

**SEXUALITY AND THE DEGENERATE BODY IN ROBERT
LOUIS STEVENSON'S *THE STRANGE CASE OF DR JEKYLL
AND MR HYDE***

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nineteenth-century western European cultures generally thought of as dominated by ideologies of progress were, in fact, also preoccupied with notions of degeneration, with concepts of regression and decline. A multitude of nineteenth-century representations identified and pursued degenerative processes in individual organisms, species, persons, families, races, societies and states. Such conceptions of degeneration traversed a wide discursive spectrum, informing genres as diverse as the medical treatise, the political speech and the novel, and were inflected by differences in national culture, historical moment, and occasion of utterance. What they had in common were the functions of describing, and speaking to anxieties about, poverty, crime, population growth, urbanisation, and social unrest. In an era in which science increasingly came to replace religion as the most authoritative discourse within bourgeois culture, ideas about degeneration, which modified or supplanted older notions of sin and the fall, drew upon, or took the form of, scientific discourse.

Conceptions of human degeneration achieved their most developed and influential forms in the discourse of later nineteenth-century psychiatry, which constructed various forms of mental illness and social deviancy as atavisms. The formulation of these theories of atavism was concomitant with psychiatry's consolidation as an expert knowledge about criminality, its identification and treatment; in other words, with psychiatry's constitution as a discipline intimately linked with the law. In Italy in the 1870s, the physician Cesare Lombroso founded what he called criminal anthropology: an influential, though certainly not uncontested, "science" for which social deviancy was written on the body, legible in a grammar of physiognomy, gesture, and gait (Pick 109-52). Theories like this—and Lombroso's is only the most notorious instance of a widespread trend within medicine—radically confused subject and predicate, reifying social definitions as the properties of classes of individuals: science functioned as an apologetics for the status quo, grounding criminality in biology and thus disavowing the efficacy of individual rehabilitation or structural social change.

Although initially generally resisted in England, due to their conflict with classic liberal notions of individual susceptibility to melioration then dominant

within English law and penology, positivist theories of the irremediable location of criminality in a type of individual gained increasing currency in the 1870s and 1880s as a sense of cultural disorder deepened (Pick 176-203). In contrast to the relative social stability and economic prosperity of the 1850s and 1860s, the last three decades of the nineteenth century were marked by a variety of conflicts and crises. With regard to the period of my concern, the 1880s, these might be enumerated as follows: first, deep economic depression and the resultant seemingly ineradicable unemployment among the slum-dwelling poor, along with the re-emergence of socialism and other collectivisms; second, various set-backs in the imperialist enterprise, of which the most symbolically significant was the fall of Gordon at Khartoum in 1885; and third, agitation for home rule in Ireland, expressed through agrarian unrest and Fenianism.

In England, as elsewhere in Europe, degenerationist discourse was impelled by a desire to prophylactically separate perceived social evils from the mainstream of bourgeois culture by locating them in individuals who visibly manifested them. At the same time, however, such discourse typically invoked the notion of a general, ineluctable and invisible decay immanent to society. This tension between notions of degeneration as, on the one hand, external, readily apprehensible and treatable, and, on the other hand, ubiquitous and inexorable, is apparent in some of the fiction which taps and contributes to degenerationist discourse, such as Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). In its representation of the villainous Hyde, Stevenson's novella draws upon contemporary medico-forensic conceptions of individual degeneration and atavism, but is also haunted by a sense of a general social corruption.

Along with Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which appeared four years later and for which Stevenson's novella has been suggested as a source, *Jekyll and Hyde* brought contemporary conceptions of degeneration and male homosexuality into proximity. Both texts may be seen as negotiating the discursive terrain mapped by contemporary sexology, a new specialisation within psychiatry which emerged in the 1870s. Sander Gilman notes that the "sexual connotation of the word 'degenerate'" has its source in late nineteenth-century sexology and psychiatry's project of taxonomising and pathologising human behaviours (72). According to Gilman, in early sexology, as representatively and most famously instanced by Richard von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (published in the same year as Stevenson's text), the male homosexual replaced the masturbator as the pre-eminent exemplar of hereditary degeneracy. This eminence was short-lived: the notion of homosexuality as a degenerative disorder was soon replaced by more "liberal" conceptions of the phenomenon as a congenital or environmentally-determined abnormality. However, degenerationist and deviancy theories of homosexuality shared the conviction that the homosexual was an isolatable and recognisable type, a notion which came to supplant earlier interpretations of homosexual behaviours as potential in all humans as sinful creatures. While it did not cause, or even necessarily precede the constitution of identities along the axis

of same-sex desire, the coining of the term "homosexual" in 1869, and the subsequent attention paid to homosexuality in medical discourse, nevertheless set in place a broader cultural perception of the homosexual as type. In England, Henry Labouchere's modification of the Criminal Amendment Act of 1885 which criminalised "acts of gross indecency" between men, replacing the vague and—at least notionally—non-gender-specific statute against sodomy, played a similar role in bringing the homosexual into discourse and representation.¹

The discourses of Science and the Law, and their involvement with the identification of degenerative processes and entities, are integral to Stevenson's 1886 novella. *Jekyll and Hyde* may be read as a text that both interrogates, and is informed by, widely disseminated notions of degeneration. The novella is animated by a double impulse to both ratify and trouble the status quo, a double impulse generated by the peculiar status granted literature as discursive genre.

In the discursive economy of post-Romantic European culture, literature occupies a kind of intermediate point between (what are defined as) the pure rationality and authority of scientific and legal discourses and the pure unreason of the discourses of criminality and madness. Literature is construed in this way and is itself shaped by and exploits this construction of its discursive status. As the product of the "imagination," literature is licensed to deploy the fantastic, to represent states and events disallowed by, or outside the ken of, scientific, rational and realist discourses; but literature also deploys the concepts of causality and rationality which subtend the discourses of authority, and may invoke, or align itself with, authority.

If we are more accustomed to think of literature, and the practice of writing literature, as close to madness or irrationality as posited by various Romantic, modernist, and postmodernist definitions, we should not lose sight of literature's relation to the institutions and discourses of rationalist social power, and the traces that relation may leave in any given literary text. The title of Stevenson's novella embodies this double torsion of literature simultaneously toward the fantastic and the potentially subversive and toward the rational and the disciplinary. The title appropriates medico-legal or medico-forensic terminology: the word "case" is a technical term in both medicine and the law and suggests the determination and regulation of phenomena by those discourses. The adjective "strange," however, marks the text as literary and signals the fantastic pay-off which literature is licensed to supply. The title's alignment of the rational and the authoritative with the "strange" or fantastic points to the narrative's problematisation of the distinctions between propriety and crime, between the homosocial and the homosexual, between the doctor and the deviant (Koestenbaum *Double* 44-45). The novella calls into question the objectivity of science even as it invokes it: it

¹ For discussions of the emergence of the male homosexual as type, and the role of medical and legal discourses in the construction of that type, see Cohen (103-26), and Weeks (11-32). Foucault gives the best-known argument regarding the discursive constitution of the homosexual (43).

subverts the conviction of the non-pathological status of the scientist upon which the authority of science depends by locating the doctor and the deviant in the one body. "Dr Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case," the missive written by Jekyll which concludes the narrative, and which clears up the mysteries of the nature of the relationship between Jekyll and Hyde and the origin of the latter, is simultaneously a signed confession of murder and the statement of an expert witness.

The subversive aspect of the narrative should not be emphasised at the expense of its conservative tendency. In common with much fantastic literature, *Jekyll and Hyde* represents deviancy primarily in order to exorcise it. We are first told about Hyde by Enfield, a friend of Utterson, the lawyer and friend of Jekyll's from whose point of view most of the novella is related. Enfield tells Utterson that he saw Hyde trample a small girl who had accidentally run into him. Enfield, the girl's family, and a doctor for whom the girl had been sent, "collar" and surround Hyde (31). Enfield describes the extreme loathing which the very sight of Hyde inspires in himself and the girl's family, then says: "But the doctor's case was what struck me . . . every time he looked at [Hyde] . . . I saw that Sawbones turned white and sick with the desire to kill him" (31). The doctor's "case," as Enfield here relates it, proleptically and telescopically figures the narrative which "Dr Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case" recounts: the transformation of a "cut-and-dry apothecary" (31)—Jekyll, at least apparently, is the soul of respectability and rectitude—into someone capable of homicide. But the catalyst for this transformation is here located outside the doctor rather than, as in Jekyll's account, within him: the book oscillates between a representation of alarming forces as internal or infiltrating, and a representation of them as external, visible, the objects of a righteous desire to destroy. If the book in some ways disturbs or subverts a sense of bourgeois heterosexual Anglo-Saxon male subjectivity, it also tries to shore up that subjectivity by concentrating threatening forces in the demonised figure of Hyde and then killing them off.

It is my contention that a contemporary preoccupation with social degeneration is mapped onto the body of Hyde which, in its depiction as stunted, deformed and hideous, draws upon available conceptions of various physically degenerate types. Hyde's body, which, as we shall see, is literally unintelligible to the ordinary citizens of London, exemplifies what Judith Butler calls the "unthinkable, abject, unlivable [body]," the "constitutive outside" which enables the construction of the normative body (xi). Hyde's unintelligibility may be read as registering in an overdetermined way the presence and effects of various types of bodies differentiated from the normative body of the society in which the novella was produced; while the threat he constitutes registers the threat of abjection which those bodies produce. Butler describes abjection as "a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality" and argues that "certain abject zones within sociality . . . constitute zones of uninhabitability which a subject fantasizes as threatening its own integrity with the prospect of a psychotic dissolution" (243n2). It is this threat of a dissolution, which in the text is simultaneously social and

psychic, and which is inflected by an historically specific sense of cultural crisis, that I want to foreground in the following discussion.

Important among the abject zones which Hyde represents—in my reading the primary or the most emphasised one—is the zone of male homosexuality. The novella, with its central enigma of the respectable doctor Jekyll's "strange preference" for Hyde (38), with its motif of blackmail, with its adversions to unspeakable acts, and with its cast of bachelors, has been noted for its aura of homosexuality.² Hyde is at different points readable as (or suggests) Jekyll's homosexual lover, his blackmailer, or a working-class prostitute. The descriptions of Hyde and the unspeakable acts in which he engages echo the rhetoric of abomination traditionally used to figure homosexuality. In the original draft of the manuscript these rhetorical suggestions of homosexuality were even stronger and implicated Jekyll, the "good" half of the Jekyll/Hyde dyad, more clearly: Jekyll describes himself as having been "from an early age . . . the slave of certain appetites . . . at once criminal in the sight of the law and aberrant in themselves" (Veeder, "Collated" 34-35).

Characters' descriptions of Hyde invariably invoke an ineffable horror, an abhorrence or repulsion which is profound, but which they are incapable of defining or accounting for. The first description of Hyde is that given by Enfield to Utterson:

He is not easy to describe. There is something wrong with his appearance; something displeasing, something downright detestable. I never saw a man I so disliked, and yet I scarce know why. He must be deformed somewhere; he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although I couldn't specify the point. He's an extraordinary-looking man, and yet I really can name nothing out of the way. No, sir; I can make no hand of it; I can't describe him. And it's not want of memory; for I declare I can see him at this moment. (34)

The inability of all who see him to define just what is "wrong" with or "detestable" about Hyde might be read as an interpolation at the narrative level of the traditional rhetorical strategies by which homosexuality was designated, strategies that are of inexplicit or oblique representation: preterition, euphemism and periphrasis. Hyde, as a figure for the homosexual, has a liminal representational status: he can be seen, yet he can't be adequately or explicitly described. At the same time as the text insists upon the inscrutability of the repugnance which Hyde inspires, it also discloses a desire for the stigmata of the

² Vladimir Nabokov, in his *Lectures on Literature*, was apparently the first to speculate on homosexuality in the novella. See also, more recently, Koestenbaum, "The Shadow on the Bed"; Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy*; and Veeder, "Children of the Night". For a brilliant reading of the text as negotiating male sexuality more generally, see Heath, "Psychopathia Sexualis."

degenerate, some clear physical sign by which Hyde may be differentiated from the text's respectable bourgeois bachelors, and by which homosexuality may be distanced from the notionally heterosexual fraternity. After he has seen Hyde for himself, Utterson reflects:

God bless me, the man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic shall we say? . . . or is it the mere radiance of a foul soul that thus transpires through, and transfigures, its clay continent? The last I think: for, O my poor old Harry Jekyll, if ever I read Satan's signature upon a face, it is in on that of your new friend! (40).

To "read Satan's signature" on the face of the deviant was precisely the project of positivist psychiatry and sexology, whose texts detailed the distinguishing physical characteristics of prostitutes, homosexuals, criminals and so on.

However, the barriers set up between the bourgeois male and the literally stigmatised Hyde are consistently undermined by intimations of the bourgeois characters' interest in, similarity to, and even complicity with Hyde, which suggest a connection between professional homosocial milieux and the criminal homosexual world.³ The repulsion the male characters feel with regard to Hyde is, it is strongly suggested, at least partly compounded with fascination. Enfield's story about Hyde induces in the sleepless Utterson an oppressive, hyper-stimulated state somewhere between masturbation fantasy and nightmare: "enslaved" to the image of Hyde, as he "lay and tossed in the gross darkness of the night," Utterson imagines the relationship between Jekyll and Hyde as a scenario of homosexual rape:

He would see a room in a rich house, where his friend lay asleep, dreaming and smiling at his dreams; and then the door of that room would be opened, the curtains of the bed plucked apart, the sleeper recalled, and, lo! there would stand by his side a figure to whom power was given, and even at that dead hour he must rise and do its bidding. (37)

The ostensible respectability of the men in the story is frequently undermined by suggestions of impropriety. Utterson's speculations on Jekyll's possible misdeeds lead him to reflect on his own proclivities: although "his past was fairly blameless," he is "humbled to the dust by the many ill things he had done and raised up again into a sober and fearful gratitude by the many that he had come so near to doing, yet avoided" (42). As for Enfield, he first encounters Hyde "coming home from some place at the end of the world, about three o'clock of a black winter morning"

³ In "Children of the Night" Veeder has produced a comprehensive account of connections between Hyde and the other characters indicated by the text (116-122).

(31), associating him with Hyde's own nocturnal activities, which are unspecified but marked as nefarious.

Homosexual scandal is suggested in the circumstances of Hyde's murder of an MP, Sir Danvers Carew, fully witnessed from a window above the street by a maidservant: Carew "accosts" Hyde in a disreputable or poor area of London "not far from the river" (46), and Hyde beats him to death. To "accost" can mean to solicit in the street for an immoral purpose (*OED*). The text's emphasis upon the scandalous nature of Carew's death, and the publicity accorded it, seems in excess of the fact of murder alone: the investigating officer says "this will make a great deal of noise" (47), a prediction realised and literalised in the news-boys "crying themselves hoarse along the footways: 'Special edition. Shocking murder of an MP'" (53). Carew's body is identified by Utterson, as a letter addressed to the lawyer is found on the MP's person. The contents of this "sealed . . . envelope" (47) are not divulged, but the fact that it is addressed to a lawyer suggests, in this narrative in which sealed envelopes play such a crucial role in the revelation of secrets, and in which the lawyer is always the recipient of these confidential communications, that it contains the "blackmailable" secret of homosexuality (Sedgewick 88): a homosexuality which is everywhere signalled in the text, but nowhere named.⁴

However, while homosexuality plays an important part in the representation of Hyde, the effect he produces is not reducible to it: the murder of Danvers Carew provides an opportunity for delineating other aspects of Hyde's signification. The fact that this murder victim is an MP would recall for some contemporary readers the murder by Fenians of the Irish chief secretary and under-secretary in Dublin's Phoenix Park in 1882. The representation of Hyde may be read as informed by English constructions of the Irish—and Fenianism as metonymic of the Irish—as atavistic and animalistic: Hyde is described at different points as "troglodytic" (40), animalistic, and apelike⁵ (and Hyde is an Irish surname). Such representations of the Irish had a long history in colonialist English discourse; they were, however, given new impetus after 1871 by the promulgation of Darwin's theorisation of man's simian ancestry, and were newly mobilised in the 1880s in response to agitation for home rule.⁶

Conceptions of the London poor as a physically degenerate, yet paradoxically potent threat to the status quo may also be at work in the

⁴ Compare the pivotal documents, both sealed in envelopes, of "Dr Lanyon's Narrative" and "Dr Jekyll's Full Statement of the Case." Koestenbaum writes, in the context of a discussion of the love letters between Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas, of the "closet of sealed envelopes" ("Wilde's Hard" 179).

⁵ Other such descriptions include "like a monkey" (68); "mere animal terror" (69); "the animal within me licking the chops of memory" (92); "ape-like spite" (97).

⁶ For a discussion of the closeness of Hyde to the "stereotype of the Irish hooligan," and some examples of cartoons in which Fenianism is depicted as an apelike Irishman, see Boyle and Brantlinger (273-4).

representation of Hyde. The mid-1880s saw the height of widespread, anxious discussion of the potentially revolutionary threat of so-called "outcast London," the unemployed slum-dwelling poor. Gareth Stedman Jones quotes a representative description from this period of a "typical" working-class male by a concerned member of the elite: Lord Brabazon, writing in 1884 on the "necessity" of colonial settlement as a means of alleviating the problem of an unmanageably large working-class population, rhetorically sets "the reader" down in "the wretched streets . . . of the Eastern or Southern districts of London": "Should he be of average height, he will find himself a head taller than those around him; he will see on all sides pale faces, stunted figures, debilitated forms, narrow chests, and all the outward signs of a low vital power" (308). Just like the "typical" working-class male specimen here, Hyde is pale, stunted and deformed (40). A month after the publication of Stevenson's novella, unemployed men rioted in Hyde Park and the surrounding streets, an apparent realisation of the elite's fears of insurrection.

I read *Jekyll and Hyde*, then, partly as an articulation of, and an attempt to exorcise, anxieties about social crisis current in the mid-1880s. Aberrant sexuality was mobilised in some figurations of this crisis as alternatively, or simultaneously, its exemplification and cause: the excesses of male lust, for instance, were linked by social purity campaigners to a perceived national decline (Weeks 18). The text's deployment of homosexuality as its master trope of disorder may therefore be a more politically salient feature than is immediately apparent. More particularly, with regard to its political effects, *Jekyll and Hyde* participates in contemporary representations of the body as metaphor for, and instantiation of, social crisis: the text's representation of the human body as "immaterial" is figuratively implicated in a suggestion of social instability. Jekyll's experiments on his body point to the potential instability and fragmentation of the unitary subjectivity which the unified body of realist narrative signifies. In his closing missive, Jekyll writes of "the trembling immateriality, the mist-like transience of this seemingly so solid body in which we walk attired" (82); his transformation into Hyde is described as an assault on the "fortress of identity" (83). Describing the experiment which led to the manifestation of the "duality" of "man," the revelation "that man is not truly one, but truly two" (that is, good and evil), Jekyll qualifies:

I say two, because the state of my knowledge does not pass beyond that point. Others will follow, others will outstrip me on the same lines and I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens. (82)

This notion of the subject as a schizophrenised, cosmopolitan "polity" recalls an earlier description of Soho, in which the perturbed Utterson, passing through in a carriage on his way to visit Hyde's vacated residence after the murder of Carew, sees "women of many different nationalities passing out, key in hand, to have a

morning glass" (48). The slum, like the body in Jekyll's descriptions, is a chaotic site of "fog," "vapours" and "swirling wreaths" (48). The coincidence or echoing of terms in which the slum and the body are described suggests the novella's mobilisation of the body/society chiasmus, widely deployed in nineteenth-century discourses, in which both body and society are legible in terms of the attributes of the other. The metaphorisation of Jekyll's body as a "fortress" and the assault carried out on it (its "dethrone[ment]") by what are called "lower elements" (83)—I'm suggesting here that "lower elements" be read as carrying a class as well as a moral valence—along with the similarities between the description of the transformation into Hyde and the description of Soho, may be regarded as speaking to fears of social and psychic chaos induced by the perceived invasion and infection of various forms of alterity. The location of Hyde's residence in Soho is significant in this respect: in the late nineteenth century Soho was a predominantly poor area with a large immigrant population, situated not in the east or the south of London, as are the slums in Lord Brabazon's article, but in the heart of the West End, the home of the elite. Soho's location thus figures the proximity of feared insurrection; the text's disturbing descriptions of it, "like a district of some city in a nightmare" (48), may be read as fantasmatically figuring the dissolution of existing power structures. The fact that the inhabitants of the slum observed by Utterson are not only foreign, but also women, also strikes me as significant in this tale in which women figure very little and middle-class women not at all, and points to another possible associative link between the representation of the slum and the representation of Hyde. For Hyde is figured not only as a disruption of heterosexuality but also, and relatedly, as a disruption of gender boundaries: he is described at one point as "weeping like a woman" (69) and at another as "wrestling against the approaches of hysteria" (78); a condition always implicitly gendered as feminine, even when it occurs in a man. The novella treats such transformations, such assaults on the "fortress of identity" phobically, as psychic or political threats to the stability of bourgeois subjectivity and hegemony. In certain excesses of its representation of them, however, it inadvertently suggests their strength, efficacy and proximity.

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