Since the histories of medical psychology, mental science, and psychical research have become subjects of vast and controversial discourses, this chapter attempts only to highlight key developments within each field which had the most profound implications for dynamic psychology and which most engaged fiction writers. The rise of debates on psychosomatic illness and pathological states of mind transformed the discourse on selfhood in several essential ways. The conception of a single, unified self was increasingly called into question, and the boundaries between normal selfhood and abnormality became blurred. Mental science emphasized that abnormal conditions could arise in the so-called normal life. This focus contributed to inculcating widespread cultural anxiety about mental instability or nervous illness. In order to understand and heal these conditions, mental scientists developed new therapies, including hypnosis and psychotherapeutics in general. Not only pathological conditions and therapies but also those treating these conditions with the new therapies, the psychotherapists, were scrutinized in fiction. Writers initially portrayed them as having considerable powers of insight and healing, and certainly more than the older type of medical doctor whose approach was based on scientific materialism. The new doctors were typically referred to as doctors of the soul or psychic doctors, and might even be granted supernormal capabilities. Their relations with patients were of considerable interest, and only later when abuse-of-power stories emerged in the media was there scepticism and satire directed at these figures. This chapter begins by focussing on hysteria and hypnosis before highlighting the impact of Pierre Janet, yet another underrated figure whose discourses on medical psychology were frequently assimilated by fiction writers.

2.1 Medicine: Hysteria and hypnosis

Interrelated developments in the study of hysteria and hypnosis are the key contributions of medical psychology to dynamic psychology. The phenomenon
of hysteria challenged fundamental assumptions about the nature of disease, eventually forcing medical professionals to shift from focussing exclusively on somatic aspects of illness to paying closer attention to the patient’s psyche (characteristic of dynamic psychology). Diagnosis of hysteria also led to the further development of hypnosis, which became the primary tool for analysing non-conscious layers of the mind and led to more precise mapping out of these regions. Sigmund Freud was only one of many lured away from the study of neurology by the rising interest in these “abnormal” mental conditions. In Britain, the controversy over hysteria and hypnosis clearly reveals the shift in paradigms that was taking place, as well as, once again, the crucial role of the SPR.

In general, nineteenth-century medicine, with its pragmatic focus on description and diagnosis, was less engaged with philosophical discourse and more engaged with scientific materialism than the burgeoning discipline of psychology. The revolutionary germ theory of disease, which led to the discovery of cures for several infectious diseases such as typhoid, gave impetus to the materialistic bias (Drinka 62). Not until discourses about subconscious activity began to gain acceptance did medicine make a significant contribution to dynamic psychology. Hearnshaw claims that

as long as mind was identified with consciousness, as it was by Descartes and his successors, the ‘alien’ forces responsible for mental breakdown could not be located within the mind itself; they had to be regarded either as material or as supernatural. (Short 150)

The story of the gradual acceptance of hypnosis and hysteria into medical orthodoxy is crucial to an understanding of that shift in perspective.

Mesmerism, the eighteenth-century forerunner of hypnotism, posited that a fluid called “animal magnetism” coursed through the body: its flow was disturbed in illness. Franz Mesmer, the French originator of the theory, believed that by putting patients into a trance and then precipitating a crisis in them, he could transfer into them his own healthy animal magnetism (Drinka 127–128). Although magnetism became immensely popular, it remained on the margins of science and eventually was banned in France (Drinka 131). Renewed interest in mesmerism did not occur until the late 1840s in the United States. While in a trance state, one Andrew Jackson Davis dictated revelations about the world of spirits (Ellenberger 83). Other incidents of paranormal communications were reported, engendering the Spiritist movement. Spiritism quickly spread into Europe, where its manifestations were eventually examined more systematically by the SPR, among others.

In the wake of this popularity, mesmerism, renamed “hypnosis” by an Englishman, James Braid (Drinka 133), came under scrutiny by the French medical community in particular. In the 1870s the world-famous neurologist