DISCIPLINARITY AT THE FIN DE SIÈCLE

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CHAPTER 7

Dying Twice: Victorian Theories of Déjà Vu

ATHENA VRETTOS

In Thomas Hardy’s 1873 novel A Pair of Blue Eyes, the heroine, Elfride Swancourt, whose romantic life demonstrates an inconvenient tendency toward repetition, is provoked to walk around the tower parapet of West Endelstow Church by the memory of the same “giddy feat she had performed the year before.” This time, in the presence of a new lover, she loses her footing and falls a short distance onto the roof below. After being rescued, she discusses her feelings with her companion, Henry Knight (who knows nothing of either the earlier incident or the earlier lover):

“You are familiar of course, as everybody is, with those strange sensations we sometimes have, that our life for the moment exists in duplicate.”

“That we have lived through that moment before?”

“Or shall again. Well I felt on the tower that something similar to that scene is again to be common to us both.”

“That such a thing has not been before, we know. That it shall not be again, you vow. Therefore think no more of such a foolish fancy.”

Envisioning these “strange sensations” as a temporal division, a feeling of living “in duplicate,” Elfride describes a psychological state in which the perceived boundaries of time and space have become strangely blurred. But whereas Knight understands this state to consist of an uncanny feeling of repeating the past, a form of retrocognition, Elfride interprets her sensation as precognition, a prevision of the future. In Hardy’s novel, both paradigms turn out to be true. Three weeks later, on a cliff overlooking the ocean, Elfride and Knight do indeed experience a dangerous repetition of this event, that, in turn, precipitates the revelation of their feelings for one another and an awkward second engagement for Elfride. More than a “foolish fancy,” Elfride’s strange experience, it seems, looks both backward and forward, marking (for Hardy and his heroine) the potentially disturbing intrusions of past and future into the experience of the present.

Twenty-two years later, in 1895, Elfride’s drama of re-remembering was reenacted, this time in the annual Cavendish Lecture presented to the West London Medical-Chirurgical Society by the Lord Chancellor’s Visitor in Lunacy, physician and psychiatrist Sir James Crichton-Browne. (The lecture was subsequently published in the British medical journal The Lancet.) Taking as his subject the somewhat amorphous phenomena of “Dreamy Mental States,” Crichton-Browne began his lecture with an exhaustive set of literary quotations (including a reading of Hardy’s scene) that describe, as he put it, “the simplest form of these dreamy mental states—a sense of reminiscence it has been called by some, a sense of prescience by others.” He went on to note that “the application to it of such apparently contradictory names suggests that it is somewhat mysterious in nature and difficult of interpretation.” Reading fictional passages from Sir Walter Scott, Charles Dickens, and Hardy, as well as excerpts from the poetry of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Dowden, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, James Russell Lowell, Coventry Patmore, and Lord Alfred Tennyson, Crichton-Browne catalogues the repetition of a type of uncanny experience that soon came to be called “déjà vu.” Tracing its frequent appearances through the fiction and poetry of the nineteenth century, he observes that those who describe this disorienting state of mind “know well that it is no ordinary reminiscence, no error of memory, no mere poetical fancy, but an absolute identification of the present with the past.”

Crichton-Browne’s lecture was part of a flurry of interest in the experience of déjà vu in the 1890s. In England, Frederick Myers and Crichton-Browne published lengthy studies of the phenomenon in 1895, followed by Havelock Ellis in 1897; at least two studies appeared in America, and no less than ten articles on the subject appeared in French journals of philosophy and psychology between 1893 and 1898, followed by four medical theses and, over the following decade, at least twenty articles and numerous references in British, American, French, German, and Italian psychological and medical writings (including, of course, those of Freud). The 1890s were also the decade in which the term “déjà vu” made its first official appearance in psychological treatises in France and England. Although it seems to have entered the French language in 1876, when E. Boirac described “la sensation du déjà vu” in a letter to the journal Revue Philosophique, it did not emerge as part of the classificatory terminology of psychology until 1894, when it appeared in the title of an article by L. Dugas, also in the Revue Philosophique: “L’impression de ‘l’entierement nouveau’ et celle du ‘déjà vu’” [The Impression of “the Entirely New” and That of the “Déjà Vu”]. The first English citation seems to be in 1895, in Frederick Myers’ lengthy study of retrocognition and precognition titled “The Subliminal Self,” which was published in the Proceedings of the Society for Psychological Research, of which Myers was a founding member. Within a decade, “déjà vu” emerged as the dominant designation for this particular mental state, consolidating what had been referred to variously as parasomia (a general term for disorders of
memory), pronenessia (memory beforehand), false recognition, false memory, memory of the present, memory illusion, hallucinations of memory, memory falsification, pseudo-reminiscence, dreamy mental states, voluminous mental states, double memory, double perception, and double illusion. In addition, J. Hughlings Jackson had identified in 1888 the frequency of "intellectual aurae" (in effect, déjà vu experiences) as preludes to epileptic seizures.

This definitional instability of the very concept of déjà vu corresponded to a broader disruption in conceptualizations of memory and mental structure that, I argue, became emblematic of the fin de siècle. In this chapter, I examine the debates surrounding déjà vu in the disciplines of psychology, neurology, and the emerging sciences of memory in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, focusing particularly on its appearance in the medical and psychological theories of four British writers: George Henry Lewes, Havelock Ellis, Sir James Crichton-Browne, and Frederick W. H. Myers. By studying the different explanatory models of déjà vu, its emergence as a distinct psychological phenomenon, its place in competing conceptualizations of memory, and its role in distinguishing between normal and pathological states of mind, we can see some of the contested disciplinary boundaries among literature, psychology, neurology, psychical research, and spiritualist belief in this period. We can, in addition, see how British psychologists attempted to enter into and claim a national stake in the field of experimental psychology, which was becoming increasingly dominated by continental theories and theorists at the century's end.

The debates about déjà vu emerged within a constellation of discourses of the self, at a moment when psychological conceptions of selfhood were becoming increasingly destabilized. If we look at a range of psychological writings—both in the area of medical psychology and in the tradition of introspective philosophy—we can see how the coherence of personal identity had already been substantially (though not systematically) challenged by the century's end, as psychological writings confronted questions about suggestibility, somnambulism, hypnotism, alternating or multiple personality, and crowd psychology (to name just a few). Such studies challenged traditional Enlightenment assumptions about the existence or necessity of a unified self, or a transcendental ego. Debates about the phenomenon of déjà vu, while not addressing the more spectacular pathologies of memory that helped to define and codify the memory sciences, highlighted the conjunction of philosophical and medical uncertainty about the normal functioning of mind at the fin de siècle. They pitted psychologists who sought to stabilize the category of the "normal" by pathologizing déjà vu experiences against those who used déjà vu to explore the permeable boundaries of consciousness. These debates marked a transitional moment in conceptions of selfhood, as writers from various disciplines attempted to define normal versus abnormal memory and to establish its relation to the stability (or instability) of identity. Indeed, what was at stake in definitions of déjà vu was the very notion of a "normal" self. Thus, at a historical moment when the boundaries between past, present, and future were particularly charged with cultural and psychological significance, déjà vu not only emerged as an important object of study, but also came to represent a pervasive sense of disorientation in psychological conceptions of selfhood. In their common attempts to answer philosophical questions about time and space, about the identification of memory with identity, and about the proper (and possible) relationship between past, present, and future, studies of déjà vu confronted, in Crichton-Browne's words, "those ultimate scientific ideas—space, time, matter, motion, force, and the like—which are beyond the domain of certain knowledge, and, according to Herbert Spencer, unthinkable."

**THINKING ABOUT THE UNTHINKABLE**

Before the 1890s, déjà vu seems to have been considered too fleeting and too familiar an experience to generate sustained inquiry. It was too common, too universal to be seen as a psychological problem in need of classification, treatment, or cure. Yet it was too far out of the ordinary realm of experience to be easily incorporated into normative theories of mind. It is precisely this definitional impasse that is foregrounded when déjà vu appears in medical and psychological writings, for as the one uncanny psychological experience that almost everyone could recognize (either as having experienced it oneself or hearing it described by others, seemingly normal people), it functioned as a kind of boundary line between the normal and the pathological, between the transcendental and the everyday. Its appearance in late-nineteenth-century psychological treatises seemed, like accounts of the experience itself, to open a door to another world, to invite spectral intrusions. In one sense it had to be accounted for in theories of normal psychology, precisely because of its presumed familiarity. Yet even proponents of the most resolutely physiologcal explanations (Arthur Ladbroke Wigan's and Henry Maudsley's theories of brain hemisphere asymmetry; James Sully's and George Henry Lewes's analogies between optical illusions and mental echoes; Crichton-Browne's speculations about hereditary brain lesions) often found themselves stepping into a realm of metaphysical conundrums and ontological doubts. Déjà vu immediately confronts us with questions about identity and temporality that seem mystifying. For writers like Crichton-Browne, it seemed to strike terror of a knowledge beyond scientific comprehension—a rupture between past and present. "Contrary to all experience," Crichton-Browne writes, such phenomena
have yet apparently the highest experiential validity. They declare themselves now as tamperings with those intuitions that yield the consciousness of continued existence, and again as excursions into that infinite field that lies behind appearances and of which it is dangerous to affirm or deny anything. Plunges they are into these depths of outer mystery in which the certitudes of science lose themselves and out of which, it has been said, the certitudes of faith arise.\textsuperscript{12}

For Crichton-Browne, as for a number of other psychologists and philosophers in this period, d\textsuperscript{e}j\textsuperscript{a} vu marked the experiential borderland between science and faith. To explore the mysteries of memory and identity scientifically formed part of what many historians have seen as a more widespread project of nineteenth-century science, which was to explain and demystify phenomena that had previously been the domain of the supernatural and the subject of religious faith. Thus the “dangerous excursions” and “plunges” into “the depths of outer mystery” that threaten, in Crichton-Browne’s description, to baffle scientific certitude, are, he concludes, “especialy ... worthy of medical observation and research.”\textsuperscript{13} They are of interest, Havelock Ellis similarly claimed, precisely because of their “real influence on belief” in “earlier stages of [human] culture ... suggesting to primitive man that he somehow had wider experiences than he knew of, and that, as Wordsworth put it, he trailed clouds of glory behind him.”\textsuperscript{14}

Before turning to the specific theories, I want to outline three problems of definition that they all faced—each offering slightly different conclusions—in confronting the phenomenon of d\textsuperscript{e}j\textsuperscript{a} vu. First, the problem of temporal perception: what delimits the present moment and distinguishes it from past and future? Second, the problem of normality: what does normal memory consist of and can strange experiences nevertheless be considered normal? Third, the problem of ownership: where do our memories come from and can they be linked to a continuing sense of identity?

Precariously poised between looking forward and looking backward, d\textsuperscript{e}j\textsuperscript{a} vu depends perhaps foremost upon the ability to define what is the present; for it is only by understanding the temporal experience of “presentness” that we can locate how the present is routinely distinguished from past and future, and identify states of mind in which such borders might break down. Thus we find numerous discussions of time and memory by late-nineteenth-century psychologists that offer comparative numerical calculations of the human experience of presentness, attempting to register through the almost mystical precision of numbers the intangible moments of transition when future becomes present and present becomes past. Frederick Myers claimed that “The true Present is an evanescent, an infinitesimal thing. It is the imaginary meeting-point between two eternities; and the more finely we divide Time the less is left which is not Past or Future.”\textsuperscript{15} “Let anyone try,” writes William James, “I will not say to arrest, but to notice or attend to, the pre-sent moment of time. One of the most baffling experiences occurs. Where is it, this present? It has melted in our grasp, fled ere we could touch it, gone in the instant of becoming.”\textsuperscript{16} In his attempt to “grasp” the concept of time, James must locate it in space, asking not “When is it, this present?” but rather “Where is it?” It is as if, by merely shifting the terms of the question, James seeks to give time substance and weight—to register the present’s presence. It is perhaps significant that James, at this point, resorts to quoting poetry to register this sense of the ineffability of the present and its collapse of spatial and temporal dimensions of experience: “Le moment où je parle est déjà loin de moi” [the moment where I speak is already far away from me]. This conceptual shift from time to space becomes particularly acute in explanations of memory, as psychologists seek to locate the temporal sequences of memory in the spaces of the human mind. Thus Ellis explains how external sensations could be mistaken for internal ones—that is, for memories—as a result of mental exhaustion; and Myers speculates about the mind’s absorption of subliminal perceptions—“of knowledge afloat, so to say, in the Universe”—and their conversion into the temporal disjunctions of d\textsuperscript{e}j\textsuperscript{a} vu.\textsuperscript{17}

In exploring the development of amnesia and hypermnesia as diagnostic categories in nineteenth-century French psychiatry, Michael Roth has argued that doctors and philosophers were confronting questions about the “normal or healthy relationship of past to present” at the same time that historians were posing similar questions about the national past in the professionalization of their discipline.\textsuperscript{18} Unlike amnesia and hypermnesia, however, d\textsuperscript{e}j\textsuperscript{a} vu did not pose questions about the quantity of memory (the dilemma of remembering either too much or too little) so much as it presented problems of spatial and temporal displacement and raised questions about the proper ownership of memory. Memories appeared to be in the wrong place or the wrong time, or even inhabiting the wrong person. “False memories,” William James claimed, “distort the consciousness of the me. ... [The me is changed.]”\textsuperscript{19} D\textsuperscript{e}j\textsuperscript{a} vu threatened to disrupt the very category of “normal” in conceptualizing memory. It marked a fissure in the relation of past to present, and a potential gap between memory and identity, that was all the more confusing for being so widespread. Very few psychologists viewed d\textsuperscript{e}j\textsuperscript{a} vu as a pathological condition, and those who did, like Crichton-Browne, placed it at the normal end of the spectrum; even Jackson stressed that although “intellectual aurae” often accompanied epilepsy, they could not be used as diagnostic criteria because of their frequency of occurrence in healthy people. It was precisely the familiarity of the experience that was disturbing (that is, both the familiarity of d\textsuperscript{e}j\textsuperscript{a} vu as an experience and the inappropriate feeling of familiarity that constituted its defining feature). In effect, d\textsuperscript{e}j\textsuperscript{a} vu forced psychologists to think about the unthinkable by virtue of its strange familiarity—its spectral intrusions into everyday life.
Dying Twice

Although nineteenth-century psychologists offered numerous descriptions of déjà vu—gathered from friends, patients, poetry, novels, essays, travelogues, other psychologists’ writings, and personal experience—there was one particular instance of déjà vu that seemed to haunt British psychology more than any other. Appearing repeatedly in treatises on memory (sometimes in brief references, sometimes in lengthy descriptions), it became, I would argue, one of the paradigmatic experiences of déjà vu in the nineteenth century. First appearing in 1844 in a book entitled *The Duality of the Mind* by the psychologist Arthur Ladbrooke Wigan, it consisted of his first-hand account of a powerful feeling he had experienced twenty-seven years earlier, on 19 November 1817, while attending the funeral of Her Royal Highness the Princess Charlotte, heir to the British throne, in Windsor Chapel. Princess Charlotte’s tragic death in childbirth, along with the death of her newborn child, caused a crisis of succession in the British monarchy and provoked a spectacle of mass mourning that Wigan’s account both reacts to and participates in. Wigan describes how, in a state of grief and exhaustion, as he watched the coffin sink slowly and silently into the crypt, punctuated only by outbursts of tears from the bereaved husband, Prince Leopold, he was overcome by “not merely an impression, but a conviction, that I had seen the whole scene before on some former occasion.” Wigan’s description came to function, through the cumulative effect of repetition, not merely as a description of déjà vu, but as the description of déjà vu. That is, I would argue that it became the British model for examining the phenomenon of false reminiscence in the second half of the nineteenth century. Two of its later appearances—in the final volume of Lewes’s 1879 *Problems of Life and Mind* and in Ellis’s 1897 “A Note on Hypnagogic Paramnesia” (which he later expanded upon in *The World of Dreams* in 1911)—are particularly extensive, each reinterpreting Wigan’s experience according to the later author’s own paradigm; yet each is haunted by the conjunction of memory and mourning that Wigan’s experience evokes.

Lewes uses Wigan’s account of déjà vu at Princess Charlotte’s funeral to outline a theory of mental echoes. Envisioning memory as a reinstatement of emotions and perceptions that have not necessarily entered fully into consciousness, Lewes offers two scenarios in which mental echoing could produce the impression of remembering something that the individual had never actually experienced before. First, Lewes envisions the power of an emotional experience (such as the death of a princess and the spectacle of national mourning) to flood mental channels, thereby erasing the boundaries between past and present. Invoking the spatializing rhetoric that we see so often in theories of déjà vu, he claims that “the thrill of emotion diffuses itself over the field of consciousness, and obliterates the landmarks whereby new and old would be distinguished.” Second, Lewes goes on to claim that once this “wave of feeling has swept through us . . . another similar though fainter wave succeeds, [and] this secondary feeling will naturally be mistaken for a vague remembrance.” In effect, Lewes envisions the mind as filled with orienting landmarks that separate past and present—landmarks that become disorienting (as they are erased or concealed) and produce mental echoes when powerful emotions flood temporal reference points.

In explaining this two-part wave of feeling, Lewes describes incidents of memory in which “there is proof positive” that they “could never have been experienced by us.” The most positive such proof, of course, is in the experience of another’s death as having happened before. Lewes offers two such examples. The first is Wigan’s account of Princess Charlotte’s funeral. The second is from a German case study in which, upon hearing of the death of an acquaintance, a patient “was seized with indefinable terror, for it appeared to him that he had lived through this experience already.” In the words of the patient, “I felt that I had once before been lying here, in this bed, and that K. had come to me and said, ‘Müller is dead’; and I replied, ‘Müller died some time ago; he can’t die twice.’” For Lewes, both of these accounts of “dying twice” seem to crystallize the ontological and epistemological disorientations of false memory. That is, while we can experience the perception of a particular place any number of times, and thus we might be uncertain whether we have seen a given landscape or locale before, read about it in a book, or viewed it in a picture, it is more immediately evident that we cannot have experienced another, particular person’s death twice. Lewes’s interest in the presence of powerful emotional experiences preceding déjà vu (as opposed to Wigan’s interpretation of brain hemisphere asymmetry or Ellis’s emphasis on hypnagogic fatigue) marks one of the few theories, before Freud’s focus on the emotional content of déjà vu experiences, that conceptualized the power of emotion to produce disjunctions of memory. (And one might note here that Freud’s explanation of déjà vu in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* as a remembrance of unconscious fantasies analyzes a young woman’s experience of anticipating another’s death and mourning).

Wigan himself described the funeral of Princess Charlotte in terms of the contagious emotions it provoked: “One mighty all-absorbing grief possessed the whole nation, and was aggravated in each individual by the sympathy of his neighbour, till the whole people became infected with an amiable insanity . . . [a] universal paroxysm of grief which then superseded every other feeling.” By the time Wigan and, later, Lewes recalled Wigan’s experience, Princess Charlotte’s death had come to exemplify a quintessentially communal experience of mourning, a moment of national crisis in which assumptions about the private ownership of feelings were challenged by an insistently public experience and definition of grief. Although, in his actual
haunted by spectral columns of numbers to add and by “phantasms” of “spinning teetotums” (302), and a physician who experienced a “Hallucination” of a corpse wearing a hat—the image of a dead man whom he had tended days before (303). Lewes concludes with two accounts of his own phantom sensations. These consist of “several weeks” of “violent” olfactory after-sensations of being sprayed by tiger urine at the zoo (298), and a vanishing and reappearing “transverse section” of a woman’s spinal cord under a microscope that, he claims, “followed me in long country rambles” and “went to bed with me at night” (299–300). By linking false reminiscences with the after-sensations of sight, smell, and sound, Lewes attempts to ground memory in the material, defining it as a physiological process. Yet he simultaneously reveals the instability of experience, the spectral mysteries and echo chambers of the senses. In order to explain aberrations of memory, Lewes must define all after-sensations as spectral, as physiological hallucinations that chart the mind’s power to haunt. The processes of memory thereby become invested in the spectral rhetoric and gothic imagery that Terry Castle has identified as characteristic of nineteenth-century psychology and its transference of the spiritual world to the human mind. Yet what Lewes reveals is the slippage involved in the very project of explaining the supernatural. If nineteenth-century psychology sought to reinscribe (and thereby contain) the supernatural within a rationalist scientific discourse, it simultaneously disrupted the rationality of that discourse with the intrusion of haunting emotions and phantom sensations.

Ultimately, Lewes’s account of anomalous memories, sensory hallucinations, and emotional echoes place him, conceptually, between psychologists who sought to stabilize the category of the “normal” by pathologizing déjà vu experiences, and those who challenged the very concept of a unified self by seeing the familiarity of déjà vu as evidence for the permeable boundaries of consciousness and identity. For Lewes, to invest the normal functioning of the mind with the trappings of the supernatural provided a way of explaining seemingly inexplicable and irrational experiences in scientific terms while simultaneously expanding accounts of normal mental processes such as sensation, emotion, and recollection to include the irrational and uncanny. In accounting for déjà vu experiences such as Wigan’s, Lewes exposed the arbitrariness of the divide between the normal and the pathological, the scientific and the supernatural. He thereby helped to destabilize some of the conceptual and disciplinary categories through which selfhood had been defined.

If Lewes accounted for the mystery of false recollections—and Wigan’s funeral episode in particular—by envisioning all processes of mental repetition as forms of spectral illusion, Havelock Ellis attempted to demystify déjà vu—and Wigan’s experience—by explaining it as the consequence of hypnagogic fatigue. Ellis identifies Wigan’s experience as “the earliest case
of paramnesia recorded in detail by a trained observer,” and goes on to describe the funeral scene in considerable detail. Yet this is a somewhat different scene than the one Lewes describes. For Ellis, it is Wigan’s exhaustion that is paramount, his nights of disturbed sleep before the ceremony. It is not only his grief, but his want of food, his standing up for four straight hours and nearly fainting when taking his place by the coffin that explains his uncanny conviction of having seen the scene before. Ellis sets out to explain what he characterizes as a “simple” yet “much-discussed phenomenon” to “throw some light” on a condition that has led to “so many strange and complicated theories” (283–84). Yet Ellis seems unable to sustain, in part because of the example he has chosen, the simple, prosaic explanation he seeks to propose. Associating déjà vu with a trajectory that leads from fatigue to hypnagogic states and eventually to parallels with dreams, Ellis claims that the paramnesic state differs from the allied state of hypnotic trance in that “[i]nstead of accepting a representation as an actual present fact, we accept the actual present fact as merely a representation” (286).

That is, déjà vu makes the present moment unreal, representational. It constitutes “an internal hallucination, a reversed hallucination” (286). And at this point, as perhaps by now we might expect, Ellis resorts to another form of representation and recollection—quoting poetry to make his point and letting literature have the last word. As if describing his own invocation of Princess Charlotte’s funeral, Ellis explains how—in the experience of paramnesia—the present appears “in the enfleebled shape of an old memory—‘like to something I remember / A great while since, a long, long time ago’” (286).

I would like to speculate here that this curious reappearance of Princess Charlotte’s funeral in Victorian discussions of déjà vu performed a particular function toward the century’s end. If the experience of déjà vu involves locating present feelings in the past or future, distancing the present moment from itself by making it representational, the end of the century is also a moment when the present takes on an unusually charged relationship to both past and future. The act of remembering Princess Charlotte’s funeral—that is, psychologists’ combined acts of remembering and re-remembering Wigan’s memory of re-remembering the funeral—memorialized an unusually communal and national experience of mourning both the death of a princess and the death of the state, the end of a royal line and the end of an era. In confronting this almost infinite regress of memory (Princess Charlotte seems to die not just twice but many times), we might see the task of explaining déjà vu as a characteristically fin de siècle gesture. That is, accounting for Wigan’s curious psychological response to the death of the princess may have offered a way for British psychologists to conceptualize the historically intensified relationship of the past to the present and the present to the future toward the century’s end. The repeated recollection of this one example reproduced the effect of déjà vu in the very discourses that sought to explain it. In the process, these discourses also came to conceptualize déjà vu (as I will go on to show) as an increasingly prevalent phenomenon at the fin de siècle and—in at least one case—as a product of both evolutionary progress and social class.

REMEMBERING AT THE CENTURY’S END

By the mid-1890s, when Ellis, Myers, and Crichton-Browne published their studies of déjà vu and related mental states, memory had newly become, according to Ian Hacking, “an object of scientific knowledge” and the shape of that knowledge had taken on different forms in different national and cultural settings. In Germany, it developed first as a science of measurement, of statistical analysis of recall, with Hermann Ebbinghaus’s 1885 study On Memory. French studies focused more on pathology after the publication of Théodule Ribot’s lectures on diseases of memory in 1881. If, as Hacking has claimed, British psychologists were simply less interested in questions of memory—or at least in identifying pathologies of memory—than their French counterparts, a number of British psychologists nevertheless were, by the 1890s, aware of this national divide and concerned about British psychology and neurology falling behind in the emerging scientific and disciplinary territories of the approaching century. It was not, however, the more spectacular pathologies of memory that interested writers like Ellis, Myers, and Crichton-Browne. Instead, they focused on the more familiar anomalies of memory that British poets and novelists had been writing about over the course of the century, those “mental conditions,” according to Crichton-Browne, “that are encountered in daily life . . . which have not yet received in this country the amount of attention they deserve.”

For Crichton-Browne, literary accounts of anomalous memories testified to a pervasive psychological phenomenon that medicine and psychology needed to explain. Yet Crichton-Browne’s literary quotations serve a double purpose in his lecture, both describing and, in a sense, enacting déjà vu. “They mark an intrusion of the past into present; they are, he claims romantically, “culled from the faded leaves of an old notebook” (1). Functioning as a double reminiscence, they represent memories from Crichton-Browne’s past (his old notebook) that are, nevertheless, not quite his own. As he collects past acts of reading, returning to meaningful passages he has extracted over many years of his life, Crichton-Browne marks the eerie conjunction of reading and remembering, blurring the boundaries between having memories of reading about other’s memories and having memories of one’s own. The role of the quotation book—in particular, the popularity of collecting and compiling one’s own favorite quotations—was part of a wider, virtually institutionalized “culture of quotation” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which, as Pinch has argued, emotions seem to circulate freely, dis-
mental development, and are not themselves a part of the evolutionary process, but one of the accidents by which it is attended" (2). Here, Crichton-Browne echoes a wide array of arguments that appeared toward the end of the nineteenth century envisioning the combined effects of evolutionary development and modernity on an increasingly nervous, intellectual population. Discussions of neurasthenia, for example, elaborated a similarly dangerous trajectory for the world’s “brain workers,” though Crichton-Browne’s overwhelming emphasis on heredity draws at least equally from theories of genius, degeneration, and eugenics. A substantial portion of his lecture is devoted to a detailed case study that traces dreamy mental states through four generations of one family, chronicling a spectrum of experiences that ranged from “spells of absentmindedness” to topographical disorientation (a periodic inability to locate oneself in space), to temporary losses of personal identity, to epileptic seizures (4). Proposing a continuum from comparatively normal to distinctly pathological states of mind, Crichton-Browne is anxious to prove that even the “slightest and simplest form [of dreamy mental states] . . . occurring in presumably healthy persons, involve disorder of mind” (2). In this re-trenchment of mental norms, Crichton-Browne attempts to ward off the encroaching dissolutions of memory, identity, and consciousness that déjà vu experiences seemed to evoke. Precisely because he envisions different kinds of dreamy mental states as interconnected, and false reminiscence as merely “the first step in a series” (2)—a slippery slope into the uncanny that ends with epilepsy and insanity—Crichton-Browne seeks to redefine the boundaries of the normal mind. In effect, by challenging the inclusion of unaccountable reminiscences within the category of the normal and universal, Crichton-Browne hopes to avoid the philosophical consequences of déjà vu’s anomalous familiarity, and to resituate memory and identity on more stable ground.

In order to do this, Crichton-Browne argues that false reminiscences are not isolated events; rather, they may be the first dangerous symptoms of a dreamy temperament, potentially leading to “more elaborate manifestations” such as “double consciousness . . . a loss of personal identity . . . a deprivation of corporeal substance. . . . It is impossible to put into words such strange and incomprehensible visitations” (2). He turns at this point to a poet, Tennyson, to express the inexpressible:

Moreover, something is or seems,
That touches me with mystic gleams,
Like glimpses of forgotten dreams—
Of something felt, like something here;
Of something done, I know not where;
Such as no language may declare.

("The Two Voices,” 379–84)
Crichton-Browne invokes the wide range of dreamy states represented in Tennyson’s poetry as his justification for tracing a progression from simple forms of false reminiscence to lost identity to epileptic seizure (“weird seizures,” he notes, afflict the hereditarily nervous hero of Tennyson’s “The Princess”). What is perhaps most striking here is that Crichton-Browne does not cite Hughlings Jackson as his authority for this leap, even though Jackson had made the connection between “intellectual auræ” and epileptic seizures a decade earlier. Instead, Crichton-Browne relies on poetry precisely because Jackson had cautioned against using this type of loose diagnostic trajectory from false reminiscence to epilepsy (though one might note here that Jackson himself quoted from Charles Dickens’s description of déjà vu in David Copperfield).

In his attempt to redefine false reminiscences as pathological states of mind, to associate them with a dangerously efete fin-de-siècle population, and to identify them as threats to a stable conception of identity, Crichton-Browne repeatedly emphasizes case studies and memoirs that chronic losses of identity as either accompanying false reminiscences or representing the next stage of mental dissolution. He describes the case of a young man—representing the fourth generation of a family of nervous sufferers—who experienced sudden feelings of “los[ing] hold of the universe and ceas[ing] to know who he was.” He found that he “could bring [these attacks] on by gazing intently at his own face in a looking-glass... [and if he became] abstract and metaphysical,” as he termed it... If he asked himself, “Who am I?” “What am I?” “Where do I come from?” “How do I stand related to persons and things around me?” he inevitably had an attack” (4). For a population becoming progressively dreamier as a side effect of evolutionary development, Crichton-Browne suggests, even to ask metaphysical questions might pose a crisis of identity and a threat to the nerves. As a consequence, the medical profession must pay new attention to issues previously reserved for philosophy.40

Despite such medical forays into the metaphysical—indeed, having identified the very contemplation of metaphysics as dangerous to the nerves—Crichton-Browne ultimately seeks to contain such unthinkable questions (and those who persist in thinking about them) by classifying them in the domain of pathology. In the process, he identifies disruptions of memory (and the confusions of identity that they both embody and encourage) as the proper subject of medical study—as hereditary disorders of the brain. Crichton-Browne attempts to turn the attention of British medicine toward issues and conditions that had previously been the province of mental philosophy, introducing both a British voice and a medical agenda into debates that increasingly were becoming the disciplinary territory of psychology, particularly continental psychology. Offering strikingly prosaic medical advice for those suffering from too many psycho-poetic flights (he advocates the rest

cure, vegetarian diet, and a “well-ordered education”), Crichton-Browne enters into the debate about déjà vu, confronts its abysses of time, space, and identity, in a bid to reclaim the proper ownership of memory and reestablish the coherence of identity as the defining criteria of mental health.

Whereas Crichton-Browne sought to reframe the category of the normal in the face of growing fin-de-siècle dreaminess, his contemporary Frederick Myers envisioned a competing continuum that not only embraced the universality of déjà vu sensations, but also extended it to include telepathy. As part of a wider effort to include psychical research in the emerging discipline of experimental psychology, Myers’s study of promnesia sought to establish the scientific validity of transcendental states—to expand the category of the normal to explain psychic and spiritual phenomena. Myers and Crichton-Browne had clashed with each other well before they published their contrasting studies of déjà vu in 1895, both having participated in tests of thought transference sponsored by the Society for Psychical Research in 1883. Expressing skepticism and insisting on subjecting telepathic claims to more rigorous tests than the Society members had scheduled, Crichton-Browne provoked Myers’s anger, leading the latter to accuse Crichton-Browne of derailing the demonstration through his “offensive incredulity.”41 Crichton-Browne seems to have taken pride in this accusation, recording his memory of it in an account of the proceedings for the Westminster Gazette in 1908. Despite their shared interest in explaining uncanny psychological experiences such as déjà vu, Myers’s and Crichton-Browne’s different approaches chart some of the tensions between materialist and spiritualist accounts of the human mind, the status of psychical research in a period of disciplinary consolidation and professionalization, and the role of déjà vu as a representative site for shifts in disciplinary ground at the century’s end.

One of the most striking aspects of the clash between Myers and Crichton-Browne’s studies of déjà vu is how the far more theoretically marginal figure, Myers, draws upon a much more extensive body of psychological research, offering summaries of the latest continental debates on déjà vu, introducing the term to his British audience, and demonstrating a widespread knowledge of British, American, and continental psychology. (Myers’s series of articles titled The Subliminal Consciousness [1891—95], in which his study of déjà vu or “promnesia” appeared, included the first introduction of Freud’s and Brauer’s studies of hysteria to an English audience.)42 Myers summarizes previous explanations of déjà vu, dividing them into two camps. First, theories arguing that the reminiscence is a true one, arising either from past waking experiences or dreams. Second, theories that view the reminiscence as illusory, depending either on disruptions of perception and attention (such as fatigue, wandering attention, accelerations of thought, after-sensations) or on the asynchronism of cerebral hemispheres.43 Myers pays particular attention to the French psychologist André Lalande, whose 1893 article
on déjà vu corresponded to the theory of subliminal consciousness Myers had developed in his series of articles for the Society for Psychical Research, beginning in 1891. Grounding his work, in part, on studies of hypnosis, Lalande posits the role of a powerful, unconscious hyperesthesia, or subliminal perception, which he calls “telepathy,” as the basis of paranormal experiences. That is, both Lalande and Myers conceptualize déjà vu as a division of attention between conscious and subconscious modes of perception. Myers goes on to speculate that promnesia arises not only from our heightened subliminal perceptions of the material world, but from subliminal telepathic communications with other minds. That is, he argues that many false reminiscences really may belong to someone else; they may constitute intrusions of others’ thoughts and others’ reminiscences into our consciousness, providing instances of both retrocognition and precognition.

For Myers, the traditional concept of memory is called into question by déjà vu experiences, as he explains in “The Subliminal Self.” Not only, he speculates, do we have latent memories richer than even hypnosis can evoke, those memories descend “deeply to gland and blood vessel” to the very “germ-plasm” that links the generations (348–49). Under these circumstances, he claims, “memory must become no more than a metaphor” (348). Noting that “[n]o one doubts” the transmission of maternal emotions to the embryo in “children born during the alarms of a siege, or of the Reign of Terror in France” (349), Myers suggests that even more local shocks to maternal emotions may “imprint upon the child the organic memory of the mother’s emotion of admiration, disgust, or fear” (349). This organic memory may even reach into the distant past, and evolutionary ancestors “more remote than Adam” may “even now influence our psychical life” (349). These speculations lead Myers to propose that sensations of déjà vu may actually be resurgences of ancestral memory, as we visit locales familiar to our grandfathers, or even more primitive progenitors. Though he is careful to admit that as yet there is no adequate scientific evidence to substantiate these claims, he offers them as hypotheses that have the power to explain phenomena that seem “at first to be still more incredible” than the theories he proposes (351).

Myers, like Lewes, envisions the power of emotions to produce déjà vu experiences, but for Myers these are neither false recollections nor echoes. Rather, they are surfacings of subliminal perceptions, details that our subliminal selves have perceived but that we are not consciously aware of experiencing or remembering. Expanding upon Lewes’s observation that we may remember aspects of an experience that we were not conscious of at the time they occurred, Myers conceptualizes a stratum of subliminal perceptions—perceptions that include impressions of the world around us, as well as unspoken and unintended signals received from other people. Powerful emotional experiences may bring these subliminal perceptions to the surface.

“Almost any mental tempest,” Myers claims, “may bring remote impressions to light—as storms will wash up cannon-balls on a long-since bombarded shore” (354). Thus, sensations of déjà vu may, in many cases, be recollections of actual experiences—experiences we were only partially aware of at the time they occurred.

In his attempt to establish the normality of déjà vu experiences and their telepathic origins, Myers is careful to disassociate déjà vu from nervousness. Unlike Crichton-Browne, Myers claims that “the subjects of promnesia... do not seem to be specially morbid or nervous persons” (345). What they do seem to have in common is that “they have often also experiences of veritable telepathy or precognition” (345). Of course, for Crichton-Browne, this association between experiences of uncanny reminiscence and experiences of telepathy would serve to confirm the pathological trajectory of dreamy states. For Myers, however, this is a sign that those who frequently experience déjà vu have a greater ability to bring subliminal perceptions to consciousness. It is, in effect, a proof of the potential normality of both déjà vu and telepathy, insofar as both arise from the layered structure of the human mind.

Ultimately, Myers seeks to synthesize competing theories of déjà vu under a wider explanatory rubric. That is, he proposes not one theory of promnesia, but a number of possible explanations for different causes of promnesic experiences, each of which confirms his larger theory of subliminal perceptions. Thus, returning to his initial division between theories of déjà vu that see it as a product of false or displaced reminiscences and those that see it as a product of forgotten, but real, events, we can see how Myers accommodates both sides of the argument. Some sensations of déjà vu are, he claims, the surfacing of forgotten or latent perceptions of real events. Other déjà vu experiences can be explained by the presence of fetal or ancestral memories in the subliminal consciousness, or, alternately, by the power of subliminal perceptions to transfer the memories and experiences of others (either alive or dead) into ourselves—in effect, a process of telepathy. Even objects, Myers speculates, may have this power of transference, retaining traces of their contact with organisms that may be communicated subliminally. Finally, Myers incorporates theories of brain hemisphere asymmetry, which had been dismissed in continental psychology but were still being discussed in Britain (342). Rejecting the physiological explanations of writers such as Wigan and Maudsley, Myers nevertheless proposes his own account of the duality of mind: “one among many causes of promnesia may lie in a double perception of the present moment by the subliminal and the supraliminal self” (342). For Myers, all of these theories converge to suggest that déjà vu is not merely a strangely familiar phenomenon, but rather the most tangible and recognizable evidence of a hidden stratum of consciousness—a subliminal selfhood or “secular soul.”
CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have argued that déjà vu emerged as a distinct and classifiable phenomenon in medical and psychological literature in the final decades of the nineteenth century, and that attempts to explain this phenomenon generated debates among doctors, psychologists, and psychical researchers as they tried to define both the normal function and proper ownership of memory and its relationship to both consciousness and identity. I have further suggested that the repeated quotations of fictional and poetic representations of déjà vu, as well as the repeated reminiscences of one particularly haunting déjà vu experience at the funeral of a princess, transformed psychological explanations of displaced memory into strange reenactments of the déjà vu experience itself. Finally, I have speculated that this intense flurry of interest in the phenomenon of déjà vu may have arisen because déjà vu seemed to manifest the heightened experience of temporal disorientation involved in contemplating the century’s end. If déjà vu represents an intensified instance of the problem of identifying the present in relation to the past and the future, it may very well be that it offered an especially significant topic at a moment in history when anxieties about the passing of a century and the advance of a new era were crystallizing assessments of evolutionary development, national character, and the spiritual consequences of scientific progress. Certainly Crichton-Browne’s and Ellis’s associations between paramnesic phenomena and languid, anemic, or nervous tempers—writers, dreamers, and the intellectual elite—suggest that the emergence of déjà vu as an object of study, and the competing attempts to normalize and pathologize it, arose in part from a shared set of cultural narratives about the state of society at the century’s end. Like Crichton-Browne, we might see déjà vu as an appropriate emblem of the fin de siècle, the psychological paradigm for that sense of exhaustion and repetition, of having seen and done it all before, that pervades so much of the literature of the period and has come to characterize how we think about British (and much of European) culture at this time.

In the debates I have traced here, we can see the culmination of a century of challenges to philosophical conceptions of a unified self. If memory and consciousness constituted the basis of personal identity, déjà vu called into question the integrity of both. Crichton-Browne desperately attempted to stabilize this rift by pathologizing déjà vu in the interests of a coherent ontological norm. Myers embraced it by seeing the universality of déjà vu as evidence for the permeable boundaries of a subliminal consciousness. Both Lewes and Ellis charted the uneasy middle ground between these two positions. For all four writers, déjà vu marked a fissure in the relation between memory and identity. It became a fertile testing ground for competing conceptualizations of memory, and exposed the contested disciplinary territories at stake in psychology, neurology, and psychical research at the fin de siècle. To raise questions about the ownership of memories is to raise doubts about who “owns” the past and how it intrudes on the present or shapes the future. Ultimately these questions, which would seem crucial at any century’s end, are about who has the right to interpret memory and history.

NOTES

2. Sir James Crichton-Browne, “Dreamy Mental States,” The Lancet 3749 (July 6, 1895) and 3750 (July 13, 1895): 1. The next two quotations are from the latter source (1).
8. Ian Hacking cites an 1843 article by Thomas Wakely, the editor of The Lancet, as one of the first to address the philosophical (rather than strictly medical) implications of phenomena such as somnambulism and double consciousness, seeing them as a challenge to long-held philosophical assumptions about the unity of personal identity and the singularity of consciousness. See Ian Hacking, Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 221.
10. See Arthur Ladbroke Wigan, The Duality of the Mind (1844; U.S. reprint, n.p.;
35. Crichton-Browne, “Dreamy Mental States,” 1. All subsequent references to this source will be listed parenthetically by page number.


37. See, for example, Jackson, “On a Particular Variety of Epilepsy”; Burnham, “Memory, Historically and Experimentally Considered”; James, Principles of Psychology; Ellis, “A Note on Hypnagogic Paramnesia.”


39. Ellis also associated déjà vu experiences with a characteristically fin de siècle temperament, claiming that they were particularly prevalent in the “languid and anaemic,” people who are suggestible, and those prone to daydreaming and wandering attention. He notes that the French psychologist Dugas (who published a study of déjà vu in 1894; see note 5) had associated déjà vu with writers and others of “unusual mental capacity” (Ellis, “A Note on Hypnagogic Paramnesia,” 285). There were, however, competing accounts of susceptibility to sensations of déjà vu, especially in France. André Lalande, for example, writing on déjà vu in 1893, associated the prevalence of déjà vu experiences with children and savages, claiming “with them . . . the senses are more subtle and impressionable than with developed men. Life blunts our sensibility little by little” (translated in Myers, “The Subliminal Self,” 346).

40. Confirming his view that hereditary weakness, intellectual development, and the “refined” classes were associated, Crichton-Browne goes on to note that the late Lord Beaconsfield suffered from debilitating dreamy states that involved sensations of lost identity. Lord Beaconsfield claimed in his memoirs: “I was not always assured of my identity or even existence, for I sometimes found it necessary to shout aloud to be sure that I lived, and I was in the habit very often at night of taking down a volume and looking into it for my name to be convinced that I had not been dreaming of myself” (quoted in Crichton-Browne, “Dreamy Mental States,” 5). Returning yet again to the linkage of reading and remembering, Lord Beaconsfield’s description offers uncanny echoes of the opening scene of Jane Austen’s Persuasion, in which, we might recall, Sir Walter Elliot repeatedly confirms his sense of identity (admittedly an inflated rather than a diminished one) by finding himself in his favorite book, the British “Baronetage.” We might even recognize parallels between the self-affirming fictions of Lord Beaconsfield’s library and Crichton-Browne’s own notebook, in which acts of reading and rereading simultaneously confuse and constitute identity.


42. Ibid., 245.


45. All subsequent references to “The Subliminal Self” will be listed parenthetically by page number.

46. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “The Leather Funnel” explores this theory. Doyle, who was a devoted spiritualist and an initial supporter of psychical research, describes the power of objects to retain traces of powerful emotions that have been associated with them—even over centuries. In Doyle’s story, a man is asked to sleep next to a leather funnel, knowing nothing of its history or purpose, and
to think about it before falling asleep. The man dreams of a scene of torture, the leather funnel placed in a woman’s mouth to force her to swallow water until she confesses or dies. Upon waking and relating his terrifying dream to his host, he is informed that his dream was an accurate depiction of the object’s history, and that the victim’s terror—dating back to a murder trial in seventeenth-century France—has left such powerful emotional traces on the funnel that they can be transferred to receptive minds. See Arthur Conan Doyle, “The Leather Funnel,” in Tales of Terror and Mystery (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 29–42.

47. I have taken this term from John J. Cerullo’s study The Secularization of the Soul: Psychical Research in Modern Britain (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues Publication, 1982), which provides an excellent account of Myers’s relationship to continental work on hypnosis (particularly that of Pierre Janet) and his participation (along with other representatives from the Society for Psychical Research) in the International Congresses of Experimental Psychology in 1889, 1892, and 1896.