The Emergence of Psychical Research in Imperial Germany

Introduction

At a meeting of the Psychologische Gesellschaft [Psychological Society] in Munich during September 1887, the physician Albert von Schrenck-Notzing presented the findings of a series of forty experiments in which a range of obscure phenomena associated with hypnosis had been investigated.\(^1\) Placing the talented young somnambulist Lina Matzinger into a state of hypnotic lethargy, members of the society, who included the philosopher Carl du Prel, the former colonial propagandist Wilhelm Hübbe-Schleiden (1846–1916), and the artists Albert von Keller (1844–1920), Gabriel von Max (1840–1915) and Wilhelm Trübner (1851–1917), sought to conduct three distinct kinds of experiment. The first, which took their impetus from the English Society for Psychical Research, involved the transference of thoughts.\(^2\) Seated behind or in another room from the hypnotised Lina, the experimenters attempted to mentally transmit instructions to her. In one such experiment, Lina was ordered to take a specific book from a table covered in reading material and place it in the pocket of a jacket hanging in another room; a task she completed with astonishing success.\(^3\) In related tests, the experimenters tried to transmit physiological responses, such as pain, and sensations, such as taste, to the somnolent girl, piercing their skin with pins and placing a range of sweet and sour substances on their tongues.\(^4\) Lina responded to these strange experiments with a range of appropriate cries and grimaces. The men investigating these phenomena concluded from this series of tests that the transference of thoughts and sensations from one person to another without the mediation of the known senses was possible and that this ability was heightened in certain states of hypnosis.\(^5\) The second group of experiments sought to transfer one of the five senses to another part of the body. In a state of deep hypnosis, a blindfolded Lina demonstrated the ability to read a book pressed against her skull, leading the experimenters to speculate that her sight had been transferred to the intersection of her sagittal and crown sutures (see Image 1.1 overleaf).\(^6\) Similarly, witnesses noted Lina’s ability to read material pressed against her mid-section, indicating perhaps the transfer
of her sight to the pit of her stomach. The third set of experiments attempted to elicit emotional and physical responses to visual and aural stimuli. Placed in front of a picture or exposed to music, the somnambulistic Lina exhibited a profound mimetic passion and plasticity which experimenters such as Albert von Keller tried to capture on photographic plates. The suggestions provided by those in attendance saw the hypnotised girl assume the role of a priestess, mimic prayer and religious ecstasy, as well as a variety of angry, threatening poses. Examining the photographs that resulted from these experiments, the members of the Psychologische Gesellschaft claimed that