lessons of Materialism”, 11). Hence he also rejects the idea of sin, suggesting instead that when confronted with a criminal, one should diagnose illness: “There is no question in such case of moral guilt; it is not sin but disease we are confronted with” (“Lessons of Materialism”, 7). Maudsley’s view here makes psychology a biological process, and while it may seem to liberate man from questions of wrongdoing, it simply substitutes the idea of disease, refusing to investigate any social causes of criminality.

With the mind and body intimately linked, belief could thus have a direct physical effect. Along with other nineteenth century psychologists, Maudsley saw will and self-restraint as central to human health or pathology, and thus took a dim view of occult beliefs that involved surrendering the conscious personality to outside forces. Bruce Haley has described the importance that psychologists attached to this idea as promoting “a belief in the special dignity of man and his moral nature. Without the will the mind has no self-sustaining power, no special identity, no health apart from the body’s health” (40). In contrast to the idea that man will keep evolving into a higher spiritual state – an idea shared by many groups across the occult field – Maudsley argues that of all spiritual beliefs “none is perhaps more wildly irrational than that of a complete regeneration of human nature and the coming of a perfect transformation scene on the troubled earth”.¹⁹ These criticisms of spiritualism were not confined to theory: Maudsley was responsible for the confinement of a medium in his asylum during the 1870s.²⁰

Indeed, even spiritualism’s supporters could use the language of degeneracy when describing their beliefs. Lombroso described Eusapia Palladino, who had been responsible for his conversion to spiritualism, in terms that mark her out as a hysteric:

We must not forget that Mme. Eusapia is a neuropath; that in her childhood she received a blow in the left parietal bone, which produced a hole so deep that you could put your finger in it; that she remained subject to attacks of epilepsy, catalepsy, and hysteria. (150)

The views of Lombroso, despite his outright support for spiritualism, seem to place Palladino as a *fin-de-siècle* degenerate, her body displaying the signs of the hysteric, making a direct link between the spiritual, psychological and physical.

However, although Maudsley defines these beliefs as a pathological symptom, he also suggests that there is no way in which they can be cured, and that degeneration is an inevitable result of becoming too civilised: “When the organism – individual, social, or national – has reached a certain state of complex evolution it

¹⁹ Henry Maudsley, ‘Materialism and Spiritualism.’ *The Journal of Mental Science* 63:263 (October 1917), 494.

²⁰ See Owen, *The Darkened Room*. 183-8

inevitably breeds changes in itself which disintegrate and in the end destroy it.”²¹ The body is here pitted against civilisation: the biological will undermine the cultural. However, Maudsley’s degeneration is not actually a sliding back down the evolutionary scale. Instead it is “the transformation of it into a new or abnormal kind; a kind which, incapable of rising in the scale of development, tends naturally to sink lower and lower” (*Body and Will*, 241). Maudsley here uses the same argument as Myers, but with a negative interpretation: the neuroses of modernity are evidence not of newly emerging powers, but of the dissolution of the human. This ends up in a circular movement: man is the end-point of evolution, but his very development means that he is doomed to produce new and abnormal varieties of the human, thus losing his position at the centre of creation. In future it may be that:

a higher race of beings sprung from man and releasing his loftiest ideals shall supplant him; but even if these visions of devout imagination become facts they will only be the steps of a progress that lead progress so much nearer its grave. (*Body and Will*, 317)

For Maudsley there can be no progress beyond the current state, no regeneration beyond the degenerate, but only the constant regression to more primitive forms of life: modernity itself is pathological.

Maudsley’s views define the pathology of spiritual beliefs in two ways. Firstly, those who claim to have direct contact with spirits are placed outside of the range of the normal, healthy human. Secondly, this also reflects on modes of knowledge that claim to study these phenomena scientifically. They are made into pathological disciplines, standing outside the range of normal scientific enquiry, being instead a distortion of reality, and a regression to irrational modes of belief. Psychical researchers had defended spiritualism against charges of degeneracy by arguing that the abnormal occurrences of the séance were evidence of evolution. Maudsley argued that they were evidence of degeneration. These two strategies are thus directly opposed, and might seem to lead to a kind of stalemate. Aleister Crowley, however, pursues a third strategy: rather than directly opposing Maudsley and degeneration theories, he appropriates him as part of his magical project.

Regeneration

Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) was (and is) a notorious figure in occult circles, and was described in 1924 as “the wickedest man in the World” (Suster).²² He is a pervasive cultural presence, having appeared in W. Somerset Maugham’s *The Magician* (1908), Anthony Powell’s *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951) and as one of the faces on The Beatles *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). Crowley’s life has been recounted in several biographies, and his followers have produced works interpreting his magical system, yet he, along with the field of ritual magic in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have only recently begun to

²¹ Henry Maudsley. *Body and Will: Being an Essay Concerning Will in its Metaphysical, Physiological and Pathological Aspects*. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench & Co., 1883, 238-9.

²²Gerald Suster. *The Legacy of the Beast: The Life and Work of Aleister Crowley*. London: W H Allen, 1988, 85.

the subject of academic investigations focusing on psychological, scientific, and literary histories of the period.²³

Crowley wrote two novels, *Moonchild* (1917) and *Diary of a Drug Fiend* (1922), a large number of poems (in a traditional style when compared to contemporary modernist experiments) and is well known for his extensive magical writings, often written in dense mystical aphorisms. Crowley's magical motto was "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law". While this sounds a justification for anarchy, in fact Crowley always stressed that this meant the finding and development of one's inner will and self, a view that places him in continuity with psycho-physiologists such as Maudsley.

The aim here is not to trace elements of Crowley's life and magical writings in *Diary of a Drug Fiend*, but to read it in terms of the debates over evolution, occultism and pathology set out above. This will also suggest a different reading of Crowley's ritual magic from that suggested by Alex Owen, who sees his magical experiments as mirroring the contours of modern psychological theories that suggest the contingency of subjectivity, its ability to take on aspects of other personalities and genders.²⁴ Instead, I will suggest a version of Crowley's magic that insists on the importance of disciplined, healthy bodies and correct gender roles as essential for national efficiency.

Diary of a Drug Fiend describes the descent of an English nobleman, Sir Peter Pendragon and his wife Lou into cocaine and heroin addiction, eventually overcoming this by finding their inner will, led by Basil King Lamus, a fictionalised and idealised portrait of Crowley himself. That Crowley is concerned with questions of national progress and degeneration is suggested by the name of Pendragon, showing a lineage with the mythical kings of Britain: what is at stake is not just the health of one individual, but that of the nation. Crowley is suggesting that his project be viewed as a contribution to political and social discourses, not taken as questions of esoteric spirituality. The immediate inspiration for the novel would seem to be what Crowley calls the "diabolical dope act," the Dangerous Drugs Act of 1920, which for the first time regulated the trade in cocaine and heroin.²⁵ Crowley wants to suggest that this legislation is unnecessary, as it restricts the ability of man to discover his true will: his magical system is thus set up as a therapeutic discourse. The slightly more mundane interpretation would be that Crowley, a lifelong heroin addict, is inconvenienced by the new law himself, and that his magical system, in his own case, did not work: he remained addicted until his death, needing ever larger doses to satisfy his cravings.

The problem set by the novel is that of the post-First World War world, where ideals of progress have been destroyed; Pendragon himself has been a war pilot, and at the beginning of the novel is profoundly depressed: "It's a disease of civilization. We're in an intermediate stage between the stupor of the peasant and – something that

²³ Two recent studies that focus on Crowley and the broader field of occultism, science and psychology are Mark S. Morrisson, *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007 and Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004.

²⁴ See Owen, *Place of Enchantment*. 186-220.

²⁵ For a recent investigation into this act see Toby Seddon, 'The Regulation of Heroin: Drug policy and Social Change in Early Twentieth-Century Britain.' *International Journal of the Sociology of Law* 35:3 (2007) 143-156.

is not yet properly developed.”²⁶ Crowley here seems to combine both the attitude of Maudsley’s theory of degeneration that saw modernity as pathological, and the occult field’s optimism that man will evolve into a higher state. Pendragon is essentially rich and bored, and turns to drugs as a way of stimulating interest in his life. Like Oliver Lodge’s view of mediums as scientific instruments, Pendragon views his drugged body as a laboratory where scientific advance can take place, insisting “on our regarding ourselves as pioneers of science and humanity. We were making an experiment; we were risking life and reason for the sake of mankind” (190).

The pleasures of cocaine are seen by Pendragon as healthy, emphasising the purity of the body: “One is bounding with health and bubbling with high spirits. [...] And yet this excitement is singularly calm and profound. There is none of the suggestion of coarseness which we associate with ordinary drunkenness” (48). This purity of vision leads to a heightened consciousness, evolving into a superhuman state: “It was as if we had acquired a totally new mental faculty as superior to the normal course of thought as the all-comprehending brain of the great man of science is to that of a savage” (88). This is expressed in terms that are reminiscent of the degeneration theories of the *fin de siècle*: the taking of drugs allows users to make an evolutionary leap forward, comfortably distancing them from the primitive. This finally results in the belief that individual boundaries have been transcended: “We had sprung in one leap to be coterminous with the Universe” (118). They seem to leave the boundaries of the individual body behind, everyday perception dulling in comparison to the new world they have become part of: “With H[eroin] or C[ocaine], there is never a dull moment; without them the hours drag. It’s difficult to read or write. My eyes won’t focus properly. They have been open to the spiritual world, they can’t see anything else” (226). Here the corporeal effects of drugs are the means to spiritual perception: occultism seems not so much a flight from the body as a way of transforming or sublimating corporeal experience into mystical insights.

Having believed they have ascended to the superhuman they then descend back down the evolutionary scale, in terms that clearly evoke anxieties about degeneration:

The toil of countless generations of evolution had been undone in a month. We still preserved, to a certain extent, the conventions of decency; but we knew that we did so only from ape-like cunning. We had reverted to the gorilla. (120)

The body, previously the medium of spiritual progress, is now the measure of their degeneracy: “H.[eroin] makes one want to scratch, and scratching is infinite pleasure. But that is only a relic of animal appetite” (171). It is at this point that Lamus, who has been reviled throughout the book, is turned to for help. He suggests their addiction is not simply a personal failing, but is a symptom of modernity, in the same terms that Maudsley regarded the inevitability of degeneration:

Just as the Roman Empire began to break down when it became universal, when it was so large that no individual mind could grasp the problems which

²⁶ Aleister Crowley. *Diary of a Drug Fiend*. 1922. New York: Weiser, 1971, 7. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

it postulated, so to-day, the spread of vulgar education and the development of facilities for transport have got ahead of the possibilities of the best minds. The increase in knowledge has forced the thinker to specialise, with the result that there is nobody capable to deal with civilisation as a whole. (251)

Democracy is here called into question; in contrast to psychical researchers' desire to distribute new knowledge through scientific networks, Crowley's magic is restricted to an elite that are able to synthesise the knowledge of separate disciplines. The comparison of the fall of the Roman Empire to the contemporary British Empire was another common trope of theories of degeneration, drawing on Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), and the link with degeneration is made explicit when we are told that Lamus had studied insanity under Henry Maudsley. (252)

In his autobiography Crowley claims he met Maudsley aboard a ship in 1904, where they discussed Eastern Yogic practices of meditation, which in Crowley's view "remove the inhibitions which repress the manifestations of genius or [...] enable one to tap the energy of the universe".²⁷ In Crowley's view Maudsley "fitted in exactly. He was the very man I wanted," and that "Maudsley – rather to my surprise – agreed with all these propositions, but could not suggest any plausible line of research" (386). It is of course entirely possible that this encounter never took place – Crowley was fond of making outlandish claims, so anything he writes should be treated with suspicion. Indeed, given Crowley's own addiction it seems unlikely that Maudsley, who saw the drug addict as a "miserable specimen of degradation, of moral feeling and of impotence of will," would have had much sympathy for him (*Lessons of Materialism*, 7) Nonetheless, the historical accuracy here is perhaps less important than the textual encounter that Crowley stages between them.

Perhaps surprisingly Crowley agrees with Maudsley that "any state of mind is accompanied by a corresponding state of the body" and wonders why exalted spiritual states cannot be created through the methods of modern science: "why then should we not be able to devise some pharmaceutical, electrical or surgical method" (386). The magical and the technological are here complementary ways to accelerate the progress of humanity, rather than opposing theories. Crowley sums up his position as an attempt to find a middle way between science and the occult:

I had been forced into the awkward position of having to be ready to go to the stake with Maudsley, Ray Lankester and Haeckel [...] as against religious superstition, and yet to attack their conclusions with the utmost vehemence in the interests of the impregnable spiritual position which I had built. (314)

In order to stake out a claim for magic as a therapeutic, socially useful science, Crowley shows it as engaging on the same terms as Maudsley's degeneration. Rather than directly opposing the idea of evolutionary regression, Crowley suggests his magic can use the link made by Maudsley to ensure the continued evolution of the human and its political advancement.

²⁷ Aleister Crowley. *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autobiography*, ed. John Symonds and Kenneth Grant. 1929. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, 386. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

This is clearly seen at the conclusion of the novel, where the action moves to Lamus' Mediterranean island retreat, which is a fictional version of Crowley's own magical retreat, the Abbey of Thelema – ancient Greek for will, and the name of Crowley's magical system. Here Pendragon and Lou embrace a primitive existence; not one that is degenerate, but rather is healthy in its simplicity, exemplified in the description of the local wine, in contrast to the cocktail of champagne, cocaine and heroin on which they have previously lived: "There was a sort of vitality in it. It was primitive, like all the arrangements of the Abbey, but the freshness and naturalness of everything made more than amends even to our cultivated palates" (315). The regime at the Abbey also includes rock climbing and football, so that the importance of the disciplined and trained body in the occult field is apparent.

The novel concludes with the discovery of their true wills, resulting, somewhat idealistically, in the conquering of their physical addictions, and they become once more fit political and gendered subjects. However, although a new subjectivity emerges, this psychological re-birth continues to address the concerns of technology, national efficiency, and physical degeneration that have been prevalent throughout the novel, suggesting that even at its moment of triumph the emergence of a magical self still depends upon materiality. Pendragon recalls that prior to his addiction he was designing a helicopter, and the magical and technological emerge together in this rediscovery of his true will: "The true 'I' was the mathematician and engineer working on the helicopter, and the interval had been an elaborate nightmare" (342). The magical will here is marshalled in the service of industrial efficiency, allowing Pendragon to take his place in the lineage of warrior kings that his name suggests. Although he has thus escaped the clutches of degeneracy to take his rightful place at the vanguard of technological development, the degeneration paradigm is itself still affirmed, as Lamus showed him how "my heredity, my natural inclination and the solution of my crisis, all pointed to the same thing" (355). Here the designing of helicopters is naturalised, given a genetic basis, so that ultimately the cultural is still seen in terms of the biological.

Meanwhile Lou's true will is the discovery that she is to serve and help Pendragon, so that the magical is here used in the service of normalising gender relations, rescuing Lou from the pathological status of the sexually liberated, hedonistic female degenerate to that of the angel in the house:

I stopped taking heroin only because I had to fit myself to help you to do your will. That is my will. [...] I'm going to keep this place in order for you and assist you as best I can in your work. (356)

The occult superhuman that Crowley's system evolves is one that will contribute to the technological progress of the nation, while ensuring that troublesome women stay firmly in their place. The fears of degeneration are thus finally accepted, whilst Crowley suggests that he can provide a way to reverse this. However, when the novel is compared to Crowley's own magical theories, a crucial element is missing from the novel: that of communication with spiritual beings. Crowley's magical revelation occurred in Egypt in 1904, where *The Book of the Law*, the first of the "holy" book of Thelema was dictated to him by the demon Aiwaz: this would suggest that Maudsley's views are less compatible with Crowley's than in the novel, as Crowley's system depended on the surrender of will that also characterised

spiritualism. A second element is also missing that Maudsley would surely also have disapproved of: that of sexual magic, which was carried out with partners of either sex.²⁸ The novel then, can be seen as a kind of publicity statement for magic, an intervention into scientific debates about the evolution of the human, and the pathology of the occult, and a rationalisation of Crowley's own occult beliefs.

Crowley's use of Maudsley suggest he is a figure that still carries scientific authority in 1922, which might also suggest the continuation of anxieties characteristic of the *fin-de-siècle* in one of the foundational years of modernism. Mark S. Morrisson has seen Crowley's magic, in relation to images of alchemy in modern atomic science, as showing "the degree to which the workings of a Hermetic society could be fashioned as a cutting-edge 'new' science, one that predated all existing scientific knowledge by centuries".²⁹ However, the present argument positions Crowley as fashioning his magical system as a more recent science, that of degeneration, and in the process addressing concerns of national progress. Crowley's science of magic here emphasises both the evolutionary optimism that was seen in psychical research, but also affirms the degeneration paradigm through its emphasis on will. Elaine Showalter has argued that "Will, self-restraint, and self-control were still considered the ultimate development of mental health, an ordering that also governed late-Victorian sexual codes and economic policies" and Crowley can be seen clearly addressing each of these aspects.³⁰ Whereas on the one hand he might seem to suggest a more liberating idea of the human subject that rejects conventions in the finding of the true will, he ultimately reinforces the biological interpretation of psychology and the importance of the will in producing healthy, efficient, political subjects.

The views discussed above all suggest that the status of the occult in relation to science at the *fin-de-siècle* depend on the ability to diagnose and differentiate the pathological from the evolutionary. As Roger Luckhurst has argued, the occult should be seen as "oppositional yet also supplemental" to biological theories of evolution, much as theories of degeneration were produced by the apparent ability of Darwinism to explain not just physical evolution but broader cultural formations.³¹ In part this is due to the content of the theory itself which, as Gillian Beer has stressed, was able to be metaphorically applied to a range of subjects outside of orthodox biology: "Its order welcomed difference, plenitude, multifariousness so that the exigencies of the environment were persistently controverted by the genetic impulse towards variety."³² Secondly, as James Moore in *The Post Darwinian Controversies* has argued, the Darwinian theory of evolution did not immediately cause a break between the biological and the spiritual, and the idea of evolution was appropriated by both Christian theologians and writers championing spiritualism and psychical research. Peter J. Bowler has argued that the period from the 1890s, to the emergence of modern genetics during the 1930s, saw the eclipse of Darwinism, where although

²⁸ See Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*. 186-220 for a detailed reading of one of Crowley's homosexual magical rituals in terms of modern ideas of subjectivity

²⁹ Mark S. Morrisson. *Modern Alchemy: Occultism and the Emergence of Atomic Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 44.

³⁰ Elaine Showalter. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980*. London: Virago, 1987, 106.

³¹ Luckhurst, 'Demon Haunted Darwinism.' 127.

³² Gillian Beer. *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. 2nd edn. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, 12-13.

there was general agreement about the fact of evolution, there was no consensus as to its exact process: whether it be by natural selection, an essentially random undirected process, or some other means - was still open to question.³³

The challenge of the occult to theories of evolution was not simply a distortion, but can be seen as part of the network of debates surrounding models of evolution during the 1890s as a direct result of gaps in biological knowledge, gaps that allowed occult writers to formulate their own alternatives to the materialist theory of evolution. Crowley's novel suggests that if magic is to be considered a science, then it can only be so by addressing the same anxieties as the science of degeneration that also drew upon this gap in biological knowledge. Both suggest that culture can intervene in the evolutionary process. Here two marginal sciences are seen to be competing for the authority to speak on the future evolution of the human, drawing on challenges and gaps in the more orthodox theories of evolution. This in turn suggests that scientific legitimacy is here defined not only by its objects and methods of study, but by the broader social and political anxieties that it can address: it is only through diagnosing a pathological condition, and showing a regeneration into fit political and gendered subjects, that Crowley can mark out a claim for magic in the networks of science.

³³ Peter L. Bowler. *The Eclipse of Darwinism: Anti-Darwinian Evolution Theories in the Decades Around 1900*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983.

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