

Taming the Spirit: The University, Domesticity, and the Definition of Hypnosis in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Bloomsbury

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During the 1860s and 1870s, Britain witnessed the emergence of a self-consciously ‘disciplinary’ science of psychology. Calling themselves ‘physiological’ or ‘comparative’ psychologists, a group of academics sought to fashion a new identity for the study of mind. Figures such as Thomas Laycock, Henry Maudsley, William Benjamin Carpenter, Alexander Bain, George Croom Robertson and Herbert Spencer became active proponents of the study of mind as an inherently (or exclusively) ‘nervous’ phenomenon. ‘Psychology’ was thereby constructed as an academic study that would draw on physiology and zoology as neighbouring disciplines that could be appealed to in controversies regarding the nature of human mentality.

This movement was controversial: much debate regarded the apparently radical, ‘atheistic’ tendencies of those that sought to explain mental phenomena as manifestations of material bodies. But today, I want to point to another aspect of physiological psychology; that could also, as will be seen, help consolidate the power of the emerging intelligentsia of middle-class urban Britain. What was the relation between this new way of thinking about the psyche and Bloomsbury? UCL became a key centre for the new physiological psychology.

Carpenter and Laycock both studied at UCL during the 1830s, and both of their psychologies draw on the lectures of the then-professor of zoology, Robert Edmund Grant. After establishing himself as an authority of zoological physiology, Carpenter became (1847) an examiner in zoology at University College in 1847 and then in 1849 a lecturer in ‘medical jurisprudence.’ In 1856 he was elected Registrar of the University of London.

Carpenter became a key sponsor of psychologists committed to physiological explanations of mind. For example, almost certainly at Carpenter’s suggestion, Alexander Bain was appointed examiner in moral philosophy at University College in 1857. Bain’s protégée and collaborator George Croom Robertson was controversially appointed Grote professor of Mind and Logic at UCL 1866 over a more widely known candidate; the Unitarian minister James Martineau. Henry Maudsley was appointed to Carpenter’s old chair in 1869, holding it until his retirement in 1879.

So, through Carpenter, UCL can be seen as an important place in which physiological psychologists were able to consolidate their ideas within the nineteenth-century academy. But what remains less clear is the precise conditions under which these ‘radical’ conceptions of life and mind were able to take hold. In this talk, I want to look in detail at one way in which physiological psychology constituted itself as a physical science discipline at UCL.

Specifically, I will argue that the immediate surroundings of University College—ie the inhabitants and buildings of the middle-class ‘suburb’ that sprang up around it from the 1830s—played a critical role in the constitution of the college as a home for an objective, detached and above all ‘disciplined’ science of mind and brain. In so doing, I will play particular attention to some of the more controversial practices relating to the mind or soul that emerged during the nineteenth century: those generally referred to as ‘mesmerism’, ‘electro-biology,’ ‘table turning.’

All of these were primarily carried out in middle-class homes (as well as theatres and street stalls), rather than newly 'scientific' places such as the Royal Institution or University College. They also came to be subsumed under the category of 'hypnotic' phenomena in later psychological texts. What I want to suggest, is that in posing their activities as a 'problem' for the explanation of mind as a manifestation of the nervous system, the mesmeric activities conducted in the middle-class homes of Bloomsbury became critical to the formation of physiological psychology as an academic discipline.

Mesmerism was one of the most disputed 'sciences' of mind in Britain during the early-mid nineteenth century. By such simple activities as passing one's hands over the body of a person, mesmerists were able to place their subjects in a trance-like state that made them especially susceptible to the suggestions of their mesmerizer. Most frequently, mesmeric phenomena were interpreted in terms of an immaterial or spiritual mental 'force,' the functioning of which was changed in some way to enable the mesmerizer to gain control of their subject.

Mesmerised subjects were thereby portrayed (and portrayed themselves) as able to access an invisible, spiritual realm, out of reach of normally-functioning, rational people. Mesmerism was also conceived of as a problem for those seeking to connect the study of mind and body. That actions apparently completely divorced from the operation of the nervous system could induce strange effects on the mind was interpreted as proof that the nervous system could not be the same thing as the rational soul.

By the 1860s, Bloomsbury had acquired something of a reputation as an area in which one might find mesmerists, often equally as if not more famous mesmeric 'subjects', and their admirers. One of the the founder of 'mesmerism' Anton von Mesmer's followers, 'Dr. de Mainaduc,' had set up an office in Bloomsbury square in 1784, hoping to export the science to England from France. Though initially seemingly unsuccessful (probably because the practice became associated with the 'radicalism' of the French revolution), mesmerism gradually gained a foothold in British homes, fairs and even universities during the 1820s.

One of the principal figures in efforts to establish mesmerism as a medical practice was John Elliotson, who had controversially introduced the study of both phrenology (the evaluation of character by the reading of the shape of the skull) and mesmerism to the medical faculty at University College during the 1830s. With the O'Key sisters, he performed a series of experiments with mesmeric trances at University Hospital, even inviting local dignitaries to these events. In 1849, following his 1839 resignation from from University College on the grounds that his mesmeric practices had been banned there, he helped found the 'London Mesmeric Infirmary' at 9 Bedford St (now Bayley St).

Others, such as the medics James Braid and James Esdaile, also sought to investigate mesmerism or (as Braid termed it) 'hypnotism' from a 'scientific' point of view. But by-and-large, mesmerism came to be seen as an activity that took place in middle- and upper-class parlours, and as something practised by vulgarly 'popular' practitioners. The 1838 'trial' that discredited Elliotson, organised by the medical journalist and politician Thomas Walkley, took place took place in his home in Bedford Square.

Many of the most successful authors of the period participated in or at least witnessed mesmeric phenomena at their homes or those of friends: Harriet Martineau, Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins,

George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Darwin, to name but a few. This domestic focus of mesmerism put it in an uncomfortable position regarding the emerging ethos of professionalism that was beginning to attain prominence in nineteenth-century British culture. Of particular note is the way mesmerism could be appropriated by women seeking to avoid the constraints of the domestic ideals of womanhood that were coming to prominence at the time.

Alison Winter notes how the O'Keys were able to control mesmeric performances with Elliotson, a circumstance that culminated in one of them implying that he was a feminine 'wet rag' or dandy. Harriet Martineau similarly took control of the mesmeric act, using it not only as a cure for a debilitating illness, but as a means of attaining clearer perception of what she declared to be the underlying nature of existence. By the 1870s, spiritualists such as Georgina Weldon (an early radical 'new woman' who ran an orphanage at Tavistock House) frequently held performances of seances, table-turning and mesmerism at their homes, either for friends or (significantly) to gain an income. Mesmerism can be seen as a means by which women could earn money and/or a certain degree of independence (and even begin a life of stage performance) through the provision of spiritual services.

So mesmerism not only offered apparent proof of an immaterial or spiritual force that could not be explained by physical science; it also helped constitute an economy that threatened to subvert the Victorian ideal of the 'professional' working man and his (dependent) domestic help-meet. The domestic sanctity of middle-class homes such as those around Bloomsbury, it seemed to critics, were in danger of being infected by such disquieting and potentially impious practices.

For those concerned with the constitution of a science of man's psyche, the domestic focus of such investigations seemed particularly problematic. Other academic disciplines such as chemistry, physics, geology and zoology were being constituted around sites devoted to them—principally museums and laboratories. For example, the School of Mines in South Kensington became an important site for geology because of its' extensive museum, and the opening of the Natural History Museum in 1881 was understood as signifying the centrality of zoology in scientific investigation.

For physiological psychologists, the 'popular' nature of mesmerism indicated both its illegitimacy as a science, and that it needed to be understood in terms other than those that its' practitioners tended to appeal (ie as an unknown spiritual force). For the rest of this talk, then, I am going to detail the way in which one key figure in the construction of psychology a a discipline—William Benjamin Carpenter—sought to position psychology as a science that could help regulate such practices as mesmerism, as well as other potentially 'subversive' aspects of mid-nineteenth-century culture.

As already noted, Carpenter was a key figure in the constitution of a science of psychology at UCL. Born in 1813, he was the son of the Unitarian preacher Lant Carpenter, who instilled a strong sense in him that nature was a moral force for good in the world. Like his sister, the renowned educationalist and penal reformer Mary Carpenter, he became an embodiment of the respectable face of nineteenth-century 'reform.' He had established himself as a reputable representative of the new 'comparative' science of anatomy and physiology over the 1830s and 1840s, which many High Anglicans mistrusted as associating human and animal bodies too closely. Most notably, as part of his campaign to make zoologically-sensitive conceptions of physiology acceptable, he had challenged the intellectual legitimacy of the phrenology movement, contending that their non-comparative focus on human anatomy alone led them into a series of errors regarding the location

of various faculties of mind in the brain.

Shortly after his appointment at UCL in 1847, Carpenter began to investigate and lecture on mesmerism. In a series of articles published in medical and scientific journals during the late 1840s and early 1850s, he sought to articulate a new conception of the significance of mesmeric phenomena. His critique centred not on the practice itself, but on the interpretation that many mesmerisers gave to their performances. Mesmerised subjects were not accessing some immaterial, spiritual 'force,' but were placed in a state in which they became highly sensitive to the directing influences of others. For Carpenter, it was not that subjects had gained access to a spiritual realm, but rather that they had lost their ability to direct their own activities, that characterised the mesmeric state. Mesmerism was thereby an induction of a loss of the self-direction or 'will-power' that was generally understood as a fundamental element of human life; it was a degeneration into a pre-human state, or as Carpenter referred to it, an 'epidemic disorder' of the human and social body.

This conception of the practice of mesmerism as something that could produce psychological illness drew on the then-forming disciplines of zoology and experimental physiology as legitimating authorities. The simplest kinds of animal had been characterised since at least the seventeenth century as living without consciousness, controlled by the instinctive or reflexive actions of their nerves. During the 1830s, the physiologist and natural philosopher Marshall Hall had identified this reflexive action with certain parts of the nervous system—specifically the spinal cord and the parts of the brain that predominated in 'lower' animals.

In 1840, Thomas Laycock had published a treatise 'On the Nervous Diseases of Women' that argued that it was not just the 'lower' brain that was 'reflexive,' but the entire nervous system. Consciousness was simply a manifestation of the blind actions or reflexes of nervous fibres:

If we would obtain a large and definite knowledge of the action of force upon matter and intelligence, in exciting the phenomena of life and thought as displayed in man, we must examine the laws of its action, as exhibited both in every living organism, and the molecular changes in inorganic matter. A thousand circumstances assure us, that between these last and the highest efforts of human intellect, there is a continuous chain of phenomena, although we are unable to follow it link by link. (*A Treatise on the Nervous Diseases of Women*, 1840)

Carpenter accepted much of Laycock's argument, suggesting that every aspect of mind apart from the will could be understood as the natural manifestation of the action of nerves. The will, however, could only be produced through education; it constituted the moral achievement of man over his animal nature:

All educational efforts, as it seems to us, must be based on the assumption, that until the self-directing power has been acquired, the character is the resultant of original constitution, and of the circumstances in which the individual is placed... The real *self-formation* commences with his consciousness of the power of *self-control*; a power which is exercised by the Will, in virtue of its dominion over what may be designated the automatic operation of the *mind*. ('On the Relations of Mind and Matter,' 1852)

To subvert the operation of the will, therefore, was to undermine what it meant to be human. More broadly, a deep (ie academic) understanding of physiology and zoology revealed not a 'mesmerism' that seemed to pose a problem for physiological conceptions of mind, but a 'hypnotism' that could

only be understood by psychologists trained in the organic sciences. So a ‘physiological’ psychology sought to draw mesmerism inside the academy, making explanations of it only possible by those that could engage with and understand zoological and physiological investigations of nerves.

But this move also had wider implications for the organisation of academic life. During the late 1840’s, and early 1850s, when Carpenter was articulating his critique of mesmerism, the UCL campus became a site of political protest. Students inspired by the 1848 revolutions in Europe began demanding better facilities and access to the university library and museums, as well as joining in chartist meetings outside of the campus. The faculty’s immediate reaction was hostile, calling on special constables to police the corridors of the Wilkins Building, and making examples of students that were deemed to have behaved particularly badly. Carpenter’s psychology, in contrast, counselled a more moderate approach.

The best strategy, according to Carpenter, was not to oppose the ‘animal-like’ actions of the students, but to direct them. As he commented in an 1853 textbook: those who are not able to exercise their will “are rather to be considered as ill-conditioned automata, than vicious men.” (*Human Physiology*, 4th ed., p. 850). They could thereby be led by those that had been able to cultivate their wills, and remain above the fray.

It was for faculty members to guide the dissatisfaction of students towards more ‘productive’ outlets, such as their studies; the faculty had a responsibility to quell the dissent of their student charges (a responsibility that was reflected in changes to the College’s constitution following the protests). Indeed, from 1853, as principal of the student residence University Hall, Carpenter was able to fulfil his ideal of academic-as-moral-guide, before leaving to concentrate on his duties as Registrar of the University of London in 1859. So, to conclude, physiological psychology relied on the perceived threat of mesmerism—and other similarly ‘popular’ sciences such as phrenology—in the constitution of itself as an academic discipline.

It positioned itself as a means of explaining, and thereby providing a series of solutions to, problems of scientific investigation that had been raised by those that remained outside of and excluded from academic life. But the act of responding to amateur or ‘quack’-like scientific speculation also involved the articulation of new conceptions of what it meant to be an academic. Instead of cultivating an air of personal authority, which (it was presumed) students would follow out of personal deference, physiological psychology conceived of academics as above all moral guides for their students. Teachers of all kinds should, Carpenter believed, seek to harness the energies of their students, and thereby prevent the animal elements of their bodies from subverting their cultivation of moral will-power.

Mesmerism and physiological psychology thereby constituted two different visions of psychological investigation. Mesmerism emphasised personal experience and popular participation, encouraging non-experts to trust their own senses when it came to the examination of psychological phenomena. Physiological psychology, in contrast, emphasising the need to appeal to specialist knowledge, and the discipline of trained expertise. UCL and its surrounding urban environment were engaged in a relationship that could be contentious as well as productive—as one of the most ‘respectable’ institutions associated with reform, the College at times sought to control the less reputable aspects of nineteenth-century middle-class life. Whether or not such attempts at moral control or (as Carpenter might have put it) ‘guidance’ are suitable purposes for a university

faculty, however, remains a matter for debate.