

CHAPTER ONE

Trilby and Svengali

I will tell you a secret. 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. She is now! But she had no more idea of singing than I have of winning a steeplechase at the Croix de Berny. She could no more sing than a fiddle can play itself! She could never tell one tune from another—one note from the next ... But all at once—pr-r-r-out! 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 ... you might have run a red-hot needle into her and she would not have felt it. He had but to say ‘Dors!’ and she suddenly became an unconscious Trilby of marble, who could produce wonderful sounds—just the sounds he wanted, and nothing else—and think his thoughts and wish his wishes—and love him at his bidding with a strange, unreal factitious love ... just his own love for himself turned inside out—a l’envers—and reflected back on him, as from a mirror ... un echo, un simulacre, quoi! pas autre chose! ... Ah monsieur, that Trilby of Svengali’s! I have heard her sing to kings and queens in royal palaces! as no woman ever sung before or since.¹

First serialized in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1894, George du Maurier’s novel of hypnosis, *Trilby*, was a phenomenal bestseller. Its publication set off a marketing frenzy during which the heroine’s name was bestowed upon a hat, several shoes designs, candy, toothpaste, soap, a brand of sausage, and even a town in Florida. Trilby’s face appeared on dolls, fans, writing paper, puzzles, and there were ice cream bars made in the shape of her feet. Trilby clubs were formed and parties held where guests would perform dramatic readings from the novel, or dress up in *tableaux vivants*, to match the story’s illustrations.²

Given the character's enormous appeal, it is surprising that while Trilby hats by the hundreds are listed for sale on eBay, the name of Trilby as a mesmerized young woman has all but disappeared from popular awareness. The bestseller's villain, on the other hand, has held on to his infamous cultural identity for more than a century. Who doesn't recognize Svengali, the shadowy hypnotist who displays unseemly power over women?³ It may be that Trilby has been less well remembered because she was crafted by du Maurier to end up as nothing but a simulacrum, a reflection of Svengali himself. Everything that makes Trilby an unusual and memorable character is systematically taken away from her, so that by the end of the story she is less of a protagonist than she is a clockwork doll.

The relationship between Svengali and Trilby illustrates assumptions about the nature of hypnosis and the relationship between the hypnotist and the hypnotized subject that were common at the time the novel was written, but many of them persist into the present day. Svengali's psychological and physical control of Trilby manifests in the novel in an array of phenomena that are miraculous, psychopathological, sexual, and occult. The idea that a hypnotist has the power to "create" multiple personalities in an unwitting subject seems to be an artifact of the late twentieth century, but it was dramatically represented in *Trilby* more than a century ago.

Centuries-old assumptions about the hypnotic relation and the nature of hypnosis survive today to varying degrees in popular belief and practice, despite being widely discredited by researchers who reject them as myths. They are important in this history of hypnosis not because they are damaging misconceptions that need to be once and for all unmasked as false—but because they have become *mythical*, meaning that they are cultural images that have the power to defy empirical science. As novelists, lawyers, mystics, and some practitioners champion beliefs about hypnosis that others endlessly strive to lay to rest, a cycle continues that has been going on for more than two hundred years.⁴

The Hypnotic Relation

The story of Trilby assumes that a wide gulf of character exists between hypnotists and their subjects. Those who are easily hypnotized, the novel tells us, are gullible and weak. Whatever marvels they produce during hypnosis are due entirely to the skill of



Figure 1 *Svengali mesmerizing Trilby. Illustration from George du Maurier's 1894 novel, Trilby.*

a talented hypnotist. Early in the novel Svengali hypnotizes Trilby to relieve her headaches. She is grateful but is also disturbed by the strange power the man has over her and tries to avoid him as much as she can. When a series of personal misfortunes strike her, Svengali comes to her aid, taking advantage of her vulnerability. At that point the story of Trilby becomes a drama of psychological victimization.

Du Maurier makes his villain a Jewish musician and the portrait he draws of the unsavory and morally dubious hypnotist is a study in anti-Semitic stereotypes.⁵ Du Maurier describes Svengali as “a tall bony individual of any age between thirty and forty-five, of Jewish aspect, well-featured but sinister.” The description continues:

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, lusterless 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 ... 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.⁶

Svengali is presented as vain, egocentric, bullying, and cruel. His "love" for Trilby is, in no small measure, self-love. He possesses her parasitically, using her against her will and without her knowledge. He plays her, quite literally as his instrument, until the end of her life, which follows soon after his. The musical brilliance that Trilby demonstrates while under hypnosis is a result of Svengali's will and talent moving through her: "When you heard her sing the 'Nussbaum,' the 'Impromptu,' you heard Svengali singing with her voice, just as you heard Joachim play a chaconne of Bach with his fiddle! Herr Joachim's fiddle ... what does it know of Sebastian Bach?"⁷

Although Trilby is blessed with the physiological hardware to be a great singer, she is by herself talentless. In a humorous passage early in the novel she delivers a tortured rendition of the popular tune "Ben Bolt," to the stunned silence of those around her: "It was as though she could never once have deviated into tune, never once have hit upon a true note, even by a fluke—in fact, as though she were absolutely tone-deaf, and without ear, although she stuck to the time correctly enough."⁸ Trilby loses her amazing singing abilities at Svengali's demise, with one exception—the painted image of Svengali's eyes can still induce Trilby into a trance state, and allow her to sing. We are to believe that Svengali's musical talent is so powerful that it even survives his death.

Although Svengali is presented as a genius, he is an evil genius, motivated by a desire for power in general, and sexual power in particular. Du Maurier implies the existence of an intimate relationship between Svengali and Trilby while she is in trance that is completely absent in her waking life. Awake, Trilby speaks of Svengali's love for her with pity, and even disgust:

"He always made out he was so fond of me that he couldn't even look at another woman. Poor Svengali!" (Here her eyes filled with tears again.) "He was always very kind! But I never could be fond

of him in the way he wished—never! It made me sick even to think of! Once I used to hate him—in Paris—in the studio; don't you remember?"⁹

In this passage, the sinister undertones of the hypnotic relation come fully to the surface. Hypnosis is revealed in the novel to be a dangerous process that could have devastating consequences for a hypnotic subject, victimized by an unscrupulous practitioner.

Du Maurier's Trilby, in contrast to the nefarious Svengali, is an uneducated but sunny-dispositioned young woman of partial Irish descent, working in the Latin Quarter of Paris as an artist's model. Though Trilby is not chaste, she is innocent and trusting, sinning from weakness rather than wickedness. He had this to say about her character:

My poor heroine ... had all the virtues but one; but the virtue she lacked (the very one of all that plays the title-role, and gives its generic name to all the rest of that goodly company) was of such a kind that I have found it impossible so to tell her history as to make it quite fit and proper reading for the ubiquitous young person so dear to us all. ... 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.¹⁰

Trilby falls under Svengali's power in the latter part of the novel because she accepts friendship from him at a vulnerable moment. Earlier in the novel when Svengali entrances Trilby to relieve her headache, a witness to the affair warns her about what has taken place:

"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!" ... Cold shivers went down Trilby's back as she listened. She had a singularly impressionable nature, as was shown by her quick and ready susceptibility to Svengali's hypnotic influence.¹¹

By presenting the hypnotic subject as innocent and impressionable, Du Maurier is casting doubt on the motives of Svengali—and

by association those of any hypnotist. If the subject is gullible, it follows that the hypnotist could manipulate her; if the subject is weak, the hypnotist is free to exploit her. Du Maurier represents the hypnotic relation in its essential form as a perilous encounter between a powerful actor and a passive subject.

The differences between *Trilby* and *Svengali* only thinly disguise deeper cultural messages about race, gender, social class, and mobility. These are obscured in the novel because the relationship between the characters seems to arise as a result of the personal character traits of *Svengali* and *Trilby* themselves. This pattern will appear recurrently in the history of hypnotic theory and practice: personal traits (particularly the subject's psychopathology and the hypnotist's skill and techniques) are assumed to be essential to the success or failure of a hypnotic venture, rather than the social or cultural context surrounding the event, which give it particular meanings and shape the expectations of both hypnotist and subject.

The Nature of Hypnosis

The images of hypnosis employed by Du Maurier project not only a particular view of the hypnotic relation, but also of the dynamics of hypnosis itself. If the hypnotist can impose his will upon a hypnotized subject, this implies that some aspect of the experience for the subject is involuntary—not under conscious control. In fact, the novel *Trilby* perpetuated this very particular and still widespread view of the nature of hypnosis. Most significantly, it presented hypnosis as physiologically related to sleep, and defined it as a state of consciousness characterized by enhanced and involuntary suggestibility. Du Maurier describes *Trilby's* experience of waking from hypnotic trance as similar to what she feels when she wakes from sleep:

'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.'¹²

The idea that being hypnotized is related to being asleep is based on the related assumption that most hypnotic subjects are

unaware of their surroundings while they are “under” hypnosis. A hypnotized individual, in this view, has dissociated from ordinary consciousness and is experiencing some sort of altered state.

Most people can be said to experience a more-or-less completely discrete separation between waking and sleeping selves, and experience spontaneous amnesia for their dreams, usually forgetting them shortly after waking. Du Maurier suggests in his novel that something like this is also happening to a hypnotized subject. Trilby’s waking state and her hypnotized state are so discrete from one another that there is no overlap in her memory at all:

While hypnotized she sang before the crown heads of Europe, passed by her dearest friends on the street; while “awake” she could not sing a note, and had no memory of the rehearsal process or her performances. After Svengali’s death, her prior life as a singer was completely gone, simply erased: It was impossible to realize that her brain was affected in the slightest degree, except when some reference was made to her singing, and this seemed to annoy and irritate her, as though she was being made fun of. The whole of her marvelous musical career, and everything connected with it, had been clean wiped out of her recollection.¹³

Du Maurier clearly connects hypnosis with issues of memory and identity. At the moment of Svengali’s death Trilby is on stage in front of a London audience. When pressed to sing, Trilby comes out with the same tuneless rendition of “Ben Bolt” that she delivered at the beginning of the novel—and this after what has amounted to years and years of training by a master. In other words, the suggestions that made Trilby a singer while under hypnosis had no effect on her un-hypnotized self. Hypnosis, it appears, has power to divide the self:

‘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.’¹⁴

The presumption that hypnosis can create two Trilbys, separate and unaware of one another, implies that hypnotists have power over the processes of remembering and forgetting and that they can create profound dissociations of identity in their hypnotic subjects.

Assessing the Myths of Hypnosis

The story of Trilby presents very strong images of the hypnotic relation, the nature of hypnosis, and, particularly, the power of hypnosis over memory. How can we evaluate these ideas: that there are some gullible people who are more hypnotizable than others, that hypnosis is a state of consciousness related to sleep, or that hypnotists have the power to alter a subject's identity?

To begin, a preview of the main theoretical positions on "hypnotizability" as they are currently understood by hypnosis researchers will help in assessing Du Maurier's version of the hypnotic relation. The most recent research findings will be surveyed in Chapter Seven; here we note only that whereas some believe *anyone* can be hypnotized given the proper procedures, others maintain that only a small number of people will spontaneously score high on clinical measures of suggestibility and other measures of hypnotic ability. A third position is that although most people can be taught to respond to hypnotic suggestion, certain phenomena associated with extremely high hypnotizability (posthypnotic amnesia, for instance) cannot be taught, and do seem to be an aptitude. Regardless of which of these three views is held, there is widespread consensus among theoreticians as well as researchers that the most "hypnotizable" people are neither more gullible, nor weaker by objective standards, than those who, within the context of a hypnotic induction, respond less dramatically to suggestion.¹⁵

There is much less consensus on the question of whether or not hypnosis is (or necessarily produces) a special or unique state of consciousness. Prior to the 1960s it was generally accepted by clinicians and researchers that hypnosis is itself a special state of consciousness, essentially different from non-hypnotic consciousness. But from that point on, "non-state theorists" began to challenge state theorists, maintaining that all of the phenomena associated with hypnosis could be explained by normal behavioral processes, attitudes, beliefs, and expectations.

Although during the 1960s and 1970s hypnosis research polarized into "state" and "non-state" camps, by the 1980s the two theories were no longer diametrically opposed, and now can be placed along a continuum of beliefs and theoretical positions.

At one extreme are theorists who champion the hypnotic trance as an example of a discrete altered state of consciousness that is qualitatively and objectively (biologically) different from waking states. At the other extreme are the theorists who use the term *state* in a purely descriptive, metaphorical way or who reject it altogether. At the center of the continuum is the theoretical position that hypnosis is not a special altered state, but one that is common in everyday life, the same experience we have when we are on a long car drive, or when we are particularly absorbed in a task.¹⁶ Generally speaking, the state versus non-state issue boils down to the need to explain (or explain away) the apparent phenomenon, illustrated entertainingly by Du Maurier, that hypnotized subjects are profoundly *different* while they are undergoing a hypnotic induction, from when they are not.

Finally, despite the widespread belief that hypnotic subjects will remember nothing about what occurred while they were in trance, just as Trilby forgot about her concerts during her waking, non-hypnotized state, empirical evidence suggests that spontaneous posthypnotic amnesia is actually an unusual phenomenon. The persistence of the belief in hypnotic amnesia is not based on any particularly influential evidence, but seems to arise from a traditional connection of hypnosis with dramatic alterations of memory and identity. Among the assumptions that arise from this connection are also the beliefs that hypnosis increases the accuracy of memory, and that it can foster literal reexperiencing of past events. Although the belief that hypnosis has these effects is widespread, as no few reruns of *The X-files* reflect, it is not borne out by research which suggests that childhood episodes remembered during hypnotic sessions may be less accurate than memories that spring to mind in states of ordinary waking consciousness.¹⁷

From Trilby to Svengali

One reason for *Trilby's* phenomenal success may be that Du Maurier was able to crystallize a central mythology that had developed over a century, despite medical and scientific arguments that directly contradicted its central assertions. Du Maurier conflated mesmerism with hypnosis, so that the

cultural assumptions that were tied up with the earlier technique and practice were transferred to the hypnotic relation as well, regardless of the fact that practitioners of hypnosis who were working at the time the novel was written took particular pains to distinguish their practices from those associated with mesmerism.

Everyone was familiar with the characters and the plot that he presented: a personally powerful and ethically dubious (male) practitioner of the hypnotic arts takes emotional and sexual advantage of a gullible and passive (female) subject. The nature of the danger has to do with the profound personal transformation a hypnotist is supposed to be able to force upon an unwitting subject. The last decade of the twentieth century was notable for the spate of malpractice lawsuits alleging that irresponsible hypnotherapeutic clinicians were responsible for implanting false memories or constructing multiple personalities in their clients. The presentation of hypnosis as dangerous is based on the belief, matter-of-fact for Du Maurier, that because what occurs to hypnotic subjects while they are hypnotized is involuntary, their experience is controlled by the hypnotist. Regardless of the exact biological and psychological processes underlying the subjective *experience* of involuntariness for hypnotic subjects, research does not support the idea that skillful hypnotists can make subjects perform against their will.¹⁸

Researchers may argue that psychotherapists are not nefarious Svengalis with the power to make their gullible Trilby-like clients remember things that never happened. They may repeatedly demonstrate through empirical research that hypnosis does not deprive individuals of their agency or volition. Still, popular culture clings to the idea of the Trilby-Svengali dyad, in which the hypnotist has all the power, and the subject is always, potentially, a victim. *Fin de siècle* legal battles between hypnotists and their subjects over the “implantation” of false memories and the “creation” of multiple personalities indicate that the boundary between fact and fiction may be transgressed more often than is generally acknowledged. The history of scientific discovery is often narrated as an orderly progression of ideas, as though knowledge evolves in a linear way, truth replacing error through systematic experimentation, leading to broad consensus. The story of hypnosis suggests that the process is infinitely messier, and more interesting, than that.

Notes

- 1 George Du Maurier, *Trilby* (New York: J. M. Dent, 1992): 352.
- 2 Emily Jenkins, "Trilby: Fads, Photographers, and 'Over-Perfect Feet'," *Book History* 1 (1998): 221–267; See also Edward L. Purcell, "Trilby and Trilby-mania: The Beginning of the Bestseller System," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 11 (1977): 62–76.
- 3 For a consideration of possible real-life inspirations for Du Maurier's Svengali, see the introduction to George du Maurier, *Svengali: George du Maurier's Trilby*, ed. Peter Alexander (London: W. H. Allen, 1982): 5–34.
- 4 The "myths" of hypnosis as they are presented here are based on an analysis found in Irving Kirsch and Steven Jay Lynn, "The Altered State of Hypnosis: Changes in the Theoretical Landscape," *American Psychologist* 50 (1995): 846–858. For another approach to the myths of hypnosis, see John F. Kihlstrom, "The Two Svengalis: Making the Myth of Hypnosis," *Australian Journal of Clinical & Experimental Hypnosis* 15, no. 2 (1987): 69–81.
- 5 For a critical analysis of race and anti-Semitism in *Trilby* in its nineteenth century cultural context, see Daniel Pick, *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000).
- 6 Du Maurier, *Trilby*, 13.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 352.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 21.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 300.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 61.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 300.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 307.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 353.
- 15 Steven J. Lynn, Victor Neufeld, and Cornelia Maré, "Direct versus Indirect Suggestions: A Conceptual and Methodological Review," *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 41, no. 2 (1993): 124–152.
- 16 Irving Kirsch and Steven Jay Lynn, "Hypnotic Involuntariness and the Automaticity of Everyday Life," *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* 40 (1997): 329–348.
- 17 See Helen M. Pettinati, ed., *Hypnosis and Memory* (New York: Guilford, 1988).
- 18 Steven Jay Lynn, Judith Rhue, and John R. Weekes, "Hypnotic Involuntariness: A Social Cognitive Analysis," *Psychological Review* 97, no. 22 (1990): 169–184.