

Professional Heresy: Edmund Gurney (1847–88) and the Study of Hallucinations and Hypnotism

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The English music theorist and philosophical writer Edmund Gurney was the first ‘full-time’ psychical researcher in history. While he was primarily concerned with empirical evidence for telepathy, Gurney significantly contributed to the late nineteenth-century literature on hallucinations in the sane, and the psychology of hypnotism and dissociation. He conducted the first large-scale survey of hallucinations in the general public and, with Pierre Janet, was the first to publish experimental data suggesting dissociated streams of consciousness in hypnotism. This paper sketches Gurney’s contributions to psychology and dynamic psychiatry in the context of his friendship with Frederic W.H. Myers and William James. It is argued that although Gurney’s research into hallucinations and hypnotism had been embraced and assimilated by contemporary psychologists such as William James, Alfred Binet and others, his contributions to psychology have subsequently been marginalised because of the discipline’s paradigmatic rejection of controversial research questions his findings were entangled with.

Psychical Research and Psychology

Since the publication of Ellenberger’s monumental *Discovery of the Unconscious*, Freud has been dethroned as the monarch of the unconscious. As Ellenberger and subsequent authors have shown, Freud’s work was preceded by significant contributions from French, British and Swiss psychopathologists and psychical researchers such as Pierre Janet, Frederic Myers and Théodore Flournoy.¹ These and related authors’ psychological work was significantly intertwined with studies of trance mediumship, telepathy, clairvoyance and other controversial areas of research.

An important forum in which to observe the early intersection between psychology and psychical research was the early International Congresses of Psychology, which

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¹ See, for example, Henri F. Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970); Sonu Shamdasani, *Jung and the Making of Modern Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

were initiated by the Polish philosopher and psychical researcher Julian Ochorowicz.² The first Congress in Paris in 1889 was co-organised by the physiologist and psychical researcher Charles Richet; the Second Congress in London in 1892 was organised by the founders of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), Frederic Myers and Henry Sidgwick; and the Third Congress in 1896 in Munich was hosted by the Munich Psychological Society (originally founded as a psychical research society), with the sexologist and psychical researcher Albert von Schrenck-Notzing as general secretary. At these early congresses, studies of mediumship, telepathy and clairvoyance figured alongside discussions of psychophysiology, psychopathology, developmental and social psychology, and other areas constituting current mainstream psychology.³ Among other contributions of psychical research to psychology and medicine were the first methodologically sophisticated randomised trials⁴ as well as a pioneering experimental study of the psychology of eyewitness testimony.⁵

Gurney's Contributions to Psychology

Gurney, born on 23 March 1847 in Hersham, Surrey, studied Classics at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he met the poet Frederic Myers and the moral philosopher Henry Sidgwick, with whom he would found the Society for Psychical Research in 1882. In 1877, he resigned his fellowship at Trinity, married, and enrolled to study medicine at University College London, where he studied under the physicist Oliver Lodge, who was introduced to psychical research by his student. However, prior to Gurney's final commitment to psychical research, his greatest passion had been music. Frustrated by his limited abilities as a performing musician, Gurney was beginning to gain recognition as a music theorist and philosophical writer. In 1881, he published his monumental *The Power of Sound*, a treatise on the psychology and philosophy of music, which is still highly regarded by music theorists.⁶ He had exchanges about the evolution of musical sentiment with Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin, and published on philosophical

²Serge Nicolas and Hedvig Söderlund, 'The Project of an International Congress of Psychology by J. Ochorowicz (1881)', *International Journal of Psychology*, 40 (2005), 395–406.

³I am grateful to Carlos S. Alvarado for allowing me to read his manuscript 'Telepathy, Mediumship and Psychology: Psychical Research at the International Congresses of Psychology, 1889–1905', forthcoming.

⁴Ian Hacking, 'Telepathy: Origins of Randomization in Experimental Design', *Isis*, 79 (1988), 427–51.

⁵Richard Hodgson and S.J. Davey, 'The Possibilities of Mal-Observation and Lapse of Memory from a Practical Point of View: Experimental Investigations', *Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research*, 4 (1887), 381–495; Richard Hodgson also investigated the famous Ansel

Bourne case of multiple personality. See Hodgson, 'A Case of Double Consciousness', *Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research*, 7 (1891), 221–57.

Studies in multiple personality were a major domain of French, British and German psychopathologists as well as psychical researchers, which together informed the work of leading figures in the so-called Boston School of Abnormal Psychology, i.e., Morton Prince, James Jackson Putnam and Boris Sidis. See Eugene Taylor, *William James: On Consciousness Beyond the Margin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁶Edmund Gurney, *The Power of Sound* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co., 1880). The author of Gurney's last biographical monograph, Gordon Epperson, was a musicologist. See Epperson, *The Mind of Edmund Gurney* (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1997).

topics (mainly ethics and aesthetics) in *Mind* and other periodicals.⁷ In 1881, Gurney started studying law, but became increasingly interested in philosophy and psychology. Around the same time he became a member of the 'Scratch Eight', an informal philosophical circle comprising philosophers and psychologists, such as James Sully, Shadworth Hodgson, and the editor of *Mind*, G. Croom Robertson. It was at a meeting of the Scratch Eight in England were Gurney and William James, who had been introduced by William's brother Henry, probably first met. In 1882, Gurney quit his legal studies and became a founding member of the SPR as well as the head of the Society's committee on mesmerism, an important early British forum for studies in hypnotism.

While hypnotism was continually gaining a strong foothold in French psychiatry and medicine, Gurney was the first Englishman since James Braid to systematically study hypnotic phenomena. Together with Frederic Myers and his brother, the physician Arthur Thomas Myers, Gurney travelled to Paris and Nancy to study hypnosis, and he was the first Briton to work along the lines of French researchers such as Pierre Janet, Alfred Binet and Charles Richet. Around the same time as Janet, Gurney reported experiments apparently revealing 'secondary selves' in hypnotic trance and post-hypnotic states, though, contrary to Janet, in mentally normal subjects which Gurney, Myers, James and others presented as evidence for the non-pathological nature of hypnotism.⁸ He identified two discrete stages of hypnotism: a state of hypnotic 'alertness', and the hypnotic trance proper. Gurney found that in these states, mutually exclusive, state-specific memory chains would be overt, which he counted as evidence that unconscious strata of personality in hypnotism were not unconscious in themselves, but merely in relation to other states of consciousness, an idea later developed in detail by Frederic Myers. Since Gurney's experiments seemed to suggest that dissociative states sometimes involved volition and refined reflective reasoning, they were presented as an empirical refutation of William Carpenter's theory of hypnotic phenomena, and other psychological automatisms as 'unconscious cerebration' and related notions, such as that of Rudolf Heidenhain in Germany.⁹ Gurney and colleagues deemed them benign equivalents of cases of 'multiple personality', a field psychical researchers would come to increasingly contribute to after Gurney's death.

Another important contribution to psychological knowledge by Gurney was his study of hallucinations. In 1886, he was the lead author of *Phantasms of the Living*, a first systematic survey of 'telepathic' hallucinations in the general English public. Aided by the pioneer in statistics Francis Y. Edgeworth, Gurney delivered a sophisticated treatment of the role of chance coincidence in such cases. Displaying a firm command of the relevant

⁷ Gurney's philosophical papers were published in his *Tertium Quid: Chapters on Various Disputed Questions*, 2 vols (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, 1887).

⁸ Edmund Gurney, 'The Problems of Hypnotism', *Mind*, 9 (1884), 477–508; *idem*, 'An Account of Some Experiments in Mesmerism', *Proceedings of the Society of Psychological Research*, 2 (1884), 201–16. Other important papers in hypnotism by Gurney were 'Peculiarities of Certain Post-Hypnotic States', *Proceedings of the Society of Psychological Research*, 4 (1887), 268–323; 'Hypnotism and Telepathy',

Proceedings of the Society of Psychological Research, 5 (1888), 216–59; 'Further Problems of Hypnotism', *Mind*, 12 (1887), 212–32, 397–422; Edmund Gurney and Frederic W.H. Myers, 'Some Higher Aspects of Mesmerism', *Proceedings of the Society of Psychological Research*, 3 (1885), 401–23.

⁹ See William Carpenter, *Principles of Mental Physiology*, 3rd edn (London: Henry S. King, 1875); Rudolf H. Heidenhain, *Der sogenannte thierische Magnetismus: Physiologische Betrachtungen* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Händel, 1880).

literature, he also discussed possible confounding psychological factors, such as prior beliefs and expectations, errors of memory and the problem of human testimony in general. One of the centre pieces of *Phantasms* was a masterly review of the contemporary literature on the psychology and pathology of hallucinations, based on a paper he had published two years previously in *Mind*.¹⁰ Gurney and his collaborators collected and scrutinised 5,705 cases of alleged ‘telepathic’ hallucinations (mostly apparitions of distant persons in a severe bodily or emotional crisis at the time of their alleged appearance to the percipient, who could have no plausible knowledge of the perceived person’s state), of which around 700 he felt were sufficiently corroborated to be included in the book. Shortly after *Phantasms*, Gurney initiated the SPR ‘Census of Hallucinations’, an international replication of *Phantasms* based on a sample of 17,000 sane persons. The international Census, which the SPR continued after Gurney’s death, was conducted with the support of the International Congress of Psychology and published by Henry Sidgwick and his colleagues in 1894.¹¹ Independent of their conclusions regarding the prevalence of telepathic experiences, the results of *Phantasms* and the ‘Census of Hallucinations’ seemed to provide overwhelming evidence for the prevalence of hallucinations in the general public.¹²

Within the six years from his involvement in psychical research to his early death in 1888, Gurney became the most important English hypnotism researcher since James Braid. Whereas Henri Ellenberger identified Janet as the discoverer of ‘secondary streams of consciousness’ in hypnotism, Alfred Binet, who replicated Gurney’s studies in hypnotism, and William James credited Gurney rather than Janet with the discovery,¹³ and other contemporary major French authors in hypnotism, such as Janet and Richet, acknowledged Gurney’s contributions in their own works. Under Gurney’s editorship from 1883 to 1888, the SPR *Proceedings* became the leading scholarly periodical in England devoting space to the problem of hypnotism and dissociation. An analysis of materials published in the SPR *Proceedings* between 1882 and 1900 shows that out of 204 papers and notes, 79 (39%) were devoted to dissociative phenomena, which was more than was published in the *Journal of Mental Science* and *Mind*, the only other English

¹⁰ Edmund Gurney, ‘Hallucinations’, *Mind*, 10 (1885), 161–99. In his paper, Gurney reviewed and scrutinised empirical findings and theories by Binet, Wundt, Griesinger, Taine, de Boismont, Burdach, Müller, Baillarger, Régis, Kandinsky, Meynert, Krafft-Ebing, Despine, Esquirol, Féré and others.

¹¹ Henry Sidgwick *et al.*, ‘Report on the Census of Hallucinations’, *Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research*, 10 (1894), 25–422. For preliminary reports and discussions at the International Congresses of Psychology see, for example, Joseph Delbœuf, ‘Séance du samedi 10 août 1889: Statistique des hallucinations’, in *Congrès international de psychologie physiologique* (Paris: Bureau des Revues, 1890), and Henry Sidgwick *et al.*, ‘Statistical Enquiry into Hallucinations [with Discussion]’, in *International Congress of Psychology: Second Session* (London: William & Norgate, 1892). The results were presented by Nora

Sidgwick at the 1896 Congress in Munich. See Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick, ‘On a Statistical Enquiry into Hallucinations’, in *Dritter Internationaler Congress für Psychologie* (Munich: Lehmann, 1897).

¹² For an assessment of the significance of the SPR’s work for late nineteenth-century psychopathology, see John P. Williams, ‘Psychical Research and Psychiatry in Late Victorian Britain: Trance as Ecstasy or Trance as Insanity’, in W.F. Bynum, Roy Porter and Michael Shepherd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry, Vol. 1: People and Ideas* (London: Tavistock, 1985), 233–54.

¹³ Eugene Taylor, *William James on Exceptional Mental States: The 1896 Lowell Lectures* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1983), 37; Alfred Binet, *Les altérations de la personnalité* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1892), 79, and *idem*, *La suggestibilité* (Paris: Librairie C. Reinwald, 1900), 41.

journals discussing these topics, together.¹⁴ By 1890, owing to Gurney's and Myers's connections to scholars abroad, the membership of the SPR included French psychologists and hypnotism researchers such as Beaunis, Bernheim, Féré, Janet, Liébeault, Liégeois, Ribot, Richet and Taine, as well as the Germans, Dessoir and von Schrenck-Notzing. With hypnotism still a neglected field of research in England at the time of his death, it was mainly foreign authors who paid tribute to Gurney in obituaries.

In his obituary of Frederic Myers, William James had stated that Myers' contributions to psychology 'were incidental to that [psychical] research, and would probably never have been made had he not entered on it. But they have a value for Science entirely independent of the light they shed upon that problem.'¹⁵ James' assessment is tacitly extended to Gurney, who closely collaborated with his friend Myers and whose works formed a significant basis for the latter's ideas, which proved highly influential on James. A more direct impact of Gurney's work on the ideas of the founder of American psychology was a section in *Phantasms* called 'Note on witchcraft', which aimed to counter widespread sceptical assumptions, according to which belief in telepathy was no less irrational than a belief in witches flying around on broomsticks. After a comparison of the standards of evidence for witchcraft and the SPR's work in telepathy, Gurney's historical analysis identified striking parallels in accounts of witchcraft trials and the clinical reports published in the late nineteenth-century continental literature on hysteria and hypnotism, and he concluded that the witch craze had been mainly due to 'diseased imagination, hysteria, hypnotism, and occasionally, perhaps, of telepathy'.¹⁶ This was the basic theme of lecture six, 'Witchcraft', of William James' 1896 Lowell Lectures on exceptional mental states, where James appealed to the relativity of the morbid, making a concession to the prevalence of psychopathological potentials even in the mentally robust.¹⁷ In 1887, James had commended Gurney's treatment of witchcraft in his review of *Phantasms*,¹⁸ which Gurney acknowledged gratefully: 'I was specially pleased at your singling out for commendation the note on witchcraft; with the exception of the census of hallucinations. . . that witchcraft thing was the most bothersome part of the book; & no one but you seems to have remarked it'.¹⁹

'Boundary Work' and the Historiography of Psychical Research

As the example of Gurney shows, a clear-cut distinction between late nineteenth-century psychology and psychical research was at times difficult to draw. However, perhaps nothing epitomises the ambivalent relationship of psychology to its unloved sibling clearer than the research agendas of the very founders of modern psychology, Wilhelm

¹⁴ Carlos S. Alvarado, 'Dissociation in Britain during the Late Nineteenth Century: The Society for Psychical Research, 1882–1900', *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 3 (2002), 9–33.

¹⁵ William James, 'Frederic Myers's Service to Psychology', *Proceedings of the Society of Psychical Research*, 17 (1901), 13–23: 16.

¹⁶ Edmund Gurney, Frederic W.H. Myers and Frank Podmore, *Phantasms of the Living*, 2 vols, (London: Trübner, 1886), Vol. 1, 172.

¹⁷ Taylor, *op. cit.* (note 13), 113–130.

¹⁸ William James, 'Phantasms of the Living' (review), *Science*, 9 (1887), 18–20.

¹⁹ Letter, Edmund Gurney to William James, 16 January 1887, in Ignas K. Skrupskelis and Elizabeth M. Berkeley (eds), *The Correspondence of William James* (Charlottesville, VA: The University of Virginia Press, 1998), Vol. 6, 190.

Wundt and William James. While Wundt's foundation of the first German laboratory of experimental psychology in Leipzig in 1879 coincided significantly with his publication of a popular pamphlet denying the investigation of alleged psychic phenomena a place in science,²⁰ James attempted to integrate psychical research into nascent American psychology, a project that was vehemently attacked by other leading US psychologists, such as G. Stanley Hall, J. Jastrow, J. McKeen Cattell, E.B. Titchener and Hugo Münsterberg.²¹ Gurney's work, publicly praised by James as science par excellence, became the subject of early boundary work, not only in American academic psychology. Wilhelm Preyer in Germany published an attack on the SPR's and Gurney's work which, however, Gurney was able to show in detail was based on serious errors and misrepresentations of the original publications Preyer purported to rebut.²² Gurney's defences against Preyer's and others' allegations of scientific incompetence and gullibility failed to be promulgated in the popular and academic press psychologists had learned to utilise to demarcate the 'new psychology' from its 'unscientific Other'. As a consequence of psychology's lasting uneasiness with its occult 'shadow' and resulting boundary work, the likes of Gurney and Myers, who enriched the science of the soul by fundamentally challenging it in its infancy, were refused treatment in the standard history of psychology textbooks.²³

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²⁰ Wilhelm Wundt, *Der Spiritismus: Eine sogenannte wissenschaftliche Frage* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1879); Nikola Kohls and Andreas Sommer, 'Die akademische Psychologie am Scheideweg', in A. Büssing, T. Ostermann, M. Glöckler, P.F. Matthiesen (eds), *Spiritualität, Krankheit und Heilung – Bedeutung und Ausdrucksformen der Spiritualität in der Medizin*, (Frankfurt: Verlag für Akademische Schriften, 2006). Other prominent German psychologists debating psychical research were Wilhelm Preyer and Hugo Münsterberg. See, for example, William T. Preyer, *Die Erklärung des Gedankenlesens nebst Beschreibung eines neuen Verfahrens zum Nachweise unwillkürlicher Bewegungen* (Leipzig: Grieben, 1886); Hugo Münsterberg, *Gedankenübertragung* (Freiburg i. Br.: Mohr, 1889).

²¹ Deborah J Coon, 'Testing the Limits of Sense and Science: American Experimental Psychologists Combat Spiritualism', *American Psychologist*, 47 (1992), 143–51; Taylor, *op. cit.* (note 5); Andreas Sommer, 'Psychical Research and the Origins of

American Psychology: Hugo Münsterberg, William James and Eusapia Palladino', *History of the Human Sciences*, 24 (2011), forthcoming.

²² Wilhelm Preyer, 'Telepathie und Geisterseherei in England', *Deutsche Rundschau*, 46 (1886), 30–51; Edmund Gurney, *Telepathie: Eine Erwiderung auf die Kritik des Herrn Prof. W. Preyer* (Leipzig: Friedrich, 1887). Other critics of Gurney were, for example, Joseph Jastrow, Josiah Royce and Charles Saunders Peirce.

²³ See, for example, the problematic first biographical monograph of Gurney by Trevor Hall, *The Strange Case of Edmund Gurney* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1964). For critiques of Hall's Gurney biography, see Alan Gauld, 'Mr Hall and the S.P.R.', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 43 (1965), 53–62; Trevor Hamilton, *Immortal Longings: F.W.H. Myers and the Victorian Search for Life After Death* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2009), Fraser Nicol, 'The Silences of Mr. Trevor Hall', *International Journal of Parapsychology*, 8 (1966), 5–59.