When Bénédict Augustin Morel advanced his formative definition of degeneration as ‘a pathological deviation from an original type’ in his *Traité des dégénérescences* in 1857, Charles Darwin was getting his own grand treatise into shape. *On the Origin of Species* (1859), however, seems to work in the very opposite direction of Morel’s thoughts. Instead of degeneration, it traced the vagaries involved in the generative process of evolution by means of natural selection. At the same time, Darwin’s theory can be read as accommodating the spectre of its own inversion. Not only could degeneration be pictured as a species’ evolutionary development reeled off in reverse – evolutionary theory in itself contains the very notion of biological regression.

Post-Darwinian degenerationists combined ideas about the physical processes involved in (de)generation from both Morel and Darwin, and a detailed reading of the latter’s *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* (1871) can highlight those aspects of Darwinian evolutionary theory which lent themselves most readily to such a fusion. The following chapter traces the history of degeneration within the Victorian sciences from evolutionary biology, to criminology, psychopathology and sexology. Even though the writers assembled here have been chosen on the basis of their undisputed significance for their respective fields of inquiry, this is not to claim that Darwin, Thomas Henry Huxley, Cesare Lombroso, Henry Maudsley and Richard von Krafft-Ebing were the only voices who shaped the degeneration debate. The sciences in the Victorian age cut across disciplinary and national boundaries in a way that can seem remarkable and surprising from a twenty-first-century perspective, and I have tried to give a sense of the sheer vigour and polyphony of scientific exchange in the nineteenth century by also referencing other influential writers who engaged in the degeneration debate. In this chapter, I carve out and order the main themes that were discussed under the umbrella term ‘degeneration’ in the second half of the nineteenth century and thus aim to show how the debate’s focus was soon shifted from biological to moral and social issues. The possibility of atavistic reversion in hereditary processes, the biological innateness of
Degeneration and the Victorian Sciences

criminal behaviour, the potential invisibility and contagiousness of degenerative conditions – all of these concerns conflated the biological and the social. Furthermore, this chapter investigates how far the degenerationists conceptualised notions of normativity and the normal in their work, as the incessant examination of biological, criminal and psychological deviance raises the question about what constitutes the normative standard from which a deviation has supposedly occurred. As we shall see, Victorian degenerationists attempted to sever the connection between their deviant objects of study and their investigating normative selves by making visible what they simultaneously believed to be undetectable. Thus this chapter will also reveal a subtle mechanism of self-deconstruction inherent in degeneration discourse that has important ramifications for the redefinition of what it means to be normal at the fin de siècle.

‘Man’s lowly origin’: Darwin, Huxley and the evolution of degeneration

Darwin’s On the Origin of Species is an enormously complex and multilayered treatise with fictio-narrative as well as philosophico-logical properties, which deserve more attention than they are given here.1 With regard to The Origin’s enduring impact, however, two central concepts seem to have been most influential: the evolutionary force of natural selection and Darwin’s metaphor of a ‘tree of life’.2 More importantly for this study, both these ideas bear fundamental implications for the consequent development of degeneration discourse.3

Darwin employed the term ‘natural selection’ by analogy with the artificial selection practiced by professional breeders of domestic animals and plants to produce ‘variation under domestication’.4 For Darwin, natural selection was the inevitable consequence of an all-pervasive and everlasting ‘struggle for existence’ (p. 116) amongst the earth’s vegetable and animal creatures.5 Darwin saw this struggle in turn necessitated by the high degree of increase common to all organisms:

Every being, which during its natural lifetime produces several eggs or seeds, must suffer destruction during some period of its life, and during some season or occasional year, otherwise, on the principle of geometrical increase, its numbers would quickly become so inordinately great that no country could support the product. Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life. It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms; for in this case there can be no artificial increase of food, and no prudent restraint from marriage. Although