THE EQUIVOCAL EROTICS OF MESMERISM IN ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE'S *THE PARASITE*

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Arthur Conan Doyle's 1894 novella *The Parasite* is a first person narrative of an initially scientific investigation into the phenomenon of mesmerism which quickly becomes problematically personal and distressingly intimate, and ultimately threatens to destroy the once keen researcher, Professor Austin Gilroy's career, hopes and life. As a variation on the motif of the double, the tale has obvious affinities with such texts as *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, presenting the process by which a somewhat hapless and increasingly powerless and frustrated protagonist becomes implicated in acts undertaken by an Other who is identified with himself. The final section of the tale in particular, akin to Stevenson's in its presentation of split agency, registers the mental deterioration and public humiliations of the formerly materialist professor of physiology, who discovers that he has committed absurd, outrageous, and finally criminal acts during periods of suspended consciousness. In *The Parasite*, though, the criminal agent is indisputably physically the protagonist himself, not a grotesque and aberrant by-product of his psyche or a literally demonic simulacrum. The trope of possession complicates that of the double, for Gilroy is spitefully dispossessed of his volition or agency, and with increasing frequency his awareness as well, by the female mesmeric operator Miss Penclosa[1] who revenges herself for Gilroy's rejection of her love. In the initial phase of her vindictive attempt to break his spirit, by means of her long-range telepathic powers, she derisively interpolates into his lectures nonsense, fallacies, even jokes, toasts and personal abuse of students, making him the laughing stock of the university and costing him his chair. Unsatisfied with merely publicly demeaning him and eroding his self-assurance, judging that "another turn of the screw" (72) is called for, Miss Penclosa employs Gilroy in a criminal, then a violent act, making him a public menace. Gilroy becomes a puppet, worked like a mechanism, his body and voice at the disposal or whim of the mastering female spirit that displaces his own.

In his dissociation, Gilroy recalls Jekyll, but, by the final section of the story, his disavowal of any personal responsibility for, or intimate connection to, the

[1] While I have relied on the Polygon edition of *The Parasite* in my discussion, I have corrected that edition's spelling of "Penelosa" to conform with the spelling "Penclosa" in the 1895 Harper Brothers edition.

mesmeric automaton's bizarre antisocial conduct and dangerous actions, is firm and unequivocal. In his narration, Gilroy comes to attribute his unaccountable acts to an alien and malign will intermittently controlling his actions and words. This parasite not only works his destruction, consuming his social status, reputation and self-possession, but also sadistically takes pleasure at his expense. However, Gilroy's absolute disavowal is only reached after some reluctant self-scrutiny which threatens to undermine his self-conception. As he is forced to recognise, confront and account for his uncharacteristic behaviour, the narration passes from ambiguity through equivocation to revelatory certainty. The confusion, shame, guilt, self-loathing and desperation that accompany Gilroy's early self-inquisition provide a textual indication, against the conviction of the narration, that his disavowal is not merely self-interested, but necessary to arrest the destabilisation of his identity.

The text presents several crises, turns and transitions in the relations between Professor Gilroy and Miss Penclosa, but the underlying continuities between the apparently different phases of the affair make a symptomatic reading of these shifting dynamics possible. The first half of the story, in which his uncanny predicament as an unwilling and eventually oblivious actor of a new distasteful role emerges ironically out of a scenario of compromised interpersonal relations, is particularly rich in its implications. Through telepathic ventriloquism, Miss Penclosa literally puts words in Gilroy's mouth, making him profess his ardent love for her, making him play a part, in violation of his own professed inclinations, in her own sexual fantasies. Gilroy protests that "the horrible thing was that I felt impelled to say what she expected me to say" (56). Moreover, he is even forced to feel what he doesn't feel, to yearn for a woman he repeatedly describes as repellent. Gilroy vehemently disavows the alien desire which is articulated in and through him. Decentred by the words, impulses and actions assigned to him by the domineering Penclosa, Gilroy experiences desire as a parasitic invasion of his psyche and usurpation of his volition.

However, although Gilroy's culpability in initiating the supposedly one-sided affair is screened by the protagonist-narrator's ostensible concern (the pursuit of scientific knowledge), the first half of the story suggestively establishes the intersubjective and dialogical dimension of desire. Gilroy's desperate struggle to extricate himself from the amorous toils of a preternaturally domineering and self-deluding lover constitutes the main drama of the text, but it never fully effaces his retrospectively incidental yet nonetheless telling involvement in establishing an initial circuit of desire. The dilemma of agency initiated by Gilroy's compelled misconduct and his states of dissociation manifest (with a slight shift of focus) what Jacques Lacan characterises as "the self's radical eccentricity with respect to itself" (*Écrits* 162), a psychoanalytic insight even more provocatively condensed in his neologism "extimacy," which denominates "the intimate exteriority" (*Seminar of*

Jacques Lacan 139) of the human subject.[2] Jacques-Alain Miller, in his essay, "Extimité," elaborates, "Extimacy is not the contrary of intimacy. Extimacy says that the intimate is Other – like a foreign body, a parasite" (76).[3]

Doyle's *Parasite* mandates a first, literal reading, conforming to the narrator's resolution of the mystery of his anomalous experience (he is no more than the unfortunate victim of mind-control), but the text also provides the basis for a reading running counter to the narrator's retrospective assurance, taking telepathic possession as a figuration of this invasive otherness in the innermost recesses of the subject. In this "counterfactual" reading which perversely adopts a perspective at odds with Gilroy's own, the professor's rejection and disavowal of the disquieting, unaccountable thoughts, feelings and actions that attend on the continuing involvement of Miss Penclosa in his life function as a desperately self-serving literalisation of "extimacy."

This essay will first provide a characterisation of mesmerism and an account of the more scandalous "abuses" that its practitioners were accused of throughout its history. It will then briefly consider some of the relations and points of contrast between *The Parasite* and Doyle's earlier mesmeric tale, "John Barrington Cowles," before moving on to a more detailed reading of the erotic subtext of *The Parasite* itself, informed by the conceptual trope of "the intimate exteriority" and more broadly by Lacanian ideas of desire and ego identity.

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The complex history of mesmerism, and its later more respectable manifestation as hypnotism, is presented at length in the scholarly work of Alan Gauld, Derek Forrest, Adam Crabtree, Alison Winter and others, and cannot be compassed in a short treatment. However, a few remarks on some of the permutations in the theory and practice of mesmerism may be useful for what follows. In his materialist theory, conjoining physiology and physics, the discoverer of "animal magnetism," Franz

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[2] In *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Dylan Evans elaborates that "'extimacy' [. . .] neatly expresses the way in which psychoanalysis problematises the opposition between inside and outside, between container and contained. For example, the real is just as much inside as outside, and the unconscious is not a purely interior psychic system but an intersubjective structure ("the unconscious is outside"). Again, the Other is "something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me" (58-59).

[3] Anne Cranny-Francis examines some aspects of the role of sexual desire in the novella in her essay, "Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Parasite*: The Case of the Anguished Author," but from within a Freudian framework. She concludes, for instance, that "Gilroy's hatred of Miss Penelosa, of his own sexual desire, is a function of the sexual repression endemic to his society" (102). A Lacanian conceptual idiom and orientation, however, seems better suited for an analysis of the situational and verbal inversions, or the polysemy, of Doyle's text. Moreover, Lacan's emphasis on the intersubjective nature of desire can more usefully engage the phenomenon of "influence" than can a Freudian approach relying on the notions of id and instinct.

Mesmer (1734-1815), asserted that all physical bodies exercise an influence over others through a mediating superfine, unseen and unmeasurable fluid pervading all things. Disease occurs when the flow of the magnetic fluid is arrested, obstructed or impeded. Mesmer's panacea, then, aimed at restoring the proper circulation of magnetic force or fluid through the human body. In practice, the physician-operator, sitting opposite and physically touching the patient, would direct the mesmeric fluid into the affected parts of his or her body through magnetic "passes," rapid, sweeping movements of the hands. If the treatment was successful, the patient would suffer a disruptive "crisis," often in the form of a convulsive seizure, indicating that the magnetic fluid had broken through the obstruction in question. The Royal Commission established to investigate Mesmer's controversial claims, headed by Benjamin Franklin, experimentally disproved the existence of a magnetic fluid at work in the healer's miraculous cures, and concluded that the sufficient causal factors in mesmerism were "touching, imagination, and imitation" (Crabtree 92).

It was, however, one of Mesmer's disciples, the Marquis de Puységur (1751-1825) who first identified many of the more fascinating features of mesmerism. Puységur, who objected to Mesmer's therapeutic insistence on the role of the "crisis," finding it unnecessary and humiliating for patients, stressed instead the importance of the trance, "sleep-waking" state or "magnetic somnambulism" induced in mesmerism. While the subject was in this state, a "rapport" existed between magnetiser and magnetised, and Puységur, who continued to credit the existence of a magnetic fluid, came to consider the mesmerist's will as being a determining factor in mesmeric procedures. Moreover, once the rapport had been established, the "operator [could] move the patient's body pretty well as he [could] move his own, simply by willing the result he desire[d] [. . .] and in extreme cases [the somnambulist could] almost become an automaton controlled by the magnetizer" (Gauld 47). Through his work with the peasant Victor Race, the Marquis also discovered that the personality of the subject was altered in the somnambulistic state and that the individual restored to his or her normal consciousness would not remember events which occurred in the trance state. More startling yet was Puységur's discovery that somnambulists could possess paranormal abilities (telepathic powers of communication, clairvoyance and even prevision) while in the trance state.

In his *Neurypnology* (1843), Thomas Braid, discounting two of the foundations of mesmerism as it was disseminated in Britain at mid-century, the physical force of the magnetic fluid and the decisive role of the operator's will, coined the term "neurohypnotism" for his demystified version of the phenomenon. In Braid's research, "[T]he physical and psychological condition of the subject was considered paramount, no importance being attributed to the will-power or behaviour of the operator" (Forrest 195). He characterises "'nervous sleep'" as "'a peculiar condition of the nervous system induced by a fixed and abstracted attention

of the mental and visual eye, on one object, not of an exciting nature'" (qtd in Forrest 196).

Taken at face value, *The Parasite* is clearly a parabolic, cautionary investigation of the ethics of mesmerism, demonstrating through exaggeration the potential for abuse in the mesmerist's hold and influence over his or her entranced and suggestible subject. One recurrent and broad apprehension generated by the practice of mesmerism after its sensational rise in the Paris of the late 1770s, and again after its popularised dissemination in Britain in the late 1830s and the 1840s, and of hypnotism after its re-designation by James Braid in 1843, centred on the possible suspension of ethical judgement in states of magnetic sleep. Could a mesmerist override not only the subject's volition but his or her own moral code as well? Could individual conscience be placed in abeyance, moral and social restraints circumvented and the somnambulist compelled to commit acts morally abhorrent to the conscious person by an unscrupulous mesmerist? Defenders of mesmerism often insisted that the moral sense, if anything, was accentuated in mesmeric sleep or trance. However, the potential for misuse of mesmerism or hypnotism for the purposes of crime became particularly topical at the end of the century, and *The Parasite*, published in 1895, capitalises on this interest. Alan Gauld observes:

> In the second half of the 1880s, and for much of the 1890s, no aspect of hypnotism attracted greater interest, popular, medical, scientific and literary, than that of its possible adaptation to criminal ends. The possibility that animal magnetism might be misused for criminal purposes had now and again been mooted by its enemies since the time of Bailly's secret report [on the moral implications and effects of mesmerism, written for the king of France], or even earlier, but with little support in the way of proven cases. (494)

This narrative intersection of villainy and criminality with mesmerism becomes a common motif in much *fin de siècle* popular fiction (Guy Boothby's *A Bid for Fortune: Dr. Nikola's Vendetta* [1895], Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* [1897] and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* [1897]), not to mention early twentieth-century mass culture (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [1919], *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* [1923]), and Doyle explores its possibilities in both *The Parasite* and his earlier short story about a female mesmerist, "John Barrington Cowles" (1884).

Another and more persistent concern about the ethical pitfalls of mesmerism, which figures in most studies of the history of animal magnetism and hypnotism, was the agency's disconcerting likeness to certain aspects of human sexuality and its perilous contiguity or connection with the intimate passions and the erotic dimensions of dyadic interpersonal relations. From the beginning, mesmerism's critics had significant misgivings about the sexual qualities and implications of

mesmeric experience, particularly for young and essentially healthy women, evident to impartial observers of the indecorous spectacle of cure by animal magnetism. In the secret report of the French Royal commission (written 1784, published 1800), Jean Sylvain Bailly cautions: "The magnetic treatment cannot but be dangerous for morals" (qtd in Crabtree 93). The sceptical Bailly can recognise unacknowledged sexual stimulation in the induction techniques of close physical contact ("the knees of the woman gripped between his own and all the parts below . . . therefore in contact") and physical stroking "of some of the most sensitive parts of the body" (qtd in Crabtree 92-93). This leads to an interpretation of the mesmeric "crisis" – the patient's convulsive seizure supposed to be the index of the channelled magnetic fluid's force and curative effect – quite at odds with Mesmer's own. With restricted reference to the female patient, Bailly writes: "When this kind of crisis is coming, the face reddens and the eyes become ardent – that is a sign from nature that desire is present. [. . .] Then convulsions occur [. . .] With lively and sensitive women, a convulsion often occurs as the final degree and the termination of the sweetest emotions" (qtd in Crabtree 93). This arousal of "agreeable, sweet emotions that are missed afterwards and are sought to have again [is] [. . .] reprehensible morally" and these professionally and often publicly provoked climaxes, he warns, are "all the more dangerous since they can easily create a sweet habit" (qtd in Crabtree 93).

As a suspicious outsider, Bailly can discern the sexual kernel in many instances of mesmerism, but for the magnetising physicians and their clients, conviction and theory mystify the true nature of the inappropriate titillation of the female patient and veil the apparent quality of her subsequent cascade of sensations. Both practitioner and patient, deluded in general about the mechanism of the treatment, seem oblivious to the indecorum, indecency and morally pernicious, addictive effects of the procedure and phenomenon. Eventually however, more serious alarms were sounded over the opportunities for sexual exploitation afforded by the mesmeric transaction. Might certain mesmerists, alerted to the affective bond established over a series of sessions, be tempted to capitalise on the inherent erotics of mesmeric dependency? This was the upshot of the anonymous *The Confessions of a Magnetiser, Being an Exposé of Animal Magnetism* published in 1845. The author, professing to speak from experience, outlines the problem from the point of view of the mesmerist, appealing to the reader's sensibilities and imagination in a novelistic evocation of a representative scene:

> Reader, let me tell you that to be placed opposite a young and lovely female, who has subjected herself to the process for the purpose of effecting a cure of some nervous affection or otherwise, [. . .] is [. . .] entrancing. You [. . .] look intently upon the pupils of her eyes, which as the power becomes more and more visible in her person, evince the tenderest regard, until they close in dreamy and as it were spiritual affection. – Then is her mind all your own,

> and she will evince the most tender solicitude and care for your good [. . .]. [S]omnambulists will stop at no point beyond which they may afford you pleasure should you indicate it by thought or word. (9-10)

Although the author has never taken advantage of the affective intensity and accentuated dependency characteristic of magnetic rapport for purposes of sexual gratification, he knows one who has. Alluding to a mesmerist "in this city [who] [. . .] exert[s] his power in the art mainly for vile and sensual purposes" (qtd in Crabtree 100), he is perfunctorily dutiful but reticent, leaving the details of his former colleague's shocking behaviour to the reader's imagination:

> I cannot refrain from warning young females and even married ladies not to trust themselves alone with practitioners who arc comparative strangers to them, for did I feel at liberty to reveal some startling facts with which I am conversant, the community would be thoroughly awakened to the danger of permitting publicly the exercise and employment of this agency. (qtd in Crabtree 100)

Many defenders of mesmerism inoculated the practice against these kinds of sensationalist aspersions by stressing the rectitude of not only the exemplary, but the typical, mesmerist. Adam Crabtree remarks, "As the practice of animal magnetism became more standardized and manuals of practice began to appear, mesmerisers made frequent mention of the sexual dangers and the precautions that should be taken when a male magnetizer treated a female patient" (100). The practice of mesmerism nevertheless was dogged in the nineteenth century by innuendoes of sexual indelicacy, and as animal magnetism faded from respectable discourse and then hypnotism itself waned in scientific importance, the features of hypnotism – the mastery of one will over another, the trance state and alternative consciousness of the somnambulist, the power of suggestion, and the theatrical compliance of the hypnotized person – became at times bound up in the sub-literary imagination with prurient fantasies. The anonymous pornographic novel *The Power of Mesmerism* (1891), for instance, flimsily deploys mesmerism in the service of a farrago of ludicrously incestuous couplings. By the end of the century, the calumny of the mesmerically-enabled sexual opportunist had evolved into the spectre of the preternaturally equipped sexual predator. It is this wild prospect, subject both of fantasy and anxiety, that Doyle's two mesmeric fictions imagine – with, however, a telling gender reversal: it is a woman who reputedly seizes hold of the mind and body of a man for her own narcissistic and sexual satisfaction.

Interestingly, this sexual stigmatisation also appears in the pronouncements of sceptics of mesmerism, who impugned not just the motives of the supposed

charlatans but their subjects as well. Whereas the audiences for public displays of mesmeric wonders were to be faulted for their credulity and condemned for their voyeurism, mesmeric subjects fell into two categories: outright frauds, cunning tricksters with a theatrical bent, and vain, weak-minded attention-seekers, in whom the capacity for self-deception was matched by a yearning for self-importance and a shameless tendency towards exhibitionism. In the vituperative editorial coda to an article entitled "What is Mesmerism?" in *Blackwood's* (July 1851), the characters of actual or would-be mesmeric subjects are savaged. "[M]agnetic phenomena and the mesmeric prostration" are "[r]eal to a certain extent," but are manifested only in the "inferior type" with its "occult tendency to self-abandonment," since the "mesmeric degradation" entails a loss of "every endowment which makes man *human*" (84). Essentially, somnambulism is an accentuation of an all too common folly and capacity for self-delusion: "The true explanation of mesmerism is to be found [. . .] in the weakness or infatuation of human nature itself. [. . .] [A]ll that silliness, whether of body or mind, at any time wants is *to get its cue*" (84). Those who demonstrate the efficacy of mesmeric agency do so because they are predisposed to: "They resign themselves passively, mind and body, into the hands of the manipulator; and by his passes and grimaces, they are cowed pleasureably, bullied delightfully, into *so much* of the condition which their inclinations are bent upon attaining" (85). Mesmerism in this account seems at most a dis-inhibitor, little more than a convenient pretext for the indulgence of discreditable impulses. However, the editor anticipates that these unseemly charades will be eradicated once the participants are universally treated with the derision they so richly deserve.

This mustering of social scorn in the polemics against popularising campaigners for mesmerism arguably could only take place in the wake of the prior professional dismissal on the part of the medical establishment of the therapeutic claims made for mesmerism by its principal advocate and champion, John Elliotson, in 1837-1838. The sceptical and ultimately hostile work of Thomas Wakley, editor of the *Lancet*, was instrumental in this disciplinary repudiation.[4] In time, Wakley

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[4] The central story of Elliotson's crusade to win acceptance for mesmerism and the professional ostracism he suffered as a result is detailed and interpreted in Chapters Three and Four of Alison Winter's seminal cultural history, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*. To briefly summarize, in his investigation into the curative powers of mesmerism, Elliotson came to rely on the marvellous abilities of one of his patients, Elizabeth O'Key, who, in the mesmerised state, possessed an "altered persona" (69). Her audiences were "divided as to whether she was a physiological effect, a supernatural phenomenon, or a fraud," and she was variously cast in responses to her performances "as a stereotypical prophetess, seductress, or actress" (93). The sceptical Wakley undertook, with Elliotson's participation, to test mesmeric phenomena at his own home, and "staged a spectacular discreditation" (96), which, as Winter argues, was designed to expose the credulous Elliotson as the dupe of a canny amateur actress simulating effects. Blinded by his will to believe in the physical reality of animal magnetism, Elliotson refused to credit the evidence mounted against the unreliable causal agency of mesmerism. Winter concludes that the protracted O'Key affair became an exemplary "tale of many seductions. Mesmerism became, not a science of human interaction, but a

reverted to the sexual libel against mesmerism, raising the rhetorical and social stakes of his contention against the medical heterodoxy. Alison Winter notes Wakley's charge that "Mesmerists' 'passes' were really pleasures, '*indecent assaults*' on the body that were allowed because neither party acknowledged the erotic purpose" (101).[5]

What happens in mesmeric seduction is neither supernatural nor preternatural; it is all too human, the result of the complementary weakness and the perfidy of those involved. For Wakley and for others, mesmerism in private is little more than a convenient excuse for immorality, a placebo dis-inhibitor pandering not just to the ordinarily suppressed exhibitionism of the subject but her or his libidinous inclinations as well. Moreover, if "the magnetic sensibility [. . .] invariably betokens a *physique* and a *morale* greatly below the average" (*Blackwood's*, July 1851: 85), then the readiness to succumb to the mock-agency of mesmerism and to comply with the commands of the operator may very well indicate a pre-existing tendency towards concupiscence. In his 1847 Harveian Oration delivered before the Royal College of Physicians one year after Elliotson's own, Dr. Francis Hawkins insinuates as much: "Among quacks, the imposters, called mesmerists, are in my opinion the especial favourites of those, both male and female, in whom the sexual passions burn strongly, either in secret or notoriously. Decency forbids me to be more explicit" (qtd in Forrest 302).

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What needs to be stressed for the purposes of a reading of *The Parasite* is that two contrary readings of the conjunction of sexuality with mesmerism were available by the late nineteenth century. On the one hand, as a sham sustained through shared delusion, mesmerism facilitated self-deception and could act as a corrupting cover for initially misrecognised and seemingly sublimated desires and experiences. On the other hand, mesmerism, whether considered an effect of subtle physical phenomena or of a powerful will, could be approached in fantasy and in fiction as an irresistible force which, when unconscionably harnessed to the vicious propensities of a villain, would enable the perpetrator to commandeer another's mind and body and press the other, voided of volition, into psycho-sexual subjugation.

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practice whose fundamental effect was to make people deceive each other and themselves, lose control of their bodies and minds, and become the means of each others' ruin" (100).

[5] Winter recounts, "In late 1838 Wakley relayed to English readers an alarming report that was going the rounds of the French press. A mesmerist had placed the young daughter of a wealthy French banker in a 'profound sleep,' whereupon 'the quack stole her honour.' Wakley did not believe that the young woman in question really had been placed in an altered state of mind. [. . .] [Mesmerism was dangerous instead because it] gave 'young and sanguine girls' the most dangerous of temptations, especially those 'nervous and impressionable females' who were said to succumb to the (pretended) power of the mesmerist, but in reality, to use the contemporary parlance for seduction, to place themselves in the (real) 'power' of an unscrupulous lover" (101).

The tentative indeterminacy that makes *The Parasite* so interesting draws on these stark alternatives, although the text pushes beyond the two frameworks in a pre-psychoanalytical adumbration of the agency of the unconscious. Tzvetan Todorov has taught us to recognize a particularly constituted oscillation between two irreconcilable explanatory modes as the hallmark of what he calls the fantastic genre. For Todorov, the fantastic

> lasts only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to reader and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from "reality" as it exists in the common opinion. At the story's end, the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic [into the uncanny or the marvellous]. (41)

In *The Parasite*, the crux of the fantastic is just as ethical as it is epistemological. In fact, if the fantastic is to be located at the crossroads of the possible and impossible, the known universe of fixed and ascertainable laws and the order of occult occurrences, Doyle's story may not, strictly speaking, fit the paradigm. The phenomenon of hypnotism as re-conceived by James Braid, distinct from the mummeries and outlandish claims associated with mesmerism, and segregated from the mystifying rationales and objectives of spiritualism, was not in itself necessarily oriented beyond reality or outside the scope of science. As a precursor of psychoanalysis, hypnotism's "undiscovered country" was the hidden inner world of the psyche and the subtle dynamics of personal interaction.

Doyle provides a variation on the equivocal scenario of mesmeric seduction in both *The Parasite* and its precursor, "John Barrington Cowles" by reversing the typical genders of mesmerist and subject.[6] If the domination of the stronger will of the mesmerist over the sensitive, receptive and pliable subject replicated and re-inscribed the conventional power relations of men and women, this innovation has broader significance. What gives the two stories about controlling and punishing women with threatening, superhuman wills their currency is their relation to the appearance of the "New Woman" at the end of the nineteenth century. The figure of the independent woman pursuing a career and articulating an identity outside of the family, even expressing, and acting on, irregular desires of her own, was caricatured

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[6] Roger Luckhurst makes this point in his short sketch of Doyle's two mesmeric fictions: "A female mesmerist inverts societal norms of weaker feminine will-power, norms reflected by mesmeric theory. From the first accounts of Mesmer's treatments the anxiety was the risk to women from male charlatans" (206). Percy Bysshe Shelley had earlier reversed the gender polarity of mesmerist and subject in his 1822 poem "The Magnetic Lady to her Patient" (*Poetical Works* 667), but for quite different purposes.

in polemics and displaced and demonised in fantastic literature. Glennis Byron comments:

> The breakdown of traditional gender roles, the confusion of the masculine and the feminine, was seen as a significant indication of cultural decay and corruption, an attack on the stability of the family structure. The conventional opposition of good woman / evil woman is frequently produced by 1890s Gothic, suggesting an attempt to stabilise the notion of proper femininity by identifying the sexually aggressive female who usurps male strength as something alien and monstrous. (133)

This gender confusion is particularly prominent in "John Barrington Cowles" where the titular character's enigmatic love interest, Kate Northcott, is characterised by an "extraordinary mixture of masculine decision and womanly tenderness about her, with the consciousness of something all her own in the background" (Doyle 1884, 132). This ambiguity, intensified by the anxiety generated by her decidedly sadistic bent, is ultimately concentrated and raised to a higher power in the horrific revelation she makes to her fiancé before their marriage. Miss Northcott's "baleful secret [. . .] which must be known before her marriage [provides] [. . .] some reason which forbade her to marry [. . .] [or] forbade others to marry her" (141). Put through the "terrible ordeal" of learning the true nature of her character and her desires, Cowles is "thoroughly unnerved," and announces that the engagement is off for a reason which is "too dreadful-too horrible-unutterably awful and incredible" (142). The text intimates, through the ravings of both Cowles and an earlier victim, that Miss Northcott is actually an unimaginable composite of horrific supernatural beings and unnatural impulses, a fiend, ghoul, vampire and werewolf all at once, who seems to require her lovers to participate in her acts of "cruelty and crime," including perhaps infanticide and cannibalism (142-43).

In both of Doyle's stories mesmerism is associated with a female sexuality inimical to male dignity, autonomy and sanity, although in the cruder and more conventionally Gothic "John Barrington Cowles," with its hodge-podge of supernatural horrors, mesmerism is peripheral and supplementary. The text hints that the fascinating Miss Northcott's hold over her lovers is in part bound up with her mesmeric powers which are established in a triumphant contest of wills with a professional stage mesmerist. The narrator, however, revealingly pays a fair bit of attention to her gaze throughout the tale, and her ex-lovers, in their decline, seem haunted by what has become a persecuting and demoralising gaze. Her disembodied gaze drains a previous fiancé, one Archibald Reeves, in a notably gendered and

sexualised vampirism.[7] Reeves confides to the narrator that her apparition sits at the foot of his bed, "her great eyes watching and watching hour after hour," and complains, "I tell you it saps all the strength and manhood out of me" (126). The sensitive and impressionable Cowles, unwillingly the selected test subject of the performing mesmerist Dr. Messinger, later reports his "strange feeling" while struggling against the projected, powerful will of the hypnotist in phrasing that echoes Reeves's experience. "All the strength seemed to have gone out of me" (138), he says.

Nevertheless, by comparison with *The Parasite*, the role of mesmerism in "John Barrington Cowles" is noticeably underdeveloped.[8] It is merely one element among many in the depiction of the composite *femme fatale*, and its role in the sequence of events often needs to be inferentially pieced together. The hermeneutic transference between sexual passion and mesmeric experience, however, is central to *The Parasite*. If "John Barrington Cowles" evokes, in passing, the succubus among its other nightmare figures, this archetypal female demon, disguising herself in the sexual transports of the erotic dream to prey upon the vital energies of the morally vulnerable male, informs the whole of the contentious erotic scenario of *The Parasite*.

One last set of contrasts between the stories provides orientation for the explication that follows. In *The Parasite* Miss Penclosa has none of the arresting beauty and impressive presence of Miss Northcott in the earlier work. She is neither desired nor desirable. So, while mesmeric power is merely one of several of Miss Northcott's attributes, Miss Penclosa uses mesmerism to compensate for, and overcome, her physical disability and other disadvantages in affairs of the heart. She substitutes mesmeric agency for the erotic appeal and sexual power she lacks, or, to approach this questionable substitution as a textual anamorphosis, her discredited mesmeric command over the powerless male *is* her erotic power. Finally, whereas Miss Northcott's monstrous nature and terrible desires are revealed too late to her prospective husbands, repulsing and deranging them, Miss Penclosa's desires are quite prosaic, even largely conventional in nature. What makes her desires sinister is that they are imposed on another, or rather they invade and take hold of another.

[7] Karl Beckson observes, "In the late nineteenth century, female aggressiveness, often associated with unrestrained sexuality, manifested itself in the anxiety-provoking image of the femme fatale and the female vampire in the imagination of men, unconsciously yearning, perhaps, for encounters with such alluring evil" (151).

[8] In his remarks on "John Barrington Cowles," Luckhurst asserts, "Kate's sexuality is hinted at confusedly by 'wehr-wolves' and dark transformations, but her 'unutterably awful' secret marks a textual blank that typifies representations of female sexuality at the fin de siècle. Female desire is figurable through a mesmeric will that renders men subordinate"; he adds that "Doyle returns to the same plot" (206) in *The Parasite* (this time punishing the mesmerist-woman, rather than the subject-male). As I have suggested, however, Kate's mesmeric will-power ultimately seems secondary or supplementary to the overdetermined enigma of her particular, dreadful desires. In *The Parasite*, desire *per se* is more explicitly at play in the initially consensual course of mesmerism.

Yet, initially what seems incredible is that she has desires at all and what is inexcusable is that she makes these desires known, felt, operative. In *The Parasite* it is desire itself, the desire of the Other which implicates the subject, that is unthinkable.

* * *

The plot of *The Parasite* unfolds in five movements which are punctuated by a discovery, demonstration, disclosure or confrontation. In the opening pages Austin Gilroy characterises himself as a scientist and materialist with a strong dislike of vagueness and an anxious insistence on exactitude. This ego image is immediately undercut, for he acknowledges that he is in reality "a highly psychic man" (42), and once "was a nervous, sensitive boy, a dreamer, a somnambulist, full of impressions and intuitions" (42), but this more fundamental character is held in check. The novella opens, in fact, with an act of restraint. Gilroy's response in his laboratory to spring, to "the work of reproduction going forward" (41) in nature, is lively and physical. Feeling "the ferment in [his] blood" as the sunlight pours through his window, he confesses that he "could dance about in [it] like a gnat." He doesn't because as "a man of four-and-thirty he must try and act the part [of a professor of physiology] consistently." From the very opening of the story, then, desire or more broadly the inclination to act, is linked to impropriety and is suppressed in the interests of maintaining a consistent social persona.

The entire text takes the form of a series of entries in Gilroy's diary, and this private writing explicitly functions to clarify, define and fix identity as well as experience. Gilroy reflects, "Once a day at least I endeavour to define my own mental position. It is a useful piece of self-analysis, and has, I fancy, a steadying effect upon the character. Frankly, I must confess that my own needs what stiffening I can give it" (43). In this fateful entry marked "10:50 p.m." Gilroy reports that what he has witnessed at his colleague Professor Wilson's house has "set [his] nerves thrilling" so that he is "all unstrung." This presumably uncharacteristic excitement is the effect of a convincing demonstration of mesmeric sleep with Gilroy's fiancée Agatha as the test subject. The sceptical professor, who formerly presumed all mesmerists to be tricksters and charlatans, has witnessed the "strange eclipse" (46) of his beloved's soul under the influence of the West Indian mesmerist Miss Penclosa.

His complete conversion to the cause of psychic research, however, occurs the next morning. Provoked by his dogmatic incredulity about the reality of her powers, Miss Penclosa has engineered a conclusive and memorable demonstration of the power of suggestion. At half past nine in the morning, Agatha, acting on instructions given her the night before, breaks off her engagement to a stunned Gilroy in a manner which is "cold," "strangely formal and hard" (48). A note given to the professor the night before and opened as instructed at 10.00 a.m. confirms that the mesmerist has compelled Agatha to act in this otherwise unaccountable fashion.

Gilroy is "too relieved to be angry" (49), and chooses to overlook the personal nature of the demonstration. Moreover, he seems blind to its taunting, even sadistic overtones, and to its possible intimation of Miss Penclosa's jealousy and desire. He himself is implicated in the stunt, for she has responded to his demands for proof. In her somewhat apologetic, though wry, letter, she justifies her expedient by complaining, "Science is so exacting that it is difficult to give a satisfying test" (48). Gilroy's recapitulation of this indicates that his desire is at play in what has occurred and what has passed between them. He allows, "It may have been, as she said, a little difficult to devise a test which would satisfy me" (49) – "me," not science. But refusing to attend to the message she has sent him, Gilroy is unable to appreciate fully the manner in which her desire dialectically answers his. Revealingly, however, the prospective husband decides to keep the stunt, in which his betrothed is dramatically discounted and instrumentally deployed, from Agatha, giving to the episode a savour of infidelity.

In the second section of the story Gilroy is something of a changed man, having undergone a revolution in his conception of the relation of spirit to body. So profoundly have his former beliefs been shaken that his identity seems altered as well. He asks in ironic self-deprecation, "Is this Austin Gilroy?" (52). In this section, Gilroy overcomes Miss Penclosa's initial reluctance to submit her abilities to scientific scrutiny and evaluation, and together they pursue a daily regimen of mesmeric experiments. The professor clings to the notion that he is unimpeachably professional, a conscientious scientist setting up the conditions of his experiments and posing the problems to be solved, but he is at the same time the test subject. Gilroy congratulates himself on his versatility as a researcher, and doesn't reflect on the degree to which he is confusing rather than combining roles or functions. He smugly boasts, "To have the power of examining these phenomena from inside – to have an organism which will respond, and, at the same time, a brain which will appreciate and criticize – that is surely a unique advantage" (53). Not only is his objectivity compromised, his impartiality is as well, for Gilroy is more than a willing subject – he is an ardent one. Moreover, while Miss Penclosa has no interest in helping Gilroy find a satisfactory scientific explanation of the power at her command, she is paradoxically the expert on the subject, and Gilroy is also interested in simply seeing and experiencing first hand what the mesmerist can do. Miss Penclosa, then, is a kind of mentor or a guide who initiates Gilroy into the mysteries of what might be called mental or spiritual intercourse. Perhaps predictably Gilroy gets no closer to his goal. He complains, "Results, results, results – and the cause an absolute mystery" (53).

Worse yet, the once scrupulously empirical professor is oblivious to the irreducibly personal nature of the proceedings. He is absolutely astonished, then, when he is finally forced into awareness of his partner's romantic disposition. Gilroy notes, "I must be carefully on my guard. A complication has crept into our experiments which I had not reckoned upon. In my eagerness for scientific facts I

have been foolishly blind to the human relations between Miss Penclosa and myself. I can write here what I would not breathe to a living soul. The unhappy woman appears to have formed an attachment to me" (55-56). But while the first person narrator remains positively obtuse about the intimate and vaguely amorous aspect of their regularly scheduled experiments, the text has nonetheless hinted that this "complication" arises out of a dialectic of desire. Even here, word choice links Gilroy's passionate quest for a scientific breakthrough with his partner's longing for his company; retrospectively reading the signs of her infatuation aright, he recalls among other indices "her eagerness that I should come often," an eagerness which mirrors, though perhaps in an inverted form, his own "eagerness for scientific facts" (56).

This unwelcome discovery introduces the third and most interesting section of the story, a highly indeterminate one, in which agency is put in question. Emerging from mesmeric sleep, in a moment of stupefied self-estrangement, he is aware that he "put out [his] hand, unconsciously, involuntarily, and clasped hers" (56). This unaccountable gesture of courtship and the accompanying sense of compulsion to make some complementary declaration, barely avoided through his flight from the room, precipitate a crisis of subjectivity. In a sheer panic, Gilroy struggles to regain his self-possession and self-control, shifting from a sense of disgust with himself ("What a false wretch I should have been! How I should have loathed myself") to the repugnance he feels towards her ("She is far older than myself, and a cripple. It is monstrous-odious"). This entire section is characterised by his frustrated attempt to repudiate the impulses he is experiencing, for it is impossible for him to deny what he has done and what he is doing. He has to admit that it was "in a moment of reasonless passion [that he] nearly professed love for this woman whom [he] hardly know[s]" (56), and he resorts to idioms of intense sexual attraction when checking himself: "I cannot trust myself with that woman" (58). Repeatedly, though, his self-accusation yields to a self-pitying incomprehension. He expostulates, "What could I have been dreaming of?" and remarks, "What a creature I have been!". In a more anguished moment, he cries, "God help me! What is the matter with me! Am I going mad?" (58). In an attempt to sustain his identity, he struggles to distinguish between his genuine, representative, durable feelings, and the passing and alien feelings that seem to invade him, occluding his better self. His equivocation, then, is kept distinct from ambivalence. He may experience certain feelings, but they neither belong to him nor originate in him; rather, he "suffers" them. The uncharacteristic, unmotivated and abhorrent passion that takes hold of him is to be rejected as parasitical.

So, as decorum is catastrophically rent asunder through the insurgence of desire, the narrator must urgently determine the provenance and the site of desire. He attempts to expunge his guilt by edging towards the redistributed blame in the idea of temptation. If the fantastic, preternatural context is tentatively disregarded, Gilroy's transference of guilt can be recognised as a familiar misogynistic gesture of

inversion and projection. The temptation to act improperly originates in Miss Penclosa. "She rouses something in me – something evil – something I had rather not think of," he complains, "She paralyses my better nature, too, at the moment she stimulates my worse" (57). He insists that "anything is better than facing this monstrous temptation which drags me so low" (58).

In the wake of what seems like his moral collapse, in the face of a disintegrating self, Gilroy successfully quarantines desire. After wrestling with the question of his culpability, he finally alights on the simple, elegant solution to his problem, which is presented as the obvious explanation of his behaviour:

> Did she not tell me [. . .] that when she has acquired power over a subject she can make him do her will? And she has acquired power over me. I am, for the moment, at the beck and call of this creature with the crutch. I must come when she wills it. I must do as she wills. Worst of all, I must feel as she wills. I loathe her and fear her, yet while I am under the spell she can doubtless make me love her. There is some consolation in the thought, then, that these odious impulses for which I have blamed myself do not really come from me at all. They are all transferred from her, little as I could have guessed it at the time. I feel cleaner and lighter for the thought. (59)

With enormous relief and with a feeling of purification, Gilroy emerges from the liminal. Boundaries between self and other become clearer, though significantly redrawn. His brief period of disorientation attested to by equivocation can be retrospectively dismissed as unwarranted, the unfortunate effect of ignorance. Now even the imputation of ambivalence has been countered. In the first flurry of exculpatory inventiveness, he hits on the titular metaphor and readily embraces it. Concentrating his powers of thought and proceeding methodically, he says, "Let me try to reason it out [. . .]. She can project herself into my body and take command of it. She has a parasitic soul – yes, she is a parasite, a monstrous parasite" (59). The dialogic reiteration in the culminating sentence here signals the resolution of a crux, and the orientational metaphor has all the neatness, explanatory power and functional necessity of a delusional axiom.

But though secure in his knowledge of what is happening, Gilroy is anything but secure in practice or in action. The source and nature of the contamination has been identified and categorically isolated, but *The Parasite*'s powers of corruption and psychical decomposition have in no way been curtailed. Clarification is succeeded only by Gilroy's determination to resist Penclosa's powers. Although outmatched, Gilroy prepares himself, taking stock of his faculties and mustering the resources he has: "I must not lose my head. I must pit my intellect against her power. After all, I am no silly puppet to dance at the end of a string. I have energy,

brains, courage. For all her devil's tricks I may beat her yet. May! I must, or what is to become of me?" (59).[9] However, the disputed territory or the prospective battlefield is problematically himself in the broad sense. What becomes distressingly evident to him, in the contest of wills that ensues, is that large portions of what he once would have identified as his self are "up for grabs." When the professor experiences dispossession, the portion of Austin Gilroy that remains both *him* and *his* is very small; his will is nullified and what he holds to as the kernel of his identity is radically diminished. What's more, although Gilroy strives to preserve some ultimate line of demarcation between the "I" at its point of furthest contraction and the "not I" in its greatest expansion, even this is unfixed and insecure. And because the mental parasite works her subversion from deep within Gilroy, intermittently substituting "other" passions, impulses and intentions for those Gilroy would willingly acknowledge as his own, his "real self" is repeatedly displaced, rendered peripheral, contingent, ineffectual, virtually a satellite orbiting "his" life. Gilroy elaborates later, "A peculiar double consciousness possessed me [. . .]. There was the predominant alien will [. . .] and there was the feebler protesting personality, which I recognized as being myself" (64). This impotent, passive, but truer "self" which he *recognises* and with which he equates himself, recalls the Lacanian ego, a compensatory, unified and fixed image of the self that should be. Here Gilroy wistfully suggests that his "real self," his ego, or even his "better self," his ideal-ego, should dominate and define his interiority as well as his external, social life, that it should be the exclusive source of agency, and bemoans the fact that it isn't. This "real self," Gilroy attests, was formerly predominant, its sovereignty unchallenged, and remains so for most of the day, but is frequently, though intermittently, at night supplanted in terrible episodes of psychical occupation and subjection. So Gilroy can continue to protest that these episodes, and all that they represent and effect, can and must be "disassociated from the rest of [his] life" (64).

Gilroy's vehement post-facto protestations notwithstanding, it is possible to see in these episodes in which the real and the best self is thrust aside, decentered by unwelcome feelings, impulses, words, speeches, by seemingly anomalous dictates and directives apparently coming from, and serving the interests of, the Other, the insistence of the unconscious. The disruptions, lapses and errors which befall or beset him, far from being fleeting and evanescent, however, are protracted, and what is, for Gilroy, disconcertingly played out in these periods of dispossession is the determining dynamic of intersubjectivity, in which Gilroy's solipsistically posited

[9] Although superficially the poor professor's resolve to stand up against the mesmerist's subversions of his dignity seem to have nothing in common with the discourse of love, traces of the hyperbolic rhetoric and the textual histrionics of the sonnet tradition can be detected. Compare, for example Gilroy's self-exhortation, "I must not lose my head. [. . .] I have energy, brains, courage. [. . .] I may beat her yet. May! I must, or what is to become of me?" (59) with that of the lover in Sir Philip Sidney's Sonnet XLVII in *Astrophel and Stella* (146).

identity is bypassed or overridden by a discursive network that exceeds it.[10] Gilroy retreats to the protection of the diminished province of authentic self-presence, maintained against the co-presence of the Other. He will not come to occupy the place laid out for him in the dialogic discourse taking place in and through him. He will not assume the status of a subject of desire, for to do so would also make him subject to desire, the desire of the Other. His ego, this reservation of what he allows to be himself, is not only passive, powerless and irrelevant here, but is non-participating, an unwilling and deeply resentful witness to a spectacle of degradation.

The Parasite, unlike say *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, does not readily lend itself to a Freudian interpretation predicated solely on "renunciation of instinct." Admittedly, in the transitional period of his confusion, Gilroy does wonder about a possible instinctual cause of his unaccountable behaviour, employing a geological conception of human nature: "Was it the sudden upcropping of some lower stratum in my nature – a brutal primitive instinct suddenly asserting itself?" (56). This recourse to an atavistic conceit, however, is nothing more than a tentative, even wild, speculation. Particularly interesting in the panic-stricken Gilroy's clutching at explanations is the way in which he moves and hesitates between two very different conceptions of what is happening to him, between the conceptual thrusts of "impulse," with its connotations of springs of action deep within the recesses of human nature, and "influence," with its connotations of external forces and agencies, of intersubjectivity, even of demand, manipulation or coercion.

When Gilroy first discovers himself in an amorous attitude, "involuntarily" reaching out to clasp Miss Penclosa's hand, he employs the language of impulse. The action took place, the baffled and exasperated exemplar of propriety despairs, in "a moment of reasonless passion"; "the impulse was so strong," he laments, "so overmastering was the feeling" (56). But even here the intersubjective dimension inflects the shocking disturbance in Gilroy's personality. There is something familiar, even commonplace in the scenario. Something like an occasion or opportunity for dalliance presents itself. What's more, the woman seems to be encouraging him. Something primitive and base within him springs with "such bestial swiftness to meet it," the inviting moment, the chance for an affair (57). Two

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[10] In an apposite passage, Lacan remarks that a person "may not misrecognize that what he desires presents itself to him as what he does not want – a form assumed by negation in which misrecognition is inserted in a very odd way, the misrecognition, of which he himself is unaware, by which he transfers the permanence of his desire to an ego that is nevertheless obviously intermittent, and, inversely, protects himself from his desire by attributing to it these very intermittences" (*Écrits* 301). Silvia A. Rodriguez glosses this by saying, "The subject perceives his/her desire as that which he/she does not want. In order to defend him-/herself against it, the subject transfers to the ego the permanence of this desire – paradoxically, as it is the ego that is intermittent in its always failing mastery, and not desire" (194).

days later, after some time to reflect and a second moral lapse, he emphasises the contingency of these disgusting impulses – so disconnected from any true sentiment. He observes, "that odious feeling which urges me to throw away my honour, my career – everything" makes absolutely no sense "when I am away from her influence" (57). He is working his way towards a solution that will absolve him, not only of responsibility but also complicity. It is important to note that the "influence" he so deeply resents is not strictly speaking mesmeric at this point, not the power of suggestion, telepathy, or the seizure of mind-control. The "influence" is her presence, her proximity, or worse yet the subtle encouragement she is giving him to behave inappropriately. Gilroy complains, "She rouses something in me – something evil – something I had rather not think of" (57). The source of the contemptible urge is still within him, but only as a potentiality which she activates.

The third section of the narrative shows Gilroy moving from the explanatory notion of impulse to that of influence, and makes quite clear why and how it serves his own interests to do so. As a being subjected to, and suffering from, mind-control rather than instinctual energy or drives, wayward impulses or sudden urges, Gilroy is unequivocally a victim, and his self-lacerations can cease ("these odious impulses for which I blamed myself do not really come from me at all" [59]). But perhaps more importantly, Gilroy is attempting to extricate the two notions of impulse and influence from one another. The labour of extenuation and recuperation in the crucial middle section of the novella enables Gilroy to reach a reductive "either/or" perspective on his entanglement with the female mesmerist: either he is acting on what have to be acknowledged as his own impulses or he is an automaton acting on command. At this conceptual and emotional turning point, Gilroy decides on the latter. The reader, however, need not accept either his conclusion or the establishment of these two alternatives. Gilroy himself no longer has doubts about what is actually happening to him; he is no longer unsure of where he really stands in relation to Miss Penclosa. Nevertheless, the language of the text, the language Gilroy himself employs in his journal, continues to belie this confident discrimination and characterisation.

Once Gilroy supplies the key to these novel experiences, a relatively straightforward interpretation of his ordeal is laid out. The lonely and unattractive Miss Penclosa uses her mesmeric powers to get what she would otherwise never have: a lover. She works the automaton, Gilroy, the mechanism that is his body, to do and say what she would like Gilroy, body and soul, to do and say. In the fourth section of the text, anticipating on the basis of painful experience that he will be irresistibly drawn to the mesmerist's side, Gilroy takes measures to circumvent or block his further degradation. In a tactic reminiscent of Dr. Jekyll's withdrawal "with" the cowering, hunted Hyde into his study, Gilroy locks himself into his room and tosses the key out of the window. The next morning he congratulates himself for having forestalled any compelled egress: "I have done splendidly!" (61). He believes that Miss Penclosa must have in some sense been aware of his trick, since the night

passes without any awareness of her mesmeric influence. This triumph stiffens his resolve and he spends several nights successfully warding off her commands by protectively imprisoning himself. However he is "disturbed to hear" that Miss Penclosa is sick, and hence unable to project her will beyond herself, since this "rather discounts the victory" he has achieved over her (62). Once she has recovered and extends her imperious will over Gilroy, he is no match for her, and his ingenious manoeuver of sliding his key under his door is rendered absurdly ineffectual (64). However, in the eagerness of desire, she has exercised her powers too soon after her convalescence. It is precisely at the nadir of Gilroy's degradation as a "programmed" robotic lover that the mesmerist's hold slips away. Coming to himself, he seizes this first opportunity to tell her what he thinks of her in no uncertain terms: "The thought of you is repulsive" (66). Gilroy makes sure that this brief moment of liberation will make a permanent impression and will have more lasting effects, invalidating any future satisfaction she may derive from his unwilling attentions: "You may put what words you will into my mouth, but you cannot help remembering –" (66). This confrontation signals the end of the fourth section although it is not until two pages later, when, in a frosty interview, Miss Penclosa confirms that Gilroy is "still of the same mind" (68), that the fifth and final section of the narrative commences. Replacing her love with hate, the scorned woman vows to show Gilroy "what can be done with fear" (69). Angrily, she sets out to bring him to his knees and, humbled and contrite, back to her side. But her malevolence carries her beyond this disciplinary intention. She engineers the destruction of both his social self and his private self, his reputation and career, and his self-possession and self-esteem. She makes him an academic buffoon, costing him his chair; she mockingly manipulates him in a break-in at the local branch of the Bank of England; and she vindictively puts him to work in a violent assault on one of his colleagues, Charles Sadler, a man who has withstood her mesmeric advances and who has, in her jaundiced view, set her devoted lover Gilroy against her. In her remote control of the Gilroy mechanism, he, or rather she through him, has become a menace to others. He realises that the mesmeric *rapport* must be broken at all costs. His duty becomes even clearer when he is providentially spared the unbearable horror of disfiguring the face of his fiancée. Coming to himself at half-past three in his beloved Agatha's boudoir with a bottle of sulphuric acid in his hands, he understands Miss Penclosa's horrible purpose, and unhesitatingly commits himself to *The Parasite*'s extermination. When he arrives at Professor Wilson's house, his muscles "quivering with the strength of a frenzied man" (79), he learns that his mesmeric mistress has expired uncannily at three-thirty (80). He can once again be wholly, confidently and harmlessly himself.

The Parasite, then, can be read as a relatively straightforward gothic horror story about possession, albeit a halfway demystified variant of possession. As a direct outcome of Gilroy's discovery that the "odious impulses" have been "transferred" from his dominating mistress (59), the narration cognitively masters

the phenomenon even while the protagonist remains in practice subject to the erotic and, later, violent dictates of his operator. However, an alternative to Gilroy's hermeneutic determination is sustained by the text itself, often at the level of metaphor, idiom and implicit counter-contextualisation. A structurally concentric, rather than retrospective and retroactive interpretation of *The Parasite* would not privilege Gilroy's epiphanic resolution of his dilemma of identity, agency and desire, but rather the central crux itself, and by doing so would hold open the question as to whether the impermanent but recurring affects, thoughts and reckless displays are, in some sense at least, Gilroy's or not.

Gilroy has, to his own satisfaction, differentiated between impulse and influence, the intrinsic and extrinsic, himself and the other in himself which is not himself, and has opted to comprehend his situation as one in which another will is imposed on his own, nullifying his accountability. Nevertheless, ambiguity, hesitation and confusion persist in the section of the story which details his heroic resistance to foreign control, partly as a problem of representation. A brief consideration of one particularly suggestive passage should suffice to demonstrate some of the ways in which the text undercuts and even contradicts Gilroy's self-righteously antagonistic position. The depiction in question, of his utter debasement in abhorrent passion, sets the stage for a kind of sham peripeteia in which the facade of his apparent bliss is broken by his true feelings of fierce disgust.

Dragged from his residence to Miss Penclosa's side by a violent and "overpowering [. . .] force which pounc[es]" like a tiger upon him, Gilroy stresses the profound split in his subjective experience in the shadowy transit to her "little boudoir in which [their] experiments had usually been carried out" (64):

> A peculiar double consciousness possessed me. There was the predominant alien will, which was bent upon drawing me to the side of its owner, and there was the feebler protesting personality, which I recognised as being myself, tugging feebly at the overmastering impulse as a led terrier might at its chain. I can remember recognising these two conflicting forces. (64)

Miss Penclosa is not herself recognisably present in his mind, but he is able to attribute to her agency the irresistible compulsion under which he labours. The alien will is connected as by a chain with its owner; Gilroy directly suffers the chain which is an index of his mistress. The analogy here rather than clarifying the distinction between Other and self clouds it, for presumably the led, albeit recalcitrant "terrier" is just as owned as the chain. More striking yet is the way in which the distinction between the resentful, indignant self, "the feebler protesting personality," the "led terrier," and the imposed will is very quickly undermined in the same paragraph. He remembers that while at her side, acknowledging his professions of his love for her, "she passed her hand over my hair as one caresses a

dog. And it gave me pleasure, the caress. I thrilled under it. [. . .] I rejoiced in my slavery" (65). If the "terrier" is the personality, the ensemble of genuine inclinations and affects, here it revels in physical intimacy with the supposedly despised mesmeric mistress. Metaphoric continuity equates the impotent "real self," "the feebler protesting personality," with the supposedly imposed, supervening false self.[11]

While Gilroy perhaps "doth protest too much" after the fact, there is precious little timely protest here. In what follows he doesn't even attempt to register any dim sense of objection, any dissonant awareness, any censorious and pained presence in his account of his abject humiliation as the "slave" of his West Indian mistress. Particularly noticeable is the frequency with which forms of the first person pronoun appear:

> She smiled at me and pointed to a stool beside her. It was with her left hand that she pointed, and *I*, running eagerly forward, seized it – *I* loathe myself as *I* think of it – and pressed it passionately to my lips. Then, seating *myself* upon the stool, and still retaining her hand, *I* gave her the photograph which *I* had brought with *me*, and talked, and talked, and talked, of *my* love for her, of *my* grief over her illness, of *my* joy at her recovery, of the misery it was to *me* to be absent a single evening from her side [. . .]. Once *I* remember that she passed her hand over *my* hair as one caresses a dog. And it gave *me* pleasure, the caress. *I* thrilled under it. *I* was her slave, body and soul, and for the moment *I* rejoiced in *my* slavery. (my emphasis; 65)

This virtual delirium of "I"s and "my"s may reflect the vulgar intent on the part of the mental operator, who derives immediate gratification from the series of direct, impassioned romantic declarations. But because, like all of Gilroy's utterances when "under the influence," these speeches of romantic fervour are not presented directly, but are summarily categorised, the precise relation of Miss Penclosa's thoughts and her desires to Gilroy's words is unclear.

When the mesmerist loses her mental hold over him shortly after this demeaning display, Gilroy angrily sets the record straight, disavowing any share in the words which have passed his lips while under her spell. Unrestrainedly, he spits

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[11] Later, Miss Penclosa will remind Gilroy of her capacity and willingness to reduce him to the status of a fawning domesticated animal: "you know very well that I could bring you this instant crouching like a spaniel to my feet" (69). This particular image of debasement recalls a passage in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the love-sick Helena emotionally prostrates herself before the disdainful Demetrius: "I am your spaniel; and Demetrius, / The more you beat me, I will fawn on you. / Use me but as your spaniel – spurn me, strike me, / Neglect me, lose me; only give me leave / (Unworthy as I am) to follow you" (II.i.203-7).

out his real feelings towards her, and concludes, "'You may put what words you will into my mouth, but you cannot help remembering –'" (66) only breaking off when she has fainted. In their interview a few days later, he tramples over her insinuations of his bad faith and perjury, dispensing with all personal responsibility for their "affair": "'If ever you heard me speak of love [. . .] you know very well that it was your voice which spoke and not mine'" (69).

Resonating with commonplace idioms, *The Parasite* uncannily literalises or reifies them. This is the case when Gilroy says, "'You may put what words you will into my mouth'" (66). Familiarity with the idiom also allows us to turn the uncanny inside-out, to frame the preternatural and extraordinary with the everyday and ordinary. To "put words into someone else's mouth" does not of course entail mental dictation, but the far more intersubjective gesture of wilful, even perverse, misconstrual. Meanings and intentions are unfairly attributed to another.

In any case, it is clear that the idea of "injected speech" is more conducive to the maintenance of some residual integrity than the seeming alternative the text sets out. By attempting, in the later intervals of reaffirmed self-confidence, to redefine his dispossession as primarily a superimposition of words and deeds, Gilroy is suppressing his past experience and understanding of the internal consistency of those feelings, thoughts and utterances when "under the influence," that is to say, wishing away the internal links of intention and expression.

However, nowhere in Gilroy's hostile account is the "fit" between feelings, words and actions more tight than in this description of his reunion with his exploitative mistress after the period of her illness. Although ironised by the prefatory articulation of self-disgust ("'I loathe myself as I think of it'" [65]), the passage conveys something of the giddy exhilaration of a lover, as the rush of formerly pent-up feelings is released. Gilroy's unwillingness melts away, the "protesting personality" is eclipsed, and whatever it is that remains, whatever is designated by "I," experiences intense enjoyment. This remainder is more than a hovering awareness; it is sensually vitalised, emotionally engaged and intellectually active. His preceding double consciousness extinguished in this interim of passion, he seems more profoundly "one" than ever before – though of course, as we have heard so often, not himself. Internal dissonance and division cease. Even the duality of body and soul seems for the moment transcended: "I was her slave, body and soul." The paragraph closes with Gilroy characterising the self-conscious reflection of the "double" he had become in this terrible or rapturous moment.[12] Although no doubt there is some trace here of retrospective self-condemnation, signalled in part by the stress on the momentary, the evaluation, "for the moment I rejoiced in my

[12] If it is possible to speak about the fully "acquiescent" automaton, the living and enjoying phantasm (or double) of Gilroy as distinct from the real Gilroy, it is important to note that, like Jekyll and Hyde, "they" share consciousness. Memory, however, which contributes to the continuity of personal identity, seems, in this passage and in others, blotted out by the incompatible pressures of the present moment.

slavery," not only affirms the passionate and physical nature of his experience at the level, one might say, of consciousness (which the "two" Gilroys share), but betokens an even higher level of intellectual approval, an enthusiastic commitment to an abject status, to a masochistic economy of pleasure.

Earlier he had come to the understanding that Miss Penclosa is able, with her "parasitic soul," to "project herself into [his] body and take command of it" (59). Although the primary accent here is on will, Miss Penclosa becoming the ghost in Gilroy's machine, he learns the hard way that she can accomplish much more; her soul can in some fashion enter into his very own, infecting and altering its nature. It is important to note that she has the power to displace the soul utterly, to usurp its function and to banish it, as she demonstrates with Agatha. In the parlour room exhibition of mesmeric trance, Gilroy is shocked to see Agatha's "soul [. . .] slipp[ing] beyond [the onlookers'] ken" (46). It suffers a "strange eclipse" (46). He acknowledges, "A second soul had slipped in, as it were, had pushed her own aside" (49). While Agatha remembers nothing of her dream waking activities, Gilroy is painfully aware of his lovemaking. Since Miss Penclosa has the power to "work" Gilroy without his knowledge, as she demonstrates with the attempted burglary, the assault on Sadler, and the aborted attempt to disfigure Agatha, her preservation of his consciousness can be viewed as serving some purpose. If nothing else, this dispensation to the residual consciousness makes the experience of love not simply more realistic, but also more real. Gilroy must "be there" in body and spirit, must know and feel; he is not allowed simply to go through the motions. In an odd sense, then, Miss Penclosa literally acts as "a soul within the soul," to use Shelley's phrase from "Epipsychidion" (455).[13] Much later in the text Gilroy regrets, "'I am no longer master of my own soul'" (69), a phrase which in another context would be recognised immediately as a hyperbole of romantic love (love displaces all other concerns, or, to draw more directly on Renaissance sonnet conventions and behind them the tradition of courtly love, the besotted lover is the devoted servant of his imperious lady). Although Gilroy's remark expresses his sense of defencelessness, being prone to unpredictable losses of control, and although this ostensibly despondent thought arises after Gilroy has been released from his role as lover and begins to have "[v]ague presentiments of coming misfortune" (69), supplementary connotations from the literature of love are unavoidably brought into play.

A reading firmly aligned with Gilroy's perspective and judgement will accept that the story is not about an illicit and perverse love affair or about an ill-considered erotic detour in the otherwise unimpeachable professor's life, but about the dangerous and criminal ends to which mesmerism can be directed, and about the

[13] Reaching further back in the tradition of elevating love, the implicit co-presence of two souls in one body recalls mystical variations on the theme of "Platonic love." For example, see Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* 336. Mesmerism allows Doyle to literalise as well as parody this communion of souls in *The Parasite*, though of course the "spiritual intercourse" there is one-sided and utterly disconnected from any uplifting aspiration to the beautiful and good.

"terrible power" (51) itself which deprives the subject of volition. The text nonetheless is seeded throughout with idioms of courtship, seduction, sexuality and sexual politics,[14] and interspersed throughout the text are episodes, exchanges and utterances which assume a more commonplace, domestic cast if dislodged experimentally from the substructure of the preternatural. These hints coupled with the invalidated perspective of Miss Penclosa on the affair constitute the suppressed alternative-that mesmerism is not just a pretext and an instrument for seduction, but functions at times as a metaphoric transposition of intimacy, seduction and sexuality. Not only are the erotic dimension of the pair's rapport and the encoded sexuality of their mesmeric "dates" dissolved and dispelled with Gilroy's triumphant self-exculpation and indictment of the predatory sexual solipsist, Miss Penclosa, but the disturbing implications of his double consciousness revealed in the semi-somnambulistic state are similarly neutralised by the oddly more reassuring, though still indeterminate phenomena of hypnotic suggestion and telepathy. At its heart, however, *The Parasite* stages a complex *aporia* of agency, identity and desire which, as its own "extimacy," continues to destabilise the narration's hard-won perspective.

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[14] As my reading shows, I clearly concur with Luckhurst's observation in passing that "Once Gilroy submits to her mesmeric experiments, the novella is suffused with the language of sexuality" (207), although I have also delineated the role of desire in initiating the course of experiments in the first place.

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