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Mesmeric Clairvoyance in Mid-Victorian Literature: Eliot, Bulwer-Lytton, and MacDonald

Helena Ifill

In 1845, the natural philosopher William Grove reviewed Chauncy Hare Townshend's *Facts in Mesmerism with Reasons for a Dispassionate Inquiry into it* (1840) for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.¹ Grove warily admitted that he was "by no means indisposed to believe some of the abnormal phenomena of mesmerism" but insisted on his "right to doubt, to disbelieve" (220). Such an attitude allowed popular magazines like *Blackwood's* to run articles on a subject that fascinated the Victorian public without appearing gullible. The claim that raised the most skepticism was that a mesmerized subject could demonstrate "clairvoyance, or the power of perception without the use of the usual organs" (Grove 220). Used broadly, "clairvoyance" could relate to activities such as telepathy, remote viewing, and precognition. For many, this led the practice of mesmerism into the realms of the supernatural and the incredible. Grove accepted that it was possible to put a mesmeric subject into a trance state but declared himself to be "entirely incredulous" about clairvoyance (240). Writing for the *British Quarterly Review* in the same year, the physician David Skae similarly asserted that some "facts" associated with mesmerism (including the inducement of mesmeric sleep) "demand investigation" but identified clairvoyance as part of "the mass of absurdities and fancies with which they are mixed up" (404).

As a topic of public interest, the theme of mesmeric clairvoyance unsurprisingly appealed to authors of popular fiction. The following provides readings of three stories, all featuring mesmeric clairvoyance and published within a five-year period: George Eliot's short story "The Lifted Veil," published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in July 1859; Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *A Strange Story*, serialized in Charles Dickens's *All the Year Round* from 1861-1862; and George MacDonald's *The Portent*, published in three parts in *The Cornhill Magazine* from May-July, 1860, then revised, expanded, and published in a single volume in 1864 (I refer to the latter version). An analysis of these stories demonstrates that all three authors were clearly aware of the debates surrounding mesmerism. However, whereas non-fictional writing about the subject was predominantly concerned with the authenticity of mesmeric phenomena, this is not the primary concern of the texts discussed here: in all three cases clairvoyance is probably real.² This is partly because the most heated arguments about the veracity of mesmeric clairvoyance occurred in the 1830s and 1840s and were superseded by the craze for spiritualism in the

1850s (although, as spiritualists also claimed clairvoyant abilities, mesmerism continued to be discussed alongside it). Also, the reality of mesmeric clairvoyance essentially ceases to be problematic for writers of fiction, who can dictate the boundaries of the possible within their work. Most importantly, mesmerism is dramatically and thematically fertile, as it represents a forging of links or a breaking down of barriers (spatial, temporal, mental), which may be liberating, empowering, or deeply threatening. Eliot, Bulwer-Lytton, and MacDonald take advantage of this potential and appropriate the theme of mesmerism in order to explore other issues within their work.

For Eliot, mesmeric clairvoyance becomes a way of depicting the importance, and difficulty, of creating sympathetic understanding between people; her treatment of it in “The Lifted Veil” is both a challenge to, and an elucidation of, her belief that art can inspire “the extension of our sympathies” and demonstrates the need to overcome egotism and idealism in order to truly connect with others (“Natural History” 54). In *A Strange Story*, in-text debates about the nature of mesmerism and descriptions of characters exhibiting clairvoyant abilities become a means of delivering an anti-materialist, religious message. MacDonald’s story reflects contemporary concerns about the potential for abuse of mesmeric powers but does so in order to explore notions of sexual propriety and repression. Although the three authors use mesmerism for different ends, the texts share a tendency to treat mesmeric clairvoyance with suspicion; it is depicted as neither desirable nor useful, and the opportunities afforded by mesmerism are repeatedly restricted, denied, or relinquished. In part, this negative portrayal is a reflection of the skepticism with which mesmerism was often viewed, as demonstrated by Grove and Skae above.³ However, it is not just mesmeric clairvoyance which is suppressed but also the different values that mesmeric clairvoyance has come to represent by the end of each narrative.

“The Lifted Veil”

George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil” tells the story of Latimer, an insular and melancholy young man who after a “severe illness” begins to develop precognitive and telepathic powers, only to be utterly disappointed by the pettiness of others’ thoughts (8). Throughout, Latimer describes telepathy in terms of violation and sickness: he refers to himself as intruding on “other souls,” feels his own mind obtruded upon, and calls his telepathy a “diseased condition” and a “pitiable peculiarity” (18, 13). Latimer marries his neighbor, Bertha, largely because she is the only person whose thoughts he cannot read. Latimer is at length able to read Bertha’s mind, only to realize her hatred of him. Unlike the other two stories discussed here, “The Lifted Veil” does not explicitly portray a mesmeric trance;

however, feats of prescience and telepathy were standard in mesmeric displays, and, as Martin Willis has shown, “Eliot was determined to place Latimer’s talent clearly within the context of mesmeric clairvoyant activities” (188). Although Latimer’s powers are less restricted than those of many mesmeric subjects, requiring no mesmerist to induce his trances and retaining a full memory of his visions, he never attempts to alter the course of events. His disillusionment causes him to grow increasingly passive, to the extent that, when he discovers that Bertha has been plotting to kill him, he calmly accepts this as “only like an old pain recurring with new circumstances” (42). After this, the couple live apart until Latimer dies of heart disease, his clairvoyance having brought him nothing but sorrow.

As many critics have observed, Latimer’s ability to hear the thoughts of others aligns him with the reader and writer of realist fiction, even with Eliot herself.⁴ “The Lifted Veil” is therefore an important qualification of Eliot’s belief that fiction should, and could, “enlarge men’s sympathies” (*George Eliot Letters* III: 111). Latimer’s disappointing revelations can be seen to provide Eliot with her “fullest exploration of the hypothesis that visionary powers may lead, not to sincerity and sympathy, but to disenchantment and creative impotence” (Viera 753). To rescue the story from this bleak interpretation, Thomas Albrecht argues that Eliot protects “her ethics of sympathy from the implications of Latimer’s antipathy” by “projecting that antipathy onto Bertha,” who can be dismissed as the evil “*femme fatale*” figure, leaving Latimer free for “redemption” (Albrecht 442). I agree with Albrecht that “The Lifted Veil” is more than a nightmarish dashing of Eliot’s hopes that greater knowledge would lead to greater sympathy between people. However, to really read this story in line with Eliot’s notions of sympathy, it is in fact important that Latimer is *not* redeemed, and also that we do not try to redeem the other characters from the petty thoughts that Latimer’s telepathy uncovers. Moreover, the reader is not obliged to share Latimer’s disillusionment or to trust his assessment of people. Carol Christ contends that “although we can fault [Latimer] for his emotional attitude, we cannot fault him for his accuracy of observation” (139), and Diana Postlethwaite suggests that Eliot “holds her characters to the same standards of accurate observation she sets for herself—and punishes them for failing to attain it” (109). Yet through Latimer, Eliot demonstrates that “accuracy of observation” is not enough to truly understand, or sympathize with, other people; the reader, author, or clairvoyant must make an ongoing effort to interpret, comprehend, and accept what is revealed to him or her.

Metaphor is Eliot's main narrative device for revealing Latimer's negative interpretation of the thoughts he hears. For example, when he first begins to experience telepathy, he describes it in the following way:

[T]he rational talk, the graceful attentions, the wittily-turned phrases, and the kindly deeds, which used to make the web of their characters, were seen as if thrust asunder by a microscopic vision, that showed all the intermediate frivolities, all the suppressed egoism, all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermenting heap. (14)

Eliot frequently uses web imagery to point out a disjunction between appearance and reality in human relationships, but in this excerpt, the image is unusually violent: Latimer's telepathy reveals (as one would expect of a microscope) the details that comprise the façade of polite human interactions but in such a way as to irreparably rend the web of human character and expose what lies beneath.⁵ However, Latimer could equally focus on the fact that kindness and rationality do not merely cover the "fermenting heap" of human pettiness but *grow* from it. Similarly, when Latimer refers to seeing the aspects which make up his brother's nature "in all their naked skinless complication" (15), it should be remembered that, while the removal of the skin may reveal the body's constituent parts, this makes not a truer picture of a human being but a less complete one; skin is, after all, essential to hold those parts together.

Latimer is in fact far from Eliot's ideal reader or writer. Whereas Eliot prized an artist who helped readers to "imagine and to feel the pains and joys of others" (*George Eliot Letters* III:111), Latimer, who wants to be a poet, is more concerned with expressing his own "song" to a "listening ear and answering soul" (7). Whereas Eliot wished that "less of our piety were spent on imagining perfect goodness, and more given to real imperfect goodness" (*George Eliot Letters* II: 230), Latimer deems "enthusiasm for the great and good" as the "highest element of character" (15). Whereas Eliot stressed that one's "fellow-mortals" may be "more or less ugly, stupid, inconsistent people," but "it is these people—amongst whom your life is passed—that it is needful you should tolerate, pity, and love" (*Adam Bede* 160), Latimer shows no enthusiasm for the mundane minds around him. He instead loses his "appetite for the common objects of human desire" and pines "after the moonbeams" (32).

Latimer's disinterest in mundane humanity and desire for attention means that when he develops his telepathic powers, he is bound to be disappointed. In *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), Eliot's narrator asks "who would find his satisfaction enhanced by an opportunity of comparing the picture he presents to himself of his own doings, with the picture they make on the mental retina of his neighbours?" (13). Indeed, Latimer is struck by how rarely people think of him. When he accidentally pre-empts a witty remark of his brother's and nobody notices, Latimer admits "I magnified, as usual, the impression any word or deed of mine could produce on others" (18). As Latimer becomes increasingly disenchanted, his connection to his "fellow-men" becomes "more and more deadened," his telepathy grows "dimmer and more fitful," whilst his visions of uninhabited places become more frequent (35-36).

Willis has explored Latimer's disinclination to put effort into comprehending or using his powers (197-98), but it is equally important that Latimer's egotism and hypocrisy make him unwilling to exert himself to really understand the thoughts that he hears. As Jill Galvan has shown, he calls "out to the reader for a sympathy he himself refuses to exercise" (245) and tries to inspire that sympathy by encouraging a "shared animosity" towards other characters (244). Galvan concludes that this instead invokes a feeling of "moral disgust" towards Latimer (245). While this is true, to stop here would be for a reader to act like Latimer, to refuse to look beneath the "fermenting heap" of melancholy self-absorption that makes him so unattractive. Latimer's lazy use of his powers shows us that effort is required to interpret uncovered truths in a useful and meaningful way. Eliot provides some clues to explain Latimer's personality. He has himself been a victim of poor interpretation at the hands of the phrenologist Mr. Letherall, who correctly reads Latimer's character but then recommends a course of study that puts him into an "uncongenial medium" that increases his insularity (6-7). Moreover, Latimer's egotism can be traced back to the early loss of his mother.⁶ "The Lifted Veil" is a warning that clarity of vision, clairvoyance, does not show all that there is to be seen, and that, with each new layer that is uncovered, we must look deeper still, with a willingness to face and accept the worst and the best in humanity. Reading "The Lifted Veil" shows how difficult this can be; Eliot does not ask us to like her gloomy narrator, but we must nevertheless challenge ourselves to read his story with the attention that he craves, in the hope of achieving sympathetic understanding.

A Strange Story

In Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *A Strange Story*, the skeptical, materialist physician Allen Fenwick witnesses a mass of strange phenomena

(including visions, magic, and the raising of demons), and battles the soulless mesmerist Margrave, who is searching for the elixir of life. Meanwhile, Fenwick's clairvoyant fiancée, Lilian, struggles with "thoughts" that are "too fantastic, too visionary" (69) for daily existence, making her "discontented" with her "lot on earth" and with her future husband (401). Whereas Latimer never achieves any deeper understanding about human nature or his relationship to other human beings, *A Strange Story* centers on Fenwick's and Lilian's journeys towards spiritual revelation and a comprehension of Man's place in the world. Bulwer-Lytton's story is pointedly geared at elucidating a Christian message, and the depiction of mesmeric clairvoyance features prominently as one means of delivering it.

The veracity of mesmeric clairvoyance is debated at length by Fenwick and his mentor, Dr. Faber, and their discussions are supplemented by an explanatory preface and extensive footnotes. References are made to theories by physiologists, philosophers and mystics, believers and skeptics. Just a few examples include Chauncy Hare Townshend's notions of the mesmeric subject's "electric temperament" (336); attempts by the alienist John Elliotson (whose advocacy of mesmerism led to his resignation from University College Hospital in 1838) to discover what mesmeric feats "can be tested by experiment" (334); and the cynical natural philosopher David Brewster's theories of vision (339).⁷ In correspondence with Bulwer-Lytton, Charles Dickens assured him that those "readers who combine some imagination, some scepticism, and some knowledge and learning" would regard *A Strange Story* as "full of strange fancy and curious study, startling reflections of their own thoughts and speculations at odd times" (200-201). In this way, the novel aligns with Dickens's desire that *All the Year Round* should provide readers with a mixture of "instruction and entertainment" (Henson 114).

The diverse (often contradictory) theories entertained by Fenwick and Faber all share the feature of being used to suggest 'natural' explanations for clairvoyance.⁸ As the occultist Sir Philip Derval explains to Fenwick, magic is "but philosophy, applied to certain mysteries in Nature remote from the beaten tracks of science" (160). Many Victorians who wanted simultaneously to believe in and rationalize apparently inexplicable occurrences expressed similar sentiments. For example, the spiritualist convert Robert Bell argued:

To say that certain phenomena are incredible, is merely to say that they are inconsistent with the present state of our knowledge; but, knowing how imperfect our knowledge is, we are not, therefore, justified in asserting that they are impossible. (224)

Joseph Fradin contests that the novel "in effect denies the world view of

science and examines the essentially occult view that the universe is animate and that its animating force may be touched or controlled through esoteric ritual” (13). However, Bulwer-Lytton is not denying the scientific world view but expanding it: mesmeric clairvoyance and other phenomena obey natural laws and can therefore, one day, beunderstood.⁹

The marvels that would usually be described as supernatural and are relegated to the natural realm (albeit an esoteric part of it) are also subjugated by what Bulwer-Lytton understood to be truly *supernatural*. In a *Blackwood's* article from 1862, he stated that by “supernatural” he meant “not that which is against Nature but, that which is above Nature” (“On the Moral Effect of Writers” 164). For Bulwer-Lytton, the truly supernatural was inexplicable because it was associated with God, and this is a key part of the spiritual revelation that Fenwick undergoes at the end of *A Strange Story*: “[T]he wonders of God? These belong to the Infinite and these, O Immortal! will but develop new wonder on wonder, though thy sight be a spirit's, and thy leisure to track and solve an eternity” (435). Faced with a new understanding of “the wonders of God,” Fenwick comes to realize that the “weird riddle” about the existence of supernatural phenomena that has concerned him throughout the novel is “trivial” when compared to the “clear recognition of Soul and Hereafter” (434). Having filled his fictional world with extraordinary phenomena, Bulwer-Lytton then asserts that they are nothing compared to a belief in Man's immortal soul.

As Bulwer-Lytton explains in his Preface, Fenwick represents the “Intellect, obstinately separating all its inquiries from the belief in the spiritual essence and destiny of man” and ends the novel having learnt to embrace such a belief (8). Contrastingly, Lilian is “the pure-thoughted visionary, seeking overmuch on this earth to separate soul from mind” (8). Lilian is a powerful clairvoyant and “intuitive genius” (300) who experiences trances “in which the soul entirely supersedes the mere action of the mind” (145); she is subject to visions, prescience, and spirit visitations, and can astrally project herself, doing so to prevent Fenwick from performing a dangerous ritual at one point (265). Lilian “never seems at home on earth” (60), and her visions provide a psychic escape from the everyday world, much as mediumship could offer Victorian women a diversion from restrictive and unstimulating daily lives (Oppenheim 10).

However, Lilian's clairvoyance is not portrayed as something of which to approve; her visionary experiences mean that she will never “be contented with a prosaic earthly lot” (60). Moreover, her strengths are negated by her weaknesses; she is mesmerized and exploited by Margrave in his search for immortality and, tellingly, she is at her most visionary after suffering a breakdown.¹⁰ Lilian is an important addendum to Bulwer-Lytton's message about the existence of the soul; while Fenwick learns

that the soul is “distinct from mind and body” and is Man’s link to heaven, Lilian must come to accept that humans belong to the mortal world and that there must be a balance between “soul” and “mind” (17). This balance is symbolized by Lilian’s marriage to Fenwick, and also by her realization that she has been letting her “soul ... indulge in its own presumptuous desire” by wandering “forth from the trammels of mortal duties” and her admission that she failed to “perceive the truth that earth is a part of the same universe as heaven!” (401).

By on the one hand placing mesmeric clairvoyance in the natural realm, firmly below the “wonders of God,” and on the other by using Lilian’s clairvoyant powers to symbolize the existence and duties of the soul in the world, Bulwer-Lytton delivers his spiritual lesson. Bulwer is anxious that his message be understood by his readers (Brown 159), and perhaps he was right to worry. In the same article in which he stated his conception of the supernatural, he pointed out that

a writer may present to you, at the end of his book, some unexceptionable dogma, which parents would cordially admit into the copy-book ethics of their children, yet, in the process of arriving at his harmless aphorism, he may have led the mind as much astray into mischief as it is in his power to do. (“On the Moral Effect of Writers” 163)

In *A Strange Story*, Bulwer-Lytton may well lead his reader into “mischief.” After the wonders of Lilian’s visions, it is not just the gender politics that jar when she abandons her psychic world in order to become the “rational companion” that Fenwick has desired in a wife from the start (26). Following the excitement of his adventures, it is also difficult to see Fenwick abandon his attempts to solve the “riddles of Nature” (349) that have been such a significant part of the novel without feeling that much potential has been lost.¹¹ Furthermore, most reviewers were far more concerned with Bulwer-Lytton’s depiction of the paranormal than with his spiritual teachings; one reviewer even suggested that he was immorally encouraging “a morbid appetite for the marvellous” (Anon., “A Scientific Supernatural Novel” 235). Dickens repeatedly reassured Bulwer-Lytton during the writing of the novel that if “you were the Magician’s servant instead of the Magician, these potent spirits would get the better of you; but you *are* the Magician, and they don’t, and you make them serve your purpose” (201). Bulwer-Lytton’s “potent spirits” may have gotten the better of him after all. While functionally it may be a mere tool with which to prepare Fenwick for his revelation, mesmeric clairvoyance comes across as fascinating, powerful, and liberating; it does not, in fact, appear “trivial” at all (434).

Duncan, the hero of *The Portent*, is employed as a tutor at Hilton Hall, where he meets Lady Alice, with whom he develops a mesmeric bond. Duncan discovers that Alice is kept in a state of mental alienation by the Hiltons so as to take advantage of her inheritance, and he uses their mesmeric connection to restore Alice to “sane life” (264). After a brief romance, a failed elopement, and many years apart, Duncan and Alice are reunited and marry. Alice and Duncan’s connection is not purely spiritual; their mesmeric link is described in implicitly, but unmistakably, sexual terms. The novel thus plays with what many critics of mesmerism saw as a worrisome blurring of the therapeutic and the erotic. For example, in 1851, John Eagles went to see a mesmeric display by John Elliotson. Eagles described the “exhibition” as “very beautiful,” involving a “young woman [who] assumed most graceful attitudes” as Elliotson “willed that she should come to him, at the same time telling her by word of mouth not to come” (75). Elliotson hoped to be seen as a responsible medical practitioner, but as Eagle’s description shows, his work left plenty of room for less favorable interpretations.¹² In *The Portent*, MacDonald keeps his characters on the right side of propriety but manages to make some liberal (though tacit) statements about the power of sexual attraction during the course of the narrative. Although not as pointedly didactic as *A Strange Story*, and in fact praised by one reviewer for having, “and, thank Heaven! no moral” (Holbeach 42), MacDonald intended the *The Portent* to be “founded in the marvellous, [but] true to human nature” (iii). In this novel, mesmeric clairvoyance (the “marvellous”) is used as a means to explore “human” issues of sexuality and repression.

Duncan’s first significant encounter with Alice occurs when she sleepwalks to an abandoned chamber near his bedroom and, suddenly awakened, faints. Issues of propriety are immediately signaled as Duncan fears “being found, in the dead of night, by common-minded domestics, in such a situation” (91). Duncan carries Alice to his own bedroom, and as he does so stumbles upon her trailing hair, a sign of their burgeoning romantic entanglement (92).¹³ Although they only speak briefly, by the morning Duncan has “fully entered that phase of individual development commonly called *love*” (102).

Some time after this, Duncan accidentally “calls” a somnambulant Alice to him. This is explicitly linked to his lust for her:

In this concurrence of idleness, distraction, and vehement desire, I found all at once, without any foregone resolution, that I was concentrating and intensifying within me, until it rose almost to a command, the operative volition that Lady Alice should come to me. In a moment more I trembled at the sense of a new power which sprang into conscious being within me. (109)

The suggestion of onanism, as Duncan fantasizes alone at night, climaxing with the sending forth of his “operative volition,” conveys the impropriety

of what he is doing. It was generally assumed that the type of advantage that a mesmerist would take over his subject would be sexual in nature; for example, Eagles worried that a mesmerist could store up his mesmeric energy and load it “with any passion-power he pleases” (82); it seems that this is what Duncan (albeit unintentionally) has done. But when Alice really does arrive at his room, Duncan is ashamed of his conduct; he later likens “compelling the attendance of her unconscious form” to “kissing the lips of a sleeping woman whom he loved, not knowing that she loved him in return” (144), a thing he is too honorable to do. Duncan subsequently engages in “fearful” struggles to avoid psychically calling Alice at night, showing the power of his desire (116).

While much of the concern over mesmerism and propriety centered on licentious men exerting their influence over “nervous and impressionable females,” there was also the possibility that mesmerism provided “young and sanguine girls” with an “excuse for ‘going to sleep,’” giving them an outlet for sexual desires which they were not meant to acknowledge (Anon., “Animal Magnetism” 451).¹⁴ Alice is legitimately sleepwalking, so not consciously finding an “excuse,” but her responsiveness to Duncan reveals her attraction to him. When Alice awakes in Duncan’s chamber, she is far more lucid than she is during the day. Duncan resolves to restore the night-time Alice, whom he is certain is the “real” Alice, and by doing so, he is restoring a woman who consciously expresses her desire for him (115). It turns out that Alice can even exert a mesmeric influence over Duncan while he is awake. She makes him yield “to the irresistible” and visit her in the abandoned chamber, where she falls into his arms “with a low moan of delight” (151-52). The more Alice reclaims her “real” self, the more dominant she becomes. It is Alice who invites Duncan to elope with her, claiming it would be “false delicacy” to leave her with her abusive guardians, and even adds, “I am yours.—Am I not?” (140). Faced with such coquettish logic, Duncan admits that he is “very willingly persuaded to what was so much my own desire,” even though he is uncertain “whether the reasoning was quite just” (140). Although in their final escape Duncan heroically goes to rescue Alice from Hilton Hall, it is Alice who grabs the “Malay creese” and, brandishing this exotic weapon (linking the femininity of the east with the masculinity of an unsheathed dagger), gets them to safety (282).

Mesmeric clairvoyance in *The Portent* is clearly associated with sexuality and the flaunting of social convention, but only in the face of a repressive environment. MacDonald’s explanation for Alice’s somnambulism is an example of pre-Freudian hysteria caused by repression:

Some obstruction in the gateways, outward, prevented her, in her waking hours, from uttering herself at all. This obstruction,

damming back upon their sources the outgoings of life, threw her into this abnormal sleep. In it the impulse to utterance, still unsatisfied, so wrought within her unable, yet compliant form, that she could not rest, but rose and walked. (133)

MacDonald is acknowledging the danger of repression (intellectual, emotional, and sexual, in Alice's case). Unable to express herself during her waking hours, Alice is led into the morally dubious position of going to Duncan while asleep, but it is their connection that initiates her reintegration into the waking, sane world from which her guardians have kept her excluded. It is crucial that Alice and Duncan's relationship is both mutual and exclusive. Duncan in fact declares his hatred of "mesmerism and its vulgar impertinences," but consoles himself that his power can be exerted "only over one, and that one allied to me by a reciprocal influence, as well as long-tried affection.—Did not love give me the right to employ this power?" (258). In this novel, it does.

While Alice and Duncan's mutual mesmeric influence aids Alice's mental recovery and escape from Hilton Hall, its association with repression and intense erotic attraction means that it is neither required nor even permitted to endure beyond the end of the novel. Duncan and Alice render their sexual desire acceptable by marrying, and, tellingly, the supernatural is left behind along with impropriety. Duncan reports euphemistically that their powers start to fade after they have "passed a few months in the absorption of each other's society" (287). Although it feels "as if the gates of the unseen world were closing against" them, Duncan insists that "we let it go gladly" (288). Their initial intense desire being satisfied, the couple learn to channel their feelings in a more socially acceptable and constructive manner: "We felt that love was the gate to an unseen world infinitely beyond that region of the psychological in which we had hitherto moved; for this love was teaching us to love all men, and live for all men"¹⁵ (288). Their psychic bond having served its purpose, they are rewarded by ending up "very much like other people" (288).

A significant criticism levelled against mesmerism was the lack of practical use to which it could be put. Trances and clairvoyance did not always occur as the mesmerist expected. Eliot's partner, the notoriously skeptical G.H. Lewes, was particularly unimpressed that a mesmeric clairvoyant could "describe what is going on in India" but "cannot describe what is going on next door" (390). Bulwer-Lytton also expressed disappointment that "mesmeric clairvoyance...with all its assumptions of intelligence more than mortal...has not solved one doubtful problem of science," but went on to assert that it "is no rare phenomenon for a poet 'to see through organs other than the eyes'" and that "whereas the clairvoyance of the somnambule has solved no riddle in nature, added no invention to art, the clairvoyant of wakeful intellect has originated all the

manifold knowledge we now possess” (“On Monotony” 304-05). All three of the authors discussed here hope, like clairvoyants, to open their readers’ eyes to truths that are not immediately apparent; they hope to make their writing useful as well as entertaining.

Although mesmeric clairvoyance is often shown to be powerful and full of potential, in each of these stories it is repressed or abandoned by its possessors. This is in part because mesmeric clairvoyance is metaphorically linked to things that are undesirable or unacceptable. In George Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil” telepathy stands for the ability to see beneath the surface of human relations, but the egotistical Latimer does not know how to use this to increase, rather than to destroy, his sympathetic understanding of others, and so he rejects his powers. In Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *A Strange Story*, mesmerism represents that which distracts us from understanding what is truly valuable and important; discovering the truth about the strange phenomena he experiences seems all-important to Fenwick until he realizes the ultimate truth about Man’s immortal soul, while Lilian’s preference for visions and spirit visitations over her mundane life prevents her from appreciating the world in which humans are required to live. In George MacDonald’s *The Portent*, the clairvoyant link between Duncan and Alice represents an erotic attraction that is presented as natural and wholesome but also inappropriate and unsustainable in the long run. Most importantly, mesmeric clairvoyance is abandoned at the ends of the stories because all three narratives, despite their fantastic subject matter, are ultimately about how to live meaningfully and contentedly in the ordinary, non-supernatural world.

Notes

1. The practice of inducing a trance in another person developed from Franz Mesmer’s eighteenth-century theories about the manipulation of magnetic fluid. In medical circles mesmerism was quite quickly overshadowed by James Braid’s theories of hypnotism, which emphasized the importance of concentration in the creation of the trance state, rather than an exertion of power over the subject by the mesmerist. See Tatar 3-44.
2. Although only probably: Docherty asserts that the final half of *The Portent* is Duncan’s insane fantasy, and Galvan finds a number of reasons “to question the real existence of Latimer’s occult abilities” in “The Lifted Veil” (242).
3. All three first-person narrators are skeptical and propose logical explanations for their strange experiences. Bulwer-Lytton explained that he was catering to the tastes of his age, in which readers respond to “the Marvelous” by saying “in one breath, ‘Very extraordinary!’ and in the next breath ask, ‘How do you account for it?’” (*A Strange Story* 8). Certainly some readers appreciated this: one review of *The Portent* praised MacDonald for striking “that deep chord in our human nature which responds to the wonderful” while making sure that “we are never fairly out of the world of fact” (Bayne 24). These stories imply that apparently supernatural phenomena should not be accepted unthinkingly—useful advice for readers who

- might well be witnessing mesmeric displays in their own lives, not to mention séances, table-turning, and spirit-rapping, all of which were popular at this time.
4. See, for example, Albrecht's "Sympathy and Telepathy: The Problem of Ethics in George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil,'" Sally Shuttleworth's introduction to "*The Lifted Veil*" and "*Brother Jacob*," and Martin Willis's "Clairvoyance, Economics and Authorship in George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil.'"
 5. In *Middlemarch* (1871-72), for example, the incompatible Lydgate and Rosamond naively spin a "gossamer web" of "young love-making" around themselves as they anticipate a happily married future (325).
 6. Latimer's earliest memories are of being held on his mother's "knee from morning till night" during a childhood illness; after her death, he feels that there are now "no loving eyes looking" at him (5). Although during a later illness, his father visits his bedside (8) and rides out with him every day (11), he fancies that his father feels "little fondness" for him (5). Clearly, no attention will ever match the memory of his mother's "unequaled love" (5).
 7. Gavin Budge provides a reading of the scientific theories which inform Bulwer-Lytton's conception of mesmerism, particularly "medical theories of vitality" (41).
 8. Bulwer-Lytton draws the line at overtly materialist theories; Fenwick comes to understand that Condillac and Hume threaten to "reduce to a phantom... the whole solid frame of creation" (350). Tellingly, Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) is not mentioned, a conspicuous absence given its popularity at the time. Bulwer-Lytton's feelings about evolution are implicit in several extracts, such as Fenwick's reference to "Man, the king of the animals, fashioned forth from no mixture of humbler races by the slow revolutions of time, but his royalty stamped on his form when the earth became fit for his coming" (281-2).
 9. This extended to "spirit manifestation" which, Bulwer-Lytton insisted, must have "a natural cause... [e]ven if that natural cause be the admission of a spirit world around us" (cited in Noakes 23).
 10. Mesmerists were usually male and mesmeric subjects female, which "tended to reinforce gender hierarchies" (Willis and Wynne 9). In contrast to Lilian's abilities, masculine mesmeric powers are portrayed as threatening but attractive. Fenwick experiences both the "shame and indignation" of being reduced to a "puppet" by the powers of Derval (155) and the thrill of making Margrave drop "to the floor as a dog drops at the word of his master" by channeling mesmeric power through a wand (282). Fenwick later discards the wand in Lake Windermere to avoid being tempted to abuse its powers (305). *A Strange Story* implies that to exert mesmeric power is to risk corruption, reflecting contemporary assertions that mesmerists were "endeavouring to raise themselves above ordinary mortals" but that in doing so, "they lay claim to attributes and powers which must place them, for ever, beyond the pale of civilised society" (Anon., "Animal Magnetism" 450).
 11. Reviewers were bemused by Fenwick's "astonishing indifference regarding the reality or unreality of all that has taken place" (Anon., "*A Strange Story*" 274). In fact, it is not just the supernatural that is abandoned; by the end of the novel, Fenwick has retired from practice and moved to Australia, where he ignores the abundant gold on his land.
 12. For a thorough account of Elliotson's practice of mesmerism, see Allison Winter's *Mesmerized: Powers of the Mind in Victorian Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998., pages 32-108.13. This echoes a scene in Duncan and Alice's family history (they are distant relatives) in which an ancestor

murders his brother and steals his lover, Elsie, whose hair becomes entangled in the horse's hooves as he flees, thus underlining the impropriety of Duncan and Alice's situation (31).

14. *A Strange Story* also addresses the impropriety of mesmeric bonds between men and women. Margrave mesmerically calls Lilian from her home, risking her "irretrievable disgrace" (283). Another character, Mrs Poyntz, also complains about "young ladies allowing themselves to be put to sleep by gentlemen, and pretending they have no will of their own against such fascination!" (62).

15. The original *Cornhill* version ends with Duncan and Alice caught alone at night by Lord Hilton. The extended ending is important in rendering their desires proper. For a comparison of the two versions, see Rebecca Thomas Ankeny's "Endings and Meanings: A Study of George MacDonald's *The Portent*." *North Wind* 17 (1998): 21-30.

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