

# Lennart Green and the Modern Drama of Sleight of Hand

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## ABSTRACT

The broad purpose of this essay is to suggest an approach to sleight of hand magic, which looks at its social resonances as a dramatic medium. I outline a modern tradition of sleight of hand, that is a form of sleight of hand that was self-consciously described as modern by magicians. This tradition takes shape in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, and its stylistic influence extends well into the twentieth century. I argue that this modern style had a specific set of social resonances, which help to explain the power of sleight of hand magic as a form of performance. In particular, modern sleight of hand was intimately intertwined with the relationship between magic and crime, and with a now-unfamiliar distinction between magic and juggling. The point of this exploration, though, is not purely historical. Through it, I want to lay some ground for cultural criticism of contemporary magic. In this, my subject and stimulus is the Swedish card maestro Lennart Green.

## KEYWORDS

Sleight of Hand; Magic; Modernity; Juggling; Crime; Robert-Houdin; Cardini; Manipulation; Lennart Green.

## LENNART GREEN

Lennart Green cuts an unlikely figure on stage. The Swedish doctor-turned-magician has a portly build, speaks with a thick accent, and muddles his words. An untidy mop of hair hangs over his forehead. At the beginning of his 2005 TED performance, he looks slightly as though he has been squeezed into a suit for the occasion (TED, 2008; all references are to this performance). He sits at a table and rubs an empty tumbler nonchalantly with a handkerchief. 'Cheers', he says, raising the glass now full of beer. This, his first trick, gets a ripple of laughter and applause. We suspect, though, that the reason we missed how he did it was because we weren't paying close attention. This is not, it seems, a slick, master illusionist but more of a friendly con man. Leaning forward and gesturing with his elbows on the table, he looks more like he is trying to flog us something than show us a magic trick.

He recalls, in fact, a mix of stereotypes: perhaps an awkward, office-bound IT worker, or an embarrassing distant uncle who crops up at family gatherings. His outfit brings to mind Ken Weber's advice for the style-conscious magician:

Never wear a short-sleeved shirt with a jacket! It is acceptable to wear a short-sleeved shirt with a jacket only if you are a NASA engineer, a high school math teacher, or a member of those few other professionals for whom the description 'nerd' is taken as a compliment. (Weber, 2003, p. 124)

He also seems to like his drink, keeping his beer to hand as he continues his performance. He brings out some playing cards, and immediately starts to fumble and drop them. They scatter across the tabletop. His comic timing is unerringly precise, but the cards are all over the place, and we suspect nothing. Until, that is, he starts talking about cheating at poker and claims that he has stacked the deck to deal someone a full house, which raises a smirk. He deals to several imaginary spectators in a ring, until each has a complete poker hand of five. Then he turns over the cards, revealing not only a full house but a string of progressively stronger hands. 'But of course, I will have the winning hand.' He turns over his royal flush.

Lennart Green is, we begin to realise, breathtakingly skillful. Underlying his angular exterior, he seems to have a Zen-like awareness of the position of playing cards as they scatter. Accounting for this awareness becomes more and more difficult. A volunteer shuffles – several times – and the cards are left at all angles in a heap. By the end of his act, his eyes are sealed with electrical tape and his head wrapped in tinfoil, and yet he still manages, gingerly, to fish the whole suit of diamonds out of the deck – in order. And by the time he reaches the royals, all hesitation has evaporated. The cards snap into his outstretched hand: jack, queen, king.

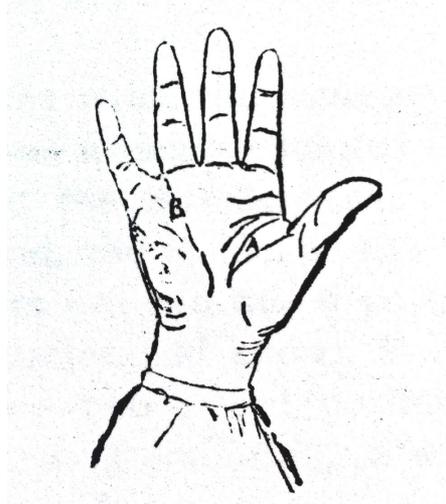
There is a tipping point in his act. The cards are, as usual, in a hectic state. He asks

anyone to name a card and someone in the audience calls out the seven of diamonds. He squares and tenses his body, squints his eyes and holds open his empty hand. A card flicks faster than the eye can follow from the deck into his outstretched fingers: the seven of diamonds. The disorder and vagueness of the routine have suddenly been cut short, transformed in an instant into uncanny precision. This is one of his signature moments. It comes mid-flow. It is unexpected. It has no build-up, and no delayed climax. It is a mini-climax amid the fray of his act, a moment so exact and so sudden that it seems to pierce the general chaos and pull everything taut.

Who is this man and what is he trying to tell us? He doesn't exactly teach us anything, at least not any new insights or information. All information is mock information: 'There's a lot of water in beer'. His act is forged out of gesture, manner and timing, like a kind of physical theatre. It has a strange gravity. The figure on stage is a likeable anti-hero, a caricature of something or other, tragi-comic. He creates a mess of possibilities and questions, which seem to tumble out of his hands onto the table top, like the cards, forming haphazard arrangements. This mess is somehow open to an onlooker, like an offering, chaotic yet generous. He pauses: 'Do you see the pattern?' At the same time though his performance seems underpinned by an intangible precision. It has, overall, a definite quality, as though all the haphazardness amounts at some level to an exact proposition. And look at his hands. Large, chunky hands, with fingers like blunt chisels, at once hopelessly clumsy and impossibly nimble.

### **MODERN SLEIGHT OF HAND**

Towards the beginning of Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin's seminal textbook on conjuring, *Les Secrets de la Prestidigitation et de la Magie (The Secrets of Conjuring And Magic or How to Become a Wizard (1878))*, there is a short chapter on 'The Hand'. 'The five fingers', he writes, 'have each their distinctive names. They are, enumerating them in succession, the thumb, the index or first finger, the middle finger, the ring-finger, and the little finger' (1878, pp. 38-9). The book was intended to give practical tuition in conjuring. Robert-Houdin, covering all bases, thought to include some elementary foundation in the hand's anatomy. He adds an illustration of his own hand.



*Figure 1*

Then, on this apparently unremarkable specimen, he comments:

It may possibly suggest itself to some of my readers that the hand above depicted lacks elegance and grace of form; that the fingers, for example, might be longer and more slender, after the manner of the hands represented by our celebrated painters. [...]

My hands are short, I don't deny it, reader, but allow me to tell you that that very shortness is a virtue, if not a beauty.

It has been remarked by a celebrated observer that 'the dexterity of the fingers is in inverse proportion to their length.'

Notice, my dear reader, henceforth all the fingers of your acquaintance; see how they accord with the saying I have just quoted, and you will admit that it is strictly correct.

Having laid down this proposition, let me entreat those persons who have been gifted by Nature with long and delicate fingers not to be offended at my preference for short ones, particularly when they remember that everybody is not bound to possess manual dexterity, and if a long hand loses in that particular, it has greatly the advantage in point of elegance and aristocratic appearance. (Robert-Houdin, 1878, pp. 40-1)

Sleight of hand textbooks are an intimate literature. They are preoccupied with minute movements of the fingers, and the manipulation of small objects: how to pass, or seem to pass, a coin from one hand to the other; how to position a deck of cards in the hand for dealing; how to roll a handkerchief. Typically, they contain

precise technical diagrams. Such literature was sparse until the mid-nineteenth century; since then it has acquired its classics, and has been one of the main forms of writing produced by magicians (and hence an important chunk of the source material available to historians of magic). *The Secrets of Conjuring And Magic* was of unprecedented thoroughness.

These books hold a certain intrigue, as they promise to reveal how magic was done. They are equally likely - particularly for a 'lay' reader - to seem banal, because their unending detail seems to convey very little about the context and meaning of magic as a practice and spectacle. In fact, though, the significance of this literature is not immediately obvious. Consider the fact that magicians, as a knowledge community, are unusually dependant on the exclusivity of their technical knowledge. Consider the importance that that places on the teaching, or inheritance, of magic's methods. Magic's 'how-to' literature has carried a peculiar weight, both ideological and pedagogical. It has not only served to pass on technical expertise, it has also been a major form of expression within magic. Furthermore, it has been one of the main ways in which magic's traditions and self-understanding have been reproduced. Books on sleight of hand, therefore, pose a problem of interpretation, or methodology: the importance of this technical literature to the history of magic is not purely technical. It matters, in various ways, that Robert-Houdin should want to describe the anatomy of the hand in the manner of a scientist carrying out a dissection, and that he should worry about how his illustrations jar with the aristocratic sensibilities of 'our celebrated painters'.

Moreover, as the passage quoted suggests, the hands are themselves a site of social distinction. An interesting avenue, which is the concern of this essay, is to investigate how broader social forces at play in performance magic are refracted *through* its sleight of hand. The macro history of magic - its cultural import, its social dynamics, its ideological resonance - is articulated at a micro level. Viewed with this in mind, magic's technical literature presents a rich record. It is an ethnographic rarity: a detailed inventory of the actions, gestures, and equipment used by practitioners of a performance genre as it discovered its modern forms. Stylistic discernments and distinctions within sleight of hand are bound up in broader value structures with cultural, social and ideological dimensions. An understanding of this connection may, in turn, open up a nuanced reading of sleight of hand magic as a form of performance. This is where I am aiming towards the end of this essay with a discussion of the celebrated twentieth century magician Cardini, and, finally, in returning to Lennart Green.

Broadly, I have in mind a social history of sleight of hand, which unpicks its social resonance as a dramatic medium. This essay attempts to advance a particular methodology in the study of performance magic. As such, it takes in only one sweep

of material. In what follows, I lay out three interrelated strands of this history. Firstly, I look at the rejection of the term ' juggler ' by modern conjurors. This shift was famously announced by Robert-Houdin, but it remained a recurring theme in discussions of sleight of hand into the early twentieth century. Secondly, I look at the subject of crime in magicians' writings. I examine how it was taken up by proponents of magic's modernity and, in particular, in the context of accounts of the sleights used by criminals. Finally, I look at how these themes unfolded in turn of the century vaudeville and music hall. The term 'juggling', in particular, became associated with the fashion for manipulation acts in this period.

## NOT A JUGGLER

As will be obvious to anybody interested in the history of performance magic, the terms 'magician' and 'conjuror' were not widely used in their familiar senses until the nineteenth century. Before then, the closest parallel to what we now think of as performance magic was known as juggling. Less obvious, though, is what this shift meant. It is important not to presume that it was a mere substitution of names. Likewise, subsequent assumptions should not be imposed on the figure of the juggler. Most obviously juggling did not denote, as now, a niche skill associated with the circus involving the throwing up and catching of objects; but nor did it denote a style of magic reminiscent of it. Butterworth, in perhaps the most rigorous dedicated study of juggling, finds that the juggler was routinely identified (in England, at least, from the 13th century onwards) with two forms of artifice: 'confederacy' and 'conveyance' (2005, p. 5). Confederacy meant collusion, and conveyance meant something like sleight of hand. Having said this, it is difficult to generalise about the nature of juggling. The kinds of performance it encompassed, as well as the social position of the juggler, varied as much as magic and conjuring did subsequently. Moreover, juggling bordered on a range of other activities such as song and storytelling; and these associations were stronger still in the case of the related French term *jongleur*.

One thing is clear, however. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, performers of magic explicitly distanced themselves from juggling. The most famous instance is from Robert-Houdin's *The Secrets of Conjuring And Magic*, in which he wrote that '[a] conjuror is not a juggler [*jongleur*]; he is an actor playing the part of a magician; an artist whose fingers have more need to move with deftness than with speed' (Robert-Houdin, 1878, p. 43). The phrase is often clipped and paraphrased, as for example in *The Illustrated History of Magic*, where Christopher has Robert-Houdin define 'a magician as an actor playing the role of a man who could work miracles' (1973, p. 7). This rendering highlights a common interpretation of Robert-Houdin's legacy: as Steinmeyer puts it, he reminds us 'that a magic show is a piece of theatre' (2004, p. 17). The original, however, is a more intricate statement of identity. It involves no fewer than five characters - conjuror, juggler, actor, magician, artist - who must be

held in some relation to one another. Furthermore, it seems to imply not only who the conjuror is, but how he should move ('with deftness' rather than 'with speed').

Before discussing this statement, though, it must be set in the context of Robert-Houdin's modernising project. This is ground well trodden, so here I simply outline its basic aspects, by way of recent studies (During, 2002; Mangan, 2007; Jones, 2008). Firstly, Robert-Houdin attempted to dissociate conjuring from the occult, witchcraft and black magic. As such, he occupies a special place in the development of what During calls 'secular magic'. Secular magic is presented as illusion, and is supposed to be understood as such by its audience. It is a 'self-consciously illusory magic', which severs or weakens the relationship between performance magic and the supernatural (During, 2002, p. 27). With Robert-Houdin, this relationship is inverted. He worked to establish the conjuror as a man of science, and considered a knowledge of the sciences essential to his craft. His illusions made use of electromagnetism and intricate mechanical and electrical machines, known as automata, which were presented, to a large extent, as scientific marvels. Hence, the spectacle of conjuring acquired rationalist underpinnings.

A second shift concerned the social standing of the conjuror. Robert-Houdin strove to elevate the status of performance magic. Just as he dissociated it from the supernatural and superstition, he also tried to cleanse it of its popular roots in street performance and fairground attractions. He recast conjuring as a respectable form of entertainment, to be performed in theatres. Accordingly, the figure of the conjuror was remodelled as 'a perfectly socialized nineteenth-century gentleman', mirroring the upper-class audience he tried to attract (Mangan, 2007, p. 104). On stage, Robert-Houdin used amiable, educated patter to frame his illusions. He dressed in modest but elegant evening attire, in keeping with contemporary bourgeois fashion. He regarded the long, flowing robes and pointed hats worn by some of his contemporaries as old-fashioned. Thirdly, and relatedly, conjuring was presented as a high art form. It was to be judged, not on the strength of its supernatural claims, but on aesthetic grounds. This key ideological shift was, again, linked to a preoccupation with status. Conjuring was supposed to stand aloof from the crude, immediate gratification provided by street entertainers, and was to be brought in line with bourgeois good taste. The conjuror's principal virtues, therefore, were elegance, naturalism, attention to detail and moderation.

Mangan has done much to link Robert-Houdin's assertion that '[a] conjuror is not a juggler' to his overall conception of modern conjuring. The term 'juggler' denoted an available archetype, and one which, in mid- to late-nineteenth century France, still impinged on conjuring. Juggling bore connotations which Robert-Houdin sought to distance from himself and from his profession. The archetypical juggler was likely to make a living on the street. He had an air of buffoonery, and entertained the public

with brazen displays of sleight of hand. His signature piece was the cups and balls. Many depictions of this act from the time, and before, show someone at the margins of the frame pick-pocketing an onlooker, highlighting that the juggler was likely to be viewed as an accomplice to criminals and confidence tricksters (Dawes, 1979, p. 125; Mangan, 2007, p. 62). These associations made juggling an obstacle to the conjurer's social aspirations. In rejecting the term, therefore, and in likening the conjuror to an actor, 'Robert-Houdin is making the point that his spiritual home is in the heart of the mainstream theatrical culture. It is, on one level, part of this larger project, to establish the conjuror as a 'respectable' kind of entertainer' (Mangan, 2007, p. 103).

To this analysis I would like to add a further layer. Whilst the connection between conjuring and acting evinces a social dynamic, its immediate upshot, for Robert-Houdin, was a particular way of moving: the conjuror is 'an artist whose fingers have more need to move with deftness than with speed' (Robert-Houdin, 1878, p. 43). The counter-distinction between juggler and conjuror signified a distinction between different kinds of sleight of hand. The immediate setting of the remark gives a further idea of what this distinction was. It is preceded in the text by a brief commentary on two terms that Robert-Houdin also considered inappropriate to describe conjuring:

*Escamotage* will always recall to the mind the 'cup-and-ball' tricks whence it derives its origin, and referring specially, as it does, to one particular feat of dexterity, suggests but an imperfect idea of the wide range of the wonder-exciting performances of a magician.

*Prestidigitation* seems to imply, from its etymology, that it is necessary to have nimble fingers in order to produce the illusions of magic, which is by no means strictly true.

A conjuror is not a juggler; he is an actor playing he part of a magician; an artist whose fingers have more need to move with deftness than with speed. I may even add that where sleight-of-hand is involved, the quieter the movement of the performer, the more readily will the spectators be deceived. (Robert-Houdin, 1878, p. 42-3)

Both *escamotage* and *prestidigitation* implied something about the conjuror's dexterity that Robert-Houdin sought to avoid. *Escamotage* suggested an over-reliance on a specific branch of sleight of hand magic, and hence failed to capture the breadth of a conjuring performance. *Prestidigitation* suggested speed of execution, or nimbleness. Hence, the passage implies, whilst both terms may have been correctly applied to juggling, they do not capture the kind of dexterity proper to the conjuror. His

movements are smooth, naturalistic and discreet, and, furthermore, they are kept in balance with the other aspects of his art.

It is primarily in this form - as a social distinction *made through* a distinction between different styles of sleight of hand - that the rejection of juggling continued to appear in conjuring literature into the early twentieth century. The stylistic distinction is explicit, the social distinction implicit. Take for example C. Lang Neil's *The Modern Conjuror and Drawing Room Entertainer* (1903). He reiterates Robert-Houdin's stylistic preferences, noting the '[g]racefulness of movement and gesture' essential to conjuring (1903, p. 25). The proper manner of the conjuror, we are told, can be 'summed up in the one word *natural*' (1903, p. 23). Juggling, meanwhile, is over-reliant on speed:

"It is the quickness of the hand deceives the eye" was a maxim correctly applied to the performances of the earlier conjurors, whose skill was of the juggling order. [...] But as descriptive of the secrets of conjuring and magic (I always use the word in its natural, not the supernatural sense) it is entirely erroneous. (Neil, 1903, p. 19)

Neil elaborates on the distinction via an illustration of juggling: 'The performer who takes a card or coin and apparently throws it into space, immediately showing the hand which held it quite empty both back and front, has astonished his audience - he has not deceived them' (1903, p. 19). When a card or coin is juggled, it simply leaves the audience at a loss: 'They have not been led to think it is anywhere. They merely wonder what he did with it and admire the quickness of the manipulation which made the object disappear without their being able to follow it' (1903, p. 19). Conjuring, by contrast,

consists in the performer's audience being led to believe that certain definite actions have been carried out before them, while they presently discover that the results of those actions are something directly contrary to any natural law. [...] It is thus the mind of the spectator which must be deceived. (Neil, 1903, pp. 19-20)

On this account, a conjuring trick must make an exact proposition, a 'definite' claim. Cause and effect should be clearly presented to the audience, then confounded. In juggling, the proposition is incomplete. The juggler intimates that something has happened, without making a positive claim. He plays on baser instincts, and never penetrates the prized territory of the conjuror: the rational mind of the spectator. To grasp the full extent of cause and effect, that spectator must, it goes without saying, have an 'educated mind' (Neil, 1903, p. 20).

This reliance on a rational intellect is a recurring theme, as, for example, in Edwin Sachs' *Sleight of Hand* (1946 [1877]). Sachs reiterates the chronological succession from juggling - which belongs to a bygone era - to conjuring - which describes contemporary magic. He cites Chaucer, who describes a juggler producing a windmill from under a walnut shell:

There is doubtless some slight exaggeration in this statement, or else modern wizards are far behind those of early days - a hypothesis I cannot accept. In the superstitious lands of the East, jugglery was doubtless at the bottom of the many manifestations that were mixed up with religion, and the wily priests made the best (or worst) uses of its influence on the uncultivated mind. (Sachs, 1946, p. 3)

Juggling, then, is intertwined with, and takes advantage of, superstition. It belongs to a superstitious age (and, in this case, the superstitious 'East', though that's another story). With regard to conjuring, meanwhile, Sachs upholds the stylistic norms laid out by Robert-Houdin, who is credited with 'elevating the art in the eyes of the public' and 'investing it with nearly all that it possesses of the graceful' (1946, p. 3). Evening dress is 'now conventional', and the student is advised to acquire a 'neat method of manipulation' and 'suavity of manner' (1946, pp. 3-4).

The juggler-magician distinction reappears in a late, ponderous form in *Our Magic*, by Nevil Maskelyne and David Devant (1912). This text, from the heart of the British magic establishment, again distinguishes magic by its reliance on the mind: 'It will be found that, so far from being bound up in jugglers and paraphernalia, the true art in magic is purely intellectual in character [...]' (1912, p. 2). Manual labour, meanwhile, can be left to the juggler (who's better at it anyway):

[F]rom the standpoint of mechanical art, the juggler's attainments are far higher than those of the magician. The latter can only take a higher place by realising that he has to depend for success upon his brains, rather than upon his hands. In manipulative skill, he is hopelessly outclassed by the juggler. The amount of practice and physical training he requires cannot in any way be compared with that which is needed by the juggler. If, therefore, the Normal Artist in magic insists upon regarding his art as a mere *congeries* of mechanical accomplishments, he must be content to occupy a position inferior to that of a common juggler, and immensely inferior to that of a skilled mechanic. (Devant and Maskelyne, 1912, p. 20)

Conjuring is not juggling. With Robert-Houdin, a set of associations come together. The juggler is the bugbear of magic's past, on the wrong side of history, on the opposite side of a dividing line between civilisation and barbarism, modernity and

pre-modernity. This line also divides high from low, the street from the theatre, and art from vulgar entertainment. The juggler mixes in different circles, tainted by criminals and humbugs. These associations are, in turn, embodied in different ways of moving. The conjuror's movements are seamless, elegant, natural, economical and open; the juggler's are quick and shifty. Furthermore, whilst dexterity is the juggler's only weapon, the conjuror keeps his sleight of hand in balance with the other aspects of his art. It is not a means to an end. He aims to deceive rather than impress, and relies on the mind rather than the hand - which denotes, of course, a particular style of sleight of hand.

## MAGICIANS ON CRIME

The juggler, then, provided a counter-distinction, both social and stylistic, for the modern conjuror. An abiding preoccupation with status was expressed through fine distinctions, within sleight of hand, between the conjuror's movements and juggling. Another distinction, running parallel within the same modern tradition, was that between magic and crime. We have touched on this already, as petty criminality was one of the associations colouring the juggler's reputation. However, crime and criminals form a far more extensive literary theme. Magic's literature contains a telling sub-strand of works about criminals and their methods.

It is worth remembering that one of the essential texts on card magic from the turn of the century, S. W. Erdnase's *Artifice Ruse and Subterfuge at the Card Table: A Treatise on the Science and Art of Manipulating Cards* (1902), devoted two thirds of its pages to methods for cheating at cards for money. The book details a long series of sleights which could be used by magicians and cheats alike. On the subject of crime, Erdnase takes an amoral stance, and makes no secret of the fact that his insights were learned in 'the cold school of experience' (1902, p. 14). The author - who wrote under a pseudonym - had no reputation to preserve. Within the modern tradition I have been discussing, however, the subject of crime was more often an opportunity for the gentleman conjuror to moralise and demonstrate his integrity. Robert-Houdin is a case in point. The stated aim of his *Card-Sharpers: Their Tricks Exposed or The Art of Always Winning* (1891), was to prevent cheats from exploiting the well-to-do public: 'I have myself an excellent opinion of the respectable classes, and hope that the reading of my book will inspire no thought beyond that of guarding themselves against the tricks of sharpers' (1891, p. vi).

Robert-Houdin's text sets a number of precedents. Firstly, it assumes that, by the nature of his profession, the conjuror has a privileged vantage point onto the world of crime. Although the book's primary concern is to expose how criminals operate - it contains long sections on sleight of hand - Robert-Houdin's claim to expertise is far more extensive. He discourses not only on the methods of criminals, but on their lives and habits, as well as the social ills they cause. Secondly, however, the author is

careful to preserve his own good standing by specifying how he received this illicit knowledge. Not for Robert-Houdin was it gained in 'the cold school of experience'. He begins the book with a colourful account of how he went in search of a master of cheating with sleight of hand. He arrives at the man's house to find it disgusting and smelly. The crook then emerges from his bedroom and tries to rob his visitor at knifepoint. A few months later, we learn, he was arrested. Little more than an inquisitive naïveté, it seems, accounts for Robert-Houdin's contact with criminal elements. This episode, moreover, seems to have put him off, as thereafter his riskier research is carried out via an acquaintance, 'a young man whose life, although tolerably respectable, was passed in eating houses and gambling-places' (1891, p. 13).

Thirdly, the criminal underworld is divided into types. Robert-Houdin's categorisation makes room for higher and lower kinds of criminal. The world of cheats, whom he calls Greeks, can be divided three ways:

Taken collectively, the Greeks do not present any marked type; it would be difficult to portray their facial appearance, because the species is so numerous and varied. I, however, think it necessary, in order to better describe them, to divide the Greeks into three categories:

1st. THE GREEK OF THE FASHIONABLE WORLD.

2nd. THE GREEK OF THE MIDDLE CLASSES.

3rd. THE GREEK OF THE GAMBLING HELL. (Robert-Houdin, 1891, p. 21)

As we descend the social ladder, the skill and dexterity of the criminal decreases. The Greek of the Fashionable World shows great refinement in sleight of hand and uses sophisticated methods. The Greek of the Gambling Hell, meanwhile, is to the higher classes of criminal 'what the whining beggar is to the virtuoso' (1891, p. 34). The quality most essential to this lower variety is 'the capacity to smoke and booze without being affected by either' (1891, pp. 35-6). The degree of skill, therefore, mirrors the Greek's social standing:

The lower type of Greeks are nearly all alike; they are, for the most part, wretches that idleness and debauchery have driven to ask from cheating what they will not attempt to win by honest industry.

Their tricks are usually as coarse as the people to whom they address themselves. (Robert-Houdin, 1891, p. 35)

Why write a book like this? Erdnase said he did it for the money. If Robert-Houdin simply wished to distinguish and distance himself from criminals, or if he was

driven purely by moral indignation, we would still have to explain his barely disguised admiration for The Greek of the Fashionable World. This class of cheat has extraordinary powers of perception, is finely attuned to human behaviour, and is explicitly compared to the conjuror:

To these eminent qualities of mind, the Greek of the fashionable world unites a profound knowledge of the most difficult tricks of conjuring. Thus no one knows better than he how to draw the card or break the cut, to use or place aside concealed cards, etc. (Robert-Houdin, 1891, p. 24)

This comparison suggests that what is at stake is not only the representation of criminals, but the representation of the conjuror in relation to them. In a recent study, Mangan considers the methodological challenges posed by the autobiographical writings of magicians, which are, he notes, prone to lying and self-aggrandisement. He concludes that '[t]he most realistic way to think about magicians' own accounts of their lives, careers and tricks is to consider them as extensions of their stage acts - as a particular kind of "performative writing"' (Mangan, 2007, p. xix). This is fruitful, as it suggests that we see the subject of crime as a platform on which magicians could elaborate their own stage identity. It is, furthermore, a platform with a strong dimension of class.

The relationship between conjuring and crime can be understood as a dramatic tension within modern conjuring itself, which magicians' writings on crime actively encourage and sustain. In *Card-Sharpers*, the tension is carefully modulated. The text is a finely tuned piece of social positioning. First, the author evokes a world, a sort of class-based mythology, which his readers - the text presumes - know little about. There is the risk of a dangerous association. 'Cards, dice, and dominoes' can, in the hands of a criminal, be 'very dangerous things', but they are also the tools of the conjuror, who, by implication, has danger in his hands, though he refrains from abusing it (1891, p. 28). Then, Robert-Houdin openly flirts with the idea that the upper-class cheat and the conjuror think and act alike. The refinement of this kind of criminal earns a nod of recognition, like a glance exchanged among equals. Finally, though, when we come to the poorest, lowest kind of cheat, the tension is broken off. The Greek of the Gambling Hell is beyond the pale, morally and aesthetically repugnant: '[i]t is no longer the art of the conjurer; it is trickery without a name' (1891, p. 35).

Several of these themes are reiterated in '*Sharps and Flats*': *A Complete Revelation of the Secrets of Cheating at Games of Chance and Skill* (1894) by John Nevil Maskelyne. His contribution to this literature is more staid than Robert-Houdin's, adopting a more resolute moral stance: '[t]hat the condition of affairs herein revealed should be found to exist in the midst of our boasted civilisation is a fact which is, to say the least,

deplorable' (1894, p. 4). For him, the moral disease of cheating extends even to straight gambling, which he considered 'essentially dishonest' (1894, p. 315). The central purpose of the book, meanwhile, is to protect the upright reader: '[m]y self-imposed task, then, has ever been to endeavour to educate the public, just a little, and to enlighten those who really seek the truth amid the noxious and perennial weeds of humbug and pretence' (1894, p. x).

In spite of this high moral tone, the theatrical aspect of the writing is still apparent. Maskelyne's career, which was strongly influenced by Robert-Houdin, had a strong rationalist bent. His opposition to spiritualism was the theme of his earliest stage shows, and became a lifelong preoccupation, as well as a considerable source of publicity (Dawes, 1979, p. 164-5). In '*Sharps and Flats*', he implies that his exposé of crime should be seen as part of the same dramatic crusade for truth:

This book, then, is but another stone, as it were, in an edifice raised for the purpose of showing to the world the real nature of those things which are not really what they appear to be, and practices with the very existence of which the average man is unacquainted. (Maskelyne, 1894, p. x)

Meanwhile, although Maskelyne doesn't categorise criminals as thoroughly as Robert-Houdin, he doesn't shy away from pronouncements on cheating as a social phenomenon. On the origins of crime, he writes: 'To my mind, the only hypothesis which in any way covers the facts of the case is that some men are *born* to crime. It is their destiny, and they are bound to fulfil it' (1894, p. viii). Hence the magician's privileged vantage point onto the criminal classes is preserved. Again, though, he specifies how a man of his standing came into possession of the nefarious information contained in his exposé. He had the help of 'a friend who desires to be nameless'. Not a criminal, though, but a 'gentleman' in 'the assumed guise of an English "sharp"' (1894, p. 5).

The same tropes appear again in Harry Houdini's *The Right Way to Do Wrong: An Exposé of Successful Criminals* (2007 [1906]). In this text, the identity of the performer looms large. In the preface Houdini assumes a theatrical tone of address:

There is an under world - a world of cheat and crime - a world whose highest good is successful evasion of the laws of the land.

You who live your life in placid respectability know but little of the real life of the denizens of this world. [...] Of the real thoughts and feelings of the criminal, of the terrible fascination which binds him to his nefarious career, of the thousands - yea, tens of thousands - of undiscovered crimes and unpunished criminals, you know but little. (Houdini, 2007, p. 3)

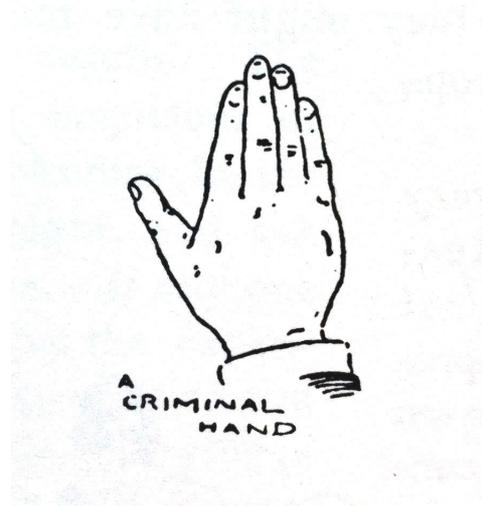
With Houdini, the simmering tension between conjuring and crime becomes a raging contradiction. He opens up a panorama of the unknown, a montage of criminal ways and vices, which he is uniquely placed to understand. He makes his moral position clear at the outset: 'to those who read this book, although it will inform them "The Right Way to Do Wrong," all I have to say is one word and that is "DON'T"' (2007, p. 11). Likewise, he makes it clear that he has not learnt the methods of criminals first hand, but by conversing with 'the chiefs of police and the most famous detectives in all the great cities of the world' (2007, p. 4). At the same time, though, he freely indulges in this criminal connection. Each chapter of the book deals with a different type or aspect of crime, until we reach the final chapter, entitled 'Houdini' - who is, by inference, the ultimate criminal. There he regales us with his various feats, including his publicly staged jail escapes. With a characteristic egoism, Houdini has it both ways, both defying and deferring to the law.

The thematic of crime in conjuring literature is writ large in Houdini's text. His categorisation of the criminal classes is playful and uninhibited. He introduces us to the professional burglar ('a man of resources and daring'), the pickpocket ('a natural rover'), the 'Bunco' man, the forger, and the 'Fair [female] Criminal' (2007). At the top of the ladder is the 'Aristocrat of Thievery', at the bottom the 'Beggar' or 'Dead Beat', who, 'in ninety cases out of a hundred [...] is a cheat and a fraud' (2007, p. 44). Above all, Houdini emphasises that criminals penetrate every layer of society in a way calculated to put the well-to-do reader on edge:

Do you see that well-dressed, respectable-looking man glancing over the editorial page of the *Sun*? You would be surprised to know that he is a professional burglar and that he has a loving wife and a family of children who little know the 'business' which takes him away for many days and nights at a time! (Houdini, 2007, p. 7)

Crime, here, is an unsettling spectacle. It cannot be held at a distance, morally or otherwise. Houdini claims to pierce the veneer of bourgeois society, and uncover a criminal universe lurking beneath the surface. At the same time, though, he is not too unsettling. He is subversive only within limits. The norms of propriety are not brought into question, still less the law. Criminals are among us, they threaten us, but 'us' remains the operative word. Unsurprisingly, then, whilst the plague of criminality infiltrates the middle- and upper-classes, it remains unproblematically associated with the lower classes. Of the 'humble criminal', for example, he writes: '[n]o avarice, but simple laziness keeps these thieves dishonest' (2007, p. 9). Overall, Houdini's free-hand typology of criminals is thick with class-based caricature and noxious generalisations. At the end of a chapter on burglary, he drops in a quaint illustration, which could almost be passed over within the lively flow of the text. He

shows a diagram of 'A Criminal Hand'. Underneath it is the following caption: 'The ordinary criminal's hand has a peculiarly rough shape, the thumb being very plump and short, while the fingers are uneven and heavy. The small finger is turned inward, and bluntness is the hand's chief characteristic' (2007, p. 18).



*Figure 2*

## **MANIPULATION**

Houdini's fraught rhetoric gives us a clue as to what happened to magic's modernity in American vaudeville and in its British counterpart, music hall. Houdini was one of the best-paid vaudeville performers, and one of a host of acts which toured on both sides of the Atlantic. His knack for having it both ways – his ability to position himself both within and above the law – illustrates pervasive tensions within both vaudeville and music hall between the respectable and the illicit, or between high and low. It also suggests how magicians could take advantage of such tensions, exploiting them, inflating them, whilst remaining oriented towards the high.

Speaking broadly, the characteristic ambivalence of these early forms of mass-entertainment was linked to upward class dynamics. Over the course of their heydays, both music hall and vaudeville distanced themselves from their variegated popular origins and working class roots, and increasingly appealed to middle class audiences. Both were subject to moral censure, and both attempted to reform their images according to bourgeois sensibilities. Accordingly, variety theatre was torn between different class loyalties. Which way it tended to tip in a given case is a matter for debate (see e.g. Bailey, 1994; Faulk, 2004; Mintz, 1996). Provisionally, though, within magic we can note a general heightening of the tensions underlying the tradition of the gentleman magician. With Houdini, in his performances as much as his writings, a long-standing connection between magic and crime was thrown into relief. Likewise, one could think of how the patriarchal subtext of this tradition was dramatised by the cutting a woman in half illusion, pioneered by P.T. Selbit and quickly imitated (this was also, taken literally, a crime enacted on stage). Perhaps

unsurprisingly, in this context, juggling also made a comeback. The term became bound up in new stylistic developments.

The presentational innovations of the variety 'specialists' are well known. They served a market for short, focused acts. Typically, a performer would develop a niche ability, designed to make a unique contribution to a variety bill. Such acts could last as little as eight minutes, and would be devoted to a particular branch of illusions. Many magicians built their careers on specific props, such as silks, watches or billiard balls (Christopher, 1975). At the same time, the pace of magic acts increased, and an increasing number of magicians performed without speaking, relying on visible cues and striking visual routines. Finally, manipulation - that is, effects produced purely by controlling objects with sleight of hand - came into fashion. Such effects were, necessarily, quite stark and small-scale. A manipulation act would typically involve the repeated appearance and disappearance of small objects such as cards, coins or cigarettes. The category of manipulation, though, also encompasses flourishes, or dramatic displays of dexterity, which produce no illusion as such.

Speed and an over-reliance on dexterity were characteristics that had traditionally been disdained in juggling. Furthermore, pure manipulation often produced the kind of stunted illusion that was considered the juggler's domain. When a manipulator makes an object disappear, the spectators 'have not been led to think it is anywhere. They merely wonder what he did with it and admire the quickness of the manipulation [...]' (Neil, 1903, p. 19). Hence, T. Nelson Downs, one of the most successful sleight of hand acts in Vaudeville, who specialised in coin manipulation, warned of the renewed threat that juggling posed to his profession. *The Art of Magic*, which he co-authored with John Northern Hilliard, reaffirmed the distinction between conjuring and 'the juggling order of sleight of hand' (1980 [1909], p. 17):

The last decade was devoted to manipulation and specialization. Kings and emperors and dukes and panjamdrums of cards and coins, monarchs of eggs and handkerchiefs, czars of cabbages and billiard balls sprung up like mushrooms. Magic degenerated into a mere juggling performance. Dexterity was paramount and the psychological side of the art neglected. Mind gave way to matter. (Downs, 1980, p. 12)

The traditional cornerstones of refinement are invoked with renewed urgency: moderation, naturalism, smoothness, distinctness and the intellectual character of magical deception. Crucially, magic should convey more than 'mere rapidity of movement' (1980, p. 13). Dexterity for its own sake must be rigorously curbed:

[...] after the desired degree of dexterity is attained the student should not, in the vanity of his achievement, exhibit his dexterity and boast of the rapidity with which he can execute the various movements. It is not quickness of the hand that deceives the eye, as spectators so fondly imagine. The modern conjurer depends for success on a more adroit and more permanent foundation - psychology. The cunning hand works in harmony with the active mind, and by means of both mental and physical adroitness the spectators are deceived and mystified. The really expert performer, however, does not prattle of his dexterity. He lets art conceal art. (Downs, 1980, pp. 17-8)

For Downs, the temptation to 'exhibit' sleight of hand was rife. Magic had, then more than ever, to guard against degenerating into a mere display of mechanical ability. Against this tendency, he invokes two traditional correctives: art and the mind. In the second part of *Our Magic*, Devant shows a similar concern. As a performer who straddled the divide between the old school of stage magic and music hall, Devant would have been acutely sensitive to the interplay between high and low. He, like Downs, disregards manipulation for its own sake:

Catching cards from the air, or rather, appearing to do so, and making them vanish, one at a time, from the finger tips, are also effects much in vogue. They are apt to appear akin to the feats of jugglery often exhibited by conjurers, such as throwing cards boomerang fashion, or spreading them deftly along the forearm, springing them from hand to hand, and various eccentric shuffles, which can hardly be called feats of magic. In our opinion they are incomplete; they may impress the onlooker with the fact that the card manipulator is very clever, very dexterous, but the feats convey no mystery, and all idea of watching a real magician is destroyed by such diversions. (Devant and Maskelyne, 1912, p. 275)

The 'effects much in vogue' would have referred to the craze for card manipulation in variety theatre. Although Devant disapproves of '[c]atching cards from the air' in this manner, he later describes an ostensibly similar feat in which he produces not cards but billiard balls at his fingertips. How does he distinguish what he is doing from jugglery?

It will be noticed that if the body is twisted to the left without altering the position of the hand holding the ball the performer will naturally show both sides of the hand as well as the ball and it will be obvious that nothing but the ball is in the hand. When a second ball appears suddenly beside it whilst the conjuror holds his hand thus outstretched, the full length of his arm from his body, and when the conjuror further proves

that they are both solid ivory balls by knocking them together then indeed we have a surprise which savours of real magic. (Devant and Maskelyne, 1912, p. 314)

The threat of juggling is set at bay by a deliberate clarity. The act of deception must have every outward appearance of transparency. No rapid or angular movements should arouse suspicion. The hand reaches outwards, extracting a moment of clear and distinct impossibility from the fray of manipulation. The body provides no cover. Only then, and only through a heightened attention to detail (the sound of the balls knocking together), can the performer achieve - not the full impression of real magic but - 'a surprise which savours' of it. The strain in this distinction is palpable. Juggling, here, is an intimate anxiety. It is a temptation at the heart of sleight of hand magic, something to be reeled in and controlled.

On this note, I would like to turn from text to the act of performance. As should already be clear, the tension between magic and manipulation, and the other distinctions I have discussed, provided fertile ground for magic acts. In what remains of this essay, I consider how these themes have played out on stage. Among the most accomplished sleight of hand performers of the vaudeville era was Richard Valentine Pitchford, who is better known by one of his stage names, Cardini. He provides one of the richest case studies of a manipulation act from this period, owing to a 1957 video recording (*National Broadcasting Company*, 1957). Although Cardini had, by then, long since shifted to other venues, his repertoire was developed as he climbed through the ranks of vaudeville, first in Australia and New Zealand, and then the United States in the late twenties as the genre was in decline.

His act was built on character. On the NBC tape, he appears in a top hat and an opera cloak, with a cane tucked under his arm. Whilst manipulating cards, he wore a pair of white gloves, which presumably added to the difficulty of the sleights, but also served to highlight their refinement. His persona had aristocratic overtones, and a large element of the upper-class English toff, as suggested by his monocle. On close examination, though, he was not entirely genteel. His billing as 'The Suave Deceiver' had a hint of irony. He appeared tipsy on stage, pausing by a lamppost during an evening out, or stumbling in after a trip to the opera. The drink seemed slightly to have got to his head, making him smug and irritable, and he would only just manage to maintain appearances.



*Figure 3*

A close parallel to Cardini's act can be found in the British swell song. 'Typically,' writes Bailey in his analysis of this sub-genre in early music hall, 'the swell was a lordly figure of resplendent dress and confident air' (1986, p. 49). He was recognisable by his top hat and his penchant for Champagne. Whilst, in some variations, the swell was fashionable and upright, he could also be indulgent and raucous, a lad about town with more money than sense. At one extreme, he was a counterfeit, an imposter in the upper-classes, assuming their airs and graces but barely disguising his courser habits:

the term swell carried an early suggestion of the bogus, particularly in the appellation 'swell mob', denoting a class of pickpockets who dressed in style to escape detection as they mingled with their fashionable victims. But the sham swell was more commonly registered as a social rather than a criminal menace. (Bailey, 1986, p. 55)

This was a controlled undertone, though, as usually the swell would combine caricature with glamour. He was someone to be admired, an object of aspiration. Cardini, like the swell, trod a fine line between mockery and homage, but gravitated none the less towards homage. This becomes clear at the end of the NBC video. Rather than stumbling off stage in the midst of a drunken haze, Cardini exits with steadier step and a wry smile. He turns once more to the audience and gives a knowing tip of his hat, as though to confirm a mutual acknowledgement that his antics are in jest and his style unquestionable (Bailey writes about the 'knowingness' of music hall (1994)).

How did sleight of hand figure? Cardini belongs to an interesting lineage in magic in which the effects, rather than seeming to spring from any magical capability, seem to happen *to* the performer. Vaudeville magicians exploited the potential of this perverse style of magic for physical caricature. Mr Hymack 'The Human

Chameleon', for example, who Cardini knew and admired, had an act in which items of clothing - his gloves, his bow tie, his top hat - would suddenly change in colour or size, upsetting his well-groomed composure. Similarly, Cardini portrays a gentleman at his leisure, who is unexpectedly set upon by cards, cigarettes and billiard balls. These appear incessantly at his fingertips in spite of his attempts to shake them off. He becomes grouchy and flustered. Fisher, Cardini's biographer, captures the tone of these trivial apparitions: 'playing cards were a nuisance like wasps at a picnic, cigarettes their own persistent will-o'-the-wisp, and billiard balls, whatever their colour, as irksome as so many pink elephants' (2007, p. 23).

Cardini's sleight of hand seems involuntary. It works through him, in spite of him, against him. One of his dramatic masterstrokes is the way his monocle keeps dropping from his eye. To concentrate, to see clearly, and to sustain his image, he needs it in, but as he raises his eyebrows in surprise, it falls out. His act was a study in vanity: the vanity of keeping up appearances, and of a mind struggling, in vain, to keep up. There is one moment during the NBC video, though, which seems to buck the trend. Having pulled a billiard ball from the air, he twirls it at his fingertips, shifting it from finger to finger at a lightning pace. His hand gyrates wildly. After a few seconds, his movement slows, and the ball seems to defy gravity for a moment, sliding down his vertical index finger. This sequence is the only prolonged, overt display of skill in his act.



*Figure 4*

This inconsistency, though, brings us to the crux of the performance. Sleight of hand is done *both* by him *and* in spite of him. His frenetic hand is another apparition, like the billiard ball itself. It takes over from his mind. This is simply to say, though, that sleight of hand represents another side of his nature. It is like an addiction; it seizes his body whilst his mind is idle. The drink has put him off guard, and he is beset by temptations. Cigarettes keep appearing, in spite of his attempts to discard them, until, at one point, he has one in each hand and another appears between his lips. The sequence in which he twirls and floats the billiard ball is of a piece with the

performance as a whole: it is a moment of indulgence, of succumbing to temptation. Sleight of hand, in short, is portrayed as a vice, as excess.

By the available criteria, what Cardini does during his momentary lapse into overt dexterity is juggling. It is an overt display of dexterity for its own sake. His whirring fingers seem to taunt the conjuror 'whose fingers have more need to move with deftness than with speed' (Robert-Houdin, 1878, p. 43). Even when his movements slow down and the ball floats, he falls short of those 'definite actions' resulting in 'something directly contrary to any natural law', which are proper to conjuring. As Neil would have it, we 'merely wonder what he did with it' (1903, pp. 19-20). Cardini's spasm of virtuosity is a victory of the mechanical over the intellectual. The magician, remember, 'can only take a higher place [than the juggler] by realising that he has to depend for success upon his brains, rather than upon his hands' (Devant and Maskelyne, 1912, p. 20). With Cardini, the hands take over, his mind dulled by drink. (Of course, this is to say nothing of the actual intellectual demands of his act, but then again there is no reason to believe that conjuring's prejudices against jugglers ever held.)

As we have seen, the term juggling was used in relation to variety theatre to denigrate manipulation. Cardini, though, was keen to define himself, as Fisher points out, 'as a manipulator first and a magician second', suggesting an interesting strand of manipulator's professional pride (2007, p. 186). However, his act was not as much of an about-face as this suggests. The traditional dichotomies remain in place: conjuror-juggler, mind-hand, dexterity-psychology, moderation-excess, high-low. Cardini only complicates matters by straining the tensions between them. Meanwhile, the whole roster of accompanying social tensions are there in the mix: theatre-street, fashionable-vulgar, leisure-work. Even the frisson between magic and crime lingers in the background, as it did with the swell. The vast quantity of playing cards he has about his person suggests a gambling habit, crooked or otherwise.

The manipulation of cards wearing gloves, then, was improbable in more than one sense. Even the hands that did the juggling were dressed in gentlemen's clothing. Gloves were a contradiction in terms, suggestive of a split identity. Cardini's act provides a potent example - the more rewarding for a good video record - of how the internal stresses and social resonances of the modern drama of sleight of hand manifested on stage. He is, needless to say, only one example, but one particularly redolent of the distinctions and nuances contained in that tradition. A close reading of Cardini's act suggests the ultimate rewards of the methodological approach to magic's literature I have been pursuing. Though the social history of sleight of hand is bound up in texts, full of technical detail - in the archive, so to speak - it has the

capacity to return us with renewed insight to the performance of sleight of hand magic.

### **'AS THOUGH BEELZEBUB WERE HARD ON HIS HEELS'**

The disparagement of juggling outlived the old meaning of the word. In the introduction to *Expert Card Technique: Close-Up Table Magic*, for example, first published in 1940, Jean Hugard and Frederick Braué write:

The performer who constantly riffles the ends of the pack, who rushes through his feats as though Beelzebub were hard on his heels, whose movements are quick and jerky, is defeated before he starts, for his spectators always are conscious of the fact that he is employing sleight of hand; his very action betrays the fact. (Hugard and Braué, 1974, p. xx)

By now this advice should sound familiar. It points to the continuing influence, at a stylistic level at least, of the modern school of sleight of hand through the twentieth century. The basic virtues of this modern style were gracefulness, clarity, succinctness and naturalism. Above all, it was distinguished by its moderation. It was not supposed to be an end unto itself; its aim was to engage the rational mind of the spectator. This essay has attempted to recognise some of the peculiar social resonances of this modern style. This has involved holding certain large themes in relation to certain small ones. The epochal shift from juggling to conjuring, the emergence of magic's modernity, the historical relationship between magic and crime, and the social antagonisms of turn of the century variety theatre were all played out on the terrain of sleight of hand.

The modern style I have outlined was - in spite of its seamlessness - underpinned by a cluster of social tensions. It courted an ambiguous relationship to criminals and their methods, both distancing itself from them and taking on some of their allure. Juggling, meanwhile, served as a counter-image, embodying, variously, the out-dated, the inexpert, the extravagant and the vulgar. The juggler's movements were characterised as quick, jerky, ostentatious and suspicious, whilst the conjuror's were supposed to be natural and modest. Crucially, however, these tensions were not banished from modern magic at its inception. They continued within it, at varying degrees of intensity. Modern sleight of hand was a dramatic medium shot through with ambivalence. Its conflicting tendencies - at once stylistic and social - explain something of its power as a form of performance.

If, however, modern sleight of hand had, in its inception, a peculiar set of social resonances, then its perseverance begs the question: how does it transpose into different contexts? How does it translate, or mistranslate, across time? Have its aesthetic norms acquired different meanings? Have they come to signify, for

instance, a nostalgia for magic's past? Or do they amount to no more than an empty formalism? Whatever the answer (there is no one answer) performance magic remains, to a striking extent, indebted to its modern forms. Commenting on the act of card throwing, which was performed by Isaac Fawkes in the eighteenth century and is still done today, Durning notes that '[m]agic has a slow history' (Durning and Najafi, 2007). This may be especially true of close up magic in which traditional props are still pervasive: cards, cups and balls, money, rope, linking rings, handkerchiefs, and so on.

More to the point, the stylistic legacy of modern magic can still be felt. There is, among magicians, a recognisable middle ground: polite, smooth, natural. More interesting, though, are those at either extreme of the modern tradition. It has its cultivated adherents – say, Michael Vincent or Guy Hollingworth – and its outliers. Examples of the latter that come to mind are Tommy Cooper, the close up work of Danny Sylvester, or recently Yann Frisch; all, in different ways, make a play of awkwardness, rapidity, angularity and confusion. Both extremes are, as we have seen, equally traditional. Formal tensions persist, then, with an indeterminate echo of the social tensions that once ran through them.

Against this backdrop, we can begin to make sense of Lennart Green. The appeal of his act becomes more intelligible when his style and persona are considered partly as a reaction to something. It somehow matters that his shifty, cack-handed manner would have been, for Robert-Houdin, unspeakably vulgar:

It is not unusual to see conjurors affect a pretend clumsiness which they call a 'feint.' These hoaxes played on the public are in very bad taste. What should we think of an actor who pretended to forget his part, or of a singer who for a moment affected to sing out of tune in order to gain greater applause afterwards? (Robert-Houdin, 1878, p. 34)

The drunk and the petty criminal rear their heads again in Lennart Green's act. He demonstrates various moves which could be used, apparently, to cheat at the card table. He places a card in front of him, and has a higher one called out. He readies himself, and, with a snap, the card on the table has changed to the one named. Or again, after having the deck shuffled, he riffles the cards onto the table, lunges with his hand, and pulls out a complete royal flush. Meanwhile his glass of beer - which he fills as his first trick - is on hand throughout. 'When I'm sober,' he says, 'I do this much quicker.'

Is this juggling? In his quick movements, his angularity, and his total lack of naturalism, he resembles the juggler. Juggling, though, can be a slick performance, which Lennart Green's is emphatically not. Rather, he is closer to the baser side of juggling: its showiness, its shiftiness, its vanity. He boasts of his skill, though at first

we don't believe he has any. Once he has proven that he knows a move or two, he unashamedly shows them off. This, again, is sleight of hand as mere excess, as something for its own sake. Likewise, his movements are utterly unlike the 'definite actions' that Neil requires of the conjuror (1903, p. 19). They are spasmodic, sometimes confusing sometimes definite, but never structured by a clear narrative of cause and effect. Someone names a card - here it is. In a way, nothing could be more definite. But we are not prepared in advance; there is no premise. For a while in the middle of his act, the drama seems not to build. It becomes a succession of quick-fire moves, with little linking one to the next.

Yet his act does build. It gradually becomes clear that something confounding is going on. There is an overall effect that comes through. Lennart Green's clumsiness belies a profound precision, his drunkenness a penetrating insight. His successes are too consistent. He has produced the right card five times, ten times, too many times. There is some kind of order in his chaos, method in his madness. He cuts the deck into small piles all over the table and says 'when I lift the heap I peek'. This seems unlikely, but we are left with no better explanation. Either the mad cutting and reassembling is making everything more chaotic, or strangely ordered. We are left at a loss in the face of a whole series of mock-explanations: vague patterns in the cards, slow motion, Mandelbrot spirals, a high frequency laser. The basic notions of system, control and memorisation become more and more plausible.

For this reason, though, he is not quite juggling. The juggler, as we are told, resorts to the mechanical over the intellectual. He depends on his hands, *rather than* his brains. He claims the attention of his spectators by flaunting his skill. To begin with, this is what Lennart Green seems to be doing. He shows off his dexterity (though at first he seems not to have any). The mind, though, comes in gradually, unexpectedly, like an undercurrent. A series of coincidences begins to suggest some design. The impression mounts. His precision becomes increasingly uncanny, and his bluffs less and less laughable.

By the end of his performance, he is blindfolded with electrical-tape and tinfoil, looking alien and incapacitated like a Dalek, and yet he continues to produce the right cards: the entire suit of diamonds in ascending order. He seems more aware of his surroundings than his volunteer. He throws her the wrong card as a decoy ('misdirection'), she reaches to pick it up, and he brandishes the right one before she turns her head. His performance turns out to be about the mind after all - an acute, obscure mind, with an almost mathematical consciousness. It is tempting to say that there is, in the end, only one trick, only one effect: the impression of a brain at work. The blindfold seems to make no difference, as though he is gifted with some kind of blind sight. The lasting image of the act is the performer with his knowing head cocooned in foil and his hands seamlessly carrying out his bidding.

It is not exactly juggling, then. It is something like the juggler out-thinking the conjuror, the juggler beating the gentleman at his own game. It is an oblique retort to modern conjuring's originating drive for status. Lennart Green's rarest ability is to turn this into such a comic and likeable satire. It is always unlikely, never controlling. It leaves none of the bitter aftertaste of one-upmanship. Through all his flourishing and showing-off he is always the underdog, the butt of his own jokes. So when the tables turn and the juggler gets his own back, we are right there on his side.

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## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

### *Figure 1*

Robert-Houdin, J. E. (1878) *The Secrets of Conjuring And Magic or How to Become a Wizard*. Professor Hoffman, tr. and ed. London; Glasgow; Manchester; New York: George Routledge and Sons. p. 38.

### *Figure 2*

Houdini, H. (2007) [1906] *The Right Way to Do Wrong: An Exposé of Successful Criminals*. New York: Cosimo. p. 18.

### *Figure 3*

National Broadcasting Company (1957) *The Festival of Magic*. Producers' Showcase, 27 May 1957, [television broadcast]

### *Figure 4*

National Broadcasting Company (1957) *The Festival of Magic*. Producers' Showcase, 27 May 1957, [television broadcast]

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