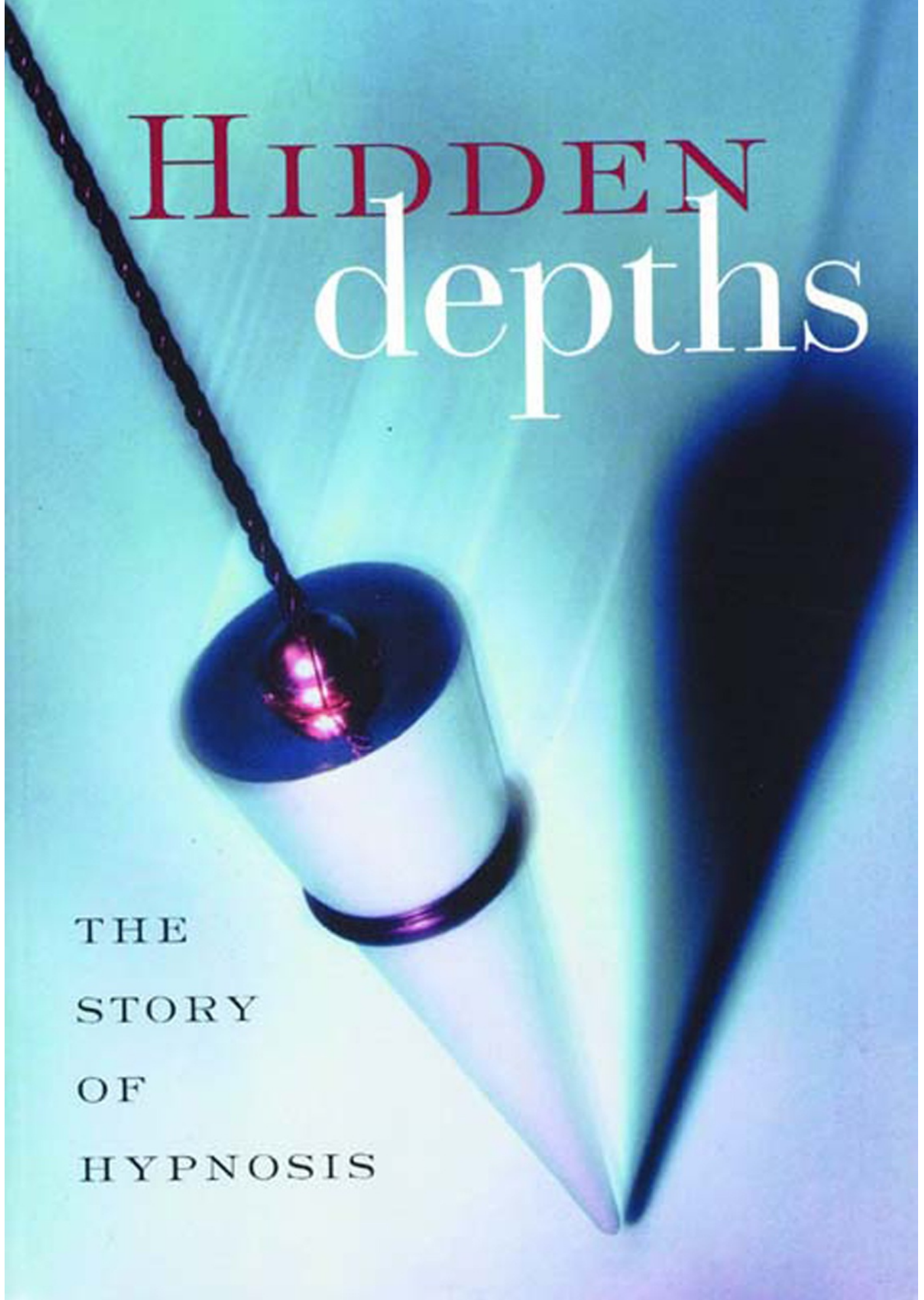


ROBIN WATERFIELD

# HIDDEN depths

THE  
STORY  
OF  
HYPNOSIS



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# **HIDDEN DEPTHS**

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**Robin Waterfield**

**HIDDEN DEPTHS**

*The Story of Hypnosis*

MACMILLAN

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**To my *karass***

**Code the world with the fugitive light**

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‘Animal magnetism is the most significant discovery ever made, even if, for the time being, it brings more enigmas than it solves’

Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sämmtliche Werke* IV

‘Mesmerism is too gross a humbug to admit any farther serious notice. We regard its abettors as quacks and impostors. They ought to be hooted out of professional society’

Thomas Wakley, first editor of the *Lancet*

‘All sciences alike have descended from magic and superstition, but none has been so slow as hypnosis in shaking off the evil associations of its origin’

Clark Hull, *Hypnosis and Suggestibility*

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# Preface

It is 1784. You are in a dimly lit salon in a mansion in a prosperous section of Paris. The room is presided over by a tall, slightly overweight man dressed in a purple cloak trimmed with lace and embroidered with occult symbols. Other sigils decorate the walls and heavy velvet curtains cover the windows, allowing just the odd ray of sunlight in to strike the thickly carpeted floor, and hardly any sound penetrates from the street outside. Melodious piano music can be heard softly from another room. You and a number of other Parisians are seated around a large, low tub, and there are other such tubs in the room, three for the rich and one for the poor. However, there are few poor people at the tub, since it is fashionable Paris that is fascinated by this new science. Movable iron rods stick out through the cover of the tub and have been bent at right angles, so that from where you sit on chairs around the tub you and the others can hold the rods, or apply them directly or by means of an attached rope to an afflicted part of the body. The other end of these rods, you have been informed, are resting in phials of magnetized water, and these phials in turn stand in a pool of water containing magnetized iron filings. The wizard, who is none other than Franz Anton Mesmer, calls this contraption a *baquet* (which just means ‘tub’), and explains that it, or the attentions of an individual healer such as himself, can restore the lost balance of the magnetic fluid which pervades the universe and animates all living creatures, and whose disturbance is ill health. The group of clients grasp the rods and wait in silence. The atmosphere in the room grows very intense. Occasionally Mesmer or one of his assistants prowls around the room. To complete his appearance as a wizard, Mesmer carries a wand, with a metal tip. He inspects the woman next to you, passes his hands behind her back without touching her, points the wand at her, and she goes into convulsions. Her body begins to jerk, and her breathing is shallow and uneven; a flush comes over her face and neck. Finally she collapses gently to the floor, coughing up phlegm. Assistants calmly come and take her away to another room, which you can see is lined with mattresses and soft silk drapes. Mesmer follows to attend to her, now that she is on the road to health.

\*

It is 1850. You are in the comfortable and cluttered drawing room of a well-to-do self-styled doctor. He sits you down in a straight-backed chair, and pulls up another chair opposite you. If you are a woman, you are chaperoned, and he delicately places your knees to one side of his; if you are a man he sits with his knees between yours. He feels rather too close for comfort, but you are here of your own free will to be mesmerized, and so you submit. He asks you gently to relax, and tells you that you have nothing to fear. Then silence falls. He makes a few sample passes over your hands, from the wrist to the fingertips, drawing his hands close to the skin, so close that you can feel the warmth of his hands but never quite touching. To your surprise after a while you feel a faint coolness and tingling. Satisfied, he then proceeds to take your right hand in his left hand, and your left hand in his right hand in a special grip that involves pinching the balls of your thumbs, and he asks you to stare intently at one of his eyes. He returns your gaze without blinking for some minutes; you can feel him exerting his will to some end which is mysterious to you. You begin to feel a strange sensation of heaviness and drowsiness. Without speaking a word, he begins to make passes with his hands over your forehead and

eyes and down to your neck. Your eyelids begin to feel very heavy ... and that is the last you remember clearly for a while.

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It is 5 May 2000. I am in the surgery of Tom Bell, who is currently a candidate for the chair of the British Society of Medical and Dental Hypnotists. He is a general practitioner from Okehampton, who uses hypnotherapy in his practice. His office combines comfort and professionalism; there are reassuring medical tomes on the windowsill, and light prints by Gilbert Ster on the walls, along with a number of family photographs. The room is light and sunny, and the bird-song outside contrasts with the noises of a busy medical practice from the corridor. In contrast to the intense quiet of the scenario from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Tom talks throughout the procedure, peppering his sentences with key words and phrases which remind me that I am calm, relaxed and in control. His tone of voice is quiet but authoritative, and I notice that he rarely uses negatives such as 'not' and 'don't', but finds ways to express himself positively. He gets me to close my eyes and talks me through a standard relaxation exercise, familiar from yoga, drama and antenatal classes, in which I progressively relax my whole body from toes to scalp. Once I am somewhat relaxed (a state which is unusual for me at the best of times, and especially today since one part of my mind is constantly exploring, looking at Tom's technique, and placing what's happening in the context of this book), he completes this phase by suggesting that my eyelids are so comfortable and heavy that I can't open them, and then deepens the trance by having me picture a blackboard on which a hand writes the sequence of numbers from 100 downwards, with the numbers gradually getting fainter and fainter until they fade out altogether. To my astonishment, at his suggestion that there is a helium-filled balloon attached by a string to the index finger of my right hand, I feel a distinct tug on the finger, and gradually, as Tom continues to talk me through it, my arm rises slowly and effortlessly into the air until my hand is at shoulder height. But this is all just an experiment, so the exercise ends shortly afterwards, with no therapeutic suggestions implanted, except for the idea that I will be able to feel the tug on the finger whenever I like and use it as a trigger to go to a peaceful, relaxing place in my mind. My hand is returned to my thigh, and I count myself down into wakefulness.

\*

The last of these descriptions is taken from my own experience; the second is based on a practical manual published in 1851 and written by George Barth: *The Mesmerist's Manual of Phenomena and Practice, with Directions for Applying Mesmerism to the Cure of Diseases, and the Methods of Producing Mesmeric Phenomena; Intended for Domestic Use and the Instruction of Beginners*. The first is based on eyewitness accounts of Mesmer's practice. All three fall into the province of the history of hypnotism, but obviously hypnotism has not stood still since its invention or discovery at the end of the eighteenth century.

This book tells the story of hypnotism, a practice which has attracted the most extravagant praise and the most acidic vitriol for at least 200 years. I am not a practising hypnotist or hypnotherapist, nor am I an academic psychologist or a doctor. This book is a work of reportage about something which, even if half the claims made for it are true, deserves the attention of medical science to a far greater degree than it has yet received. It appears to offer a gentle, non-invasive method of treating a wide range of ailments, and yet it has been abandoned on the margins of medicine. Indeed, in some cases it appears to deal with causes where normal medicine deals only with symptoms, to be able to go deeper and further than normal medicine. Here is a dramatic case of hypnotic healing, well documented and authenticated because it is a recent case; it hit the headlines in the early 1950s.

In 1951 a young doctor, Albert Mason, was presented with a terrible case of ichthyosis, a hereditary disease in which the patient has fewer sweat and sebaceous glands than usual, so that his skin is d

and scaly. In this case the body of the patient, a sixteen-year-old boy, was all but covered in a thick black, smelly, hard layer of dried skin, which occasionally cracked open in places to ooze a blood serum. The boy had had the condition since infancy, and conventional medicine was at a loss. He had endured two skin-graft operations, but in each case the new skin had soon taken on the foul appearance of the rest of his body. Dr Mason, perhaps not realizing that hypnosis was not supposed to be able to deal with congenital diseases, offered to try hypnosis. He hypnotized the boy, in front of a dozen sceptical doctors, in the hospital at East Grinstead, Sussex. He planted the suggestion that his left arm would clear. Five days later the blackened skin became crumbly and fell off to reveal reddened but otherwise normal skin underneath. Within ten days the arm was clear. Mason then worked on other parts of his body, achieving similarly astonishing results; his success rate ranged from good to remarkable. The boy was then taught self-hypnosis to maintain the improvement. The case was written up with the laconic brevity typical of many medical articles, in the bastion of traditional medicine, the *British Medical Journal*, for 1952, and three years later Mason was able to write a follow-up article reporting that the improvement seemed to be permanent.

It is in fact still a major bone of contention whether hypnosis can treat organic or structural ailments rather than psychosomatic ones. Where psychosomatic illnesses are concerned, there are many thousands of success stories that one can get blasé about them. So let's make a sceptical assumption. Let's assume that Mason's patient underwent spontaneous remission – that the disease would have improved of its own accord, as in fact sometimes happens in their teens to children who contract ichthyosis young. It still remains the case that Mason achieved a significantly high success rate, and with significant speed; it still remains the case that conventional medical science had tried its best and failed. It still remains the case, then, that hypnosis can be a powerful weapon in a doctor's arsenal, and that it should be brought into the mainstream as quickly as possible.

As sometimes happens, science is actually behind the times on this. A great many ordinary people – you and me – know perfectly well that hypnotherapy (and some other so-called 'alternative therapies') works. Nearly everyone knows someone who has been to a hypnotherapist for, perhaps, nicotine addiction. Many people have also seen, live or on TV, the astonishing effects produced by stage hypnotists such as Paul McKenna, and have little doubt that something real is going on, even if it seems inexplicable. This is the world this book explores. The past story of hypnotism is fascinating in itself, but it also may be of no little importance for us and our futures.

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# Introduction

Hypnotism is a fascinating subject, its history littered with quirky individuals (in both fact and fiction) and odd or remarkable stories. The subject takes us from the flakiest end of alternative medicine to the frontiers of experimental science, and from entertainment to healing. More extraordinarily, precisely the same ranges are encapsulated right from the start of modern hypnosis, the life and work of Franz Anton Mesmer. We will meet tales of remarkable healing, and heavy science (lightly treated); we will meet famous individuals from real life and storybooks, such as Mesmer, who gave his name to a whole new healing art and whose work was press-ganged into the political rhetoric of the French Revolution; Emile Coué with his famous saying, 'Every day, in every way, I am getting better and better'; Freud, who made extensive but often unsuccessful use of hypnosis in his early years; Svengali, the character from George du Maurier's 1894 novel *Trilby*, who exerted an evil influence over the innocent and ambitious Trilby O'Ferrall (and who, with his pointed beard and dark, staring eyes, has often cropped up in films and has spawned a host of lesser literary lookalikes); Grigoriy Rasputin, the Mad Monk of Russia; Milton Erickson, probably the most famous modern hypnotherapist, who could hypnotize a person with a handshake or by tapping the top of a table, or just by altering his tone of voice in specific ways. Did you know that the 1955 James Dean film *Rebel Without a Cause* was based on a medical book of the same name describing the case history of a psychopathic criminal and his successful treatment through hypnosis? Did you know that Rachmaninoff was helped over depression and 'composer's block' by hypnosis? That Stalin, perhaps aware of the power of hypnotism through his own carefully stage-managed rare appearances, and his repetitive and rhythmical speech style, banned the practice throughout the Soviet republics in 1948?

This is a book about the history of hypnotism in the West. I do not cover any of the related arts of the East, such as those practised by Indian fakirs. There is plenty of material from the West, enough for a much longer book than this one. Moreover, it is not clear that many Eastern practices should be counted as hypnotism, and in some cases there has been influence from the West to the East. For instance, a booklet I once saw on Indian hypnosis contained instructions and ideas which would have been familiar to any Western practitioner; since it is clear that these methods evolved in the West because we can trace their history, it follows that the Indian booklet was written in imitation of Western practices.

In addition to telling the story of hypnosis and the characters who crop up along the way, there will be two main sub-themes in the book: first, what hypnosis can teach us about the powers and further reaches of the human mind; second, the degree to which hypnotic techniques have become absorbed and reflect everyday culture. Under the latter heading I mean to include not just questions such as whether advertisers can be said to hypnotize us, but also the fact that hypnosis seems to reflect, in each era, the interests and predispositions of the era. For instance, from the time of Mesmer to the middle of the nineteenth century professional science was still young enough to be nervously aware of its limitations, and so the budding medical establishment, anxious to confirm its credentials, attacked Mesmer and his followers with particular acrimony. Or again, in periods when there is a revolt against

technology (as with the early Romantics) or scientism (as today), hypnosis becomes a focus of the revolutionary party. In the middle to late nineteenth century there was a conflict between two groups of thinkers about hypnosis – the occultists and paranormalists, and the scientists and therapists. At the same time, mesmerists in general aligned themselves with Protestants against Catholics, because they tended to welcome scientific progress as a revelation of God's handiwork. And mesmerists also aligned themselves with reformers in a number of other spheres. Just as Mesmer himself was made something of an icon by partisans of the French Revolution, so in nineteenth-century England mesmerism was seen by its opponents as a working-class invasion of medicine, which was of course restricted to those with the money for education.

I do not intend this book to be a debunking of hypnosis, but a work of reportage which will allow me to present the views both of those who do debunk hypnosis and of those who believe in its real existence. Assuming that there is such a thing, I will make a fair assessment of what it is and what it can and cannot achieve, what its medical and psychotherapeutic uses and potential are, its history and ramifications. In fact, since the impression most people have of hypnotism (either because they have been duped by popular myths, or because they are die-hard rationalists) is that it is something wacky, it will be a major part of my purpose to prove that this is not so – that hypnosis has a great deal to offer, especially in therapeutic contexts, and that its value should be more widely recognized.

But why should people believe that there is no such thing as hypnosis? After all, we can see a hypnotized subject plunge his arm into a bucket of icy water with no discomfort, just because he has been told that it is tepid; conversely, we can see him screw up his face in pain on tentatively lowering his hand into tepid water, because he has been told that it is icy-cold. He may hallucinate that he is dancing with Marilyn Monroe, or smell the scent of a room full of imaginary flowers. He can remember events from his childhood which he had long forgotten, and even re-enact them. On the therapeutic side, hypnotherapists have achieved remarkable results in a wide range of ailments, and both major and minor surgery have been carried out on hypnotized patients.

All these phenomena, and all the many other marvels we will come across in the book, seem to be a clear case of mind over matter. And there's the rub. There are a number of people, academics above all, who simply do not believe in the existence of mind. They think that this is a naive belief held by the rest of us, and that the phenomena attributed to our minds are best explained otherwise. In philosophy they are called 'positivists' and in psychology 'behaviourists'. The mind they regard as a 'ghost in a machine' – the machine being the body. Where hypnosis is concerned, they might maintain, for instance, that hypnotized subjects are merely very suggestible people who are anxious to please the hypnotist, and who therefore play out the role in ways that conform to their ideas of the kind of behaviour that is expected of them and in response to often unconscious cues given them by the hypnotist.

Part of the problem is also that ever since the early days of hypnosis its practitioners and supporters have made fanciful claims for it. In the nineteenth century it was frequently claimed that a suitably sensitive hypnotized subject could see things clairvoyantly by projecting her spirit elsewhere; in recent years there have been a number of cases of supposed recall of past lives by regressing a hypnotized subject back past his childhood, past birth, past conception ... and into the wild blue yonder. These are two extreme cases, but many practitioners have been guilty of making less radical but still far-fetched claims for their favourite art. And this in turn has attracted the wrong kind of response, in which overly sceptical investigators have thrown out the baby with the bathwater and rejected hypnosis as a whole in rejecting such extreme claims. By and large science has been unfair to hypnosis: it has been dismissed to the margins, where it can safely be ignored and left in the hands of amateurs – which then, in a vicious circle, increases the scientists' justification for dismissing it.

One of the main reasons the story of hypnotism is important, and deserves to be told, is that it

concerned with the essential human quality of suggestibility. This word often carries negative connotations, as if it meant 'liability to be manipulated by others', but it is not a faculty we could do without. No one is always active; we are also acted upon. We could not sustain relationships with family and friends otherwise. And suggestibility is also closely linked to other important abilities such as imagination, empathy and feelings in general; tests have shown that the best hypnotic subjects are often those with vivid imaginations, who can put themselves in a situation or someone else's shoes.

There are a number of good books on hypnosis, but a lot of them are academic or partisan. Yet it is a subject that demands more accessible treatment, especially today with an audience which is likely to be open-minded and curious about such matters. The historical approach taken in this book will allow the reader a general overview of the subject in all its manifestations. In the meantime, lacking more accessible treatments, the subject is surrounded by myths and misconceptions. Here are some of the most common:

1. You're asleep when you're hypnotized.
2. You're unconscious when you're hypnotized.
3. People with strong wills can't be hypnotized, only weak-willed people.
4. Hypnosis is the dominance and manipulation of gullible people by the hypnotist.
5. Hypnosis is a mysterious magical power.
6. A hypnotist can make people commit immoral or illegal acts when they're hypnotized.
7. People can be hypnotized at long distance, or over the phone or TV.
8. People can remain in trances for a long time, perhaps a lifetime.
9. People can be woken up only by the person who hypnotized them. So what would happen if the person who hypnotized them were to leave or drop dead of a heart attack?
10. Hypnosis can cure almost any ailment.
11. Hypnosis is dangerous: it can cause after-effects ranging from headaches to psychosis.
12. Hypnosis is unchristian. It is the work of the devil, and while hypnotized your soul can be possessed by the devil.
13. Hypnosis, especially self-hypnosis, is the same thing as meditation.
14. Under hypnosis people can accurately recall things that happened earlier in their life, or even in earlier lives.
15. Under hypnosis people gain paranormal powers.
16. Under hypnosis people can be made to tell the truth.

Most of these fears and fantasies about hypnosis will only be dispelled once hypnosis is properly understood. Although the primary focus of this book is the history of hypnosis, an understanding of hypnosis will emerge through the pages and by the end of the book every single one of the above statements will, implicitly or explicitly, have been shown to be wrong. It is a great pity that hypnosis has become surrounded by so much fear, since in quite a wide range of ailments and problems it is actually a very safe form of therapy – far safer, for instance, than the pharmaceutical and interventionist form of medicine most commonly practised in the West today.

We need a working definition of hypnosis. Unfortunately, no such definition can be non-controversial and agreed upon by all the experts. Here is a rapid survey of the main contenders in the bid to define hypnotism: magnetism (de Puységur, etc.), monoidealism (Braid), a form of sleep



(Liébeault, Vogt, etc.), nothing but a state of passive suggestibility, with selective attention and a reduced planning function (Bernheim, Gauld), hysteria (Charcot), a form of dissociation (Jane Myers, James, Sidis, Prince, Hilgard, etc.), a loving, possibly Oedipal, relationship with the therapist (Freud, Ferenczi), a state of inhibition between sleep and wakefulness (Pavlov), nothing but task-motivation (early Barber), nothing but an imaginative response to test-suggestions (later Barber), nothing but a goal-directed, role-playing fantasy (White, Spanos, Sarbin and Coe), activation of the implicit memory system (Spiegel).

Faced with this welter of definitions, it has to be borne in mind that nothing about hypnosis is uncontroversial, and that these various definitions depend on various theories of what is going on psychologically and neurologically, and these in turn depend on the approach taken by the particular researcher (behaviourist, occult, etc.). In other words, no one really knows what hypnosis is; this is part of the attraction of the view that there really is no such thing. All of the current theories may be wrong, or none of them may be wrong, while all giving a partial picture.

I am not qualified to add to the confusion by coming up with a new definition of hypnosis. In this book I will be less concerned with its definition than its phenomenology. Phenomenology is the descriptive study of some facet of human experience in order to make it intelligible. That is, from one point of view it doesn't matter whether there is such a thing as the hypnotic state, which is different from any other state of consciousness. All that matters is that something unusual is going on, that we can trace the history of this unusual something, and that as a result of this unusual something people can have all sorts of experiences, including being cured or relieved of a number of disorders. Hypnosis should still be acknowledged as a powerful therapeutic tool, since access is gained to the client's subconscious and imagination. So in this book I will begin, at any rate, by using the term 'hypnotism' or 'hypnosis' to mean precisely whatever the experts want it to mean, whether that is no more than 'relaxation and suggestibility', or as much as 'a specific altered state of consciousness'.

The phenomenological model I have adopted for this book is as follows. Hypnotism or hypnosis is the deliberate inducement or facilitation by one person in another person or a number of people of a trance state. A trance state is (briefly) one in which a person's usual means of orienting himself to reality have faded, so that the boundaries between the external world and the inner world of thoughts, feelings, memories and imagination begin to dissolve. The ensuing altered state or states involve passivity and lack of initiative, a decrease in normal critical thinking and hence a tolerance for incongruous situations ('trance logic'). The subject is highly compliant to incoming suggestions and is capable of role-playing; he has focused, selective perception; he allows his imagination greater freedom than usual, and fantasies are experienced, or memories re-experienced, with vivid intensity; he is capable of a certain range of unusual physical and mental feats, is susceptible to alterations in perception and memory, and tends to behave in a way he thinks appropriate to the role he is being asked to perform.

All these phenomena of hypnosis can be summarized under three headings: absorption, dissociation and suggestibility. The hypnotized person tends to become highly involved in whatever he is perceiving, imagining or thinking; he separates out aspects of his experience that would normally be processed at the same time (so that, for instance, the raising of an arm can seem to be involuntary, as if the arm was controlled by something other than oneself); and his responsiveness to social cues is increased, which leads to an enhanced tendency to comply with hypnotic instructions. It is worth stating from the outset that this does not mean that the subject has given up his will to the hypnotist, but just that he has suspended his critical judgement for a while. In the hypnotic state, the subject must be capable of speech and action, which is to say that he or she must not be merely asleep or unconscious. Importantly, I would add that the participation of the subject or subjects must be by their consent (which is not quite the same as saying that the subject must be willing, because there may be

no conscious act of will involved): you cannot hypnotize someone if they have not at some level agreed to be hypnotized.

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This model is simultaneously broad and narrow, in different respects. It is broad enough to include, for instance, entrancement by incantation, if it involves the direct and deliberate action of an operator on a consenting subject, and in other ways conforms to our model. But it excludes phenomena such as enchantment where the bewitched person was not aware of being deliberately worked on. It is common in 'primitive' societies for a person experiencing a run of bad luck to attribute this retrospectively, to an enemy having bewitched him, but this is not hypnotism because the victim was not aware at the time of being enchanted, and there was no direct interaction between operator and subject. The model also excludes the so-called trance states involved in, for instance, watching TV while driving a car ('highway hypnosis'). Every driver knows the experience of looking back on a journey and saying to herself: 'I know I passed through Newcastle, but I have no memory of having negotiated the traffic, the lights, the roundabouts and so on. How did I do it?' Personally, I'm not sure I would identify this as a trance state at all, because otherwise it becomes all too easy to say that almost all states of consciousness are trance states: am I in a trance state now because I am focused on writing this book? This seems a misuse of the word; and anyway these states are not hypnotism, above all because there is no operator.

Self-hypnosis is another legitimate special case, provided the same person deliberately acts simultaneously as operator and subject. This proviso is necessary to distinguish self-hypnosis from mere daydreaming or relaxation. The important point here again is this: not all trance states are hypnotic states. But in so far as in this book I am dealing with historical cases from the past, my focus is not really on self-hypnosis. After all, how could I or anyone know whether an ancient Egyptian, said to have hypnotized himself? The subjective element of self-hypnosis will more or less rule it out of the book.

One thing I do want to exclude from the start is animal hypnosis. People have induced hypnosis in a wide range of animals, by a wide range of methods, from repetitive stimuli (e.g. stroking, swinging the animal back and forth), to pressure on certain body parts (especially the abdominal region), to tipping the poor creature upside down. There are some impressive effects in the animal kingdom which seem to resemble hypnosis. In his book *The Red Hourglass: Lives of the Predators*, for instance, Gordon Grice vividly tells how a particular kind of wasp, called a tarantula hawk, hypnotizes its prey, a tarantula, which would otherwise make short work of it. But we have no way of knowing whether the spider is really hypnotized. Does it have the mental powers to be hypnotized in any way that makes a meaningful parallel to a human being? Does any animal have the kind of powers that can be shut down and focused, made more suggestible and so on? I doubt it. It is a common fallacy to attribute to animals human characteristics based on behavioural traits which resemble those of humans. We even do the same with plants. When you brush the leaves of *Mimosa pudica* it curls up in a way that can only be described as shy, but it would be a bold person who said that the plant was actually shy. In the animal kingdom there are many behavioural characteristics that resemble a hypnotic state: for instance, they go rigid, pretending to be dead, to deter an enemy. But we have no need to postulate the kind of sophisticated psychological processes in animals that might lead us to say that they can be hypnotized. Any reader who wants more information about animal hypnosis should read Ferenc Völgyesi, *Hypnosis of Man and Animals*; he claims to have hypnotized just about every major species of creature on earth.

In the course of this book I will touch on phenomena and practices related to hypnosis, but the focus will be on practices which satisfy the criteria of the model I have just outlined. One implication of the model needs to be brought out right from the start, since it will play a considerable part in the history of hypnosis. I have described the hypnotist as the operator, and the other party as the subject.

In other words, the hypnotist is active, and the subject is passive. This is not surprising – no more surprising than the fact that we put ourselves into a passive state when we visit the doctor or go in hospital. ‘They are the experts,’ we think. ‘They’ll tell us what to do.’ To this extent hypnosis involves the imposition of the will of the hypnotist on the subject, and the subject allows himself to be in a suggestible or open frame of mind. This extent is perhaps not very large – it does not license the idea of the evil, manipulative hypnotist – but it remains true that there is *inequality of will* between operator and subject. A hypnotized subject can snap out of his trance any time he chooses, but while he is entranced he is in a state of heightened suggestibility, more open than usual to the suggestions of the operator (within certain parameters laid down by the subject’s long-term moral and social conditioning). This passive suggestibility is what I mean by the idea of inequality of will; the subject makes fewer choices than usual, leaving many such decisions up to the operator.

One thing hypnosis is not is sleep. It’s true that the word is derived from the Greek word *hypnos* meaning ‘sleep’, but this is because the closest analogy to hypnosis in familiar experience is sleep. But there are differences, the most important of which is that when hypnotized you are aware of incoming sensory data, such as the hypnotist’s voice, and can carry on a conversation. In fact, because you are focused on the hypnotist’s voice, to the virtual exclusion of a great deal of other stuff that would normally be distracting you, you’re more awake than at other times, and you may well feel an increased vigilance.

The main thing that misleads is the term ‘hypnotism’. Almost every book I’ve read credits the Scottish physician James Braid with the coining of the term in his 1843 book *Neurypnology*. Even that is not strictly accurate, since Braid had already used the term ‘hypnotic sleep’ the year before, in an open letter sent to the Reverend Hugh McNeile (or M’Neile) on 4 June 1842. In this letter he seeks to defend himself against the charges of satanism which McNeile had brought against him (while not naming him), and to distinguish hypnosis from its precursor, animal magnetism, which he declares should be founded on ‘a gratuitous assumption, unsupported by fact’. In an incidental way, he describes the ‘stupor’ into which his subjects have been put as ‘hypnotic sleep’.

However, although Braid certainly popularized the term in the English-speaking world, and may have invented it independently, it had been in use some thirty-five years earlier in France and was the favourite of the French writer Etienne Félix d’Hénin du Cuvillers (1755–1841), a mesmerist with a classical bent, who edited the important journal *Archives du magnétisme animal*, issued from 1820–1825. Braid later came to regret the term, since he came to associate hypnosis not so much with sleep but with fixation. So he coined another word, ‘monoideism’, but it never caught on. By the same token, although stage and fictional hypnotists talk about the ending of the trance as ‘waking up’, if hypnosis is not a form of sleep, talk of ‘waking up’ is incorrect and misleading, and some modern hypnotists prefer the term ‘dehypnotization’. I’d be prepared to bet that it doesn’t catch on either.

The story of hypnosis is an adventure story. As a species, we are endowed with curiosity. We climb mountains, explore the depths of space and the oceans; we split the atom just to see what happens, and then we have to take responsibility for the results of our curiosity. We deny this curiosity at our peril, running the risk of stagnation or attempting the impossible task of turning back the clock. Hypnosis has for many years been one of our main tools for exploring the further reaches of the mind, and it remains true today that we know less about some of the workings of the mind than we do about the moon. Without wishing to sound too like a cheap stage hypnotist – and I hope your eyelids are not already getting heavy – I would like to take you on this historical journey.

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# 1

## Hypnosis in Fact and Fiction

When you stop to think about it, it's very strange that at a few well-chosen words quite a number of us – perhaps all of us – can fall into a sleep-like state in which we are more open than usual to suggestions from a person we trust, and capable of some unusual mental and physical feats. It is a little oddity, a reminder of the extraordinary capacities and capabilities of the human brain and mind. I would like the reader to keep this in mind throughout: you are bigger than you think you are, capable of more than you imagine. In a book of this length, the facts about hypnosis may start by repetition and seem ordinary. They are not. Since these extraordinary phenomena are produced by the human mind, it follows that the human mind – yours and mine – is extraordinary in its capabilities.

Although my main purpose is to tell the story of hypnotism from a historical perspective, it will help to devote a preliminary chapter to laying some ghosts and building some bridges. There are two main topics to cover: what people generally think of hypnotism, and what actually happens.

### Popular Conceptions of Hypnotism from Fiction

Everybody has heard of Svengali. You can even look him up in a dictionary, since his name has entered the English language. My Chambers dictionary gives the following definition: 'A person who exerts total mental control over another, usually for evil ends.'

George du Maurier, the creator of Svengali, was actually a successful cartoonist for *Punch*. One day, late in the 1880s, he outlined to his friend, the American novelist Henry James, the plot of a story. James was impressed and told him he ought to write it down. 'But I can't write!' protested du Maurier, and offered the plot to his friend. Henry James refused, saying that it was too valuable a gift, and so it was left to du Maurier himself to tell the tale, which was published in 1894 as *Trilby*.

*Trilby* tells the story of Trilby O'Ferrall, a young artist's model in Paris. Three young English artists are in love with her, and she becomes engaged to one of them, William Bagot (who is nauseatingly called 'Little Billie' throughout the book). But their relationship breaks down and she falls into the clutches of Svengali, a Jew (Jews were often thought in Victorian times to have mesmeric powers), gaunt and grim, with a pointed beard and dark, staring eyes. Svengali, from Hungary, is a musician, and by the use of hypnotism he turns Trilby, who has a resonant speaking voice but is tone deaf, into an outstanding singer.

The book is not as melodramatic as the many film versions of it would have one believe, except for du Maurier's own illustrations. Nor is mesmerism as pervasive in the story as in the films. Svengali

displays his hypnotic power early in the book by alleviating a neuralgic pain from which Trilby is suffering. A little later he tries to hypnotize her again, against her will, as a way of gaining control over her, because he wants to marry her, and is foiled only by the bluff Englishmen, who look after her and are deeply suspicious of Svengali. So when Svengali and Trilby reappear, later in the book, as a married couple, the great diva and her manager, we know he's been up to his tricks. In the middle of his triumphant tour of Europe, Svengali dies in the theatre, Trilby's gift fails her and she makes a laughing stock of herself; she can sing only when entranced and fixed by his eyes. After Svengali's death, her former life as an international star seems totally unreal, only vaguely remembered, if at all. She remembers only his kindness to her, not his bullying and physical violence. 'There were two Trilbys' as du Maurier puts it in the book – or, in psychological parlance, her hypnotized self was dissociated from her waking self.

Du Maurier's novel was a huge success on both sides of the Atlantic, selling over 200,000 copies in the first year alone. Trilby's songs from the book were sung by socialites at parties, and the book was soon turned into a stage play. But the plot is not as original as du Maurier might have pretended. Henry James. It's not just that a number of earlier novels had featured an evil, manipulative mesmerist or hypnotist. James Braid, the Scottish doctor who exploded the myth of magnetism and introduced hypnotism, wrote in 1850 of how he hypnotized a musically incompetent girl and took her through some of the most difficult exercises in the repertoire of Jenny Lind, the soprano, known as the 'Swedish Nightingale', who was conquering the world at the time. Moreover, in Alexandre Dumas' *Memoirs of a Physician*, first published in French in 1848, Joseph Balsamo mesmerizes Lorenza Feliciani, after saving her from rape, and marries her while she is under his spell. She, too, manifests two different personalities: in a trance she loves her husband and is grateful to him for rescuing her from the bandits; but when 'awake' she hates him and longs to be allowed to go to the convent where she was heading when she was set upon by the bandits.

But the success of *Trilby* has made Svengali the prototype, and the deepest spell cast by him has been over future fictional treatments of hypnosis, and hence over the minds of generations of audiences. Unwittingly, we have all taken in false beliefs, such as the two perpetuated by du Maurier: that a person can be kept in a permanent hypnotic trance and that we can be made by a hypnotist to do something we would not ordinarily do. The evil Medina in John Buchan's 1924 thriller *The Thirty-Nine Steps* also keeps his victims in a permanent trance. Total dominance of will through hypnosis features prominently in numerous cheap thrillers, but also in more upmarket treatments. Cipolla, the deformed and boastful conjuror and stage hypnotist of Thomas Mann's *Mario and the Magician* (1930) likes to impose his will on members of the audience even to the extent of humiliating them. Somerset Maugham's slightly ponderous tale *The Magician* (1908), the evil Haddo (a character based on Aleister Crowley, whom Maugham knew) hypnotizes Margaret in order to revenge himself upon her fiancé by taking her away from him. His will completely dominates hers, and the evil in her brings out the latent evil side of her nature. At one point in Peter Carey's excellent *Jack Maggs* (1997) the hypnotist's control over his subject's will is so total that the subject, implausibly, cries out: 'Let me wake up!'

The Russian monk Rasputin was evidently a larger-than-life character, and over the years has become even more so in various fictional treatments. In the 1966 *Rasputin, the Mad Monk* (a poor movie salvaged only by Christopher Lee's efforts in the title role), he gets women to stare into his eyes: 'Look deep into my eyes. Think only of me. Listen and obey.' They are putty in his hands, to satisfy his sexual appetite and his ambition. He even uses hypnosis to get a woman with whom he has grown bored to commit suicide. To many people's minds Rasputin, Svengali and even Dracula merge because of the similarity of their treatment on film: the camera pans in on their piercing eyes – never better than in the original 1931 *Dracula* film, starring Bela Lugosi, or in the 1932 *Svengali* with John

Barrymore. But, at the risk of spoiling the fantasy, I'm sorry to have to say that in actual fact Rasputin did not practise hypnotism. Not only did he consistently deny that he did so, but in February 1914 – that is, towards the end of his life (he was assassinated in December 1916), long after he had become famous for his healing powers – he took lessons from a hypnotist called Gerasim Papandatos, nicknamed the Musician, because he was afraid his powers were waning and he wanted to supplement them by learning hypnotism. But I doubt that future film-makers will let the truth stand in the way of a good story.

Fiction has steadily perpetuated the idea that women are more liable to be entranced than men. The sexual undertones of this are rarely brought out into the open (or are at least treated with some delicacy, as in Maugham's *The Magician* or Henry James's 1874 short story 'Professor Fargo'), but *The Power of Mesmerism: A Highly Erotic Narrative of Voluptuous Facts* (1880) is a piece of anonymously written Victorian pornography which goes all the way. The hero of the book has learned hypnotism at school, and throughout the book uses it to seduce others, until the licentious side of the human nature has been awoken enough for hypnotism and convenient amnesia to be unnecessary. Within a few pages he has had sex with his sister, mother, father and school friends – often in threesomes and foursomes. And so the wearisome book proceeds. Where films are concerned, Barbra Streisand's remarks at one point in *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* (1970) to her hypnotist (Yves Montand) – 'That's quite a weapon you've got there. I mean, you guys must have one glorious night after another.'

The fascination of film directors with hypnotism is shown by the fact that as early as 1909 D.W. Griffith, who is best known for his slightly later masterpieces *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, made a film called *The Criminal Hypnotist*. No copies of this movie exist, unfortunately. The earliest extant film in which hypnotism plays a major part is the 1919 *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari*, directed by Robert Wiene. This atmospheric classic of expressionist cinema reflects both the main ideas of *Trilby* – the evil hypnotist and permanent entrancement.

Dr Caligari appears as a fairground huckster, offering to predict the future through his somnambulist, Cesare, who has reputedly been kept entranced for twenty-five years. But Caligari also uses Cesare to carry out murders. Things go badly wrong when Cesare fails to murder Jane Olsen, the girlfriend of the film's hero, Francis. Her beauty wakens him from his trance, and he soon drops dead. Caligari is chased by Francis back to the insane asylum of which he turns out to be the head doctor. Francis recruits the help of the other doctors; they search his office and find indisputable evidence that the doctor took control of a somnambulist patient, in order to try to repeat the experiments of a mad monk of the eleventh century called Caligari, who toured with a somnambulist called Cesare, and to test the theory that a somnambulist may be made to commit murder. The doctor is hauled off in a straitjacket to join the other patients. But there is a final twist: it turns out that Francis and Jane are actually inmates of the hospital. These are all the fantasies of a pair of paranoid patients!

Other fictional treatments are even more alarming or macabre. In 'A Tale of the Days to Come' (1927) H.G. Wells gave a fore-taste of the brainwashing scare of the 1950s, the ludicrous consequences of which will entertain us in a later chapter. Wells speculated that in the future the art of hypnotism will be able to change a person's character permanently (or at least until the change is reversed by the original hypnotist) by effacing or replacing a person's ideas and feelings, so that she has no memory at all of an element of her former life (in this case, the existence of a lover whom her father considers unsuitable, which is why he brought in the hypnotist).

In Conan Doyle's 1885 short story 'The Great Keinplatz Experiment' (later to be plundered by H. C. Heard for the plot of his 1944 novel *The Swap*) Professor von Baumgarten believes that the phenomenon of clairvoyance proves that the mind can separate from the body, and that it does so during hypnotism. He simultaneously hypnotizes his young assistant Fritz von Hartmann and himself to see if in its disembodied state his spirit can see Fritz's spirit. But the experiment goes ludicrously

wrong when the two minds reincarnate in the wrong bodies. The scary 1964 movie *Devil Doll* takes this idea of transposing souls to a more bizarre level; the story depends on a stage performer using hypnosis to steal a young woman's soul and transfer it to the dummy he uses in his ventriloquist act.

The possibilities hypnosis holds – in fiction, at any rate – for baffling the authorities have often been exploited in fictional media. For instance, in the 1972 film starring Robert Redford, *The Heiress*, the employee of a bank is hypnotized to help a gang of thieves rob the bank, the idea being that the bank employee would then forget all about his involvement and appear genuinely innocent to the police. For a similar reason, in the 1949 movie *Whirlpool*, directed by Otto Preminger and starring Gene Tierney and José Ferrer, the hypnotist (played by Ferrer) hypnotizes *himself* to commit murder! Or again, the virtual unassailability of the murderer in Michael Connelly's tense 1996 thriller *The Poet* depends on his hypnotic abilities. But as we will see later in this book, hypnosis would be at best an erratic tool for criminals.

Another myth perpetuated by fictional treatments has been that hypnotism involves or bestows supernatural powers. This is familiar not just from *Das Cabinet des Dr Caligari* and from countless Dracula movies, but more insidiously has appeared in children's fiction. T.H. White's 1957 children's adventure story *The Master* is an example of this. The Master has the ability to hypnotize people (male and female, children and adults) and enter into telepathic communication with them while they are hypnotized; they can't communicate in this way unless they are under his spell – the trance they are in gives them their special powers.

In *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, Barbra Streisand sits in on a psychology lecturer's demonstration of hypnotism, and is accidentally hypnotized herself, leading to comic consequences. Every time she hears the word 'Wednesday', she takes off a shoe. Or again, in the 1956 musical *The Court Jester*, Danny Kaye is hypnotized by a scheming courtier, and there is plenty of excellent comic play with the idea that a mere snap of the fingers can change him from his timid real personality to his daring hypnotized alter ego. Both these movies trade on another popular fallacy about hypnosis – that a trigger word (like 'Wednesday') or action (like a click of the fingers) seeded by a hypnotist will work whoever says it or does it. This is not so: only the hypnotist himself or a limited number of people he himself has specified could affect the subject's psyche in this way, and then only with his cooperation.

In analysing fiction like this I run the risk of spoiling the fun. 'It's fiction,' you say. 'Of course you don't take it seriously.' But that's where you're wrong. The lighter the book or film the lighter the conscious attention given to it – and these are precisely the circumstances in which ideas sneak under our guard and become lodged in the mind as if they were the truth.

## Stage Hypnotism

Another main source for popular conceptions and misconceptions of hypnotism has been the practice of stage hypnotists. There is a high degree of continuity between the performances of the earliest stage mesmerists and 'electro-biologists', and those of today. The techniques are similar, the phenomena more or less identical.

It is mostly from stage hypnotism, which is essentially a form of showmanship, that we get our image of the hypnotist as a flamboyant and authoritarian figure: 'You will go to sleep *now!* You are under my spell!' He will wave his arms around as if dealing with a quasi-physical electrical

magnetic substance; he will employ theatrical tests to check whether the punter has been hypnotized, such as the arm-levitation test, or the hand-clasp test, whereby the subject locks her hands together and is told that she cannot pull them apart. Then he will put his subjects through the most extraordinary (and sometimes demeaning) manoeuvres. Partial or total catalepsy, when a part of the body or the body as a whole is made rigid, is a popular choice. The most famous form of this is the trick known as the 'human plank', when a subject is put into catalepsy and suspended between two chairs, with his head resting on one chair and his ankles on the other. At this point the hypnotist, a beautiful assistant, or a member of the audience, will be asked to stand on the rigid hypnotized person, or, even more dramatically, a piece of stone will be put on a cushion on the subject's stomach and then smashed with a sledge-hammer. Then he will make a couple of them carry on a conversation in a Martian, or forget how to count to ten, or have a man nurse a baby.

Hallucination is another hypnotic phenomenon commonly exploited by stage hypnotists, so that a subject might be made to dance with a broom, thinking it is Marilyn Monroe. Anaesthesia is another in which a subject is made to endure something that would otherwise be painful, even to the extent of sticking needles through her arm, burying her hand in icy water, or something like that. Anosmia, or loss of the sense of smell – allows subjects to take a whiff of ammonia under the illusion that it is the attar of roses. A skilful stage hypnotist will have several subjects up on stage at once, each performing a different act. Then he may well make use of posthypnotic suggestion, telling the subject (or victim) for instance, that every time he hears a bell he will act like Elvis Presley.

Stage hypnotists have to do all this, because they are, first and foremost, entertainers. Even if they start with a gentle relaxation technique, they will move on to more flamboyant suggestions as soon as they can. The examples I've given are mostly fun, but there are also a good many shows which are designed to humiliate the subjects, especially in a sexual or lavatorial context. 'You have lost one of your breasts. As you walk back to your seat, you must look for it' – that kind of thing. But there is one secret of stage hypnotism that should be revealed: many of the subjects are not really hypnotized.

To the serious-minded student of hypnotism, who wishes to produce a hypnotic show for entertainment purposes, it is recommended that he forget all about trying to be a legitimate hypnotist ... Experience has shown ... that the hypnotic show must be faked, at least partially so, to hold audience interest and be successful as an entertainment.\*

In his autobiography Mark Twain tells a story about a charlatan stage hypnotist who came to his hometown when he was a child. Twain went night after night, and eventually summoned up the courage to go up on stage and be one of the hypnotist's subjects, in order to perform all kinds of bizarre and degrading acts. But he was not hypnotized, and he faked various performances, with the hypnotist on each stage crying out to the audience: 'Of course, I just told him to do that. He is under my spell!'

For obvious reasons, a stage hypnotist does not have time for a full hypnotic induction, which takes time and patience. This too gives a false idea to the audience – the idea of omnipotence: 'Look at this guy! All he has to do is touch them on the shoulder and they fall asleep!' This in turn leads to the feeling that a stranger could hypnotize you all of a sudden in a train and take advantage of you in some way. If you see this kind of performance on TV, it is very likely that the induction has taken place beforehand to save time and because it is illegal to show a hypnotic induction on TV (at any rate, in Britain), in case it works on people in their front rooms, and in case people all over the country start practising on their friends and relatives. 'Dad, you are finding that you want to increase my allowance,' says the teenage son!

A performer in a theatre or club, however, might employ a shortcut, such as pressing the carotid artery near the ear, which rapidly induces a pseudo-trance, more accurately described simply as



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