



Mesmerism and Magic, Science and Self in *The Beetle* and *Dracula*

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Robert Miles argues that all Gothic writing 'touches upon the sensitive and sensitized joints in the representation of the self' and that this fractured, 'disjunctive self'¹ is one of the genre's defining features. Expanding upon this statement, it is possible to see this disjointedness manifested in both *Dracula* and *The Beetle* through these texts' treatment of mesmerism. Mesmerism shatters the boundaries of the self, allowing one person to be overpowered by another, and leads to a change in the person mesmerised. By breaking down the distinction between private and public selves, mesmerism makes rational categorisation impossible and thereby threatens established social order.

Mesmerism obscures boundaries between the human and non-human. The term 'mesmerism' itself was derived from Franz Mesmer's notion of 'animal magnetism': 'a force closely associated with biological life which fills the entire universe and brings all things into a state of mutual influence.'² Animal magnetism thus places humans on a continuum with other animals, both in its theoretical framework and in its name which incorporates mankind as a hyponym subordinate to the category of 'animal'. In the post-Darwin London of *The Beetle*, mesmerism's destruction of the distinction between species reflects contemporary fears of degeneration into savagery. Cesare Lombroso was a famous criminologist of the time and his theories are explained by his daughter Gina as follows: 'Atavism, the reversion to a former state, is the first feeble indication of the reaction opposed by nature to [...] perturbing causes. [In humans,] the criminal is an atavistic being.'³ In Marsh's novel, mesmerism actually causes this devolution to occur in those upon whom it is inflicted. Holt, once a clerk, becomes a burglar while Lessingham changes from an upstanding politician into a horrified wreck. In this last example, medical lexis heightens the sense of degeneration by associating it with wasting illnesses: Paul is called the 'greatest living force in practical politics' who is 'strong' and 'straight'⁴ but after exposure to the Beetle's image, his fits are compared to 'epilepsy' and 'palsy' (pp.114-6). By causing its subjects to change from rational to irrational beings, mesmerism not only threatens the integrity of humans as superior to beasts, but also of individual people in whom it creates a dangerous alternation between capability and helplessness.

This alteration can also be found in *Dracula*, as Jonathan Harker is diagnosed with debilitating 'brain fever'⁵ in response to his experience in the castle. This fever manifests itself as physical weakness when Harker sees the Count on the London streets: Mina remarks that

¹ Robert Miles, *Gothic Writing, 1750-1820: A Genealogy* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 11-13

² John Michael Greer, 'Mesmerism' in *The New Encyclopedia of the Occult* (Minnesota: Llewellyn) p. 306

³ Gina Lombroso Ferrero, 'Criminal Man According to the Classification of Cesare Lombroso' in Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, ed. Martin A. Danahey, 2nd ed (Ontario: Broadview, 2005) p.161

⁴ Richard Marsh, *The Beetle*, ed. Julian Wolfreys (Ontario: Broadview, 2004) pp.63-4. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁵ Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. Glennis Byron (Ontario: Broadview, 1998) p.134. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

'if he had not me to lean on and support him he would have sunk down' (p.209). On a literal level this refers to his ability to remain standing, but it also initiates the cognitive metaphor of UP IS BETTER, DOWN IS WORSE⁶ to suggest he is atavistically 'sinking down' the hierarchy of nature from capable rationality into useless mindlessness. Unlike the characters of *The Beetle*, Harker's temporary atavism is not attributable to specific acts of mesmerism but is a response to the overall trauma of his experience; nevertheless, it articulates similar fears regarding the degeneration of man into animalistic irrationality. These fears are also exemplified in the character of Renfield, whose lunacy blurs the distinction between human and animal as his zoophagia causes him to believe that he has become one with the life-forces of insects and birds: 'it was life, strong life, and it gave life to him' (p. 101-2). The Count, meanwhile, can actually transform into a bat or a wolf, completely erasing any division between man and beast and therefore implying that Dracula is himself the product of atavism. This is reinforced by Van Helsing's explicit reference to Lombroso's theories in his argument that the Count is of 'imperfectly formed mind' (p.383) and 'has not full man-brain' (p.382). Both Renfield and the Count are examples of degeneration, though Dracula's is physical in origin – he is 'not of man-stature as to brain' (p.382) – whereas Renfield's is purely psychological: when his condition is not exacerbated by the influence of the vampire, Dr Seward comments that it seems as if 'his reason had been restored' (p. 284). Renfield demonstrates that atavism can produce dangerous effects, but also that it can be cured: through force of will, Renfield overcomes Dracula's influence and regains control over his sanity. Although he is eventually killed by Dracula, he dies a sane man. His final confrontation with the Count is laced with meteorological language: 'His eyes. They burned into me, and my strength became like water [...] There was a red cloud before me, and a noise like thunder, and the mist seemed to steal away under the door' (p.321). The Count changes from mist to man and back to mist, while the metaphoric heat of his 'burning' eyes melts Renfield's solid strength into liquid water. Whereas the Beetle's mesmerism threatens its victims by severing the mind from control of the body, Dracula's power alters the elemental state of the body itself – Renfield still has control of his arms, but they have become useless 'water'. Dracula's effortless shape shifting and ability to transform others poses a threat to conventional knowledge, moving rapidly from one scientific category to another: from solid to liquid, man to animal. Nevertheless, he moves between these stages in a linear and always knowable fashion: when he is mist, he is definitely mist; when a wolf, he cannot be mistaken for any other animal. *Dracula* positions science as a reassuring force: even if it cannot explain phenomena such as 'corporeal transference' and 'astral bodies' (p.228) it can nevertheless name, categorise and order them, rendering them safe as targets for rational investigation rather than unregulated mysticism. *The Beetle*, on the other hand, suggests that its discoveries actually threaten those same lines of difference: the titular creature refuses to fit comfortably into any scientific category and even at the novel's end, a variety of 'experts' are unsure whether its remains are blood, paint, or even 'the excretion of some variety of lizard' (p.319).

As well as suggesting that science can be as disruptive as it is enlightening, *The Beetle* also suggests that Western empiricism and Eastern mysticism exist on the same axis and are interchangeable. *The Beetle* was published in 1897, fifty-four years after James Braid used the term 'hypnotism' to define the empirical study of suggestion and declared it to be 'investigated quite independently of any bias [...] as connected with mesmerism.'⁷ He distrusted the latter term because it had strong spiritual and mystic connotations as well as scientific: Nash and Barnier refer to it as 'an anchor point for the transition between religious

⁶ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) p. 14

⁷ James Braid, *Neurypnology; or, The Rationale of Nervous Sleep, Considered in Relation with Animal Magnetism* (London: John Churchill, 1843) p.5

healing rituals [...] and a more scientific approach to medicine.⁸ Therefore, by using both terms throughout the book to describe the Beetle's effects on its prey, Marsh markedly locates the novel within a pseudo-scientific discourse in which science and mysticism both overlap and oppose each other. This is succinctly demonstrated in Sydney's lab, when the science of electricity is used to combat the Beetle and referred to by Atherton as 'my – magic' (p.146). The hyphen here graphically and grammatically separates Sydney from magic while nevertheless showing the two to be strongly linked. Sydney's identity becomes difficult to categorise as he is both scientist and shaman, showing science to be as dangerous as the occult: Atherton's gas nearly causes Woodville to enter cardiac arrest - 'his heart seemed still' (p.139) - while although the Beetle is destroyed by technology, it is only a technological malfunction – a train crash – which causes this to happen, and poses equal danger to the humans on-board. Mesmerism and science both have the capacity to harm. In contrast to this attitude, *Dracula* shows a more positive approach to science, suggesting that it is controllable and beneficial to society. There is no mention of mesmerism, only of the more scientifically accepted 'hypnosis'; furthermore, of the thirty-four direct references to hypnotism in the novel, only three of them relate to the effect of vampires on humans while the rest refer to people acting on each other – often specifically to Van Helsing's use of hypnosis on Mina. Although Jonathan exclaims 'I was becoming hypnotised!' (p.77) in the castle, 'hypnotised' in this sentence functions as an adjective rather than a verb; it describes the effect, not the process. Likewise, when Van Helsing refers to Dracula as 'he who have hypnotize [Mina] first' (p.363) he is merely assuming, based on her symptoms, that hypnotism was employed – he has not witnessed Dracula's technique himself. This clearly differentiates 'hypnosis' from the practices of the vampire: the former is a legitimate and ordered practice belonging to responsible scientists such as Van Helsing, the latter is a process that produces similar effects but through less identifiable means. The quasi-hypnosis performed by the vampires is an act often described but never given the credibility of an accurate name, rendering it shadowy and occult. It is therefore, more suitable to refer to Dracula's power of influence as mesmerism rather than hypnotism, as the vampire's abilities are very different to the true hypnotism performed by Van Helsing. This hypnosis is precise and controllable: its methodology, being based around an understandable system of gestures, is clear and, as it takes several minutes to work, it cannot be used without the consent of the subject. Although such consent is not given by Dracula when Van Helsing accesses his mind through hypnosis, the professor is merely using a connection previously established by the Count himself without which such access would be impossible: 'this power to good of you and other, you have won from your suffering at his hands' (p.384). This clear division of responsible science from ungoverned magic suggests, in stark disagreement with *The Beetle*, that hypnotism is just one of a series of sciences and technologies – along with phonographs and indeed trains – which unambiguously benefit mankind.

Hypnosis and mesmerism also illuminate personal tensions as well as scientific ones. *The Beetle* proposes that a unified and well-presented self is healthy and desirable: Lessingham is admired for his ability to act as a cool politician at all times with an 'invulnerable presence of mind' (p. 75) and it is his presentational skill, in the form of his speeches, which attracts Marjorie to him: 'the speaker's words showed such knowledge, charity and sympathy that they went straight to my heart' (p.187). In contrast, Marjorie's father has little self-presentational skill: while Lessingham is 'calm' and 'airy' and his words travel 'straight', Major Lindon's speech is 'a whirlwind of anathemas' (p.201). This imagery suggests that good presentation is the triumph of the controlled over the chaotic. However, as in *Dracula*, the meteorological terminology also implies a rapid change in state; like the

⁸ Michael R. Nash and Amanda J. Barnier, *The Oxford Handbook of Hypnosis: Theory, Research and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) p.226

weather, self-presentation is subject to unforeseen and rapid transformation. Such an alteration can be caused by mesmerism as it threatens the mind's control over the body, and it is the body through which any act of self-expression takes place. Robert Holt, when mesmerised, is dominated by the Beetle to such an extent that he cannot express himself: 'It was not I who willed that I should speak; it was he. What he willed that I should say, I said' (p. 54). Without that vital self-control displayed so abundantly by Lessingham, Holt ceases to be seen as human at all but a mere 'automaton' (p. 52). In *Dracula*, the heroes' ability to fully and accurately represent themselves through phonograph recordings and writing is fundamental to their success, allowing them to rapidly build and disseminate a comprehensive body of knowledge regarding their foe. Furthermore, in both texts the lower classes are marked by their non-standard English which frequently causes difficulties for the protagonists: Harker derisively complains that their 'phonetic spelling had again misled me' (p.302). This would appear to suggest that standard English is an integral feature of positive self-expression but this argument is complicated by Van Helsing's idiosyncratic speech, which turns his sentences into 'puddle[s]' (p.354). Franco Moretti argues that Van Helsing's dialect reflects the foreign threat posed by *Dracula* to British culture, and that his 'approximate and mangled English' disappears once the 'notions [of vampirism] have been translated into the linguistic and cultural code of the English, and the code has been reorganized and reinforced.'⁹ Thus, he suggests, the victory of the heroes is also that of standard English. However, Van Helsing's dialogue features many speech-orientated performative verbs such as 'I counsel' (p.156) and 'I say' (p.354) while he employs the command 'let me tell you' (p.155) nine times throughout – and is the only character to do so. These draw attention towards Van Helsing's speech, not away from it, while the issuing of commands also gives his words authority. This suggests that rather than having to reform his ideas and modes of expression to match English values, the English characters must instead adjust their understanding to match Van Helsing's, to 'believe in things which [they] cannot' (p.230). In this way, Van Helsing operates as a gateway between the foreign culture of Romania and the familiar codes of the British. Only through him can the other characters learn about vampires and they do so by abandoning their 'sceptical, matter-of-fact' cultural codes to incorporate Romanian 'traditions and superstitions' (p.278). Van Helsing's English may be 'mangled' but this is irrelevant compared to its ability to convey meaning – indeed, his status as leader of the vampire hunters shows that his ability to express himself is actually very well-developed.

This concern with the presentation of a public self is intrinsically linked with the notion of a private self to whom access is restricted. Paul Lessingham, beneath his controlled public exterior, seeks to repress his reckless past and when forced to reveal the details of that time insists that 'I was never really myself from the first moment to the last' (p.242). He declares those events 'unspeakable' and 'beyond [his] power' (p.243) to discuss, distancing his modern public self from his past private one. This initial separation of selves is caused by the Beetle's mesmerism, which creates a disjunct between Lessingham's desire for escape, and his inability to act upon that wish. Once away from the monster, he presents only a favourable public image yet, when the Beetle is nearby, its mesmeric terror reasserts his suppressed other self by placing him in a 'dream' (p.115) state in which he relives his previous horrors. When others see this made public, he is forced to explain that 'which [he] had hoped would continue locked in the secret depository of [his] own bosom' away from 'prying eyes' (p.237) and, in doing so, he defies his previous categorisation as a respectable politician. Mesmerism brings the public and private into open conflict, entering the individual's identity into a state of flux which eludes understanding.

⁹ Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgas, and David Miller (London: Verso, 1983) pp.96-7

Jonathan Harker is similarly fragmented by his exposure to Dracula's mesmeric power, suppressing his experiences and stating that 'the very thought [of Dracula] drove me mad' (p.84). Like Lessingham, he fluctuates between public health and private trauma, resisting categorisation until Van Helsing confirms his story, relabelling it from a mad nightmare to a rational truth and allowing Harker to reintegrate it into his concept of himself as a coherent rational being. Lessingham, however, never gains such vindication and is left permanently fractured, praying that his private, damaged self 'be kept far off from him for ever' (p.320). Both texts, then, show that mesmerism leads to self-fragmentation, though for Harker at least it is reversible. Renfield exhibits a more complex demonstration of this psychic dissonance, displaying both sanity and lunacy. After his initial meetings with Renfield, Seward attempts to find 'a sufficient cause,' an underlying rationality which he claims is 'the secret' (p.104) of the lunatic's mind. However, his efforts to reach this private normality are confounded by Renfield's public madness, which obscures reason with silence and violence. Later, however, when Van Helsing attempts to discover Renfield's relationship with the Count, Renfield's sane self has become public and the professor struggles to access the now-hidden lunatic: though he wishes to see him 'when his mind is disturbed,' (p.281) Seward remarks that Renfield is 'more rational [...] than I had ever seen him' (p.282) and their conversation proves fruitless. Renfield's constant escapes from containment within his cell reflect and emphasise his continual evasion of enclosure within in any one psychiatric category.

Scott Brewster claims that this demonstrates the risk that he who understands lunacy may reproduce it in himself: 'to grant meaning or autonomy to pathological disorder, and reproduce its terms, threatens reason [...] Renfield epitomises this danger.'¹⁰ However, this argument is invalidated by the example of the Count himself: the heroes gain a comprehensive understanding of his history and motives yet this does not lead to them adopting his mindset. They even gain direct access to his thoughts by hypnotising Mina, and he himself breaches Mina's mind, yet nevertheless she does not replicate his pattern of thought. By understanding the pathology of the vampire, they enclose him within secure boundaries, categorising and limiting his capabilities and paving the way to eventual victory. Furthermore, Renfield does eventually reveal the information they seek by explaining his history with Dracula and the source of his mental disturbance, yet this ascribing of meaning to pathology has no ill effect on the examiners.

Such understanding does not therefore, as Brewster claims, threaten reason but it does threaten the sanctity of the private self, making hidden thoughts public through non-consensual violation of the mind. In Renfield, this is achieved by drilling into the skull; in Dracula, it is by turning his original mesmeric violation of Mina against him. The invasive nature of mesmerism is reinforced when compared with writing and reading, which provide a consensual and controllable method of expressing a private self. Writing, like mesmerism, fragments the self but does so by creating a snapshot of the self at one point in time - this crystallised self exists outside the mind of the writer, safely constrained within text and therefore unable to pose a threat to psychic unity in the same way as Paul Lessingham's traumatised private self or Renfield's madness. Both Jonathan Harker and Marjorie Lessingham use writing to contain and communicate horrifying experiences which they cannot otherwise express or tolerate, and though they allow the reader to 'look through words into [the] soul' (*Dracula* p.207), the writer is still able to control exactly what is seen. Writing functions as an antidote to the invasiveness and psychic schism of mesmerism: whereas these techniques obliterate the distinction between individuals (as in the Beetle's hijacking of Holt,

¹⁰ Scott Brewster, "Seeing Things: Gothic and the Madness of Interpretation" in *A Companion to the Gothic*. Punter, David (Ed). Blackwell Publishing, 2001. Blackwell Reference Online. [accessed 23 May 2009] http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9780631206200_chunk_g978063120620024

or *Dracula* speaking through Mina) reading allows one person to access another's private self while remaining safely separate from them, reasserting the categoric distinctions upon which scientific knowledge and social functioning depend.

The defiance of such static delineations forms the basis of mesmerism's threat within the two texts. It introduces ambiguity into previously solid distinctions: the private and the public, science and magic, the self and the other, human and animal. While *Dracula* shows science – including hypnosis – as eventually restoring those distinctions and therefore normality, the science of the *The Beetle* fails to reinstate the status quo, leaving both the human and non-human characters uncertain of their own identities and futures.

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