

All I Believed is True: Dickens under the Influence

Steven Connor

I

Universal Fluid

The revival of mesmeric thinking and practice that took place from the late 1830s onwards in Britain provoked two contrary sorts of response that, in the account given by Alison Winter, were focussed in the rivalry between two new academic institutions in London, University College and King's College.¹ For those associated with KCL, and most particularly Herbert Mayo, mesmerism provided proof of the existence of a spiritual principle in man, separate from his physiological being. For others, mesmerism was primarily a phenomenon of physics and physiology – even if these phenomena were surprising and sometimes mysterious, they were perhaps not conspicuously more so than the effects of electromagnetism. As with the investigation of spiritualism later in the century, physicists such as Faraday and Wheatstone undertook detailed, if sometimes sceptical, investigations of the physical phenomena of mesmerism.

The most important figure in the British revival of mesmerism during the late 1830s was John Elliotson, a physician working at University College Hospital who had been impressed by the mesmeric displays of Charles Dupotet, a French exponent of the art of mesmerism, who came to London in 1837. Elliotson began using mesmeric trance to treat patients in 1837, and in 1838 started to conduct his experiments with mesmerism in the form of public displays. It was through Elliotson that Dickens had his first encounter with mesmerism, when he was invited, along with a number of other figures of distinction, to witness displays of mesmeric phenomena Elliotson mounted at University College Hospital, in January 1838.

Elliotson relied upon the spectacular powers demonstrated in particular by two patients in the hospital, Elizabeth O'Key and her sister Jane. Extraordinary scenes began to unfold in the hospital, which were witnessed by considerable groups of people and reported in detail in *The Lancet*. Alison Winter has explicated the epistemological tussle that seemed to be taking place in these demonstrations, with Elliotson trying to explicate and demonstrate the

physical laws governing mesmerism, and the sisters taking the opportunity to display mischievous irreverence to authority and to lay claim to supernatural and clairvoyant powers, telling the future, reading books with their stomachs or the backs of their hands. The most obvious symbolic challenge to medical-scientific authority came when Elizabeth O'Key started to claim medical powers for herself, claiming to be able to see the figure of 'Big Jacky' (Death) hovering over one of the patients in the hospital, who, obediently terrified, duly expired.

Uneasiness grew over Elliotson's public displays, which came to a head when a trial in August 1838 at the house of Thomas Wakley, the editor of *The Lancet*, who had by now become a fierce opponent of mesmerism, tricked the O'Key sisters into revealing their fakery. Elliotson was forced to resign his position. Dickens became very close to John Elliotson, supporting him through the bitter scandal and remaining a friend thereafter. Freed from the conflicts of institutional medicine and mesmerism, Elliotson founded the journal *The Zoist* in 1843, which would become the focus of the experimental and scientific investigation of mesmeric phenomena, in a strange combination with phrenology that Elliotson called 'phrenomesmerism'. Dickens in fact learned mesmeric technique from Elliotson and his assistant, though he does not record having put it successfully into practice until he mesmerised his wife Catherine in Pittsburgh in March 1842.² Dickens extended his mesmerising to family and friends on his return to England later in the year.

The issue that divided adherents of mesmerism was the question of its physical agency. Those who saw mesmerism as a matter of spiritual agencies and forces tended to focus on the dynamic relation between persons. Materialists tended to focus by contrast on mediating objects, many of which were held to be themselves magnetisable, or able to act as reservoirs of mesmeric force. Elliotson was inclined to the belief in a physical system of pseudo-chemical affinities; water was thought to be highly magnetisable, meaning that in his patients, 'mucous surfaces are much more sensible to the magnetic influence than cutaneous'; gold and nickel were held to be highly potent transmitters of the mesmeric influence; lead, by contrast, was near-useless. Dickens himself would later let slip his mock-arrogant 'perfect conviction that I could magnetize a Frying-Pan'.³ It was a conviction shared by many magnetisers. The point of these objects was to lend a kind of palpability to imaginary powers and virtues, to mechanise and materialise them.

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These objects are the subject of an imaginary physics, which is at the same time a physics of the imagination: they are the repositories and distributors of the most imaginary quasi-object of all, the mesmeric or magnetic fluid, a notion that was inherited from the beginnings of mesmerism in the late 1770s in France, as the invention of the flamboyant Anton Mesmer. Mesmer characterised the many differing qualities of this subtle fluid in a series of propositions appended to the *Mémoire sur la Découverte du Magnétisme Animal* he published in 1779. Its most important feature is that it is omnipresent and incapable of being restricted: it is ‘a substance whose rarefied nature enables it to penetrate all bodies without appreciable loss of activity [...] Its action is exerted at a distance, without the aid of any intermediate body’. And yet, remarkably, even though it is ‘universally distributed and continuous’, this substance can be condensed and stored: ‘It is intensified and reflected by mirrors, just like light [...] It is communicated, propagated and intensified by sound’, thinks Mesmer. It can also be ‘stored up, concentrated and transported’.⁴ Thus it is both universally diffused, and differentially concentrated. What is concentrated is the power of dissipation. It is a force which has the powers, and some of the susceptibilities, of a body.

In his later writings, Mesmer enlarged his claims for this fluid’s powers to mediate across any and all differences. In *Mémoire de F.A. Mesmer, Docteur en Médecine, sur ses Découvertes* (1799), he made it clear that, as the universal mediator, it has no differentiating qualities of its own:

Having no particular property, it is neither springy nor ponderous, but is the means in itself of determining properties in all divisions of matter which exist in a more composite form than it does. With regard to the properties which it determines in organic bodies, this fluid is as air is to sound and harmony, or as ether is to light. (*Mesmerism*, 99)

As the medium of universal permeation and communicability, which can overcome every resistance, it is in fact indifference itself:

There can never occur any movement or displacement, even within its slightest parts, which does not reach, to some extent, the entire expanse of the universe. We can therefore conclude that there is neither a being nor a combination of matter which – by the relations in which they exist in the whole – does not imprint an effect upon all surrounding matter and upon the medium within which we are immersed. (*Mesmerism*, 119-20)

Thus, '[t]he universe is dissolved and reduced to a single common entity' (*Mesmerism*, 99). Mesmer is at pains to insist that the fluid which transmits animal magnetism is not the air, since '[t]his type of sensation can only be acquired through the mediation of fluids which are as superior in their subtlety to ether as ether is to ordinary air' (*Mesmerism*, 122). But, however super-attenuated it may be, this fluid is still regarded as material, and never crosses the line into pure spirit. As such, its closest material analogue will always nevertheless be the air, which is a matter from which many of the evidences of what is usually thought of as 'matter' are missing, and so the matter which most nearly approximates to the immaterial.

One might be reminded by all this of the fantasy of a 'universal acid', which Daniel Dennett tells us so amused him as a child. The prospect of an acid that is so corrosive that it can burn its way through anything is thrilling and enthralling, especially perhaps to a young boy. But mature reflection throws up a problem: *what do you keep it in?* And, without such a container, how do you keep it from eating its way through the centre of the earth, coming out the other side and diffusing into space, vaporising asteroids and other celestial bodies as it goes?⁵ Mesmer's universal fluid is a much softer kind of solvent, but it is subject to more or less the same objection. How could it be possible to gather, or store a substance (if it is a substance; perhaps it's a force), whose nature is to permeate all space and everything in it? How could such a fluid possibly be subject to the damming or clotting which Mesmer thought caused illness, for what could possibly constrain or impede it? What could it really mean for a human body to act as a reservoir or conductor of such vital fluid, making it move faster or more freely than normal? How could there be more of it in one particular location than in another (wouldn't this make it denser, less dilute, and thus less able to penetrate bodies and objects?) In fact, like the universal acid, the vital fluid could never possibly be or remain in any one place at all – by the very condition of its nature, it would always be in motion, moving through and between things. These will be the adverbs that will govern the movements of mesmerism in the discussion that follows.

Many of those comic incongruities in the magic stuff of mesmerism were already apparent to Mesmer's contemporaries, such as Elizabeth Inchbald, in whose play *Animal Magnetism* (1788) Dickens appeared in 1857. Disguised as a mesmeric doctor, the deceiving manservant in the play, La Fluor gropingly tries to characterise the slippery substance-force of which his name seems to indicate that he is some kind of embodiment:

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You know Doctor, their [sic] is an universal fluid which spreads throughout all nature...a fluid – which is – a – fluid – and you know, Doctor that this fluid – generally called a fluid, is the most subtile of all that is the most subtle – Do you understand me... This fluid is like a river, that – that – runs – that – goes – that – gently glides – so – so – so – while there is nothing to stop it. – But if it encounters a mound or any other impediment – boo – boo – boo – it bursts forth – it overflows the country round – throws down villages, hamlets, houses, trees, cows and lambs; but remove obstacles which obstruct its course, and it begins again, softly and sweetly to flow – thus – thus – thus – the fields are again adorned, and every thing goes on, as well as it can go on. – Thus it is with the *Animal* Fluid, which fluid obeys the command of my art.⁶

II

The Clutch of My Steady Ken

The question that reasserts itself in all cultural productions and manifestations of mesmerism seems similarly always to be: *what do you keep it in?* It was abundantly obvious to the Victorians as it has again, somewhat ponderously, become patent to contemporary readers that mesmerism was a matter of power. On one side of the phantasmagoria of power is the manipulating figure of Robert Browning's poem 'Mesmerism', who turns his victim into a helpless, somnambulistic automaton:

I have sat and brought
 (So to speak) my thought
 To bear on the woman away,
 Till I felt my hair turn grey –

Till I seemed to have and hold,
 In the vacancy
 'Twixt the wall and me,
 From the hair-plait's chestnut gold
 To the foot in its muslin fold –

Have and hold, then and there,
 Her, from head to foot
 Breathing and mute,
 Passive and yet aware,
 In the grasp of my steady stare –

Hold and have, there and then,
 All her body and soul
 That completes my whole,

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All that women add to men,
In the clutch of my steady ken.⁷

On the other side, there is the mesmeriser as humble gatekeeper or guide, who, giving entrance to the powers of trance or, as it was frequently called, coma, gives to the subject access to powers which mimic and even surpass his own powers of clairvoyance, projection, doubling of the self.

There were two conjoined issues of power involved in mesmerism. The first was the power exercised over particular subjects in mesmeric relations. The other was a more general effort to establish and maintain power over the mesmeric phenomenon itself. Spiritual-religious and scientific-materialist explanations offered very different understandings, but they both constituted an effort to stabilise and regularise a set of phenomena that otherwise threatened to radiate unpredictably in all directions. This involves a complex play between explanation and performance. Both forms of explanation attempted to stabilise and simplify relations that the various ways in which mesmerism was performed and enacted tended in fact to multiply and complicate. Alison Winter has suggested that mesmerism was not only a problem in science, but also, as an experimental technique for performing and analysing operations of mind, became ““a science of sciences” [...] a means of exploring the nature and relations of the sciences’.⁸ The question at stake in mesmerism was not just what kind of power it might involve, but what kind of power was to be had over that power, who was to exercise it, and how.

Dickens’s experience of mesmerism caused him to move between the transcendentalist and materialist explanations. He had learned the techniques of mesmerism from the most powerful and sustained advocates of the scientific-materialist understanding of mesmerism. But he was also close to Chauncy Hare Townshend, a poet, who, in his influential *Facts in Mesmerism* (1840), had attempted to separate mesmerism from science, or from a narrowly materialistic science:

With the scientific men of our day, (and far be it from me to censure this) certainty is the great object. In order, then, to claim the notice and the fostering protection of science, the friends of mesmerism have long endeavoured to identify their presumed agent with physical forces, already ascertained and of invariable action. In their principle, perhaps, they are right – in its application, wrong altogether. Forgetting that mesmerism is a mental and vital, not less than physical phenomenon, and that mind and life are in perpetual opposition to the laws of the

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material world, they have endeavoured to recognise in mesmerism an operation as constant as that of the galvanic battery, or the electric vial... they have ransacked the material world for analogies to mesmerism, till the mind itself has been endued with its affinities and its poles. Such attempts as these have done the greatest disservice to the cause we advocate.⁹

In fact, like many others, Townshend had his own version of the imaginary physics of Mesmer, in the form of what he called '[a]n elastic ether, modified by the nerves, and the conduction of which depends on their condition; which can be thrown into vibration immediately by the mind of man, and mediately by the nervous system; which manifests itself when thrown out of equilibrium, and produces mental effects through unusual stimulation of the brain and nerves' (*Facts in Mesmerism*, 497).

Dickens's most sustained period of involvement with mesmerism took place during 1845, during much of which he was travelling in Italy after the completion of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-44). In Genoa, Dickens made the acquaintance of Augusta De La Rue, the English-born wife of Emile, a Swiss banker. Madame De La Rue had suffered for some years from one of those generalised and unnameable clusters of symptoms on which mesmerism was so often brought to bear – in her case, headaches, insomnia, tics, convulsions.

Dickens first mesmerised Madame De La Rue on 23 December, and, finding her a responsive subject, and impressively undaunted by the fact that the first exercise of mesmerism seemed to have triggered a particularly severe attack of her mysterious disorder, began to do so regularly, keeping detailed notes of their conversations during her trances. The most detailed account to have survived is in a letter of 15 January to Emile De La Rue:

Having been asleep some twenty minutes, I drew her into a conversation, as follows – occasionally with some little difficulty, and by dint of repeating the same question two or three times. 'Well! where are you today? On the Hillside as usual?' – 'Yes.' – 'Quite alone?' – 'No.' – 'Are there many people there?' – 'Yes, A good many.' – 'Men, or women?' – 'Both.' 'How they are [sic] dressed?' – 'I can't see. I have too many things to look at.' – 'But you can tell me what they are doing. Can't you?' – 'Yes. They are walking about, and talking.' – 'To you?' – 'No. To each other.' – 'What are they saying? I don't know.' – 'Try and find out' – 'I am too busy.' – 'But not so busy that you can't listen to them, surely?' – 'Yes I am. I have so many things to attend to,' – 'Are they in a crowd?' – 'Yes; quite a crowd.'

Suddenly, she cried out, in great agitation. 'Here's my brother! Here's my brother!' – and she breathed very quickly, and her figure became stiff. 'Where? In the crowd?' – 'No. In a room.' – 'Who is with him?' – 'Nobody.' – 'What is he

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doing?’ – ‘Leaning against a window: looking out. Oh he is so sad! He is so sad!’ – shedding tears as she spoke, and shewing the greatest sympathy. ‘What Brother? The Brother I know?’ – ‘No no. Not the Brother you know. Another.’ – ‘What is his name?’ – ‘Charles. Oh how sad he is!’ – ‘What makes him so?’ – ‘I don’t know, I don’t know. I must try to find out.’ – ‘Watch the door, and perhaps somebody will come in’ – ‘Yes yes, I will. I am very busy, looking. I am trying to see.’

After a pause, I said:

‘Well! Has anybody come in?’ – ‘No. He is still alone.’ – ‘Leaning against the window?’ – ‘No. Walking up and down the room.’ – ‘Still sad?’ – ‘Oh! Very sad. What *can* make him so sad?’ – ‘Tell me what you see through the window.’ – ‘No. I can’t, I can’t. I am looking at him.’ – ‘Yes. But look at the window too. I’m sure you will if I ask you. What do you see through the window? Fields?’ – ‘No no. The sea.’ – ‘How is your brother dressed?’ – ‘In his uniform.’ – ‘With a sword?’ – ‘No.’ – ‘With a hat?’ – ‘No.’ – ‘You will be sure to tell me, if anyone comes in?’ – ‘Yes yes. But I am trying to find out what makes him so sad, poor fellow!’ – still crying, and in great distress. After a time, she said, with increased agitation. ‘He is thinking of me!’ – and after another interval, she cried that she had found out the reason of his despondency. That he thought himself forgotten. That the letters had miscarried, and he had not received them. Then she fell back in the chair, like one whose mind was relieved; and said it was gone and she saw him no more. (*Letters*, IV, 247-48)

The striking thing about this account is the struggle it conveys between the mesmeriser and his subject. Dickens probes, urges, insists, doing everything he can to maintain the illusion. His seems the eagerness at once of the reader and the novelist, dependent on the position and point of view of his focalising subject, and yet using her as a viewfinder, directing and redirecting her focus, and attempting to see through her. Augusta for her part comes in and out of range, withdrawing, half-complying, half-resisting, even at times refusing (‘I am too busy’).

This account makes Dickens’s exercise of mesmerism very different from that of Elliotson and other experimenters. Dickens is fascinated, not by the externals of Madame De La Rue’s condition, nor by any particular powers or capacities she might demonstrate, but rather by the details of her inner theatre. He seems so keen to secure the scene in its fullness that he seems not to recognise its apparent reference to him, or the part that he might be playing in it. Madame De La Rue might well have had a brother called Charles, but this was also the name of the man who was urging her to give a name to the figure.

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The most important part of Madame De La Rue's vision, and the one that engaged Dickens's curiosity, dread and determination, is introduced in the same letter:

She always imagines herself lying on a hill-side with a very blue sky above, green grass about her, and a pleasant air stirring. That the sensation of pain, suggests to her the rolling of stones down this hill, by some unseen people: which she is much distressed in her endeavours to avoid: and which occasionally strike her. There is a man haunting this place – dimly seen, but heard talking sometimes – whom she is afraid of, and 'dare not' look at. I connect it with the figure she calls her bad spirit; in consequence of her trembling very much, when I once asked her, lying on this imaginary hill, if that phantom were to be seen: when she implored me not to speak of him. She said today that this creature was talking of me; and at my request, she tried hard to overhear what he said. But 'she couldn't make it all out', she complained, and suddenly added, 'Don't go away upon a Monday. Be sure not to go away upon a Monday. It's not he who says that. *I say it.* (*Letters*, IV, 248-49)

Dickens became obsessed with this figure of the phantom, who seems to be both his double and his rival. Having begun his travels away from Genoa, Dickens wrote to Augusta's husband 'the extent to which her thoughts are directed to, and clustered round, that bad phantom – and the manner in which she watches the effect upon it, and trusts to my influence over it, and refers all her suffering to it – is most remarkable [...] I see af[ar] off, how *essential it is that this Phantom should not regain its power* for an instant. And we can hardly expect, yet, that she will very long be able to combat it, successfully, alone' (*Letters*, IV, 250). Dickens celebrates his growing power over the 'devilish figure' (*Letters*, IV, 254) in later letters, and starts to wonder whether it is an effect of the illness or an image of it: 'I cannot yet make up my mind, whether the phantom originates in shattered nerves and a system broken by Pain; or whether it is the representative of some great nerve or set of nerves on which her disease has preyed – and begins to loose its hold now, because the disease of those nerves is itself attacked by the inexplicable agency of the Magnetism' (*Letters*, IV, 254-55). Dickens here veers between clumsy physicality and the intensity of his struggle with the phantom. He now seems or claims to know more of the figure than Augusta herself, having taken possession of the agency which possesses her:

That figure is so closely connected with the secret distresses of her very soul – and the impression made upon it is so entwined with her confidence and trust in me, and her knowledge of the power of the Magnetism – *that* it must not make head again. From what I know from her, I know there is more danger and delay in one appearance of that figure than in a dozen fits of the severest bodily pain.

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Believe nothing she says of her capacity of endurance, if the reappearance of that figure should become frequent. Consult that mainly, and before all other signs. I shudder at the very thought of the precipice on which she has stood, when that Fancy has persecuted her. If you find her beset by it, induce her to be got to me by one means or other; for there the danger lies so deep, that she herself can hardly probe it, even now. (*Letters*, IV, 255).

Fred Kaplan offers an early but still influential reading of the attraction that mesmerism had for Dickens and the use that he made of it in his work. ‘Mesmerism provided Dickens not only with a rationale for the working of personality and mind... but with a language and an imagery that could be dramatically utilized in fictional creation’ (*Dickens and Mesmerism*, 112-13). Elsewhere, he describes mesmerism as ‘a source of imagery for the depiction of character and the dramatization of the relationships between people’ (*Dickens and Mesmerism*, 138). I think that Kaplan is right, but not quite for the reason he suggests, namely that Dickens saw mesmerism principally as a resource for art. I want to suggest that psychologising of mesmeric relations was part of a defence that Dickens mounted against the impersonality of mesmerism - a means of ensuring, in the Freudian formula, that *wo es war soll ich sein* – where it (id) was there shall I (ego) be.

It is easy to see what the wilful, even sadistically-inclined Dickens might have got from the prospect of mesmerism, and protected under the belief that he was healing. But the imperious streak of passivity that was also part of Dickens’s composition meant that the strong desire for there *to be* submission in the subject could not, it seems, but entail an envious identification with that submitting subject, with that power of *being subject* which mesmerism promised and on which it depended. Chauncy Hare Townshend was anxious that Dickens subject himself to mesmeric experiment, but Dickens insisted in July 1841 that he ‘dare not be mesmerized, lest it should damage me at all’, though he did hold out the promise that ‘a time *will* come’ (*Letters*, II, 342) And yet, we may readily agree with Fred Kaplan that, in the very urgency with which he depended on the dependency on him of Augusta De La Rue, which he both assumed and demanded, ‘Dickens needed his patient and mesmerism as much as his patient needed him’ (*Dickens and Mesmerism*, 88).

In his emphasis on the operation of the will, as the self-creating, self-projecting, self-sustaining emanation of the soul, Dickens now seems to be identified with the transcendentalist as opposed to the materialist view of mesmerism. Seemingly with little

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interest in these 1845 letters in the physical modalities of mesmerism – in forces, focuses, mediators, repositories, he substitutes a dramaturgy of projected persons for a physics of forces. However, Dickens's transcendentalist view of the mesmeric effect as a kind of self-begetting emanation of spiritual force must subdue or stand out against certain features of the mesmeric process which seem to suggest that it operates in an objective, impersonal, or interpersonal mode that goes beyond the powers of the individuated wilful soul to capture. Something of this is suggested by the strange possibility that Dickens raises of accidental or collateral mesmerism. Dickens and his wife left Genoa on 19 January to travel around Italy. Convinced of his capacity to exert his mesmeric influence at a distance, Dickens made an arrangement with Madam De La Rue that they would each concentrate on establishing rapport with the other for an hour at 11 o'clock every day. Dickens reported the following extraordinary incident in a letter to Emile De La Rue of 27 January:

I was on the Box of the Carriage; and, as usual, at Eleven by the Genoa time, composed myself for one hour's abstraction, in rigid pursuance of our agreement. Now, it happened that I was not alone, as it is my custom to be then; but that Mrs. Dickens had been hoisted up, to get the air. As I very often sit a long time without saying anything at all – when I am thinking, or when I am thinking I am thinking – and as she is well used to it, I didn't mind her, but sat quite still and quiet. Observe. – I didn't move hand or foot. I engaged myself, in imagination, in mesmerizing our Patient; and my whole Being, for the time, was set upon it, certainly, with the greatest steadfastness. But it was impossible for anyone to know in what I was engaged, otherwise than that I was very intent on some subject. Will you believe me when I tell you that I had not remained thus, more than five or ten minutes, when I was disturbed by Mrs Dickens' letting her muff fall. And *can* you believe me when I tell you that looking at her I found her as I live! in the Mesmeric trance, with her eyelids quivering in a convulsive manner peculiar to some people in that state – her hands and feet suddenly cold – her sense numbed – and that on my rousing her, with some difficulty, and asking her what was the matter, she said she had been magnetized? She was so discomposed that it was necessary to put her into the carriage immediately; and she had a bad fit of trembling until the influence wore off. (*Letters*, IV, 253)

In one sense, we may be being asked to believe that the force of will being exercised by Dickens was so abundant that it could spill over incontinently into its vicinity. But this is also a will beyond will, a will no longer in command of itself, which can have effects that exceed, or fall short of, its own reach.

It should be obvious that mesmerism gave considerable scope for what among S&M enthusiasts is known as 'topping from below', that is, the exercise of power in and through

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the apparent posture of submission. Mesmerism did not just offer to its operators the power of enthralling, but also held out the power of being able to succumb to power – the passipotent power of sensitivity, susceptibility. This is maybe why mesmerism came to be associated so strongly with medical practice. For in offering healing, the mesmeric operator (spiritual or medical) will always be deploying the fantasy of a power (and, of course, the power of a fantasy) which he (nearly always he) merely refracts, reflects or conducts. He may suggest himself as the mere prompt or occasion for an access of sensibility in the mesmeric subject. The office of healing is the curbing and constraining of the power which, operating without limit, would be pure, unmediated domination.

We should, I think, be wary of reading mesmerism simply in terms of the ‘Svengali effect’ that has been analysed in Daniel Pick’s book *Svengali’s Web* (2000) and that came to a focus at the end of the century in George du Maurier’s *Trilby* (1894), in which a young girl is hypnotically enslaved by the sinister Svengali.¹⁰ Pick uses this story to unfold the histories of the many charismatic fascinators and captivators of the will who flourished through the nineteenth century. For the Svengali effect, which it is hard not to see at work in Dickens’s readings, is actually the result of a processing, production, or performance of what may be called the mesmerism system. Dickens asserted his violent, overmastering will through his fantasy of mesmeric power; but this was an assertion not just *through*, but *over* mesmerism. It was a binding of others to his will through mesmerism, and a bending of mesmerism itself to his will. What must be subdued in mesmerism is precisely that in it which resists channelling or concentration – the circulation and dispersal of will-power and wills-to-power. As obsessive compulsive disorder shows us, the will and its power are never in as zipped-up an apposition as the phrase ‘will-power’ might suggest, and we are never more compelled and commanded than when we are compulsive, which is to say in thrall to our own will-power.

III

In Articulo Mortis

The transcendentalist proponents of mesmerism saw it as an affirmation and embodiment of a vital principle: Harriet Martineau declared confidently that ‘[t]he principle of life itself – the principle which is antagonistic to disease – appears to be fortified by the mesmeric

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influence'.¹¹ The powers of life were to be commandeered and directed by powerful souls, who would both concentrate and diffuse them.

But there were aspects of mesmerism that seemed to stand out against, or sometimes to be difficult to assimilate to this principle of life. There was, first of all, the fact that mesmerism seemed so bound up with experiences of insensibility. The proof of the mesmeric trance was often bodied forth in subjects who showed astonishing insouciance when they were pricked with pins or had pistols discharged close to their ears. But mesmerism also seemed to offer the heightening of perceptual powers and sensibilities – seeing and hearing at a distance, X-ray vision, community of sensation between mesmerisers and their subjects, migration of sense organs, allowing subjects to see and hear through their stomachs and fingertips – but it came to be powerfully associated, and for good practical reasons, with the possibilities of anaesthesia – so much, indeed, that, as Alison Winter puts it, ‘mesmeric anaesthesia grew to be the test case for mesmerism in general’.¹² Among those who insisted most strongly on the laying to rest of the physical senses in mesmerism was Dickens’s friend Chauncy Hare Townshend:

Another of my sleepwalkers (E. A–) watched his sensations, while he was entering into the mesmeric state, up to the last moment, when consciousness became extinguished. He told me that he could distinctly perceive a gradual deadening of sensation; that at length he no longer felt his limbs; but that all his life and feeling seemed to rally towards the brain. In the mesmeric state, he continued to assure me that he was corporeally insensible; and, anxious, as it seemed, to try experiments upon himself, he would bite his own hand till he drew blood, without, as he affirmed, exciting sensation. (*Facts in Mesmerism*, 146-47)

Townshend aimed to show that, when ‘the ear is closed; the eye is an abolished organ’ (*Facts in Mesmerism*, 395), another kind of mental sensitivity takes over, operating via the agency of the magic ether. Here, the higher, or transcendent life of the spirit subdues and substitutes for the material body. But this association between mesmerism and bodily insensibility could suggest another much more grotesque kind of possibility to Edgar Allan Poe who knew and admired Townshend’s work, describing it in 1845 as ‘one of the most truly profound and philosophical works of the day’.¹³ Poe may have drawn on Townshend for his extraordinary story ‘The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar’, published in 1845, the year of Dickens’s mesmeric adventures with the De La Rues, in which a patient dying of consumption is kept alive and articulate by the force of mesmerism, even beyond the point of physical death.¹⁴

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When the trance is finally withdrawn, his body too crumbles away. In one sense, this asserts the transcendental power of mesmeric force and will over death; but the trance which allows the mesmerised man to speak *in articulo mortis* also suggests that mesmerism might in some sense belong to, or be compact with death. The story seems to compound undecidably together the vitalist and the materialist explanations of mesmerism. Here we may make out another sense in which explanations of mesmerism in terms of channelling or containing will-power may be directed against another view or possibility of mesmerism, as embodying something much more indifferent, undirected, impersonal – a life-in-death or unnaturally vigorous and loquacious mortality.

Dickens's experiments with mesmerism belonged to a period in which the scientific understanding of the phenomena by experimental investigators began to diffuse into popular forms. Elliotson forged the link with phrenology in order to put and keep mesmerism on a more sound and consistent footing as a material science, but this very association with what had established itself as a kind of folk-science assisted the spread of mesmeric exhibitions and displays, far from the centres of medical or scientific authority, and in less orthodox institutions like the popular lecture halls and mechanics' institutes.¹⁵ Proponents of mesmerism like Elliotson and Harriet Martineau were ambivalent about whether to approve or condemn this diffusion, which both expanded understanding and acceptance of mesmerism, and yet also threatened to degrade its distinctiveness. Elliotson's exhibitions of the O'Key sisters instantiated and inaugurated a tension between knowledge and understanding on the one hand, and embodiment, enactment and performance on the other that would run through the 1840s (and be repeated decades later in Charcot's exhibitions of hysteria in the Salpêtrière). Even though explanation and knowledge gradually clustered on the side of professional and elite science, and pure performance became more and more characteristic of popular expositions and demonstrations of mesmerism, explanation and performance remained closely and intricately intertwined. Jennifer Ruth's study of these tensions between the professional and the popular in the case of *The Zoist*, which Elliotson directed from 1843 to 1856, shows how difficult it was to discipline the seemingly undirected, credulous, semi-conscious fascination that mesmerism exerted over mass audiences into credible and acceptable forms.¹⁶ The opposition between liberal intelligence and mass sensation seems like a recasting of the complex struggle between life and death. This makes Townshend's remark

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that '[w]e have asked whether such a *power* as mesmerism exists; when we should rather have demanded whether there is a *state* so denominated' seem prescient (*Facts in Mesmerism*, 7).

Fred Kaplan has discussed the many examples of the dominative relations between characters in Dickens's work in which something like the Svengali effect seems to be being exercised. But, despite Dickens's conviction of his mesmeric powers, there are perhaps only two incidents in Dickens's work in which mesmerism seems to be represented as something like a literal truth, rather than as a metaphorical suggestion or framework. One of them is Oliver's vision in chapter thirty-four of *Oliver Twist* (1837-39), of the words and actions of Monks and Fagin.¹⁷ The other is the mesmeric influence which Jasper seems to exercise over Rosa as she sings in chapter seven of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870), causing her to break off her singing in terror.¹⁸ But even here mesmerism is not named as such, but rather mimed; it is left to us to supply the name. The most powerful form of mesmeric enactment is to be found in Dickens's readings late in his life. Here, Dickens seems to be providing a kind of immediate bodily warrant of the kind of *rapport* that he sensed and desired with the large, anonymous mass of his readers. Mesmeric power both incorporates and dominates this mass, the readings being both literal actings out of immediate contact between the writer and his audience and a sort of projection or production of a scene of powerful fantasy. In the readings above all, the asymmetrical logic whereby life, will and power subdue and dominate a subject by mesmeric means is cut across by a logic of shared or distributed compulsion, in which performer and audience are both taken up. In the readings, the centred and oriented disposition of speaker and listener is only one state or actualisation of an entire, yet never quite completed mesmerism *combinatoire*.

IV

The Mesmerism System

Mesmerism was a radiating system, a system of radiations, the focal centre of which it is hard to determine. In taking up their stations with respect to it, its adherents, enthusiasts, investigators, anathematisers, debunkers and, now historical interpreters like me, have helped to form it, producing in it and producing it in the ways in which they in each case attempted

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to reduce it to rule. Some of these indeterminacies break from the word ‘operator’ that came to be used frequently of the mesmeriser. The word had been in use at least since the sixteenth century to indicate one who effects an operation, or carries out a work, though it often has the implication of carrying out a work, not on one’s own behalf, but on somebody else’s. But it had early on been associated with subterfuge, to indicate the work of counterfeit, the work of simulating a work: Cotgrave glosses the French ‘opérateur’ in 1611 as ‘a quacksaluer, cheater, imposter’, and the word quickly gathered the associations of guile, deceit and underhand dealing that it still retains. So it is never quite plain what work the *operator* is engaged upon, or on whose behalf, or to whose benefit.

As a species of magical thinking, mesmerism may be thought of as a circulating constellation of different principles: power, fantasy, knowledge and the body. These principles are neither precisely commensurable with each other, in that they are all different kinds of thing, nor entirely separable from each other, for none of the quartet is intelligible or effective without reference to the others. Power, fantasy, knowledge and the body are related to each other partly like the different elements in the game of scissors, stone and paper. Each can bear on and be differently borne on, by the others, depending on the playing out of the game.

If we imagine these relations spread out a combinatory array, with different kinds of propositional and prepositional links between them, it may provide us with a machine for thinking the action of mesmerism. The power of mesmerism might be seen for example as a particular *fantasy of power over the body*. But, insofar as that fantasy had an undeniable power of its own – to baffle, intrigue, amuse, astonish, convince, terrify, appal – it cannot be dismissed as simply a fantasy. There is a verifiable power in the fantasy of power, a power that implicates the body, that becomes embodied. Fantasy is popularly supposed to be something non-bodily, the projection of imagination or desire in excess or despite of the realm of material facts that are given instance in the body. But the particular kind of fantasy at work in mesmerism was an intensely and intimately lived fantasy of the body itself. So the fantasy of power over the body is itself a kind of bodily thing – call it a *body of fantasy-power*. Mesmerism is the power of a fantasy of the body. Mesmerism is one species of the magical thinking that deliciously gives itself the permission or power to give credit to its

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belief. 'All I believed is true,' Browning's 'Mesmerism' begins. The belief has come first, has been there, it suddenly, at long last, appears, all along.

For the scientific or materialistic mesmerists like Elliotson, mesmerism was a matter of bodily facts, which were there to be carefully observed and laid out. No supernatural principle was involved in mesmerism. The proponents of mesmerism, of whatever persuasion, endlessly insisted on the palpable, visible 'facts' of what was produced. These facts depended upon the visible, unfalsifiable body. On the other side, there are fantasies, fanatical delusions of what the body is longed and believed to be able to do, in flagrant excess of its own condition. But the contrast between the fact and fantasy of the body, or between the body, as the numb repository or passive display of fact, and fantasy, is complicated by the fact that there is no stronger or stranger theatre of fantasy than the realm of fact. Fact is deployed against magical thinking, but the subordination to fact, to things as they in themselves actually are, is itself an exercise of magical thinking. It is not that there are no facts, or that all facts are merely made up; but facts are only accessible through and as a kind of fantasy, the most irresistible and imperious of all.

The fantasy of a knowledge of the body, and the fantasy-power of the knowledge of that body of fantasy power and propagate each other. Every understanding of mesmerism will come up short of the mesmerism system, because it will fail to contain it all, or stand securely outside it. Every such understanding will be part of its performance, its way of working, its way of playing itself out.

All this goes beyond Dickens, like mesmerism itself, for to be part of the mesmerism system, even as what Jill L. Matus has called somewhat cryptically a 'practicing mesmerist' (a practising mesmerist as opposed to what – a pretend one?) is to be exceeded by it.¹⁹ But Dickens's involvement with the mesmeric engine of identifications is given an extra turn later in his life by the role he took in 1857 in Elizabeth Inchbald's *Animal Magnetism*, which he performed in a double bill with Collins's *The Frozen Deep*, in the writing of which Dickens has substantially collaborated. The farce can be regarded as a comic counterweight to the first play of the evening, in which clairvoyance is taken very seriously, as well as poking fun at Dickens's own mesmero-medical pretensions. It shows the gulling of an elderly quack Doctor (played by Dickens), who is keeping imprisoned his young ward Constance with a view to making her his wife. The Doctor is persuaded by Constance's disguised suitor that he is able

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to cure any ailment and induce amorous fascination in any woman by the exercise of a magnetic wand. After the wand has brought about a series of misdirected adorations, and the Doctor has been tricked into thinking he has accidentally killed a patient by his bungling application of the magnetic influence, he agrees to sign a contract giving over his ward to her lover in exchange for protection from exposure and professional ruin. Here, the fictional fluid of animal magnetism flows together with the fluid fiction of influence, as the fluid becomes a metaphor for the mobile machinery of farcical deceptions and dissimulations. It would be easy to see this as an assertion and enjoyment on Dickens's part of a comic self-distancing from the often frankly absurd theatrical mechanics of mesmerism. But even as the play puts mesmerism in its place, it intimates the intractable complexity of the transferences and displacements it allows to be played out. Dickens's participation in *Animal Magnetism* puts him at least partly under, as well as beyond reach of the influence.

¹ Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 32-59.

² Fred Kaplan, *Dickens and Mesmerism: The Hidden Springs of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 70. Subsequent references to this edition are given as *Dickens and Mesmerism* in text.

³ Charles Dickens, *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Madeline House, Graham Storey et. al., 12 Vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965-2002), IV, p. 265. Subsequent references to this edition are given as *Letters* in text.

⁴ F.A. Mesmer, *Mesmerism: A Translation of the Original Scientific and Medical Writings of F.A. Mesmer*, translated by George Bloch (Los Altos, CAL: William Kaufmann, 1980), pp. 68, 67, 68. Subsequent references to this edition are given as *Mesmerism* in text.

⁵ Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. London: Penguin, 1995), p. 63.

⁶ Elizabeth Inchbald, *Animal Magnetism, A Farce, In Three Acts* (Dublin: P. Byron, 1788), p. 12.

⁷ Robert Browning, *Poetical Works 1833-1864*, ed. Ian Jack (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 602-03.

⁸ Winter, *Mesmerized*, pp. 55-6.

⁹ Chauncy Hare Townshend, *Facts in Mesmerism: With Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry Into It* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1840), pp. 16-17. References hereafter to *Facts in Mesmerism* in text.

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- ¹⁰ Daniel Pick, *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).
- ¹¹ Harriet Martineau, *Letters on Mesmerism*, 2nd edn. (London: Edward Moxon, 1845), p. 12.
- ¹² Winter, *Mesmerized*, p. 169.
- ¹³ Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 17 Vols, ed. James A. Harrison (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co, 1902), XII, p. 123.
- ¹⁴ Sidney E. Lind, 'Poe and Mesmerism', *PMLA*, 62 (1947), pp. 1077- 94.
- ¹⁵ Terry M. Parsinnen, 'Mesmeric Performers', *Victorian Studies*, 21 (1977), pp. 87-104.
- ¹⁶ Jennifer Ruth, "'Gross Humbug" or "the Language of Truth"? The Case of the *Zoist*', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 32 (1999), pp. 299-323.
- ¹⁷ Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, ed. Steven Connor (London: J.M. Dent, 1994), pp. 246-9.
- ¹⁸ Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, ed. Steven Connor (London: J.M. Dent, 1996), p. 61.
- ¹⁹ Jill L. Matus, 'Trauma, Memory, and Railway Disaster: The Dickensian Connection', *Victorian Studies*, 43 (2001), pp. 413-436.