

THE TWO SVENGALIS: MAKING THE MYTH OF HYPNOSIS

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A reading of Du Maurier's *Trilby* and a viewing of the 1981 film made from it, reveal nine myths concerning hypnosis: that the hypnotist possesses a special power to control others; that the hypnotist has a particular personality; that women are more responsive than men to hypnosis; that hypnosis is closely related to compliance; that hypnosis is sexual in nature; that constant exposure to hypnosis is harmful; that hypnosis permits transcendence of normal voluntary capacity; and that hypnosis terminates with spontaneous amnesia. At the same time, *Trilby* sets limits on a number of these same myths, and anticipates current theoretical accounts of dissociation and subconscious mental processes.

Of all the fictional portrayals of hypnosis, certainly the most influential is George Du Maurier's portrait of Svengali (Figure 1), the Polish-born Austrian-Jewish-demon-Orpheus (the book is incredibly anti-Semitic) who imposes his will on the vulnerable Trilby (Figure 2) and ultimately brings about her degradation and downfall. Svengali is truly a mythical character, a character of the imagination, but one who embodies the beliefs about hypnosis of the culture that made him.

There have actually been at least *seven* Svengalis: the literary character drawn (figuratively and literally) by Du Maurier in *Trilby*, his best-selling

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FIGURE 1 Svengali

novel; the role in the hit play, adapted by Paul Potter and starring Wilton Lackaye; and the villain in no fewer than five films (Maltin, 1984). The first was a silent film shot on location in Paris by Richard Tully and released in 1922. The second was the 1931 classic produced by Tully, directed by Archie Mayo, and starring John Barrymore and Marian Marsh. The third, a follow-up (you cannot have a sequel when both of the characters have died) entitled *The Mad Genius*, had the same stars—Marsh a dancer, Barrymore a deranged promoter, with Boris Karloff in a walk-on role—and was directed by Michael Curtiz. The fourth was a 1955 British version directed by Noel Langley, starring Hildegard Neff as an actress and Donald Wolfitt as her teacher. And the fifth was a 1983 television production starring Jodie Foster as a rock singer and Peter O'Toole as a musical has-been. But I want to focus on the two original articles—Svengali as described by Du Maurier and as portrayed by Barrymore. The illustrations accompanying this paper are from Du Maurier's own hand, and are reprinted from the 1895 American edition of *Trilby*.

Trilby was not, of course, the only fictional portrayal of hypnosis in the nineteenth century. Ellenberger (1970) lists a number of others, including 'La Horla', a short story by Guy De Maupassant in which a man suffering unaccountable anxiety attacks realizes that he has been victimized by a posthypnotic suggestion. There was also *Sister Marthe*, by the physiologist and hypnotist Charles Richet, writing under the pseudonym of Charles Epheyre. Hypnosis appears in various novels by Balzac, Dumas, and Flaubert and Robert Browning wrote a poem, 'Mesmerism.' But *Trilby* was by far the most successful. Du Maurier reaped a fortune from its publication, first as a magazine serial and then as a novel. Interestingly, he had no faith in his work and turned down royalties in favour of a flat fee; Taylor (1932)



FIGURE 2 Trilby.

informs us that *Harper's* magazine, in an act of generosity that ought to be emulated by every author's publisher, tore up the original contract and paid Du Maurier royalties anyway. Edward Purcell (1977) argues that the success of *Trilby* began the "best-seller system" in publishing, including the notion of book tie-ins (see also Gilder & Gilder, 1895). Kelly (1983) has described a bout of "Trilby-mania" (see also Gilder & Gilder, 1895) that ran rampant through Europe and America in the late 1890s, including no less than three parodies, one featuring "Thrilly" and her tormentor, "Spaghetti." A New York restaurateur sold ice-cream moulded in the form of Trilby's foot; a Chicago cobbler introduced the high-heeled "Trilby" shoe for women; another cobbler in Philadelphia, a women's boot; the word "trilby" became English slang for "foot." In 1897 London haberdashers sold trilbies, soft felt hats

with indented crowns, modelled after the headgear worn by Little Billee, a struggling artist who is the book's hero; and this usage remains in the dictionary today. A Kansas City newspaper reporter purchased Trilby's house in Paris and put a plaque on the door in her honour. Florida boasts a town called Trilby, complete with Little Billee Lake and Svengali Square.

Where did Trilby and Svengali come from? George Du Maurier, grandfather of Daphne, was born in Paris in 1834, the son of a French father and an English mother, and was raised for a time in London but went to school in Paris. For critical biographies of Du Maurier, see Kelly (1983) and Ormond (1969). He failed at the Sorbonne and dropped out of University College, London. In 1856 he set himself up in the Latin Quarter as a student of painting and shared a studio with Whistler, who later sued him for an unflattering description that appeared in the original version of *Trilby*. He returned to England in 1859 and became one of the staff artists with the satirical magazine, *Punch*. During his years on the continent he spent some time in Antwerp with his friend Felix Moscheles, an amateur hypnotist (Moscheles, 1896). When Du Maurier was recuperating from a detached retina in Molines, Moscheles visited him. Together they became attracted to a shopgirl named Octavia, whom they tried to hypnotize repeatedly. She seems to have become Du Maurier's mistress, and the three of them were a *ménage à trois*, at least in his fantasies. In any event, Octavia became the model for Trilby, and Moscheles for Svengali.

Sometime in 1889, Du Maurier was walking down a London street with Henry James, brother of William, and Du Maurier, an artist and illustrator rather than a writer, offered James the story of Trilby. Possibly James was already contemplating his own portrait of mesmerism (and his tweaking of his sibling's nose) in *The Bostonians*. At any event, Taylor (1932) reports that he replied, "Why don't you speak for yourself, George?" That night Du Maurier went home and put pen to paper. The result was not *Trilby*, but *Peter Ibbetson*, the story of two lovers separated by circumstances, who met only at night, in their dreams. Work on *Trilby* began in 1892 and it was serialised in 1894 and eventually appeared in book form with copious illustrations by the author. Shortly before his death in 1896, Du Maurier published a third novel, *The Martian*, about a man whose mind was possessed by a spiritual being from another planet.

Du Maurier drew on a number of sources for *Trilby*. First, of course, he had lived the Bohemian artist's life that the novel portrays: the students Taffy, the Laird, Little Billee, and Trilby, the artist's model of easy virtue, all are drawn from life. Other inspiration was supplied by Henri Murger's *Scenes of the Bohemian Life*, which also served as a source for Puccini's *La Bohème*. But what about the hypnotist? There was, of course, the amateur Moscheles. Moreover, as an artist on *Punch*, Du Maurier had illustrated two short stories in which villains use hypnosis to achieve their ends. Then there is Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, in which John Jasper, a music master addicted to opium, hypnotizes his pupil, Rosa Bud, into slavery.

Here is how Svengali is introduced:

A tall bony individual of any age between thirty and forty-five, of Jewish aspect, well-featured but sinister. He was very shabby and dirty, and wore a red beret and a large velveteen cloak, with a big metal clasp at the collar. His thick, heavy, languid, lustreless black hair fell down behind his ears on to his shoulders, in that musician-like way that is so offensive to the normal Englishman. He had bold, brilliant black eyes, with long heavy lids, a thin, sallow face and a beard of burnt-up black, which grew almost from his under eyelids; and over it his moustache, a shade lighter, fell in two long spiral twists. He went by the name of Svengali, and spoke fluent French with a German accent and humorous German twists and idioms, and his voice was very thin and mean and harsh, and often broke into a disagreeable falsetto.

On that occasion he played piano for Trilby and “flashed a pair of languishing black eyes at her with intent to kill.”

Svengali’s hypnotic technique is standard enough (Figure 3). Here he is, in the Englishman’s studio, curing Trilby’s neuralgia for the first time:

Svengali told her to sit down on the divan, and sat opposite to her, and bade her look him well in the white of the eyes . . . Then he made little



FIGURE 3 Svengali hypnotizes Trilby before a concert.

passes and counterpasses on her forehead and temples and down her cheek and neck. Soon her eyes closed and her face grew placid.

Svengali demonstrates rapport: Trilby responds only to his words and not to the Laird's questions. She awakens to find her pain gone. Svengali encourages her to visit him whenever she is in pain. He will relieve her and take it upon himself. "And you shall see nothing, hear nothing, think of nothing but Svengali, Svengali, Svengali."

The Laird is outraged:

"I wouldn't have much to do with him, all the same!" said the Laird. "I'd sooner have any pain than have it cured in that unnatural way, and by such a man as that! He's a bad fellow, Svengali—I'm sure of it! He mesmerized you; that's what it is—mesmerism! I've often heard of it, but never seen it done before. They get you into their power, and just make you do any blessed thing they please—lie, murder, steal—anything. And kill yourself into the bargain when they've done with you! It's just too terrible to think of!"

So here we have the beginnings of the myth of Svengali, and of hypnosis as well. First and foremost is the idea that the hypnotist possesses a special power to control others, including the ability to produce antisocial and self-injurious behaviour. We see this early in the 1931 film, where Svengali jilts another of his pupils and causes her to commit suicide. And of course we see it in his relationship with Trilby. In the film, Svengali forces her to come to his rooms at night; in the novel he makes her snub Little Billee and his friends after a concert appearance, and he even reaches her from the grave.

Second is the implication that the hypnotist possesses a special personality—not a very appealing one, to be sure. We don't know how much Du Maurier's stereotype of hypnotists is confused with his stereotype of Jews, a topic treated by Edmund Wilson (1957) in a famous essay on literary anti-Semitism. But his hypnotist is very much like the other hypnotists of popular culture: dark, mysterious, foreign, somehow set apart from the ordinary run of men. And *the eyes*: in the film they are the focus when the camera is on Svengali, and in the book the dying Trilby is mesmerized one last time simply by gazing at Svengali's picture. Svengali's power resides in his gaze.

I compared Svengali to the ordinary run of men. The third myth is the connection between hypnosis and gender. Svengali is male, of course, but all his victims are women. The notion that women are more responsive than men to hypnotic procedures has been very hard to dispel, even among scientific investigators of the topic.

What is it about women that makes them especially vulnerable to the hypnotist's power? The fourth myth is the connection between hypnosis on the one hand and responsivity to other forms of social influence on the other: gullibility, persuasibility, compliance—features commonly associated with the Western stereotype of femininity. Du Maurier writes: "She had a singularly impressionable nature, as was shown by her quick and ready susceptibility

to Svengali's hypnotic influence." Later, describing Trilby's state of mind while sitting "in the altogether" "for the figure" in Durien's studio, he writes:

It was poor Trilby's sad distinction that she surpassed all other models as Calypso surpassed her nymphs; and whether by long habit, or through some obtuseness in her nature, or lack of imagination, she was equally unconscious of the self with her clothes on or without! Truly, she could be naked and unashamed—in this respect an absolute savage . . . In fact she was absolutely without that kind of shame, as she was without any kind of fear. But she was destined soon to know both fear and shame.

Not for nothing is Trilby portrayed as a naive girl of easy virtue. Here is Du Maurier's account of her sexual entanglements:

Whether it be an aggravation of her misdeeds or an extenuating circumstance, no pressure of want, no temptations of greed or vanity, had ever been factors in urging Trilby on her downward career after her first false step in that direction—the result of ignorance, bad advice (from her mother, of all people in the world), and base betrayal. She might have lived in guilty splendour had she chosen, but her wants were few. She had no vanity, and her tastes were of the simplest, and she earned enough to gratify them all, and to spare.

So she followed love for love's sake only, now and then, as she would have followed art if she had been a man—capriciously, desultorily, more in a frolicsome spirit of camaraderie than anything else. Like an amateur, in short—a distinguished amateur who is too proud to sell his pictures, but willingly gives one away now and then to some highly valued and much admiring friend.

Sheer gaiety of heart and genial good-fellowship, the difficulty of saying nay to earnest pleading. She was *bonne camarade et bonne fille* before everything. Though her heart was not large enough to harbour more than one light love at a time (even in that Latin Quarter of genially capricious hearts), it had room for many friendships; and she was the warmest, most helpful, and most compassionate of friends, far more serious and faithful in friendship than in love.

Indeed, she might almost be said to possess a virginal heart, so little did she know of love's heartaches and raptures and torments and clings and jealousies.

With her it was lightly come and lightly go, and never come back again; as one or two, or perhaps three, picturesque Bohemians of the brush or chisel had found, at some cost to their vanity and self-esteem.

The same qualities that made her easy in love apparently made her easy in hypnosis as well.

The connection between hypnosis and sexuality is clear in both novel and film and constitutes the fifth element in the Svengali myth. In the time of Queen Victoria, as in the time of Louis XVI, special notice was taken of

the dangers to morality posed by the hypnotist's power over his subjects. Svengali has his power, in part, because he is male; Trilby is susceptible to it, in part, because she is female; in conventional thinking, male dominance and female submission are inextricably bound with sexuality; and thus, so is hypnosis. Moreover, as Richard Kelly (1983) points out, Svengali the hypnotist treats his subject like an object (he even counts her teeth!)—as an instrument to be played for his enjoyment, not hers. When she finally succumbs, she is known as La Svengali—as an extension of her master, with no identity of her own. Note also that their erotic relationship leads to death and destruction for them both.

Svengali dies because he has a heart condition. But why should Trilby die? Here is the sixth myth: that harm may come to the subject from constant hypnosis. Trilby has been hypnotized many times—during her lessons and during each concert of an extended tour. It has drained her of her energy, her vital spirit.

The link between hypnosis and the supernatural is the seventh myth (Figure 4). Svengali never gives suggestions; he doesn't even use words in his induction, except to instruct Trilby to fix her gaze upon him. All the hypnotic influence is accomplished through a kind of mental telepathy on the part of the hypnotist, or perhaps clairvoyance on the part of the subject (one is reminded of Victor Race, De Puysegur's peasant subject who could diagnose illnesses at a distance). In the film, Svengali brings Trilby to his rooms simply by wishing it. In the book, his portrait arrives by post, perhaps from beyond the grave—"looking straight out of the picture, straight at you . . . his big black eyes full of stern command."



FIGURE 4 Svengali as incubus.

The connection with parapsychology leads to the eighth myth—that hypnosis permits people to transcend their normal voluntary capacities. Trilby, though tone-deaf in her normal waking life, becomes the most acclaimed singer in Europe while hypnotized:

The orchestra swiftly plays the first four bars of the bass in Chopin's Impromptu (A flat); and suddenly, without words, as a light nymph catching the whirl of a double skipping-rope, La Svengali breaks in, and vocalises that astounding piece of music that so few pianists can even play; but no pianist has ever played it like this; no piano has ever given out such notes as these!

Every single phrase is a string of perfect gems, of purest ray serene, strung together on a loose golden thread! The higher and shriller she sings, the sweeter it is; higher and shriller than any woman had ever sung before . . . And there is not a sign of effort, of difficulty overcome.

But here is also where the myth begins to unravel. After Trilby dies, the Englishmen learn more details of her life with Svengali and Gecko, his toady and first violinist. The picture is remarkable, because it turns out that Svengali accomplishes this feat not through hypnosis, but through sheer hard work. Trilby was utterly tone-deaf, but by all accounts she had a beautiful singing voice. Indeed, her reputation preceded her, and the implication in the book is that her meeting with Svengali was no accident, but that Svengali deliberately sought her out. We know she had a beautiful voice because she entertained the Englishmen with a rendition of "Ben Bolt," which she had learned on her father's knee by rote. Her performance is described as grotesque, but that is only because she is tone-deaf, not because she lacks the necessary vocal equipment. Svengali followed precisely the same method as her father, patiently teaching her the most complex musical passages note by note, playing them on his flute and having her imitate them (Figure 5). Hypnosis was used only to elicit behaviour that had been acquired through dint of profuse labour on both their parts, not to mention Gecko's. Of course, none of this appears in the film. Svengali makes an admiring (and erotic) speech about her vocal apparatus, but the film gives no reason to think that this is anything more than a come-on. In this case, the film perpetuates a myth that the book does not.

Both book and film set limits on another myth—the coercive power of hypnosis. Toward the end, Svengali is forced to admit that he has been able to make Trilby sing, but not to love him. He can force her to utter words of love, perhaps, but he realizes that he is just speaking to himself. In the book, Trilby's ability to resist is even clearer: after the initial encounter with Svengali, in which he relieves her neuralgia, she stays quite clear of him, quite simply because she loathes him. In fact, she goes to Svengali—or perhaps he finds her—only after her engagement to Little Billee has been terminated by his mother, and the sculptor Durien, with whom she has had one of her affairs, has died. She turns to Svengali only because she is alone—and also, perhaps, because he wants her so much. Still, through it all:



FIGURE 5 Svengali teaches Trilby to sing by rote.

Svengali had for his wife, slave and pupil a fierce jealous kind of affection that was a source of endless torment to him; for indelibly graven in her heart, which he wished to occupy alone, was the never-fading image of the little English painter, and of this she made no secret.

At the end, after Trilby has died and Little Billee has been driven to a frenzy by the idea that she died with Svengali's name on her lips (Figure 6) and had joined him in some afterlife, Gecko informs Taffy (who has since married Little Billee's sister), "There were two Trilbys":

There was the Trilby you knew, who could not sing one single note in tune. She was an angel of paradise . . . and that was the Trilby that loved your brother, madame—oh! but with all the love that was in her! . . . But all at once . . . pr-r-r-rout! presto! augenblick! . . . with one wave of his hand over her—with one look of his eye—with a word—Svengali could turn her into the other Trilby, *his* Trilby—and make her do whatever he liked . . . He had but to say "Dors!" and she suddenly became an unconscious Trilby of marble . . . That Trilby was just a singing-machine—an organ to play upon—an instrument of music—a Stradivarius—a flexible flageolet of flesh and blood . . . When Svengali's Trilby was being taught to sing . . . when Svengali's Trilby was singing—or seemed to *you* as if she were singing—*our* Trilby had ceased to exist . . . *our* Trilby was fast asleep . . . in fact, *our* Trilby was *dead* . . . *she* never



FIGURE 6 Trilby, entranced by the eyes in Svengali's picture, dies repeating his name.

knew! she heard nothing—felt nothing—saw nothing! . . . Once, at Prague, Svengali fell down in a fit from sheer excitement! and then, suddenly, *our* Trilby woke up and wondered what it was all about.

This is an amazing passage, for it contains clear reference to several dissociative phenomena occurring in hypnosis. Consider, first, the assertion that there were two Trilbys. Kelly (1983) notes that the theme of duality is central in Du Maurier's fiction. In *Peter Ibbetson* the hero's physical existence and his mental life (particularly his dream life) are entirely independent. In *The Martian* the possibility is raised that the extraterrestrial spirit might have been the unconscious product of the hero's imagination—shades of Julian Jaynes (1976). Of course, duality appears in other novels as well—Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* for one; Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* for another. But the duality in these two cases is between good and evil, while the duality in Du Maurier is, in Kelly's (1983) words, "more esthetic than moral." The unconscious self is not better or worse, it does not operate on different principles: it is just *different*—and, of course, it is unconscious. Here we see, worked out in literature, a foreshadowing of the debate between Freud and Janet over the nature of the unconscious mental processes. Trilby exemplifies Janet's duality, not Freud's.

And there is more. Trilby's singing is a clear example of state-dependent learning. She acquires her musical skills while hypnotized, and can only use them in that state. When Svengali collapses, as in Prague or the climactic scene in Paris, she loses her talent immediately and utterly as the trance is lifted. When the trance is re-induced, as in her deathbed scene with Svengali's portrait, she automatically re-acquires her musical ability.

Trilby also shows post-hypnotic amnesia. The Englishmen are present in Paris when Svengali dies, and when Trilby recovers from the trance she has no idea where she is, and no recollection that they have met in the interval since she broke her engagement to Little Billee. She has no memory for an incident, during rehearsal, in which Svengali struck her, after which Gecko attacked Svengali with a knife and was arrested. She doesn't even know that she is a world-renowned singer. In fact, she rejects the notion that she can sing at all, and when people bring the subject up she thinks they are teasing her. Of all the gifts she has been given, the only ones she recognizes are those that Svengali gave her himself.

She remembers Svengali for his kindness in curing her illness, and in taking care of her after Durien's death, but she has no idea that she was his mistress. She does not recognize her wardrobe as her own, and asserts that all the clothes belong to Svengali's aunt and housekeeper, Marta. She will only admit that she has tried them on; they fit her because she is easy to fit. The following passage is extremely revealing:

As soon as I felt uneasy about things, or had any pain he would say, "Dors, ma mignonne!" and I would sleep at once — for hours, I think — and wake up, oh, so tired! and find him kneeling by me, always so anxious and kind . . . I've often tried [the clothes] on: I'm very easy to fit being so tall and thin. And poor Svengali would kneel down and cry, and kiss my hands and feet, and tell me I was his goddess and empress, and all that, which I hate. And Marta used to cry, too. And then he would say — "Et maintenant dors, ma mignonne!" And when I woke up I was so tired that I went to sleep again on my own account.

Now, I would be the last person in the world to say that post-hypnotic amnesia is a myth. Nor is the effect of hypnosis on pain a myth. But there is a mythical aspect to both phenomena as portrayed by Du Maurier, in that both amnesia and analgesia occur spontaneously, without any suggestions being given.

Du Maurier did not invent the idea of spontaneous amnesia, any more than he invented the other eight myths. Some of these ideas he undoubtedly got from Moscheles, who was probably relying on the authority of the same texts that influenced the generation that came after Puysegur, Elliotson and Braid; and he was probably also influenced by the "mesmeric mania" that swept England during his schooldays there. Du Maurier did not make the myth of hypnosis, really, but he made Svengali embody it; and in that sense, he made it anew and perpetuated it, beyond the grave, until this day.

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