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Louis Eilshemius's "Svengali-Like Stare": Mesmerism and the Artist's Figurative Paintings

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Abstract:

Louis Eilshemius often bragged that he had perfected a "method of attracting women involving a pendulum-like motion of the head and a fixed-stare," wrote the artist's obituarist in 1941. This essay explores Eilshemius's interest in mesmerism, or hypnotism, as the method behind the enigmatic paintings for which he had become famous: images of zombie-like, female nudes.

Louis Eilshemius's "Svengali-Like Stare": Mesmerism and the Artist's Figurative Paintings

by Catherine McNickle Chastain

During the second decade of the twentieth century, New Yorkers knew American artist Louis Michel Eilshemius (1864–1941) as a writer who voiced madcap opinions in his letters to the editor of the *New York Sun*. He feigned knowledge of a host of topics, from the banana industry and haircutting techniques to the weather in Arizona. During the same period, he circulated self-congratulatory handbills with egotistic epithets like "Scientist Supreme: all ologies," "Ex Mimic, [of] Animal Voices and Humans," and, intriguingly, "Mesmerist Prophet and Mystic."^[1] Living on a family trust fund in a brownstone at 118 East Fifty-Seventh Street in Manhattan, Eilshemius also devoted himself to painting. Although academically trained, and a tempered-Impressionist landscape and figure artist at the outset of his career, he failed to find much of an audience for the work he created prior to c. 1910. While Eilshemius exhibited some of his early work at the National Academy of Design during the 1887–1888 season, and at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1890 and 1891, he received no further invitations to exhibit this early work.^[2]

Critics from the 1920s onward preferred Eilshemius's later, more idiosyncratic images of women created during the years c. 1910–1921. Although his editorials and handbills brought him notoriety during this period, no one took note of the paintings he was then producing until the 1930s. This body of work marks a dramatic shift in Eilshemius's artistic practice: the paintings, which today exist by the hundreds in collections across the United States and Europe, portray females with unusually wide eyes who sit, stand, or lie in stiff, zombie-like poses. In many instances, the figures appear to be riveted to something—or someone—beyond the picture plane. What are we to make of paintings such as *The Prodigy* (1917), a typical piece from this phase of Eilshemius's career? (fig. 1) In this painting, a young girl sits at a piano, her head twisted awkwardly to the side. She stares directly into the viewer's space, and would make eye contact, except for the fact that her eyes are overly large, glassy, *unseeing*. She is at once active—playing the piano—and passive—emotionally and intellectually absent.



Fig. 1, Louis Eilshemius, *The Prodigy*, 1917. Oil on board. Private collection. [\[larger image\]](#)

Eilshemius adopted a new painting style with this subject matter. He rendered these images with less emphasis on lifelike representation and, indeed, Eilshemius appears to have stopped working from life. He included fewer details, and utilized looser, at times almost frenetic, brushwork. He also changed the support material from canvas to makeshift grounds such as cigar box lids, newspaper, and pie plates, and he painted borders directly onto the paintings in place of frames. He painted the female figure repeatedly—some would say obsessively. The 1930s critics viewed these paintings as primitive, or belonging to the realm of folk art, despite the fact that Eilshemius had a top-notch education—he studied at Cornell University (1882–84), the Art Students League (1886), and the Académie Julian in Paris (1886–87). Bitter about the lack of attention to his early work, Eilshemius relished these critics' attention, even though he was trained and could not technically be called a folk artist. The view of Eilshemius's works as primitive, rather, supported isolationist American politics in the years following the Depression, when collectors patronized "homegrown" artists, or those whose work revealed little or no European influence.[3] During the 1970s, collectors revived Eilshemius's work, seeing it as anti-establishment, and labeling it "kitsch." [4]

Why did Eilshemius's subject matter, and for that matter, his style of painting, change drastically in the years between 1910 and 1921? Why did he forego traditional, carefully finished landscapes, for a radically new approach? The reasons for Eilshemius's stylistic shift are complex, and relate to broad cultural phenomena as well as Eilshemius's unique personal situation. It is no coincidence that the thematic shift, from mostly landscapes to images of women, corresponds in time to the rise of the "new woman" and society's hostility to her.[5] The late 1800s and early 1900s saw many more women seeking college degrees, moving into the workforce, and gaining financial independence from men. Women challenged traditional views about their sex as being weak, delicate health-wise, and unsuitable to operate outside the domestic sphere. The work of suffragists and feminists gained for women the right to vote in 1921, the very year that Eilshemius decided to give up painting for good. Eilshemius, who had proposed marriage to at least two women—both of whom rejected him—and who unsuccessfully courted several others, balked at empowered females.[6] He resisted the new woman, preferring to deny that a change was underfoot. He maintained an old-fashioned view of women, once writing, "Girls and women generally, exceptions do not count—despise intellect, genius, and spirituality. They love sensuality, materiality, and *men-devils* [author's italics]."[7]

A revival of the popularity of mesmerism, or early hypnosis, coincided with the rise of the new woman. Mesmerism made its way to the United States as a quasi-scientific practice in the 1830s.[8] By the late 1800s, it was a popular carnival sideshow that involved guiding a person—very often a woman—into a trance state and causing her to perform various actions without her knowledge. It also became a subject for literature, theater, and eventually, film. Mesmerism appealed mightily to those like Eilshemius, who were uncomfortable with the rise of the new woman. It provided a means to view females, and any men who submitted to the practice, in a highly vulnerable state (even if actresses sometimes rigged demonstrations).

Mesmerism also appealed to Eilshemius for personal reasons. Despite the egotistic letters to the editor, he was a painfully shy human being who lived as a recluse for most of his life. Eilshemius had no spouse, and no close friends. His mother, his only confidant, died in 1911

—her death likely fueling Eilshemius's artistic shift, and what amounts to a corresponding personality change. Around 1910, Eilshemius began to show signs of mental illness. In addition to megalomania, or extreme egotism, Eilshemius exhibited an unusual fear of human touch, and he was known for public outbursts.^[9] It is no wonder that an indirect method of causing people to interact with him—coercing them through mesmerism without their knowledge—appealed to him. In addition, Eilshemius's bringing a woman into a mesmerized state (or at least imagining that he had done so) eliminated the possibility of rejection and guaranteed that she would respond to him favorably.

Although the history of mesmerism and its bearing on popular culture is a topic of scholarship in many fields,^[10] mesmerism's specific impact on Eilshemius is not. In fact, no study links Eilshemius to mesmerism, despite the fact that evidence points to it as a signature trait of his artistic practice.^[11] In this article I demonstrate that Eilshemius was well familiar with mesmerism and that it greatly impacted his art. Furthermore, I argue that Eilshemius viewed his paintings as alternate realities: he imagined that he controlled the women he portrayed, using a self-invented form of mesmerism, from his vantage point outside of the picture plane. His painting technique involved his imagining that he was transfixing his subjects using a steady gaze—which we might view as the ultimate objectifying "male gaze" that is the subject of much contemporary feminist scholarship.

As far as can be determined, Eilshemius witnessed mesmerism for the first time at Cornell University, where he studied from January 5, 1882 to December 21, 1883. Eilshemius records in his journal that on Saturday, October 28, 1883, he attended a lecture-demonstration on the topic for fun. "Went to Post," Eilshemius writes, "Letter from Papa. Then to Mr. Brown the me[s]merist—Had a wonderful loud laughter. Very good subjects and a very good entertainment."^[12]

Subsequent entries record Eilshemius's many attempts to mesmerize his college friends. On the morning of November 30, for example, Eilshemius decides to mesmerize his friend Coles, who lives next door to him in his boarding house. Although Eilshemius and Coles experiment with mesmerism for entertainment purposes, the exchange reveals that both have a solid beginner's knowledge of the subject. The method Eilshemius uses to entrance his subject is to pat Coles's forehead until he appears to be asleep, then command him to open his eyes. At this point Eilshemius convinces his friend that mosquitoes are biting him, that a bear is pursuing him, and that he is stiff and cannot move. When Eilshemius tells him that waves are crashing around him, Coles climbs the nearby curtain.^[13]

Long after he left Cornell Eilshemius remembered having mesmerized his college friends. In fact, he saw fit to make his memory of the incidents the subject of one of his many letters to the editor of the *New York Sun*. Humorously introduced by the editor as "LOUIS THE HYPNOTIST: He Makes a Human Fly of a Chum at College," the letter embellishes the events told in his diary in a manner that came to be typical of Eilshemius. "To the Editor of the Sun—Sir," he begins. "This time I will not speak about my own proper person, but I shall relate to your readers things concerning my former powers as a hypnotist." Eilshemius asserts that in Ithaca in 1883 he "attended a performance of Professor Reynolds, then the foremost American hypnotist." Until his junior year he did not know about mesmerism. But after the performance, "during which the professor tried to control [him] but did not

succeed," he mesmerized his 16-year-old friend in his room. "As [the friend] had been with me to the show," Eilshemius writes, "he willingly allowed me to hypnotize him. Remembering all the passes, etc. of the professor, I went through all of them, and behold, ten minutes afterwards he was my subject, asleep and subdued." Eilshemius was startled: "I never dreamed that I had such magnetic virtues in my composition." Eilshemius then relates his and Coles's antics (although he does not mention Coles by name), but unabashedly exaggerates them.^[14]

At this point in the editorial, Eilshemius describes his opinion of the basis of mesmerism, relates his personal method for gaining control over people, and reveals his plans for an essay on the subject. Sounding like Franz Anton Mesmer himself, the originator of mesmerism who first proposed the idea that people's bodies have electromagnetic properties that can be controlled using hand passes, Eilshemius also claims that humans have electromagnetic properties. Importantly, however, Eilshemius argues that these properties can be channeled through the *eyes* rather than the hands. All that is needed to entrance people is to gaze at them.^[15]

Eilshemius's promised essay took the form of a short pamphlet called *Some New Discoveries in Science and Art*.^[16] In it, the artist claims that he is well versed in the techniques of mesmerism—having read books on the subject—and he describes in detail his method for mesmerizing people. Later on, Eilshemius became so well-known for distributing this pamphlet, that artist Miron Sokole painted his portrait and showed him holding a copy of it in his lap (c. 1932, location unknown, photo Archives of American Art). In the tract, Eilshemius gives detailed directions for mesmerizing people. He emphasizes that mesmerism must be carried out without the person's knowledge, preferably without the other person even seeing the mesmerizer (a strategy perfectly suited to Eilshemius's adult introverted personality). The process, Eilshemius stresses, occurs through the mesmerizer's eyes. In addition, he suggests using an unobtrusive up-and-down head movement to bring the person under his spell. Like other mesmerizers, Eilshemius speaks directly to the mesmerism of women by repeatedly using the terms "she" and "her" in places. He reveals how to make them perform simple tasks, and how to cause them to respond romantically.^[17]

It is important to note that there were precedents for all of Eilshemius's mesmerism techniques, including his method for mesmerizing women. One need only examine pamphlets published in the late- nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—when the fascination with the pseudo-science peaked in the United States—to see how closely Eilshemius's ideas echo those of his contemporaries. Such pamphlets stress controlling people by mesmerizing them through the eyes. Many indicate that women provide the best subjects for mesmerizers due to their so-called weaker "constitutions."^[18]

Eilshemius may have never reached the point of desiring to publish his own tract had it not been for the appearance of British artist and novelist George Du Maurier's novel *Trilby*. First published in 1894 as a series in *Harper's Monthly*, *Trilby* chronicled the fate of a wayward but much-loved artist's model who was mesmerized by an evil pianist-conductor, and then saved by her rag-tag artist friends. The musician, known only as "Svengali," mesmerized

Trilby, whom he thus induced to fall in love with him, marry him, and become a star opera singer, even though while un-mesmerized she was completely tone-deaf.

"Cold shivers went down Trilby's back," the narrator states, when the model first met Svengali. "She had a singularly impressionable nature, as was shown by her quick and ready susceptibility to Svengali's hypnotic influence." All day long as Trilby modeled for the artist Durien, she remained "haunted by the memory of Svengali's big eyes and the touch of his soft, dirty finger-tips on her face." And "'Svengali, Svengali, Svengali!' went ringing in her head and ears till it became an obsession... '*Svengali, Svengali, Svengali!*'"^[19]

After Svengali dies, and Trilby is no longer subject to his spell, his assistant Gecko informs Trilby's friends that the musician had mesmerized her in order to cause her to perform, and to carry out other tasks and, indeed, to love him—a fact that would not be lost on the gunshy Eilshemius. The book relates that Svengali's method was to use his conductor's baton, a simple repeated phrase, and a steady gaze to enslave her. "With one wave of his hand over her," Gecko reveals, "with one look of his eye—with a word—Svengali could turn her into the other Trilby, *his* Trilby—and make her do whatever he liked." Svengali would exclaim "*Sleep!*" and Trilby "[would] suddenly become an unconscious Trilby of marble, who could...think his thoughts and wish his wishes—and love him at his bidding with a strange, unreal, factitious love."^[20]

It is fitting that Eilshemius would wish to imitate the figure of Svengali for Eilshemius, too, was a musician, albeit an amateur one (he played piano), and felt that he must compel women to love him. So popular was *Trilby* even as late as 1941, the year Eilshemius died, and so clear the relationship between Eilshemius's method for mesmerism and Svengali's, that one of Eilshemius's obituarists could write, "Another of [Eilshemius's] self-advertised accomplishments was the perfection of a Svengali-like method of attracting women, involving a pendulum-like motion of the head and a fixed-stare"—and be understood.^[21]

Du Maurier's drawings for *Trilby*, such as *The 'Rosemonde' of Schubert* and *And Now Sleep, My Sweet* (c. 1894, fig. 2), capture both Svengali's craftiness and Trilby's "factitious" love for him. The first portrays Svengali glancing piercingly at Trilby and playing the piano while she sits on the model's stand, and the second depicts him more actively mesmerizing her. Dressed for a performance, Trilby stares vacantly ahead while Svengali, on his knees, gestures with his hands in her line of sight.



Fig. 2, George Du Maurier, *And Now Sleep, My Sweet*, 1896. Illustration from *Trilby*, London, 1896.

[\[larger image\]](#)

The popularity of *Trilby*, especially in New York City, was such that it was impossible that Eilshemius would be unaware of it. When the last installment appeared, which chronicled Trilby's death, the entire country mourned. The reaction was similar to the present era, when a well-liked television series dramatically concludes. In September 1894 when the serial came out under one cover, the book was so popular that public libraries had to order extra copies to keep up with demand.^[22] Stage versions of the narrative appeared; various groups organized concerts of music from the story, and for several years afterward *Trilby* impacted popular culture in America much like blockbuster movies do today. *Trilby* historian Albert Parry describes the impact in depth. He notes that the town of Macon, Florida, renamed itself Trilby, and renamed its main streets after the other characters in the book, and he describes the development of Trilby ice-cream, scarf-pins, cocktails, bathing suits, and even a brand of sausage named after Trilby.^[23]

With the impact of *Trilby* such as it was, it is no surprise to find Eilshemius, who attempted poetry and fiction in addition to writing editorials, self-publishing three books that betray its influence. These books, which appeared in 1900 and 1901, at the height of the *Trilby* craze, are *Sweetbriar*, Eilshemius's only full-length novel, *A Triple Flirtation and Other Stories*, which includes a character with a name similar to one of *Trilby*'s minor characters ("Gehiko" as compared to Du Maurier's "Gecko"), and *The Devil's Diary*.^[24]

The Devil's Diary appears to be a compilation of Eilshemius's real-life journal entries mingled with fictional entries he created especially for the book. A general narrative holds the entries together to relate the story of a crafty but fun-loving "Satan," (remember, Eilshemius believed that women loved "men devils") who resembles Eilshemius. This character mesmerizes women in order to seduce them, and he does so by gazing at them from behind or otherwise without their knowledge. Such is the case when Satan visits a church, takes a seat in the back of the sanctuary, and mesmerizes a woman who sits two rows in front of him. "When I gazed at her intently for awhile," Satan reveals, "she turned towards me—all at once she fell into a shiver of passion."^[25]

Of course, mesmerism made its way into numerous literary works, including "Mesmeric Revelation" and other stories by Edgar Allan Poe, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, as historian Maria Tatar puts it, "The cruel exploitation of an innocent girl by a shrewd mesmerist wizard was...a pervasive theme in nineteenth-century European and American literature."^[26] None of these other sources, however, appealed to artists as a group in the manner that *Trilby* did. In 1894, the painter Robert Henri, who had just returned from Paris, organized the first theatrical version of the story. Leader of the anti-academic "Ashcan School," Henri and his circle's production was a comic spoof called *Twillbe*. Henri played Svengali, and John Sloan, "Twillbe."^[27] Scheduled to run only once, the show, performed at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, received such positive reviews in the press that the group scheduled a second show.^[28]

Eilshemius's fascination with mesmerism finds its greatest expression in his art. Gallery owner Sidney Janis, who coined the phrase the "wild period" to describe Eilshemius's late paintings, analyzed the pieces, in 1970, in a catalogue that featured many of them. He observed, "[Eilshemius] had stored hundreds of paintings [in his townhouse] on board from shirt-board size up to 60"; the larger sizes were so 'bad' as to become good." And Clement Greenberg, who used the more explicit phrase, "deranged period," commented on the lurid palette Eilshemius favored at this time: "yellows, acid greens, oranges, tans, and pinks." More unsettling, however, are the figures themselves. Instead of the idealized, academic-style women of Eilshemius's American contemporaries Kenyon Cox, Walter Shirlaw, or Arthur B. Davies, the wild-period figures resemble sleep-walkers. They stare unabashedly at the viewer with peculiar, glassy eyes. Unnervingly, the figures seem to lack control of their faculties. Instead, as John Canaday noted, they exude a disoriented "brainlessness."^[29]

Consider additional commentary on the "wild-period" paintings by Eilshemius's critics. Many sense something uncanny about the images, but they never manage to discover what that "something" is. Canaday, and others, note that the figures appear to perform for the viewer. In his words, "odd females describable only as Eilshemius Girls disport themselves in land and waterscapes...[The figures] have abandoned their senses, they have an air of comical exposure, as if taking part in amateur *tableaux vivants*." An unnamed critic observes, "[the paintings] lure the smile on which, in turn, they seem to thrive. The nudes by Eilshemius are not, perhaps, exactly hilarious. But they are very, very, odd." And yet another asks, "Can [the public] love and at the same time laugh at a painter? Something of that is required, for these Eilshemius nudes are more than a little wild and drunken...There can be no doubt but that Eilshemius did them for his own private delectation, scarcely dreaming that the public would ever see them." Perhaps *New York Times* critic David Shirey came closer to explaining the paintings than did earlier critics when he wrote, in 1978, "All told, it is neither the women nor the landscapes that cast the spell in the paintings"; it is rather the paintings' "sinister magic" that "lead[s] us through all kinds of thoughts and spiritual states."^[30]

We might view Eilshemius's late-period paintings as "wish fulfillment," or alternate worlds wherein he caused people to act as he desired. Just as, in Eilshemius's words, "a journal [was] a substitute for a companion," so too did the figures in his paintings provide companionship. Eilshemius needed friends, for he lived alone the last three decades of his life; he communicated with the outside world primarily through his near-daily letters to the editor

of *New York Sun*. As art historian and critic Lloyd Goodrich observed, Eilshemius's peopled landscapes manifested "an odd dreamlike quality, as if they pictur[ed] not the everyday scene but an inner world which was yet quite real to their creator."^[31]

The proposition that Eilshemius saw his paintings as worlds unto themselves becomes more than conjecture when we consider what his friend and patron, the sculptor Louise Nevelson, who first came to know Eilshemius's work during the 1930s, had to say about him. Nevelson asserts that she saw Eilshemius *talk* to his paintings. "I went into Dudensing, on 57th Street," she reminisces, "that was *the* gallery of the time, and he was giving Eilshemius a show. I went into the show and there was Eilshemius looking at his paintings. There was one painting of ladies sitting on a bench." Eilshemius approached the piece and said, "Now you move over. I told you not to get off that bench. You sit where I put you." Eilshemius "had a whole conversation with these people on the bench." She continues, "You see, Eilshemius was absolutely caught in his pictures. When he painted a picture, that was the reality more than this world."^[32]

But Eilshemius was even more caught in his pictures than Nevelson and others suspected. Why should he not be? After all, they provided a world where he called the shots. Whereas in real life women rejected Eilshemius, in his paintings, women not only liked him, but they responded to him with enthusiasm! The tragedy of Eilshemius's situation was that, like Svengali, he believed that he had to coerce people into favoring him. And like Svengali, Eilshemius's chosen method for achieving such an end was mesmerism.

It is in this context, then, that Eilshemius's enigmatic images of women acquire meaning: the figures, with their wooden poses, glassy eyes, and overly-zealous regard for the viewer, are spellbound by the hand of their creator. Just as Svengali's conductor's wand mesmerized Trilby, so too did Eilshemius's paintbrush weave its magic. And just as Svengali's steady gaze "fixed" his subject, so too did that of Eilshemius from his vantage point outside of the picture plane. So keenly do Eilshemius's figures stare back, in fact, that one wants to look over one's shoulder to discover what they see. At the very least, one receives the odd sensation that the figures mistake one for somebody else—for Eilshemius!

The Prodigy provides this sensation. The young woman in the painting stares directly into the viewer's space, her eyes open so wide that the whites show in their entirety. We know with some certainty who this painting portrays: Marie Fowler, a girl whom Eilshemius fancied while a student at Cornell University, and never forgot. He wrote about Marie in the diary he kept at the time, and in a lengthy romantic poem he dedicated to her more than forty years later.^[33] In the diary, he calls on Marie with the purpose of asking her to accompany him to the circus. During the course of conversation, Marie goes to the piano, and he notes that he has brought about an "effect" on her (attempted to mesmerize her), although she eventually laughs at him:

Soon we are alone. Eyes to eyes, and more affectionate the conversation becomes. She evidently is getting excited. Had I perhaps produced an effect upon her, that young soul. She gets up, and with excited manner seats herself at the piano.... She now and then looks at me. Will you come with me to the circus? I ask. She is astonished and says 'No, no, that would not be proper; and laughs me in the face.'^[34]

It may be that Eilshemius, at this later date, used the painting to "rewrite" the visit so that it ended on a more favorable note—with Marie, rather than rebuffing him, successfully mesmerized, not resisting him, in his power.

A painting similar to *The Prodigy* is *Girl Catching Ball* (1917). (fig. 3) This piece portrays a mesmerized female, perhaps a teenager, who is athletically engaged—the epitome of the new woman. Like the figure in *The Prodigy*, this person's head tilts awkwardly to the side. One arm reaches up, grasping the ball, and the other sticks stiffly out to her left. A leg thrusts backwards, as if she is in the middle of taking a step. Overall, she appears to be holding a pose, unmoving, as if she is not in control of her body. She has the same wide-eyed stare, and wan half-smile as the figure in *The Prodigy*, and appears to be riveted to the picture plane. Descriptions of the mesmerized Trilby could very well describe figures such as these. When mesmerized, Trilby's eyes were "larger, and their expression not the same," and her face "smiled rather vacantly, her eyes anxiously intent on Svengali."^[35] Finally, loose, sketchy brushwork that barely describes a landscape, surrounds the girl, and provides a dream-like quality. The frame Eilshemius paints directly onto the support material, in this case he uses board, solidifies the impression that we are peeking through a keyhole into Eilshemius's fantasy world.^[36]



Fig. 3, Louis Eilshemius, *Girl Catching Ball*, 1917. Oil on board. Purchase, New York; Neuberger Museum of Art, State University of New York College at Purchase. [\[larger image\]](#)

At some point between 1910 and 1921, Eilshemius metaphorically "entered" his canvases—in order to better wield his influence, occasionally in the guise of his favorite character, Satan. Like Satan in *The Devil's Diary*, however, most—though not all—of the demons exhibit a playful quality. As Mina Loy put it in the Dadaist publication, *The Blind Man*, Eilshemius's "princes of darkness are repeatedly the best tempered, most unsophisticated young devils imaginable," whose "nearest approach to evil is in the symbol of the horn."^[37] Loy came to know Eilshemius through Marcel Duchamp, who discovered him at the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibit.^[38] Duchamp maintained a fascination with Eilshemius, possibly seeing Dada-esque qualities in his unusual paintings, in his personality, and in his opinion pieces.^[39]

Dreaming of Temptation (1918) may very well be Eilshemius's late-period masterpiece, for it is both a striking painting and a textbook example of his method for mesmerism. (fig. 4) The painting depicts a devil positioned unseen, or *behind*—as Eilshemius required—a zombie-like nude who half-stands, startled, in front of her bed. She is frozen in the process of rising. The devil holds one arm out in order to touch the nude on the shoulder, but he looks downward instead of directly at her, probably to perform the up-and-down head movement Eilshemius prescribed in *Some New Discoveries*. In Eilshemius's words: "A simple way [to mesmerize] is to breathe upon her, best on her neck—then move your eyes vertically as well as your head, and in a few seconds she will start up...just breathe on the back of her neck and move your eyes and head vertically." Once the woman is mesmerized, he writes, "You have her in your control." If you wish "to flirt with her," proceed. "At this point," Eilshemius concludes, "you can make her actions subservient to your caprice."^[40]



Fig. 4, Louis Eilshemius, *Dreaming of Temptation*, 1918. Oil on board. New York, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry N. Abrams. [\[larger image\]](#)

One last painting deserves our attention—the enigmatic *Rose-Marie Calling (Supplication)* (1916). (fig. 5) This painting caught the eye of Marcel Duchamp at the unjuried 1917 Society of Independent Artists Exhibit. Duchamp's selection of this piece, along with a second artwork by a similarly unknown artist, as the two best artworks in the exhibit, baffled the art world in the manner that many of Duchamp's Dada "performances" did.^[41] Duchamp's infamous *Fountain* had just been ejected from the same exhibit and, as I argue elsewhere, Duchamp retaliated by using these pieces to create a new Dada spectacle, for the paintings he selected were two of the oddest works in the show.^[42] *Rose-Marie Calling* breached levels of propriety by portraying a large-breasted nude who entices the viewer with her overly wide eyes, long, exotic hair, and beckoning arms—a sexualized object for the male gaze. The other piece, *Claire Twins* (1915, now lost) by amateur artist Dorothy Rice, portrays a set of immensely overweight female twins who performed in a sideshow at the Barnum and Bailey circus. Eilshemius's painting depicts the aforementioned Marie Fowler, and represents a modified portrayal of a scene described in "Rhapsody of Regret," the romantic poem Eilshemius dedicated to her. The painting illustrates passages such as, "Mary! Then thy rosy, rounded arms twisted back of thee," and "Yea, and when thy beauteous breast

heaved wantonly/When thine arms bent back of thee;/ Heaven-blessed, pink-flowered Marie!"[43]



Fig. 5, Louis Eilshemius, *Rose-Marie Calling (Supplication)*, 1916. Oil on board. New York, Collection of Michael Werner, Inc. [\[larger image\]](#)

The difference between Eilshemius's poem and his painting is that if while at Cornell, Eilshemius questioned whether or not his mesmeric "influence" played a role in Marie's actions toward him, by the time the painting was executed, he believed that it did. Or, we might say, he created a scene—again, re-writing reality—in such a way that he came out as the victor rather the rejected one. For in the painting, the woman, like the rest of Eilshemius's females, has all of the traits of one who is mesmerized. Marie's eyes are glassy and wide, her gaze vacant, her body unnaturally posed. She resembles a marionette, with arms and one leg lifted not by her own will but pulled by invisible strings—the mesmerist Eilshemius's controlling gaze.

Eilshemius's late-period creations, then, existed to him as more than works of art: they were alternate worlds, where he dictated events through the powers of mesmerism. As such, Eilshemius's paintings served the purpose of controlling a world that continually frustrated him. At the time of his death in 1941, Eilshemius had not created art in years. Yet his *oeuvre*, especially paintings of the type discussed here, had become tremendously popular. The paintings were exhibited, on a regular basis, at Manhattan's best galleries. None of Eilshemius's critics or collectors, however, surmised the complex meaning the paintings held for their creator. If they did, they never committed their suspicions to prose. Only with hindsight does the complete picture of Eilshemius's artistic practice come to light.

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Notes

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[1] Quotes from handbill, which Eilshemius also used as a calling card, reproduced in Catherine McNickle Chastain, "Louis Michel Eilshemius," *American National Biography*, vol. 7, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 364. Additional quotes include, "Amateur All Round Doctor," "Universal Supreme Critic," "Ex Fancy Amateur Dancer," "Most wonderful and diverse painter of nude groups in the world," and "Saved 20 lives—3 from suicide." (Handbill collection of the author.) Eilshemius also self-published several works of fiction and poetry that received little critical attention and are, due to their amateurish approach and biographical thrust, primarily valuable for the insight they provide into the artist's paintings. These include Louis Eilshemius, *Creation's End (A Four Page Epic and Two Other Poems)* (New York, The Dreamer's Press, 1925); Louis Eilshemius, *The Devil's Diary* (New York: Abbey Press, 1901); Louis Eilshemius, *My Brother Victor (A Convalescent's Fancy)* (New York, The Dreamer's Press, 1912); Louis Eilshemius, *Mystery and Truth, A Sonnet Sequence* (New York, The Dreamer's Press, 1907); Louis Eilshemius, *Songs of Spring and Blossoms of Unrequited Love* (Buffalo: Peter Paul Book Co., 1895); Louis Eilshemius, *Sweetbriar* (New York: Abbey Press, 1900); and Louis Eilshemius, *A Triple Flirtation* (New York: Abbey Press, c. 1900).

[2] Background information on Eilshemius, from Chastain, "Louis Michel Eilshemius," 363–364.

[3] For more on the reception of Eilshemius's paintings in the 1930s, and Eilshemius's reaction to it, see chapter 5., "Louis Eilshemius as Metaphor for Post-War America," in Catherine McNickle Chastain, "The 'Eilshemius Pendulum,' Louis Eilshemius, Marcel Duchamp, and the New York Art World," (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 1998) 126–36.

[4] See Sidney Janis, ed., *The High-Kitsch of Eilshemius* (New York: Sidney Janis Gallery, 1970).

[5] An introduction to the concept of the new woman and her reception in American culture found in Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Women's Movement in America, 1875-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003).

[6] For a discussion of Eilshemius's views of empowered women, his difficulties relating to women in general, and the theme of unrequited love as it appears in Eilshemius's writings, see Chastain, "The 'Eilshemius Pendulum,'" 29–43. Also see writings by Eilshemius on these subjects in n. 1.

[7] Eilshemius, *The Art Reformer* 2, October, 1911, 8. (Eilshemius wrote and self-published *The Art Reformer*, which only lasted for a handful of issues.)

[8] Resources on mesmerism include Vincent Buranelli, *The Wizard from Vienna* (London: Owen, 1976); Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994); Robert C. Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982); Alan Gauld, *A History of Hypnotism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Barbara Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1991); Maria M. Tatar, *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); and James Wyckoff, *Franz Anton Mesmer: Between God and Devil* (Engelwood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1975).

[9] Eilshemius was in his forties when his artistic style and personality changed. At her death, Eilshemius's mother expressed her concern for her son's well-being and requested that the family housekeeper watch over him. For a discussion of the possibility that Eilshemius was mentally ill, see Chastain, "The 'Eilshemius Pendulum,'" 40–53.

[10] Two new studies include Bruce Mills, *Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2005); and Martin Willis, *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines: Science Fiction and the Cultures of Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006).

[11] The major scholarly works on Eilshemius include Chastain, "The 'Eilshemius Pendulum,'" Steven Harvey, ed., *Louis M. Eilshemius (1864-1941): An Independent Spirit* (New York: National

Academy of Design, 2001); Janis, *The High-Kitsch of Eilshemius*; Paul Karlstrom, *Louis M. Eilshemius: Selections from the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978); Paul Karlstrom, *Eilshemius* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1978); Paul Karlstrom, *The Romanticism of Eilshemius* (New York: Bernard Danenberg Galleries, 1973); William Schack, *And He Sat Among the Ashes* (New York: American Artists Group, 1939).

[12] Eilshemius's indication that October 28, 1883 was a Saturday was an error; it was actually a Sunday. Eilshemius's diary found in the Sterling Strauser Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm reel 4398. I cite diary page numbers instead of microfilm frame numbers because the microfilm is unmarked. See pages 97–98.

[13] *Ibid.*, 106, 109.

[14] Louis Eilshemius, "LOUIS THE HYPNOTIST: He Makes a Human Fly of Chum at College," *New York Sun*, July 13, c.1932. (Newspaper clipping from Louis Eilshemius scrapbook, New York Public Library.)

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] Louis Eilshemius, *Some New Discoveries in Science and Art*, (New York: privately printed, 1932).

[17] *Ibid.*, 1–2.

[18] Eilshemius's pamphlet resembles several late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tracts so closely that it appears that he copied them. See in particular James Coates, *How to Mesmerize: A Manual of Instruction in the History, Mysteries, Modes of Procedure, and Arts of Mesmerism*, 2nd ed. (London: W. Foulsham, after 1887); A.C. Maxfield, *Popular Mesmerism: How to Mesmerize* (London: Gaskill and Webb, c. 1900); and *How to Be a Clairvoyant, Containing Full Instructions for Producing the Psychologic, Mesmeric, and Clairvoyant Conditions* (Chicago: Frederick J. Drake, n.d.). These tracts and many others from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are found in the Houdini Collection of the Library of Congress's Rare Book Collection.

[19] George Du Maurier, *Trilby*, (London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1892), 73.

[20] *Ibid.*, 440–41.

[21] "Eilshemius, 77, Dies in Bellevue, Penniless, Bitter and Famous," *New York Herald Tribune*, Tuesday, December 30, 1941.

[22] Synopsis of the popularity of *Trilby* from Avis Berman, "The Curse of Svengali," *Smithsonian* 24, no. 9 (December 1993): 110–26, and Albert Parry, *Garrets and Pretenders* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 102–6. See Daniel Pick, *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) for an overview of the impact of Svengali on modern culture.

[23] In Parry's words, "In Florida, there was a railroad station, obscure under the name of Macon, which boomed into a prosperous town as soon as Henry B. Plant, the railroad magnate and a Du Maurier fan, renamed it Trilby...The realtors took their hint from Plant and named the streets of the new town after the heroes of Du Maurier's studio...Businessmen the country over, rushed to cash in on the craze. A Broadway caterer in New York made 'Trilby Foot' ice cream, a Chicago firm made Trilby shoes, a Philadelphia concern issued Trilby sausage, brazenly advertising it as a fulfillment of a long-felt want. Other wide-awake gentlemen christened a scarf-pin, a cocktail, a bathing suit, a cigar, a cigarette, and a restaurant after Trilby. There were many yachts with 'Trilby' proudly lettered on their sterns and bows." Parry, *Garrets*, 104.

[24] Eilshemius, *Sweetbriar*; Eilshemius, *A Triple Flirtation*; Eilshemius, *The Devil's Diary*. Quotes from *Sweetbriar* are found on 119, 192–96, 201, and 215.

[25] Eilshemius, *The Devil's Diary*, 19.

[26] Tatar, *Spellbound*, 31.

[27] Berman's article, "The Curse of Svengali," includes a photograph of John Sloan as "Twillbe."

[28] Discussion of *Twillbe* in Berman "The Curse of Svengali," 123–24.

[29] Sidney Janis, foreword to Janis, *High-Kitsch*. Clement Greenberg, "Review of Exhibitions of Louis Eilshemius and Nicolas Mocharniuk," *The Nation*, December 18, 1943, reprinted in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 1, Perceptions and Judgments 1939-1944* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 166. John Canaday quotes from John Canaday, "Eccentric Genius or High Kitsch?" *New York Times*, Sunday, March 15, 1970.

[30] Quotes from unnamed critics are found in Louis M. Eilshemius Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, microfilm frame 249 (no date). David L. Shirey, "The Eilshemius Legacy," *New York Times*, Sunday, December 31, 1978.

[31] Painting as wish-fulfillment is a theme that surfaces often in psychoanalytic literature on art. See, for instance, Aaron H. Esman's essay "Cézanne's Bathers: A Psychoanalytic View," in Mary Mathews Gedo, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Art*, vol. 3 (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates for Analytic Press, 1985). Similar to my argument, Esman argues that Cézanne was obsessed with the female nude because he wanted relationships with women but could not orchestrate them. He also notes that Cézanne feared physical contact, a trait that Eilshemius shared. Louis Eilshemius, *The Art Reformer*, 1, no. 4, November, 1909, 8. Lloyd Goodrich in John I. H. Baur, ed. *New Art in America* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1957), 32–34.

[32] See Louise Nevelson, *Dawns and Dusks: Taped Conversations with Diana MacKown* (New York: Scribners, 1976), 39–40.

[33] Louis Eilshemius, "Rhapsody of Regret," in *Creation's End, A Four Page Epic and Two Other Poems* (New York: Dreamer's Press, 1925), 13–15.

[34] Eilshemius, Cornell diary, 54–55.

[35] Du Maurier, *Trilby*, 323, 362. When not mesmerized, "Truth looked out of her eyes...truth was in every line of her face." *Ibid.*, 382.

[36] Ruth L. Bohan, an editor for the 1984 Yale University Art Gallery Société Anonyme catalog, describes the superreality of Eilshemius's frames. She makes the case that his frames, which were "a common device in Eilshemius's painting after about 1910," suggest that he "viewed [his] artwork as a distinct and elevated level of reality." See Robert L. Herbert et. al., eds., *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University, a Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 260.

[37] Mina Loy, "Pas de Commentaires! Louis M. Eilshemius," *The Blind Man* 2, May 1917, 11. The exception to Loy's statement may be Eilshemius's painting *The Demon of the Rocks* (1901, Museum of Modern Art), in which a horned devil bearing a realistic self portrait of Eilshemius terrorizes two women, who flee for their lives. In relation to works such as Eilshemius's *Girl in a Swing* (c.1915), a picture nearly identical to Fragonard's eighteenth-century piece *The Swing*, which portrays a girl swinging while a man voyeuristically inspects her underside, Karlstrom, in *Eilshemius*, 68, writes: "The thought immediately arises that in [this picture] Eilshemius has painted himself directly into a statement of his own fantasies. This idea goes a long way toward providing an explanation for much of Eilshemius's otherwise inaccessible art."

[38] See Chastain, "The Eilshemius Pendulum," 116.

[39] *Ibid.*, 120–25.

[40] Eilshemius, *Some New Discoveries*, 1–2.

[41] See Daniel Catton Rich, *The Flow of Art, Essays and Criticisms of Henry McBride* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 124, and Henry McBride, "The Discovery of Louis Eilshemius," *The Arts* 10, December 1926, 316.

[42] For further analysis of Duchamp's spectacle see Chastain, chapter 6, "Marcel Duchamp and the Discovery of Louis Eilshemius," in "The 'Eilshemius Pendulum'", 107–25.

[43] Louis Eilshemius, "Rhapsody of Regret," 13–15.

Illustrations



Fig. 1, Louis Eilshemius, *The Prodigy*, 1917. Oil on board. Private collection. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, George Du Maurier, *And Now Sleep, My Sweet*, 1896. Illustration from *Trilby*, London, 1896. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 3, Louis Eilshemius, *Girl Catching Ball*, 1917. Oil on board. Purchase, New York; Neuberger Museum of Art, State University of New York College at Purchase. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, Louis Eilshemius, *Dreaming of Temptation*, 1918. Oil on board. New York, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Harry N. Abrams. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Louis Eilshemius, *Rose-Marie Calling (Supplication)*, 1916. Oil on board. New York, Collection of Michael Werner, Inc. [\[return to text\]](#)