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Primitive Minds

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DREAMY INTUITION AND DETECTIVE GENIUS

Ezra Jennings and Sherlock Holmes

Inspector Bucket's "high tower of the mind" in *Bleak House* is in many ways the cerebral model for the detective figure of later-century crime fiction. The enormous intellect and keen observational talent that characterize *The Moonstone's* Sergeant Cuff repeat Bucket's high mental exercise, as do the extraordinary deductions of Sherlock Holmes. Yet it is not only the higher faculties that become activated in the service of crime solving. Cuff himself is rivaled by another and very different kind of investigative thinker—a medical man and devotee of John Elliotson who unlocks the real mystery of the novel with the help of mesmerism. Holmes, who solves many of the most obscure elements of his cases under the influence of drugs or while absorbed in art or music, effectively combines the rational command of a Cuff with the power of unconscious cerebration explored by an Ezra Jennings. Such recourse to the "lower" or more automatic mental functions in criminal detection compromises the figure of the robust intellectual

hero by invoking its more nervous alter ego. The character of the detective becomes enfeebled in this way even as it merges with the figure of the mental alienist, who digs beneath the surfaces of conscious motive and reasoned behavior to uncover the psychological origins of criminal events.¹

At the same time, these intuitive or dreamy elements of crime detection raise questions about medical science's mastery of the human mind, whose most primitive recesses contain mysterious powers that can appear supernatural rather than nervous in origin. Even as the detective decodes some puzzles of the mind—prevision, apparitions, or remote influence—exposing these either as criminal fraud or as nervous phenomena, others spring up or remain unsolved. In particular, clairvoyant powers associated with primitive human types—from the ancient worlds of the “barbarous East” or from prehistoric civilizations whose traits remain dormant in modern man—maintain an unexplained influence over the narrative above and beyond their significance for highly imaginative or superstitious characters. Indeed, manifesting in the irresistible gaze of the mesmerizer or in the mental magic of the detective sleuth, these imperfectly explained powers become instruments of the investigating mind as much or more as they become objects of its rigorous inquiry.

Perhaps because of its flirtation with Eastern mysticism, detective fiction engages, sometimes critically, with the science of degeneration. Although the concept of degeneration originated in eighteenth-century monogenetic accounts of human origins and the decline from an original type, the medicalization of “*dégénérescence*” begins properly in 1857 with Bénédict Augustine Morel's account of pervasive and progressive cross-generational decline. It therefore embraces what Daniel Pick describes as a “kaleidoscope” of medical conditions in the second half of the nineteenth century.² For Morel, degeneration combined hereditary and environmental factors: Traits acquired by an individual during its lifetime (particularly through modern overindulgence in toxic substances like alcohol) could be communicated in amplified form to subsequent generations.³ Morel's concept of degeneracy offers a negative imprint of the Lamarckian principle of acquired, heritable, and advantageous characteristics; degenerative symptoms are cumulative, so that each generation becomes weaker than the last. In subsequent accounts of the phenomenon, such as Eugene Talbot's *Degeneracy: Its Causes, Signs and Results* (1898), Henry Maudsley's *The Pathology of Mind* (1890), E. Ray Lankester's *Degeneration: A Chapter in Darwinism* (1880), and Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892), the degenerate human body is further mapped onto a landscape of broad cultural and moral decline, often combining the biologically inherited characteristics of physical and mental decline with the

poisonous environmental influence of industrial modernity.⁴ Degeneration theory could therefore either predict, as Morel did, that degenerate types are headed for extinction, or else propose that under the influence of environmental factors, imbeciles and congenital criminals may thrive.⁵

The stress on acquired, negative characteristics in the context of social change turns the cultural signs of moral decline into biologically inherited, nervous dispositions that in turn determine perception and taste. For Nordau especially, the ill-disciplined, decaying bodies and brains of urbanized, morally decentered human beings find expression in the art, music, and literature of the fin de siècle and in the enervation and weak-mindedness of its connoisseurs. These “degenerates” and “hysterics”⁶ are at the mercy of representations brought forth from an “unrestricted play of association” (56) and are “aroused and extinguished automatically” (56) while the will is mute and judgment is distorted. Mysticism, he argues, is also a symptom of the age, similarly arising from an incapacity to control the association of ideas by the attention and thus by weakness of will (46). Maudsley, who stressed that insanity was primarily a social problem that must be studied from a social point of view,⁷ nonetheless took a similar view of spiritualism, linking it with the inherited and acquired nervous susceptibility, indeed even the “neurotic temperament” that characterizes delusions of the insane.⁸

While mysticism points to degeneration, the most vigorous and cultivated kind of thinking is represented by positive science. For Nordau, the mystic is the evolutionary inverse of the scientist, since the former is guilty of feeble observation: “He brings all the forms that he seems to discern into connection with the principal presentation which has aroused them” and “fancies that he perceives inexplicable relations between distinct phenomena” (*Degeneration*, 57). In future centuries, when nervous, mystical degenerates have perished along with the “aberrations of art,” science and its observational methods will introduce “the uniformity of civilized life” (550). Science becomes a form of psychological therapy; those degenerates who have not yet reached an irreversible state of mental derangement may yet learn to interpret sense impressions properly and systematically (553). Maudsley too contrasted the degenerate mystic with the scientist, arguing that the former’s obsession with evidence of prophesy, clairvoyance, and thought-reading represents the neurotic’s defective power of observation, since the mind is so possessed by a single idea that its ability to discern facts is suspended.⁹ Even for Lankester, a professed advocate of the theory of natural selection, the Lamarckian model of inheritance allows for self-cultivation or progressive adaptation in the individual’s response to environmental influ-

ences, and hence the practice of rigorous thinking can reverse nervous and cultural deterioration. Lankester closed his *Degeneration* with a call to the “full and earnest cultivation of science—the knowledge of causes—. . . to which we have to look for the protection of our race—even of the English branch of it—from relapse and degeneration.”¹⁰

Where crime solving depends on dreamy intuition even as it employs what Nordau lauds as “method[s] of observation and registration” (*Degeneration*, 106), the distinction between the degenerate and the rigorous empiricist comes under considerable pressure. The mental labors of the detective-hero therefore point to an evolutionist understanding of the human mind that emphasizes atavism, or the resurgence of ancestral forms, rather than progressive degeneration. Although Victorian writers themselves sometimes collapsed the terms, particularly when, following Morel and Cesare Lombroso, they identified atavistic features as the “stigmata” of degeneration, the Holmes stories, by blending the muscular, systematizing intellect of a Bucketlike man of science with the dreamy talents of a Bohemian art lover, recognize a subtle but crucial distinction between those terms. In so doing, the stories position the detective simultaneously in the modern metropolitan centers of scientific inquiry and in the worlds of primitive past and savage periphery invoked through the activity of the dreamy mind.¹¹ Rather than the pervasive decline of modern civilization, his character and his genius suggest that modern science itself is entangled with mystical forms of knowledge that rise up from a remote past as well as from earlier expressions of human physiology.

I. MESMERISM, DREAMY DEGENERACY, AND LITERARY FORM

With the arrival of table turning and table rapping in Britain in the early 1850s, mesmeric science was increasingly linked to investigations of spirit agency.¹² W. B. Carpenter’s *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, &c., Historically and Scientifically Considered* (1877) highlighted the preposterous claims of mesmerism in its title, and dismissed the testimonies of mesmeric lucidity and supernormal intelligence as evidence of the mind’s “extraordinary tendency to self-deception.”¹³ Carpenter proposed that the apparently clairvoyant perception of entranced subjects should be interpreted as the effect of the subject’s liberation from his or her own controlling will and the consequently preternaturally acute and impressible senses.¹⁴ In the case of arti-

ficially induced trance states, it was not the passes of the mesmerizer but rather the feeble will of his subject that brought on mesmeric sleep.¹⁵ This physiological explanation for the strange results achieved by mesmerists followed in the path of numerous earlier efforts to rid animal magnetism of its occultist associations, including James Braid's hypnosis, which emphasized the power of suggestion, including autosuggestion over the manipulative power of the mesmerizer.¹⁶ Hypnotic or "nervous sleep," Braid asserted, is "a peculiar condition of the nervous system, induced by a fixed and abstracted attention of the mental and visual eye, on one object, not of an exciting nature."¹⁷ Even those physiologists who ignored Braid's studies and continued to focus on mesmeric influence downplayed the principles of magnetism. Although Elliotson enjoyed a renewed medical respectability in the 1840s, he emphasized the practice and practical benefits of mesmerism over the theory of magnetic fluid, while his colleague Chauncy Townshend remarked in *Facts in Mesmerism* that "we have asked whether such a *power* as mesmerism exists, when we should have demanded whether there is a *state* so denominated."¹⁸

However, efforts to minimize mesmerism's occult associations had been compromised by Elliotson's recording of somnambulistic marvels in *The Zoist*, as well as by the keen interest in paranormal mental phenomena maintained in studies on mesmerism, such as J. C. Calquhoun's *Isis Revelata* (1836), which went through three editions by 1844, or George Sandby's *Mesmerism and Its Opponents* (1848). Such works ignored Townshend's caution that mesmerism's advocates should refrain from emphasizing its inexplicable products. They also seemed to anticipate Elliotson's conversion to spiritualism by D. D. Home in 1868, an event apparently confirming that the "science" of mesmerism had always favored the occult.¹⁹ When the preternatural events of artificial somnambulism became the subject of systematic investigation by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in the 1880s, both mesmerism and hypnosis became formally associated with efforts to establish the truth or otherwise of a noncorporeal intelligence. In particular, in *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903), Frederick Myers respiritualized the therapeutic science of hypnotism by proposing that the power of suggestion comes not from external but from internal sources and those are the property of a subliminal mind shaped by spiritually influenced "lower organic centers."²⁰ Animal magnetism and phreno-mesmerism proposed materialist accounts of altered mental states, yet their investigations were often approximations of the séance room and exalted in the exotic phenomena of trance states, including telepathy, clairvoyance, and the apparent existence of spirit visitors.²¹

To a large extent, mesmerism and hypnosis owed their occultist associations to their affiliations with ancient and Eastern medicine. Alison Winter has shown that British medicine in colonial India linked mesmerism rhetorically with indigenous magic and Eastern mysticism, even as it established the authority of Western knowledge over local, native practice.²² In his *Mesmerism in India* (1847), the Scottish surgeon James Esdaile observed of the indigenous population of Bengal that the people in “this part of the world are peculiarly sensitive to the mesmeric power.”²³ He attributed this susceptibility to their ill-nourishment and deficient nervous energy, yet he also observed that it was probable that the technique has been practiced in India since remote antiquity.²⁴ Indeed most influential books on the subject of artificial somnambulism refer to Oriental traditions: In *Isis Revelata*, Calquhoun stressed the ancient history of mesmeric practice and refers to magnetic marvels from numerous remote traditions, including those of physicians in India “who cure diseases merely from the breath.”²⁵ Braid’s research on cases of suspended animation, we have seen, was focused on the traditional practice of the Indian fakirs; while in his account of mesmerism in *Human Physiology*, Elliotson refers to the medical practice of the “imposition of hands” in India and China.²⁶

Given these mystical and Oriental associations, it is scarcely surprising that mesmeric investigations of double consciousness, telepathy, and clairvoyance provide raw material for the neo-Gothic forms of the later-century British novel. Double consciousness and medical “pseudo-science” in Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and telepathy and mesmerism in Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), for example, take on grotesque, supernatural forms. Dracula’s mesmeric powers, like those of Svengali in George Du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894), represent the malevolent influence of the East. Yet these novels are as much engaged with the aesthetics of realism as they are with the tropes of the Gothic, since in each case they draw attention to narrative exactness and the careful documentation of experience and events whether by a journalistic, legal, medical, or artistic eye. In the literary context, degeneracy conflates realists and mystics, naturalism and Gothic sensation, and contemporary urban excess with “the primitive chaos of human nature” (*Degeneration*, 73). Novels that present the figure of the degenerate in a modern setting show the contemporary psyche corrupted by a failure of will and a surrender to lower and more automatic nervous activity.²⁷

Gothic-realist hybrids that blend modern scenes and characters with the monsters and mysteries of the premodern imagination give form to such pervasive mental deterioration, illustrating both the retreat of the organism into its primitive nervous pathways and the sensation-driven, mystically

minded culture to which they give rise. In *Dracula*, the modern technologies of the West that enable up-to-the-moment recording of events—the typewriter and the phonograph—merge with the ancient practices of the East as the documenting of Mina’s mesmeric visions becomes the means by which Dracula is pursued and destroyed. In *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* the rational men of the professional classes in industrialized London are disturbed by evidence of demonic possession in one of their own. The degenerative proximity of monstrous to modern is quite pronounced in *Trilby*, whose hostility to aestheticism rivals Nordau’s and which self-consciously describes the contamination of realist “truths” by the nervous influence of primitive, mystical forces. Bohemian Paris nurtures both the mysteries of “the poisonous East,”²⁸ figured in Svengali’s mesmeric abduction of Trilby, and the genius of the realist artist, Little Billee, who is mentally and physically fragile and pointedly inferior to the other specimens of British manhood with whom he associates. Despite his moral repugnance at the grosser spectacles of Parisian decadence and despite his improving reading choices of *Silas Marner* and *On the Origin of Species*, he is overwhelmed by his passion for Trilby and his loathing of Svengali, and finds himself as nervously depleted as Trilby herself or as Jonathan or Mina Harker are when unable to resist their captors’ marvelous powers. The protagonists in these novels lose their ability to “re-evolve . . . the essence of things . . . by a mere effort of the will,”²⁹ becoming Nordau’s fin-de-siècle artists: “weaklings in will, unfitted for any activity requiring regular uniform habits” (*Degeneration*, 337).

Such spectacles of moral and physical attenuation implicate late-century narrative fashion in the degeneration of the civilized world, as bodily weakness and nervous susceptibility contaminate even the sturdiest protagonist. For Nordau, realism elevates sensation over moral content, triggering pleasure or excitement through the sensory organs rather than through the intellectual faculties, thus “exciting the nerves and dazzling the senses” (*Degeneration*, 11). The artistic representation of nature is thus only another form of nervous encounter with the world and the surrender to associative habits of mind that characterize mental weakness. Hence, artistic realism is at best a poor substitute for a systematic investigation of natural forms and at worst a malicious and invalid claim on the reality that can be properly captured only by science. With the mid-century emergence of the detective hero, however, this nervous susceptibility itself promised illuminatory talents that, in combination with careful documentation, could expose and expel rather than exacerbate the criminal and degenerative influences of civilized modernity.

II. MEDICAL SCIENCE AND MYSTICISM IN *THE MOONSTONE*

In a series of letters titled “Magnetic Evenings at Home,” written to G. H. Lewes and published in *The Leader* in February and March of 1852, Wilkie Collins recorded scenes of mesmeric clairvoyance that he witnessed while visiting friends in Somersetshire. His belief in the genuineness of the phenomena he observed, notwithstanding Lewes’s skepticism, is joined to an enthusiasm for the practical benefits of mesmerism, which include enabling artists’ models to maintain a single position without discomfort over an extended period of time. He also confesses to an admiration for the secret powers of the mind, whose origins might be understood as something more than physical:

I have a thinking machine about me, normally called a “brain”—by what process is it set working? What power, when I am asleep, and my will is entirely inactive, sets this thinking machine going?—going as I cannot make it go, when my will is active, and I am awake? I know that I have a soul—what is it? Where is it? When and how was it breathed into the breath of my life?³⁰

Collins’s conception of the soul as the force that puts unconscious mind into motion and that acts more powerfully than the will—or engine of conscious thought—is the metaphysical account of a process that Carpenter would describe two years later in *Principles of Mental Physiology* as the reflex actions of the cerebrum. What for Collins suggests the imprint of spiritual force is for Carpenter the “lower” or automatic activity of a nervous center that undergoes modifications below the threshold of consciousness. When the sensorium, Carpenter argues, is unreceptive to these modifications owing to its absorption in other impressions (which may occur during sleep or during states of preoccupation), they affect the organism as unconscious cerebration rather than influential intellectual products (*Principles*, 517–19). For this reason, a great part of the creative genius of a writer like Wordsworth, he argues, must be attributed to “an inborn gift, the working of which is entirely automatic” (510), even while that imaginative faculty must be “directed and . . . cultivated” by the “chastening activity of the will” (513). Collins’s fascination with the apparently spiritual dimensions of dreamy phenomena does not dissuade him of their nervous origins. Rather, he combines a scientific focus on automatic mental activity with narrative attention to

the metaphysical content of dreamy episodes, whose mystery raises spiritual questions even as it proposes nervous explanations.

Collins's fiction converts the signs of Morel's *dégénérescence*, as Nordau would later do, into symptoms of pervasive cultural decline. His characters, like his implied readers, are so exaggeratedly, even morbidly, nervous and susceptible to developing a lopsided attachment to an idea that they fail to discern the proper arrangement of things in physical reality; his sensationalist narratives are replete with Gothic tropes that elevate suspense, supernaturalism, and gruesome spectacles over the kind of patient observation of detail that in Dickens's novels, for example, counterbalance mystery and melodrama. They draw on contemporary mental science to represent the physiology of thought and feelings, but they do so in order to heighten the nervous experience of the reader by delivering strange and horrifying scenes to familiar and domestic settings and stimulate the kind of associative thrills that Nordau would censure. This "pathology of the real" or "morbid naturalism,"³¹ as Jenny Bourne Taylor describes it, brings the cult of spiritualism to what is in other ways an extremely "scientific" form of writing, observing at the most minute level how human physiology shapes experience. When, for instance, Walter Hartright first encounters Anne Catherick in *The Woman in White*, he is absorbed in the idea of his future life at Limmeridge. This state of reverie combines with the nervous shock caused by her sudden appearance to create the impression of an "apparition," while also affecting him with a dreamy unreality so that the familiar road they walk on, the recently departed domestic environment of his mother's cottage, and his very identity seem estranged and uncertain to him.³² The "supernatural" event of Anne's appearance is not supernatural at all; yet it appears so under the influence of nervous automata that occur as Hartright's attention is drawn away from his physical surroundings, and it takes on a premonitory significance in the larger narrative that unfolds around the mystery of Anne's identity. Collins's narratives draw force from the marvelous productions of the mind—like the presentiments of Hartright and Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White* or the "supernatural movements"³³ of *The Haunted Hotel*—and at the same time recognize these as the likely epiphenomena of cerebral reflexes or involuntary nervous movement. They at once lay claim to the existence of spiritualist phenomena and also identify exotic mental phenomena as the nervous productions of "lower" faculties.

This confluence of spiritual manifestation and exquisite nervous physiology explains both the ambiguous representation of science in Collins's novels and the poor physical condition of the nervous hero, who in both *The Woman in White* and *Heart and Science* contrasts with a villainous and

more vigorous antagonist. The experimental chemist, Count Fosco, and the physiologist and vivisectionist, Benjuila, are both extremely large as well as emotionally powerful men, whose physical strength is exaggeratedly opposed to the weakness of Hartright and Ovid Vere.³⁴ Both too are students of nervous automata: Fosco is skilled at mesmerism; Benjuila experiments with spinal reflexes in order to isolate specific nervous pathways. In the detective novel, on the other hand, the man of science himself is often a nervous subject. Ezra Jennings of *The Moonstone* is so frail as to be on the point of death; his practicing of mesmerism situates him on the fringes of medical practice; and his “science” is dangerously close to the mesmeric “magic” performed by a group of Indians who are likewise endeavoring to recover the mysterious stone. Although he shares the disturbing gypsy features of Benjuila, and although he remains a mysterious and less-than-respectable figure in the novel, he transforms the figure of the mental alienist from villain to hero and endows him with the frail physique that signifies “heart” over “science” in the later novel so titled.³⁵

The Moonstone describes both an unwitting robbery and its exposure in an opium-induced trance, thus overlapping the dreamy and the scientific minds as it links the nature of the crime to the process of its detection. Both scrupulous observation and dreamy intuition, it emerges, have a role to play in uncovering the mystery. Even before the novel introduces the unlikely nervous profile of its true detective, leading us instead to imagine the self-possessed Sergeant Cuff will properly assemble all the forensic clues, it introduces another disorienting and thrillingly unfamiliar element that brings “primitive” and modern minds into contact: Indian conjurers appear incongruously in the English countryside. To decipher their role in a mystery that turns on the agency of a subliminal consciousness demands recognizing the proximity of ancient, Eastern “magic” to the most up-to-date inquiries in mental science. Extraordinary events in the unconscious that drive unpredictable events in the English country home thus become associated with Oriental mysticism, even as they are studied and accounted for by Jennings and Dr. Candy, the representatives of Occidental medicine.

This proximity of East to West and of mysticism to science is embodied in the physician-detective himself.³⁶ Jennings has eyes that are “dreamy and mournful.” Although this can be attributed to his failing health and his opium addiction, his accompanying “complexion of gypsy darkness” and a nose that recalls those “found among the ancient people of the East, so seldom visible among the newer races of the West”³⁷ imply a hereditary tendency to the degenerative disease that has prematurely aged and enfeebled him. When he is excited, his eyes become “wild and glittering” (373), just

as Rachel described Franklin Blake's eyes as unusually bright when she saw him take the Moonstone from her cabinet in his opium-induced sleepwalk. Indeed, although he is the carefully observing physician who understands mesmerism physiologically—he is writing a book on the brain and the nervous system—his own nervous susceptibility and his manifestation of the symptoms of trance align him with all the other characters in the novel who experience these symptoms: with Blake himself as he twice walks unconsciously through the house; with Rosanna Spearman who is bewitched by the shivering sands; with Rachel, who, despite her repulsion at Blake, acts “under some influence independent of her own will” (338) and then “willingly open[s] her whole mind to [him]” (342); with Miss Clack's erotic fascination with Godfrey Ablewhite, which she represents as a state of religious ecstasy; and with everyone who gazes at the “unfathomable” (61) Moonstone itself, whose hypnotic properties even the skeptical amateur-detective Betteredge confesses, contained “a yellow deep that drew your eyes into it so that they saw nothing else”—so that it “laid a hold” on you (62). Where “the great” (109) Sergeant Cuff is set apart from and intellectually above all these other characters by his exceptional scientific ability to “look about” him (97), Jennings is as much a victim of the nervous contagion set loose by the stone and its Indian guardians as the English characters whom he has directly and indirectly taken under his care. He is a detective who assembles evidence like the pieces of a “puzzle” (370) and who, by drawing such data from Blake's subliminal consciousness rather than exclusively from forensic and circumstantial evidence, is more successful than Cuff. Yet he is also himself a dreamy, nervous subject who suffers from opium-induced visions. And when Blake finds himself so much under the physician's influence that he covers the paper on which he intends to write notes to Betteredge with images of the “irrepressible Ezra Jennings” (354), readers might be reminded of the involuntary and irrepressible preoccupation of the members of a “quiet English house” with “a devilish Indian diamond.” This in turn reminds us of mysterious forces that the novel never exposes as natural—that of the jewel whose influence is set loose supernaturally by “the vengeance of a dead man” (33) and the legend of the special protection of the stone by Vishnu.

Indeed, scientific method struggles through much of the novel to preserve respectability as much as epistemological sovereignty. Jennings's dubious, possibly gypsy origins, combined with the mysterious, scandalous event that has destroyed his career, make him a less-than-reputable representative of the medical profession. Moreover, his hypotheses about Blake's unconscious cerebration and about the probable duplication of his actions on the

night of the robbery according to the principles of double consciousness are, as critics have noted, based on the contradictory authorities of Carpenter and Elliotson.³⁸ Although it is set in 1848, *The Moonstone* postdates Elliotson's conversion to spiritualism in 1863, as its readers would have been aware and although Carpenter's *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, &c., Historically and Scientifically Considered* was not published until 1877, his assault on spiritualism was anticipated in his papers and articles published in the 1850s.³⁹ Carpenter's position is broadly represented in the account of Indian clairvoyance provided by the gentleman-explorer Murthwaite, who claims that such power is nothing more than nervous sensitivity and that strange events, must be traced "by rational means to natural causes" (282–83). Yet the novel reaches no firm conclusion about the scene Penelope witnesses in which the Indians force their captive clairvoyant child to read the whereabouts of the Moonstone in an ink-stained palm. Nor does it, in Murthwaite's closing account, entirely dismiss a supernatural explanation for the eventual return of the stone to the Temple of Brahma. Occult possibilities linger, if only to titillate readerly nerves.

Moreover supernatural explanations and scientific investigations of the unconscious are conflated in one narrative point of view that dismisses both as disreputable: that of solid English skepticism. Betteredge dismisses Jennings's experiment as a "conjuring trick" (398), while also identifying belief in "the ability to see persons and things beyond the reach of human vision," as the effect "in our country, as well as in the East . . . [of a] curious hocus-pocus . . ." Above all, he is contemptuous of what he sees as a quintessentially un-English interest in the special powers of the mind, something which accounts perhaps for his instinctive distrust of Jennings and his natural liking for Cuff, despite the latter having insulted the family with his suspicion of Rachel. Cuff himself speaks only teasingly of the prophetic powers of the detective, when he informs Betteredge of three significant events that will expose both the hiding place and thief of the diamond, but these are happenings whose likelihood Cuff has determined through his professional skill at interpreting events via experience rather than through any special intuition (129). In this respect, Cuff manifests the same mental talents as Betteredge's English literary hero, Robinson Crusoe, whose physical and psychological survival of the castaway ordeal was achieved in large part by the careful recording of his daily experiences in a diary. In Defoe's novel, the diary form is in itself a sort of stand-in for realist narrative, as it binds together the day-to-day material realities of Crusoe's life—finding food, domesticating animals, protecting his enclosure, and so forth—with

the internal experience of these realities, the first-person account of the feelings of triumph, comfort, or despair that characterized his religious and emotional development. Cuff himself, reciprocating Betteredge's sentiment, often indicates his liking and approval of the latter, whom he describes in terms that seem to applaud his veracious narrative mode as much as the man himself: Betteredge is, Cuff praises, as "transparent as a child" (177).

But *The Moonstone* has little formally in common with *Robinson Crusoe*. Murthwaite and Jennings dismiss the possibility of supernatural agency in the disappearance of the stone; yet their grasp of the way that nervous automata affect knowledge suggest that the mystery cannot be resolved through the systematic approach of Defoean realism, where truth is secured by consulting the conscious mind's record of events and thoughts as they have occurred over time. Too much is stored in the subliminal mind to make this "child-like" transparency possible. If the sequence of events and the subjective states that precipitate them (not to mention the thrill of their revelation) are rooted in nervous activity that takes place beneath the conscious threshold, then the investigation of a crime must be simultaneously the interrogation of the "lowest" mental activity. *The Moonstone* stresses that this very form of inquiry engages the primitive, dreamy movements of the mind. The investigator must be more than a careful and exact observer; it is the opium-addicted "Easterner," traveling in dreams with "the phantoms of the dead" (392), who can fully reconstruct the sequence of events and the reasons for their occurrence. Jennings's success suggests that the scientific mind should not be sequestered from the visions associated with weakness and nervousness.

Doyle's detective stories deliver very similar conclusions. However, in his characterization of Holmes, scientific observation and dreamy intuition converge specifically in the resurgence of savage traits, or atavism. Like *The Moonstone*, the Holmes stories resist the plots of degeneracy in which only the sanitizing influence of the ordered, reasoning mind can restore nervous and social health to a corrupted physiology and a degraded culture. Instead, criminal and immoral acts are uncovered by the more obscure workings of genius. Understood as a resurgence of peculiar ancestral talents, genius invokes the figure of the savage to suggest not contemporary moral decline but rather the recovery of mental riches stored in the subliminal mind and therefore normally unavailable to conscious thought. In this way, detective genius anticipates the spiritualist focus of Doyle's later work. Holmes's genius is intuitive rather than rational and, it turns out, as worthy an object of scientific and psychical investigation as are the strangest phenomena of the séance room.

III. THE SAVAGE GENIUS OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

Like the story of the moonstone, the history of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson begins in the East. When they first meet in *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson is an itinerant medical veteran of the Second Afghan War who, sick and rootless, without “kith or kin” in England, is naturally drawn to London, “that great cesspool into which all the loungers and idlers of the empire are irreversibly drained.”⁴⁰ Lacking emotional ties, physical strength, and purpose of any real kind, Watson seems to illustrate the “feverish restlessness” and “blunted discouragement” that Nordau describes as symptoms of the age (*Degeneration*, 2). Watson’s identification with urban refuse of the empire, together with his metaphor of the metropolitan landscape as cultural sewer, suggests Nordau’s degenerative “feeling[s] of immanent perdition and extinction” (2), and emphasizes both the pervasiveness of modern social decay and the destructive potential of insalubrious influences that lurk within the civilized world as much as they do on its remote peripheries. Although, in his association with Holmes, Watson will not only remove himself from these influences but also actively help to cleanse late Victorian England of its morally most unsavory and dangerous elements, the threat of contagious degeneration is apparently never very far away even in the business of criminal detective work. The dandyish Holmes himself is subject to depression, has a taste for the Romantic composers, and has an addiction to cocaine that compromises a lifestyle otherwise remarkable for its “temperance and cleanliness” (*Study*, 1).

Yet once Watson meets Holmes and agrees to share accommodation with him, he begins to recover respectability and civility. Suddenly the “lowest portions of the city” (13) have nothing to do with him and the attention that had been dangerously “objectless” becomes focused on the character and methods of his companion. Watson then becomes healthier in mind as well as body, and he transmutes into the practical-minded Englishman whose personality provides a narrative counterweight to Holmes’s own often dreamy eccentricity.⁴¹ Despite his peculiar character, there is much Cufflike intelligence in Holmes, and it is no surprise that he has a healing effect on Watson. The detective’s extraordinary powers of ratiocination, his skill at interpreting evidence, and his ability to empty his memory of superfluous cultural knowledge so as to retain only a perfectly ordered collection of facts provide an antidotal influence to the aimlessness and excessiveness of Nordau’s fin de siècle. For Holmes, burdening the mind with “small matters” like Copernican theory jumbles thought so much as to risk mental torpor (15). He is thus the antithesis of Nordau’s degenerate, who, like the formerly

dissolute Watson, is unable “to fix his attention long, or indeed at all, on any subject, and [is thus] equally incapable of correctly grasping, ordering, or elaborating into ideas and judgments the impressions of the external world” (*Degeneration*, 21).

The healing of Watson has its counterpart in the healing of the city, whose criminal underworld is exposed and frustrated by the penetrating detective mind.⁴² In narrative form, correspondingly, the stories themselves conduct a kind of self-purging of sinister or barbarous elements. The realism of detective fiction, refusing to shy away from the most brutal elements of modern life and truthfully recording what it sees, encounters and overcomes that fiction’s own attraction to the Gothic—to the horrific, the concealed, and the (often) apparently supernatural. The dark alleyways and subterranean passages of criminal London, hidden behind and beneath the houses of the respectable and well-to-do as well as in the poorest and most desperate parts of the city, are exposed to the light of discovery that shines from 221B Baker Street. Yet the stories do not fully expel the Gothic. For one thing, the miraculous findings of deductive reasoning seem sometimes so improbably achieved that the work of ratiocination blurs with mysticism; Holmes may have a superbly logical mind, but he also has a divinatory gift, and the stories intrude primitive nervous activity into the most evolutionarily advanced nervous and social networks—intellectual inquiry and civilized modernity. As Srdjan Smajic puts it, Holmes’s ratiocination “has something oddly intuitive about it.”⁴³ Moreover, the stories tend to linger distractingly on Gothic tropes: *A Study in Scarlet* opens with the spectacle of writing in blood; “The Man with the Twisted Lip,” centers on disguise and the double life; “The Speckled Band” is set in a haunted mansion; and so on. Although Holmes brings these mysteries to light, he does so through his own mysterious disappearances and reappearances in the murky criminal underworlds or other sinister settings that give these mysteries life. Illuminatory realism struggles against the sensational attractions of the Gothic.⁴⁴

Given that this realist–Gothic hybrid promises to exacerbate the attenuated nervous state associated with thrill and superstition, the Holmes stories might be seen to manifest behavioral and aesthetic signs of degeneracy. Yet if they depict the peculiar recesses of the mind on which Holmes draws as an atavistic throwback to primitive mental talents rather than morbid deviation from a higher form, then they in fact challenge the principles of *dégénérescence*. Morel declared that evidence of degeneration could be found in the abnormal features or “stigmata” of inheritable physical, mental, and moral disease that are carried, often invisibly, through succeeding generations. These features, he argues, are sometimes brought into prominence by

particular environmental circumstances, but they often remain concealed for long periods of time, surfacing as a variety of individual ailments that collectively promise to undermine social order and the health of the nation as a whole.⁴⁵ Atavism, on the other hand, which was central to the Italian school of positivist criminology, describes the unexpected reappearance in a single organism of ancestral characteristics, often very remote ones. Unlike degeneration, atavism, which Darwin emphasized is represented in the “astonishing” appearance of traits from a distant ancestor,⁴⁶ defies neo-Lamarckian principles, since atavistic features are not the directly inherited modifications determined by an organism’s relationship with its environment as vestigial or degenerated forms might be. Moreover, although atavism, particularly Lombroso’s taxonomy of criminal stigmata, was appropriated by the language of degeneration, it does not in itself carry any implications of pervasive biological and social decline since, on the contrary, it highlights the anomalous status of the throwback.

That atavism does not imply degeneracy was a subject of debate in the last decades of the century. In *The Criminal* (1890), which he wrote in order to bring England up-to-date with continental developments in criminal anthropology, Havelock Ellis defends the use of the term “atavism” to describe the progressive degeneration within families and the “rising flood of criminality” that occurs as a consequence.⁴⁷ The argument that “degenerescence and atavism are two absolutely distinct facts,” he objects, is disproved when we consider that reversion to older and lower physical, mental, and social states—all of which are increasingly visible conditions in the diseased modern nation—can very probably be said to have a pathological cause and that pathology itself “is the science of anomalies.”⁴⁸ For Maudsley, reversion to savage or even lower animal characteristics reveals the “evil ancestral influences”⁴⁹ latent within civilization, but he stresses with Morel that these are expressed in degeneration, as the “germs of a morbid variety” are passed down “from generation to generation” culminating in “the extreme degeneracy of idiocy.”⁵⁰ Talbot’s *Degeneracy*, on the other hand, identifies atavism as the feature of heredity that determines diversity within a species. Degeneracy, like Spencer’s dissolution, is the effect of a “gradual change of structures by which the organism becomes adapted to less varied and less complex conditions of life”⁵¹ and determined by the principle of the inheritance of such acquired modifications. Atavism, by contrast, “tends to preserve the type and offsets the influence of degeneracy.”⁵²

For Doyle, as a member of the SPR and an increasingly committed spiritualist, the difference between degeneracy and atavism was crucial. His stories demonstrate what could be called the persistence of a primitive mind

that cannot be collapsed into the symptoms of moral and social degeneration that characterize the metropolitan underworld. The mysterious powers that this mind reveals testify to human evolutionary potential as much as to our savage past and that past's lasting expression in a crime-infested present. The instances of atavism in these stories, we shall see, encourage his fin-de-siècle audience less to read the tendencies of prehistoric man into the social problems of late nineteenth-century England than to take the scientific study of human faculties into a primitive past in which ancient mental talents recognize otherworldly dimensions of knowledge and experience.

Despite the healthier state of mind it encourages in him, Watson's life with Holmes and his involvement in the detective's work is not without its moments of doubt and distress. In the early days, he retains the suspicion of a séance-room skeptic, as "there still remained some lurking suspicion in my mind . . . that the whole thing was a prearranged episode, intended to dazzle me" (*Study*, 23). Later in their career together, this uncertainty about Holmes's genuineness develops into ambivalence about the moral safety of crime-solving work itself. In "A Case of Identity," Watson observes that the stories of criminal violence, often domestic, reported in the papers are "rude, bald, and vulgar," thus suggesting "realism pushed to its extreme limits."⁵³ His fear is that the work of criminal detection is procedurally allied with the lowest forms of realist narrative—sensation fiction and naturalism—both of which satisfy the contemporary appetite for representations of the morally ugliest and most brutal symptoms of modern life. Where he had once doubted the authenticity of Holmes's methods, speculating that such arch positivism could only be rehearsed and pretended observation, he now feels corrupted by his own involvement in a business that is so readily commoditized for a sensation-hungry public. In either case, realism, the narrative method that (like Holmes's strategies of detection) creates a true picture by recording and ordering a multitude of facts, risks degenerating into mere spectacle. Holmes, however, calms Watson by insisting that "there is nothing so unnatural as the commonplace," thus distinguishing the true job of criminal detection from the sham realism of sensation fiction. Police reports and newspaper stories lay more stress "upon the platitudes of the magistrate than upon the details, which to an observer contain the vital essence of the whole matter" ("Case," 75). In its true incarnation (as detective fiction), then, realism is a bulwark against the degenerate literary forms and appetites that affect the age.

Although it was published four years before the English edition of *Degeneration*, Doyle's story thus seems to anticipate and answer Nordau's assault on realism as the literary manifestation of pervasive nervous and

cultural decay in the late nineteenth century. Realism's impressionistic sacrificing of the concept to mere sensory stimulation, Nordau accuses, fails to engage the higher centers of the brain in which true knowledge of phenomena is produced through reason and judgment. Moreover, through the vehicle of "milieu," realist novelists have the arrogance to theorize about and experiment with the impact of environment on character without any of the systematic assembling of facts that has been undertaken in biological science and criminal anthropology. The result, he claims, is not only an erroneous but also a decadent portrait of the social world in which sexual pathologies, brutal behavior toward one's fellow creatures, and hysteric disorders become the norm. "The would-be 'realist,'" he pronounces, who "sees the sober reality as little as a superstitiously timid savage," manifests the primitive mental activity and intellectual and moral laziness of a generation that is witnessing the end of civilization (495). For Doyle's detective hero, on the other hand, the careful assembling of facts without selection or discretion, facts that ultimately announce the truth on their own, is precisely the means by which criminal and moral insanity can be exposed and punished.

But of course this is not really how Holmes finds his man, nor does it accurately describe his character. Holmes could not be less like his fact-loving literary forefather, Thomas Gradgrind. For one thing he has a dreamy appreciation of art and music. Music, in particular, he proposes, citing Darwin, calls up not exact knowledge but rather "vague memories in our souls of those misty centuries when the world was in its childhood" (*Study*, 42). Second, the bare facts alone do not lead to his divining of the meaning behind the mystery. Indeed, Watson admires the way in which Holmes can unravel a detective puzzle without leaving his room, where other men who have seen every detail surrounding it remain baffled, and Holmes describes the rules of deduction that enable him to do so as "intuitive" (*Study*, 20). Apparently having intuited Watson's earlier skepticism about his methods (along with the probable story behind the murder), he then jokingly compares his mysterious deductive powers to the "conjurer's trick." Hence while Watson praises Holmes for bestowing the status of "exact science" (36) on criminal detection, the latter betrays how his methods employ something of the psychically supernormal, even if, perhaps, like even the most genuine séance room, they inevitably also contain something of the theatrical.

"A Case of Identity" opens with Holmes suggesting that the supernormal interpretative powers of the detective, if properly realized, would generate knowledge and appreciation of the marvels of nature in ways that far outstrip any awareness of the world that either ordinary perception or existing liter-

ary conventions are capable of producing. To really grasp criminal goings-on in London, he proposes, he and Watson would need to

fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generations, and leading to the most *outré* results, it would make all fiction with its conventionalities and foreseen conclusions most stale and unprofitable. (75)

Doyle draws on a convention that Peter Brooks recognizes in realism of doll-house play: The artificial device of Alain-René Le Sage's *Le Diable boîteux* (1707), wherein a supernatural figure reveals the private lives of the city by removing all the rooftops, becomes the figure for panoramic and penetrative narrative vision in novels by Balzac and Dickens.⁵⁴ Here, the fantastic ability to see events not only from the bird's eye but from the perspective of an airborne voyeur would, in turn, expose not the moral bleakness of a city awash in criminal activity but the marvelous and the extraordinary realities whose existence it is beyond the capacity of the ordinary senses to grasp. Such "a wonderful chain of events" seems to invoke the complexity of Darwin's "entangled bank" where "elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us."⁵⁵ Yet these realities are also psychologically *outré*: excessive, improbable, beyond the pale of what can be known empirically to the mind. Although detectives, unlike benevolent devils, cannot fly or lift off rooftops, the best of them are gifted with a form of intuition that analogously enables them to see more than the human faculties normally make possible.⁵⁶

Such vision might belong to the class of remarkable psychological phenomena examined by members of the SPR, including clairvoyance, spirit materializations, and thought transference. The society was formed in 1882 in order to investigate "amid much delusion and deception, an important body of remarkable phenomena, which are *prima facie* inexplicable on any generally recognized hypothesis, and which, if incontestably established, would be of the highest possible value."⁵⁷ Despite the findings of some key members in its early decades that the empirical evidence of human immortality remained inconclusive at best,⁵⁸ the society endeavored to lift investigations of spiritualism beyond the simple testimony of believers, on the one hand, and the prosecuting actions of the law on the other, so as to make the study of occult phenomena genuinely scientific. This was particularly the

case when, after 1886, many disaffected spiritualists abandoned the organization, leaving it largely in the hands of its intellectual founders. Although the attitudes of these and later prominent members ranged from steady skepticism, like that of Henry Sidgwick and Frank Podmore, to profound spiritualist faith, like that of Alfred Russel Wallace, Fredrick Myers, and Doyle himself, the members shared a frustration with the limiting of natural-scientific inquiry to the material world and sought to expand its framework to include nonmaterial objects and events.⁵⁹

Doyle himself became a member of the society in 1891, although his interest in spiritualism developed a good decade earlier. Despite his reservations about the antisensationalism of the society's investigative work, which, he said, sometimes undermined its effectiveness, and although he later resigned his membership over what he considered to be the organization's betrayal of the spiritualist cause, he maintained even in his later life that the society did "splendid work" that "helped me to shape my thoughts."⁶⁰ Such work provides the intellectual complement to the ideological struggles of spiritualism itself, since the latter, he proposes in *The History of Spiritualism*, challenges the nearsightedness of conventional nineteenth-century scientific intelligence, both because spiritualism represents "a survival of savagery" and because it demands rethinking of the parameters of scientific investigation.⁶¹ Doyle's spiritualist writings postdate nearly all of the Holmes stories. However, his emphases on legitimating the study of supernormal phenomena in mainstream science and on the primitive character of mystical experience suggest the interpretive preoccupations and atavistic mental talents of his detective hero as much as they advocate for spiritualist faith.

In the decade that Holmes became a celebrity, Myers was exploring the notion of a subliminal self whose powers might include thought transference, precognition, and the ability to communicate with disembodied spirits. Its more mundane task, he suggested, was to preserve all the sensory experiences that an organism expels from primary consciousness in a subliminal memory. When data from the subliminal self leaks into the supraliminal mind or conscious threshold, he proposed, it can introduce either retrocognition, the "knowledge of the past extending back beyond the reach of our ordinary memory," or precognition, "knowledge of the future, extending onwards beyond the scope of our ordinary inference."⁶² Such knowledge may be manifest in dreams, telepathy, or clairvoyant perception, and it may include information that extends back beyond that recorded by a single life, in which case it is communicated to the subliminal mind either directly by departed spirits or by objects that retain the trace of those departed souls. These objects are thereby rendered, in language that

seems to echo Charles Lyell's reading of the fossil, "luminescent with the age-long story of the past."⁶³ When we explore the action of the subliminal self, Myers suggests in *Human Personality and Its Survival after Bodily Death*, we discover both the childish weakness and the profound hidden powers of the human organism. The subliminal mind demonstrates both a readiness to "obey the whims of the hypnotist," or to succumb to its own self-suggestions in the case of hysteria, on the one hand, and a capacity for fantastic cognition, on the other (1:45). Curiously then, this dimension of mind is the source of both the most primitive and the most expansive elements of mental life.

Myers's critics included other members of the society like Podmore, who was incredulous of much of the supernatural phenomena recorded by his colleagues. Yet in 1895, Podmore defended Myers's theory of the subliminal self against Arthur Pierce's claim that this supposed secondary consciousness was merely a symptom of physiological disorders (such as hysteria) wherein memories and sensations may be suppressed from and then restored to consciousness. We infer as much about physical activity in the brain as we do about mental states, Podmore points out, and therefore the observed facts do not compel us to reduce all mental phenomena to cerebral events. "Subliminal consciousness" may be as useful a way of explaining unusual events in the mind as Pierce's account of overtaxed nerve channels is useful for thinking about what happens in the brain. Podmore then inquires whether abnormal mental states might reveal something about the psychological evolution of human beings. In the subliminal consciousness, he suggests,

We come across memories of childhood and many old forgotten things; we [also] come across traces of long lost but once serviceable faculties—telepathy, sense of time, of direction, of weight; we acquire partial control over our bodily functions—digestion, circulation, and the like—which civilized man has learned to acquiesce in as beyond his guidance. . . . [The subliminal consciousness] show[s] us what we have once had, and have not yet wholly lost.⁶⁴

This conjecture is not so very different from Doyle's proposal in *The History of Spiritualism*; that is, those who are capable of spirit communion may be the few members of the "complex races"⁶⁵ who grasp the primitive secrets of our species, thereby explaining why they are often to be found in ruder communities like those of the American provinces.⁶⁶ Wallace, too, observed that the powers of second sight are more frequent and energetic in remote, mountainous terrain and among uncivilized races.⁶⁷

In *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, Myers speculates that the subliminal consciousness might give us the kind of mental access to automatic functions in our bodies that humans achieved more readily at an earlier evolutionary stage. When inspiration bursts into the mind, he proposes, we come “one step nearer to primitive reality than in that specialized consensus of faculties which natural selection has lifted above the threshold for the purposes of working-day existence” (1:97). In other words, human evolution has suppressed the agency of the primitive mind by limiting the size and number of portals through which it can penetrate the conscious threshold. Subliminal modes of perception direct us to the “unguessed potentialities from the primal germ” (1:98). These may take the form of profound inspiration or genius, or they may manifest in hysterical disintegrations of personality, where the ordinary flow of thoughts is paralyzed by an *idée fixe*, a terror that reaches back not only to childhood fears but to “a prehistoric past” and “the vanished perils of primitive man” (1:41). Natural selection has repressed these primitive emotions and perceptions, he argues, in order that we can keep the ideas we need for ordinary working, waking life easily within reach. Yet we have glimpses of their power in the form of nervous collapse as well as in that of inspired genius.

Myers thus conceives of genius as a form of automatic mental performance as well as a “flash of the supernormal” onto the supraliminal consciousness (1:107). The man who is guided solely by ratiocination, the complex work of the supraliminal mind alone, is destined to mediocrity. In linking genius so closely with nervous pathologies like hysteria, he seems to echo Nordau’s claim that the inspiration of genius belongs to the same category of nervous pathologies as the inspiration of the mystic. For Nordau, such “hallucinations” are the product of a disturbed mind in which the imagination responds to memory-images rather than sense perceptions, thus permitting the association of ideas to predominate over the higher activities of judgment and reasoning, which, in a healthy organism, receive and order these sense perceptions. Epilepsy, hysterical delirium, and the degeneration manifest in mystics—so-called realists, aesthetes, egomaniacs, and the morally insane—are all heritable, morbid consequences of this nervous and mental disorganization in which a train of associations leads the mind away from the true realities of the external world toward disturbed and “ghostly presentations” (56). Myers too links genius to mysticism, since he attributes both to the psychical work that goes on beneath the conscious threshold. Yet he argues that supernormal perceptions, rather than being symptoms of nervous exhaustion and moral and cultural decline, are the stuff of currently unimaginable truths accessible only to the subliminal mind.

Myers's emphasis on the atavistic event of genius, the moment of inspiration as an explosion of primitive knowledge into the evolved, civilized psyche, in fact brings him closer to Lombroso than to Nordau, for whom genius represents only one of so many morbid erosions of a healthier type. In his review of *Degeneration*, Lombroso praises Nordau for identifying how genius is a form of degenerative neurosis, yet cautions him not to dismiss the extraordinary productions of artistic genius as merely symptoms of mental disease.⁶⁸ In *The Man of Genius* Lombroso, like Nordau, links such gifts of the mind to criminal insanity and mysticism, and he suggests that all three tend to run together in families, thus indicating progressive degeneration of the line. Yet he also argues that both genius and insanity are expressed in an atavistic resurgence of the ancestral mind—whether that of the prophets or occultists of ancient times or to the strange precocious brilliance of present-day savages. The powerful, divinatory conceptions of modern-day genius, like the impulsive acts of the insane, “suddenly burst forth” as they did out of the premodern minds of prophets, saints, and demoniacs.⁶⁹ Hence the shared isolation and “hypnotic condition”⁷⁰ of the genius and the madman, neither of whom can “be restrained within the bounds of common sense” or made to respect immediate realities.⁷¹ Lombroso's genius, like Myers's, has a power of divination “which precede[s] all common observation.”⁷² Given that Lombroso does not miss the opportunity to comment on Nordau's own genius and the “gaps and errors”⁷³ that inevitably accompany it (in this case his overzealous condemnation of so many great artists), it is hard to imagine that he would not look wryly back on his own account of the revelatory moment in which he became convinced that the anatomy of delinquent criminals, their “stigmata,” expressed traces of our remote ancestry:

“This was not merely an idea, but a revelation. At the sight of that skull, I seemed to see all of a sudden, lighted up as a vast plain under a flaming sky, the problem of the nature of the criminal—an atavistic being who reproduces in his person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals. Thus were explained anatomically the enormous jaws, high cheek bones, prominent superciliary arches, solitary lines in the palms, extreme size of the orbits, handle-shaped ears found in criminals, savages and apes, insensibility to pain . . . and the irresponsible craving of evil for its own sake, the desire not only to extinguish life in the victim, but to mutilate the corpse, tear its flesh, and drink its blood.”⁷⁴

Lombroso's discovery is nothing short of a revelation of genius. Given the proximity of intellectual inspiration to criminal insanity and present-day

savagery that he identifies in *The Man of Genius*, this account suggests his not-so-distant relation to the blood-drinking criminal lunatics who revive the violent instincts of primitive humankind.

The risk of embarrassment by this association perhaps explains why Henry Maudsley endeavors to distinguish between the genius, whose organic variation is “evolutional,” and the madman, whose is “pathological and degenerative.”⁷⁵ Nonetheless, in arguing for atavism as a principle of variation in breeding contesting that of simple heredity, Maudsley too is forced to link manifestations of genius to primitive ancestry. Atavism, he argues, the “latency or dormancy of ancestral qualities that afterwards wake again to open activity,” is the principle at work in the individuation in the species, whereas the law of heredity determines the preservation of that species’ character.⁷⁶ If one child in a family should manifest symptoms of insanity and another of genius, this has less to do with their shared “pathology,” than with the “deep-lying potentialities of the family stock.”⁷⁷ There is scant evidence, he corrects the eugenicist Francis Galton, that genius is hereditary; rather its rarity suggests that it represents an unstable variation which is corrected by the normalizing and stabilizing influence of heredity.

Any late-century account of heredity and atavism is of course indebted to Darwin’s use of instances of anomalous primitive physiology in some humans as evidence of our descent from a lower primate. What he describes in *The Origin* as the “well-known principle of reversion to ancestral characteristics” enables us to reconstruct how our early progenitors looked and behaved.⁷⁸ Ellis identifies Darwin as the father of criminal anthropology, highlighting the latter’s observations in *The Descent of Man* about the phenomenon of the “black sheep,” as well as his suggestion that some of humankind’s “worst dispositions . . . may perhaps be reversions to a primitive state.”⁷⁹ Much more useful to Darwin’s account of human social development than the relatively rare incidents of reversion, however, is the living evidence of our past in the form of present-day savage societies. The amazement that he describes in *The Voyage of the Beagle* at the “wide difference between savage and civilized man,” highlights at once the proximity and the enormous distance between them.⁸⁰ “Savages,” as Cannon Schmitt has put it, are “living mnemonic devices” for Darwin, enabling him to recover the early history of humankind and its subsequent development (the myriad of tiny events that Holmes deems essential to any true understanding of life) while marveling at the fantastic power of natural selection to create civilized scientific observers out of primitive, unreflecting animals.⁸¹ If atavism seems disturbingly to create a bridge across this enormous evolutionary gulf, such disturbance can be neutralized, for Darwin, by invoking the absolute alterity of existing savage communities.

However, once savage man is interpolated more aggressively into the civilized world (becoming visible either in the form of the pervasive cultural influence of degeneracy or in the aberrant tendencies of the criminally insane and the intellectually *outré*), this distance cannot be so easily maintained. The reincarnation of primitive man, hitherto encountered primarily in the figure of the colonial savage, occurs in the late nineteenth-century discourses of degeneration and atavism as a socially destructive influence *within* the civilized world, displayed on the bodies of European criminals in the form of stigmata that in turn link those bodies to those of the non-European savage.⁸² Late nineteenth-century criminal anthropology thus not only directed scientific investigation to humankind's greater history; it also indicated the enduring human potential for violence and madness as well as for exceptional acts of perception.

Crime fiction, like the technologies of fingerprinting and anthropometric analysis that were introduced to police work in the late nineteenth-century, can perhaps be seen to endorse Lombroso's insistently positivist approach to the study of human behavior.⁸³ Holmes, after all, claims that one can know almost anything about a man "by his fingernails, by his coat sleeve, by his boots, by his trouser-knees, by the callosities of his forefinger and thumb, by his expression, [and] by his shirt-cuffs" (*Study*, 28). Yet the maturing of the detective novel is contemporary, not only with the development of criminal anthropology but also with theories of the unconscious mind or subliminal awareness. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Doyle at once references the interpretive techniques of criminal anthropology and pointedly links the activity of the subliminal mind with atavism. While the supposed agency of some otherworldly diabolical force is exposed as fraud, the man who discovers it is mentally and physically associated with the exceptional mental powers of his criminal opponents.

The Holmes of this story—part stand-in omniscient narrator, part scientific experimenter who sets much of the action in motion and then removes himself to watch the results—has "the power of detaching his mind at will" and removes himself mentally from the world of crime when he is not focused on a case.⁸⁴ Here this detachment takes the form of art appreciation rather than an apparently narcotic-induced catalepsy of earlier stories in which he "lie[s] upon the sofa . . . hardly uttering a word or moving a muscle from morning to night" (*Study*, 24). Nonetheless, as the earlier stories have already shown, this apparent split in Holmes between the dreamy bohemian and the "reasoning and observing machine" barely disguises the way in which his subliminal mind also becomes part of the apparatus of detection.⁸⁵ One of the qualities that Watson admires about Holmes is that his deduc-

tions, while rooted in logical reasoning, are so rapid as to be “swift as intuitions.”⁸⁶ What turns reason into intuition, Holmes himself has explained to a client in *A Study in Scarlet*, is “the train of thoughts [that] run so swiftly through my mind that I [arrive] at the conclusion without being conscious of intermediate steps” (20). His description of the work done by subliminal consciousness seems to challenge a distinction that William Benjamin Carpenter makes between, on the one hand, the withdrawal from external reality and the surrender of will to automatic activity and, on the other hand, the volitional “vigorous mind”⁸⁷ (640). Holmes’s extraordinary reasoning powers are intuitive because they belong to the subliminal mind as much, if not more, than they do to conscious thoughts.

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, such mental magic becomes quite explicitly linked with the theme of reversion. Doyle transports his detective hero from Baker Street to the Devonshire moor, where, unbeknownst to Watson, he hides out to observe the goings on of the various suspects in the murder of Sir Charles Baskerville. Here, in the company of at least one criminal savage—the escaped convict—he is also camping amid the ruined monuments of prehistoric human culture. The Neolithic wigwams out of which Watson expects to see crawl a “skin-clad, hairy man,” instead house Holmes (77–78). This discovery is especially peculiar because it substitutes the detective for the animallike criminal who himself seems a throwback to the “old savages” of the Moor: The convict has “an evil yellow face, a terrible animal face, all seamed and scored with vile passions. Foul with mire, with a bristling beard, and hung with matted hair, it might well have belonged to one of those old savages who dwelt in the burrows on the hillsides” (97). Ironically, in the opening chapter of the novel, Dr. Mortimer expresses his astonishment at the shape of Holmes’s skull, which is oddly “dolichocephalic” and which exhibits “well-marked, superorbital development” (8). A follower of the French criminologist, Alphonse Bertillon, who developed the anthropometric system for criminal identification, Mortimer cannot help linking cranial morphology to individual development and disposition. He is so struck by the Neolithic characteristics of the detective’s skull, features that seem remarkable in a man with such mental accomplishments, that he remarks that a cast of it would provide a valuable addition to an anthropological museum.⁸⁸

Despite this possibility that, in Holmes’s skull, science might find evidence for the atavistic physiology of genius as compelling as that for the stigmata of criminal violence, we are initially more inclined to pair the detective with Mortimer so as to, as Holmes himself puts it, join the methods of the “man of science” with those of the “specialist in crime” (7). Together they are

capable of deducing the whereabouts of the convict and any link he might have with the Baskerville murder. Indeed, Mortimer's reputation as a medical scientist provides the first clue to the mystery. We have been expecting the convict to emerge from one of these burrows, not only because Watson and Sir Henry have seen his light on the moor but also because we were alerted to the theme of ancestral throwback early in the story. Dr. Mortimer, we are told even before we meet him, is the author of essays on comparative pathology titled, "Is Disease a Reversion?" "Do We Progress?" and "Some Freaks of Atavism" (6). His professional résumé will prove more significant than even Holmes suspects, since the fact eventually emerges that Sir Charles's killer is himself a Baskerville descendent, marvelously identical in all his facial features as well as his brutal character to the seventeenth-century Sir Hugo Baskerville, whose crime against a local beauty and subsequent terrible death is the source of the strange legend of the murderous hound. It turns out, then, that the biological fact of ancestral reversion reveals the truth of the Baskerville curse even while it empties that legend of supernatural content. But strangely (and in plot terms, rather superfluously) Holmes must set up camp in the ancient landscape and live like prehistoric man in order to discover this uncanny truth.

When he exposes the villain, Holmes declares that the study of atavism in old family portraits might convert him to a belief in reincarnation. The improbability that he would turn spiritualist perhaps suggests that his appearance, magicianlike, in place of the criminal savage, is merely a conjuring trick on Doyle's part to enhance narrative suspense rather than a genuine effort to link the fantastic mind of the detective with the activity of our Neolithic forebears. In the opening pages of the story, after all, Holmes reveals to the astounded Watson that he observed what the latter was studying, without looking at it and with the help of a "well-polished silver-plated coffee-pot" (3). He also teases Watson by telling him that, while his body has been in an armchair, he has been "in spirit" to Devonshire, when in fact he has merely been reading an ordnance map of the moor (27). Yet these revelations about the material truth behind apparently spiritual phenomena, a prelude to Holmes's exposure of the murderer's "trick" of using phosphorous to create his hell hound, do not entirely represent Holmes's methods any more than the ordnance map captures the spirit of the moor. The "primitive" Holmes seems to be a mysterious creation of the moor itself, which appears "like some fantastic landscape in a dream" (5) and which restores ancient forms to life. It is a place where, Watson observes, one is so mentally transported into the prehistoric age that one would not be surprised to see "a skin-clad, hairy man crawl out from the low door" (77). When Sir Henry first catches sight

of the country where his forefathers have left their mark, his attention is so powerfully drawn to it that he ceases to look to Watson like a tweed-coated American in “the corner of a prosaic railway carriage,” and becomes instead a “true descendent . . . of that long line of high-blooded, fiery, and masterful men” (56). This sudden appearance of the family likeness is of course the prelude to the climactic moment when Stapleton’s face will step out of the portrait of Sir Hugh.

Fixed on the object of enquiry as Sir Henry is fixed in rapt gaze upon this landscape, Holmes also undergoes a physical transformation. When he is working on a case, his “intense mental concentration” has the effect of blotting out the memories that influence ordinary perception (160). This gift of self-hypnosis equips him with the marvelous vision that penetrates the secrets of the criminal mind. In Watson’s narrative, however, such vision also lends Holmes a supernatural stature. Before he reveals himself in the Neolithic ruins, Holmes appears to Watson one evening “outlined as black as an ebony statue on [the] shining background” of the moon (98). Too tall to be the convict, he becomes the mysterious figure on the moor, the rival specter to the hound and the “the unseen watcher, the man of darkness” (105). In his report to the Holmes he believes to be at home in Baker Street, Watson insists it was not a delusion. Yet the explanation that emerges when Holmes reveals himself seems scarcely more credible than the possibility that the moor is inhabited by multiple phantoms and that the danger to its living inhabitants does not come from flesh-and-blood villains alone. Human and mundane as it is revealed to be, the apparently supernatural knowledge and command of the moor expressed in the stature of the “spirit” Holmes is neutralized neither by the natural, yet extraordinary, explanation for his appearance nor by the teasing exhibitions and debunking of “clairvoyance” with which Holmes taunts Watson earlier in the novel.

With his invention of a new kind of detective—a scientific investigator who also possesses the primitive gifts of supernormal vision—Doyle thus creates characters and scenes that at once suggest something comic or preposterous and yet at the same time genuinely attract us to the heroic and the miraculous. Holmes’s prodigious appearance on the moor, strangely contrasting with his jibes about clairvoyance and superstition, embodies something of Doyle’s claims for spiritualism in his *History* that “laughed at, it laughs back; scorned, it gives back scorn for scorn.”⁸⁹ Holmes’s subtle mocking of his own mysterious powers, however, also anticipates a combining of the absurd and the illuminatory that will characterize the rather more eccentric scientific character of Professor Challenger. Challenger is the truly atavistic genius, at once an intellectual marvel who can discover truth in the naturally

impossible and a man of violent and intolerant temperament. In “When the World Screamed,” he is a “cave-man in a lounge suit . . . born out of his millennium”;⁹⁰ like the moor-residing Holmes of “The Hounds of the Baskervilles,” Challenger rightly belongs “to the early Neolithic.”⁹¹ In *The Lost World*, he represents an even more radical form of reversion. Here the principle of atavism drives the entire plot: A team of scientists and adventurers discover a plateau in South America where human beings coexist with all the vertebrate animals that have preceded them in evolutionary history. Challenger’s squat, heavy figure, beard, and hairy chest pair him, bizarrely, with the king of a species of bloodthirsty anthropoid apes. Unlike Holmes, however, who seems to be aware of the ironic links Doyle’s stories make between savage intuition and scientific discovery, Challenger is the last to admit the comic truth that the king appears to be an “absurd parody” of him.⁹² Similarly, in “The Land of Mist,” where he reluctantly learns, finally, to admit spiritual phenomena into the arena of scientific facts and possibilities, he remains quite unconscious of the irony of his earlier remark that the séance is best suited to “the stone cabin of a Neolithic savage.”⁹³

If the last laugh on Challenger comes from the spiritualist narrator of “The Land of Mist,” Holmes can be outwitted only by his invented intellectual match: the evil genius Professor Moriarty. Their encounter, in “The Final Problem,” brings Holmes’s career to a narrative close, not only because he and the professor plunge over the falls of Reichenbach together but also because the communication between two such men is so purely telepathic that words become unnecessary: Moriarty observes to Holmes that “all I have to say has already crossed your mind,” and the detective replies that then “possibly my answer has crossed yours.”⁹⁴ Doyle brings his detective hero back to life in 1901 in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, with the implication that this story takes place chronologically before the tragedy at the falls. Yet however wry and eloquent, he returns as the yet-living master crime solver, he also seems to have come back as a ghost, with the supernatural vision that he had forecast through the image of the flying detective that introduces “A Case of Identity.” Silhouetted on the moor, Holmes has literally transcended ordinary perception and moment-to-moment observation. He has positioned himself, narratorlike, over and above the goings on of ordinary mortals, so as to witness “the chain of events” as it “work[s] through generations” (“Case,” 75).

In so doing, Holmes elevates the events of the story above the sordid realism of family feuds and sensational scandal revealed in its closing pages and invokes instead the marvels of the subliminal mind. In the attitude of intense concentration, he is transformed in Watson’s eyes into the spirit of

the moor, breathing the ancient talents of his forebears into the mysteries of the present, even as he decodes these mysteries through the physical evidence of reversion. That which is primitive about the detective hero, linking the lower nervous organization of the addicted Jennings to the dreamy inspirations that fuel Holmes's discoveries, is not the expression of degenerative traits that counteract the patient accumulation of physical data but rather the deeper illumination of empirical facts by the agency of the subliminal or unconscious mind. Both Collins and Doyle introduce the spiritual talents of atavistic genius to the definite, commonplace truths of literary realism, so giving narrative life to Myers's prophecy of "making for a vaster future, by inheritance from a remoter past" (1:655).