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Between science and spirit: pseudoscience and parapsychology in *Jane Eyre*.

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Introduction

The late 18th and early 19th century were characterized by important developments in the scientific field. William Whewell, president of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, coined the term "scientist" in 1833 to describe the "men of science" or "natural philosophers".[1] Sciences became a salaried occupation in the course of the 19th century; before that, it was pursued mainly by wealthy amateurs.[2] During this time, the sciences – such as chemistry, biology, and physics – underwent remarkable advancements. Significant progress was made also in the areas of medicine and psychology; psychology in particular began to be interpreted as an autonomous science.[3]

Philosophy had long questioned the relationship between the mind and the body, as well as the place of humans in nature. In the 17th century, Descartes introduced his influential theory of dualism, in which the soul or thinking substance (*res cogitans*) is separated from the body (*res extensa*).[4] By describing animals as machines without souls and humans as machines with a soul, he influenced philosophers like La Mettrie, who took this idea further by claiming instead that humans are machines both in body and in mind, thereby opposing the existence of an immaterial soul. This perspective was partially shared by other philosophers of the time, such as Cabanis, who promoted the scientific study of the human being as a whole, both mind and body.[5] What emerges from these developments is a growing attempt to understand the true association between soul and physical body.

Medical research on reflexes contributed to the understanding of the brain. At the beginning of the 19th century, the English surgeon Charles Bell and the French physician François Magendie independently discovered – the former in 1811 and the latter eleven years later – the distinction between motor impulses and sensory impulses. This proved for the first time that the nervous system

[1] Snyder, "William Whewell".
[2] Joseph, "The Profession of Science and Its Powers", 367.
[3] Legrenzi, *Storia della psicologia*, 69–70.
[4] Legrenzi, *Storia della psicologia*, 45.
[5] Legrenzi, *Storia della psicologia*, 53

performs distinct functions.[6] During the first half of the 19th century, these discoveries sparked a growing interest in comprehending the mind-body question. This attitude gave rise to several pseudoscientific approaches; among these were physiognomy, the belief that a person's external appearance mirrored their inner character, and phrenology, which claimed that the shape of the skull could reveal aspects of personality and intellect. Other pseudoscientific theories, such as mesmerism – the idea that a magnetic fluid could influence and heal the human body – were linked to altered states of consciousness and ultimately led to the development of hypnotism. These pseudosciences were particularly popular in Victorian Britain and influenced its cultural aspects, literature included. This period also saw reported cases of clairvoyance and a surge of fascination with the occult, including ghosts and séances. As science became more accessible and popular among the general public, genuine scientific advances coexisted with widespread superstition and mystical beliefs.

This thesis aims to examine the presence and narrative function of pseudoscientific discourse in *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. Specifically, it argues that physiognomy, phrenology, mesmerism and early parapsychological thought are not merely incidental references within the novel, but constitute a significant conceptual framework through which character, psychology and interpersonal perception are established. By situating the novel within its broader epistemological context, this study proposes to demonstrate how these pseudosciences influenced the novel and contributed to its engagement with questions of identity, morality, and the unseen dimensions of human experience.

The first chapter provides an historical and cultural overview of pseudosciences and their development in Britain, beginning with physiognomy. Popularized in the late eighteenth century by Johann Caspar Lavater, physiognomy sought to determine moral character through the study of facial features. Its extensive appeal lay in its promise to render the invisible visible and therefore to translate inner disposition into legible external signs. Closely related to physiognomy was phrenology, which similarly claimed to reveal mental faculties and personality traits through the examination of cranial

[6] Legrenzi, *Storia della psicologia*, 65.

shape. In Britain, this discipline gained prominence principally thanks to the work of George Combe, whose writings popularized the theory and integrated it into a broader debate on education, morality and social reform. Both disciplines reflected the nineteenth-century desire to systematize human character and anchor moral judgment in empirical observation. The chapter then shifts its focus to mesmerism, or animal magnetism, originally developed as a therapeutic practice. In the British context, mesmerism frequently intersected with phrenological thought and generated widespread public fascination. Occasionally, mesmeric trances were believed to induce altered states of consciousness in which patients allegedly exhibited extraordinary abilities, including clairvoyance and enhanced sensorial perception. Such phenomena laid the groundwork for the development of hypnotism and the nascent field of parapsychological investigation. The emergence of spiritualism in the late 1840s further intensified public debate surrounding the possibility of supernatural communication and extrasensory perception; by the time *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847, discussions surrounding pseudoscience and paranormal phenomena had reached a cultural peak.

The second chapter situates *Jane Eyre* within the biographical and intellectual context of Charlotte Brontë's life up to the novel's publication, examining aspects of the author's personal experience that may have informed her engagement with contemporary pseudoscientific discourse. Evidence indicates her familiarity with phrenology and her likely exposure to discussions of mesmerism and related paranormal phenomena. This chapter contends that Brontë's intellectual environment provided foundation for the thematic and narrative elements that emerge within the novel.

The third chapter demonstrates how these pseudoscientific discourses are embedded within *Jane Eyre*. The novel contains explicit references to physiognomy and phrenology, particularly in moments where characters interpret one another's moral and emotional states through careful assessment of physical appearance. This study analyzes how Brontë integrates such references into the narrative structure, using them both as tools of insight and as devices that complicate certainty about human nature. Furthermore, the thesis explores the more indirect influence of mesmerism and early parapsychological thought, particularly in scenes suggestive of telepathic connection, heightened

intuition, and seemingly supernatural and paranormal experiences. Close textual analysis reveals that these elements are not merely ornamental but are instead central to the novel's exploration of perception, consciousness, and the boundaries between the rational and the supernatural.

Chapter 1: historical overview of pseudosciences in the 19th century

1.1 Physiognomy: reading the face

Nineteenth-century England was characterised by a fascinating coexistence of genuine scientific progress and the widespread popularity of what we now recognise as pseudosciences. During this time, alongside groundbreaking discoveries in fields such as biology, chemistry, and physics, disciplines like physiognomy, phrenology, mesmerism, and parapsychology captured the imagination of many. These pseudosciences, though lacking rigorous empirical foundations by today's standards, were taken seriously by a large portion of society and influenced both popular culture and intellectual thought. Their appeal lay in the promise of uncovering hidden truths about human nature and the mysteries of the mind, reflecting the era's complex relationship with science, belief, and the unknown. One of the most popular pseudosciences was physiognomy, resurfaced in the 18th century following the work of the pastor and religious writer Johann Caspar Lavater from Zurich.

Physiognomy's origins can be traced back to Ancient Greece. The relationship between the body and the soul was a key concept in Plato's philosophy; according to him, every body is shaped by the soul that inhabits it, and one is the mirror of the other. The harmony between body and soul results in health, and health makes the body more beautiful. These ideas are explained in the *Timaeus*.[7] This is connected to the concept of *kalokagathia*, according to which external beauty corresponds to inner values. As maintained by Plato, what is good must be beautiful – and vice versa.[8]

Taking these early reflections as a starting point, Aristotle was one of the first philosophers explicitly associated with the idea of physiognomy. The *Physiognomonica*, attributed to him, can be described as one of the earliest works on the subject. The work outlines three main methods for analyzing character through physical appearance. The first method involves observing similarities between different human ethnicities as well as between the sexes, suggesting that physical traits can indicate

[7] Magli, *Il volto e l'anima*, 77–78.

[8] Dürrigl, "Kalokagathia – beauty is more than just external appearance.", 208–210.

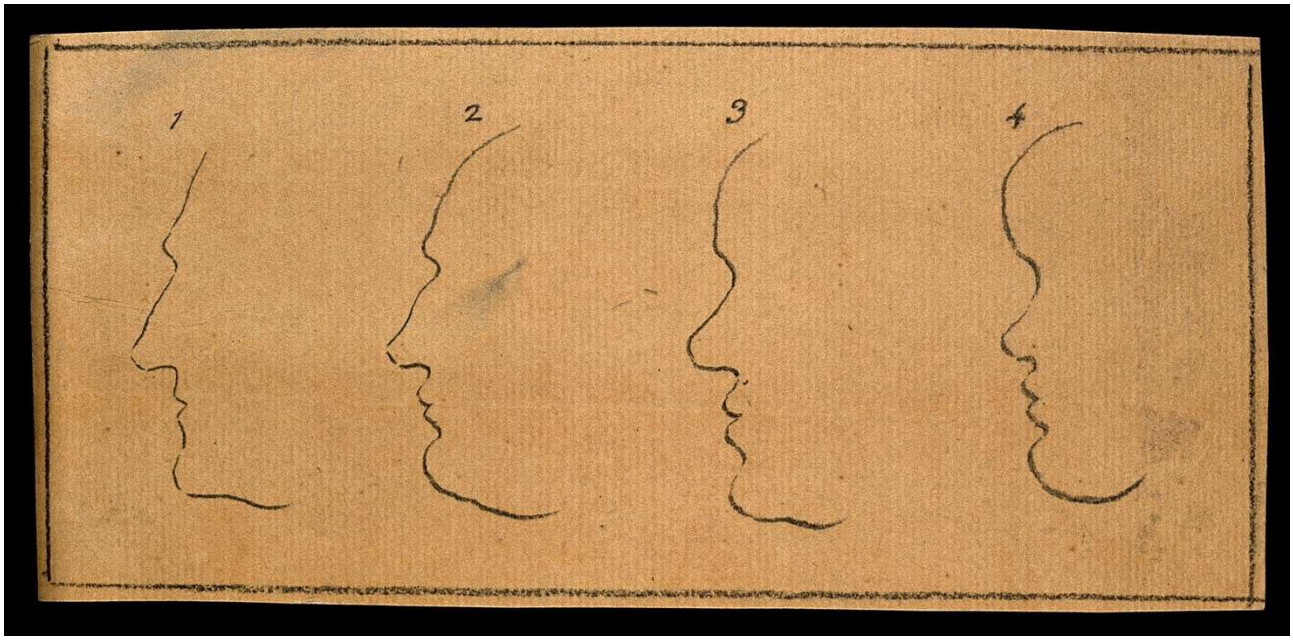
shared inner qualities. The second focuses on the analysis of facial expressions, which are seen as revealing the emotional and mental states of an individual. The third method draws comparisons between humans and animals – on the one hand – and between men and women on the other, with the assumption that similar physical features may reflect similar temperaments or instincts. Together, these approaches form the foundation of early physiognomic theory. Aristotle approached physiognomy in a systematic manner, restricting the characteristics that could be observable in both men and women, as well as in humans and animals.[9] The ideas defined by Aristotle would prove to be the foundation for later supporters of physiognomy.

Renaissance, with the rediscovery of classical texts, brought physiognomy back to the interest of people. Giovan Battista Della Porta was one of the most influential physiognomist of his time. In his *De Humana Physiognomonia* (1586) he drew from previous literature, especially Aristotle, to claim that physiognomy was a natural science. He made comparisons between humans and animals and he also stated that the character of a person is mutable: it is not just a relationship between body and soul, but environmental factors play a huge role.[10]

Therefore, the concept of physiognomy was not at all new in the 18th century, but it was thanks to Swiss philosopher and theologian Johann Caspar Lavater that it rapidly spread throughout Europe, capturing the interest of all social classes. In 1771 Lavater held a conference at the Natural History Society of Zurich, where his interest in physiognomy was expressed for the first time in public.[11] His main work, *Physiognomische Fragmente*, published between 1775 and 1778, popularized his idea that the face of a person, through the careful analysis of its parts, could reveal the soul of the individual. According to Lavater, God created all things individually and every single part of an individual has the character of the whole; this meant that every single part of a man contains their whole character. The baseline is that when we look only at people, even though individuals may look

[9] Shortland, "The power of a thousand eyes", 381-382.
[10] Kodera, *Giambattista della Porta*
[11] Magli, *Il volto e l'anima*, 307.

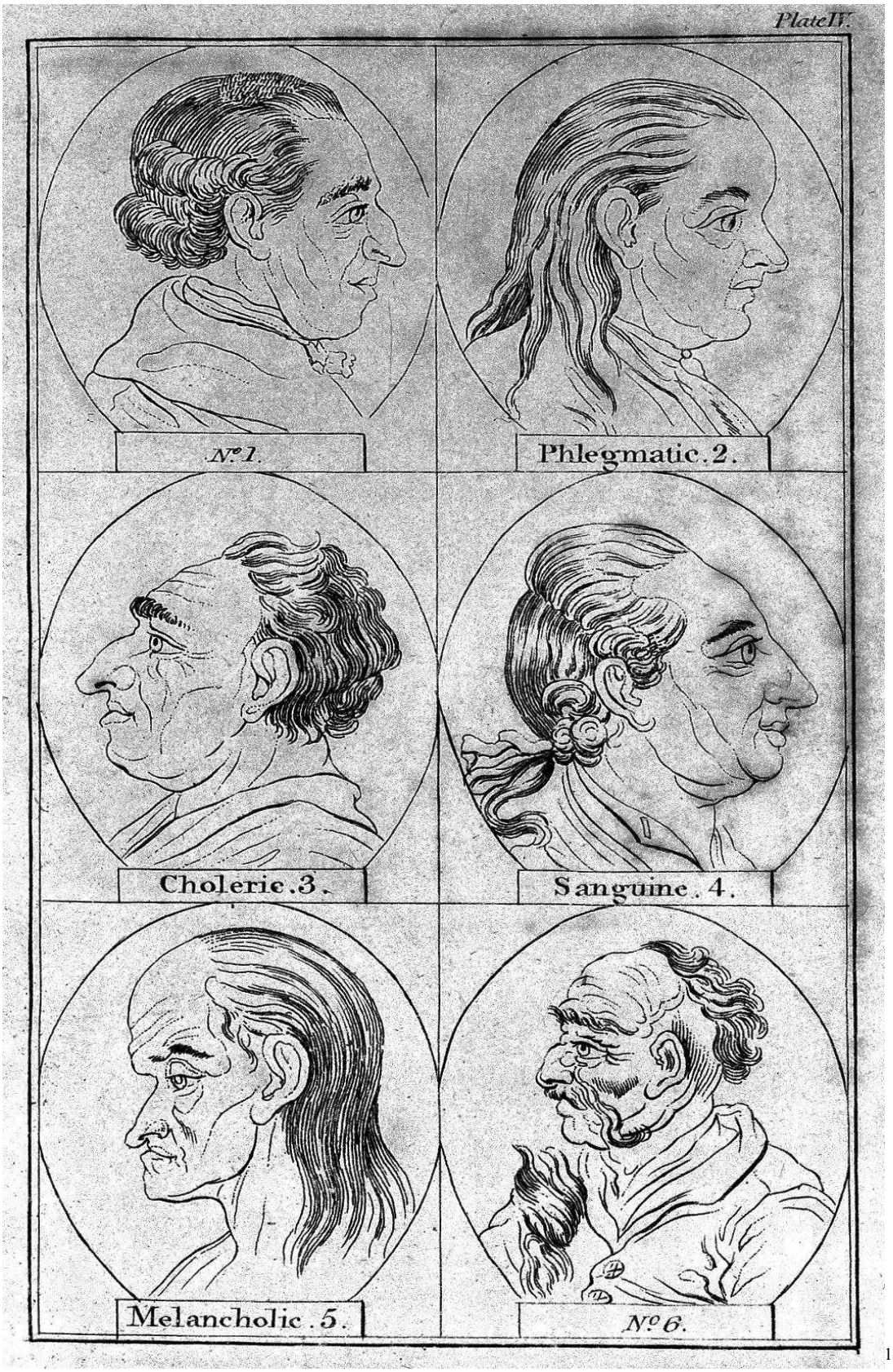
similar, no two people are exactly alike when you compare them closely. The same is true for their minds – there are not two people who think or feel in an exactly identical manner.[12] From an attentive study of the parts of a face, it was possible to comprehend the person's inner qualities. A beautiful, harmonious face, with regular features would have been an index of a good person; on the contrary, an irregular and ugly face would have meant an evil or corrupt person. This approach offered a synthesis between religion and sciences, putting an end to the conflict between the two: God had already inscribed everything there was to know about a person in his or her physiognomical traits and all there was to do was to learn how to read them. Physiognomy was treated by a legitimate science by Lavater, who presented a set of rules to abide in order to draw accurate impressions from the analysis of lineaments.



[13] Fig. 1

[12] Lavater, *Essays on physiognomy,* 3.

[13] Fig 1: outlines of faces: the left-hand pair expressing good judgment, the right-hand pair weakness of mind. Drawing, c. 1789.



[14] Fig. 2

[14] Fig. 2: temperaments, from Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy,* 1793.

The reputation of physiognomy in history was not always favourable; in early 18th – century England, it was widely regarded with skepticism and often dismissed as unscientific or superstitious. In 1743, its public practice was formally restricted under an Act of Parliament during the reign of King George II, which classified those claiming skill in physiognomy alongside rogues and vagabonds.[15] It was not until the later work of Lavater that physiognomy gained widespread popularity and recognition. Two translations of the *Physiognomische Fragmente* appeared on the market from 1789, both with the main title *Essays on Physiognomy*, one translated by Henry Hunter and the other one by Thomas Holcroft. The Holcroft translation became the most popular, since its price was more accessible to the masses. Holcroft's edition also proved the most durable, with several versions published until the end of the 19th century.[16]

There are different reasons why the *Essays on Physiognomy* became so popular in England. First of all, Lavater's work on physiognomy was crafted to have the appearance of scientific legitimacy. At the same time, his writings employed a strong theological dimension, presenting physiognomy as a means of discerning the divine order inherent in creation. According to Lavater, the moral and spiritual qualities of individuals were visibly written in their physical features, reflecting the intrinsic goodness and intentionality of God. This synthesis of emerging scientific discourse with religious devotion resonated with contemporary audiences, offering an approach that accommodated both faith and reason.[17] The work appealed to the public largely because its main goal was to make physiognomy accessible to a broad audience. By emphasizing the use of the senses – especially sight – it encouraged readers to observe and interpret the stable, visible features of a person's face as a means of understanding character.[18] Moreover, Lavater's influence extended beyond his writings, as his character and ideas were highly regarded by several prominent figures of the time. Philosopher and writers such as Johann G. Herder (by whom Lavater was influenced), M.me de Staël, and Mary

[15] Shortland, "The power of a thousand eyes", 380.
[16] Shortland, "The power of a thousand eyes", 383.
[17] Graham, "Lavater's physiognomy in England", 563.
[18] Shortland, "The power of a thousand eyes", 389.

Empress of Russia expressed admiration for him, which further enhanced his reputation across Europe. In 1777 the Emperor Joseph II had a long talk with Lavater on physiognomy[19]; ten years later, Prince Edward of England, the father of the future Queen Victoria, personally visited him in Switzerland.[20] This extensive recognition underlines the significant cultural impact of his work and the extent to which physiognomy became a subject of serious interest in both intellectual and social circles.

Furthermore, a number of positive reviews on Lavater appeared in both European and English periodicals. The *Gentleman's Magazine* linked physiognomy to medical and philosophical traditions, endorsing Lavater's work.[21] The English poet William Cowper was influenced by Lavater's ideas on physiognomy and often mentioned him in his correspondence. However, there were also notable skeptics, such as the writer and philanthropist Hannah More, as well as the Irish writer Maria Edgeworth, who remained unconvinced.[22] It is nonetheless undeniable that physiognomy began to be employed in literature all throughout Europe. In England, instances of the pseudoscience can be detected in the work of the most prominent authors of 19th century, such as Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë.[23]

In this section, we have discussed how physiognomy gained notable popularity in Victorian England, reflecting the era's fascination with interpreting character through physical appearance. Nonetheless, physiognomy was not the only pseudoscience to emerge during this period. Other prominent examples include phrenology, which will be examined in the following section, and mesmerism, which will be discussed thereafter. These pseudosciences, like physiognomy, had a considerable impact on Victorian literature, influencing character development, narrative themes, and providing authors with the framework to convey moral judgement through external appearance.

[19] Graham, "Lavater's physiognomy in England", 565.
[20] Shortland, "The power of a thousand eyes", 387.
[21] Graham, "Lavater's physiognomy in England, 565.
[22] Graham, "Lavater's physiognomy in England, 565.
[23] Boshears, Whitaker, "Phrenology and physiognomy in Victorian literature", 96-100.

1.2 Phrenology: interpreting the skull

As it was demonstrated in the previous chapter, the idea that the external appearance of a person could reveal inner traits was well-established in the 19th century. Physiognomy laid the foundation of the thought that the exterior of a person could reveal inner qualities, and highly influenced a new pseudo-science: phrenology. While both disciplines ultimately justified moral judgments through physical appearance, phrenology distinguished itself by linking these judgments to brain anatomy rather than facial aesthetics – an adaptation that aligned more closely with emerging scientific and medical discourses of the 19th century.

In the previous century, in his *L'Homme Machine* the materialist philosopher Julien Offray de La Mettrie theorised that thought arised from the material organisation of the brain (ergo, thought is a biological process.)[24] The idea of the localisation of brain function was also a central concept of *Idea of New Anatomy of the Brain* published in 1811 by Scottish surgeon and anatomist Charles Bell.[25] In 18th and 19th century, cerebral localisation became an inquiry both medical and philosophical all throughout Europe. In this context, the German physician Franz Joseph Gall formulated a theory on the functions of the brain, which would later be called phrenology. Born in 1758, Gall was profoundly fascinated by the philosophy of Johann Gottfried von Herder, who envisioned Nature as an organic entity. Herder proposed that mental states and the mind are composed of forces which express themselves through a person's bodily actions and behaviors – in the same manner that forces in physical nature manifest themselves through the movements and actions of physical objects.[26] These theories were the same that influenced Lavater's physiognomy. Gall obtained his medical doctorate in Vienna in the year 1785 and at that time, the scientific world was very receptive to new theories and discoveries. Gall did a lot of empirical observation, especially at the Allgemeines Krankenhaus, a public hospital recently founded in Vienna, where he was encouraged to observe

[24] Magli, *Il volto e l'anima*, 356.
[25] Magli, *Il volto e l'anima*, 356
[26] Forster, "Johann Gottfried von Herder"

patients, including the ones in the psychiatric ward.[27] Gall's goal was ambitious: to create a science explaining human nature and behaviours in scientific terms. He proceeded to collect and study skulls, both animal and human, to validate his hypothesis.[28] From all this observation he constructed his theory – that he himself named *Schädellehre* or *Organologie*[29] – that the brain is divided into different parts, each of which has its own specialization. The science was built on the following principles, as summarized by historian John van Wyhe:

1- The brain is the organ of the mind;
2- the mind is composed of multiple distinct, innate faculties;
3- because they are distinct, each faculty must have a separate region or "organ" in the brain;
4- the size of an organ, other things being equal, is a measure of its power;
5- the shape of the brain is determined by the development of the various organs;
6- since the skull takes its shape from the brain, its surface can be read as an accurate index of psychological aptitudes and tendencies.[30]

The different parts of the brain are called "organs", and each is linked to a different part of the personality. Gall recognized twenty-seven organs and went out to postulate that the skull was molded by the shape of the organ underneath it: this caused "bumps" or protuberances in the cranium. If the organ was particularly developed, it was signaled by a bump in the head; by analysing and touching the skull, it was possible to understand which organs were the most developed, and therefore the personality and inclinations of the subject. Out of the twenty-seven faculties, nineteen were in common with animals – sexual instinct or amativeness, love of offspring, friendship or attachment, instinct for self-defence, instinct to kill, cunning, desire to possess things, pride, vanity, foresight, memory for things or educability, sense of place and spatial sense, memory for persons or creatures,

[27] Simpson, "Phrenology and the neurosciences", 475.
[28] Van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the origins of Victorian scientific naturalism*, 14.
[29]Van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the origins of Victorian scientific naturalism,* 18.
[30] Van Wyhe, "Was phrenology a reform science?", 2.

memory for words, sense of language, colour sense, sense of musical tones, recognition of numbers, mechanical sense – while seven were unique to man: comparative sagacity, metaphysical spirit, wit and joking, poetic ability, goodness (moral sense and conscience), mimicry, religious instinct, firmness and obstinacy.[31]

In 1796, Gall began to give public lectures on his *Organologie* and hired an assistant, Johann Gaspar Spurzheim. Together, they toured several major European countries, gaining considerable attention.[32] After settling in Paris in 1807, Gall parted ways with Spurzheim, who went on to further develop Gall's ideas independently and eventually made his way to England. Johann Spurzheim introduced phrenology to Great Britain during his lecture tours between 1814 and 1815. Among his early audiences was a young Edinburgh lawyer, George Combe, who, though initially skeptical, soon became a committed advocate of the discipline. In 1820, Combe founded the first Phrenological Society in Great Britain, based in Edinburgh, and by 1823 had established the *Phrenological Journal* to further spread phrenological theories.[33] He played a crucial role in popularizing the movement by simplifying the complex theories of Gall and Spurzheim, making them more accessible to the general public. As a result, phrenology experienced significant growth in popularity throughout the 1820s. Beyond its scientific claims, Combe developed a broader social philosophy from phrenological principles, one that resonated strongly with the values and concerns of the rising middle class.[34]

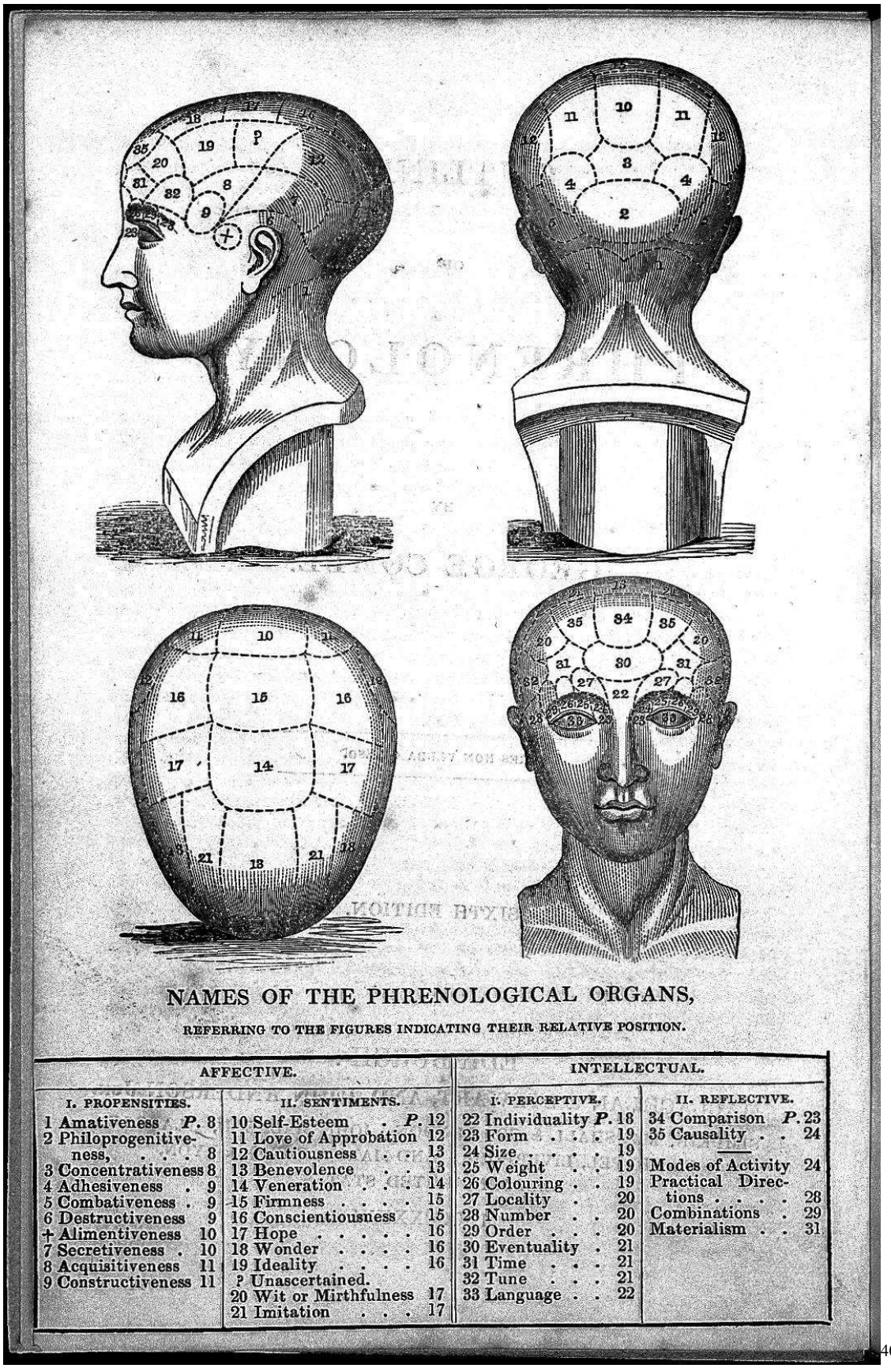
Spurzheim argued that heredity was a fundamental principle of human nature, stating that children inherited not only physical traits but also mental dispositions from their parents. In *A View of the Elementary Principles of Education* (1821), he advocated for a comprehensive educational approach that addressed the physical, intellectual, and moral development of a person. Central to his reasoning was the idea that understanding human nature was essential to tailoring education to each student's

[31] Simpson, "Phrenology and the neurosciences", 476.
[32] Van Wyhe, *Phrenology and the origins of Victorian scientific naturalism*, 19.
[33] Parssinen, "Popular science and society", 3.
[34] Parssinen, "Popular science and society", 3.

unique talents. While he acknowledged the possibility of personal improvement, he insisted that individuals could neither lose an existing mental faculty nor acquire a new one. Building on this premise – and drawing also from the work of James Cowles Prichard – George Combe elaborated a theory of human perfectibility.[35] In his main and most influential work, *The Constitution of Man considered in relation to external objects* (1828), Combe argued that although the size of a brain organ – and therefore its associated faculty – was fixed, the activity of that organ could be influenced by environmental stimulation. Over the course of an individual's life, this variation in activity could lead to observable changes in personality and behavior.[36] For Combe, the mind could be trained just like the body. A person's disposition could be identified and developed – especially in children. Teachers, therefore, had the responsibility to educate each child based on their dominant mental faculties; this perspective called for a reform in education. A similar change was necessary in the penal system. Since criminals were simply acting according to their natural dispositions, they should not be punished, but rather educated. The same applied to patients in asylums. The environment played a fundamental role: prisons and mental institutions should aim to rehabilitate individuals, preparing them to eventually reintegrate into society.[37] In this sense, phrenology resonated with Victorian ideals of progress, social order, and personal responsibility – suggesting that individuals could reshape their destinies through self-knowledge and moral discipline.

This philosophy attached to phrenology was part of its success amongst all social classes; lectures in mechanical institute and the distribution of inexpensive pamphlets contributed to its rising popularity.[38] Its widespread appeal even reached the highest levels of society: Queen Victoria and Prince Albert themselves were interested in the claims of phrenology; they invited George Combe to the Palace in two different occasions to "read" the heads of their children.[39]

[35] Jenkins, "Phrenology, heredity and progress in George Combe's 'Constitution of Man'", 6.
[36] Jenkins, "Phrenology, heredity and progress in George Combe's 'Constitution of Man'", 7.
[37] Parsinnen, "Popular science and society", 6-7.
[38] Parssinen, "The phrenology movement in early Victorian Britain", 2.
[39] Parssinen, "The phrenology movement in early Victorian Britain", 1.



NAMES OF THE PHRENOLOGICAL ORGANS,

REFERRING TO THE FIGURES INDICATING THEIR RELATIVE POSITION.

AFFECTIVE.		INTELLECTUAL.	
I. PROPENSITIES.	II. SENTIMENTS.	I. PERCEPTIVE.	II. REFLECTIVE.
1 Amativeness *P.* 8	10 Self-Esteem . *P.* 12	22 Individuality *P.* 18	34 Comparison *P.* 23
2 Philoprogenitiveness, . . . 8	11 Love of Approbation 12	23 Form 19	35 Causality . . 24
3 Concentrativeness 8	12 Cautiousness . . 13	24 Size 19	
4 Adhesiveness . 9	13 Benevolence . . 13	25 Weight . . . 19	Modes of Activity 24
5 Combativeness . 9	14 Veneration . . . 14	26 Colouring . . 19	Practical Directions 28
6 Destructiveness 9	15 Firmness 15	27 Locality . . 20	Combinations . 29
+ Alimentiveness 10	16 Conscientiousness 15	28 Number . . 20	Materialism . . 31
7 Secretiveness . 10	17 Hope 16	29 Order . . . 20	
8 Acquisitiveness 11	18 Wonder 16	30 Eventuality . 21	
9 Constructiveness 11	19 Ideality 16	31 Time 21	
	? Unascertained.	32 Tune 21	
	20 Wit or Mirthfulness 17	33 Language . . 22	
	21 Imitation . . . 17		

[40] Fig. 3

[40] Fig. 3: George Combe, *Names of Phrenological Organs,* 1836.

Though many remained skeptic about the principles of phrenology, the discipline gained supporters in the medical field. As of 1836 there were more than thirty phrenological societies in Europe, and among the members there were physicians and surgeons.[41] In 1837 Daniel Noble, member of the Royal college of surgeons in London and president of the Manchester Phrenological Society, published an inquiry on the scientific claim of phrenology, comparing it to legitimate sciences like chemistry and geology. The verdict, according to him, was that phrenology was indeed entitled to a place among real sciences.[42]

Phrenology was not the only pseudoscience that studied the possible relationship between mind and matter; in Victorian England, practitioners of phrenology were not infrequently believers in another theory: mesmerism. In the 1840s phrenology and mesmerism coexisted peacefully and mutually benefitted from each other.[43] In the next section the relationship between phrenology and mesmerism will be examined; we will then explore how mesmerism, despite its contested status, laid important groundwork for the development of hypnosis.

[41] Erickson, "Phrenology and Physical Anthropology, 93.
[42] Noble, *An inquiry into the claims of phrenology to rank among the sciences.*
[43] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 206.

1.3 Mesmerism and the power of the subconscious mind

> The science of MESMERISM is a new philosophical truth of incalculable value and importance; and, though sneered at by the pseudo-philosophers of the day, there is not the less certainty that it presents the only avenue through which is discernible a ray of hope that the more intricate phenomena of the nervous system, - of Life, - will ever be revealed to man.[44]

This is what the "Prospectus" of the first volume of *The Zoist,* a mid-nineteenth-century British journal specialized in the dissemination of phrenology and mesmerism, claimed about the importance and value of mesmeric practices. To understand exactly what mesmerism was and why it significantly captured interest in early Victorian Britain, it is necessary to regress to the earlier century, when German physician Franz Anton Mesmer conceived his theory of "animal magnetism".

In the final *Queries* of the second edition of the *Opticks*, dated 1717, Isaac Newton hypothesized that the fundament of gravitational forces was a sort of spirit, thinner even than air, a fluid through which it was possible to explain not only gravitation, but also organic processes.[45] This theory greatly influenced studies on electricity: Benjamin Franklin speculated that the cause of electricity resided in a fluid that permeated all material substances. In Turin, Luigi Galvani put forth the concept of "animal electricity," proposing that an electrical fluid was responsible for the biological processes within the body. This theory prompted a series of experiments aimed at exploring the potential medical applications of electricity. This raised the question on whether electricity was the fundamental force underlying life itself.[46]

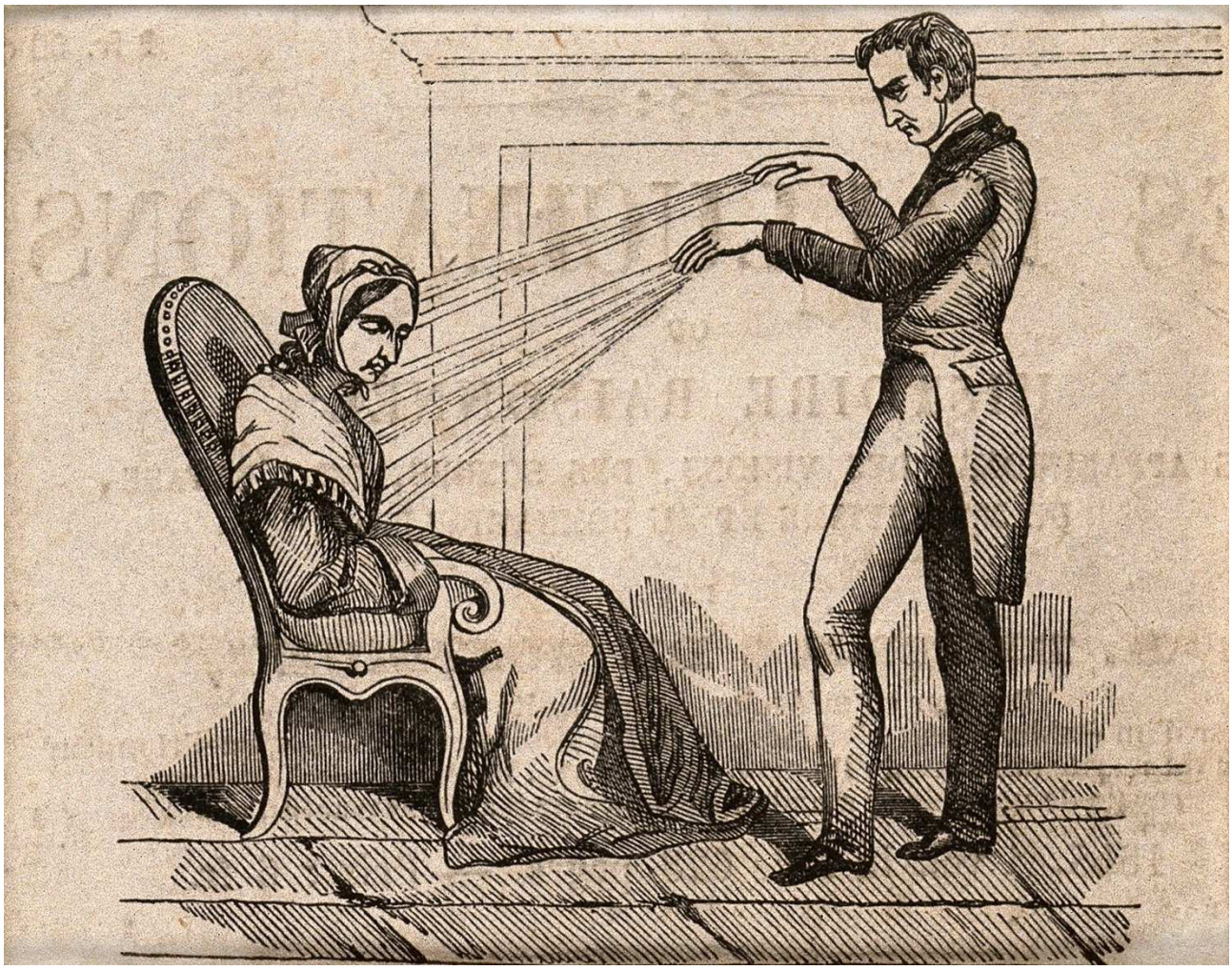
These theories on fluids influenced Mesmer, who graduated in medicine at the university of Vienna with a dissertation claiming that the essence of all natural phenomena was not electricity, but magnetism. According to him, bodies – both animate and inanimate - exercised an influenced each

[44] *The Zoist,* Vol 1.
[45] Ciardi, *Breve Storia delle Pseudoscienze*, 51.
[46] Ciardi, *Breve Storia delle Pseudoscienze*, 51.

other through the intervention of a universal and extremely fine fluid. This fluid permeated all material bodies, but some of them permitted its passage better than others, for example trees, water and the nerves in the human body.[47] Mesmer claimed that his theory was an application of Newton's laws on bodily health[48] and it was a cure for essentially every ailment. The fluid theorized by Mesmer was not static and could be moved.[49] When the flow of this magnetic substance was obstructed, disease followed. Thus, to reestablish health, the normal circulation of the fluid should be restored. Since the fluid was thought to be present in every human being, the mere touch of a mesmeric "operator" could restore health, but the contact with a chain of people would prove even more effective. Moreover, some objects – like water – could be "magnetized" that is, infused with the magnetic fluid; magnetized water was given by patients to help with the therapy on various occasions.[50] During individual treatment, although reactions varied, usually a "crisis" happened, involving convulsions and seizures, which were a supposed signal that the treatment was working.[51] As multiple people were reportedly cured by this method, it began to attract increasing attention – particularly in France, where Mesmer practiced – prompting King Louis XVI to appoint two Royal Commissions to investigate mesmeric practices and assess the validity of mesmerism.[52] Among the members were Benjamin Franklin and the chemist L. de Lavoisier. The final report was not very encouraging, claiming that it was impossible to prove the existence of a "magnetic fluid" and that the results of such practices could be attributed to the power of suggestion or, simply, the course of nature. Uneducated people, women and children were also deemed to be more sensitive to suggestions.[53] Believers in mesmerism refused to be intimidated by the reports and mesmeric practice continued. It is interesting to note that Lavater himself was a believer in mesmerism and was influenced by it in

[47] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 11.
[48] Winter, *Mesmerized,* 2.
[49] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 11.
[50] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism, 12.*
[51] Ziesche, "Containing the Flow of Animal Magnetism", 296.
[52] Ziesche, "Containing the Flow of Animal Magnetism", 295.
[53] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 26-28.

the development of his ideas, particularly his belief that all human beings are interconnected through a magnetic fluid and therefore share an innate physiognomic perception of one another.[54]



[55] Fig.4

[54] Magli, *Il volto e l'anima*, 309.

[55] Fig. 4: a mesmerist using animal magnetism on a seated female patient. Wood engraving, ca. 1845.

"Mesmeric sleep" and instances of extra-sensory perception

An important name in the history of mesmerism is that of the Marquis the Puységur, who is now regarded as one of the pioneers of hypnotism. Puységur, an artillery officer, became interested in mesmerism when his brother, the Count of Chastenet and later a mesmerist himself, was cured by Mesmer in 1780.[56] He became himself a practitioner in Strasbourg, where he progressively gained a positive reputation. One of his most notorious cases is that of Victor Race, a young man who suffered from pulmonary ailments. During a session of magnetic treatment, he entered a trance-like sleep and began to deliriously speak about his troubles at home. This was the first time a trance like this was noted in a mesmerized patient and Puységur employed the opportunity to instill positive thoughts in him. After the therapy, Victor began to improve rapidly.[57] Furthermore, Puységur observed that when the patient entered a state of mesmeric sleep, or "artificial sleep", it became relatively simple to guide him into performing specific actions and speaking in a manner that was uncharacteristic for him. Interestingly, Victor himself began to predict the trajectory of his own disease and even prescribed his own treatments. As news of his accomplishment spread, an increasing number of individuals sought Puysegur's guidance for healing.[58] During his practices, the somnambulic and clairvoyant state replaced the distressing "crises" typical of mesmerist practices, rendering his services even more desired by people who wished to avoid unpleasant fits.

This shift marked the onset of subsequent episodes of clairvoyant mesmerism. Certain characteristics of these somnambulic states began to be documented, including the inability to recall actions or words spoken during the mesmeric sleep. Additionally, individuals in this state exhibited heightened perceptive abilities not present in their normal waking condition. Moreover, they were capable of executing instructions given during the somnambulic state once they had returned to full consciousness.[59]

[56] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 39.
[57] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 41.
[58] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 42.
[59] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 60.

Instances of extra-sensory perception (ESP) began to be registered, with ESP defined as the acquisition of information without the involvement of the senses. As Alan Gauld notes, the testimonies from this early period were primarily composed of second-hand accounts, often inadequately reported, alongside a limited number of experimental records. These reports described a variety of phenomena, such as:

- Patients responding to the unexpressed will of the magnetizer, suggesting a form of telepathic connection.
- Falling into a somnambulic state at the will of the magnetizer, even when the latter was in another room. Mesmer himself was reported to have succeeded in magnetizing a subject through a wall.
- The ability to see inside oneself and being able to describe internal organs and nerves, or to see into another person's body and provide diagnostic advice for curing ailments.
- Foreseeing future crises and events, not only concerning one's own life but also in the lives of others.
- The ability to see the magnetic fluid clearly.
- Descriptions of subjects seeing people through closed eyes and speaking about their concerns without prior knowledge of them.
- The ability to perceive sensory information (sight, hearing, taste, smell) through parts of the body other than the typical sensory organs, notably through the pit of the stomach.[60]

The phenomena of extrasensory perception in a mesmeric context opened the path to a mystical interpretation of animal magnetism. As the understanding of the magnetic fluid and its effects evolved, so did the notion that magnetism could transcend its physical properties and become a vehicle for spiritual and mystical experiences. This shift laid the foundation for a "mystical

[60] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 62-64.

magnetism," where the focus moved beyond therapeutic applications to comprise deeper, more esoteric dimensions of the mind and spirit.

Mystical magnetism

In the city of Lyon, a group of mesmerists – who had not been trained by Mesmer – developed a distinctive philosophy, influenced by Swedenborgian beliefs. They posited that humans, created by God, represented one of His most recent emanations, claiming the existence of other intelligent creatures that were even closer to the divine. According to their belief, there were two distinct types of magnetic fluids: one alike to the fluid described by Mesmer, which could accumulate and cause blockages, and another fluid flowing directly from God, which could not be stored. It was this second, divine fluid that was thought to facilitate the healing of diseases. To effectively channel this fluid, an operator needed to elevate themselves spiritually through religious practice, while a patient, in a somnambulic state, could access a higher self, closer to God. Along this path, patients might encounter "intermediate spirits" or "guardian angels." These mesmerists began to ask whether somnambulic clairvoyance could serve as a gateway to the spiritual realm, providing answers to profound religious and metaphysical questions. Reportedly, a Mlle. Rochette claimed to have seen and conversed with angels and saints during her somnambulic state and also reported messages from the deceased.[61]

With the onset of the French revolution, mesmeric activity drastically declined in France; however, the interest in this practice spread to neighboring countries. In Germany, curiosity for mesmerism intertwined with romantic ideas and religious mysticism, a synthesis exemplified by the writings of Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling, who maintained that God was an all-pervasive entity. Central to Jung-Stilling's thought is the concept of the ether – identified with the mesmeric fluid – which he regarded as the medium through which divine and spiritual forces operated. He proposed that every human

[61] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 67.

possesses a duplicate, etheric "light body" which, when united with the spirit, constitutes the soul.[62] According to Jung-Stilling, mesmeric practices had the power to temporarily liberate the soul from the physical body, enabling it to traverse distant places; particularly sensitive individuals, he believed, might even perceive the souls of the deceased.

Even though not all German magnetizers were interested in metaphysical phenomena, concern about the supposed paranormal dimension of the mesmeric discipline did not go unnoticed. In his *Die Wunder des Magnetismus*, published in 1811, Ludwig Vogel reported cases of alleged paranormal phenomena during mesmeric practice. As Gauld himself notices, it is difficult to assess the reliability of these episodes, and it is even more challenging to estimate how huge a role suggestion played.[63] These reported episodes could be either spontaneous or induced through experimentation. An example of a spontaneous ESP event described by Vogel is that of a young woman who, during magnetic sleep, suddenly expressed concern for her father, whom she claimed to see dying and covered in blood. She had no recollection of this episode while awake. Weeks later she received a communication from her father, learning that at the time she was having the vision, he had actually suffered an accident and had lost a great quantity of blood.[64]

Another significant figure in the German mesmeric movement was the physician and writer Justinus Kerner, who firmly believed in the reality of mesmerism. Kerner documented the remarkable case of Friederike Hauffe, known as the "Seeress of Prevorst", a woman who claimed to communicate with spirits. Over the course of his observations, Kerner became increasingly convinced of the authenticity of her abilities.[65] Hauffe was said to perceive the contents of sealed letters, witness distant events, diagnose illnesses and prescribe appropriate cures. Moreover, reports outlined physical manifestations such as rapping sounds and instances of levitation. According to Kerner, the spirits with whom Hauffe communicated were trapped within the earthly realm, and through her

[62] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 145.
[63] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 146.
[64] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 147-48.
[65] Jennings, "Justinus Kerner's 'Seherin von Prevorst'", 304.

mediumship she sought to guide them towards freedom. Kerner recorded these phenomena with meticulous detail and now Hauffe is often regarded as a precursor to the later American spiritualist movement.[66] The case gained international attention when Catherine Crowe translated Kerner's report into English in 1845. This was one of the most famous, but certainly not the only account of women claiming contact with the spiritual word.

In France, animal magnetism experienced a revival at the beginning of the 19th century and like in Germany, in some cases it veered towards a mystical direction. This period marked the rise of public magnetic demonstrators – practitioners who toured the country showcasing the purported powers of mesmerism through public exhibitions. Some of these magnetizers sought to display the so-called "higher phenomena" of magnetism, such as clairvoyance.[67] However, the majority of practitioners remained primarily concerned with the therapeutic application of animal magnetism for the healing of disease and did not engage in public demonstrations. Accounts of extrasensory perception during mesmeric practices were recorded in France as well. During this period, it became increasingly common to employ somnambules in a mesmeric trance to locate missing people or objects, and even to identify criminals. Reports also included mystical experiences, such as encounters with angels, spirits, and souls of the deceased.[68] It must also be acknowledged that many of these instances were undoubtedly flawed and often met with skepticism. A notable example, reported in the *Provincial Medical & Surgical Journal* in 1846, involved a somnambulist who, during a clairvoyant demonstration in Paris, was asked to assess the health of a child based on a lock of hair. She confidently declared that the hair belonged to a gravely ill child and even proposed a series of remedies. In reality, however, the hair had been taken from a camel – highlighting the dubious nature of such practices and the ease with which they could mislead both practitioners and observers.[69]

[66] Jennings, "Justinus Kerner's 'Seherin von Prevorst'", 304.
[67] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 164.
[68] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 171.
[69] "Animal Magnetism: Clairvoyance", 507–508.

Mesmerism arrives in London

In Britain, interest in animal magnetism was mild during the final decades of the 18th century before fading from view, only to be revived in 1837 by the French mesmerist Baron Dupotet de Sennevoy. Dupotet began treating patients in London, and this intrigued one of the most distinguished doctors of the capital: John Elliotson.[70] Elliotson was one of the most estimated physicians of his time, professor of medicine at London University and senior physician to University College Hospital. He was known for continuously experimenting with new methods of treating illness and his goal was for medical science to progress through reforms.[71] He was also an ardent advocate of phrenology and president of the London Phrenological Society, which he also founded. Fascinated by Dupotet and his demonstrations, Elliotson himself began experimenting with mesmerism on patients and eventually opened his trials to the public, which was composed of medical students along with influential figures with no medical training.[72] Through mesmerism, Elliotson sought to provide a scientific basis and physiological explanation for purported paranormal phenomena, such as clairvoyance; hence, occurrences once attributed to mysterious or inexplicable external forces could be reinterpreted and rationalised.[73] To ensure contextual and historical clarity, it is significant to observe that, though belief in magic and the occult never disappeared, the beginning of the 19th century in Britain saw an attempt to eradicate such credence, which was considered rather scandalous in society, especially among the middle classes.[74] Nevertheless, in Victorian Britain the interest in pseudosciences was strong, and mesmerism, with its unexplainable and supernatural nuances, was no exception. Similarly to physiognomy and phrenology, its allure lay in its accessibility: it was not necessary to have medical education to induce a mesmeric trance and benefit from it, anybody could learn it.

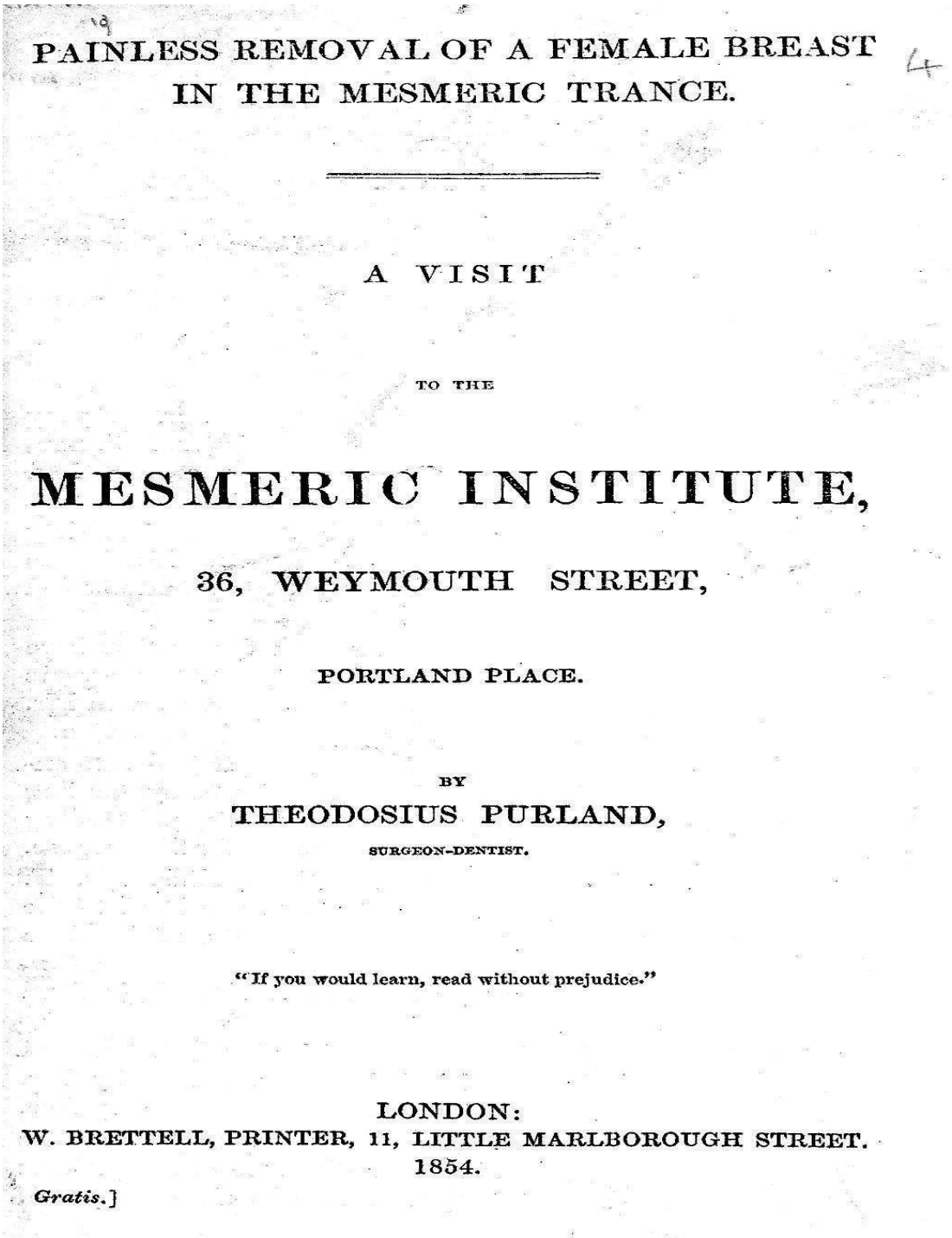
[70] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 199.
[71] Winter, "Mesmerism and Popular Culture in Early Victorian England", 320.
[72] Winter, "Mesmerism and Popular Culture in Early Victorian England", 324.
[73] Winter, "Mesmerism and Popular Culture in Early Victorian England", 321.
[74] Waters, "Magic and the British Middle Classes", 633.

The most emblematic case Elliotson treated was that of two epileptic sisters, Jane and Elizabeth O'Key, who exhibited apparent instances of clairvoyance, transposition of the senses and precognition of imminent indisposition during their treatment.[75] Accounts of these demonstrations were published in *The Lancet* in 1838. Thomas Wakley, the founder and editor of the journal, remained skeptical, regarding the experiments as fraudulent and becoming a fervent opponent of mesmerism.[76] It was indeed problematic to determine whether the O'Key sisters were genuinely influenced by a magnetic force, deliberately deceiving their audience, or merely experiencing the effects of imagination during the magnetic sleep. Nonetheless, the case achieved extensive curiosity as debate followed concerning the validity of animal magnetism as a cure. Michael Faraday himself was interested in the practice and in a few occasions accompanied Elliotson while he performed mesmeric treatment on female patients.[77] Public opinion became divided, and in response to mounting public disapproval, the College Hospital banned the practice of animal magnetism within its premises.[78] Despite conflicting impressions, mesmerism continued being pursued. In 1840, the poet and clergyman Chauncy Hare Townsend, a friend of both Elliotson and Charles Dickens, published *Facts in Mesmerism*, further contributing to the discourse surrounding the practice.

As noted previously, it was common in this period for mesmerists to showcase the wonders of animal magnetism through public demonstrations, often involving direct audience participation. In 1841, the French magnetic demonstrator C. L. Lafontaine arrived in England and embarked on a nationwide tour. The primary phenomenon he displayed was insensitivity to physical stimulation during the mesmeric trance.[79] Although remarkable to contemporary audiences, the phenomenon was not entirely unprecedented, since mesmerism had previously been used as an anesthetic in surgical

[75] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 202.
[76] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 202.
[77] Winter, "Mesmerism and Popular Culture in Early Victorian England", 326.
[78] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 203.
[79] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 203.

procedures. In France in 1826, a woman reportedly experienced no pain while undergoing a breast amputation performed under a mesmeric trance.[80]



PAINLESS REMOVAL OF A FEMALE BREAST
IN THE MESMERIC TRANCE.

A VISIT

TO THE

MESMERIC INSTITUTE,

36, WEYMOUTH STREET,

PORTLAND PLACE.

BY

THEODOSIUS PURLAND,

SURGEON-DENTIST.

"If you would learn, read without prejudice."

LONDON:
W. BRETTELL, PRINTER, 11, LITTLE MARLBOROUGH STREET.
1854.

Gratis.]

[81] Fig. 5

[80] Winter, *Mesmerized*, 42.

[81] Fig. 5: pamphlet promoting the painless removal of a breast on a patient under mesmeric trance, 1854.

Lafontaine's demonstrations attracted considerable attention and inspired a number of imitators, including Spencer T. Hall, one of the most prominent English mesmerists. Hall founded the journal *The Phreno-Magnet* to publicize and discuss mesmerism, and he personally introduced the practice to the writer Harriet Martineau as a treatment for ailments of the uterus. Under Hall's guidance, Martineau's maid learned to mesmerize her, allo wing the treatments to continue at home.[82]

The popularity of mesmerism in this period was deeply intertwined with contemporary notions of gender and sensibility. In the Victorian imagination, women were often portrayed as fragile creatures, highly susceptible to the influence of imagination and, consequently, unreliable in their perception of empirical evidence. Opponents of female intellectual activity argued that excessive mental exertion was incompatible with the limits of the female body. Yet, this same belief in women's heightened imaginative sensitivity could be reinterpreted positively within the context of mesmerism: it was such receptiveness that allowed them to achieve particularly successful results in mesmeric practice.[83] It was hardly coincidental that mesmerism was most often practiced by men upon female patients. It was also among these women that claims of contact with spirits and clairvoyance most frequently arose. Within this cultural context, Martineau's experience acquired notable relevance. The interventions reportedly brought her significant relief, and she courageously published an account of her recovery in a series of letters to the *Athenaeum* in 1844.[84] Her testimony quickly became a public sensation.

Meanwhile, Elliotson was compelled to resign from the College Hospital; nevertheless, his conviction in the principles of mesmerism remained unwavering. In 1843, he founded *The Zoist: A Journal of Cerebral Physiology and Mesmerism, and Their Applications to Human Welfare*. Within its pages, he expressed agreement with George Combe's theories, asserting that insanity and criminality should

[82] Gauld, A history of hypnotism, 205.
[83] Winter, *Mesmerized*, 214-215.
[84] Winter, *Mesmerized*, 224.

not be punished, as such behaviours resulted from innate predispositions. He was also a fervent advocate of mesmeric anesthesia and expressed bewilderment at why surgeons continued to perform operations without it, needlessly subjecting patients to pain.[85] At the height of mesmerism's popularity, it became closely associated with phrenology, a synthesis that came to be known as *phrenomesmerism*.

Phrenomesmerism

In the previous section it was discussed how phrenologists used their hands to analyze the skull of a person in order to identify which regions of the brain were believed to be most active or developed in an individual. Mesmerist began to use this approach with the aim of eliciting a particular area of the brain through hand contact. By touching the part of the skull corresponding to a particular organ, and therefore faculty, the person – already under mesmeric trance – would manifest the corresponding emotional or intellectual response.[86] The convergence of these two pseudosciences led to public demonstrations in which audiences were enthralled by the performances of so-called phrenomesmerists upon their subjects. This form of spectacle was popularized by Spencer T. Hall, who demonstrated it at the Sheffield Mechanical Institute in 1842 and after which it rapidly spread throughout England.[87] Moreover, a number of periodicals emerged that documented and discussed such experiments, further contributing to their dissemination and appeal. Beyond the realm of performance, both phrenologists and mesmerists sought to extend their beliefs into the field of literature, claiming that an author's creative effort reflected their phrenological conformation and mesmeric states. They argued that the form and content of a literary work could be interpreted through the shape of the writer's skull, and that individuals in a mesmeric trance were capable of producing

[85] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 207.
[86] Winter, *Mesmerized*, 117.
[87] Kurshan, "Mind reading: literature in the discourse of early Victorian phrenology and mesmerism", 19.

poetry that revealed the workings of the entranced mind.[88] This close relationship between the two disciplines and their appeal to popular audiences is highlighted by T.M Parsinnen, who notes that:

> To many Victorians the claims of mesmerism about the powers of the human mind were credible in light of the revelations of phrenology. Mesmerism and phrenology, in contradiction to natural science, claimed to reveal human powers that could transform a person's life. Like phrenology, mesmerism had practical implications: just as phrenology had promised knowledge that could alleviate or solve social problems, so mesmerism promised knowledge that could eradicate disease. Finally, both phrenology and mesmerism were ideally suited to a dramatic demonstration, for the performer could "prove" to the audience the truth of his science by correctly reading a subject's head or by placing him in a trance. Mesmerists of the 1840s and 1850s owed a great deal to previous generations of scientific lecturers in general, and to itinerant phrenologists in particular. The latter had, in a sense, primed the audience for-the mesmerists' performances.[89]

The fusion of mesmerism and phrenology held significant appeal for many Victorians, who were drawn to its promise of scientific insight into the mind's hidden mechanisms. This frenzy was further amplified by the widespread popularity of séances, which offered both entertainment and a seemingly empirical encounter with the supernatural, thereby reinforcing the fascination with mesmeric and phrenological practices. Moreover, the demand for mesmeric practice increased, likely as a result of the demonstrated usefulness of mesmeric anesthesia in surgical practice.[90] However, this rise was short-lived, as the discovery of chemical anesthetics in the 1850s fundamentally transformed medical procedures. In the United States – where both mesmerism and phrenomesmerism had become in

[88] Kurshan, "Mind reading: literature in the discourse of early Victorian phrenology and mesmerism", 28.
[89] Parssinen, "Mesmeric Performers", 91.
[90] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 213.

vogue – these developments, along with the emergence of spiritualism, soon overshadowed earlier mesmeric enthusiasm.[91]

Towards hypnotism

As mesmerism developed, some researchers began delving into the phenomena attributed to mesmerism and gave their own explanations. These ideas mainly coincided with those of the hypnotic movement at the end of the 19th century. One example is the Portuguese priest Abbé Faria, who argued that the effects of mesmerism were produced not by any magnetic influence but by suggestion.[92]

In Britain, one of the most significant figures in this development was the Scottish surgeon James Braid. After observing Charles Lafontaine's demonstrations beginning in 1841, Braid accepted the genuineness of the phenomena demonstrated, but sought to uncover their underlying physiological basis. Eager to move beyond speculative theories, he aimed to explain mesmeric effects through observable bodily processes rather than through notions of animal magnetism.[93]

In 1843 he published the results of his research in *Neurypnology, or the Rationale of Nervous Sleep Considered in Relation to Animal Magnetism*, which became paramount for later development on hypnosis. Braid conceived a new vocabulary, starting from the Greek word *hypnos*, meaning sleep. This shift helped situate the subject within a scientific framework, dispelling much of its earlier supernatural aura. In Braid's theory, the mesmeric fluid is completely rejected. He demonstrated that the so-called "nervous sleep" induced by mesmerists could be readily reproduced simply through the subject's fixed gaze on a small object.[94] It was therefore concentrated attention—rather than any magnetic fluid—that triggered natural neurological processes in the brain. As to the physiological condition behind nervous sleep, Braid speculated that several of the phenomena could be attributed

[91] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 214.
[92] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 273.
[93] Braid, *Neurypnology or the Rationale of Nervous Sleep*
[94] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism*, 281.

to the altered state of the circulation of the brain and spinal cord.[95] By explaining these effects in scientific terms, Braid encouraged physicians to regard hypnosis as a legitimate subject of medical inquiry and helped to distinguish it from its earlier supernatural associations. Braid also advocated for the complete separation of hypnotism from animal magnetism, as he himself stated in the Introduction to *Neurypnology*:

> It will be observed, for reasons adduced, I have now entirely separated Hypnotism from Animal Magnetism. I consider it to be merely a simple, speedy, and certain mode of throwing the nervous system into a new condition, which may be rendered eminently available in the cure of certain disorders. I trust, therefore, it may be investigated quite independently of any bias, either for or against the subject, as connected with mesmerism; and only by the facts which can be adduced.[96]

He also argued that with the hypnotic trance "we have acquired the power of raising sensibility to the most extraordinary degree"[97] and this had proven beneficial. The second part of *Neurypnology* is, in fact, dedicated to examples of cures of physical ailments through hypnosis, although in many cases he does not provide proper details of his methods.[98]

At the time of their publication, Braid's theories on hypnotism attracted only limited interest and were largely dismissed by mesmerists and by physicians who upheld the doctrine of animal magnetism, as many still sought explanations for the purported paranormal phenomena associated with mesmeric practice. Austrian chemist Baron Karl von Reichenbach suggested that individuals in a mesmeric trance became exceptionally receptive to a subtle form of radiation emitted by distant objects—radiation that would be imperceptible in an ordinary state. He named this hypothesized force "Odyle,"

[95] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism,* 281.
[96] Braid, *Neurypnology or the Rationale of Nervous Sleep,* 86.
[97] Braid, *Neurypnology or the Rationale of Nervous Sleep,* 86.
[98] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism,* 283.

presenting it as a possible scientific basis for claims of clairvoyance.[99] James Braid, however, challenged Reichenbach's theory in a published pamphlet, arguing that such interpretations lacked empirical support, arguing that a strong expectant idea, whether arising within the patient or prompted by another person's suggestion, can so dominate the mind that it can excite, suppress, or even temporarily suspend the functions of the senses and various bodily or mental faculties, leading the subject to involuntarily experience the anticipated effects.[100] Therefore, it was the power of the mind over the body, elicited by the expectation, that made the effects possible even with the patient being unconscious.

Since Braid's theories on hypnotic sleep were not widely embraced in the mid-nineteenth century, practitioners and observers mainly continued to interpret mesmeric trance phenomena in supernatural or extrasensory terms. Accordingly, the survival of these paranormal interpretations provided a pathway through which mesmerist ideas would flow into early parapsychological thought.

[99] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism,* 229.

[100] Gauld, *A history of hypnotism,* 284.

1.4 Parapsychology, the supernatural and spiritualism

The Victorian Age was a time of religious uncertainty. Although the reasons of such anxiety are not definite, there was a widespread loss of faith in religion. In an effort to overcome insecurity, the Victorians and Edwardians approached spiritualism and eventually psychic research in order to compensate the disquiet.[101]

The year in which spiritualism was formally born can be dated in 1848 near New York, when the two sisters Margaret and Katie Fox reportedly heard "rappings" of unknown nature in their house in Hydesville. These noises appeared at night and resembled knocks and furniture moving. The entire Fox family was concerned, but it was one of the two sisters who had the idea of responding to the sounds by making other noises, in an attempt to establish a communication. Through this "language" made of tapping and knocking, the family claimed to have understood that the entity was a spirit of a peddler who had been murdered.[102] Eventually, the sisters discovered they had the power to summon spirits at will and secure a dialogue with them. Soon neighbours became curious, and the story spread like wildfire not just over North America, but in Europe as well. In a society in which religion was questioned daily by people, it was comforting to receive answers directly from their deceased beloved ones.[103] The possibility of a direct communication with the afterlife and, therefore, being able to seek guidance from spirits, offered a sense of security that the traditional religious authority was failing to provide. For this reason, there was an exponential increase of people who claimed to be able to communicate with the spirits of the deceased and act as intermediaries between the earthly world and the spiritual dimension, who came to be commonly known as *mediums*. At the beginning of the 1850s mediums from America began to cross the ocean and dock in England.[104] The most famous and influential was certainly Daniel Dunglas Home, who arrived in England in 1855 and quickly became

[101] Oppenheim, *The other world*, 1.
[102] Pimple, "Ghosts, Spirits, and Scholars", 76 – 78.
[103] Tromp, "Spirited Sexuality: Sex, Marriage, and Victorian Spiritualism", 67.
[104] Oppenheim, *The other world,* 11.

a sensation for his supposed abilities to make contact with the spiritual realm and for the supernatural phenomena produced during his séances. Like the majority of the mediums, before the séance Home used to enter a state of trance[105], reminiscent of the mesmeric sleep induced by magnetizers. Attendees to Home's meetings reported furniture trembling and levitating, unexplainable sounds made by purported spirits, musical instruments playing on their own and a queer breeze in the air.[106] Although Home constituted a notable exception, mediums were predominantly women. As noted in the discussion on mesmerism, this was linked their heightened sensibility, which enabled them to perceive the spirit world and act as intermediaries. In a society that primarily valued women as wives and mothers, this ability conferred them an important form of authority. Hence, they carved out a distinct and socially significant space for themselves, challenging conventional expectations and expanding the boundaries of female agency.

As it was explained in the previous sections of this chapter, these reported experiences of connection with spirits were not unheard of. Mesmerism, with its supposed paranormal phenomena, certainly laid the ground for the spread and popularity of spiritualism; the Victorian society was already primed for the acceptance of unexplainable events, since they were a significant part of mesmerism from the 1830s. The phreno-mesmeric shows in which a practitioner elicited a patient to act in a certain way could be considered precursors of the séances guided by mediums from the 1850s onwards.

Ghosts, spirits and other supernatural beings had long been part present of the European folklore. Attempts to give an explanation began decades before the appearance of spiritualism, but there are two noteworthy of attention for the period this chapter takes into consideration because of their opposite approaches to the question. The first one is *Letters on Natural Magic, Addressed to Sir Walter Scott* – first published in 1832 - by David Brewster, in which the Scottish physicist aimed to demystify the unexplainable phenomena, deemed as magical or supernatural, which could be

[105] Oppenheim, *The other world,* 13.
[106] Oppenheim, *The other world,* 13.

explained by emerging scientific ideas.[107] Brewster proposed that supernatural apparitions were used as an instrument of slavery by rulers since ancient times. In *Letter II* he examines the susceptibility of the human to deception and *Letter III* analyses auditory and visual hallucinations, interpreting them as vivid recollection of a past image impressed in the retina and intensified by indisposition. Apparitions are, therefore, reduced to temporal phenomena with a physiological cause.[108]

Concerning the authenticity of spirits and apparition, Brewster witnessed one of Home's seances in an endeavor to investigate the phenomena displayed; yet he could find no visible trickery. Nevertheless, he later assumed that all the occurrences attributed to ghosts, like tapping, knocking and other mysteries, could be reproduced by men, even though he was unable to give a satisfactory explanation on how exactly Home could have deceived his audience and produced such effects.[109] It is worth mentioning that in Scotland the fascination with the supernatural was marked at the beginning of the 19th century and several notable thinkers attempted to provide possible explanations. George Combe himself in his *System of Phrenology* speculated that apparitions and ghostly visions were due to an overdeveloped organ of "wonder", which could overstimulate other organs, such as "colour" and "form".[110]

English writer Catherine Crowe, who was already mentioned for being the translator of *The Seeress of Prevorst* into English, spent a part of her life in Edinburgh and met George Combe; she became his disciple and held his theories in high esteem.[111] She was fascinated with phrenology, but she maintained that the explanations offered by phrenology in regard to paranormal phenomena were ultimately inadequate.[112] In her work titled *The Night Side of Nature*, published in 1848, she explores supernatural and extraordinary experiences from an investigative and methodical perspective. In chapter IV she analyses reported cases of precognitive dreams, suggesting that during sleep the spirit

[107] Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic.*
[108] Brewster, *Letters on Natural Magic.*
[109] Lamont, "Spiritualism and a Mid-Victorian Crisis of Evidence", 901-902.
[110] Jenkins, "Physiology of the haunted mind", 589.
[111] Clapton, "Baudelaire and Catherine Crowe", 286.
[112] Crowe, *The Night-Side of Nature*, ch. III.

is temporarily free from the constrictions of the physical body, allowing the soul to receive presentiment of future events. She interprets this phenomenon as a form of clairvoyance or second sight that can manifest itself either in an intelligible form or in a more obscure and symbolic manner. To support her argument, she cites Italian doctor Joseph Ennemoser and his theories on animal magnetism, which he regarded essential to the understanding of human nature. According to him, animal magnetism was inseparable from life itself; Crowe expands this concept by proposing that a particular sensibility to magnetic influence enables precognition and prophetic dreams.[113]

In chapter VII, concerning spirits and apparitions, she differentiates between wraiths (apparitions seen at the moment of death) and doubles or doppelgangers. Inspired by Greek and Roman notions on afterlife, she refers to an intermediate realm – called *mid-region* – inhabited by wandering spirits (*restants*) who crave life on earth. She agrees with the folklore suggesting that spirits who died with *something on their mind* might be unable to completely depart the earthly realm.[114] On apparitions and paranormal phenomena, Crowe is adamant that they are just natural occurrences that man cannot understand because he fails to see them in connection with nature. At the beginning of her work, she declares that "[…] nobody has a right to call any belief superstitious, till he can prove that it is unfounded. Now, no one that lives can assert that the reappearance of the dead is impossible; all he has a right to say is, that he does not believe it […]"[115] and that in the future apparitions would be analyzed in relation to science. Although she agrees that illness makes people more sensitive, illness itself is not a sufficient explanation and every case should be evaluated separately.

The Night-Side of Nature can be considered one of the first attempts in Great Britain at psychic research; Crowe gathered and evaluated and compared reports on prophetic dreams, ghosts and supernatural interventions, making them a study subject and producing a systematic investigation of the paranormal phenomena. While Brewster was a physician, Crowe was a novelist with a particular

[113] Crowe, *The Night-Side of Nature*, ch. IV.
[114] Crowe, *The Night-Side of Nature*, ch. VII.
[115] Crowe, *The Night-Side of Nature*, ch. I.

interest in ghosts and paranormal manifestations. Her work proved influential in a society that was already fascinated with the paranormal; moreover, it was published immediately before the ontogenesis of the spiritualist movement.

Spiritualism emerged amid widespread fascination with mesmerism, the supernatural and the limits of scientific knowledge, attracting both popular interest and intellectual scrutiny. In Victorian Britain it intersected closely with religious beliefs, offering an alternative form of spiritual authority that both complemented and challenged established faith. Believers in spiritualism thought that their practice provided the empirical proof that God had endowed every individual with a soul that continued to exist even when the body perished. This perspective was viewed with suspicion by the Christian church, which traditionally claimed exclusive authority as mediator between the human and the divine realms, and which associated spirits to malignant forces allied with the devil. Spiritualism encouraged trust in personal experiences of the supernatural, rather than blind adherence to Church dogma.[116] The rise of science, secularism, and industrialization in the nineteenth century further challenged traditional religious authority, yet many individuals reconciled their Christian faith with spiritualist beliefs, seeing the two as complementary: God guaranteed life after death, and spiritualism seemed to provide evidence of this promise. While the Church of England officially disapproved of spiritualism, a few clergymen were interested in the ideas and investigated them on their own and were still allowed to be part of the church.[117] Some Anglican ministers argued that the spiritual immediacy provided by direct communication with the dead could help the church to reconnect with the faithful at a time where religious participation was declining.[118] Nevertheless, an anti-Christian branch of spiritualism also emerged, particularly among the working classes, which rejected the doctrines of eternal punishment and the inherent evil of man—both of which were increasingly viewed with distaste by Christians as well.[119]

[116] Oppenheim, *The other world*, 63.
[117] Oppenheim, *The other world,* 67.
[118] Oppenheim, *The other world*, 81.
[119] Oppenheim, *The other world,* 87.

The crisis intensified at the end of the 1850s, when Charles Darwin published is theories on evolution, in which he proposed that humans were not a direct creation of God but a product of a natural and indiscriminate process of evolution. By challenging the biblical account on human creation, Darwin's work undermined the authority of Church even more and prompted many to question the divine origin and purpose of human life. In this context, spiritualism gained further appeal, offering empirical proof of the soul's continued existence after death and a sense of direct access to the divine.

Peter Lamont argues that other than a religious crisis, Victorian attempts to provide scientific explanations to the phenomena occurring in the séance rooms ultimately proved unsuccessful. Some observers tried to attribute these manifestations to mesmerism, though Elliotson himself rejected the interpretation.[120] Those who dismissed the events as mere trickery failed to account for the mechanisms by which such deception was carried out.[121] Lamont further contends that, although the crisis of faith significantly contributed to the rise of spiritualism, it was not the sole factor. The physical phenomena detected during the séances were equally influential due to the "crisis of evidence" regarding how such phenomena were possible in the first place. Since the scientific community could not produce satisfactorily explanations, witnesses of the séances attributed the phenomena to genuine supernatural factors. Notably, these witnesses often belonged to a high social status, such as Robert Owen, John Ruskin and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who became convinced that Daniel Dunglas Home possessed authentic paranormal abilities.[122]

As debates over the legitimacy of séance phenomena intensified, mid-nineteenth century scholars began to pursue formal investigations into the paranormal. In 1850 the *Ghost Society* was founded at the University of Cambridge as an early attempt at psychical research.[123] Similar groups followed, reflecting a growing conviction that mediumship and its associated manifestations merited systematic study. As mediums gained prominence, investigators came to believe that their purported abilities

[120] Lamont, "Spiritualism and a mid-Victorian crisis of evidence", 900.
[121] Lamont, "Spiritualism and a mid-Victorian crisis of evidence", 907.
[122] Lamont, "Spiritualism and a mid-Victorian crisis of evidence", 898.
[123] Oppenheim, *The other world*, 123.

extended beyond the sole communication with the dead, and required scrutiny by what would eventually emerge as a separate branch of psychology: parapsychology. These paranormal abilities included clairvoyance – encompassing precognition, retrocognition and remote view –, telepathy, psychokinesis, and extra-corporeal experiences.[124] This trajectory culminated in 1882 with the institution of the *Society for Psychical Research* in London, which sought to examine these phenomena within a formal scientific framework.

This first chapter aimed to examine pseudoscientific practices, their cultural reception and their implications and reception in Victorian Britain, particularly in the first half of the 19th century. When *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë was published in 1847 parapsychology as it is intended today did not formally exist, but both scientists and writers were actively attempting plausible explanation for phenomena regarded as paranormal. Charlotte Brontë lived in a society that was deeply influenced by pseudoscientific theories and widespread belief in the supernatural and beliefs in the supernatural; these influences are discernible in her literary production, including *Jane Eyre*.

[124] Ciardi, *Breve storia delle pseudoscienze*, 33.

Chapter 2: Charlotte Brontë and pseudoscience

2.1. Charlotte Brontë's early life

Charlotte Brontë can be considered one of the most celebrated English female writers. Her love for literature and writing manifested itself from an early age, and Charlotte always sought to contain the ardent imagination which compelled her to write. In a time where women were seen as fragile and generally not compatible with literary purpose, the fire of artistry that burned inside of her collided with the desire to be composed and self-controlled. During her lifetime, theories such as physiognomy, phrenology and mesmerism enjoyed widespread popularity; through various channels she was exposed to these ideas, which influenced her intellectual and creative output. This second chapter aims to offer an overview of Charlotte Brontë's life, her character and her relation to the pseudosciences in vogue in the first half of the 19th century.

Childhood, Cowan Bridge and early literary production

Charlotte Brontë was born on the 21st of April 1816 in Thornton, Yorkshire, to Patrick Brontë, an Anglican priest, and Maria Branwell, in a family of Irish origin. In 1820 her father received a perpetual curacy in Haworth, a village situated in the Yorkshire moorlands, and the family relocated. The area was described in an 1857 article of the *Cosmopolitan Art Journal,* following the first publication of Elizabeth Gaskell's *The life of Charlotte Brontë*, as extremely lonely and desolate, with its inhabitants being "as rough, cold and cruel as the hill themselves."[125] Haworth was undoubtedly small, yet it occupied a strategic position on one of the main routes between Yorkshire and Lancashire; this resulted in constant traffic passing through the town. Its population grew over the course of the nineteenth century, particularly as industrial development expanded, and factories were

[125] *Cosmopolitan Art Journal*, "Charlotte Brontë", 158.

established in the surrounding area.[126] Worsted was the main industry in the township and the Brontës were not immune to the economic distress of the Yorkshire region from the 1820s onward. By the early 1830s the discomfort of the population had considerably worsened: the 1834 Commons Select Committee received extensive testimony of unprecedented suffering amongst the workers in the villages around the nearby cities of Bradford and Keighley.[127] In the wake of ongoing debates about workers' living and labour conditions, a crucial question emerged – whether workers should be regarded merely as extensions of the machines they operated or as autonomous human beings with agency and moral standing. This controversy reflected a deeper preoccupation in Victorian Britain with the idea of self-control, a moral and social tenet that influenced contemporary discussions of labour, identity, and individual responsibility.[128]

The conditions of Haworth were decidedly unsanitary, and the life expectancy was therefore low. Shortly after the family's arrival in Haworth, the mother Maria Branwell died, leaving five daughters and one son. According to Lyndall Gordon, the reverend Brontë did not show particular interest in his daughters' education, imparting an academic formation only to his son Branwell. The girls were therefore largely educated by their maternal aunt, Elizabeth Branwell, a conscientious and devoted presence within the household. [129] Despite this, the aunt was far from being a maternal figure and she taught the girl to beware of instinct and independence; Charlotte and her sisters were very energetic children, and such energy expressed in girls was considered suspicious in Victorian Britain.[130] Her manners were modest and diligent, while inside she was gifted with an extraordinary imagination that needed to be channeled.[131] Elizabeth Gaskell, in her famous biography of Charlotte Brontë, recalls an episode in which the father, wanting to ascertain the inner disposition of his children, asked them intellectual and moral questions. He required to know from Charlotte what her favourite book was,

[126] Barker, *The Brontës,* 134.
[127] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology*, 21.
[128] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology*, 22.
[129] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 15.
[130] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 30 - 31.
[131] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 38 – 39.

and her answer was "The Bible" and, secondly, "The book of Nature".[132] As Gordon observes, Charlotte's response was likely crafted with full awareness of what would please her father, demonstrating the degree of self-control and emotional discipline she exercised from a remarkably young age.[133] At home, reading was one of the preferred activities for the members of the family. Other than the Bible, the children had access and read with involvement newspapers like the Whig's *Leeds Mercury* and the Tory's *Leeds Intelligence*, which was a source of information about politics, economy and often included reviews of novels and magazines. Moreover, the family had a subscription to the *Blackwood Magazine.*[134] The children were constantly encouraged to read, and Charlotte shared the passion for writing with her siblings; together they read Walter Scott, Byron, Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan and Wordsworth. Notably the works of Scott, whom Charlotte greatly admired, were abounding of references to physiognomic theory. This influence, combined with the extensive recognition of Lavater's *Essays* in the first decades of the 19th century, significantly contributed to the impact physiognomy would have not only in *Jane Eyre*, but in her whole literary production.[135] It is to be noted that Brontë recognized the limits imposed by judging an individual solely by external appearance; although her characters are often described in detailed physical terms, she frequently subverts the conventional association between physical beauty and moral virtue. Both Jane and Rochester are portrayed as objectively unattractive, yet morally and intellectually complex. By contrast, physiognomic description is employed in a more traditional and reductive manner in the depiction of Bertha Mason, whose appearance is linked to moral degeneration and madness in ways that intersect with the racial discourse of the time. Physiognomy, widely disseminated within Victorian culture, functioned primarily as a shared interpretative work rather than a consciously applied discipline; its presence in Brontë's work should therefore be understood as part of a common cultural language instead of a specific personal interest.

[132] Gaskell, *The life of Charlotte Brontë*, 93.
[133] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 19.
[134] Barker, *The Brontës,* 159.
[135] Tytler, "Physiognomy in *The Professor*", 340.

The reverend Brontë and his family participated actively in the local network of the intelligentsia who were fond of the principles of self-improvement and control through the pursuit of knowledge and adherence to the laws of science.[136] One of the main sources of books for the Brontës was the library of the Keighley Mechanics Institute, which contained a large number of literature concerning natural sciences and philosophy, although literary works were also present. These publications interweaved with practical guides to self-improvement and phrenology manuals.[137] At home, an essential book for the reverend was *Modern Domestic Medicine* by Thomas John Graham, in which he methodically annotated every ailment experienced by his children. Sally Shuttleworth notes that "every aspect of the family's daily life was regulated by the dictates of medical science; not only their diet but even their sleeping habits were subject to control."[138] Patrick Brontë was fascinated by the interplay between body and mind, a topic particularly prominent in the 19th century, and was interested in the late discoveries about anesthesia and the potential of mesmerism.[139]

The education of his five daughters became a motive of concern from 1824, when the reverend decided to grant them proper schooling. The family had economic issues and identifying an appropriate school proved to be a demanding task, until Patrick discovered the existence of Cowan Bridge School in Cowan County, Lancashire, which offered education to young girls at a modest price. The school was open to the daughters of clergymen, and, therefore, seemed a perfect fit for the Brontë sisters. Maria and Elizabeth, the eldest daughters, were the first to be sent to the boarding school, followed by Charlotte, who was to be educated as a governess, and Emily, two years younger than her. Charlotte was not accustomed to spending time away from her beloved home and suffered greatly during her permanence at Cowan Bridge. Her misery was enhanced by the harsh conditions the pupils had to tolerate regularly. The institute was a decidedly unhealthy place: its regimen was strict, dominated by an excessive religious observance and countless prayers, inadequate food,

[136] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology,* 24.
[137] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology,* 30.
[138] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology,* 28.
[139] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology,* 28.

constant cold during winter months, and frequent outbreaks of diseases. The aim of the school was, in fact, to "save" young girls from eternal damnation by suppressing what was perceived as their inherently sinful nature; this ideology manifested in corporal punishment, and Charlotte witnessed her sister Maria enduring physical abuse on multiple occasions. Charlotte, with her intellectual acuity, recognized that such practices did not reflect the genuine will of God.[140] The modest library at Cowan Bridge mirrored the institution's atmosphere of affliction, offering books about death, like Richard Baxter's *Dying Thoughts* and *Hymns for Infant Minds*, which cannot have been a comforting reading for young schoolgirls.[141] Under the school's distressing conditions, Maria became gravely ill, soon followed by Elizabeth, and both girls perished in 1825. The loss of her two beloved sisters had a considerable impact on Charlotte's psychological well-being and it became one of the aspects she most deeply resented about Cowan Bridge, along with the restrictions it imposed in terms of personal freedom. After the death of Maria and Elizabeth, Charlotte and Emily were brought home at their father's insistence and never returned to Cowan Bridge.[142] British historian Juliet Barker remarks that Charlotte was likely the most affected by the death of her sisters, as she experienced an intense sense of injustice at the loss of two family members she considered morally superior to herself. Moreover, their demise elevated her to eldest sister and obliged her to assume the responsibilities created by their absence – a burden she would carry for the rest of her life.[143] The repercussion these events had on her future writing would be visible in *Jane Eyre*. Lowood, the school Jane is unwillingly sent to, is modeled on Cowan Bridge, and her dear friend Helen Burns – who suffers and endures all her hardship in silence – is based on the uncomplaining Maria Brontë.

Following their time at Cowan Bridge, Charlotte and Emily returned to Haworth, where they were able to recover physically and mentally. During this period, Charlotte found Maria's copies of *The Lady's Magazine* and read them with considerable interest; however, their father subsequently

[140] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 23.
[141] Barker, *The Brontës*, 191.
[142] Barker, *The Brontës*, 191.
[143] Barker, *The Brontës*, 194.

destroyed the magazines, deeming their sentimental love stories frivolous.[144] This was an exceptionally productive time for the Brontë children: they immersed themselves in the extensive reading materials available at the parsonage, including newspapers, magazines, and works of history, poetry, and fiction. With her sisters Emily and Anne, Charlotte invented the *Glass Town* fantasy world, while with her brother Branwell she developed the *Angria* narrative universe. Drawing inspiration from *The Blackwood's Magazine*, they also produced their own periodical, *Branwell's Blackwood Magazine*, a monthly miscellany edited and curated by themselves. This was a fertile phase, during which Charlotte's poetry and prose were shaped by contemporary poetic traditions and influenced by classical Greek and Latin authors, whom Branwell was studying at the time. Until then, Charlotte had not yet employed a female perspective in her works; the women she depicted were largely passive, while the men were characterized as passionate and active. Female characters existed only in relation to their male counterparts. At this stage, her work may still be regarded as immature, reflecting her youth and developing literary skill.[145]

In the year 1830 Patrick Brontë, who had always been socially active, experienced a decline in health that resulted in bed confinement. On the 22nd of June of that year Charlotte records on her diary a strange occurrence. She and her governess witnessed an almost supernatural scene: an elderly man knocked at the parsonage's door claiming to bear a divine message for the reverend. He declared: "The Lord, he desires me to say that the bridegroom is coming and that he must prepare to meet him; that the cords are about to be loosed and the golden bowl broken; the pitcher broken at the fountain and the wheel stopped at the cistern." This speech is a direct reference to the Bible, a symbolic warning about death and the necessity to remember God before the eternal sleep. Allegedly, the old man had come to warn the family that the father was approaching death. Charlotte noted that, although the man was probably some "fanatical enthusiast", his words made a profound impression on her.[146]

[144] Barker, *The Brontës*, 200.
[145] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 45.
[146] Barker, *The Brontës*, 228 – 229.

Her enduring fascination with the unexplainable, supernatural signs and apparitions is evident in her Juvenilia, which is rife with magical and supernatural elements. Although she later abandoned the enchantment for a more realistic prose, traces of it can be discerned in her mature production. The fantastic characters of Genius Talli, Branni, Emmi and Anni – which appear as early as 1829 – function as semi-autobiographical alter egos of herself and her siblings, each endowed with supernatural powers.[147] Her earlier work abounds with genii, spirits, fairies, elves, all inspired by the stories told by the family's maid Tabitha Ackroyd.[148] Remnants of this magic language are detectable in *Jane Eyre*, especially in the terminology Jane and Rochester employ in their communication with one another. Fascinated by spirits and supernatural phenomena, Charlotte explored these themes in *The Keep of the Bridge* (1829), where the narrator is imprisoned within a haunted tower by an unseen force and is ultimately liberated by a thin mist rising from the earth. A year later in *Albion and Marina*, the spirit of Marina manifests in front of her beloved, who only subsequently realizes she had died at the precise moment of her apparition.[149]

Roe Head and teaching

Although he ultimately made a recovery, his illness prompted Patrick Brontë to recognize that his daughters needed to be able to support themselves in case of his death. In 1831 Charlotte enrolled at Roe Head, a modest school with no more than ten pupils at a time, to receive training as a governess. Overseen by Margaret Wooler and her sisters, the school was fundamentally different to Cowan Bridge: the regimen was not as rigid, and the humble student body allowed the curriculum to accommodate each girl's preferences and capabilities.[150] Charlotte was fourteen when she entered the school and was initially considered different by the other girls due to her Irish accent, mannerism and outer appearance. Although she experienced homesickness at first, she gradually adapted to school

[147] Lonoff, "Magic in the word", 36.
[148] Lonoff, "Magic in the word", 39.
[149] Lonoff, "Magic in the word", 37.
[150] Barker, *The Brontës*, 230.

life and appreciated her time at Roe Head. Her outstanding intellectual abilities soon earned the admiration of her peers; she did not blatantly display them and, as a result, she gained the respect and the acceptance of her schoolmates.[151] It was at Roe Head that Charlotte formed lasting friendship with Mary Taylor and Ellen Nussey, with whom she maintained extensive correspondence in the ensuing years. Mary Taylor, as reported by Elizabeth Gaskell, described her attitude at school as regulated by self-improvement, eager to learn and almost relentless.[152] Additionally, Roe Head's environment allowed her to exercise her talent as storyteller: she invented stories to entertain her fellow students, such as a frightening tale about a sleepwalker, which left an impression on her audience.[153] Yet, beneath this creativity, even though a few years had passed, the loss of her two sisters continued to haunt her and she often spoke of them with undiminished emotion. On one occasion, she confided to Mary Taylor a dream in which Maria and Elizabeth returned to life, a vision that disturbed rather than comforted her:

> She used to speak of her two elder sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, who died at Cowan Bridge. I used to believe them to have been wonders of talent and kindness. She told me, early one morning, that she had just been dreaming; she had been told that she was wanted in the drawing- room, and it was Maria and Elizabeth. I was eager for her to go on, and when she said there was no more, I said, 'but go on! MAKE IT OUT! I know you can.' She said she would not; she wished she had not dreamed, for it did not go on nicely, they were changed; they had forgotten what they used to care for. They were very fashionably dressed, and began criticising the room, &c.[154]

The friendship with Mary and Ellen contributed greatly to shape her character. Having had a difficult experience at Cowan Bridge, the only place she had known beside Haworth, she found in her two

[151] Barker, *The Brontës*, 234.
[152] Gaskell, *The life of Charlotte Brontë*, 140.
[153] Barker, *The Brontës*, 237.
[154] Gaskell, *The life of Charlotte Brontë*, 130.

friends a reference point beyond her immediate family circle. Hence it was with sadness that at the age of sixteen, two years after her initial admission, Charlotte left Roe Head to return home. Her time there was marked by a sincere happiness and contentment and, although they could not meet frequently thereafter, the correspondence with her friends remained uninterrupted.

While at home, Charlotte successfully supervised her siblings' education, making significant progress in French with Emily. At the same time, she continued to immerse herself in her *Glass Town* and *Angria* worlds and to write poems in close collaboration with Branwell. During this period, she nurtured a desire for economic independence, a sentiment she shared with her friend Mary. This aspiration, combined with the will to contribute to Emily's education led her to return to Roe Head in 1835, this time in the capacity of teacher.[155] She was initially accompanied by Emily, but her younger sister soon began feeling mentally and physically weak, thus Anne replaced her. Roe Head offered little intellectual stimuli; in the 1830s there was virtually no concern for women's need of mental challenge and Charlotte, endowed with remarkable intellectual gifts, suffered greatly as a result. Despondent and on the verge of depression, she confided her mental state only to Ellen and Mary and recorded her reflections in a journal. Although she lacked a genuine passion for teaching, prioritizing her literary ambitions over service to others would have conflicted with the Christian morality to which she adhered.[156] Her dissatisfaction was exacerbated by the inadequate salary; as Mary observed, English women had few opportunities to secure remunerative employment.[157] Charlotte confronted this period as a form of mental and physical imprisonment, possessing a vivid imagination but no mean to express it. As she wrote to Ellen in a letter: "If you knew my thoughts, the dreams that absorb me, and the fiery imagination that at times eats me up, and makes me feel society, as it is, wretchedly insipid, you would pity and I dare say despise me."[158] Highly imaginative, introspective and ambitious, she was nevertheless constrained by the role society imposed upon her.

[155] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 61.
[156] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 66.
[157] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 66.
[158] Gaskell, *The life of Charlotte Brontë*, 44.

School life allowed for scarce uninterrupted time, and therefore she only managed brief pieces of writing. When she was able to return home, her ultimate haven, she attempted to reenter her fictional world of *Angria*, though she produced relatively little.[159] Her growing frustration began manifesting in outbursts of anger toward her pupils: thoughts of her beloved *Angria* offered brief moments of solace from the necessity of concealing her true emotions and her urgent need to write without hindrance. Yet even if her creative impulse granted her joy, she regarded her proclivity for imagination as a sort of vice.[160] Despite these conflicting sentiments, she wished to acquire an external and impartial opinion on her literary production. At the end of December 1836, she sent a few of her poems to poet laureate Robert Southey, whom she greatly admired, confiding to him the extent of her imagination and probably expecting a form of understanding and validation.[161] Three months later, the anticipated reply arrived. In the first part of the response, Southey praised her, admitting she had an authentic talent for writing. The second part of the letter, however, added that the imaginary world Charlotte indulged so often in was dangerous for the mind of a woman. With his famous statement "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: & it ought not to be." he essentially affirmed that her imagination was so fervent because she had not yet reached a state of accomplishment: for the Victorian woman this meant marriage and motherhood. Once she achieved such state, she would not feel the need to resort to imagination for excitement and the desire of being a published author would vanish. To these assumptions Charlotte replied with dignity, thanking Southey for his assessment, claiming that his letter would remind her of the impossibility of her endeavor; while a note of sarcasm might be discerned in her words, this interpretation cannot be confirmed with certainty.[162] Lyndall Gordon remarks that this exchange with Southey might have contributed to her distancing herself from fantasies of *Angria*, reinforcing her determination to indulge less in

[159] Barker, *The Brontës*, 333.
[160] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 77.
[161] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 80.
[162] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 81.

daydreaming.[163] In 1837, her resolute attempt to engage less with the fantastic visions of her mind, combined with the illness of her sister Anne, led her to depart from Roe Head. Between 1837 and 1839, while again in Haworth, Charlotte inaugurated a more mature phase of her literary production. A precursor of Jane Eyre can be identified in the character of Elizabeth Hastings, a young teacher who struggles to free herself from the influence of her brother, in a story of growing independence.[164] The narrative was clearly autobiographical: in those years Branwell, who aspired to a career as a painter, did not have success, and began abusing alcohol and opium. Charlotte, concerned by his destructive behaviour, resorted to her considerable discipline trying to maintain her family's stability. In this tense atmosphere, Charlotte, like Elizabeth struggled to find a person with whom to form a deep emotional connection, as no individual seemed to share her intellectual and sentimental affinity. In 1839 she refused the proposal of rev. Henry Nussey, Ellen's brother, as she claimed he did not truly know her and they were not well suited to one another.[165] These personal and familiar challenges ultimately directed her to accept her first role as governess with the Sidgwick family, near Skipton. The experience granted her a direct insight into the reality of Victorian society, in particular class differences. The dynamics between employer and employees, along with the hardship she endured, served as fundamental inspiration for *Jane Eyre*.

[163] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 83.
[164] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 89.
[165] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 92.

2.2 Life as a governess and the Brussels experience

Charlotte's occupation as a governess lasted for two years in total. Similarly to her sister Anne, who persisted for six years, she detested the position. In her letters to Ellen, she repeatedly complained – the work was distasteful and she felt miserable.[166] In her own words, "I am miserable when I allow myself to dwell on the necessity of spending my life as a governess."[167] When she accepted the post, Charlotte already had an idea of who Mrs. Sidgwick was, as she was acquainted with her prior to her marriage. Due to these circumstances, she probably expected a warmer treatment than what she received. The mistress of the house displayed a cold attitude toward Charlotte and expressed no intention to familiarize with her. The children she was assigned to educate were at first disobedient and undisciplined, and her attempts to protest were met with indifference by their mother, who condoned their demeanor. Additionally, her tasks included more than teaching: she was expected to supervise the infants, attend to their needs, and she was assigned to a substantial amount of needlework, an activity that she despised.[168] Stonegappe, the family house, would serve as inspiration for Gateshead Hall in *Jane Eyre* and the river Ayre, which flowed nearby, could have produced the surname Eyre. In broad terms, her sojourn at Stonegappe inspired the Reed family: the disposition of Mrs. Sidgwck, constantly defending her children, mirrored that of Mrs. Reed.[169] It is fascinating to note that, according to the testimony of Mrs. Sidgwick, Charlotte had a very peculiar character: when she was asked to partake in family activities, she experienced the proposition as an order, while if she was not invited, she felt excluded.[170] Her idiosyncratic personality contributed to the burdensome nature of her experience as a governess; fortunately for her, this was a temporary post and after a few months she returned home. Soon after her reappearance in Haworth, she declined her second marriage

[166] Gilbert, "A Servitude of One's Own: Isolation, Authorship, and the Nineteenth-Century British Governess." 461.
[167] Barker, *The Brontës: a life in letters*, 130.
[168] Barker, *The Brontës*, 405.
[169] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 95 – 96.
[170] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 94-95.

proposal, this time from an Irishman she met once, concluding that she did not know him sufficiently well to accept the proposal.[171]

By Christmas 1839 the entire family was reunited at Haworth; Anne had been dismissed from her post and the four siblings were all unemployed. Around the same period, the new young curate of reverend Brontë, William Weightman, a charming man of twenty-six, paid frequent visits to the house and soon became well-acquainted with the members of the family. Although it is commonly accepted that Anne developed feelings for him and was subsequently devastated by his premature death, evidence suggests that Charlotte was, in fact, the more involved. She painted his portrait and her letters from this period are replete with references to Weightman.[172] Other than being intensely charismatic and alluring, Weightman, like Charlotte's father, was also a scholar. It is a fact that Patrick Brontë presented lectures at the Keighley's Mechanics Institute on different occasions. Although it is presumable that she participated more than once, the only documented occasion is when she attended Weightman's lesson on the importance of classical studies in 1840.[173] Nonetheless, in a report of the Keighley's Institute dated 1852, Charlotte is thanked *as usual* for her services; it can therefore be assumed she used to be regularly involved with the Institute.[174] Mechanics Institutes generally offered lectures on a wide range of scientific and popular subjects and phrenology and mesmerism were amongst the most prominent concepts, as determined in the first chapter of this thesis. The Keighley's Institute had purchased a book on phrenology in 1836 and a lecture on the subject was therefore given.[175] Starting from the years 1820s, newspapers, including the *Blackwood Magazine* read by the Brontës, offered phrenological descriptions, while local publications began discussing Samuel Smiles' doctrines of self-help, which were modeled on Combe's ideas of exercising one's good faculties and trying to suppress the faulty ones. Furthermore, Yorkshire was a publishing hub for

[171] Barker, *The Brontës*, 410.
[172] Barker, *The Brontës*, 426.
[173] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology,* 27.
[174] Shuttleworth, "Mind and Body in Charlotte Brontë's Fiction.", 226.
[175] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology,* 64.

phrenological guides and manuals. [176] Charlotte was indeed interested in phrenological discourse and this enthusiasm is demonstrated by the numerous mentions of its principles in both her private correspondence and her literary production. In 1839 a character of her *Angria* fantasy world, named Jane Moore, is described as having a large organ of secretiveness[177], a direct testimony that phrenological theories could already be discerned in her creation. It is plausible that Charlotte, who – as previously ascertained – exercised a rigorous self-control from a young age, would have approved the idea of exerting control over her own mind. As Shuttleworth highlights, in phrenology she would have found a philosophy which offered a legitimating belief in latent talent, implying the possibility of escaping the social impasse she was constrained in: an educated middle-class woman, at risk of genteel poverty, and with no proper social outlet for her literary talent.[178] Her involvement with phrenology was not merely theoretical: in 1851, when she was already a published and recognized author, she visited the London phrenologist Dr J.P. Browne with her publisher George Smith. They did not reveal their true identities, opting for the pseudonyms of Mr. and Mrs. Fraser. Brontë reacted with notable enthusiasm to the resulting phrenological report, which she felt offered a compelling revelation of her inner qualities. She described the experience as a "miracle," "like the very life itself," a response that reflects both her receptiveness to contemporary psychological sciences and her investment in modes of interpretation that claimed to render the inner self legible.[179] Unlike physiognomy, in fact, physical appearance played no role in phrenological assessment, and Charlotte recognized she was not conventionally attractive. This distinction may help to explain the appeal phrenology held for her, as it appeared to offer a mode of self-knowledge detached from aesthetic judgment and grounded instead in an ostensibly objective reading of mental and moral faculties. Moreover, a branch of phrenology advocated for the mental equality between the sexes. When Jane Eyre contemplates:

[176] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology,* 64.
[177] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology,* 57.
[178] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology,* 65-66.
[179] Dames, "The clinical novel", 368.

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; **they need exercise for their faculties**, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.[180]

The reader detects an unequivocal reflection of Charlotte's inner struggle. If Southey attested that literary pursuit was unsuitable for a woman, she certainly did not agree. Yearning for a further opinion on her production, in 1840 she contacted the poet Hartley Coleridge, son of the renowned Samuel Taylor Coleridge, submitting a narrative under the pseudonym of C. T – acronym for Charles Townshend, one of her narrators in her Angrian writings. The correspondence did not survive; however, Coleridge responded without enthusiasm and, moreover, was not able to discern the sex of the writer.[181] Nevertheless, even after a second opinion on her writing proved discouraging, Charlotte remained determined to persevere until her literary talent received due recognition.

In the meantime, she understood that the attentions Weightman directed toward her were not personal but were instead extended indiscriminately to nearly every young girl he was acquainted with. With this realization in mind, in 1841 she accepted a new post as governess, choosing a humbler family compared to the Sidgwicks; although this position proved more tolerable, she nonetheless remained dissatisfied with the work.[182] After this experience, she began to conceive the idea of opening a school in partnership with her sisters Emily and Anne. The project appeared exciting at first, yet it was abandoned when she received an inspiring letter from Mary Taylor, who was completing her studies

[180] Brontë*, Jane Eyre,* 107. My bold.
[181] Barker, *The Brontës*, 440-41.
[182] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 111.

in Brussels and urged Charlotte to join her there. Eager to expand her horizons and experience the wider world, she relinquished the hypothesis of the school and started planning her trip. Her anticipation was articulated in a letter to Ellen, in which she confessed: "I was tantalized with the consciousness of faculties unexercised – then all collapsed and I despaired."[183] This statement – expressed in phrenological terms – is particularly revealing, as it demonstrated the awareness that a life devoted solely to teaching would not have been fulfilling. Charlotte maintained that she needed to exercise all her intellectual and emotional faculties and to achieve this, she was compelled to move beyond the constraints of her comfort zone.

The Brussels experience

As of 1842, the eldest Brontë sister travelled to Brussels, accompanied by Emily. The girls were staying at Pensionnat Heger, a school offering education for young girls and directed by Zoe Heger, a thirty-eight-years old woman, while her husband Constantin Heger, five years younger, served as teacher.[184] Despite his youth, Heger already had a strong reputation as a teacher and professor in French literature. Adapting to the school proved demanding, as all the schooling was conducted in French and the two sisters made no attempt to connect with the other students. Monsieur Heger, although irritable in temperament and fastidious, promptly recognized the intellectual potential in the two sisters and placed them in an advanced class. There, they read canonical French literature and were required to compose original pieces in the same stylistic mode, producing a substantial number of essays, the majority of which were religious in motif. Heger was the first one to offer Charlotte ruthless, yet necessary, critical feedback on her writings, which proved essential to her development as a writer. Before this experience she had never been trained to polish and refine her style or to

[183] Barker, *The Brontës: a life in letters*, 161.
[184] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 113-114.

select her words with precision; she had always written candidly and spontaneously whatever came to her mind.[185]

At the end of 1842 Charlotte and Emily returned to England following the death of aunt Elizabeth Branwell, which had been preceded by that of William Weightman. During their time at Haworth a letter written by Heger arrived, in which he requested to Patrick Brontë the permission for his daughters to return to Belgium, citing the remarkable progress they had made. Emily determined not to depart from home, therefore Charlotte returned completely alone to Brussels at the beginning of 1843. She was in high spirits and, this time, in the capacity of English teacher. At this point, Heger was one of the few individuals in her life that had recognized and encouraged her talent. However, she did not share Heger's views on teaching through imitation, instead asserting that genius was spontaneous and inspirational, and only those endowed with genius – such as herself – were capable of producing distinguished works. Although Heger partly agreed with this position, he was convinced that genius required consistent training and sustained study in order to be fully developed and strengthened, as elucidated in his own words:

> Certainly the gem-carver does not make the diamond, but without him the most beautiful diamond is a pebble. Poet or not, you should study form – if you are a Poet you will be more powerful & your works will live – if not, you will not produce poetry, but you will savour its merit and charm.[186]

Over time, Charlotte came to accept Heger's philosophy that brilliance required self-discipline and sustained study to be thoroughly realized. Throughout 1843, her initial sentiments of respect and professional appreciation for her teacher gradually evolved into a deeper and compulsive attachment to Monsieur Heger's validation, which came to play a central role in her sense of personal and creative

[185] Barker, *The Brontës*, 508.
[186] Barker, *The Brontës*, 539.

worth.[187] She began teaching him English, which fostered a certain familiarity between them. This complex student-teacher relationship would be reflected in her fiction, particularly in the dynamic between Lucy Snowe and Paul Emmanuel in *Villette*, as well as in Jane and Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. As their relationship progressed, Heger gradually distanced himself, leaving Charlotte in a situation of growing despair. Her growing sentiments for a married man created a moral and emotional conflict: she recognized she ought to leave Pensionnat Heger, although Heger himself opposed the idea at first, holding her in high esteem. The meager salary she received for her post at the Pensionnat was presumably an additional incentive, as despite the emotional anguish, she ultimately resolved to return to England, even in the absence of concrete opportunities there.[188] Undoubtedly, the whole experience with Heger influenced the later character of Rochester. After returning to England, Charlotte continued to correspond with Heger, though in 1845 his replies became increasingly sporadic; Charlotte attributed his silence to the agency of his wife. Charlotte was furious at this lack of response, declaring in a letter that she could not live without the words of her master and was desperate to receive even the slightest response. She claimed that her love for the French language stemmed from the fact that it reminded her of him; this veiled confession likely prompted him to cease the correspondence definitively, in an effort to protect Charlotte from speculations.[189] In fact, even after her death, Heger refused to allow the publication of their exchange in order to preserve her dignity. Conforming to the expectations of Victorian society, Charlotte blamed herself for her unilateral attachment to her professor, as respectable women were not supposed to derive pleasure from a man's attention, especially if the man in question was already married and with children. Therefore, under the pretext of her father's illness, she decided to remain at home in a sort of self-punishment. Her unilateral relationship with Heger left her unmotivated and disinclined to resume her life after leaving Brussels.[190]

[187] Barker, *The Brontës*, 545.
[188] Barker, *The Brontës*, 554.
[189] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 146.
[190] Barker, *The Brontës*, 562.

2.3 First publication and *Jane Eyre*

As teaching appeared to be her only viable option, she restored the idea of opening a school, this time at the parsonage and with a limited number of pupils. Despite the effort to secure students, since Haworth was not centrally located, the plan failed, and the project was ultimately abandoned. Her friend Mary Taylor attempted to persuade her that her self-imposed seclusion at home would have proven detrimental, yet Charlotte was difficult to console.[191] At the same time, however, she continued to produce poems and ideas for future novels. Mary recognized that financial status contributed to Charlotte's depression: she desired a life in which she would not need to work so sustain herself and could instead devote her energy entirely to literary pursuit. Marriage to a wealthy man appeared to be the only means of achieving such independence but at twenty-nine Charlotte faced the threat of spinsterhood with her younger sisters.[192] It was within this context that she conceived her first novel, titled *The Professor*, which remained unpublished until 1857 and whose ideas were later reworked in *Villette*. The novel tried to answer a fundamental question: how should a talented woman conduct herself in a world dominated by men? *The Professor* thus represents a fusion of Charlotte's personal endeavor to be recognized as a writer and the formative experience she underwent while in Brussels.[193] When Mary left for New Zealand and Ellen moved to Hathersage, a village in Derbyshire, Charlotte's anguish increased, as she was the only one of the three to remain at home. Nevertheless, it was a visit to Hathersage that proved intensely inspirational for *Jane Eyre*. The visual elements of the surrounding landscape exerted a strong influence in the novel. Ellen's brother Henry Nussey, who had once proposed to Charlotte and was at the time considering becoming a missionary, presumably influenced the character of St John Rivers. Furthermore, North Lees Hall, the residence of the Eyre family located a few miles from Hathersage, may have inspired not only the

[191] Barker, *The Brontës*, 579.
[192] Barker, *The Brontës*, 582.
[193] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 155.

heroine's surname, but also Thornfield Hall.[194] Whether she was actively hunting for artistic material to imbue in her stories cannot be established; yet it is indisputable that at this stage, Charlotte had long harbored the ambition to be a published author. The dream became suddenly achievable when she discovered a journal containing her sister Emily's poems. Surprised by the progress she had made, Charlotte encouraged Emily to make her writings public, though Emily initially resisted the idea, as she felt her privacy had been violated. Anne, who had also produced poems, sought Charlotte's opinion, revealing that all three sisters shared a latent desire for public recognition of their writings. Ultimately, they agreed to embark on a literary venture, adopting male pseudonyms: Charlotte, Emily and Anne Bronte became Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. Together, they decide to gather several poems and publish them. The surname Bell was inspired by Arthur Bell Nicholls, their father's new curate. As Charlotte explained to Elizabeth Gaskell, the use of male pseudonyms was intended to shield themselves from the prejudice often directed to female writers.[195] Therefore, *Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell* was published in the second half of 1846, by the editor Aylott & Jones, at the authoresses' own expense. The volume failed to achieve commercial success and only sold a few copies in its first year. [196] Prior to the publication of *Poems*, Charlotte had informed the publisher that each of the three authors was engaged in the composition of a novel. For Charlotte, the work in question was *The Professor*, which was refused. Between 1846 and 1847, she submitted the manuscript to six different publishers, each of whom rejected it.[197] *The Professor,* written from a male perspective, marked her first attempt at writing a novel; however, she soon recognized the difficulty of convincingly employing a man's point of view. She immediately started writing another novel, this time resorting to a woman's voice, while she was in Manchester with her father who underwent eye surgery. With her father being assisted by a nurse, Charlotte found time to begin a new novel.

[194] Barker, *The Brontës*, 586.
[195] Gaskell, *The life of Charlotte Brontë*, 272.
[196] Bauman, "In the market for fame", 45.
[197] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 174.

Drawing from her previous background – Lowood, Maria and Elizabeth's deaths, her time as governess, her Brussels experience – she began *Jane Eyre.*

Charlotte prepared to send her manuscript for the seventh time to the small publishing house of Smith, Elder & Co. of London, with limited expectations of success. Unbeknownst to her, William Smith Williams, the firm's reader, had already recognized the literary potential of *The Professor,* though he considered it unlikely to succeed commercially. In agreement with George Smith, the young owner of the publishing house, Williams sent a letter of appreciative criticism, refusing the manuscript while encouraging Currer Bell to pursue a work that might prove more appealing to the reading public.[198] Brontë subsequently completed *Jane Eyre* with remarkable speed and submitted the manuscript to Smith, Elder & Co., where it was accepted for publication. She agreed to the terms offered, even though she was aware that the remuneration would not allow her to make a living solely through her writing. Therefore, she stipulated that, should the novel prove commercially successful, an additional sum would be paid.[199] *Jane Eyre: an autobiography* was published on 16th October 1847 and met immediate success. Among its early admirers was William Makepeace Thackeray, whom Charlotte greatly respected; he expressed admiration for the novel and correctly identified the author as a woman, praising her. At the same time, the work provoked unease among some contemporary readers, who regarded its depiction of female autonomy and resistance as potentially dangerous for younger women.[200]

Jane Eyre was not only the product of all her personal experiences but also of her cultural and intellectual environment. As previously noted, Brontë was interested in the contemporary scientific debates of her own time; she had a genuine fascination for phrenology, while physiognomy had already entered the cultural mainstream. The novel appeared in a moment of intense discussion regarding science, pseudoscience and the paranormal. Brewster's *Letters on Natural Magic* were

[198] Barker, *The Brontës*, 680.
[199] Barker, *The Brontës*, 682.
[200] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, 198.

published in 1832, when the debate on supposed paranormal phenomena was at its peak. A year after *Jane Eyre* was published, Catherine Crowe offered her own explanation of apparitions and the paranormal. Meanwhile, phrenomesmerism gained popularity in England from 1842 onward, and in 1843, *Neurypnology* by James Braid attempted to reassess trance states within a physiologic framework. The context in which Charlotte Brontë's most famous novel was published was therefore extremely rich. It is undebatable that Brontë was exposed to these ideas, even if she did not fully accept them all. She was aware of mesmerism as her father was interested in it and he even reported reading about it in 1850.[201] In the same year, she began a friendship with Harriett Martineau, the authoress of the discussed *Letters on Mesmerism*, in which she recounted the benefits of animal magnetism for her uterine illness. Brontë held Martineau in high esteem and valued her friendship; nevertheless, her own position on the matter remained cautious.[202] In a letter to G. H. Lewes describing a visit to Martineau's, she articulated her reservations about the practice:

> You ask me whether Miss Martineau made me a convert to mesmerism? Scarcely; yet I heard miracles of its efficacy, and could hardly discredit the whole of what was told me. I even underwent a personal experiment; and though the result was not absolutely clear, it was inferred that in time I should prove an excellent subject.[203]

She was likely uneasy with the notion of surrendering herself to an invisible power. Whereas phrenology promised the discernments of one's innate predispositions in order to improve the self, mesmerism required a relinquishment of conscious control and a trust in the operation of the subconscious mind. The mesmeric subject was passive, at the complete mercy of the magnetizer: a position fundamentally at odds with Brontë's strong emphasis on self-control and moral management. Although she stated that she could not discredit its efficacy, her skepticism appears to stem less from

[201] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology*, p. 30.
[202] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology*, p. 30.
[203] Gaskell, *The life of Charlotte Brontë*, 352.

doubts about its results than discomfort with its psychological implications. Nevertheless, like physiognomy and phrenology, mesmerism – and the broader discussion about the unexplainable phenomena – formed part of Brontë's cultural atmosphere and cannot be separated from the context in which *Jane Eyre* was produced. The following chapter will therefore identify instances of physiognomy, phrenology, animal magnetism and the paranormal within *Jane Eyre,* examining how 19th century debates surrounding these discourses influenced the novel's representations of character, psychology and moral agency.

Chapter 3: pseudoscientific discourse in *Jane Eyre*

3.1 Physiognomy: plain Jane and the visible other

Physiognomic descriptions in novels gained prominence with the spread of Lavater's theories at the beginning of the 19th century. Charlotte Brontë employs physiognomy in a manner that is not consistently coherent with Lavater's assumptions. Rather, she engages with physiognomic discourse in order to partially subvert its central principle that harmonious physical features are reliable indicators of a virtuous moral disposition.

Jane Eyre – the plain observer

In *Jane Eyre*, an autodiegetic narration, the heroine provides the reader with detailed physical descriptions of the individuals who surround her. As critics have noticed, Brontë often portrays her protagonists as acute observers[204], and Jane frequently draws conclusions on the inner disposition of others based on their appearance. As she herself reveals while conversing with Rochester: "I like to observe all the faces, and all the figures."[205], a statement corroborated by her passion for drawing human subjects.

Elizabeth Gaskell reported that Charlotte Brontë deliberately chose to render her heroine plain, small, and unattractive, in opposition to the conventional canon of main literary female characters. In response to her sisters' claim that such a representation was bound to be unsuccessful, Charlotte challenged their opinion: "I will show you a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours."[206] Conscious of her own deficit in conventional beauty, she projected this self-awareness onto Jane Eyre, crafting a character who is not attractive but nonetheless endowed with intelligence, integrity and virtue. From the first chapter, Jane is described as plain and not

[204] Tytler, "Physiognomy and the treatment of beauty in Jane Eyre", 300.
[205] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 193.
[206] Gaskell, *The life of Charlotte Brontë*, 292.

conventionally attractive as a child. She compares herself to her cousin Georgiana Reed, who is objectively and typically beautiful, suggesting that her beauty functions as a passe-partout, excusing or concealing her flawed character:

> Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try to win any one's favour? Eliza, who was headstrong and selfish, was respected. Georgiana, who had a spoiled temper, a very acrid spite, a captious and insolent carriage, was universally indulged. Her beauty, her pink cheeks and golden curls, seemed to give delight to all who looked at her, and to purchase indemnity for every fault.[207]

Bessie and Abbot, the two maids, enforce the general physiognomic logic when they claim that if Jane "were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that", adding that "a beauty like Miss Georgiana would be more moving in the same condition."[208] Jane, a plain girl reduced to a "little toad", is acutely aware of the fact that, had she been more conventionally comely, she would have been subjected to less criticism and afforded greater sympathy, and her life might have therefore been easier. Within the social environment she is part of, objective beauty operates as a major criterion of value. Jane rejects this principle: what fundamentally matters is not external appearance, but inner disposition and moral integrity and the two do not always coexist. In *Jane Eyre*, faces may suggest character – but moral truth ultimately exceeds the visible body**.** This narrative enforces Brontë's critique of evaluation based solely on external appearance. The novel places significant emphasis on the inner dimension of its characters and critics generally concur that for Brontë and her narrators, true value lies in what remains hidden and nonvisible, rather than in outward appearance.[209] Nevertheless, the author does

[207] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 14.
[208] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 25.
[209] Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 85.

not suggest that external beauty never corresponds to inner virtues. Miss Temple is described as "tall, fair and shapely; brown eyes with a benignant light in their iris […] refined features; a complexion, if pale, clear; and a stately air and carriage"[210]. In this instance, Miss Temple's kindness and intelligence are clearly reflected in her outer appearance. Similarly, the character of Helen Burns is described as pale and delicate, a physical portrait that mirrors her quiet and peaceful demeanor; in this case, Brontë emphasizes not her external appearance, but her selfless disposition and spiritual virtues.

Edward Rochester – beyond conventional beauty

Edward Rochester's physical description highlights how Brontë continues to engage with physiognomic concepts while convoluting them. In chapter XII, during his first encounter with Jane, he is depicted as having "a dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow"[211], noting that it was precisely his lack of conventional handsomeness that makes Jane feel at ease and allows her to offer help and speak candidly. She realizes that a more traditionally attractive gentleman would have inhibited her openness and willingness to help; from the start, it is exactly Rochester's atypical character that attracts her. When she discovers that the mysterious traveller is her employer, Jane has the opportunity to observe him more closely and reiterates his unusual features:

> I knew my traveller with his broad and jetty eyebrows; his square forehead, made squarer by the horizontal sweep of his black hair. I recognised his decisive nose, more remarkable for character than beauty; his full nostrils, denoting, I thought, choler; his grim mouth, chin, and jaw – yes, all three were very grim, and no mistake. His shape, now divested of cloak, I perceived harmonised in squareness with his

[210] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 46.
[211] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 111.

> physiognomy: I suppose it was a good figure in the athletic sense of the term -- broad chested and thin flanked, though neither tall nor graceful.[212]

Together with the protagonist, Rochester's description is a prime example of Brontë's employing physiognomy to suggest complexity rather than forward moral truth. He is presented as a character whose inner moral and emotional life cannot be predicted from his exterior appearance alone. Jane – and the reader – are forced to look beyond the surface. Jane's attention to physiognomy reveals her inclination to read character through outward aspect, a habit that Rochester perceives and challenges with his remark: "You examine me, Miss Eyre," subsequently asking if she finds him handsome. Jane candidly replies that she does not classify him as such.[213] When Rochester declares that "you are not pretty any more than I am handsome"[214], he establishes a parallel between himself and Jane that rejects conventional standards of physical attractiveness. This assertion gains further significance when contrasted with his attitude towards Blanche Ingram, the elegant and attractive woman he feigns an intention to marry. Blanche is presented, both in appearance and in character, as an opposite to Jane. She is tall, imposing and graceful, and her presence dominates the room. Blanche regards herself as superior to Jane, whom she views as a simple governess; this sense of superiority is echoed by her mother, who makes this judgement explicit when she declares herself a "judge of physiognomy" and claims that in Jane she sees "all the faults of her class."[215] In reality, Mrs. Ingram does not demonstrate a propensity for physiognomic observation, as her assessment does not engage with Jane as an individual, bur reduces her solely to her inferior social position. Blanche's mother openly despises governesses and even denigrates her in front of the other guests by addressing her as stupid. Moreover, Blanche believes beauty to be the primary prerogative of the female sex, revealing her superficiality in judging others. Jane evinces Miss Ingram's true nature through careful observation, juxtaposing

[212] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 117.
[213] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 128.
[214] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 129.
[215] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 172.

her physical beauty with her lack of empathy and genuine feelings. This insight prevents Jane from experiencing jealousy over the attention Rochester appears to bestow upon her:

> Miss Ingram was a mark beneath jealousy: she was too inferior to excite the feeling. […] She was very showy, but she was not genuine: **she had a fine person**, many brilliant attainments; **but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature**: nothing bloomed spontaneously on that soil; no unforced natural fruit delighted by its freshness. She was not good; she was not original: she used to repeat sounding phrases from books: she never offered, nor had, an opinion of her own. She advocated a high tone of sentiment; but she did not know the sensations of sympathy and pity; tenderness and truth were not in her. [216]

Blanche serves as a foil to Jane: whereas Blanche's charm conceals moral shallowness, Jane's plainness disguises intelligence, integrity, and strength. Educated in high society, where beauty was regarded as a form of social trade for women in securing a suitable partner, Blanche suppresses her authentic self in order to appear pleasing and securing a wealthy match.[217] By contrast, Jane remains faithful to her own identity and refuses to alter her behaviour to compensate for her lack of conventional attractiveness. Rochester is not in love with Blanche and could never be, for she is unable to charm him. Rochester himself later reveals that women who appeal to him only on the basis of their looks provoke his callousness if he perceives a lack of genuine feeling and inner depth.[218]

It is noteworthy to inspect the shift in perception that Jane and Rochester develop toward one another as their relationship deepens. The affective lens through which Jane regards him forecloses any judgement of him as physically unattractive: "And was Mr. Rochester now ugly in my eyes? No, reader: gratitude, and many associations, all pleasurable and genial, made his face the object I best

[216] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 180 – 181. My bold.
[217] Cadwallader, "Plain Jane and the Limits of Female Beauty.", 240.
[218] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 253.

liked to see; his presence in a room was more cheering than the brightest fire."[219] This transformation in perception is reiterated later in the novel, when Jane becomes fully aware of her love for him:

> Most true is it that "**beauty is in the eye of the gazer**." My master's colourless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth, – all energy, decision, will, – were **not beautiful, according to rule**; but they were more than beautiful to me; they were full of an interest, an influence that quite mastered me, – that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his.[220]

Albeit Jane has grown to appreciate his appearance, her admiration is primarily directed towards his mind. Their conversations are intellectually stimulating, and he treats her as an equal – a rare occurring for a woman, especially for a governess. In the same manner, Rochester's love for Jane subsequently leads him to frame her as "a beauty […] delicate and aerial"[221]. She actively resists this characterization, refusing to be reduced to an object of romantic flattery. As Jane herself remarks: "Don't address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, quakerish governess."[222]", adding that she would not accept fancy dresses or jewelry from him, since her plainness is part of her identity. Furthermore, the impression she has of her own features shifts: she notices greater beauty in herself, as evidenced when she examines her reflection in the mirror after Rochester's proposal.

The liminality of Bertha Mason

While the evolving perceptions between Jane and Rochester illustrate how love reshapes vision and redefines notions of beauty, Brontë employs a very different approach in describing the figure of Bertha Mason, Rochester's "mad" wife who is imprisoned in the third story of Thornfield Hall. Even

[219] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 143.
[220] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 170. My bold.
[221] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 252.
[222] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 252.

before Bertha physically appears in the novel, her presence is announced through sound: Jane hears a "mirthless", "tragic" and "preternatural"[223] laugh in a few occasions, a noise so unnatural that it scarcely seems human. This impression is enforced when the laughter is described as demoniac, foreshadowing the whole portrayal of Bertha as a liminal being, vacillating between humanity and monstrousness. When Bertha attacks her brother Richard, he reports that he was bitten: "she sucked the blood: she said she'd drain my heart"[224]. At this point in the narrative, neither Jane nor the reader fully understand Richard Mason's account; nonetheless, the language strongly conjectures the presence of an actual blood-sucking creature inhabiting Thornfield. Jane's first visual encounter with Bertha – prior to learning her identity – occurs when Bertha enters into Jane's room and destroys her bridal veil. Her features are recounted as "fearful and ghastly", with "a discoloured face […] a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!"[225] Bertha's complexion is rendered as purple, her lips "swelled and dark", imagery that culminates in the comparison with the "Vampyre, the foul German spectre."[226], a description that retrospectively enforces the narrative of monstrosity. As Bertha Mason's existence is ultimately revealed, Rochester claims he had the right of seeking the company of "something at least human"[227], once again denying her of a human representation. Jane depicts her like a monstrous animal, both in physicality and behaviour:

> In the deep shade, at the farther end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: **it** grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; **it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal**: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid **its** head and face.[228]

[223] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 105.
[224] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 207.
[225] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 275.
[226] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 276.
[227] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 284.
[228] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 284-285. My Bold.

Nina Baym notes the considerable effort Brontë has devoted into excluding Bertha from the human sphere to the extent that Jane recognizes no likeness between herself and Rochester's wife.[229] This deliberate dehumanization is crucial to the novel's romantic plot, as Bertha represents the only obstacle to the fulfillment of Jane and Rochester's love. Rochester himself explains how he was initially deceived by his wife's beauty, recalling that his father praised her as "the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty: and this was no lie. I found her a fine woman, in the style of Blanche Ingram: tall, dark, and majestic."[230] Yet this emphasis underlines the absence of genuine knowledge or emotional connection prior to their marriage. Bertha's animalistic portrayal closely intertwines with psychological theories popular in the first half of the 19th century, as well as with contemporary racial discourse. These aspects will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter, which focuses on the relevance of phrenology in the novel.

Beauty and constraint: St. John Rivers and Rosamond Oliver

When Jane decides to leave Thornfield, as her morality prevents her from remaining with a man who is already married, Brontë introduces a contrasting masculine figure in St John Rivers, whose characterization markedly contrasts with Rochester's.

Before Jane is offered the opportunity to analyze his physical features, it is St. John who passes judgement on Jane as he observes her lying ill in bed, declaring that she "looks sensible, but not at all handsome."[231] The term *sensible,* meaning an individual endowed with sense and rationality, align precisely with the qualities he is seeking in a partner, as it will be evident later in the novel. While his sister Diana attributes Jane's poor appearance to her illness, St, John remarks that "ill or well she would always be plain" and that "the grace of harmony and beauty are quite wanting in those features."[232] Although such assertions might appear offensive, they foreshadow that beauty is not an

[229] Baym, "The madwoman and her languages", 47.
[230] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 297.
[231] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 330.
[232] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 330.

element he particularly esteems in a woman. Once Jane recovers, she finally has the opportunity to observe the people who granted her hospitality. She beholds Diana and Mary Rivers as both kind and physically attractive; regarding St. John, Jane examines his physiognomic traits in detail:

> […] his face riveted the eye; it was like a **Greek face, very pure in outline**: quite a straight, classic nose; quite an Athenian mouth and chin. It is seldom, indeed, an English face comes **so near the antique models** as did his. He might well be a little shocked at the irregularity of my lineaments, his own being so harmonious.[233]

Jane recognizes and admires St John's beauty, contrasting it with her own plainness. His outward perfection, compared to the perfection of Ancient Greece's models, seems to reflect his moral rigor and self-discipline, suggesting an alignment between physical appearance and inner virtues. Yet, Brontë complicates this apparent harmony; although St. John is dedicated to his clerical duties and genuinely ambitious in his plan to become a missionary, he is emotionally rigid. Due to his austerity, it requires time for Jane to assess his disposition. As she observes, even though he appears "zealous in his ministerial labours, blameless in his life and habits, he yet did not appear to enjoy that mental serenity, that inward content, which should be the reward of every sincere Christian and practical philanthropist."[234] She further describes him through metaphors of marble and ice, suggesting his coldness and emotional inaccessibility. His love interest, Rosamond Oliver, is introduced as an embodiment of conventional exquisiteness and refinement, described as, "the face of perfect beauty"[235], followed by an exhaustive sketch of her persona. She epitomizes the ideal nineteenth-century lady, distinguished not only by her astonishing physical beauty, but also by her grace and sophisticated manners. Jen Cadwallader remarks that, similarly to Georgiana Reed and Blanche Ingram, Rosamond's upper-class education has inhibited her personal development, preventing the

[233] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 335. My Bold.
[234] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 343.
[235] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 353.

full formation of her mature character; Jane compares her manners to those of a child in more than one occasion.[236] Although Rosamond is extremely beautiful and St. John actually loves her, he ultimately does not choose her to be his partner; she lacks intellectual qualities, possessed instead by Jane. St. John attempts to convince Jane to marry him so that she will accompany him in his missionary travels. Despite recognizing he is a morally upright individual, she senses that his proposal is not motivated by love, but by expediency: he seeks a companion suited to his work, rather than a union for love. Jane, guided by strong morality, refuses to sacrifice love for duty. When he tells her she is "formed for labour, not for love"[237] Jane initially considers accompanying him, but not as his wife. She knows she will never love him and that he would not be able to provide the passion and intimacy she requires. When he argues that love might develop after marriage, she responds with clarity: "I scorn your idea of love…I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St. John, and I scorn you when you offer it."[238] Through this interaction, Brontë emphasizes that moral virtue alone, even when reflected in outward appearance as with St. John's stately features, is insufficient for emotional fulfillment.

The end of the novel and the rearrangement of roles

Finally, the novel's resolution alters the physiognomic scene. Rochester, previously characterized as physically imposing despite being unattractive, is left disfigured, nearly blind and maimed. He is nonetheless able to recognize Jane through non-visual means, identifying her solely by her voice and her touch: "this is her shape – this is her size."[239] Bertha Mason has died, and his injuries are sustained in his attempt to save her from fire, marking the removal of the monstrous impediment to their love.

[236] Cadwallader, "Plain Jane and the Limits of Female Beauty.", 240.
[237] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 397.
[238] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 397.
[239] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 422.

Jane reaffirms her identity and autonomy with a powerful pronouncement: "I told you I am independent, sir, as well as rich: I am my own mistress."[240] Her shift in position is not only moral, but also material and social; she is no longer destitute and isolate, having acquired both financial security and a sense of kinship through her long-lost cousins St. John, Mary and Diana Rivers.

Deprived of sight, Rochester no longer relies on visual perception, and Jane, in turn, shows disinterest in his altered physical appearance. When Rochester inquires whether it will be a burden for her to "bear with my infirmities, […] to overlook my deficiencies."[241], she challenges him by affirming that she loves him even more precisely because she can now be useful to him. Rochester, in return, repents his earlier conduct, acknowledging that by attempting to make her his mistress he would have "sullied my innocent flower – breathed guilt on its purity."[242]

Their reunion affirms a form of love that transcend physical markers, suggesting once more a detachment from the determinism of Lavaterian theory. Moreover, the balance between Jane and Rochester has shifted entirely. Having gained economic independence through the inheritance from her long-lost uncle, she would not be dependent from him in this sense. On the contrary, the roles are reversed: it is Rochester, blind and mutilated, who relies on her.

By challenging the authority of traditional 19th century physiognomic reading, *Jane Eyre* shifts the attention from surface appearance to the importance of the inner self. It does so by engaging with contemporary theories that sought to locate moral truth within the mind itself. The following section therefore turns its attention to phrenology, examining how Charlotte Bronte draws on this theory to conceptualize character and morality beyond external appearance.

[240] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 423.
[241] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 433.
[242] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 434.

3.2 Phrenology: deciphering the inner self

Phrenology and physiognomy enforced the equivalent notion of analyzing the external appearance of a person in order to discern their inner disposition, although through different methods. The lexicon and ideas of phrenology are widely employed in the text and occasionally coalesce. As was demonstrated in the previous section, Charlotte Brontë assigns significance to the inner qualities of her characters, which may or may not mirror their external appearance in terms of beauty. Rochester and Jane share the characteristic of lacking conventional physical beauty yet possessing profoundly complex personalities. Together, they reflect Brontë's interest in the inner life and psychological depth of an individual.

From passion to self-control – Jane's emotional development

Sally Shuttleworth remarks that Brontë's portrayal of Jane's adolescence is influenced by two different psychological positions in the 19th century: the phrenological representation of the mind as possessing different faculties, and a separate tradition which focused on the female reproductive system as the source of destabilizing energies. These positions are contradicting, as one emphasizes self-control, and the other suggested that women's energy would always be overpowered by their reproductive force.[243] Jane describes herself as "a heterogeneous thing, opposed to them [the Reeds] in temperament, in capacity, in propensities."[244] From childhood, Jane is portrayed as a passionate child, prone to outbursts of anger when crossed. Shuttleworth notes that the passionate child in the nineteenth century was perceived as dominated by irrational feelings and therefore viewed as disruptive.[245] In contrast, George Combe argued that children could feel passion to the same degree as adults, defining passion as the highest degree of activity of any faculty, therefore natural and morally neutral in itself. Within this frame of reference, passion required modulation through

[243] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology*, 154.
[244] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 15.
[245] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian psychology, 158.*

exercise and education. Jane's childhood experiences exemplify unrestrained passion, such as when her confinement in the red-room triggers her psychological collapse. In adulthood, however, although retaining her passion, she acquires the ability to regulate it. She affirms the persistence of her emotional life when she challenges Rochester with her question: "Do you think I am an automaton? — a machine without feelings?"[246] Jane's aptitude toward feeling intense emotion, tempered by uncompromising self-control, is exemplified by her reaction at the disclosure of Mr. Rochester's wife during the wedding: "My nerves vibrated to those low-spoken words as they had never vibrated to thunder—my blood felt their **subtle violence** as it had never felt frost or fire: but I was collected, and in no danger of swooning."[247] This description reminds the reader of child Jane, overpowered by surges of outrage and anger at the unfairness experienced at Gateshead and Lowood. However, for adult Jane intense feeling is no longer accompanied by a passionate outburst, marking the development of her moral discipline. Her emotions retain their depth and intensity, yet she regulates them through reason, preventing such feelings from dominating her actions or emotional responses.

Jane and Rochester – mutual legibility

This attention to the expression and regulation of her inner self situates *Jane Eyre* within a broader discourse concerned with the mental capacities and moral character, phrenology in particular. Phrenology serves as an epistemological structure through which Jane learns to interpret character; Brontë repeatedly presents occasions in which the heroine's penetrative gaze shifts beyond the face, encompassing a systematic analysis of the body and, more specifically, of the skull. The language of phrenology permeates the text, and is used by Jane when recalling seeing Miss Temple for the first time at Lowood: "I suppose I have a considerable organ of veneration, for I retain yet the sense of admiring awe with which my eyes traced her steps."[248] The organ of veneration was deemed to be the

[246] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 246.
[247] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 281. My bold.
[248] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 46.

reason for religious propensity and worshipping a superior power.[249] Jane described Miss Temple as having a "large forehead", feature considered positive by phrenology, indicating the dominance of intellectual faculties. Julia Seaton notices the juxtaposition with Mrs. Reed, who is reported having a low brow, highlighting Jane's attraction to people exhibiting signs of intelligence.[250] The pursuit of intellect and the cultivation of positive attitudes is a crucial matter for Jane; epitomizing the stance of Charlotte Brontë herself, she is aware that the society she lives in does not offer enough "exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts"[251] for women, as it does instead for men. This preoccupation with intellect is remarked when Rochester invites Jane to read him:

> "Just so: I think so: and you shall be answerable for it. Criticise me: **does my forehead** not please you?"
>
> He lifted up the sable waves of hair which lay horizontally over his brow, and showed a **solid enough mass of intellectual organs,** but an abrupt deficiency where the suave sign of benevolence should have risen.
>
> "Now, ma'am, am I a fool?"
>
> "Far from it, sir. You would, perhaps, think me rude if I inquired in return whether you are a philanthropist?" [252]

At this point, Jane does not know Rochester personally, yet she is able to discern aspects of his personality without any knowledge of his history or background. Here, she is established not merely as an observer, but as an interpreter equipped with authority and ability to translate physical signs, and especially the shape of the skull, into moral judgement. In phrenological terms, benevolence, a superior sentiment, "produces desire of the happiness of others, and delight in the diffusion of

[249] Van Wyhe, "History of Phrenology on the Web – veneration."
[250] Seaton, "Sympathy and Phrenology in Jane Eyre."
[251] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 107.
[252] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 129.

enjoyment. It disposes to active goodness, and, in cases of distress, to compassion."[253] This assessment proves accurate, for Jane later observes that, although Rochester possesses positive qualities, he was also "proud, sardonic, harsh to inferiority of every description. In my secret soul I knew that his great kindness to me was balanced by unjust severity to many others." [254], a disposition that reflects his lack of benevolence. Since Brontë does not provide explanations to the phrenological references she employs, it is implied that her Victorian readers were familiar with such jargon and its moral implications.

The counterpart of this scene occurs when Rochester analyses Jane while disguised as a gypsy woman. Seeking to ascertain her true feelings towards him without the constraints of social conventions, he engages her in conversation under this assumed identity. Jane is initially skeptical; nevertheless, when the gypsy states that destiny is not written in the hands, but rather in the face, – especially in the brows and eyes –, Jane is reassured, for she is accustomed to analysing people according to phrenological theory. Rochester, who has closely observed Jane since her arrival at Thornfield, accurately guesses Jane's disposition and inner character. Jane's features are made to "speak" to Rochester, revealing her moral and emotional nature. Through the language of phrenology and physiognomy, Rochester elevates her moral and intellectual worth:

> "I see no enemy to a fortunate issue but in the brow; and that brow professes to say, – 'I can live alone, if self-respect, and circumstances require me so to do. […].' The forehead declares, **'Reason sits firm and holds the reins**, and she will not let the feelings burst away and hurry her to wild chasms. The passions may rage furiously, like true heathens, as they are; and the desires may imagine all sorts of vain things: but judgment shall still have the last word in every argument, and the casting vote in every decision. Strong wind, earthquake-shock, and fire may pass by: but I shall

[253] Van Wyhe, "History of Phrenology on the Web – benevolence."
[254] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 143.

> follow the guiding of that still small voice which interprets the dictates of conscience.'[255]

Jane's forehead is presented as a signifier of intelligence, firmness and independence. Although she experiences deep passion, Rochester acknowledges that it is self-respect that eventually guides her decisions. In the tension between the turmoil of uncontrolled emotion and rational judgement, reason consistently prevails. This analysis subtly foreshadows later developments in the narrative; when Jane discovers the existence of Bertha, her inner voice – which coincides with her logical thought – urges her to "Leave Thornfield at once."[256] This moment represents the culmination of her rational resolve: although she intensely loves Rochester, she recognizes the implication of him being legally married to another woman. Accepting to remain with him would mean tolerating the degrading role of mistress; her dignity and self-respect, governed by reason, therefore compel her to leave Rochester, even at great emotional cost.

Jane's intelligence is fully recognized by Rochester, who therefore treats her like an equal. Jane is intellectually stimulated by their conversations, revealing that their exchanges are delectable, and she perceives a "keen delight in receiving the new ideas he offered, in imagining the new pictures he portrayed, and following him in thought through the new regions he disclosed."[257] Jane expresses her desire to analyze Rochester even further, remarking that Blanche Ingram should be consider herself fortunate to be able to "look into the abyss" of Rochester's mind, "explore its secrets, and analyse their nature."[258] However, the reader deduces that Blanche lacks the capacity and the inclination to engage with Rochester on such an intellectual and psychological level. Yet, Rochester's propensity for concealment and manipulation renders him only partially readable to Jane as well.

[255] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 195 – 196. My bold.
[256] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 288.
[257] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 143.
[258] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 183.

It becomes evident that Rochester, like Jane, is attracted to a considerable degree of intelligence. He reiterates this concept when he explains to Jane that, after confining Bertha into the attic and entrusting her care to Grace Poole, he sought for a companion who would be her complete opposite – a woman capable of moral and intellectual companionship.[259] Having failed in this pursuit, he turned instead to a series of mistresses, beginning with Céline Varens, Adèle's mother, and later "an Italian, Giacinta, and a German, Clara; both considered singularly handsome"[260], only to dismiss their beauty as inconsequential a few weeks later. Although Rochester compares the role of a mistress to that of a slave, he simultaneously attempts to position Jane in a role that would essentially replicate that of a mistress. Jane, however, refuses to assume the position previously occupied by those women. This contradiction aligns with Jane's earlier phrenological and physiognomical assessment of Rochester as being dominant and endowed with a remarkable force of character. Such traits manifest in his attempts to manipulate Jane into becoming his mistress first by invoking the prospect of remaining alone with "the maniac upstairs"[261], and subsequently arguing that, since Jane has no surviving family, she does not risk offending her relatives by living with Rochester outside of marriage. If Jane's evaluation of Rochester is thus validated by his actions, Rochester's own judgement of Jane as being governed by reason and self-respect is likewise confirmed by her resistance.

Bertha Mason and the danger of unregulated impulses

Phrenological discourse enables Jane and Rochester to be mutually legible to one another, a form of analytical recognition that is altogether denied to Bertha Mason. As demonstrated in the previous section on physiognomy, Bertha is depicted in markedly animalistic and monstrous terms and is almost entirely deprived of her humanity. Brontë's description of Bertha has multiple origins, drawing both on contemporary racial discourse and 19th-century theories on insanity. Bertha Mason is

[259] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 302.
[260] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 303.
[261] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 308.

portrayed as a creole woman from Jamaica. As explained by Sue Thomas, prior to 1850 the term "creole" was not univocal and could carry several meanings:

1. white people of Spanish descent naturalized by birth in Spanish America;
2. individuals of non-aboriginal descent but born and therefore naturalized in the West Indies;
3. non-aboriginal people from different ethnicities born in Spanish America;
4. white people of European descent naturalized by birth in the West Indies.[262]

From the evidence provided by the text, it is unclear into which of these four categories Bertha Mason should be placed. Although she is described as having a dark complexion – with references to purple skin and dark lips – nowhere it is stated whether she is ethnically black or of mixed racial heritage. Rochester declares that "Her family wished to secure me because I was of a good race; and so did she."[263], possibly juxtaposing his "good race" with Bertha's; however, this implication remains ambiguous. What is made clear is that Bertha was perceived as attractive at the time Rochester met her and he was initially captivated by her. In the 19th century geographical boundaries were strongly emphasized and in Victorian Britain Creoles were gradually associated with degeneracy and excess, faults that were believed to be exacerbated by the tropical climate.[264] These stereotypes applied to women especially and formed part of a broader discourse based on pseudo-scientific racial theories. In *Jane Eyre*, the concept of Englishness is foregrounded; Jane's self-control and rationality, traits closely aligned with her English identity, are first contrasted with the "Frenchness" of Adèle Varens, who inherited her superficiality and preoccupation for appearance by her mother. This opposition is intensified through Bertha Mason, the creole "madwoman" who functions as Jane's extreme counterpoint. The central premise of Bertha's characterization is that her insanity is depicted as hereditary. Prior to learning about her existence and her creole identity, Jane has the opportunity to observe her brother Richard Mason – unaware of their kinship – and notes that his accent sounds "not

[262] Thomas, "The tropical extravagance of Bertha Mason", 2.
[263] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 297.
[264] Thomas, "The tropical extravagance of Bertha Mason", 4.

precisely foreign, but still not altogether English."[265] Although his presence seems pleasant at first sight, on closer examination Jane notes in his lineaments characteristics that "failed to please". This moment of uncertainty anticipates his further description:

> I liked his physiognomy even less than before: it struck me as being at the same time **unsettled** and **inanimate**. His eye wandered, and had no meaning in its wandering: this gave him an odd look, such as I never remembered to have seen. For a handsome and not an unamiable-looking man, **he repelled me exceedingly**: there was **no power** in that smooth-skinned face of a full oval shape: **no firmness** in that aquiline nose and small cherry mouth; there was **no thought on the low, even forehead;** no command in that blank, brown eye.[266]

As already explained, a low forehead was understood to be a sign of weak intellectual capacity in phrenological approach. Albeit appearing attractive to the other guests, Mason's appearance is immediately perceived as disquieting by Jane. She describes him not only as visually displeasing, but also provoking an instinctive sense of repulsion. From a genetic perspective, this portrayal reinforces Rochester's account of Bertha's madness being inherited. As discussed in Chapter 1, one of the most influential theories on insanity was that of *moral insanity*, first elaborated by James Cowles Prichard, who identified this form of disorder as primarily hereditary. Rochester's assertion that "Bertha Mason is mad; and she came of a mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations! Her mother, the Creole, was both a madwoman and a drunkard!"[267] explicitly frames his wife's condition as the result of inherited mental degeneration. Bertha's insanity is, therefore, not acquired but innate, transmitted through maternal lineage. Moreover, her mother is described as morally corrupt, reinforcing the subsequent association between madness and vice. Relating his history with Bertha to Jane,

[265] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 185.
[266] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 185. My bold.
[267] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 283 – 284.

Rochester declares that "I was not sure of the existence of one virtue in her nature: I had marked neither modesty, nor benevolence, nor candour, nor refinement in her mind or manners."[268] He further predicts that Bertha's brother will likely follow a similar path, as insanity is transmitted from older generations. Although Bertha exhibited signs of insanity as early as their honeymoon, Rochester declares that "her character ripened and developed with frightful rapidity; her vices sprang up fast and rank".[269] This revelation culminates with the recognition that "her excesses had prematurely developed the germs of insanity"[270]. Rochester implies that Bertha's indulgence in her vices and her failure to exercise self-control accelerated her descent into madness and viciousness. In this view, although her insanity is presented as congenital, she makes absolutely no attempt at cultivating her rational faculties or suppressing her destructive tendencies. Rochester's analysis reflects the philosophy of George Combe, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Combe argued that individuals who were naturally predisposed to mental disorders should not be condemned, as their inclination was innate; they required assistance to train their good faculties and curb their detrimental impulses. Bertha is portrayed as failing to adhere to these phrenological principles. Jane's response "you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate — with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel — she cannot help being mad."[271] reinforces the fact that Mrs. Rochester's mental illness is inborn and, therefore, was doomed to manifest in her actions. This reasoning echoes Charlotte Brontë's own opinion regarding Bertha Mason. In a letter to W.S. Williams written at the beginning of 1848 addressing criticism on *Jane Eyre*, Brontë acknowledges that Bertha's character might appear appalling to readers; however, she argues that her portrayal is a natural expression of moral madness, adding that Mrs. Rochester lived a life of sin, and sin in itself represents a form of insanity.[272]

[268] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 297.
[269] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 298.
[270] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 298.
[271] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 293.
[272] Charlotte Brontë's letter to W.S. Williams, 4th January 1848

The specific sins Bertha is supposedly guilty of are never clearly articulated; a conundrum emphasized by the fact that she is never granted the opportunity to speak for herself. Reinforcing her representation as inhuman and animalistic, Bertha never utters a single word directly in the novel. Rochester refers to her as "depraved" and critics have generally inferred that her alleged moral transgression involves sexual excess.

Bertha and St. John as cautionary figures

Jane and Rochester are presented as legible to a degree, whereas Bertha remains fundamentally unreadable. Therefore, the latter embodies unchecked passion and unrestrained faculties, an intersection of instinct and desire that eludes rational comprehension. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their influential study *The Madwoman in the Attic*, argue that Bertha functions as a psychological alter-ego to Jane, enacting impulses and actions that Jane herself might subconsciously desire.[273] Jane, however, cannot indulge in these appetites due to her self-restraint, the constraints of society, and the assigned role for women in Victorian culture. In this sense, Bertha can be outlined as a cautionary figure, embodying the consequences of unhampered passion and the dangers of abandoning moral and rational self-control.

Bertha Mason and St John Rivers represent two polar opposites in *Jane Eyre's* exploration of human emotion and rational control. Whereas Jane herself possesses strong passion, but she is able to restrain it, St. John is entirely disciplined, governed by intellect and an uncompromising sense of duty. Although Jane is never able to interpret him in clear phrenological terms and instead only offers a physiognomic portrayal of his appearance, he is nonetheless depicted as almost completely devoid of passion and empathy. Due to his rigorous self-discipline and emotional coldness, St. John renders himself decipherable to Jane's gaze only on a superficial level. His emotional repression – particularly regarding his missionary purpose – renders him cold and one-dimensional, thereby illustrating the

[273] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 359.

dangers of excessive self-control and the denial of natural human emotions. In this respect, John functions as a cautionary figure in the opposite sense of Bertha: just as unrestrained passion leads to insanity and maliciousness, so excessive suppression of feelings in favour of duty can lead to moral sterility. His inclination to bereave Jane of a life animated by romantic love is inseparable from his willingness to renounce to such feelings himself. In this sense, phrenology and physiognomy reveal their limits when confronted with uncontrolled passion or utmost repression. Jane ultimately occupies middle-ground position between these extremes, embodying a balance between the unmitigated chaos represented by Bertha and the rigid self-denial of St John.

Phrenological and physiognomical discourse often intersect, sharing a common preoccupation in the readability of characters through external appearance. Both pseudosciences are extensively and methodically employed within the text. They are not, however, the only pseudo-scientific frameworks employed. Although not directly, Brontë harnesses ideas connected with animal magnetism and early parapsychological thought, as it will be demonstrated in the next section.

3.3 Animal magnetism and parapsychological discourse

Heightened sensitivity and precognitive dreams

Phrenology and physiognomy were disciplines concerned with the physical body as a site of interpretation. Their authority rested on a supposedly scientific and observational method, grounded by the assumption that character was materially inscribed on the body and therefore legible by the trained eye. The empiric dimension of these practices rendered them allegedly accurate, as they seemed to provide a tangible access to the depth of the mind. In contrast, theories such as animal magnetism occupied a more complex epistemological position; as Janet Oppenheim observes, mesmerism had affinities with faith healers and village wizards, despite its claims to scientific legitimacy.[274] Lingering between science and the paranormal, mesmerism invoked an invisible power – the magnetic fluid –, altered states of consciousness and phenomena that resisted rational explanation. Within this framework, women were deemed more sensitive and receptive to unseen forces and unexplained events. Victorian medical and cultural discourse attributed this heightened sensitivity to women's supposedly delicate nervous system, which rendered them unusually responsive to paranormal experience. Although Jane is repeatedly characterized as remarkably rational, as accurately guessed by Rochester during his phrenological assessment, the novel nonetheless presents numerous instances in which she appears attuned to phenomena that transcend empirical clarification. Catherine Crowe argued that phenomena like dreams, presentiments and ghost-seeing were more prominent in women because of their greater "nervous irritability"[275]. This assumption is reflected in the first encounter between Jane and Bertha, where Jane witnesses a figure tearing her bridal veil. Rochester relies on this gendered notion of female sensitivity in his attempt to persuade Jane that the vision was a product of her imagination, "the creature of an over-stimulated brain".[276] The narrative ultimately confirms that Jane did, in fact, see Bertha Mason and Rochester

[274] Oppenheim, The other world, 210.
[275] Crowe, *The Night-Side of Nature*, ch. V.
[276] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 276.

aimed to manipulate her in order to conceal the presence of his wife at Thornfield Hall. Nonetheless, the novel offers numerous instances of Jane's responsiveness to the unexplainable, the first episode occurring in the dreaded red-room at Gateshead Hall, in which she is imprisoned by her aunt. The room is descripted with gothic nuances: cold and silent, rarely used. Its actual secret, however, lies in the fact that it was the very place where Jane's uncle, Mr. Reed, died. When she looks at her reflection in the looking-glass, she perceive herself as a "strange little figure" with "a white face […] and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still"[277], likening her appearance to that of an actual spirit, specifically one of those "half-fairy, half-imp" creatures in Bessie's stories, which appeared before travellers on the moors. It is no coincidence that this episode coincides with the beginning of Jane's own journey. The eerie atmosphere of the room, combined with being left entirely alone for hours as punishment – a great injustice according to Jane – unsettles her mind. She begins to scrutinize herself, questioning the reason why she deserved such a cruel treatment. As her anxiety intensifies, so does her awareness of the space and the ominous threats it seems to conceal:

> I began to recall what I had heard of dead men, troubled in their graves by the violation of their last wishes, revisiting the earth to punish the perjured and avenge the oppressed; and I thought Mr. Reed's spirit, harassed by the wrongs of his sister's child, might quit its abode – whether in the church vault or in the unknown world of the departed – and rise before me in this chamber.[278]

Jane is primed by superstition and fears that the spectre of Mr. Reed might appear, since Mrs. Reed failed to fulfil her promise of properly taking care of Jane. When she suddenly notices a light on the wall, she confesses: "prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world."[279] The

[277] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 15.
[278] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 16.
[279] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 17.

anticipation of a possible encounter with a ghost shocks her, leading to a nervous collapse. Although she pleads to be released from the room, Mrs. Reed forces her to remain there an hour longer, and Jane, overwhelmed by terror, faints. As the maids observe her condition, one of them remarks: "it's such a strange thing she should have that fit: I wonder if she saw anything."[280] Jane overhears fragments of their conversation: "Something passed her, all dressed in white, and vanished" – "A great black dog behind him" – "Three loud raps on the chamber door" – "A light in the churchyard just over his grave"[281]. These images, drawn from Gothic folklore and popular superstition, retrospectively validate Jane's angst and support the atmosphere of terror. Rather than reassuring her, the conjectures of the adults reinforce the unexplainable framework through which Jane interprets her experience in the red-room. This episode establishes a pattern in which imagination and supernatural expectation intertwine. Indeed, although the text includes example of purely Gothic premonitions – such as the Chestnut tree being struck by lightning on the night of Rochester's proposal, a foreboding of Jane and Rochester's imminent separation – these elements will not be considered in this analysis, as they do not concern Jane's unconscious or intuitive abilities. Jane's enhanced sensitivity to signs and omens does not disappear as she approaches adulthood; on the contrary, what begins in the red-room as fear entrenched in superstition, resurfaces later in the form of prophetic dreams. At Thornfield, Jane discloses to the reader:

> **Presentiments are strange things**! and so are sympathies; **and so are signs**; and the three combined make one mystery to which humanity has not yet found the key. I never laughed at presentiments in my life, because I have had strange ones of my own.[282]

[280] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 19.
[281] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 19.
[282] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 214. My bold.

Although rational, Jane firmly declares that she does not dismiss presages and signs, laying the ground for their significance in the text. She recalls that, during her childhood, her maid Bessie dreamt of a little child, which was believed to be an omen predicting sufferance, either for the person dreaming or for a close relative. Bessie's anxiety was confirmed when she learned that her little sister was on the brink of death. Jane has similar dreams on her own for a few weeks, in which she dreams about an infant.

> I sometimes hushed [the child] in my arms, sometimes dandled on my knee, sometimes watched playing with daisies on a lawn, or again, dabbling its hands in running water. It was a wailing child this night, and a laughing one the next: now it nestled close to me, and now it ran from me; but whatever mood the apparition evinced, whatever aspect it wore, it failed not for seven successive nights to meet me the moment I entered the land of slumber.[283]

She explains how dreaming repeatedly about the same image fills her with unease. Yet these premonitions prove accurate when she learns that her aunt, Mrs. Reed is approaching death and that her cousin John Reed perished a week earlier. The child is thus portrayed as an accurate omen of death, and this event is just the first of a sequence. William Siebenschuh argues that Brontë displays a clearly intuitive understanding of the possible relationship between consciousness, dream symbol and the subconscious.[284] This insight recalls contemporary accounts on patients under mesmeric trance; as they were believed to be able to foretell the course of their own illness, Jane's dreams likewise assume a predictive quality that manifest itself immediately preceding decisive events in her life. Before returning to Thornfield after being at Gateshead and assisting to her aunt's death, Jane dreams of Blanche Ingram, her mind anchored in the belief that Mr. Rochester had the genuine

[283] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 215.
[284] Siebenschuh, "The image of the child and the plot of Jane Eyre", 306.

intention of marrying her: "in a vivid morning dream I saw her closing the gates of Thornfield against me and pointing me out another road; and Mr. Rochester looked on with his arms folded – smiling sardonically, as it seemed, at both her and me."[285] It is not Blanche, however, who is ultimately revealed to stand between Jane and Rochester, but Bertha Mason. Even so, Jane anticipates her own departure from Thornfield due to extenuating circumstances. Rochester, meanwhile, scornfully smiles at them, aware that none of the two women knows the truth he conceals.

Later, preceding her own wedding with Rochester, Jane describes to him an elaborate dream she had, in which the figure of the child reappears:

> During all my first sleep, I was following the windings of an unknown road; total obscurity environed me; rain pelted me**; I was burdened with the charge of a little child**: a very small creature, too young and feeble to walk, and which shivered in my cold arms, and wailed piteously in my ear. I thought, sir, that you were on the road a long way before me; and I strained every nerve to overtake you, and made effort on effort to utter your name and entreat you to stop – but my movements were fettered, and my voice still died away inarticulate; while **you**, I felt, **withdrew farther and farther every moment.**[286]

At this point, Jane experiences a subconscious anxiety regarding her relationship with Rochester, despite having no conscious knowledge of any impediment to their marriage. Notwithstanding, the dream signals to her that her pilgrimage is not yet finished, and she will distance herself from the man she loves. Siebenschuh contends that this dream occurs after Jane's visit to Gateshead Hall, one of the traumatic sites of her childhood, and might therefore be a reference to a psychological return of unpleasant memories of her past.[287] The second part of her dream begins with an accurate prediction

[285] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 236.
[286] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 273. My bold.
[287] Siebenschuh, "The image of the child and the plot of Jane Eyre", 312.

of future events: “I dreamt another dream, sir: that Thornfield Hall was a dreary ruin, the retreat of bats and owls. I thought that of all the stately front nothing remained but a shell-like wall, very high and very fragile-looking.”[288] In fact, toward the end of the novel, when Jane departs from Marsh End in search of Rochester, she discovers that Thornfield Hall has indeed been reduced to ruins:

> I looked with timorous joy towards a stately house: I saw a blackened ruin.
> […] The front was, **as I had once seen it in a dream**, but a well-like wall, very high and very fragile-looking, perforated with paneless windows: no roof, no battlements, no chimneys – all had crashed in.[289]

Jane recognizes that she foresaw exactly the wrecked state of Thornfield and does not seem disconcerted by the precognitive power granted to her by her dreams.
The dream she is recounting to Rochester right before their wedding continues as she envisions herself wandering among the ruins:

> Wrapped up in a shawl, **I still carried the unknown little child**: I might not lay it down anywhere, however tired were my arms – **however much its weight impeded my progress, I must retain it.** I heard the gallop of a horse at a distance on the road; I was sure it was you; and you were departing for many years and for a distant country. I climbed the thin wall with frantic perilous haste, eager to catch one glimpse of you from the top: the stones rolled from under my feet, the ivy branches I grasped gave way, **the child clung round my neck in terror, and almost strangled me**; at last I gained the summit**. I saw you like a speck on a white track**, lessening every moment. The blast blew so strong I could not stand. I sat down on the narrow ledge; I hushed the scared infant in my lap: you turned an angle of the

[288] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 273.
[289] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 413. My bold.

> road: I bent forward to take a last look; the wall crumbled; I was shaken; **the child rolled from my knee, I lost my balance, fell, and woke**.[290]

The child, as previously ascertained, functions as an ominous presage. Jane's inability to release the child, even though it deters her from progressing forward, could be read as a symbolic interpretation of her attachment to Rochester. Within this context, the dream anticipates the agony – and the necessity – of their separation. This is a prescient dream in nature, for again it signals her impending separation from Rochester. If the child is a figurative representation of her love for Rochester, the dream foreshadows the impossibility of their union and warns Jane that she must forgo their connection, however difficult the process. Rochester's figure is reduced to a mere "speck", a visual anticipation that Jane unconsciously acknowledges the instability of their relationship in that moment. Significantly, it is immediately after this prophetic dream Jane encounters Bertha Mason for the first time, damaging her bridal veil. The physical barrier to her happiness materializes right in front of her, even though Jane cannot yet consciously comprehend what she has witnessed. At the same time, the infant could also be interpreted as an embodiment of her unconscious fears and traumas deriving from childhood, suggesting her need to confront her ordeals and overcome them in order to find peace and contentment in adulthood.[291] This insight is corroborated by the dream Jane experiences the night before her definitive departure from Thornfield. In this dream, she is transported back to Gateshead and relives the red-room episode and her consequent fit. Subsequently, she sees a human figure that addresses her spirit directly –the voice appears distant, yet it speaks directly to her heart, telling her "My daughter, flee temptation."[292] Jane describes this episode as a trance-like state, in which the voice of her subconscious mind directed her on the ethically necessary course of action.

Jane's prophetic dreams in the novel grant authority to the powers of the subconscious mind. Rather than serving as straightforward Gothic elements, they are imbued with a significance that transcend

[290] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 275.
[291] Siebenschuh, "The image of the child and the plot of Jane Eyre", 304.
[292] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 311.

rational explanation. These visions precede conscious reasoning and exemplify the merging of psychological suggestions and ethical purpose. Jane is therefore revealed as an individual possessing unconscious precognitive abilities; a woman shaped not only by her rationality, but also by subconscious experiences that guide her towards self-preservation and autonomy.

"In spirit, we must have met": Jane and Rochester's telepathic connection

Jane and Rochester repeatedly express their bond in terms exceeding a conventional romantic attachment, describing it instead as a spiritual connection that surpasses ordinary human relationships. Jane claims that their closeness extends beyond the physical and emotional realms when she declares "it is my spirit that addresses your spirit."[293] Rochester similarly employs the same vocabulary to describe their attachment in metaphysical terms, revealing his feelings:

> "It is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame. And if that boisterous Channel, and two hundred miles or so of land come broad between us, I am afraid that cord of communion will be snapt; and then I've a nervous notion I should take to bleeding inwardly."[294]

An intangible bond unites Jane and Rochester and during her residence at Moor House, she repeatedly dreams of him. The affiliation they share, which persist despite physical separation, might be partially read in light of nineteenth-century discourses on mesmerism, which imagined a universal bond linking all individuals. In the novel, however, this bond is exclusive to Jane and Rochester and functions solely between them. Mesmerism – like phrenology – sought to explore the latent and the unknown potential of the human mind. Mesmeric trance appeared to demonstrate that our

[293] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 246.
[294] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 245.

subconscious possesses qualities exceeding those accessible through conscious awareness; these abilities reveal themselves under specific conditions. Jane's dreams could be deciphered as a manifestation of this dynamic, insofar as they mark the emergence of unconscious knowledge and sensations in moments of psychological crisis. Her resolve to discover Rochester's fate while at Moor House coincides with a moment of elevated sensitivity that culminates with a paranormal phenomenon. The experience occurs at night, when only Jane and St. John are awake, and the house is immersed in an atmosphere of stillness; Jane becomes suddenly aware of an inner sensation:

> Suddenly it [her heart] stood still to **an inexpressible feeling** that thrilled it through, and passed at once to my head and extremities. The feeling was not like an electric shock, but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling: **it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor, from which they were now summoned and forced to wake.** They rose expectant: eye and ear waited while the flesh quivered on my bones. […]
> I saw nothing, but I heard a voice somewhere cry –
> "Jane! Jane! Jane!" – nothing more.[295]

The voice Jane hears is promptly recognized as belonging to Rochester, although she cannot discern its source of origin. Despite the uncertainty, she is neither frightened nor bewildered; on the contrary, she responds to it immediately and without hesitation.

> I had heard it – where, or whence, for ever impossible to know! And it was the voice of a human being – a known, loved, well-remembered voice – that of Edward Fairfax Rochester; and it spoke in pain and woe, wildly, eerily, urgently.
> "I am coming!" I cried. "Wait for me. Oh, I will come!"[296]

[295] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 408. My bold.
[296] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 408.

The telepathic connection, as Angela Hague argues, seems to be the natural culmination of Jane's intuitive predisposition in relation to her uncanny connection to Rochester, which ultimately develops into a psychic affinity.[297] There is no rational explanation to the phenomena. The phenomenon resists rational explanation and can therefore be defined as an example of extrasensory perception. Jane denies it has anything to do with superstition, because she knows she truly heard Rochester's voice. She is sure it is not a deception, but "the work of nature." Nature was "roused and did – no miracle – but her best."[298] Charlotte Bronte was fascinated by the permeative nature of human experience, both in the lives of individuals, and in relation to a more universal dimension.[299] In this case, Jane is aided by nature herself – a universal entity –, which assumes the role of mediator and enables a connection between them, despite the circumstances. Jane feels empowered by the experience, which prompts her to finally venture to locate Rochester. Declaring, "It was MY time to assume ascendency. MY powers were in play and in force"[300], she recognizes her own strength and intuitive consciousness. This newly affirmed ascendancy is immediately accomplished when she commands St. John to leave her alone and he instantly abides. The following day, Jane contemplates anew the extrasensory perception she endured, and again reiterates the impossibility of comprehending its essence:

> I recalled the voice I had heard; again I questioned whence it came, as vainly as before: it seemed in ME – not in the external world. I asked was it a mere nervous impression – a delusion? I could not conceive or believe: it was more like an inspiration.[301]

[297] Hague, "Charlotte Brontë and Intuitive Consciousness.", 597.
[298] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 409.
[299] Hague, "Charlotte Brontë and Intuitive Consciousness.",585.
[300] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 409.
[301] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 410.

The voice originated from within Jane, in her mind, and can be thus understood to be a product of her psyche that exceeds logical comprehension. The reality of the telepathic connection is later substantiated when Jane reunites with Rochester at the end of the novel. It is revealed that, after losing Jane and repenting his past actions, Rochester finds solace in praying. In a moment of profound loneliness, he implores God to let him die so he can reunite with her: “I longed for thee, Janet! Oh, I longed for thee both with soul and flesh!”[302] That is the moment when he utters the plea heard by Jane. This moment is identified as a real telepathic connection, as Rochester claims he heard Jane’s reply. Moreover, the day and time of their reciprocal experience coincide, leading Rochester to conclude that "in spirit, I believe, we must have met."[303] Their telepathic experience is the apex of their spiritual attachment which excels the limits of empirical explanation and sensory experience.

Following criticism on the telepathic episode, Elizabeth Gaskell reports Charlotte Brontë’s defense of the occurrence. Speaking “in a low voice, drawing in her breath” she objected: “But it is a true thing; it really happened.”[304] Although no further context is provided, it can be assumed that Brontë’s response does not necessarily assert the factual reality of the incident, but rather its spiritual legitimacy within the novel.

In conclusion, precognitive dreams and telepathic connection are phenomena that defy conventional logical explanation yet are indeed the product of Jane’s psyche. These manifestations underscore the novel’s engagement with the inner operations of the mind, highlighting the heroine’s perceptive and intuitive faculties. They reveal the conflation of emotions, cognition and the early Victorian interest in pseudoscience and parapsychological ideas. In such manner, Charlotte Brontë locates Jane’s extraordinary experiences within a framework that asserts the power of the human mind to perceive and anticipate beyond the limits of ordinary sensory perception.

[302] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 435.
[303] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 436.
[304] Gaskell, *The life of Charlotte Brontë*, 382.

Conclusions

This thesis aimed to investigate the influence of 19th- century pseudoscientific discourse in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, published in 1847. As claimed by literary critics, Jane Eyre occupies a complex territory between realism and gothic romance. The historical context of its publication is crucial, as debate on science – and pseudoscience – and early psychological thought were particularly animated at the time. Mesmeric practice, with its supposed paranormal manifestations, fueled discussion of unexplainable phenomena, ranging from supernatural abilities of the self to external instances like ghost-seeing. Charlotte Brontë demonstrated unmistakable interest in the intellectual debate of her time and an engagement with pseudoscience. Such discourses were widely circulated and integrated into Victorian society, making their presence in literary works almost unavoidable.

Physiognomy and phrenology, two pseudosciences concerned with the legibility of the outer-self, occupy a prominent space in the novel, with the protagonist actively preoccupied with deciphering individuals through these methods. By observing and analysing people around her, Jane is able to infer their disposition and guess their inner character, either correctly or not. Although Gothic elements contribute to give the text a supernatural atmosphere, precognitive dreams and the telepathic connection between Jane and Rochester are experiences generated by Jane herself, in part shaped by the contemporary early parapsychological discourse. Jane operates – on conscious and unconscious levels – as a representation of the pervasive role pseudoscientific discourse played in Charlotte Brontë's cultural environment.

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